

Sindre Andersen

## THE FAIRY-TALE THAT WHISPERED ITSELF

Sindre Andersen is a Norwegian translator and critic. In his essay on Michael Ross' work *Tre Eventyr* (Three Fairy Tales), he draws on Astrid Lindgren's classic adventure novel *Mio, my Mio*.

In *Mio, min Mio*, Astrid Lindgren's classic fantasy novel (English version *Mio, my Son*), there is a well that whispers in the evening. When Mio and his friend Jum Jum visit the house of Jiri and his siblings on one of their rides through the Faraway Land, they go off to the well in the twilight so Mio can hear its whispering. After a period of total silence he hears something: "Deep, deep down there it began to whisper and murmur. It was a strange voice like no other. And it *whispered tales* – tales like no other tales, more beautiful than all other tales in the world."

Those words, "*it whispered tales*," are about the only memory I have from my childhood reading of *Mio, min Mio*. I remember that I imagined this voice as a continuous murmuring of the fairy-tale to beat all fairy-tales, wonderful and impossible to reproduce. This was the essence of the fairy-tale genre, the (lost) sense of the fairy-tale, welling up from its idealized, inextinguishable source.

The feeling of the fairy-tale may be lost, but the actual feeling that it is lost lives on. We bear it with us, in adult life, where it makes us listen to its whispering again and again, during working hours, in the city, in venerable old shops and on melancholy street corners, in broad daylight. Michael Ross's contribution to Oslobiennalen is a "city triptych" consisting of uniquely produced objects placed in waiting around Oslo: two large eggs in metal in the shop of the clockmaker Ossur Soleim on Tordenskioldsgate; two wall signs with the inscription "MILLINILLION" on the corner of Myntgata 2 (by Oslobiennalen's headquarters); a golden, bent teaspoon hanging from the ceiling of the Norli's antiquarian bookshop on Universitetsgata. The title of the work in its entirety is clear enough: *Three Fairy Tales*.

Michael Ross (b. 1954) is based in New York, and is known for his small, semi-absurd wall sculptures, pendant trifles and waste objects from useful reality. Among other things he has made a series of sculptures inspired by the American-Japanese author of tales, Lafcadio Hearn. With his contribution to osloBIENNALEN he is more figurative and at the same time more conceptual than he has been in the past.

The three sculptures are presented as “untold fairy-tales”; perhaps they should rather be described as untellable? By nature they are disconnected, non-narrative, oriented towards both the moment and eternity – morning-fresh ready-mades from a Faraway Land.

And they whisper to us in places where we would not expect them to. Or perhaps where we would expect them to do so in a different way? Shops and street corners are mythical places in the cityscape, even without such manifestations, but Ross’s objects evoke the true fascination and rebelliousness of the magical reality of the fairy-tale. Their low-key gentleness is not of the narrative variety, they coax our attention to the unexpected and our dormant imagination.

*The Longest Day and the Longest Night* is what he has called the two eggs in the clockmaker’s shop. In fact they look just as much like two light bulbs, each on its own stand. Lamps without shades that shine with light and darkness in the way we know from everyday life: one egg is dark as night, the other the sky-blue of day. The title could have belonged to its own fairy-tale, and with its reference to the experience of time it has a metaphysical feel to it.



Michael Ross, *Tre eventyr (Three Fairy Tales), The Longest Day and the Longest Night*, installation view, Urmaker Ossur Soleim, Tordenskioldsgate 7, 2019

In the world of fairy-tale, day and night are potentially eternal entities, just like good and evil. Clock time is only appearance. When the fairy-tale hero is challenged to go to the end of the world and back “in ten minutes,” it is as if someone is intervening to adapt supernatural reality to the child who sits listening in awe, to adapt it to us. We stand in the clockmaker’s shop and dream ourselves into a world where day is the enemy of night, and day is always on our side – and where we refuse to budge.

To the extent that in our time a clockmaker’s shop is a fairy-tale place, it is because clocks, so analogue-sounding and ornate, have become remote phenomena to us. And because the shop actually has them in such absurd profusion: clocks that are set differently, that tick and chime unsynchronized, and thus engage in a cacophonous whispering game. But over them all, the longest day and the longest night rule, in the form of a pair of eggs. Eggs, which in themselves are about life, about unprotected, unhatched life. Ross’s eggs have been formed beyond time, they are themselves pure time with no beginning and no end – an eternity located amidst the temporal.



