



## Object-Figure Misfits

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Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Norell, D., Rodhe, E. (2017). Object-Figure Misfits. Scroope: Cambridge Architecture Journal(26): 154-164

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.



# SCROOPE

CAMBRIDGE ARCHITECTURE JOURNAL

apologia

ISSUE 26 / 2017



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We are grateful for all the support we recieved in making this issue of Scroope. We would like to acknowledge in particular Wendy Pullan, Max Sternberg, Felipe Hernández, Ying Jin, Stan Finney, Eve Avdoulos, Anwaar Jaber, Dena Qaddumi, Sofia Singler, Rowan Lamb, Federica Goffi and Cleo Roberts.

The printing of this publication would not have been possible without the financial assistance of The Martin Centre for Architectural and Urban Studies at the Department of Architecture, University of Cambridge.



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ISSN 0966.1026v  
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Cover: *White Plan, Longhouse.* Neil Spiller.



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apologia

ISSUE 26 / 2017

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Fig. 1: Double phone booth at Kornhamnstorg, introduced in 1914. [Image Credit: Holger Ellgaard, Wikipedia, Creative Commons, 2010].

# Object-Figure Misfits

Daniel Norell and Einar Rodhe

*dead ringer*

noun, slang

1. A person or thing that closely resembles another; ringer.

*Dead Ringers* is a recent project by our practice Norell/Rodhe that explores architectural misfits between object and figure.<sup>1</sup> It examines the role of small, enclosed public spaces in Stockholm’s urban fabric, like phone booths, restroom kiosks and photo booths. These figurative ‘urban booths’ are interesting to us because they make up an atypical part of public space that is currently under threat. Phone booths, for example, were once designed to represent and provide communication technology, but are now becoming outmoded (Fig. 1). These and other urban booths are rapidly being removed from the city’s streets and squares, without anyone noticing it. *Dead Ringers* is a response to this tendency in the form of a design project. It is an *apologia* for an overlooked and increasingly rare type of small building that nevertheless forms a vital part of the city’s public domain.

<sup>1</sup> *Dead Ringers* was designed by Norell/Rodhe in 2014–2015. Team: Daniel Norell, Einar Rodhe, Karin Hedlund. Thanks to the Department of Architecture at Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg.

In Stockholm, urban booths constitute iconic architectural objects that are deeply engrained in public consciousness. They offer space and various services, but they are in addition a set of distinct figures that inhabit streets and squares. Modelled after the body that they are meant to house, their silhouettes suggest an almost human presence. Their impact on public space lies in the combination of a narrowly defined function with an overt architectural figure. *Dead Ringers* is an attempt to provide a reconceived understanding of this specific type of public space through the lens of architectural figuration.

Historically, appropriations of figure in architecture range from the representational to the symbolic. Figuration has been conceptualised by Charles Jencks as ‘a mode of architectural communication’ that relies on metaphor.<sup>2</sup> It typically involves a subject seeing and interpreting the mass of one building as another or as an object. In recent years, the figure has reappeared in architectural discourse as an alternative to material organisation and diagrams, two tropes that came to dominate discourse in the 1990s and early 2000s. To some, iconographic figuration has become an expedient way for architects to explain and justify their designs, particularly in the eyes of the public.<sup>3</sup> Figure, in short, has become a way to assign a ‘consumable image’ to significant large scale urban developments.<sup>4</sup> Projects like Beijing’s National Stadium (completed 2007), marketed as ‘the Bird’s Nest’, and London’s 30 St Mary Axe tower (completed 2004), nicknamed ‘the Gherkin’, are emblematic of this tendency. While these and other similar projects point to the figure’s capacity for ‘humanising’ architecture, they nevertheless limit its impact to a one-dimensional reading. Once and for all pinned down as a bird’s nest, the suggestive figure of the stadium is unlikely to give rise to other associations. Figure effectively becomes a way to lend an otherwise generic building type a stable and media-friendly identity.

Today, one can sense a growing anxiety with figuration as a way to assign readily comprehensible meaning to architecture through iconography. Instead, many practices seek ways to employ figuration that is less overt and more ambiguous in its nature. In light of these recent events, we are compelled to make an *apologia* for a different concept of figure in architecture – one that productively destabilises an object in order to open up a multitude of readings.

