

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a stack of vintage postcards. The person is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt. The top postcard shows a landscape with a body of water and mountains. The stack is thick, and the edges of many other postcards are visible. The background is a blurred outdoor market setting with various items on display, including a red cup and a white ceramic pot.

ORIO L VILANOVA

Anything, Everything



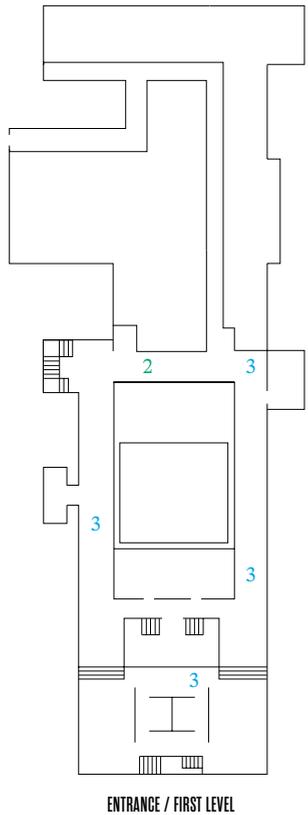
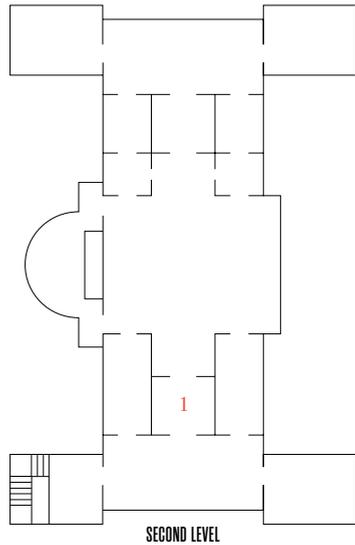
# Albright-Knox Art Gallery

May 11–July 21, 2019

<sup>1</sup> Anything, Everything

<sup>2</sup> To be Precise

<sup>3</sup> Old Masters



TINA RIVERS RYAN

## Vintage Visions

The Victorian-era “ragpickers,” who picked through and sold castoff items in order to survive, were first romanticized as modern artists by the Surrealist writers and artists of the 1920s. As cultural critic Susan Sontag has argued, the Surrealists “invented the secondhand store as a temple of vanguard taste and upgraded visits to flea markets into a mode of aesthetic pilgrimage.”<sup>1</sup> Following in this lineage, Oriol Vilanova (Spanish, born 1980) makes art out of humble castoffs. Specifically, he uses vintage photographic postcards—most of which have already been mailed and are therefore “useless” except as objects of aesthetic or historical interest—supplemented with contemporary purchases. After emerging in the late nineteenth century, printed postcards reached the peak of their popularity in the 1910s and enjoyed a resurgence in the 1950s. Today, they have mostly been replaced by emails, texts, and

social media posts; it is largely cultural nostalgia for all things analog, rather than any utilitarian need, that drives the continued production, mailing, and collection of these objects.

For two decades, Vilanova has made weekly “aesthetic pilgrimages” to flea markets, which are themselves examples of the economic and cultural systems that survive on the periphery of the industrialized global economy. His only agenda is to find postcard images that draw his eye, and his hunt is relentless, almost constituting an artistic performance in itself.<sup>2</sup> Vilanova’s personal collection now numbers more than 75,000 postcards, which he has divided into more than a hundred themes, from sunsets to portraits of Francisco Franco’s generals. Since 2000, Vilanova has used selections from this collection to create artworks

that explore how images both reflect and inform how we see the world.<sup>3</sup> In his largest installations—such as *Sunday* (2017) and *Anything, Everything* (2015–ongoing)—he covers walls floor to ceiling with grids of postcards organized by color, creating an effect similar to striped wallpaper.<sup>4</sup> While an interest in communication has spurred other artists to use postcards as their medium, it is instead the history of visual culture that is central to Vilanova’s work.<sup>5</sup> His installations emphasize not the backs of postcards and the messages they may contain, but their fronts, which together form a kind of encyclopedia of images.

