

Art in America

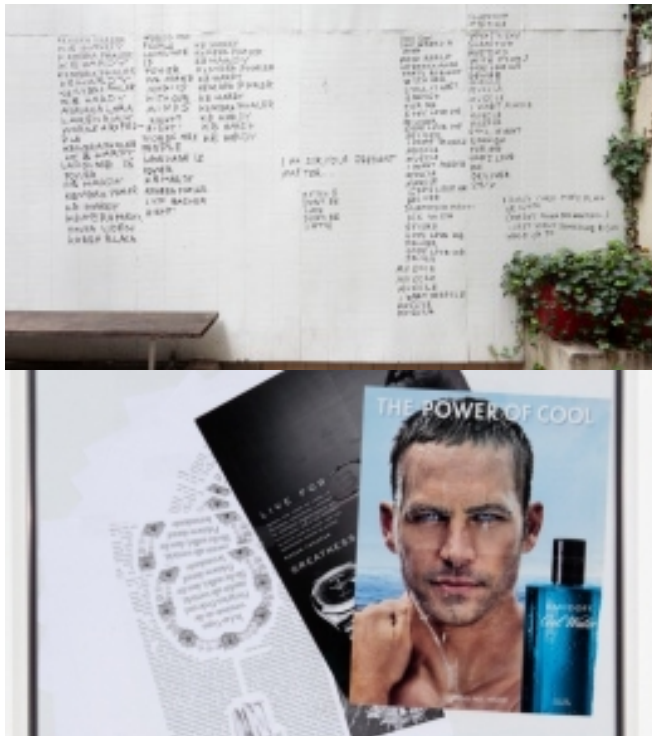
INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Words are People: Q+A with Karl Holmqvist

by [kayla guthrie](#) 06/08/12

Swedish-born, Berlin-based artist Karl Holmqvist uses a wide range of formats—poetry readings, installation and sculpture—to bring out the primal qualities of language. In his hands, news articles, conversation snippets, and pop lyrics form a textual mesh and blend into a multiplicity of private indictments, incitements, and convictions, decoding and recoding the experiential and communicative possibilities of reading, listening and seeing.

Although "Words Are People," recently on view at Alex Zachary Peter Currie, was Holmqvist's first solo show in New York, his influence can be seen on the investigative, identity-based practices of multidisciplinary performance artists like K8 Hardy (who is name-checked, among others, in a text work installed in the gallery's courtyard) and Ei Arakawa (with whom Holmqvist has collaborated), and filmmaker Ryan Trecartin, whose brash mellifluous scripts, like Holmqvist's poems, repeat and rearrange expressions and utterances to unsettle their original meanings.



[VIEW SLIDESHOW](#) Karl Holmqvist, Installation view, "Words are People," May 4-June 2, 2012. Courtesy Karl Holmqvist and Alex Zachary Peter Currie, New York; Untitled (Pissed Christ), 2012. Mixed media, aluminum frame. 20 x 24 in. Unique. Courtesy Karl Holmqvist and Alex Zachary Peter Currie, New York;

At MoMA, where his work is currently on display in the survey "Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language," Holmqvist infuses objects with poetry. An untitled wallpaper piece consists of photocopied prints installed in a grid covering two walls and a bench. Some of its pages contain text laid out in geometric typography—one

sheet displays anagrams of "DEBBIE HARRY" and Beyonce's pseudonym "SASHA FIERCE" in diamond-shaped arrangement—while others feature Holmqvist's poetry formatted in standard line-by-line style.

Using headphones visitors can listen to the approximately hour-long sound recording *Untitled (A=T=O=M=I=Z=E=D)*, 2012, wherein the artist recites an associative flow of disjointed words and slogans drawn from faintly recognizable sources. Spoken in Holmqvist's distinctive lilting monotone, they give a feeling both familiar and dislocated. The large white neon work *Untitled (ROCKLAND)*, 2012, quoting an incantation from Ginsberg's *Howl*, hangs in an adjacent window and overlooks the street below.

"Words Are People," the Alex Zachary show, had an apocalyptic pall. With letters and numbers hand-penned on the walls, windows, and sundry objects, it also includes small framed collages and poetic videos consisting of subtitles. On opening night the artist was nowhere to be found until the time of his scheduled performance at 11:30 PM, when he entered suddenly with black lace wrapped around his head and long strands of silver tinsel tucked into his jeans like a tail. He moved through the crowd towards the balcony where a white neon sculpture silently blared Beyonce's chorus "WHO RUN THIS MOTHER," and down the staircase to the lower gallery, brilliantly lit by a mirrored cube fitted with bare white bulbs.