### Object-Figure Misfits

The concept of misfit between object and figure that is of relevance here can best be explained by invoking artist Erwin Wurm’s *Fat Car* sculpture series, originating from the mid 2000s. The following question was addressed to the artist in a recent interview: ‘So lurking beneath all your fat cars are the real models?’<sup>5</sup> Each *Fat Car* is essentially a life-size car that looks as if its metal panels have been elastically inflated to the point where the whole thing is about to burst. As a mass, each sculpture is still easily recognisable as a car – and indeed even a particular model – but its finer formal features such as head and taillights, license plates, etc. are almost lost behind heavy folds of fat. Wurm’s straightforward answer to the question reveals a keen interest in the fit, or perhaps *misfit*, between an object and its figure:

Precisely. You need the real car because the idea is to distort an existing shape. I have always been interested in finding a shape that negates the actual shape, and is more like a uniform.<sup>6</sup>

Although the fat of the cars is a ‘uniform’, i.e. fake and not made from sheet metal, the *Fat Car* is based on a real car that ‘lurks beneath’. Its fat foam panels are attached to actual chassis, and the divisions between panels follow their subdivisions. For all one might know, it seems like the underlying ‘order’ of the car, its part-to-whole relationships and materiality (or at least the lacquer), is preserved and even emphasised by the distortion inflicted on it. Following these observations, it is clear that each car in the series is as much of a variation on a car proper as it is a representation. The effect is akin to the architecture parlante in that it is a sculpture that imitates a car. But each *Fat Car* does not just allude to a car. It is a car, a vaguely familiar one.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Jencks, ‘The Modes of Architectural Communication,’ in *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), pp. 25–52.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the shift towards iconographic figuration, see Alejandro Zaera-Polo, Sylvia Lavin, Jeff Kipnis, ‘About Communication,’ *Quaderns*, 245 (2005), pp. 76–101.

<sup>4</sup> Alejandro Zaera Polo, ‘The Hokusai Wave,’ *Quaderns*, 245 (2005), pp. 76–87 (p. 85).

<sup>5</sup> Gerrit Terstiege interviewing Erwin Wurm, ‘It’s All About Deformation,’ *GRID - Zeitschrift für Gestaltung*, 01 (2013), pp. 66–73 (p. 71).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

The amplification of certain morphological features in a *Fat Car* productively introduces a gap between the object and its figure. By scaling parts of its body out of proportion, Wurm calls our attention to the anatomy of the car, and, by extension, to its anthropomorphism. Beyond the obvious resemblance of head lights to a pair of eyes and the grille to a grin, this allows us to attribute human traits such as personality, emotion and intention to it. And this might just be one of the most powerful aspects of the figure in architecture: Its ability to lend agency to inanimate objects.

### Dead Ringers

*Dead Ringers* is a public art project for Stockholm, where our practice is based. The project focuses on Stockholm’s urban booths: small, enclosed spaces that are part of the public domain. These kinds of public spaces are a current concern simply because they are becoming extinct. Some, like phone booths, are rapidly being removed because of technological shifts.<sup>7</sup> Others are threatened because they are at odds with prevailing ideals for public spaces, like transparency and openness. Departing from a visual taxonomy of the city’s urban booths, *Dead Ringers* critically turns this tendency into new opportunities (Fig. 2). It proposes to selectively replace removed booths with mysterious near-copies that provide similar types of enclosed public spaces, without the narrow functional focus of phones and photo booths. These strangely familiar figures are a play on the proportions and iconic nature of Stockholm’s existing urban booths. Their dark but vaguely humorous silhouettes acknowledge the ambiguous character of most urban booths: as bright beacons of technology, but also as houses for a variety of activities of private nature.

Discourse on public space tends to be focused on open spaces – streets, squares and parks.<sup>8</sup> Small, enclosed spaces that are part of the public domain are often overlooked. Ranging from eighteenth-century urinals to 1970s photo booths, these enclosures provide shelter from the surrounding streetscape. Daily life as well as popular culture provide ample evidence that these intimate spaces are used for a wide variety of activities that go beyond their specified function. Superman famously uses a phone booth for changing clothes, but other common uses are surely shadier. These secluded public spaces provide an often-welcome opportunity to avoid the gaze of fellow citizens as well as that of surveillance cameras. In keeping with this logic, each *Dead Ringer* provides a loosely programmed enclosure for one or two people. Program is suggested rather than prescribed by adding small features like seats, arm and footrests, and light fixtures.

