

—I saw myself standing over there in the doorway, looking at myself. I sat at a table with people around me. They talked and they laughed, several of them drank beer or wine. The motions slowed down; the room transformed into an unmoving image.

“Make no mistake, the audience has not come here for you. They don’t gather to hear what you have to tell them, to marvel at the clarity of your vision. Like the city, they survive by renewing themselves, knowing that to refuse change is to be forever altered, to decay. To repair the walls of the cathedral, the masons gently lower the crumbling soot-blackened medieval stones to the frozen ground and haul them to an unheated warehouse near the harbour. Here they are remade from freshly-quarried stone—their imperfections and vagueness of shape, the effects of centuries of weathering, frost action, fungal impregnation, negated and the new carvings replace the old blocks in the once-ancient walls. Meanwhile, in the vast concrete darkness of the warehouse, the old blocks are stacked together and the cathedral rises anew.”
—Will Bradley¹

1.
Six tonnes hit the ground and then cheering and the clapping of hands can be heard. David Sjölander is in the Huila province, Angola; it is December 4, 1948.² Next to him now lies the dead elephant. Another gentleman steps up and shakes his hand. The carcass is transported to Gothenburg, where the skin is tanned and prepared. Then a structure is built from wood, iron, and steel mesh and covered with two and a half tonnes of blue clay. The clay is modelled into an anatomical sculpture, which eventually becomes a plaster mould for the hide.

At that time, Sjölander worked as a taxidermist at the Gothenburg Natural History Museum. I stand next to the elephant. It is enormous; it is unreal. Dead but alive or dead and stuffed. I have been in this building once before. We were children on a field trip. It is odd, but I don’t remem-

ber that the elephant stood here then, yet it takes up so much space and is one of the museum’s main attractions. I have a feeling that not much has changed since I was here that time. The Natural History Museum was inaugurated in 1923, and the current exhibition has apparently not been updated since 1970. Information about nature, the natural, the animal, is provided in text and images. And stuffed animals, of course. Little signs are handwritten or typed on an older kind of typewriter. The paper has yellowed in some places, and sometimes I can see thick layers of dust that has collected behind or under the glass panes protecting the exhibition. Scattered documents, everything divided into different sections and species. Like an ancient Google. The animals are frozen in their poses, framed and lit with spotlights that give the scene

more life. I look closer and look for signs of decay. Some of the hides have begun to crack at their seams. Slowly the contents leak out.

I want to ask someone who works here how many visitors they actually get. It is empty. Now it is empty. It suddenly strikes me that there is nothing digital in the exhibition at all. I think of ruins and time capsules, of how this entire building has itself in some way been transformed into a stuffed animal.

An image. It carries a history, a narrative. It is there from the beginning. Framed, flat, or three-dimensional. Moving or still. Drawing has always been a beginning. That was how it began. A drawing can have a more direct origin that quickly can end up on a sheet of paper. If it is made from looking at or watching reality, a



Untitled, On Fire. 2016. Installation view. BFA exhibition, KHM Gallery, Malmö. Sculpture and video on monitor. Dimensions variable. Rasmus Ramø Streith

transformation or distortion occurs. Somewhere on the way from the eye and down to the hand.

A drawing can have the quality of never being completely finished. Usually it does not end up on a canvas or even on a real piece of paper. On the back, in the corner, or on top of another image. There is a simplicity that entails mobility. I can almost do it anywhere. It is not large, it is small and quiet. It is private.

The drawing and the writing work as a conversation, a dialogue with myself. Sometimes more as a tool. A way to develop ideas that are allowed to grow and at the same time end up in front of me. There is always a part

of the work and the process that is a challenge. But there is also a part that can be called “habit.” Being in one’s studio is, in part, being together with one’s habits. The other part is breaking and working against them.

