

Desperately Seeking Anneè

Stephan Berg

One of the lessons to be learned from a world that has lost its transcendence is that nobody may be considered safe from one's self any longer. Or, rather, that the personal I, once understood as the expression of an unquestionable and given certainty of one's self, today seems to be at a loss when trying to ascertain its identity. At the latest since the Enlightenment period with its challenging demand to exorcise all things foreign and then to reappropriate them into what may be called a domesticated familiarity, angst has been slowly transferred from the fringe regions of unknown territories to the one place from where it may only be driven out again at the cost of self-destruction: into the self.

Undeniably, Anneè Olofsson's art is particularly defined by her conviction that *I* is another person. Instead of creating an ambience where the *I* goes unchallenged, through her photographs, installations and performances the artist conjures up a suggestive, albeit staged atmosphere of insecurity which in the end leaves us with fundamental, yet irreconcilable feelings of uncertainty about everything. The Swedish-born artist who now lives in Oslo, Norway, does not however mainly portray events that have a bearing on her own biography, but also puts her own self at the centre-stage of her work. In doing so the context of her family proves to be a key to as well as focus of nearly all of Anneè Olofsson's artistic ventures: „My work is about subjects I am dealing with in my life. Things that are important to me and have an effect on my life, and things that scare me: the fate of having parents, the fate of getting old and die [sic].“¹

This sounds like a psychoanalytic approach to biographical research by being emotionally expressive about it. Yet her art, in direct contrast, is formulated in an artificial as well as cool, hermetic diction. The large-format photograph „The Mourners – My Last Family Photo“ (1995/96) depicts the artist's family standing in a garden dressed in dark clothes in front of lush green bushes and trees. Right in the middle between her family and sitting in an armchair we see Anneè Olofsson, dressed in the fancy-dress costume of a polar bear with the bear's head carefully positioned in her lap. Everyone looks sombre. Rather stiffly everybody stares straight into the direction of the observer: „It deals with the family. I made a last family photo in the garden the day my parents divorced. The whole situation was weird. Everybody was down and out. My grandparents came in black clothes.“²

The disturbing aspect about this piece, as well as about other works of Olofsson, is that without having any background knowledge of the scene portrayed it nevertheless becomes immediately apparent that something isn't quite right, yet one can never put one's finger on it. The polar bear dress may indicate some emotional congelation, so to speak, but it may also serve as a meta-

phor for some fleecy-furry shell to which one can escape from the pressures of reality. And the lush garden greens create a paradoxical tension towards the dark funereal fashion donned by the line-up of family members. Meticulously staged, this photograph also serves as a frozen document; one however whose contents are completely derived from the cool hermetics of a carefully arranged surface structure: 'What you see is what you see is not what you see.'

Such a multiple ambiguity is also present in her exhibition at the Kunstverein Freiburg, Germany. The presentation includes the installation „Suddenly One Summer“, which was especially made for Freiburg and consists of a tower-cum-house approximately seven yards tall with neither doors nor windows and a garden-fence parapet at the top with pointed ends that look militant as well as aggressive. Also included is a cycle of nine photographs entitled „We Are Not The Ones We Used To Be“ (1997) which depict the artist in various poses together with her father.

Mysterious in its significance, yet doubtlessly commanding its surroundings, the towerlike square above its geometrical outline on the floor ultimately turns into a paradox of itself which defies any attempts to pin it down on a terminological level. While the lath construction with its garden-fence parapet, which is well-silhouetted by the strong light shining through the narrow chinks of the laths, may indeed convey a feeling of warm *gemütlichkeit*, the sheer dimension of the work and its literal inaccessibility violently contradict such a view. From the gallery above the exhibition room one can look partially into the construction's inside, which has been painted black, without being able to reach the bottom. The empty hole appears to be both an all-devouring abyss and a cave or retreat from the dangerous world outside. Even in its formal execution this work cannot be seen in one way only. At first sight the geometrical shape and cool reverberations of the square structure place the work in the close vicinity of minimalist spacial sculpture. Then again, the inclusion of narrative aspects shows that it is clearly not so close; narrative aspects like the garden-fence-as-parapet detail or like the three handmade dummies, each about two-feet tall and leaning against the wall behind the peculiar tower house, which personify the artist and her parents all at the age of twenty-five.