Grabbing a drumstick to hit an overturned aluminum tub on the tile floor, Holmqvist began a chant that slowly evolved into a rendition of industrial band Throbbing Gristle's track "Discipline." Repetitive, banal and abrasive, the song is a hallmark of experimental transgression between music, art, performance and pop, and a signifier of mystic transformation using ad hoc, urban tools.

A.i.A. interviewed Holmqvist at MoMA. He says his work is meant to spark the creative process in the viewer: "Even when you read a novel, you make the novel in your head," he said about the experiential power of words. And on their potential as art: "If you paint a dog, it's not a horse, but if you write dog, it can be a horse."

KAYLA GUTHRIE I'd like to know about your formative experiences and what influenced you to become a poet. What is your first language? Can you talk about how you first began to read poetry and develop your speaking/performing technique?

KARL HOLMQVIST Oh, there are a few things here. My first language is Swedish. I was born and raised in Sweden, and as a teenager I moved to Paris, then came to New York when I was in my mid-20s. That was in '89, and there was a lot of performance and experimentation in art going on at that time. It was a kind of the end of the money boom of the '80s—wild painting and things like that—and a lot of galleries were having problems, but were also quite brave in trying installation and performance-based formats, showing people like Rirkrit Tiravanija, Sean Landers—who had a more experimental practice in the beginning of his career—Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Lauren Szold, Karen Kilimnik, who I would say was also quite far out, and still is, actually . . .

So, there was a kind of experimental mode going on that I wanted to be a part of. I always said that I was reading poetry as a form of visual art: as a form of invisible visual art, or as a form of Everyman's visual art. I've always been interested in poetry as a vehicle for communicating with and between people. It's basically something that anyone can do: you can use pen and paper, or if you can't afford paper, you can just write on the wall; it's not something precious. The other way of doing it, of course, is by speaking it, and this is also something I began while living in New York, and have been doing since that time. I'd watch and participate in spoken word readings at places like Pyramid Club, ABC NO RIO and the St Mark's Poetry Project. But I've never actually called myself a poet. I consider myself more of an artist working with language and poetry, rather than a poet trying to have art shows or something like that.

GUTHRIE Is there a particular artistic tradition that you would situate yourself in, or historic personalities that you are influenced by?

HOLMQVIST No, other than that I'd like to see my work as experimental and coming from a background in performance. My influences vary with what I'm working on, but I always thought it important to take ideas and influences both from people I admire, and people I admire less; transforming things through reuse.

GUTHRIE What does the title of your show at Alex Zachary Peter Currie, "Words Are People," signify?

HOLMQVIST The way I write, I deal a lot with ambiguity. I like to play with words and I like it if sentences have multiple meanings, and a way of doing that when you read them out loud is through not using intonation. People sometimes say I try to sound like a machine, or like I'm from outer space, or I have a Swedish accent. I might have a bit of Swedish accent, but it's also about this idea of having every word, or even every letter of every word, have the same value somehow. The idea of "Words Are People" is that you could treat each word the same: as if "and" could be as precious as "excellent," or what have you. A kind of equality going on between the words.

GUTHRIE One thing that strikes me as characteristic of your poetry is the sense that you're using stock language borrowed from advertising or other generic types of speech, but reconfiguring it in a way that is very singular. Are most of your words or sentences borrowed, or do you write them to seem that way?

HOLMQVIST Basically every line that I write is coming from somewhere else, and that's what language is, anyway. We learn to speak by imitating—our parents, other people, teachers—and it's always about repetition. I always write in English, and my use of the English language comes through picking up phrases and also remembering things like songs that I liked as a teenager, lines from films or current political messages. It's great if they communicate a sense of urgency, but I'm not the one telling people to do things. I'm repeating these phrases because they are out there, and I like to see what they can be used for in this other context, which is my language experimentation.

GUTHRIE So you see your words as concrete material.

HOLMQVIST Yeah, but internal, too, because they're also my memories. Some messages aren't what they seem, because if you want to say something, it's often good to say the opposite of what you mean, and then people get it somehow. For example, although I'm a feminist, I have lines like, "Women's place is in the home." And people think it's ironic, but then . . . well, actually, I do think that women are men and men are women, and that everyone's place is in the home, so that phrase could be more multi-layered than it first appears when you hear it spoken in a performance.

GUTHRIE To say the opposite of what you mean is a technique for depicting those unexpressed meanings.

HOLMQVIST And through this process you either end up with something very dialectical, or you go through these layers and understand that I don't actually mean what I'm saying. Then you exit and you get rid of the dialectical. These things are not super important, but there's the motion of entering language and exiting language, entering meaning and exiting meaning, and having words stand for things but also having them be empty of specific meanings. Sounds like poetry, I guess!

My text works are about freedom. For me, as the one making/creating them, I should be free to do what I like. For those listening to or reading or looking at them, they should also be free: to like them or not like them, understand them or not understand them. That's what's important.