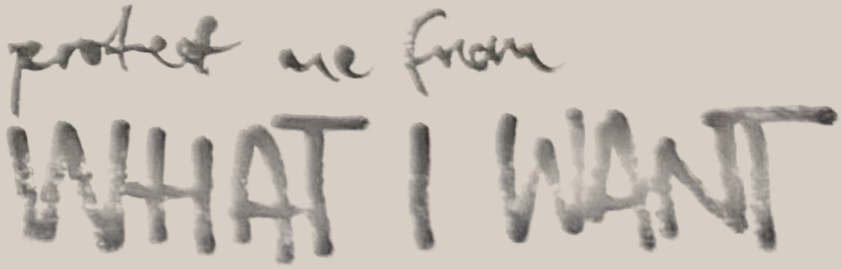
ZETTERBERG GALLERY



Prefaces

Niilo Rantala and Erwin Laiho

I

The artist sends a text message to his writer friend NR. NR wrote one of the texts for Laiho's 2023 exhibition, and they have also collaborated in the field of literature.

EL: Would you like to develop a short text, or perhaps just a brief philosophical definition, for my solo exhibition in November? The exhibition is titled 'Protect Me from What I Want' and opens at Zetterberg Gallery in November. The subjects include the materiality of technology, artificial intelligence, and a kind of neo-Rococo. The themes are abundance, self-destruction, and the irresistible longing for beauty.

NR: Wonderful subjects. I'd be delighted to be your rallying partner.

II

NR looks for his text in EL's previous exhibition. At the time, he was fascinated by EL's ability to breathe life into matter, like a rabbi bringing a golem to life. Three years earlier, NR had written:

"Laiho's works defy death. A machine has a limited service life, and the machines seen in Laiho's works have already passed their expiry date. Or have they? Having passed into eternity, the machines mock us: here I am, use me now!"

How about now?

III

NR calls EL.

NR: What are your thoughts on the literary form of the exhibition? Are there any key words or intertextual references?

EL: Not really. Except the Jenny Holzer ‘Truism’ as the show’s title. I’m more so trying to reach a world of experience that language cannot reach. I want the works to operate on such a bodily and material level that they cannot accidentally be exhausted by language.

NR reflects on the questions. Can EL free himself from his materials, from his enthusiasm for them?

EL: … The explainability of language makes it machine-learnable and mechanically repeatable. I want to approach something like pure experience: a state free from the shackles of language. No packing, no rationalisation… Pre-linguistic. Or rather, to speak of things with their own name: phenomenology. In the artistic sense of my namesake Robert Irwin.

It is the difference between a grandmother and a machine teaching you how to make pasta carbonara. One showing a “pinch” as the complete and imbued with its whole essence: tone of voice and the movement of the hand. The other is given a machine-calculated “pinch”. What would that even mean… The machine would surely express it in grams or millilitres. It is quite different to see hands—their age, size, the position of the fingers and the pressure of the grip: a lived measure. It is that presence I try to approach in my works. Within the confines of knowledge, matter and image.

IV

NR calls EL.

NR: What is the deepest essence of the exhibition? Where does the desire to make this particular exhibition come from, and what would you hope the viewer takes away from it?

EL: … The whole is experimental, unusually experimental. I want to show very recent works alongside works that have been in progress for a long time. The works may even be unfinished.

Unfinished? NR is delighted. At the same time, he wonders whether EL will agree to publish a fragment that acknowledges its own incompleteness. On the other hand, NR consoles himself with the knowledge that EL wants to emphasise playfulness. Homo ludens! It is time for people who play.

EL: … Of course the works have been carefully made, but they are very new.

NR: What is finished and what is unfinished?

EL: I know that a finished work is unfinished only when I realise how I could improve it. For a long time, this was the case with the phone sculptures I'm showing now: there was always a better vitrine in development.

By showing these works, I wish for a sense of liberation. Within the limits of being careful what one wishes for, of course. While preparing the exhibition, however, I didn't want to hold back. I have never before been this naked in relation to my art…

THE NAKED ARTIST. NR HATES THE IDEA THAT THIS TIME THE ARTIST IS "EXPOSED, NAKED, AT HIS MOST HONEST". ISN'T THAT THE STARTING POINT? WHAT DOES BEING NAKED MEAN?

EL: It is a question of the degree of uncertainty. The works are raw. I don't want to show any over-chewed design, but rather roughness and sincerity. Ideas as free as the birds in the sky.

V

EL calls NR. They are both busy.

NR considers how the text could be immediate. Something in the manner of Pascal Quignard.

EL: One of the works is titled "Do Finns take their sauna stones with them when they move?" My partner once asked me this. I thought it was completely absurd but really funny. But it is actually a rather sharp cultural observation. In Germany, people take the kitchen; in the Netherlands, the floor.

The work consists of the skirting boards from my first home. The building was designed by Einari Teräsvirta for the employees of Alko. When we moved in, I removed the original skirting boards, scraped off the paint, sanded and oiled them. But making them beautiful and good again took so long that they never made it back before the apartment was sold.

The work is a kind of statement against the eternal criticism: "That's not art." As if "art" were a term of praise, rather than a term that simply encompasses what an artist presents in galleries, museums and other art institutions. It is a cultural and social label, not some quality guarantee.

VI

NR calls L on the 11th of November to ask for a status update.

EL: … Yesterday it got very late at the gallery. I was asked whether there was already some text about the exhibition. Could this be some kind of textual tool or instrument?

NR: A kind of literary crutch for an art exhibition? In other words, a preface?