



Daniel Balabán, *Plants*, 1996, watercolor on canvas, 63 x 47 1/4". From "... and don't forget the flowers."

roster of contemporary artists who have contemplated flowers is remarkable: Ellsworth Kelly, Charles Ray, Jay DeFeo, Christopher Williams, Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Cy Twombly—the list is long, even without obvious polemical entries such as Robert Mapplethorpe's calla lilies, or the mountain blossom wielded against defenseless car windows in Pipilotti Rist's video installation *Ever Is Over All*, 1997. A recent, smartly presented exhibition in Brno attested to the continuing vitality of this subject. Curated by Yvona Ferencová, head of modern and contemporary art at the show's only venue, the Moravian Gallery (and curator of the Czech pavilion at the upcoming Venice Biennale), "... and don't forget the flowers" brought together twenty-three Czech and Slovak artists working in all media. Five of the contributing artists were

born in the 1950s and the rest ten to twenty-five years later.

Mixing pre-Velvet Revolution artists with a younger generation was critical to the show's success, for the exhibition's title reverberated with echoes of the Soviet-dominated past. Bringing flowers when visiting was yet another mundane conformist ritual of that era, like keeping geraniums on the windowsill or handing out red carnations at a public ceremony. The show's older artists were represented both by recent works—helping establish continuity with contemporary trends—and by earlier pieces that reminded viewers of the frame of reference under Communist "normalization" between 1969 and 1989. In a 1978 piece documented here, for example, installation artist Jiří Kovanda placed a houseplant at the foot of a concrete pillar in an empty attic, an absurdist gesture that contrasted fragile life with the authoritarian immovability of a prison state. Kovanda's pieces helped anchor an otherwise slight suggestion by thirty-year-old Dominik Lang (Ferencová's selection for Venice this year) that the museum guards—typically women pensioners—wear florally scented perfumes during the exhibition run (*Untitled*, 2010).

Artist and curator Václav Magid gave Kovanda's oppositional scheme a captivating twist by fashioning a giant flower out of cardboard, its petals shaped like the cell blocks of a panoptical detention center but hung with common clothes for leaves—a surveillance architecture festooned with rags (*And the Sky Saw This Proud Skeleton Blossom Out as a Flower*, 2010). Eighteen photographs by the duo of Martin Polák and Lukáš Jasanský, *Nature—God's Poor Little Things*, 1996–97, captured naturally misshapen woodland plants and trees, while Markéta Othová summoned remembrances of childhood through a cluster of portraitlike close-up photographs of ordinary plants. A delicate watercolor on canvas by Daniel Balabán, *Plants*, 1996, and runic mathematical drawings by Denisa Lehocká made vivid the theme of quickly fading beauty emphasized throughout the show and its catalogue.

One floor above the main exhibition, a parallel display centered on the representation of flowers in premodern times, with excerpts from a Baroque herbarium and samples of tulip and crocus seeds that visitors were asked to plant and then return to visit throughout the show, to help their potted creations grow and flower. Kitschy audience-participation initiative? Certainly—but that goes with the territory.

—Matthew S. Witkovsky

## STOCKHOLM

### Anna Barham

GALERIE NORDENHAKE

Using anagrams, Anna Barham has created a seemingly endless language network that riffs off the enigmatic words "Return to Leptis Magna"; the resulting phrases trail off into the nonsensical—"Repaint Lost Argument"—or just as often produce still enigmatic yet more resonant mutterings: "Interrupt Tonal Games," for example. Occasionally there are phrases that appear to reflect on the network itself, e.g., "Patrol Strange Muttering." Barham's approach is an elastic hybrid of Sol LeWitt's 1974 *Variations of Incomplete Open Cubes* and the playful nonsense poetry Hugo Ball performed at the Cabaret Voltaire. She is eclectic, ranging from installations to sculpture to artists' books—the work on view here was a reading from her 2010 book *Return to Leptis Magna*. The ancient Roman city in the title provides a fuzzy touchstone for her practice. Now a magnificent ruin in modern Libya, it was founded in the eighth century BC by the Phoenicians, whose alphabet, the origin of the script you now read, was spread throughout the Mediterranean world as a result of their trading networks. The writing system that was germinated and then disseminated by the Phoenicians, creating a potentially endless linguistic system, is emulated as anagrams sprout and sprawl from Barham's germinal phrase.

The resulting audio piece was here set within *Arena*, 2011, a wooden construction that served as seating for Barham's audience and shadowed the form of the ancient amphitheater in Leptis Magna. As language dissolved beneath her anagram system, from the merely puzzling ("Armature Nesting Plot") toward the near breakdown of meaning ("Purr Last Omega Intent"), abstract rhythms took over as pure sound forms. Where were we? Between unfolding anagrams, ancient cities, nonsense, language, and the mysterious, Barham's art seems intentionally open to the possibility of vagueness in the sense that the mathematician Friedrich Waismann touched on in his description of the notion of the "open textured concept" (later applied by Morris Weitz to art). Waismann writes: "Take any material object statement. The terms which occur in it are non-exhaustive; that means that we



Anna Barham, *Arena*, 2011, wood and MDF, 3' 3 3/8" x 13' 11 1/4" x 13' 11 1/4".

cannot foresee completely all possible conditions in which they are to be used . . . and that means that we cannot foresee completely all the possible circumstances in which the statement is true or in which it is false." Language, artistic or otherwise, is in this sense pure potential, which brings with it variability. Therefore, substantiating a fixed meaning is foreclosed: It is factually impossible and not merely logically difficult. Written language, visual art, sound design, and experience

itself are perennially indefinable—or so Barham, along with more than a few others, believes.

