JONATHAN GRIFFIN

Personal Delivery: The work of Annika Strom

[**Jonathan Griffin** is a British writer and editor living in Los Angeles. He contributes to Frieze, Art Review, Mousse, Flash Art and other publications]

Guitar slung low, legs spread wide apart, neck craning up towards the microphone, the young man screws his features into an expression that looks like something between grief and sexual ecstasy. He sings:

"I – will be – the one – to turn you on!
On the bed
I – will be – the one – *tonight*.'

Between the assembled bar crowd and the shallow, six-inch high stage, in front of clusters of people clutching bottles of beer and raising their voices to the ears of their friends, in front of other people who stare expressionlessly at the singer, surrounded by movement and noise, stands the singer's mother, holding a video camera which she points at her son for the whole duration of his performance.

No one seems to find this strange, or embarrassing, or worthy of comment.

This was a small concert that I saw just two weeks ago, but I've wondered many times before: what is it about the special zone of performance that allows us to observe such extraordinary heights of emotion and vulnerability in strangers – or even, sometimes, in our loved ones – without flinching or turning away in shame and embarrassment? Normal rules of privacy and discretion no longer seem to apply. The peculiarly distancing effect of a stage, and of the dissipation into a crowded room of words that, anywhere else, would be troubling or provocative, is a mysterious and wonderful phenomenon. It has become so normalised in our culture, however, that most people no longer even notice it. In its contemporary form, it is a structure that rises from the popular music of the past half-century, but it also has foundations in theatre, in Spoken Word Poetry, Live

Comedy and Conceptual Art. Annika Ström makes art that exploits our familiarity with its conventions in order to thrive on its strangeness.

Sometimes she sings songs. The songs are not dissimilar to many pop songs, in that they are mostly delivered in the first person and are addressed to an unspecified "you." Whatever their lyrical content – "It's my fault", "I get so sad", or "I didn't do anything wrong", for instance – we cannot help, because of their form and because of what we know about songs that start with "I' and end in "you", interpreting them as being about relationships.

In other ways they are nothing like pop songs. Ström does not perform these songs with a band, but accompanies her own voice with the preset chords and rhythms of a small electronic keyboard. She rarely occupies a stage, preferring instead to stand on the same floor as her audience, and she usually finds herself singing in art galleries. Sometimes people don't even notice her at first; at one particularly busy private view, Ström recalls, only the security guard heard her while everybody else continued chatting. The minimalist delivery of these songs is, in part, due to the fact that Ström does not consider herself – nor has any ambition to be – a musician. Her musicianship is aggressively amateur, not in a punk way but more akin to the intimate tradition of folk songs. But it is also shaped by the formal conventions of Conceptual art, which, by and large, is less concerned with technical virtuosity than resourceful autodidacticism.

Another strand of Ström's artistic output, her text works, fit more squarely into the aesthetic category of Conceptual art. They consist of phrases, normally no more than a few words, transcribed in a neat, sans-serif font onto sheets of paper or, occasionally, onto a wall. She rarely uses punctuation or capital letters except for the word "I". Although their words are different to Ström's songs, they often have the feeling of song titles or lyrics. *Please help me. All your dreams have come true. I love to live but not with me.* What these phrases share with pop songs in general is their combination of emotional directness and impersonal ambiguity. For instance, when the text says "I" does that mean Annika? If so, when she sings "you", does she mean us? We hope not, but the possibility for such intimate personal address is troubling and elevates the work beyond the cerebral chilliness of the art that it formally resembles.

Ström's text works are also comparable to the idiom of the pop song (though perhaps not Ström's own songs) because of the distance that their formal constraints – their font, their size, their concision – place between them and us, the audience. The hot words are insulated by their cool presentation, not unlike the *cordon sanitaire* where the

stage meets the auditorium in a performance venue. However, in her texts this membrane is only partially effective. In certain pieces, Ström uses humour to punch little holes in it, as with a modest-sized text that announces itself to be a “major work”, or the one that says *Excuse me but I need to lie down here and think about my next piece of art.* In this case and in many others, she uses the text to talk about itself, and to undermine the surety of its own pronouncements.

A performance or an artwork grows extremely powerful when it acknowledges the limits of its own frame. If it allows its subject to talk about itself objectively – from outside the frame, as it were – it effectively appears to remove that frame altogether. For instance, when Kanye West raps “I’m on TV talkin’ like it’s just you and me” he implies that now it *is* just us and him. Sometimes this objectivity can become the subject of the work itself: Ström has made a video of people talking about other videos by her that they have either been in or cut out of, and a sound piece in which she describes other exhibitions she has made.Where, really, is the artist in all this?

In a recent work, Ström disappears from view, and dissolves the distancing structure of the stage – real or metaphorical – altogether. *The Upset Man* was a performance devised for her exhibition *From the Community Hall*, in Temple Bar Gallery in Dublin, 2010. For the exhibition, Ström had built a stage, or rather a life-sized sculpture of a stage, on which she had displayed some of her work and Swedish textiles, and on the back of which was written the script of a heated conversation between a couple. At an unannounced moment in the exhibition, an actor began to speak into his phone, becoming more obviously distraught as the conversation went on. He was performing the script written behind the stage, but he did not ever venture onto the stage itself. The man appeared not to acknowledge the boundaries of his performance at all; despite the quietness of the gallery visitors around him, he loudly continued his conversation as if completely oblivious to his surroundings.

