Above: Sanné Mestrom
A man's name (installation view), 2005
Gouache and pencil on wall
Dimensions variable
Image courtesy the artist

Sanné Mestrom

A man's name
TCB Art Inc.
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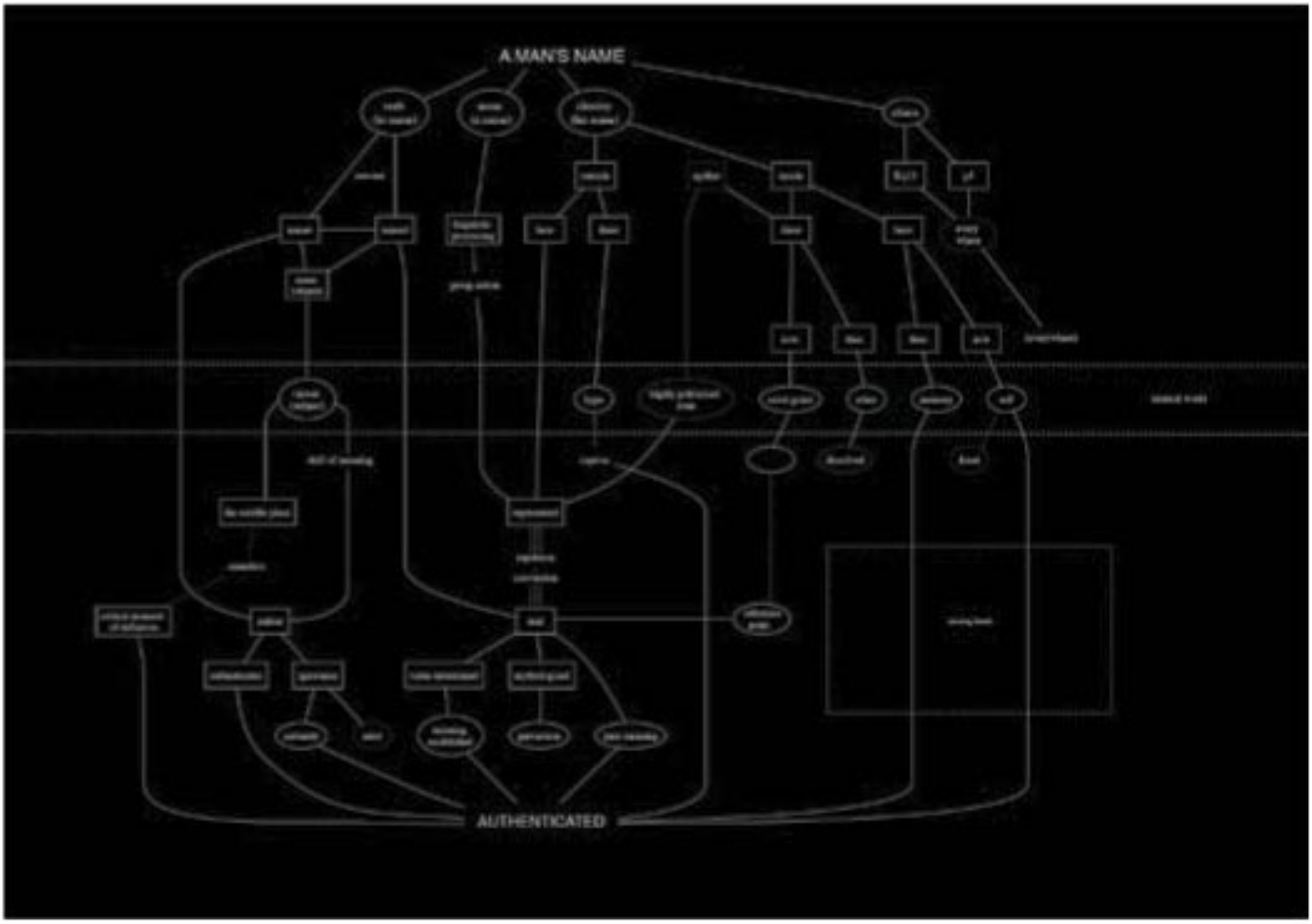
Reviewed by Christine Morrow

Emerging from the gloom of the darkened gallery space at TCB is a text that is either unfolding or suspended on the verge of a dizzying collapse. It is duplicated on two adjacent walls and incorporates the disorienting spatial illusion that its components are receding on imaginary angles. It poses the rhetorical question, 'Take away a man's name and what is left?' A question that could be paraphrased as what surplus, if any, does a name bestow on the person who bears it? Its purpose is to set us to thinking about a series of problems or issues around the concept of naming, the relationship between a proper name and its bearer, power in the bestowing of names, and the link between proper names and property.