As a measure of security, urban booths have always incorporated openings and varying degrees of transparency. These points of contact between the interior and the surrounding open space work in both directions. A person placing a phone call, for example, can casually observe people in the street from a partially hidden vantage point. However, the very same person is simultaneously singled out from the crowd as parts of her or his figure are framed and revealed by openings or glazing. This game of seeing and being seen might at most be a provocative side effect of current and historical urban booths, but it is nevertheless a profound feature of this type of space that *Dead Ringers* critically explores (Fig. 3).

*Dead Ringers* gain their rickety appearances by selectively sampling the figural silhouettes of Stockholm’s existing urban booths. Each *Dead Ringer* combines different elevations from several booths, so that new, slightly odd figures are formed. This catches and sustains visual interest as no figure is privileged over another. It makes them appear different depending on how they are approached, something that invites circling around them. Some viewing angles will reveal a silhouette that is closely aligned with an existing booth. Moving along, the same silhouette subtly shifts into a lop-sided, sculptural mix of two or several booths (Fig. 4).

Most if not all of Stockholm’s urban booths are immediately recognisable as small figures in the urban fabric. As they populate streets and plazas they stand out against the uniform fabric of classicist perimeter blocks that make up the inner city of Stockholm. The booths are strategically placed where the people congregate, at squares and busy intersections, but they never occupy the centre, where you more likely to find a fountain or sculpture (Fig. 5). Instead, they withdraw to the

<sup>7</sup> The last operational phone booth in Sweden was decommissioned in 2015. From Telia website: <http://news.cision.com/se/telia/r/telefonkiosken-tackar-for-sig.c9471263> (accessed 14 June 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Well known historical examples include William H Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (New York: Project for Public Spaces, 1980) and Jan Gehl, *Life Between Buildings—Using Public Space* (The Danish Architectural Press, 2006), originally published as *Livet mellem husene* (Arkitektens forlag, 1971).



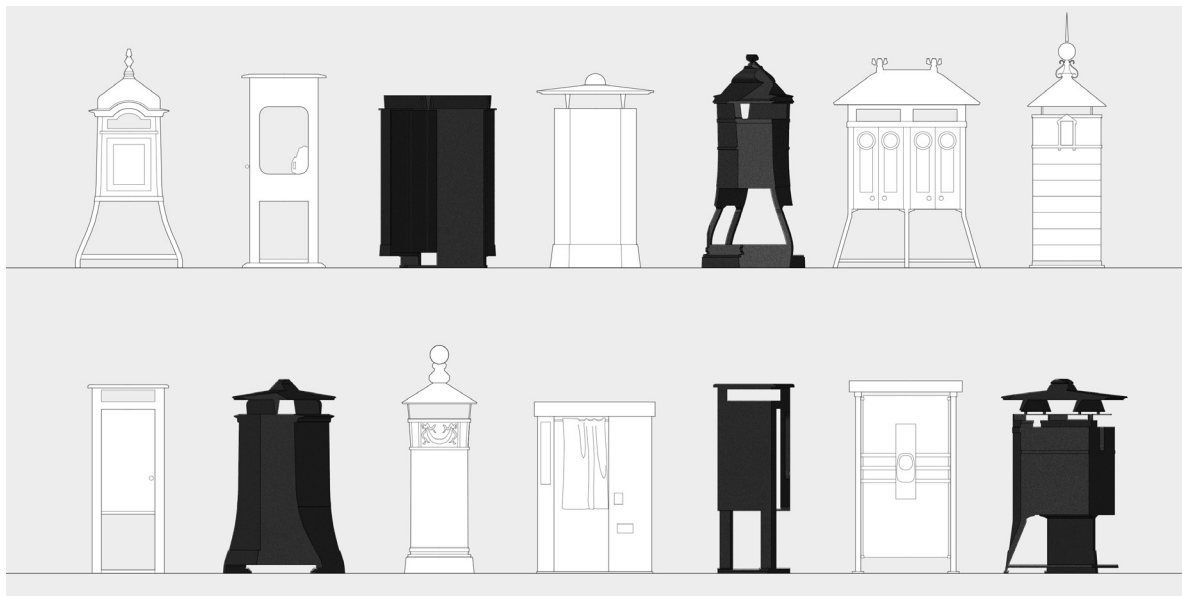


Fig. 2: Visual taxonomy of Stockholm's existing urban booths (white) and proposed *Dead Ringers* (black). [All works by Norell and Rodhe].