Like the entries of any encyclopedia, postcards reflect the values of the people who produced, sold, and bought them. For example, the museum souvenir postcards in *Anything, Everything* depict what different

cultural institutions considered to be the most important, interesting, or valuable objects in their collections. When these postcards circulate, they reinforce not only the privileged status of these objects but also the ideas these objects convey. For example, the thirteenth-century Crown of Monomakh—a bejeweled crown topped with a cross that appears on a postcard in *Anything, Everything* and is reproduced with other select postcards in this booklet—suggests that the earthly power of certain rulers (in this case, Russian czars) has been divinely ordained. With the explosion of visual culture since the late nineteenth century, the influence of images, delivered via postcards or other mediums, on how we see the world has increased exponentially. Images of sunsets, for instance—the subject of Vilanova’s postcard installation *Sunsets from* (2012–ongoing)—have become benchmarks against which we measure our experience

of the real thing; we may even associate the word “sunset” with photographic images as opposed to our memories of the phenomenon.

Seeing Vilanova’s collection of postcards on the white walls of art galleries and museums draws our attention to the simple fact that museums are also collections of historical images—just ones that are thought to be more “valuable.” Despite the fact that they inevitably are part of the art-market ecosystem, most museums present their collections as if they reflect judgments about quality that are objectively true (when, to a certain degree, they are also the product of market forces or curatorial taste). By exhibiting mass-produced, inexpensive postcards in this context, Vilanova performs a kind of institutional critique: he prompts us to consider how works in museum collections (and other objects) accrue financial, historical,

cultural, or emotional value.<sup>6</sup> In *Old Masters* (2017–ongoing), for example, the pockets of ordinary jackets are filled with postcards of recognizable artworks that the visitor can take out and rifle through. These postcards—which help promote the perceived value of the artworks they feature—may be mere reproductions, but they allow us to have a more personal relationship with the artworks, as they are the only way that most of us will ever be able to “collect” works by these artists (not to mention touch them, or carry them with us—perhaps in our pockets). All of this raises the question: which object—original or copy—is the more valuable?<sup>7</sup>

By probing the role that value plays in the creation and experience of museum collections, Vilanova’s installations challenge the supposed neutrality of the museum. When a museum adds objects to its collections,

it separates them from the contexts in which they were produced and originally circulated. In the past, this has allowed museums to pretend to be a no-man’s land lying outside of history or politics.<sup>8</sup> The decontextualization of museum objects is abetted by museum souvenir postcards that feature individual objects suspended in abstract, solid-colored fields. For example, a postcard of a ceramic Mesoamerican figure (possibly from the late first millennium in what is now the state of Veracruz on Mexico’s Gulf Coast) framed against a bright orange background transforms what was likely a funerary object into just another sculpture.<sup>9</sup> In organizing this and other souvenir postcards that make up *Anything, Everything* by color, Vilanova brings the backgrounds into the foreground, prompting us to consider the ways in which museums are not neutral but always “color,” or influence, the interpretation and value

(whether financial, historical, or aesthetic) of the objects they display. Similarly, in *To be Precise* (2015–ongoing), Vilanova embeds bundles of thousands of postcards in the architecture of the gallery or museum (for example, on a bookcase or a shelf), making clear that our experience of artworks is influenced by not only all the images we have seen before (including reproductions) but also the contexts (physical and otherwise) in which we encounter them.

The postcard bundles of *To be Precise* also serve another purpose: they insist on the fact that a museum’s collected images are also *objects*. Similarly, because Vilanova designed the grid of *Anything, Everything* to require any horizontal postcards to be mounted vertically, we see these as objects before we “read” them as images. And of course, the invitation to handle the postcards in the

pockets of the jackets of *Old Masters* is also an invitation to recognize that each photographic reproduction is, at the same time, a physical object, as well as a representation of one. This emphasis on the materiality of images across Vilanova’s works can be understood as a response to the dematerialization of images through digital technologies. In this light, the volume of images in his works evokes the volume of digital images across the internet, and the experience of viewing installations like *Anything, Everything*—in which an overwhelming number of images are inserted into a grid that flattens their differences and produces unexpected juxtapositions—is not unlike the experience of browsing Instagram or using Google’s Image Search. While algorithms increasingly are used to process enormous databases of digital image files for specific purposes, such as crowd surveillance, Vilanova’s installations—in which images

may be organized according to aesthetic principles (as in *Anything, Everything*) or not at all (as in *To be Precise*)—insist that images can shape how we see the world in more poetic ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, “America, Seen Through Photographs, Darkly,” in *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 1995 [1973]), 61–62.

<sup>2</sup> Vilanova’s obsessive collecting recalls the trend in contemporary art that art historian and critic Hal Foster memorably termed the “archival impulse.” See “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (Autumn 2004): 3–22. Notably, the obsession of collectors is a theme that runs through several of Vilanova’s works; his 2016 performance *Borrowed Words*, for example, features a collector earnestly discussing his or her passions.

