

BEAUTIFUL POTENTIAL

URI ARAN
SHANE MCCARTHY
ANNA SAGSTRÖM

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Anna Sagström *On the Beach (Karl)* Framed photographs 21 x 28 cm each 2011
Alone Like an Animal, and yet Think (Variation) Wood, lamb hide, leaf silver, tar. Dimensions variable 2011

DEFINING MOMENTS

Where to begin? “First learn the meaning of what you say, and then speak”¹

Potential is an onerous word. According to my trusty *Oxford English Dictionary* it is defined as: 1) qualities or abilities that may be developed and lead to success; 2) the possibility of something happening. Derived from the Latin *potentia* ‘power’.

As the title for an exhibition, *Beautiful Potential* is an intrepid premise. In that adventurous spirit, Anna Sagström’s *When I Entered, Silent Aviation* (2011) opens the show with two black and white films taken from aboard a hot air balloon over Stockholm. At least, I know that is what they are. But what confronts you on entering is not clear: projected on the wall of the gallery, urban buildings drift past, with no recognisable landmarks, slipping into focus only by chance; on a monitor at our feet we slowly approach a river and forest from the air. Both are shown on a loop, but each is a different length, so the concurrence of timing between them falls almost accidentally. The sense of movement is barely perceptible in the countryside, the soft edges of the trees giving no clear indication of how much is blurred, creating a stomach-lurching sense of falling as the balloon descends. In the city, the cars give a reference point by which we can try to orient ourselves in time and space, but with the hard lines of the tall buildings blurred, there is no easy point at which to level our dizzied visual judgement. The use of ‘I’ in the title places the artist within the work – in practice, placing the viewer in her shoes. It is a simple conceit, the basic function of the human eye insuring that when confronted by an unfocused image we will try to focus, and thus be instantly engaged with the work on a physical level. As composed landscapes, the river hovers within a muted rural idyll and the city’s abstract grid of dark and light evokes a more cinematographic lexicon (Saul Bass’s designs for film credits, and their derivatives like the *Mad Men* title sequence). It is the personal perspective of the artist that we are placed in, though: it is breathtakingly successful at not just making us see what the artist sees but also making us feel what the artist feels. The physicality of filming in a hot air balloon, buffeted by the wind, is translated into the seemingly windblown direction of our veering gaze. Silent though the films are, already the sound from another of Sagström’s works fills our ears, adding to the sense of bewilderment. Footage from the air habitually takes on a documentary quality; here, however, in slow motion, it is a surreal dreamscape. Yet unlike anything as arch as surrealism, without signifiers of dream analysis, Sagström creates the literal sensation of being in a dream, unsettling and beautiful.

Tucked ‘round the corner, low as the previous monitor, lies Shane McCarthy’s *coy signal* (2011). Once again we have to figure out what it is we are seeing, in this case, a projection of a digital drawing, although at first it may appear as a neon sign, floating material-less in the air. It is an impressive technical achievement, rendered almost nonchalant by the elegance of text and composition. For the sign (if it were a sign) is a fascinating oxymoron (returning to the *OED*).

Coy: 1) pretending to be shy or modest; 2) reluctant to give details about something sensitive.

Signal: 1) a gesture, action or sound giving information or an instruction; 2) a sign of a situation.





Going further still, the physical position of the work in the gallery is countered by the careful placing of a strip light, framing and apparently lighting the text (although the fluorescent in reality diffuses the projected light of the text). Every element of the work is attended to: even the wires of the light have been carefully sculpted into position. The letters fade and glow, hypnotically pulsating with a seemingly natural rhythm of light. It is boldly and deliberately intriguing, leading neatly from Sagström's work along to McCarthy's larger installation.

The work which provided the curatorial starting point for this exhibition, *beautiful expectation* (2011) similarly demonstrates McCarthy's technical skill with digitally drawn text. Here again, the wordplay is framed in a constructed environment, the artist's attention to detail providing a loaded context for his work. A large paint-splattered ladder provides an apex of obstacle around which the viewer must move to see the projected title, and whose steps lead our eye up to the source of the projection. The wire falling from the projector (affixed to an inserted beam, matching, but not quite, those already on the ceiling of the gallery) splits the linear composition. On the floor, detritus of the process of making the work – wires, electric sander, tape – are carefully arranged to create an assumption. There are unexpected flashes of colour: red rawl plugs, blue tape and rope, yellow transformer, navy sander and paint. In what at first appears to be the evidence of the process of making, there is instead proof of a meticulous fabricator. Originally created for his degree show, this work succinctly addresses that setting's curious demand for looking forward and reflecting back. Where the student is expected to display the outcome of their learning, the artist is expected to challenge the viewer and lead us on: in one context, the work itself being the end; in the other, the beginning. In this exhibition, it has been altered to fit the space (as with the beam) and a new premise. The power sander on the floor, with its surrounding dust, is a memento of the sanding necessary in the raw degree show environment, but unnecessary in the pristine gallery; its presence, like the paint on the ladder, builds a narrative of the work's past, and liberates the text beyond wry appropriateness into a deeper meaning. The expectation is shifted now away from the graduating artist, and on to the viewer. Solidly static though the disparate elements of the installation may be, the work hovers between historical document and future state.