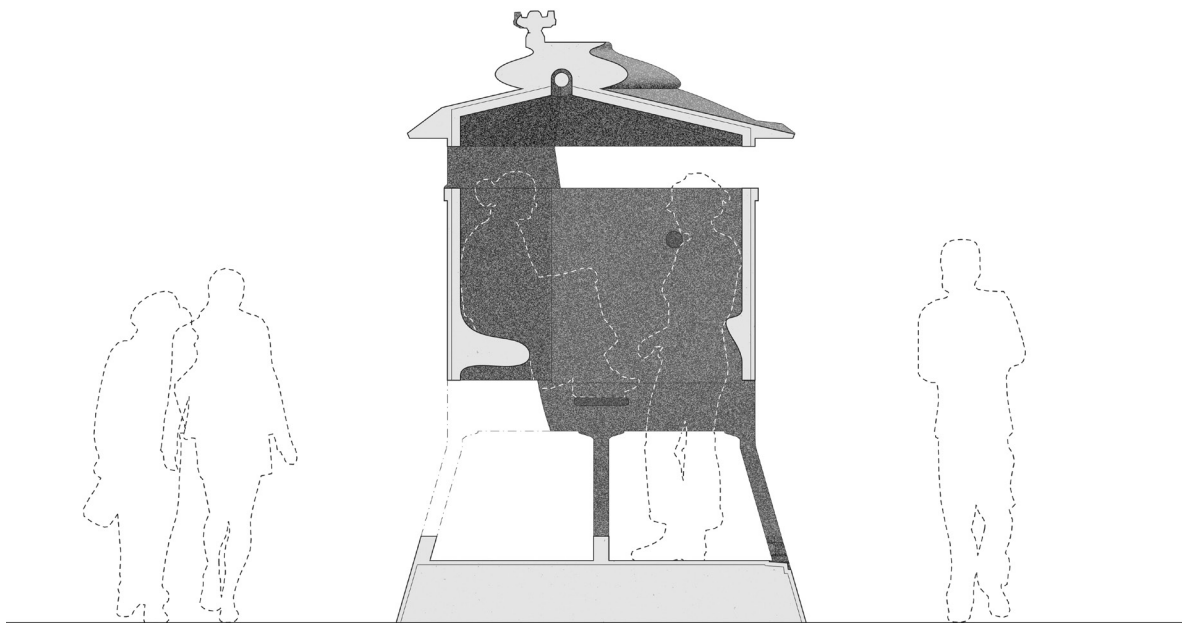


Fig. 3: *Dead Ringer*, typical section.

