

Annika Larsson's Appetite for Disaster and Destruction

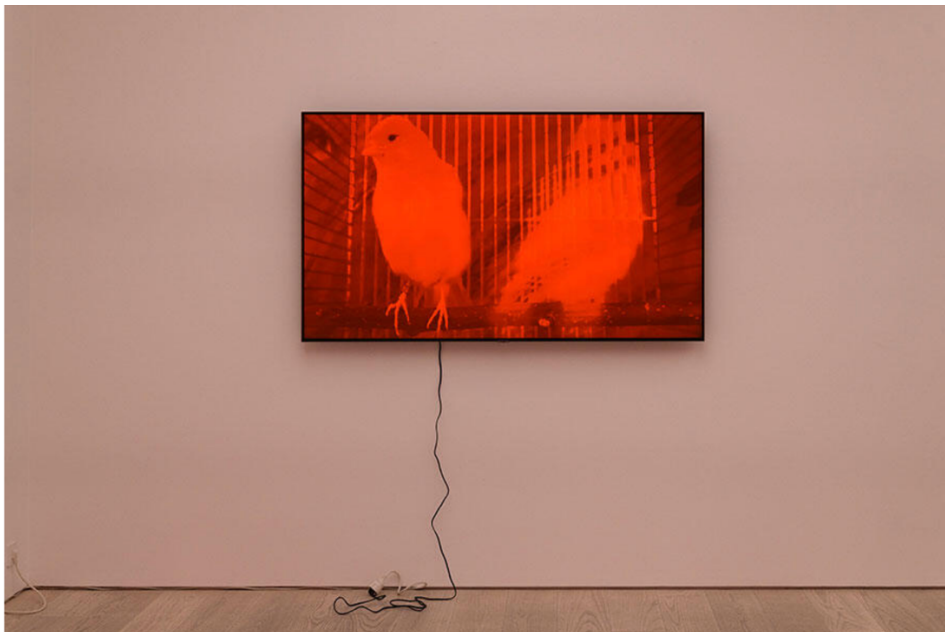
At Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm, a new body of work by the Swedish artist explores exhaustion and systemic failure

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BY MATTHEW RANA IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 05 DEC 23

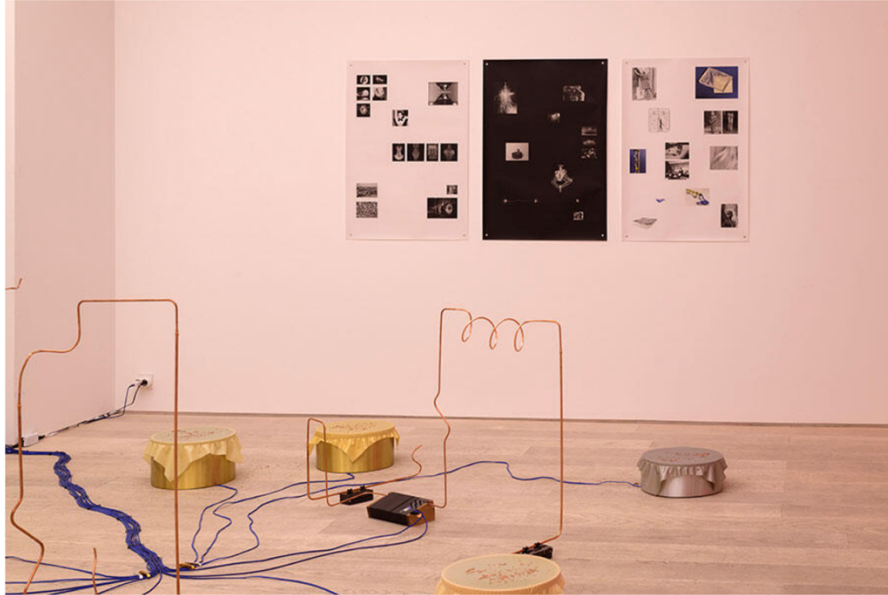


Wildfires, mine blasts, a hurricane raging through Berlin: Annika Larsson's latest video, *Strange Powers – Prologue* (2023), is a relentless montage of disaster and destruction. Interpolated among these troubling sequences of found and archival footage, however, are a number of obscure diagrams, data visualizations and short clips documenting lab experiments. Set to an eerie theremin soundtrack, much of the work is digitally processed and tinted red (an allusion to atmospheric pollution) or blue (the colour of a chemical used in quantum computers). The result is a disorienting drift of formal associations allegorized in one of the film's more memorable scenes: a commercial jet plummeting to earth in a billowing chartreuse cloud.