<sup>3</sup> Vilanova also explores the persistence of the past in his play *They Cannot Die* (2011), in which Vladimir Lenin, Salvador Dalí, and Walt Disney discuss immortality.

<sup>4</sup> In her essay “Grids,” art historian Rosalind Krauss explains how the grid became a sign of modernity in art by declaring art’s autonomy, or separateness, from everyday life (as it organizes the picture plane in a way that is distinct from the organization of real space). See *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 9–22. Because Vilanova’s grids are made of recognizable images and objects, they suggest that even the most rigorously abstract art cannot possibly achieve the dream of autonomy: fine art is necessarily part of the larger world of visual culture, including such mundane objects as postcards.

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most famously, Conceptual artist On Kawara (Japanese, 1932–2014) regularly sent postcards to friends and acquaintances that simply stated the time at which he arose that morning. The resulting series, *I GOT UP* (1968–79), poetically

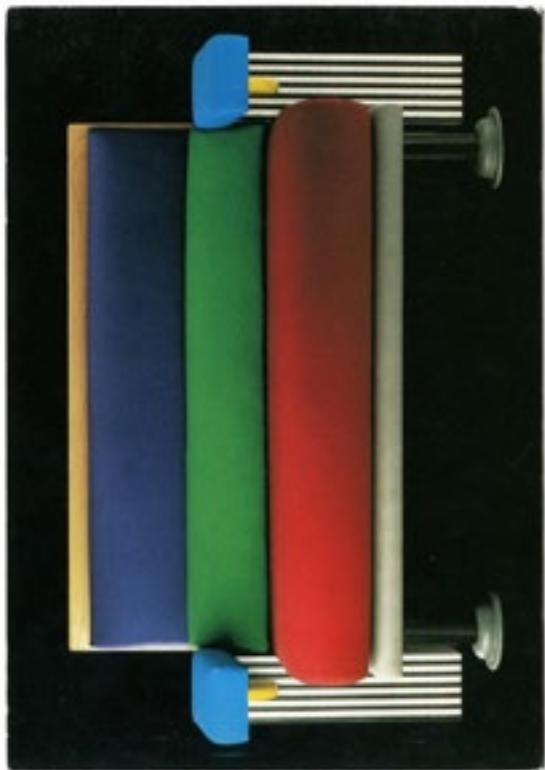
exploits the postcard's epistolary function to mark the passage of time, which each of us experience as a succession of new days.

<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Vilanova's installations are related to his performances about value, including *Last Price* (2014), in which museum visitors are invited to haggle over the admission price, and *If You Pay Peanuts You Get Monkeys* (2012), in which the artist sells visitors five-euro bills for four euros each. Note that the vertical stripes of similarly colored postcards that are a hallmark of Vilanova's installations have an affinity with Daniel Buren's (French, born 1938) use of stripes on fabric and other surfaces in projects from the 1960s to today, which ask similar questions about the role of institutions in creating value by highlighting the artificial distinction between the space of art and of everyday life.

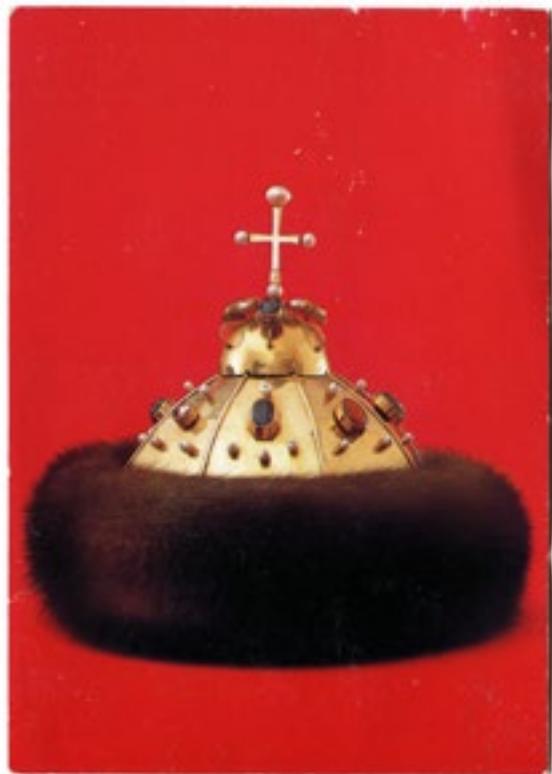
<sup>7</sup> The German critical theorist Walter Benjamin discussed the changing relationship between originals and copies in his classic 1935 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility"; see the translation by Michael W. Jennings in *Grey Room* 39 (Spring 2010): 11–38.