Michael Ross, *Tre eventyr (Three Fairy Tales)*, *The Longest Day and the Longest Night*, installation view, Urmaker Ossur Soleim, Tordenskioldsgate 7, 2019

In the work *Tvilling Millinillion (Twin Millinillion)*, day and night have become gold and silver, on two coloured metal notices hanging next to each other on a street corner. A MILLINILLION is an inconceivably sky-high quantity, a ‘fantasillion,’ a million to the power of two or perhaps even more. The word may seem invented, but it is in fact a real designation for the number which consists of a one and 3,006 zeros – and which in its capacity as an even number also meets the criterion for symbolizing the infinite in mythological language. But infinities and high numbers are not necessarily the same: the logic of the fairy-tale is like the logic of dreams – it permits several contradictions at the same time. It is both stasis (zero) and eternity (infinity), and more often than not alternates between the two. A millinillion is in reality *much more* than a million – and more than the millennia, more than the “thousands and thousands of years” that form the framework for Mio’s destiny in Lindgren’s novel. With their placement in the middle of a city, the notices also make light of the urge to go as high as possible, both in talk and in reality – and in *money*, which is after all talk and reality in perfect harmony. In Europe the correct name for the number is a “quingentilliard”; but that would not fit on the notices: “millinillion” is a word that resonates with childishness and rarity in one and the same breath. An immediately understandable new word, easy to remember, a *dollar grin* pasted on a venerable wall. The notices also suggest a street that crosses itself.

In other words, the eggs and the notices point to familiar fairy-tale clichés. On the other hand, *The Middle Ages* – the spoon in the antiquarian bookshop – gives us a hint of a little fairy-tale of its own, hanging on a maroon ribbon from the ceiling, shiny golden and fine, like a christening gift or old silverware – and oddly bent.

Spoons are among the earliest memories I have in life. Teaspoons of porridge, tablespoons of juice and cod-liver oil, of sugar for strewing over pancakes, the plastic spoons of medicine the time I had pneumonia. A spoon is something comforting and childlike, something that enters your mouth again and again, a still indispensable object for human beings, in line with shoes and cars. They transport us through life, transport food into us. They are both luxuries and utility objects: all the soft, mushy and shivering stuff we ingest with a spoon, jam and honey, whereas we take butter and pie with a knife. And the spoon is never a weapon. To bend a spoon is like bending time – it shouldn’t work. The shape of the spoon is given, it has to go straight into the mouth.

In fairy-tales, a single spoon means that someone is missing – for example the sister of Jiri who has been taken prisoner by the evil knight Kato (whom Mio later has to seek out and fight). In *The Twelve Wild Ducks*, a Norwegian folk tale, twelve spoons with no human beings attached are evidence that the princes have been turned into wild ducks so the princess can be born. At the same time spoons are also obvious class markers. The shiny teaspoon that hangs in the antiquarian bookshop – like the spoons of the bewitched princesses, and not least the spoon that tips Thumbikin (the Norwegian Tom Thumb) into the melted butter pat in his porridge during his own wedding dinner – is something other than the wooden utensils that the classic fairy-tale characters ‘Butterball’, ‘Askelad’, and the troll in the eating contest sit with.

A spoon is a profane object that becomes sacred when we see it hanging there glittering. A street corner, as at Myntgata in the old 'Quadrature,' is 'public space' at its most poetic – where sheltered neighbourhoods are linked together, where something unseen reveals itself: a way out, a meeting place. And a craftsman's shop is a residue of olden days, an area both private and public. Somebody's business, where anyone can make their own discoveries. Ross's three fairy-tales are not works that decorate, nor are they "experiences in space." They do not point to the existential content of folklore or the fairy-tale genre, the self-realization that has mainly caught the attention of the folklorists. Rather, they are small prods, reminders. In all three works there is a doubling, a crease, a bend, a fold, a contrast. Ross gives us glimpses, speaks of other worlds – but he does it in a clowning, minimalistic way.

Wandering around in Oslo in search of Ross's small sculptures is pure meta-fairy-tale – just as *Mio, min mio* is: the lonely bookworm Bo Vilhelm Olsson is sent from his dull everyday life in Upplandsgatan in Stockholm (where the notices could have hung) to the Faraway Land. But even after he has got there and is renamed Mio, he has a need for fairy-tale. It is still valid to keep dreaming. In our own grey and sad lives, there are traces of both the quotidian and the infinite experiences of the fairy-tales – and of course wells that whisper, spoons that glitter.

Ross's objects are like small magical symbols, quaint and glittering in public, like clues in a game or an episode from a surrealistic sketch show. The small works cannot be experienced unless one steps into their own little world – listens, zooms in, while at the same time seeing them in context. It is the whispering – the appropriately combined wryness and snug originality of the works – that catches hold of us. Not very firmly, but it continues to hold us back if we stop listening, or again if we rush past too quickly.

And even if we wander around in a world which in itself seems to be magical, we shall continue to hear new whispering wells, melting clocks ticking, to tempt us further in. The day-and-night-coloured eggs of Michael Ross are unlikely to lead us further into the clockwork mechanism. But the spoon that hangs there and dangles crookedly – like a hunchbacked question mark risen from the dead – tempts us definitively on into the bookshop's labyrinth of shelves.