The play on the obvious tension between the installation's inaccessibility and its being nevertheless emotionally charged is continued in Olofsson's photographic work. What we see are intimate moments full of ice-cold distance. Dressed in a sequined evening gown with a pearl necklace slung round her neck and her blonde hair worn loose, the artist is pictured reclining on a rust-coloured leather sofa. Her father in a dark suit and white shirt is bending over her and tenderly

touches her forehead with his hand while his daughter turns her face away. In another large-format photograph her father is seen holding his daughter's naked foot in his lap while both stare as if petrified into the direction of the camera. Nothing in these arrangements seems natural. The photos breathe with the atmosphere of sterile studio perfection. Cold arrangements clinically executed as in an experiment in front of an abstract, pitchblack backdrop. The festive solemnity as regards dress looks strange and out of context given the fact that the scene is wholly constricted to simply a sofa. The actors appear to be masked, dressed for a performance in front of a (hidden and/or voyeuristic?) observer for whose sole benefit the scene has been calculated and staged. We observe and are drawn into it. We start feeling slightly uncomfortable, even concerned in a certain way, maybe even shocked. Not only because there is a slight, albeit unmistakable incestuous overtone to all these frozen scenes, but rather, and primarily so, because what is usually considered normal – familiarity and intimacy between father and daughter – has been turned into its opposite in this case.

In spite of the physical closeness they seem to put on display these images nevertheless clearly indicate that the only thing the two people have in common is their deep-reaching loneliness. From there it follows that the sexualised gestures are not, as it were, expressions of desire. Instead, they serve as helpless make-believe constructions across an irreconcilable chasm between two people whose family bonds one should expect to have established the closest of connections. Essentially, these photographic works derive their disturbing power from the fact that they place all their psychological and emotional potential behind their minutely balanced stage set. As in a double exposure, the observer feels subliminal psychic battles going on in those frozen scenes while at the very moment where he attempts to enter deeper into this area he bounces off of the artificiality and the impenetrable hermetics of the image surfaces. Completely different from those psychical confessions and self-exposures which an artist like Richard Billingham produces in his perplexing photo records on his family (thereby continuing the work of Larry Clark or Nan Goldin), Anneè Olofsson is seeking the distance, which the staging of her self provides, in order to radically call herself into question. Besides the photographs and installations, a puppet caricature of the artist for which Anneè Olofsson composes rather complex autobiographical as well as fictional ventriloquist's dialogues is yet another artistic means which helps in forming this curious mélange of distance and confession so typical for the hot-cold character of her art. Just like the photographs, the ventriloquist's puppet functions as „a protective device against the world so that nobody can really reach into me.“ (3) Each of her works, however, also

represents an active attempt at exorcising the destructive forces within her own uncontrollable self. When seen as an extrapolation of the self as well as a genuine artistic invention, each work creates a space to which the artist may retreat, „my world which I can enter into when I can't stand the normal world around me any more“; a space „in which I protect myself from my self.“⁴ On the level of functioning as shelters from self-destruction or from annihilation by the outside world, all of Anneè Olofsson's art is deeply rooted in the theme of death and in the knowledge (horrifying for her to imagine) that all life from its very start is already bound inevitably to an end. Her despair about having to vanish is inscribed into her art and shows itself in the cool indifference with which the artist treats her subject matter. Yet the oppressive experience of the ubiquity of death does by no means hinder artistic productivity. Quite the opposite is the case: having nothing as a matrix serves as a catalyst and as a challenge to the artistic ego: only whilst working artistically, whilst striving towards tangible artistic results may such an existential angst be banned – at least momentarily.

During her performance for the opening of her exhibition at the Kunstverein in Freiburg Anneè Olofsson launches a bright firework display into the night-sky above South Baden while a female singer intones a version of the Pet Shop Boys' number „Being Boring“. In a tight denim mini skirt and high-heeled shoes Olofsson looks like a clichée of female seduction, while in the very same moment the black contact lenses she is wearing make her mutate into an eyeless and inscrutable artistic phantom. In the space of the few seconds between the glittering fireworks and the return of a darkness that seems to be even blacker now after the light is gone the portrait of the artist finds its frame: the glossy surface of a sensual innuendo and the abyss-like darkness of her empty eye-sockets behind which one imagines being able to sense the deep nothingness that hides behind all her disguises as their one and only true contents. 'Who's That Girl?'

1 Anneè Olofsson interviewed by Peter Herbstreuth, in: NOR. A. WAY – Junge Kunst aus Norwegen (exhibition cat.), Stadtgalerie Kiel 1997, p. 35 (English transcript of an interview with the artist printed in German in the main catalogue section, p. 27).

2 *ibid.*, p. 36.

3 John Peter Nilsson, „Talking to Myself“, Siksi: The Nordic Art Review, No. 3, 1996, p. 61 (Anneè Olofsson interview).

4 *ibid.*, p. 61.

