

The home can be as real as it can be imagined. The home is usually composed of things and objects, but also of the fabric of thoughts, dreams and illusions. Regardless of its „material” level, the home as a concept is a flexible, and at the same time an extremely stable, social construction which, consciously or not, plays a significant role in everybody’s life.

In 1999 Miriam Bäckström created a series of photographs, showing rooms with the IKEA design, arranged in historical chronology in the IKEA Corporate Museum – Älmhult<sup>1</sup>. But this is not the first thing that is perceived by the viewer. The initial impression is purely intuitive, to a large extent emotional, even sentimental: cosy, tastefully arranged rooms, comfortable furniture with upholstery pleasing to the eye and probably also to the touch, skillfully chosen colours, soft and pleasant light. And every room, regardless of whether being a living room, kitchen or children’s room, is organised with a thought of its inhabitants; the suggestion of a home and family, moreover – of an ideal home with and an ideal family in it, being achieved with remarkable skill.

In the real museum collection, as well as in Bäckström's photographs, the „ideal family”, of course, is missing, but subtle traces of its everyday life are visible. And precisely the missing inhabitants make the images extremely attractive. The curiosity and desire to unravel the hidden personal stories, at some moment turn the visitor in the museum or the person viewing the photographs into a voyeur.

The „voyeurism” in this case is the link which in some way brings Bäckström's work close to the cinema. The directed dramas, enacted against the backdrop of built, and consequently – constructed for the purpose sets, claim to present reality or „real life”, to which the viewers in the salon become accomplices to the level of identification, regardless of the consciousness that everything is „make-believe”. In the same way, at a closer look, the IKEA photographs in Älmhult create the impression of sets. At least for the fact that the camera lens consciously captures the passing from one „room” to another, from one style to another. These are in fact sets, since they represent a museum exposition. A museum dedicated to the home.

There hardly is a more successful factory for „homes” in the world than IKEA or somebody able to impose the cliché of the „home” more successfully. With all the flexibility market strategies allow. The same way Hollywood produces „realities”. „Realities” which are like the furniture – they exist, but even arranged in private space they do not necessarily create a „home”.

The interrelation between real and imagined space, between an actually existing and a constructed world, is a basic problem in the works of Miriam Bäckström, moreover – the border between them

is strongly blurred. To the same extent to which in people's mass consciousness the concept of „home” is an inseparable mixture of stereotypes, clichés and genuinely existing facts and conditions. According to the generally accepted definition, the „home” should consist of a certain range of technical appliances (their number and perfection suggesting material well-being), of a bedroom, living room and children's room for the „big united family” and a kitchen, which makes the housewife „happy”. Stereotypes, unconditionally accepted as a fact, as the only possible model and, to a large extent, as the aim of existence. An aim and a dream nurtured for years by IKEA.

To what, however, is such a stability due? Most probably the commercial success of IKEA, or perhaps vice versa – the stability of the cliché aids the profits. Like the successfulness of the Hollywood film industry, banking on the desire of millions of people in the world to believe in the illusion or the dream.

Undoubtedly, the existing social phenomenon, which to a large extent has turned IKEA into a synonym of „home” or, in other words, the lasting accommodation of a commercial trademark in intimate space, has in recent decades also been assisted by the process of globalisation. Another supporting factory, closely linked with the above-mentioned one, is the phenomenon of „mass spread” or „mass production”.

Globalisation and mass production cause people to feel comfortable and „at home” everywhere, where there is IKEA furniture, Coca-Cola or a cinema showing the latest Hollywood hit. Private life has long since become an ordinary product of marketing and advertisements or at least – consciously or not, the imposed

images from the commercial clips have become strongholds of existence. They strengthen the sense of belonging to a given community.

Nevertheless, returning again to the photographs of Miriam Bäckström – they leave behind a strange, mixed feeling. Because together with the rejection of the prefab home, which the mega-company sells in millions of „copies”, these photos provoke with the warmth and suggestion of cosiness, thus causing the viewer to secretly admit to himself that at home he has at least one object with the *IKEA* trademark, because, in the final analysis, the offered furniture is functional. And who has not, at least once in his life, been moved by the fate of a movie hero? The cinema is often annoying with the repetitiveness of its screenplays, as the advertisement brochures of the furniture factory – with the constant repetition of outdated, meaningless and in many cases extremely conservative definitions of the home and family. But the movie theaters continue to be full, just as the shops in which everybody is frantically trying to discover the magic which will turn his dwelling into something more...

Footnotes:

1) *IKEA-COPORATE MUSEUM* is a collection of chronologically ordered historical-settings in Älmhult (S), which can just be visited after an announcement.