A comic book constructs a history using frames and balloons. It is a mixture of image and text. It is like watching a film but at the same time like reading a book. In reality it is neither of these things. The round balloons that are filled with words give the character a voice. Depending on what the text looks like, it can be read in a certain tone of voice. Large, jagged letters usually mean that

someone is shouting, is in distress, or is very angry. The square frames with text usually describe what happens in the picture or what the character is thinking, the character’s inner voice. Text and symbols also occur outside the balloons and are placed together with or inside the picture. They function as sound effects. The appearance of the text is usually determined by the character of the sound and enhances the effect of what happens in the picture.

A sketch, an exercise, or a note. Almost like a film script. It remains merely a document with words before it is filmed and becomes a film we can watch. The text in a film script is usu-

ally descriptive and paints the picture the way we see it in the film. Dialogues and narrative voices. Characters that function as nodes, transporters, or real hands for ghosts. Vanished actions, stories, or events that have or have not taken place. What can they say about the world, what different voices do they have? I think about Tacita Dean and her journey to Teignmouth, and how she uses the story of Donald Crowhurst, who vanished in 1969 during the circumnavigation of the world he had embarked upon, in her film (2000) and her book *Teignmouth Electron* (1999).³ During her own investigative journey she deconstructs the story and reassembles it again into a new image. New pieces of the story have been added, and one piece is her own. To listen and imagine being someone else is to see through someone else's eyes.

Faces that seem completely abandoned. That stare, blind or blinded. A photograph that sits fading on a shelf. A mute TV left turned on. There is someone who looks while we look, an image within the image. The memory only remembers certain colours, details, and certain shapes. The rest is forgotten. An abstraction of what remains. I think about the police force's photographs from a crime scene. Luc Tuymans's paintings and drawings function as evidence in a murder mystery; they create a network of stories. It is still and charged with a quiet restraint. At the same time it feels as though what we look at will disappear at any moment.⁴

2.

*"HIC OCCULTUS OCCULTO OCCISUS EST" (Here a mysterious one was killed in a mysterious manner)*⁵

When you disappear, when you are missing, you are neither dead nor alive. He called himself Ray when he walked into the police station in Berlin. He remembered nothing. Everything was gone except for one thing. After his mother had died in a car crash, he had, together with his father, gone out into the forest and lived there for five years. But now the father was also dead, and for this reason Ray had sought assistance. Most people became interested, but also irritated. How can someone be no one? The police, the media, and the surrounding world found it difficult to accept Ray's story. It was transformed into a mystery of its own and used as a projection screen. Ray was renamed "Forest Boy" and put in a home. He kept quiet, but the search for the truth continued. Different stories and theories were rife in newspapers and on the Internet. The more question



On Fire, 2016. Installation view. BFA exhibition, KHM Gallery, Malmö. HD Video. 12:48 min loop. Rasmus Ramø Streith



Untitled, 2016. Installation view. BFA exhibition, KHM Gallery, Malmö. Plaster. 20.5 x 11.25 cm. Rasmus Ramö Streith

marks there were, the more information needed to be filled in.

After several months, Forest Boy admitted that the whole thing was a lie. A person from his hometown had recognised him in a picture the police had posted on the Internet. Robin van Helsum, which is his real name, tried to say no by not telling the truth, by not saying anything at all. A passive protest. Not unlike Herman Melville's novel about Bartleby, and his recurring answer to the lawyer, who is also the book's narrator: "Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in a singular mild, firm voice,

replied, 'I would prefer not to'."⁶

The story about Forest Boy became the point of departure for my project and installation *In a Hole in the Forest underneath Some Stones* (2014). The title is a quotation; it is Van Helsum's own words when he answered a question from the police concerning where he would have buried his father.⁷ The installation consists of a video loop, a sculpture, and a slide projector. The video shows a location. It could be in a park or in a forest. It is dark in among the bushes and trees, but the centre is illuminated. It could be the place where Van Helsum lived with his father. We wait for something to

happen. The image remains, fades into black, and then returns. The slide projector mixes text and photographs. The overdub consists of three different voices. Van Helsum's pronouncements and my own words are mixed with the theories of the surrounding world about who he might be. Cut into pieces and scattered, the voices together create a dialogue. The pictures were first taken digitally with a mobile phone camera. A camera you always keep in your pocket creates another point of departure, it tells another story. Pictures that are not meant for someone else to see, that look more like diary entries. Printed on paper

and then photographed again with an analogue camera. Finally developed as slides. This process transforms and erases the colours, the time, and the person who took the picture.

