



ORIOl VILANOVA

At first sight

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AT FIRST SIGHT

Oriol Vilanova (1980, Spain) uses installations, performances and texts to explore not only the specific identity of culture, but also its paradoxes. The themes that interest him include the icons of the past, the rewriting of history and the museum as an outmoded exhibition space. He uses the images that he collects and documents to expose underlying mechanisms or constructions, which reveal that stories are not as straightforward as they seem. The title of the exhibition directly challenges the viewer to pause and to think about how you look at things.

Vilanova took his cue for *At first sight* from M's context as a museum with its own art collection. He has created a series of installations using exhibition furniture and postcards, in which he sets out to uncover the mechanisms by which museums construct narratives. Is exhibiting simply a matter of showing? Or can it actually conceal something too?

ROOM 28

Without distinction (2016)

Oriol Vilanova collected 35 display cases for the all-embracing installation *Without distinction*. All the cases come from different museums and similar institutions in Belgium and have been appropriated by the artist for the duration of the exhibition. The lenders include museums of fine art, libraries, archives and scientific institutions.

M contacted just over 20 of them a few months ago, and roughly half responded positively. The institutions that refused to lend material gave a variety of reasons: the cases were too fragile to move, for instance; they were already in use, or else it would cost too much to transport them. In each instance, these practical considerations obliged the artist to rethink and adjust his initial plan. As is often the case in Vilanova's practice, the process of

collecting the display cases was as important to him as the installation as such.

Museums generally use display cases as a neutral presentation format that is pushed into the background, so that full justice is done to the objects they contain. Vilanova does the opposite: rather than using the cases in the customary way and filling them with art objects, he shows them for what they are and leaves them empty. He emphasises the exhibition furniture itself and questions the display cases' neutrality. Can you, as viewer, really see and comprehend the objects they display? Or do the cases actually conceal and camouflage what they contain, because their own presence, form and history is too emphatically in evidence? And what underlying power structures do they reveal?

The *mise-en-scène* of the empty exhibition furniture as a group results in a shift in meaning. Although each case tells its own story, through the traces of its use, construction materials and (historical) design, the repetition and multiplicity in the installation cancel out their individual character. Their uniqueness is made explicitly generic. In this way, Vilanova adopts a so-called metaposition. As artists like Marcel Broodthaers did in the past, he forces the viewer to distance yourself from what you think you are seeing and to focus on the act of exhibiting itself and on the associated process of looking.

ROOM 29

Voilà (2016)

Voilà is a sculpture that stands in the space almost unnoticed. An inattentive visitor could easily walk straight past it. The white wall built in a semicircle is a seemingly neutral exhibition space. The work is therefore reminiscent of the most ephemeral and invisible architecture within the museum: the room divider. Every time there is another exhibition, the partitions in the

rooms are dismantled and rebuilt in accordance with the new concept. Vilanova's partition is constructed so close to the wall of the room, however, that the visitor can't view the space it encloses. Rather than creating exhibition space, *Voilà* actually cuts it off. Like all the other works in the show, this installation too conceals more than it shows.

ROOM 30

Anything, everything (2015-ongoing)

Where Oriol Vilanova left out the art objects from the display cases in the main room, in *Anything, everything* they are absolutely everywhere. He has placed over 2,800 postcards on the walls of this room, each showing an object against a monochrome background. He spent a long time collecting the cards: for over fifteen years now, he has visited second-hand markets week by week in search of picture postcards of every kind. He selects them based on chance, intuition and repetition. Back in the studio, Vilanova arranges the cards according to a highly personal classification system, which enables him to make connections and generate meanings that go beyond what is seen at first sight.

The postcards in this installation are actually mass-produced items, most of them printed by museums as cheap souvenirs of a visit to their collection. They are all different: they do not actually belong together. Images that are not oriented vertically have, moreover, been turned through ninety degrees so that they match the prescribed vertical uniformity of the installation. Yet despite all this, the postcards in *Anything, everything* actually become more individual. For all their differences, when placed against the wall they become unique elements of a greater whole. More than this, within the installation all the postcards together become a single large exhibition object. Their actual function and meaning shift as a result. The value of the postcard no longer flows from the object it depicts, but from the card itself as an object with its own specific format and colours.

The central focus here is thus on the fetishism of the postcard itself as an object. Vilanova has not, after all, arranged the cards according to the type of object they show. The installation at M differs in this respect from historical attempts to establish databanks of artistic images, such as the *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924–29) of the art historian Aby Warburg (1866–1929) or the *Musée imaginaire* (1947) of André Malraux (1901–1976). Vilanova has classified

the postcards purely by the chosen colour in order to display the object as neutrally as possible and to the best effect. Like the display cases in the main room of the exhibition, this installation raises questions about the pseudo-neutrality of these postcards. Does the background colour actually camouflage the objects rather than doing them visual justice? Do the postcards – like the display cases – reveal underlying power structures?

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The following publications by Oriol Vilanova are available at the M shop:

- Oriol Vilanova, *They cannot die*, JRP Ringier Christoph Keller Editions, Zurich, 2011.
- Oriol Vilanova, *Goodbye*, FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims, 2014.
- Oriol Vilanova, *No middleman*, CRU, Barcelona, 2015.
- Oriol Vilanova, *Without distinction*, Christophe Daviet-Thery, Paris, 2016 (available as from 10/04/2016).

Oriol Vilanova has lived and worked in Brussels for several years. His work has previously been shown at international institutions including the Centre d'édition contemporaine Genève (2014), Nottingham Contemporary (2013), the MACBA in Barcelona (2012) and the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (2012). He won the Belgian Art'contest prize in 2015. Vilanova's work is represented by the Spanish gallery Parra & Romero, Madrid/Ibiza.