

## Karl Holmqvist

(Västerås, Sweden, 1964)

Known principally as a poet, Karl Holmqvist almost exclusively uses verbal language for his work, in written or recited form. He often intervenes on gallery walls or on the surfaces of objects, almost always writing by hand in black marking pen. In the same manner he personally conducts performances, declaiming his poems, sometimes in a slow, mumbled rhythm reminiscent of Kerouac, sometimes in an anodyne rhythm of robotic voices created using technological mechanisms.

The expressive style of the Beat poets is a significant part of the cultural panorama from which the artist draws. The compositional method of his writing also seems rooted in the “cut and paste” montage method pioneered by Allen Ginsberg.

It is no accident that the video *I Am with You in Rockland*, 2006, owes its title to Ginsberg’s most famous work, *Howl*, the third part of which begins with that phrase, which is echoed repeatedly until the poem’s end. The words are directed to Carl Solomon, a friend the poet had met while visiting the Rockland Psychiatric Center, where his mother was a patient. Holmqvist’s point of departure is the hallucinatory atmosphere of *Howl* and its fragmented style, but he imbues it with a new irony that leaves little room for existentialism.

The phrases that make up Holmqvist’s poetry come from the world of mass media, television, and, above all, rock and pop musical culture. One can recognize verses taken from songs by Madonna, Frank Sinatra, and Oasis, making it easy to understand how *I Am with You in Rockland* has turned into a lighter and more ironic involvement, not with those who have experienced the courage and desperation of madness, but rather with the community of consumers of rock music—a completely commercial condemnation.

While Holmqvist’s off-screen voices recite repeated phrases in a lyrical tone mixed with a clear comic vein, the words he pronounces appear in white on the black screen of the video, like subtitles without film. This visual minimalism strongly contrasts with the jumble of sources from which the words derive, so mixed up they take on distorted meanings. Advertising phrases come out comically sublimated by the recitation, while the rhetorical and sentimental impact of words stolen from popular songs are watered down in an indifferent and colloquial idiom. Holmqvist is the first contemporary artist to revive the penetrating verbal charge of Acconci’s early work. And as in the work of his predecessor, the efficacy of the performance, the capacity to create meaning, at times by way of nonsense, moves through the seductive power of the artist’s voice, which opens up passages of communication through the space. (EV)