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Review: “After Babel – Poetry will be made by all” at Moderna Museet

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“After Babel – Poetry will be made by all”

Moderna Museet, Stockholm

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In a somewhat blurred black and white video projected onto one of walls in the museum some ants are restlessly carrying messages on their backs. They're simple signs saying: “world” or “word”, which the innocent ants are trying their best to transport to the right addressee. As I watch Rivane Neuenschwander´s (Brazil/UK) video – accordingly titled *Word/World* – another art work from an earlier exhibition at Moderna Museet comes to mind. It was in 2008 at an exhibition called *Eclipse – Art in a dark age* that the Albanian-French artist Anri Sala´s video *Ghost Games* strangely enough was projected at the exact same spot, on the exact same wall as Neuenschwander´s. Sala´s video showed a couple of crabs on a beach at night that were chased and steered with flashlights by two men in a game of sorts. The crabs were used as toys. Whereas the video by Sala was unsettling and quietly disturbing, Neuenschwander´s film is more poetic, but both artists are using the small living creatures for their own sakes. Perhaps the videos present telling images of visible and invisible power structures in today´s society? It is a game of who´s leading who.



Installation view. *After Babel – Poetry will be made by all*. Moderna Museet, 2015 © Photo: Åsa Lundén/Moderna Museet

Moderna Museets current exhibition *After Babel – Poetry will be made by all* concerns itself with language – with its many different possible meanings and the development of knowledge brought on by it. Influenced by the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, in which God punished us humans for exercising hubris and sentenced us with an eternal confusion of languages, the curators Daniel Birnbaum and Ann-Sofi Noring has assembled a group of nine illustrious international artists all trying to assemble new meaning from established artistic languages and different cultural layers.



Installation view. *After Babel – Poetry will be made by all*. Moderna Museet, 2015 © Photo: Åsa Lundén/Moderna Museet

A utopian perspective is also present through the exhibition's subtitle – the poetry that will be made by all alludes directly to yet another of the museum's earlier exhibitions: *Poetry must be made by all! Transform the world!* This was in the museum's heydays in the late 1960s when the legendary Pontus Hultén was director, a time period that has reached almost mythical proportions in the museum's own history writing. This was when American pop artists showed at Moderna Museet and Andy Warhol had his first exhibition in Europe, but the exhibition *Poetry must be made by all!* had a more politically diversified content that reached from the Russian Avant-garde in the 1920s, through the Surrealist Movement, to the student protests that were actually evolving at the time of the exhibition itself.



Installation view. After Babel – Poetry will be made by all.
Moderna Museet, 2015 © Photo: Åsa Lundén/Moderna Museet

This visionary outlook is foremost taken up by Simon Denny (New Zealand/Germany), who's *Contemporary Tower of Babel* (2015) functions as the exhibition's focal point. Denny's imaginative and labyrinthine installation is made of scaffoldings with a constructed path leading to the top. The tower could in truth be named an exhibition in itself because of its many smaller art works presenting a brand new mix of the past, the present and the future. Here's a place for everything from drawings by the French surrealist Magritte and the Russian abstract pioneer Malevich, to a couple of horrific paintings made for Facebook's campus by artist Ian Ross. The drawings are from the museum's own collection while Denny has made copies of the original Facebook painting. It's this crazy fusion of high and low art objects from different time contexts that make Denny's *Tower of Babel* into a truly fascinating experience.

On the walls of the tower Denny has collected street slogans from the 1960s but sprayed in the design of the graffiti of today. "The future will only contain what we put into it now!" and "Vote for Nobody!" it says. And placed at the crest of the tower is a laptop used by hackers pertaining to *Anonymous*, the world spread group of protesters wearing their typical white face masks. The computer is programmed to operate inside the existing but unidentified and parallel internet – this is the real tool of resistance today.



Installation view. *After Babel – Poetry will be made by all*. Moderna Museet, 2015 © Photo: Åsa Lundén/Moderna Museet

Denny is also representing New Zealand at this year's Venice Biennale, where he's displaying objects and graphic elements based on the visual design of the NSA, the US telecommunications surveillance programme, which became notorious through the whistleblower Edward Snowden. Denny penetrates an extremely contemporary situation and a burning question that affects us all.

This is not really the case with the rest of the art in *After Babel*. It's not that they're any less intriguing or engaging, but the problem is that they're not given enough space. Paul Chan (Hongkong/US) gets to show two pieces built up of the traps of language, but here they become more illustrations to the exhibition's theme than anything else, and we don't get real access to his way of thinking. This is true as well of Yael Bartana's (Israel/Netherlands) neon wall sign *And Europe Will Be Stunned* – saying just that and not much else – and the too few examples of Haegue Yang's (South Korea/Germany) attractive sculptural hybrids of clothes racks, or of Etel Adnan's (Lebanon/France) enigmatically opaque painted memories of landscapes. Why she's painting in the manner she does is never explained and I'd really like to know why. A greater legibility – and a more deeply engaging exhibition – would be gained through decreasing the number of artists and increasing the art works of the remaining ones. As it is now the art in the exhibition functions as rather shallow utterances with unclear directions. Rather like the ants in the video by Neuenschwander.



Installation view. *After Babel – Poetry will be made by all*. Moderna Museet, 2015 © Photo: Åsa Lundén/Moderna Museet

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