Depression Deluxe

John Peter Nilsson

In her shows at Galerie Der Stadt in Esslingen in Germany (1993) and at Tallinn Art Hall in Estonia (1994), Anneè Olofsson showed forty mirrors. Directly onto these mirrors were printed forty different obituary notices taken from The New York Times. None of those who had died had reached the age of forty.

At Galerie Halskratz in Mannheim in Germany (1994), she showed an installation My home is my castle. This consisted of a white chair and a white table, on which stood 25 empty white frames. Behind the table hung a white curtain in front of an open window. In the window stood a radio with the sound turned low.

The installation called to mind an image of a small-town idyll. But this is a shut-in, anxiety-provoking image of small-town life that may bear indirect associations with Olofsson's own upbringing in a small town in southern Sweden. In her works, Olofsson tends constantly to return to themes surrounding anxiety, death and disappearance. In recent years, she has also allowed her own life to seep into her works, through her use of photographs or ventriloquists' dummies portraying herself and her family. But this is not done because she or her family are extremely exhibitionistically oriented. Rather, I suspect that she wants to leave a mark of her own presence so as to indicate the seriousness of her works.

In an interview she explained: "I have an unbelievable anxiety about death. I can get absolutely desperate and hopeless about the idea of dying. It is something that is always there in me. It runs very deep in me. I see no point in anything. Everything is meaningless. I feel like all the young people who are growing up today who have no aim, no meaning in life. But I don't think about suicide, rather I try to live with the anxiety..."¹

Admittedly, anxiety is not a particularly unique source of artistic inspiration. The history of art is filled with of more or less genuine examples of the products of anxiety. But Olofsson does not depict anxiety and fear of death as a kind of existentialist lifestyle. Rather, she uses it as a tool, not just for understanding herself, but possibly also the world we live in.

In her art, she frames a kind of modern vanitas theme. Her works are linked to a spare, minimalistically oriented aesthetic. Or, rather, to a sterile, almost clinical aestheticism. There is a coolness about these works that gradually evokes peculiar feelings of unreality. We who know her see that it is Olofsson herself in the pictures, and that the ventriloquists' dummies represent herself. We also know that it is actually her father with whom she has had herself photographed by one of those typical provincial photographers with their own studios, who primarily documents the high-

lights of family life. Or that these are her mother's and father's families arrayed around her as she poses in their midst, in the fancy dress costume of – a polar bear!

In Generation X Douglas Coupland writes: "You see, when you're middle class, you have to live with the fact that history will ignore you. You have to live with the fact that history can never champion your causes and that history will never feel sorry for you. It is the price that is paid for day-to-day comfort and silence. And because of this price, all happinesses are sterile: all sadnesses go unpitied."²

Anneè Olofsson's images of family ties are reminiscent of some of Coupland's descriptions of middle-class life. What Olofsson adds to her pictures is an interesting amalgam of what might be considered matters of either private or public concern. On the one hand, she describes her own life more or less realistically. But, on the other, she defamiliarises this life by emphasising or ironically commenting on her own feelings. She uses herself as an actor to act out her own life. Olofsson presents a strange, labyrinthine scenario. It is like a hall of mirrors in which different reflections are confused, to the point where, in the end, we are at a complete loss.

In Det utmattade Västerlandet (the exhausted west) Rafael Argullol and Eugenio Trias write: "Passivity is the hallmark of the human being of today. And it is clear: if people are turned into spectators and robbed of any possibility of influence, this gives rise to a passive being. But all this, of course, takes place under the guise of its opposite. All manner of pseudo-events take place amid a stream of constant activity."³

Are Anneè Olofsson's stagings of her own life such pseudo-events? It is more that she is making visible the anxiety of the modern welfare state. Where family ties and love are as interchangeable as any detergent. Where our dreams are dreamed into us by the mass-media. Where we no longer need to be present so as to still be alive.

We might perhaps say that what she is making visible is the welfare state's – emptiness. In her own way, she refers back to the Romantic conceptions in which man is constantly reminded of his own mortality in contrast to the eternity of nature (and of God). The perspective is the same, but in Olofsson's variant nature (and God) have been replaced by – herself and her family! In her straightforward way, she calls into question her own identity. In an almost claustrophobic way, she describes a situation in which every action becomes an action about oneself, every thought becomes a thought about oneself, every opinion becomes an opinion about oneself...

This may be the result of a kind of artistic despair about lack of meaning, or about the way in which reality and fantasy are merged in today's media society. We are bombarded by sensations

via an ever-increasing number of media at an ever-increasing pace. Entertainment merges with information. Politics becomes acting. Acting becomes reality.