Pictures usually interpret reality in one way or another, or are taken from it. Usually we have to limit the picture. Like through a window. What we choose to frame or what we choose to charge the picture with, that's where fiction comes in. A still photo does not have the same ability to create a narrative as do moving pictures. But instead the narrative is more concentrated, has another presence. The frozen moment, what happened before and what happens later. A picture that is charged with anticipation. In the same way, long shots make a moving picture resemble a photograph. Just like repetition, a moving image that is played over and over again. Using loops, I construct an image that rather creates transformation and change instead of repetition.

*"Mechanical time is about endless repetition, whereas human time is about transformation and change, with the processes of growth, ageing and death."*⁸

The work with the installation *In a Hole in the Forest underneath Some Stones* has had two different guises. The first time I wanted to have an effect on the space by building a construction. An environment that activated the visitor in a physical sense. The second time I worked with the space's own parameters. The works were installed in Gallery Sho, in Falköping, Sweden,⁹ which has two storeys. A ground floor and a basement. In order to step down into the basement, you have to bend your body and go down a stone staircase. The walls and the roof have begun to crumble. There, several rows of chairs were placed, and a screen for the projector was constructed from the ceiling tiles in the basement. The slide projector was placed on a stand at the very back. At an appointed time

I started the projector and manually fed each slide into it. There, the duration and the rhythm were decided by me and my presence.

The sculpture was created during this same period. During a trip to the Netherlands (which also turned out to be Van Helsum's native country) I found an object. A restaurant and a café sit in the middle of a park. There, in the back, at the edge of their open-air café, hidden away and used up. A painted board with two round holes cut out of it. If I put my head into one of the holes and let someone else take a picture, I am transformed into an imaginary character. A rather simple trick belonging to another time. I immediately recognise the motif and the characters in the picture. Tarzan embraces Jane with one hand while with the other hand he deftly holds a vine. Large muscles meet soft, round forms. The unknown painter has been sloppy. The upper parts of their bodies are considerably longer



Untitled, 2016. Detail. BFA exhibition, KHM Gallery, Malmö. Concrete, radiator, enamel paint. 86 x 48 x 11 cm. Rasmus Ramö Streith

than the lower parts. As for the rest, the picture gives a naive and rather silly impression. Weather and time have left their marks; the paint has vanished or faded in places. Damp and vermin seem to have eaten up the motif from the inside. In spite of this, I photographed the object from the front, and left the site. Several weeks later when I looked at the picture, I could see something I had not been able to discern as clearly while I was at the site. The two holes where the faces should be had been replaced with the wet vegetation that can be

seen behind. Suddenly the object acquired a different feeling and a different meaning. The image was transferred to a slide. I also decided to recreate the same object in my studio. Using the photograph as a template, I copied the construction, the motif, and the size. I also recreated the wear and the damage. Like a forgery of time.

By looking into the past, both the private and the common past, historical traumas emerge. The artist Robert Gober does not repeat history; he investigates the emotions in it, not

just his own but yours as well. There is something direct, but at the same time unclear, about Gober and his handmade sculptures, and even more his installations, that fascinates me. Objects that we associate with the home. Memories from childhood and fragments of bodies. I cannot stay out of his world, I want to understand it. I cannot understand it fully. Perhaps that is precisely the reason why I return. It is ambiguous and unpleasant. But at the same time there is something specific and carefully placed.



Replica, 2014. Digital photograph / Slide. 16,26 x 9,14 cm. Rasmus Ramø Streith



Mattress x2, Mattress x1, 2016. Installation view. BFA exhibition KHM Gallery, Malmö. Iron, white sheets, chlorine, white thread, foam rubber. 200 x 200 cm, 70 x 190 cm. Rasmus Ramö Streith

"If you look at it as a story, you have to supply that, what was the crime, what really happened, what's the relationship between these two men."¹⁰

3.

