***'Wait, I Need to Think About These Words'***
**Annika Ström curated by Jennifer Higgie**

**Mackintosh Lane**
**2-3, 9-10 July 2022**

This exhibition comprises text pieces, videos and a performance that I selected from my friend Annika Ström's 30-year body of work. A few years ago, I wrote about Annika for her book *Annika Ström Live*!, which was published by onestar Press in Paris. My words are as heartfelt today as they were then. I've updated the text.

Here it is. It's new title is: 'Some More Facts About Annika Ström'

Annika sings in many ways and travels with her eyes open. She makes videos and text pieces and performs music and does things like getting children to take to the streets to demonstrate their need for an art museum. Hers is the art of the everyday. She never makes anything up. She doesn't need to. The world is too full of material and possibility. She doesn't pretend something is there which isn't. She is fascinated by simple things, like leaves or fingernails or the beauty of someone dancing alone in a room. She's an optimist: she sees dust but likes the way sunlight hits it. She knows that life is absurd but, still, it can't fail to move you. Much of the action of her work takes place in living rooms, which makes sense: it's where we spend much of our lives. Her work echoes with suspended notes, elusive phrases and precise ideas. She narrates the story of her life. She's as literal as a surrealist.

She sings: *What shall I do today? I know, sing a song. A little drawing? A painting? A photo? Write a text? What shall I do today? What shall I do today? Now I know! Sing a song tra la la la tra la la.*

In one film, shot in black and white, the camera concentrates on her late mother, dancing in a living room, gazing over a hedge, bending over in a park. The soundtrack is a jazzy song: 'I'm in love', which Annika, out of camera, sings along with. Her voice fades in and out. Her mother is fragile, expressive, vulnerable. Old. Sunlight and shadows mingle and obliterate her features.

She sings: *I saw a nice man, I saw a nice man, I saw a nice man, I saw a nice man, I saw a nice man...*

She is indifferent to the assumed hierarchies of meaning. Her focus wavers: one moment, on how best to dispose of unwanted mail, the next on the look of a man looking for a lost golf ball or a love story. Often the narration of her films will not match the image we are looking at. For example, as she talks about the bread she has just bought, we see an image of a fountain. But then how often does what you are thinking about correspond with what you are looking at?

She sings: *I go out, I stay in, I go out, I stay in, I don't see you, I don't see you, I don't see you*

To varying degrees, she has focussed on the following: laughter, word play and general play. Chandeliers. The look of ice-skaters, horses going in circles and

people dancing in tracksuits. Flowers and photograph albums. Snow and sunshine. The shape of trees. Her mother ironing. The textures of cloth, paper and petals. An old man's favourite chair and a woman's fingers as she smokes. Children playing in the rain. The crunch of snow. The kindest artist in the world, he lives in Finland. Missing someone or something. Missing out. Pumpkins and how they grow. Beauty you can't own but have access to. The face of someone on a train, rays of light on a lake, some coloured tape rolling across a kitchen floor. Coping without kindness, finding kindness and the thoughts of bus drivers. Coping without romantic love, not needing it, yet realising the 'it' changes with time. Bread and its packaging. Regret. She never disguises despair.

She sings: *I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do. I have this feeling for you. I don't know what to do.*

She knows that families are complicated. She knows that being a mother means understanding the space between the cracks. She knows that being a daughter is inescapable. She knows that the collages we create in our minds as we travel through the world are as interesting as paintings in a gallery. She knows that knowing someone might mean losing them.

She sings: *This is a song for you, for you. But you will never hear it. This is a song for you, for you. But you will never hear it.*

Her text pieces are painted in plain, bright colours. They look scrubbed clean. The title becomes the content, yet because the content is so clearly expressed you tend to assume it must be more complicated than this. Her words sparkle softly, as pared back as pebbles on a beach. They include: *I have no theory about this text. This work refers to Joseph Kosutt. I love to live but not with me. Please help me. I would be very happy if it wasn't because of me. This work refers to no one. Wait, I need to think about these words. Excuse me, but I think I need to lie down here and think about my next piece of art.* Her humour easily accommodates despair. A barbecue burning in a green field. Old Swedish parents attempting to get the pronunciation right of the English phrase, *'all of my dreams have come true'*.

She sings: *All I can say I made it all look so good. But it was so bad. It was so bad. All I can say I made it all look so good. But it was so bad. But it was so bad. But it was so bad. Tried so hard to make it all look so good. But I felt so bad, I felt so bad, I felt so bad, I felt so bad.*

Annika often pre-empts failure. She once had a show called, *Everything In This Show Can Be Used Against Me*. Another show in Los Angeles was titled *Grant for a Revolutionary over 35 years old.* It comprised a marked circle on the floor for the applicants to stand in and shout out their manifesto, in order to explain why they needed a grant to Berlin to stay in Annika's flat. The show included text pieces that read: *For a period of time this piece of art will keep you going*, *This piece is made to support a revolutionary* and *This piece is made to support me*.