Uri Aran's two untitled works also proudly suggest a littered history. Each is a cereal box, painted over and graffitied with metal, and in one case, chocolate. Their recognisable, and prominently still visible, branding (Cap'n Crunch and Rice Krispies) are subverted by the sheets of metal which seem to blank out part of the product design in an act of rebellious censorship. The vivid colours which contrived in their past life to capture the consumer are homogenised by the brush of the artist beneath wood stain and varnish. Yet removed from supermarket shelf and kitchen table and appropriated to gallery wall they demand even closer visual inspection. Like Aran's wider practice, they evoke the combines of Robert Rauschenberg – with their layers of texture, assemblage and appropriation. While they are untitled and the

textual content borrowed, they continue the thread of Shane McCarthy's work: it is their context that fascinates. Dated 2006-2012, reflecting their time from creation to exiting the artist's studio, they begin here their new altered existence within an exhibition, having never previously been shown. Our response to them is pre-conditioned by the gallery setting, but the tacit acknowledgement of their previous life as objects which were contained within the studio for six years impresses on us the idea that they are changeable, and therefore potentially changing, works. The fact that they lived alongside the artist in his studio gives them their own breath of life, just as the light of McCarthy's digital projections seems to breath in and out. Nothing in this exhibition stays still; it is a dizzying sight to witness art in a state of flux.

The remaining works are all by Sagström and dominate the main space: physically, with *Alone Like an Animal, and yet Think (Variation)* (2011) and audibly with *On the Beach (For one Guitar)* (2011). *Alone...* consists of three lamb hides stretched between wooden poles, two painted with silver leaf, one coated in tar. They might be political placards, their text absent, but they evoke most strongly something more primitive. The origins of scarecrows, skins on sticks as a warning to their own kind, as detailed in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, places the artist in role of hunter or farmer, cultivating new life through the demonstration of death.² Frazer discussed the stretching of skin on poles within widespread totemic traditions and the worship of gods in animal form: "The skin in fact was kept as a totem or memorial of the god, or rather as containing in it a part of the divine life, and it had only to be stuffed or stretched upon a frame to become a regular image of him."³ The silver leaf seems to add to this reverent approach, on one hide applied expressively, as if it were paint on a canvas, on the other layered thickly, revealing only the flaws on the surface of the hide underneath. In contrast, the coating of tar on the third skin hides any detail of its original nature. This frame is positioned in the corner, shadowing the others.

Over this, as throughout the whole exhibition, the haunting guitar of *On the Beach (For one Guitar)* floats, issuing from speakers hidden out of sight. It is a recording of Neil Young's *On the Beach* (1974)⁴, played on the guitar by a friend of the artist. Without backing, lyrics or studio finesse, it is an almost domestic recording, a suggestion underscored by the photographs that are shown alongside (or rather, due to the absence of visible source for the sound, instead of, or as the material form of) the sound. The black and white images of *On the Beach (Karl)* show the recording session, in a dimly-lit room, where beside the guitarist other instruments are present, their silence highlighted: a plastic shopping bag hangs on the microphone stand; a teddy bear sits on the keyboard. These mutely signal a delicate exploration of the intimate, the deeply private made public, the duality in Sagström's work between sensitivity and domination.

It seems wrong to define *Beautiful Potential* as a group show when it leaves you with an aching sense of loneliness: the artists, each alone in their studio; the viewer, alone

with the work (casting a vague, balloon-shaped shadow on blurred buildings); the work floating one step removed from a temporal reality. Seeking solace in the *OED*, these works are best unified in the multiple definitions of situation:

1) a set of circumstances in which one finds oneself; 2) the location and surroundings of a place; 3) a job. In each case being where they are, doing what they do, and surpassing expectation.

Mai Blount

¹ Epictetus (55-135 AD)

² See James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1994 (1922), Chancellor Press, London, pp.130-131. This edition of the text removes all mention of Christianity, as a result of the controversy provoked on the publication of the previous volumes, where Frazer compares Christian rituals to those of other world beliefs in equal terms. Although his broad, sweeping approach is now widely discredited (and at times wildly inaccurate), the pervasive influence of Frazer's presentation of universal myth and ritual on western literature, thought and anthropology is far reaching (see Freud, T. S. Eliot, Joseph Campbell)

³ *IBID*, p. 501. This was a European, American and Asian tradition; often by stretching the skin in this way the god was liberated to resurrection in a new form (p.529).

⁴ "One of the most despairing albums of the decade" according to the contemporary review in *Rolling Stone* (by Stephen Holding, 26th September 1974)



coy signal