What are we looking at, really? A tiger; it has been given a childish and twisted face. There is something about its eyes—they are set too closely. Its mouth makes the tiger look sad instead of looking dangerous.

Besides myself, there is a man standing there. We are in the room devoted to insects. Thin and tall, with round-rimmed glasses, bald and wearing a dark suit, he looks like someone I have met earlier. But not in real life. He's looking for something.

"Where are the bumblebees?" He reads silently and to himself. But this is difficult because of the poor lighting in the ceiling and because the letters are both small and handwritten.

Corridors and passages. One room after the other. What part am I in

now? I didn't even mean to come here. But when I saw the sign in the street I had to follow the directions. I started walking in the direction the arrow pointed.

It is not the animals that stick in my mind; it is my own reflected image that wanders around among all these glass cages. My body moves through the animals' landscape. I travel across the seas to other countries and collect their hides. There is more to be seen here than what is displayed in the exhibition cases; this place is a map as well.

I miss something, I can't find the dinosaurs, but above all I miss what is there to be read about humans. I find an exhibition case that deals with birth. And one with the eye. A large plastic cross-section of an eye. I move on, the passage becomes darker and turns. I read on a sign, "Diorama Scenes." Here they have devoted more time to things, not just to the stuffed animals but also to the landscape. Whole scenes have been constructed.

A still, a piece of "reality," a frozen moment that captures the animal in motion. Something happens, a scene with an open narrative. My eyes search on, and perhaps somewhere something hides in there behind the high grass. On the wall at the back, the line of a horizon is painted together with a sky. Like a classic landscape painting. The illusion only works if seen from one direction. It is an image I would like to step into, but I can't. There is a glass pane in the way.

The museum closes. I have forgotten about the time. After a while I find the end and the stairs down to the entrance. A lion sits on the banister. Unlike the elephant, I do remember this one. I looked at it for a long time when I was here last, not at the lion's face but at its paw, which rests in a relaxed manner across the banister. The claws jut out several centimetres.

- 1 Will Bradley and Annika Eriksson, *The Last Round of Changes* (Gothenburg: Göteborgs Konsthall, 2008), 7.
- 2 "Göteborgs naturhistoriska museum" [Gothenburg Natural History Museum], *Wikipedia*, last modified August 1, 2015, https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/G%C3%B6teborgs_Naturhistoriska_museum.
- 3 Tacita Dean, *Teignmouth Electron*, 2000, 16 mm colour film with optical sound, 7 min.; Tacita Dean, *Teignmouth Electron* (London: Book Works, 1999).
- 4 Peter Ruyffelaere, ed., *One&By Luc Tuymans* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013), 172.
- 5 From a monument of Kaspar Hauser erected in 1833 in Ansbach, Bavaria. "Kaspar Hauser," *Wikipedia*, last modified May 18, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaspar_Hauser. See also "Kaspar-Hauser-Denkmal," Statues - Hither & Thither, <http://www.vanderkrogt.net/statues/object.php?webpage=ST&record=deby263>.
- 6 Herman Melville, *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2004), 7.
- 7 Robin van Helsum, quoted in Fiona Govan, "Photograph Released of Berlin 'Forest Boy' Nine Months after He Walked Out of Woods," *Telegraph*, June 12, 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/9327712/Photograph-released-of-Berlin-forest-boy-nine-months-after-he-walked-out-of-woods.html>.
- 8 Stan Douglas, interview by Diana Thater, in *Stan Douglas* (London: Phaidon, 1998), 18.
- 9 Rasmus R. Streith and Louise Waite, *Inte alls bara en bakgrund* [Not at all simply a background], Gallery Sho, Falköping, Sweden, June 7–28, 2014.
- 10 Hal Foster, "The Art of the Missing Part." in *Robert Gober*, ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 66.