There is also an implication in the question's gender specificity. The text could be asking, 'what do men's names bring to bear that women's do not?' Or it might be a joke – that when you take away a man's name you will merely reveal another name behind it, as when a woman reverts from her married name to her maiden name after divorce, thereby substituting the name of the husband with that of her father. You could say in this case that one can never take away men's names, if you remove one man's name the name of another man will always take its place.

Mestrom's question presumes that people can be separated from their names. It defies the assumption that names are more easily accrued or substituted than shed. And it inverts the usual order, in which the man is removed and only his name succeeds him, as happens in death after which a man's name continues to make unique reference to the person he once was. Indeed, a man's name can more easily function without the man, than a man can exist without a name. The family name precedes him before birth and all of his names will supersede him when he dies. A man's name also carries on in a patriarchal sense, when he bestows it on an heir who will carry it on through time. And there is even a third manner by which a name persists for artists and other originators: a creator's name accompanies his or her individual and collective works like a subtle appendage,



Above: Sanné Mestrom
A man's name – Authenticated, 2005
Poster (exhibition flyer)
28cm x 32cm
Image courtesy the artist

written on sheet music, stamped on a patent, embossed on the spines of books and printed on museum labels.

A kind of anonymity operates in *A man's name*. For, although Mestrom is the author of the work, she does not seem to be the orator of the text it contains. Because of its rhetorical nature, the question 'Take away a man's name and what is left?' functions anonymously rather than as a direct query posed by interrogator to subject. By duplicating the sentence across two gallery walls, Mestrom emphasises the indirectness of the 'speech' by diffusing its source, the visual device of doubling mimicking a sonic echo.

Ironically, while Mestrom's artwork declares its concern with anonymity or namelessness, it operates only because two proper names frame it like bookends. The name of the artist, Sanné Mestrom, authors and authorises the work, and the name of the work, *A man's name*, allows it to circulate within culture in much the same way that the name of a man permits him to operate in society. Each of these issues surrounding the concept of naming is evoked by *A man's name* yet the artwork cannot be reduced to the various meanings embedded in the text alone. In fact when considered in isolation the sentence, 'Take away a man's name and what is left', appears coldly theoretical but what rescues it from dull didacticism is the sly, teasing and illusory quality of its spatial incarnation. The words appear to bend around internal hinges or fault lines, forming folds and counter-folds that demonstrate their self-reflexivity. In previous installations Mestrom has painted the various words and phrases as if they were receding, flexing or disappearing toward an imaginary vanishing point. And in performing these levitations, Mestrom-the-magician supplies the texts with an illusory dimension; a levity of another kind.

Despite its large scale and use of the wall as a support, this artwork does not refer to obvious traditions such as mural painting, signwriting, advertising, propaganda or graffiti. Although Mestrom's painted texts are fixed to TCB's walls, they look like they could be the magically enlarged pages of a manuscript. The luminous and enigmatic message of

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A man's name, glowing like a beacon in the dark, may be likened to revelation or prophecy. When considered with the cryptic, even apocalyptic, tone of Mestrom's chosen texts we can imagine that the artist's primary cultural reference is Holy Scripture. The question posed in *A man's name* sounds like a riddle or conundrum alluding to death, loss and decay, while the pleats and corrugations in the layout of the text foreshadow the collapse of the walls that support it. Previous texts reproduced by Mestrom also consist of judgments, prophecies and revelations, including 'reference point for what is yet to come' and 'will judgment hurt when it falls on us?' (the latter from an exhibition in 2004 titled *At the foot of justice*). And because each part of the text comprising *A man's name* lies on a plane that cannot be reconciled with the physical space of the room it has an 'otherworldliness', contributing the impression that the text has materialised from the realm of the supernatural.

Returning to the question of what remains after a man's name is taken away, I wonder if there is a particular name that Mestrom is trying to excise. Mestrom is a New Zealander by upbringing, so it is no stretch to imagine that the name she might want to rub out is that of Colin McCahon (in a kind of symbolic patricide by which artists seek to suppress their famous precursors). He is renowned for paintings of biblical texts, which cannot help but cast a long shadow over the work of any young artist operating in Mestrom's chosen idiom. While McCahon's texts are laid out according to reassuringly vertical and horizontal co-ordinates – stacked, shored up, stable, anchored, secure and upright – Mestrom sends hers into freefall. Yet names stubbornly resist removal and McCahon's legacy signs and authorises this work by Mestrom, as surely as does Mestrom herself.

Christine Morrow is an artist who lives and works in Melbourne.