Back to the ancient world. Plato theorized that the classical elements fire, water, air, and earth were composed of regular geometric solids such as tetrahedrons and dodecahedrons. A small but intriguing light sculpture formed from tetrahedrons, *A Splintered Game*, 2009, was the perfect coda for the exhibition (and gave it its name). Here, fluorescent tubes, controlled by a computer sending random signals, turn on and off so that the work's geometry is perpetually unresolved, in a state of constant becoming: endless pure potential. It is tempting to call Barham's art esoteric or arcane, but such terms don't strike the right note. It's true that she illustrates ideas that Waismann grappled with, as did Weitz and the philosopher Maurice Mandelbaum, as they tailored fundamentals from Wittgenstein's philosophy to the concept of art. But her art is visual poetry, albeit determined by rules, and not metaphors. As Samuel Beckett once said of James Joyce: "His writing is not *about* something; it is *that something itself*."

—Ronald Jones

#### MALMÖ, SWEDEN

### Henrik Olesen

MALMÖ KONSTHALL

Henrik Olesen's art is unmarvelous. Unlike the spectacular work of fellow Nordic artists Olafur Eliasson and Elmgreen & Dragset, his is gritty and grounded. There's no appealing finish—either to his works (collages, posters, sculptures, texts, and three-dimensional architectural interventions), or to his first major exhibition in Scandinavia, at Malmö Konsthall, whose generous, rectangular space has probably never been used this inharmoniously. The far half of the space was packed with material and presented no clear distinction between the different works, while the other half, facing the street, was left almost empty. This rhizomatic installation fit Olesen's image laboratory in a way that a neatly curated show wouldn't have.

Henrik Olesen,  
*I do not go to work today. I don't think I go tomorrow* (detail),  
2010, mixed media,  
78 3/4 x 59".



He is surprisingly little known in his native Denmark, but Olesen, born in 1967, has established himself as a remarkable contemporary artist on the wider scene, for instance with a presentation currently on view in New York in the Museum of Modern Art's Projects gallery. The retrospective in Malmö (traveling next month to the Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel) contains works from the past thirteen years, and what at first glance appeared to be an incoherent accumulation of stuff turned out to be a robust presentation of works tied together by a rough thread.

The first piece one encountered was *I do not go to work today. I don't think I go tomorrow*, 2010, a much expanded version of an installation first shown at the Berlin Biennale in 2010. Mounted on Plexiglas panels hanging from the ceiling and on an old dividing wall the artist found in the basement of the Malmö Konsthall, the work displays pieces

of electronic hardware disassembled by the artist—for instance, a couple of Apple laptops. The small components are dissected and glued side by side on the panels. This is a witty, straightforward, and paradigmatic example of Olesen's artistic strategy: Like a surgeon, he opens the surface with a scalpel, revealing the materiality beneath the coded interface.

The next work, a fragmented portrait of British mathematician Alan Turing, also contained images of an apple: the cyanide-laced one that he allegedly used to kill himself in 1954. Turing was the first person to construct a machine that could read and write binary codes. But in 1952 he was arrested and sentenced for homosexual acts. To avoid prison, he agreed to undergo a hormone treatment, in consequence of which he grew breasts and became impotent. Turing didn't fit a patriarchal, heterosexual society. Through images, texts, and objects, the "Alan Turing Project," 2008–10, poetically criticizes these conventional power structures and suggests alternative ways to live.

In *Some Faggy Gestures*, 2010, seemingly modeled on art historian Aby Warburg's "Mnemosyne Atlas," 1925–29, Olesen presents an extensive collection of photocopied art images on large black plates. Under categories such as "dominance," "the feminine son," "feminine men," and "sodomites," he creates a new, more inclusive, and even funny art history, one not dictated by conventional, heterosexual standards. By suggesting this alternative history, he challenges the way society's complex realities are reduced to what Roland Barthes called the depoliticized speech of myth.

Olesen gives a radical and confusing, sometimes even paranoid, representation of society, and I left the art center with wide-open eyes, suspiciously watching people passing by, wondering what they might be repressing or hiding. And yet I smiled. Despite the rough and revealing character of his work, Olesen is an amusing and often witty artist.

—Tom Hermansen

#### MADRID

### "Atlas"

MUSEO NACIONAL CENTRO DE ARTE REINA SOFÍA

"Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back?" is a project conceived by Georges Didi-Huberman for the Reina Sofia (it will travel to the ZKM in Karlsruhe and the Sammlung Falckenberg in Hamburg). The operation underlying the project is ambitious, yet simple and plausible: to use the panels of Aby Warburg's "Mnemosyne Atlas," 1925–29, to define what might be called the "atlas drive," a voracious strain of archive fever (to borrow Jacques Derrida's phrase) that has spread throughout Western culture since what Karl Kraus called "the last days of mankind," and to illustrate this argument with a selection of 365 works, mostly from the twentieth century.

Indeed, since World War I brought an end to people's trust in language, as evidenced by avant-garde poetry such as that of the Dadaists (long before Adorno's denial that there could be poetry after Auschwitz), there has been an endless stream of epistemological ruptures: There is a gap between signifier and signified; reality does not lie in its representation; and, still worse, truth no longer submits to scientific positivism. As French philosopher Michel Serres would say, in this state of affairs the Western subject is forced to once again become a cartographer and to replace all the existing maps with his own work from scratch. The atlas, like a new operative field where, as Didi-Huberman says, "everything could begin again," is precisely what emerges after dictionaries have been abandoned. Whereas the encyclopedia is composed of the sum of details, the atlas takes shape through fragments—the largest conceivable units, though still