The effect for the confused members of the audience was profoundly embarrassing. At first, it was embarrassing because the man (who they assumed to be a regular gallery visitor) had become a performer unintentionally; a private exchange was being enacted in public, and the man was so engrossed in his personal situation that he ceased to be aware of his context. The failure to see oneself objectively (like when you have food on your chin or your trouser flies are undone) is embarrassing for those around you, precisely because it is not for you. As the performance continued, and people realised that the man was in fact an actor (perhaps when they remembered the

script on the back of the stage), it remained uncomfortable because the normal conventions of performance were not being followed. Gradually, an unspoken consensus formed that it was appropriate to be silent and still, and to listen to the conversation, but the man still refused to acknowledge his proper role as a performer. When he finally hung up the phone, the crowd clapped to re-establish their distance from the proceedings, and to put space between themselves and him.

Ström has said that all her art, whatever its nature, is embarrassing in one way or another. She doesn't say for whom, but it is clear that the embarrassment of the performer and of the audience is closely intertwined. *Ten Embarrassed Men* was the title of a work Ström made for the 2010 Frieze Art Fair, in London. It seems strange to call it a performance, although that is what it was, for the men were actors and they were playing to an audience, even through (*especially* through) pretending not to. A group of ten identically, blandly dressed men shuffled in a tight group through the bustling crowds of the art fair. Some stared at the floor; others hid their faces behind their hands; all generally avoided eye contact with passersby who looked intently at everything, many of whom were also hoping to be looked at themselves.

An art fair is not a place for the scopophobic. Things fight for visual attention on all sides – not just pictures and objects but faces and bodies. Equivalents between finance, power and (the predominantly male) pleasure in looking are easy to draw. That heterosexual male collectors enjoy having images of female bodies on their walls is no secret, and art fairs are always packed with work explicitly catering for male taste. A comparable dynamic also plays out in traditional modes of performance – theatre and cinema, but music too – in fact whenever an audience is permitted to watch other people on stage from the security of a darkened auditorium. Sigmund Freud, in his essay "Instincts and their Vicissitudes" (1915), asserted that voyeurism is unhealthy because the scopophilic does not admit the object of his desire into his sexual satisfaction; he is insulated against intimacy, and takes only the image of the other person (through looking) against her will.

Voyeurism does not map quite so neatly onto the kinds of performance I'm discussing, however. After all, performers, whether singers, actors, comedians or athletes, not only submit to the gaze of the audience but actively thrive upon it. Typically, their exhibitionism nullifies the unpleasanter associations of their being watched. Ström's work, however, tends to distort and invert these dynamics in order to disrupt the comfort of the conventional viewing space. In *The Upset Man*, for instance, the actor is seeking

the attention of the audience before they even realise they *are* an audience; instead, they believe (at least at first) that they are observing this deeply personal and traumatic scenario without the man's consent. And that is both captivating and shaming for them. Something similar happens with *Ten Embarrassed Men*, except that in this case the actors seem actively to want to evade the attention of those people around them. That in itself makes them an object of curiosity, especially in an art fair.

When Ström records herself singing for the soundtracks to her videos, as with *Ten New Love Songs* (1999), she sounds as if she's singing to herself. It's not the first time that a performer has pretended not to be performing at all, as we've just seen. But it does confuse any associations we might make between the singer and the extrovert impulse. The problem with extroverts, generally speaking, is that they are insincere; they will say or do something just to get a reaction, rather than because they mean it. In order for a singer such as Ström to convey the sincerity of her words, she must deliver them in a way that is emphatically introverted. Is then this quietness, this modest way of sharing, also an act? The answer must be that yes, in a way it is.

But it makes no sense to describe Ström as insincere, any more than we would call a Method actor a faker. (In fact she herself jokingly admits that she takes the stereotype of the tormented artist suffering in her studio to ridiculous lengths.) The opposite is true: Ström is concerned with finding ways to make her sincerity conveyable to a deeply cynical audience. Perhaps it is most valuable to think of Ström's art as being *about* sincerity. Pushing this thought further, it seems that throughout her work, one is, in every instance, made aware of the vehicle for such sincerity: language. It is the problems of communication, and of the inadequacies of language in conveying personal experience, which Ström's work brings into the light.

It is never wise to dwell too much on biography, but it is worth noting that Ström is a Swedish artist who has lived outside the country of her birth for the last 20 years. This displacement places her at a remove from both her native tongue and her adopted, second language (English – which, like many people around the world, she first encountered through the lyrics of pop songs). Sometimes, her texts handle language awkwardly, and sometimes Ström's foreignness becomes a strategy of confusion, whether deliberately or inadvertently. (She has noted that when she showed people her text piece *This work refers to Joseph Kosutt*, she sensed them wondering whether she knew she'd spelt his name wrong.)

Central to her experience as a non-native speaker, however, is her vivid awareness of those things that cannot be said. Often this is for linguistic reasons; *All my dreams have come true* (2004) is a video of her parents struggling with the translation of the work's title into English, a phrase that is apparently not so commonly used in Sweden. In other cases, the untranslatability of words is down to cultural or social factors. Ström notes that, while the English words "I love you" are bandied about so often that now they are almost meaningless, in Sweden, to say "*jag älskar dig*" is almost forbiddingly heavy (the phrase is still relatively unscathed by popular culture, and so is hesitatingly used even in the most intimate circumstances).

When I first saw Ström's pink and orange text piece *Wait, I need to think about these words*, I took it for a clever, ironic comment about voids, about the facileness of most artistic products and the pressures of creativity. Now I realise that it is absolutely sincere.

Text about exhibition *Songs by Annika Ström* (Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, 26 May – 11 September 2011).