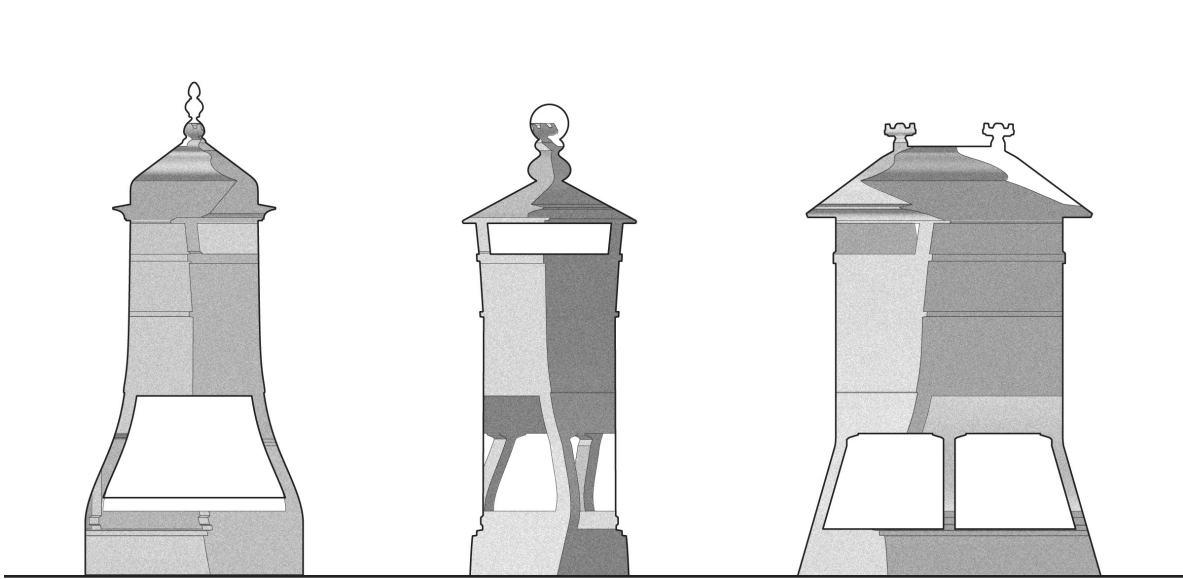


Fig. 4: *Dead Ringer* elevation studies. Misfits between figures / silhouettes and building mass.

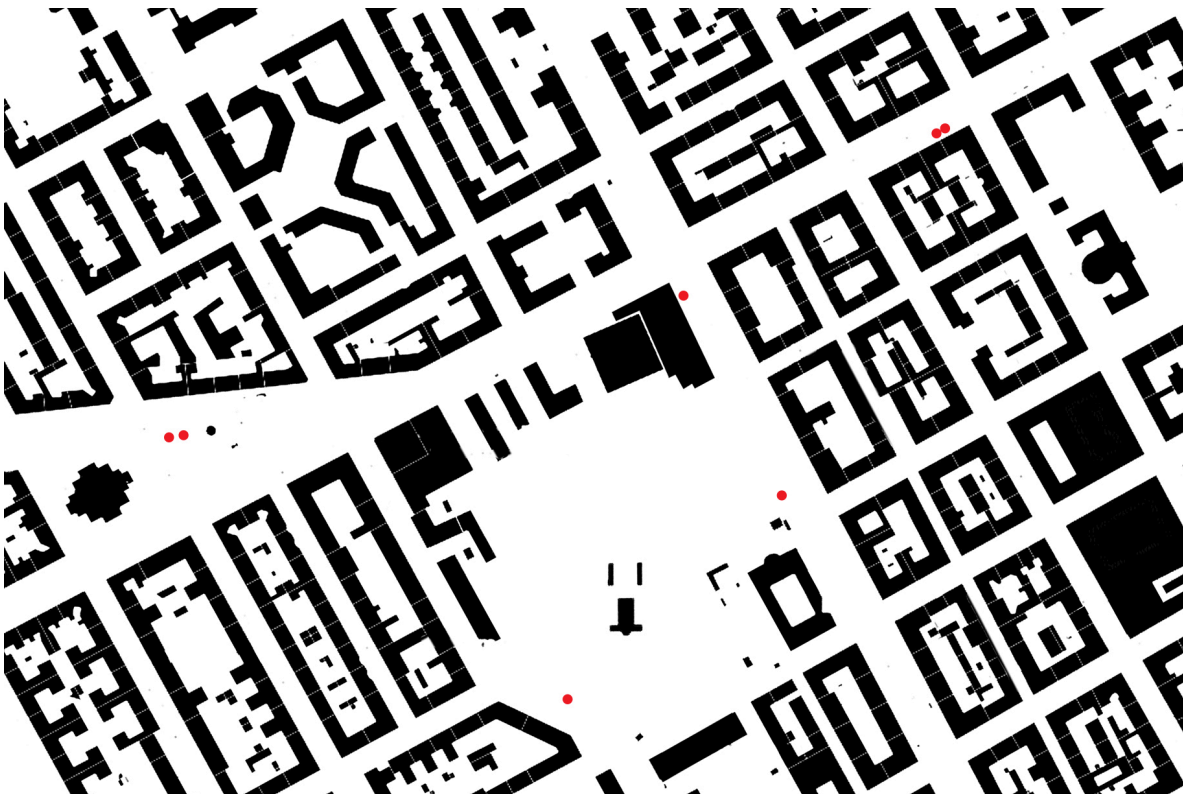


Fig. 5: Plan map of Stockholm's Vasastaden district showing the city's homogeneous fabric of perimeter blocks (black), mostly constructed between 1880 and 1950, and locations of removed phone booths (red).



Fig. 6: Elevation showing *Dead Ringer* replacing existing phone booth at Odengatan 37.