She sings: *I used to know you so well, I used to know you so well. I see you sometimes and, 'Hi, how are you and your new life?' I used to know you so well, I*

*used to know you so well. I see you sometimes and hide, I follow you walking almost beside. I used to know you so well, I used to know you so well.*

In one video, she cries into a snowball, mixes tears with the water she showers in, cries into a sponge used to moisten stamps, mixes tears with water in ice-cube holders and then, when they are frozen, drops the ice cubes into the whisky. Finally, she wipes her sink with one of her teardrops.

She sings: *You say It's my fault, It's my fault. I say it's your fault, It's your fault. You say it's my fault, my fault. You say it's my fault, my fault.*

Annika asks straightforward questions in a deceptively simple fashion. She gets mad about sexism. She sings in a high, fragile voice, accompanied by simple melodies and beats programmed into her computer. Her gentleness can be deceptive; her thoughts pack a punch.

She sings: *I was there. You weren't there. I was there. I was there.*

She recently made 100 colourful, geometric abstract paintings; 100 was enough, she told me. She is often writing a feature film, but the story keeps changing. There are so many stories in the world! How do you choose only one?

She sings: *The long song. The long song, the long song. The long song, the long song. The long song, the long song.*

She lets meaning breathe. She has moved to an island in the sunshine; always a dream of hers. She has recently decided to share her life with two cats which, at time of writing, remain unnamed. She celebrates doubt and displacement. She makes art about being a woman and knows meaning is woven into the fabric of our lives.

She sings: *I don't know what to sing, I do sing anything Sentimental. I am sentimental, I am sentimental.*

The minutia of daily life fascinates her. For example, in one of her films she muses: 'With my hands under the table I started to peel off my right-hand middle fingernail. I kept the nail in my hand. Turned it. Folded it. I wondered if I should drop it on the floor. Or rise up and throw it in the bin for recycling.' She makes me wonder: is it possible to recycle yourself?' She is obsessed with what it means to be an artist. She never stops asking questions.

She sings: *If you only knew, If you only knew, If you only knew, If you only knew, If you only knew, If you only knew, If you only knew.*

Annika's questioning has meant she has:
– Filmed her mother trying to negotiate the mysterious logic of mobile phones.
– Obsessively trained her camera on holes being punched in
paper.
– Offered one week's bed and breakfast in Berlin for talented but temporarily

frustrated, envious, and/or uninspired artist.
– Interviewed people who have been in her videos about what it is like to be in her videos.
– Interviewed people who have never been included in her videos about their thoughts on this.
– Interviewed friends about successful people whose careers went nowhere. – Filmed friends and family explaining why they missed
one of her concerts. – Asked countless people about what they would do if they weren't an artist.
– Filmed herself walking across a field on a bleak day shouting in Swedish, 'Shame on you who complain!'

She sings: *All my time is mine, I hang around, I walk around, I don't see anyone. And that is all the time. All my time is mine, All my time is mine, and that is all the time, and that is all the time. All my time is mine. All my time is mine. All my time is mine. All the time. All the time. My time is mine. My time is mine.*

Annika is practical. She likes to find solutions to problems. Thus, she has invented:
– Pillows, with holes indented in them, to be placed in windows, to relieve pressure on the elbows.
– Prams big enough for adults, to be pushed by children.
– A siphon for tears.

Her use of language is both direct and idiosyncratic. The problems of translation plague her and liberate her. From Swedish to English and back again, from image to word; from a word to the wall – how does language change meaning? She tells me that she expresses sadness in different ways in different languages. She is constantly curious about where she came from; how she became the person she is. For example: She revisited her old school. As the camera drifts around nondescript buildings, she says: 'This used to be school. These benches were not here at the time. Here we used to hang around and here as well. A different colour on the building now. This is the main entrance.' She knows how important childhood is, and how, too often, the thoughts of children are treated carelessly. When she realised that there was no art museum in Hove she set about organising children to walk through the streets waving banners of their own making while chanting their need for art. In her preparations for this she questioned the children about what they would like to see in a gallery. Their replies included a bakery, a periscope and rooms devoted to rockets, telescopes, unicorns and waterfalls. She, of course, treated these requests with the utmost seriousness.

My favourite photograph of Annika is also the best-known. She is standing in Spetsbergen, a place not far from the North Pole, in so many clothes she can hardly be seen. It's a dangerous area for polar bears; many people, apparently, carry guns to protect themselves. Annika, however, who is gazing into the distance, holds a keyboard close to her chest, like a shield. If anything can save you, she seems to be saying, music can.

*Adapted from 'A Number of Facts About Annika Ström' by Jennifer Higgie, published in ANNIKA STRÖM LIVE! onestar Press, 2008*