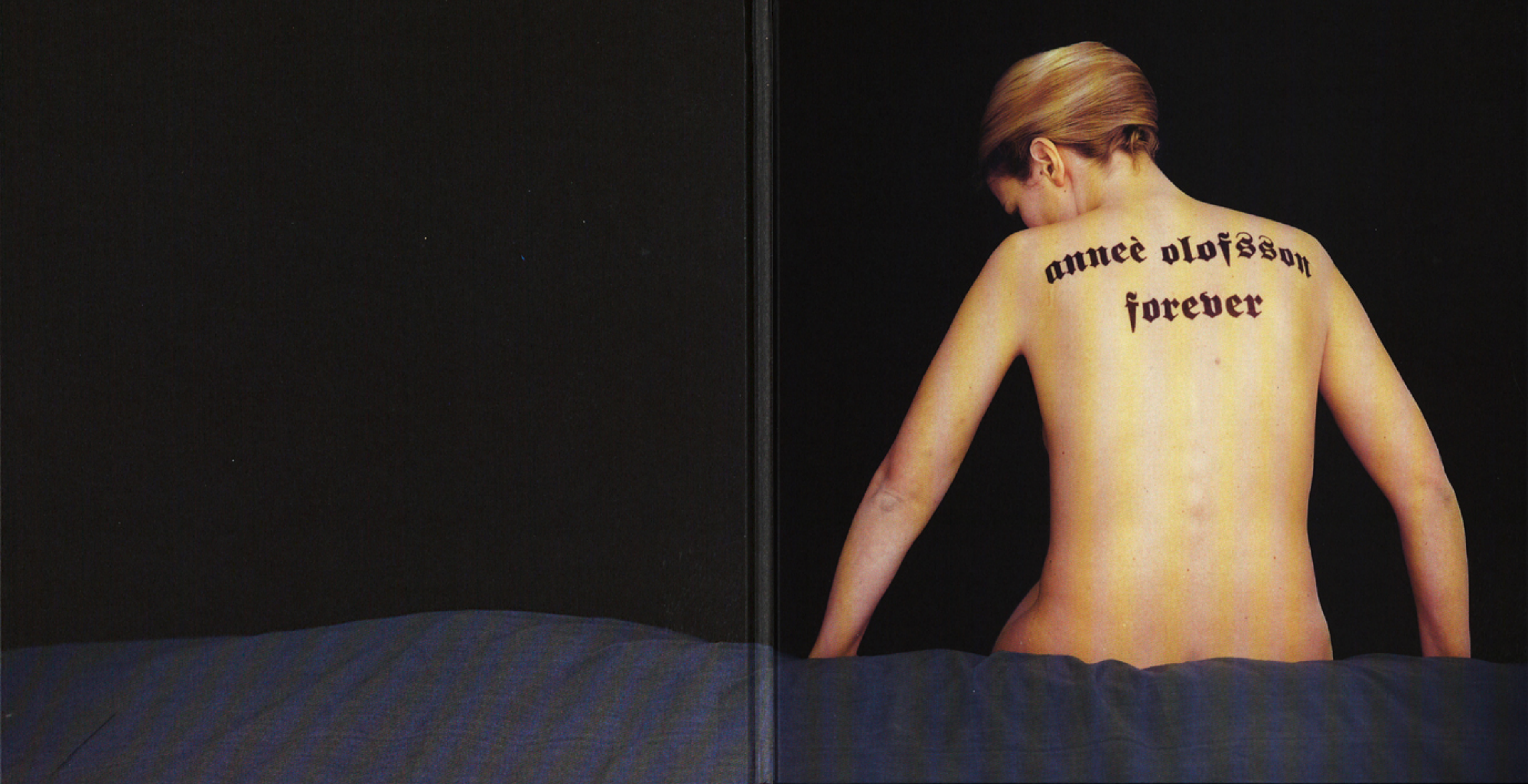
We might perhaps say that a new kind of 'despair' has come into play. On the one hand, we are brought up to be active citizens by keeping ourselves informed about what is going on in the world? On the other hand, we can no longer impose a structure or separate right from wrong, reality from fiction, private from public?

Anneè Olofsson stages her own life so as to bring existence into perspective.

1 John Peter Nilsson, "Talking to myself" (interview), *Siksi, The Nordic Art Review*, No. 3, 1996.

2 Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*, St. Martin's Press, 1991.

3 Rafael Argullol, Eugenio Trias, *El cansancio de Occidente*, Destino, 1993.

A photograph of a person's back, showing a tattoo. The person has light-colored hair and is wearing a dark blue garment. The tattoo is in a black, gothic-style font and reads "annee olofsson" on the top line and "forever" on the bottom line. The background is dark, and the lighting is focused on the back of the person.

annee olofsson
forever