Fig. 7: Section showing *Dead Ringer* replacing existing phone booth at Odengatan 37.

side or to a corner, giving their visitors a chance for a momentary disconnection from the street life. At the turn of the last century some models featured shingle-clad pitched roofs and slender legs, while more recent ones are monolithic, rectilinear volumes made from formed metal panels. What ties them all together, despite stylistic differences, is the fact that they all have been shaped after the human body. Their anthropomorphic features include vertical proportions, symmetry, and a clear division into base, enclosure and roof. Each *Dead Ringer* tweaks these ideal proportions and perfect symmetries of historical booths, recasting them as imperfect and multivalent individuals. This creates a misfit between a known and iconic object – an original booth – and the odd figure of a proposed *Dead Ringer*.

An encounter with a *Dead Ringer* that has replaced a recently removed phone booth may provoke a multitude of reactions (Fig. 6, 7). In daily life, the familiarity of a *Dead Ringer* will surely invite people to use it as urban booths have always been used: as a small private niche in the midst of a vast public space. But the strangeness of its figure will at the same time most certainly introduce a moment of caution – is it really what it seems to be? This heightens the awareness of a viewing subject that approaches it and opens up a range of emotional responses, from immediate delight to wary exploration. Like one of Wurm's fat cars, each *Dead Ringer* sets up a dialogue with a viewer in which its status shifts from being an inanimate object to a subject with intention and personality. For some Stockholmers, this conversation will take a humorous turn as they laugh and greet the stranger as a long gone friend. Others might find the dark silhouette intimidating and keep their distance (Fig. 8). Whatever the case, all *Dead Ringers* are destined to play tricks on the collective memories of Stockholm's inhabitants. They open up a gap between an object as people knew it and a new figure that is waiting to be appropriated.

## Conclusion

Overall, *Dead Ringers* is a context specific work. Part of the experience of encountering a *Dead Ringer* is dependent on prior encounters with Stockholm's existing urban booths. Their respective idiosyncrasies can be attributed to the way in which several silhouettes from existing booths are carefully sampled and superimposed. Their basic formal attributes, such as their odd anthropomorphism, can be experienced immediately by any subject. But the slower associations to finer formal features of the existing urban booths are likely to go unnoticed by a subject without any knowledge of the originals. That being said, the project still suggests some more general possibilities.

*Dead Ringers* challenges several preconceptions about public spaces. Stockholm's urban booths are continuously being decommissioned and even turned into ruins before being removed. Without their original function they open up to interpretation, appropriation and new narratives. The proposed *Dead Ringers* accelerates this tendency by further distancing these booths from their original function. The spaces that they provide are small, enclosed and specific rather than vast, open and generic. Their overtly anthropomorphic figures give them personality and agency, qualities that are antithetical to the idea of public space as a neutral stage or blank canvas waiting to be appropriated by humans.

By extension, *Dead Ringers* suggests a specific concept of figuration in architecture. Each of our proposed *Dead Ringers* looks for the moment when a clear reading of an object partially breaks down – when it can be vaguely recognised but not fully pinned down. They employ multiple, superimposed figures in order to make the reading ambiguous and multifaceted rather than distinct and didactic. They obscure and distort some of the clarity and perfection of their originals, something that emphasises their 'human' nature. Third, they take a literal approach to figuration, as they are 'real' urban booths and not just a nod or reference to such booths.

Situated in-between urban furniture, small-scale architecture and public art, *Dead Ringers* critically examines and redefines the role of Stockholm's urban booths. The fact that their removal has gone largely unnoticed suggests that their elusive nature makes them fall outside of established categories: too enclosed and specific to catch the interest of protesters against diminishing public space, and too small to be taken seriously as a subject of study by architects.





Fig. 8: *Dead Ringers* as dark silhouettes in Stockholm's urban fabric.





Ross Anderson, Pushpa Arabindoo and Regan Koch, Peter Armstrong, Theodora Bowering, Peter Carl, Michael Robinson Cohen, Amy DeDonato and Miroslava Brooks, Jessie Fyfe, Federica Goffi, Tom Heneghan, Glen Hill, Irit Katz, Luke Kon, Anca Matyiku and Chad Connery, Rowan Moore, Daniel Norell and Einar Rodhe, Wendy Pullan, Alex Young-II Seo, Claudio Sgarbi, Neil Spiller, Maximilian Sternberg, Benjamin Taylor, James Horace Vertigo, Anthony Vidler, Jonathan Weston, Susan Seung-Ok Whang

ISSN 0966-1026



9 770966 102001

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