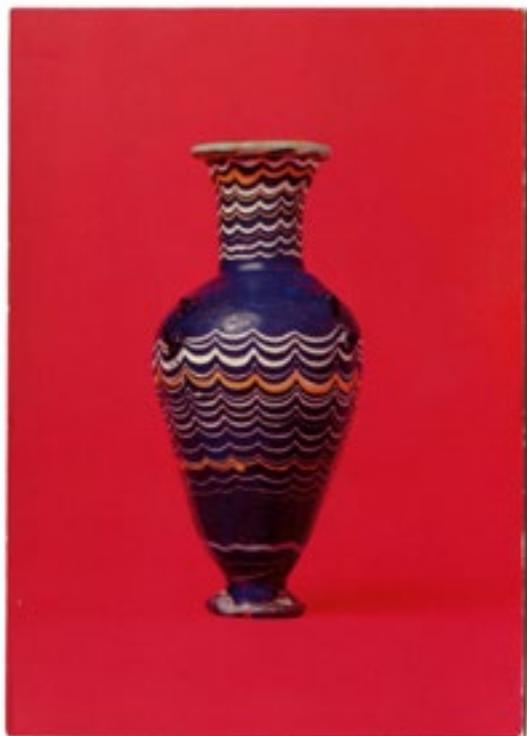
<sup>8</sup> In the installation and related book *Without distinction* (2016), Vilanova gathers empty museum display cases and presents them as objects to be contemplated in their own right; this makes the viewer aware of how these airless glass cases decontextualize the objects they contain, while themselves becoming "invisible," like ideology.

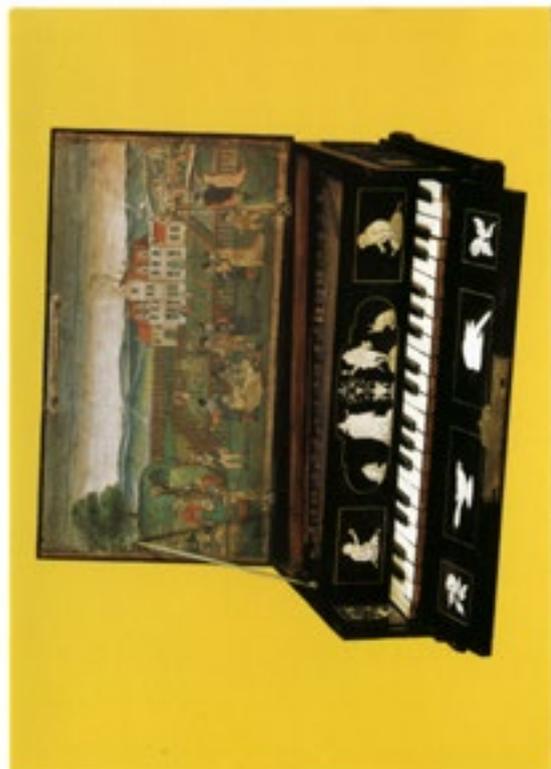
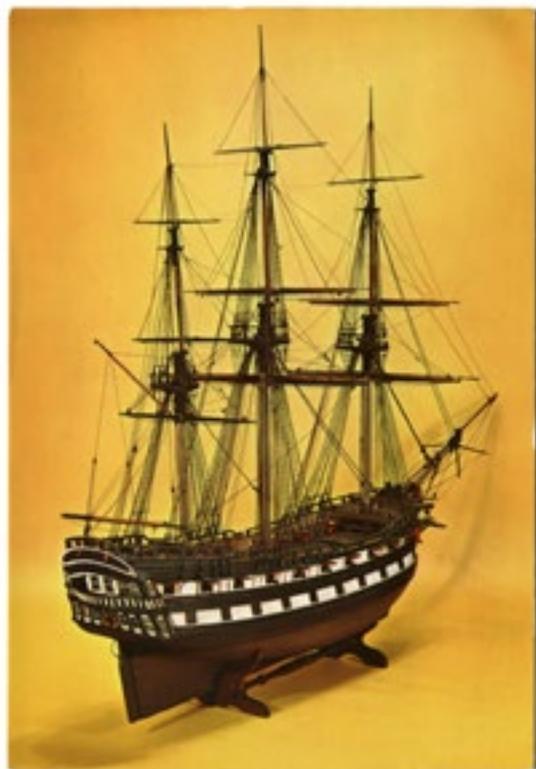
<sup>9</sup> The author acknowledges Dr. James A. Doyle, Assistant Curator for the Art of the Ancient Americas at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for his assistance identifying this object.