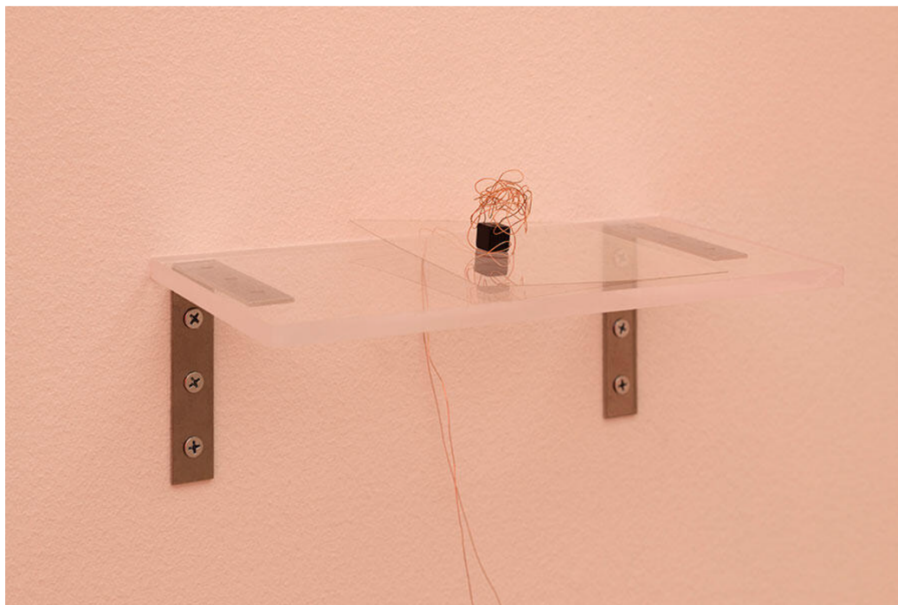
Annika Larsson, *Strange Powers - Prologue*, 2023, installation view.
Courtesy: the artist and Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm and Paris;
Photograph: Sissela Jensen

As the centrepiece for a show whose themes are exhaustion and systemic failure, *Strange Powers – Prologue* is a Gordian knot of visual and conceptual entanglements. As a prologue for a still-in-progress film on quantum computing, it is foreboding. In ‘Strange Powers’ at Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Larsson presents the exhibition’s titular work alongside a smattering of her research materials. These include minerals meticulously displayed on shelves, finely rendered watercolours of magnets and a trio of photographs combining images pulled from various scientific and art-historical sources (*Photomontage (Strange Powers) I–III, 2023*).



Annika Larsson, ‘Strange Powers’, 2023, exhibition view, Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm. Courtesy: the artist and Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm and Paris; Photograph: Sissela Jensen

Throughout her career, Larsson has regularly revisited moments of unpredictability and breakdown, often in relation to the intersubjective dynamics of the gaze. Here, however, her focus has widened considerably to address complex systems, the agency of moving images and non-human actors. While the show strains somewhat under a theoretical frame that foregrounds materialist ontologies and ‘the powers of small and unruly forces’, to quote the exhibition materials, provisional sculptures like *Fuzzy Speaker I (2023)* – a speaker reduced to its most basic elements and only capable of reproducing birdsong – exude a fragile charm. Others, like the sprawling sound installation *Theremins and Drums (2023)*, project enthusiasm for chance and indeterminacy.



Annika Larsson, *Fuzzy Speaker I*, 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm and Paris; Photograph: Sissela Jensen

'Strange Powers' is Larsson's first solo exhibition of new work in her native country since 'Blue', originally shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Rome, in 2014 before touring to Andréhn-Schiptjenko in 2015. Compared to that presentation, which drew parallels between the rise of fascism and our present era using Georges Bataille's 1935 erotic novella *Blue of Noon* as a point of departure, this show is relatively low on human drama. The behavioural transgressions that typically imbue the artist's films with affective charge here find uncanny expression in the shifting boundaries between human and machine: robotics, prosthetics and artificial intelligence, to name a few. Nevertheless, Larsson remains expert at making us feel discomfort and, despite a paucity of human actors, an anxious mood prevails.



Annika Larsson, *Theremins and Drums*, 2023, installation view.
Courtesy: the artist and Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm and Paris;
Photograph: Sissela Jensen

This show is the culmination of 'Non-knowledge, Laughter, and the Moving Image', a three-year research project on the potential of moving images to 'overturn our habitual course and change the dominant order of things', according to the project website. One of the challenges of research-based art is to present knowledge without being overly didactic. Larsson neatly sidesteps that quandary by again drawing from Bataille – in this case his theory of *non-savoir* (non-knowledge) and its effects, such as laughter, delirium and ecstasy. Paradoxically, this gesture towards the unknowable risks mystifying the material relations driving the various phenomena depicted in *Strange Powers – Prologue*. Yet, what's at stake here is not the comprehensibility of complex systems, but art's relationship to the scientific will to know. Larsson's art imposes limits on our understanding both as an ethics and as a way of looking. What her pictures want, to paraphrase art historian W.J.T. Mitchell's 2005 book, is not to represent or inform but to perplex – maybe even to enchant. It is a strange power, indeed.

Annika Larsson's '[Strange Powers](#)' is on view at Andréhn-Schiptjenko, Stockholm, until 22 December