ORIOLE VILANOVA

## The Last Work But One

*This text was first published in  
Potential Museums, edited by Donatien Grau  
(Paris: Paradis Magazine, 2018).*

X: So, you used to collect and now have stopped. What I'd like to know is, what did collecting mean for you back when you were doing it? Was it a source of pleasure, or what?

Z: Yes, I did a lot of collecting. Later I stopped. I think collecting is a matter of quantity. What I mean is that you don't collect just anything. Each collector has his passion, but within that context it's quantity that counts. It's always a matter of quantity. (Silence) Collectors come in for a lot of ridicule, because they're always saying: "I'm in control. I can stop whenever I want." People ridicule them because they don't understand what the collectors mean to say. I myself

have very clear memories. When you collect you want to get to the last work. To collect is, literally, to do everything you can to get to the last work. That's what interests you. A collector is someone who is always putting a stop to his collecting. He's always dealing with the last work.

X: Always operating at the limit?

Z: What is the limit? It's hard to explain... A collector is someone who is always putting a stop to his collecting, which means that he's always at the last work. It's a bit like the terribly lovely phrase from Péguy: it's not that the last water lily repeats all of the others and the last. The first work repeats the last, and it's the last that counts.

Now, what exactly is the last work for a collector? The collector is always reaching for that moment when he will obtain the last work. It's not the first, the second, or the third that interests him; it's much more... (Silence) The collector is a crafty, wily person, and the last work is the following: he carries out an evaluation; he evaluates what will hold up and not collapse. This varies greatly from person to person. The collector evaluates the last work, and all the others will be his way of getting by, of waiting for the last one. And what exactly does the last one mean? It means that he cannot with stand any more works. The last is the one that will allow him to start fresh on the morrow. For if he actually proceeds all the way to the last

one, if he exceeds his power, it will be the last one within his power. If he goes beyond the last one within his power, proceeding to the last one that exceeds his power, he collapses. And then he's screwed. (Silence) When he talks about the last work he doesn't mean the last one; he means the last-but-one. He's on the lookout for the work before the last.

There's a wonderful word for the one before last: penultimate. Not the ultimate, because the ultimate would ruin his arrangement.

The penultimate is the last before tomorrow's fresh start. What I can say about the collector, then is that he's the person who is always saying "Come on; it's the last one," and the last one varies from person to person.

X: And he's the one who says:  
"I'll stop tomorrow."?

Z: No. He doesn't say that. He  
says: "I'll stop today so that I can  
start again tomorrow."

Substitute Gilles Deleuze for Z,  
Claire Parnet for X, and drink  
for all the words that refer to  
collecting, and you will have  
restored a chapter from the  
television series *L'Abécédaire de  
Gilles Deleuze*, filmed in 1988.  
You will have returned from "C as  
in Collection" to "D as in Drink"  
("B comme Boisson").









SUSAN SONTAG

**Excerpt from**

***The Volcano Lover: A Romance***

*This text was first published in*

*Susan Sontag's The Volcano Lover: A Romance*

*(New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992).*

*It was selected for inclusion in this booklet by the artist.*

It is the entrance to a flea market. No charge. Admittance free. Sloppy crowds. Vulpine, larking. Why enter? What do you expect to see? I'm seeing. I'm checking on what's in the world. What's left. What's discarded. What's no longer cherished. What had to be sacrificed. What someone thought might interest someone else. But it's rubbish. If there, here, it's already been sifted through. But there may be something valuable, there. Not valuable, exactly. But something *I* would want. Want to rescue. Something that speaks to me. To my longings. Speaks to, speaks of. Ah...

Why enter? Have you that much spare time? You'll look. You'll stray? You'll lose track of the time. You think you have enough time. It always takes more time than you think. Then you'll be late. You'll be annoyed with yourself. You'll want to

stay. You'll be tempted. You'll be repelled. The things are grimy. Some are broken. Badly patched or not at all. They will tell me of passions, fancies I don't need to know about. Need. Ah, no. None of this do I need. Some I will caress with my eye. Some I must pick up, fondle. While being watched, expertly, by their seller. I am not a thief. Most likely, I am not a buyer.

Why enter? Only to play. A game of recognitions. To know what, and to know how much it was, how much it ought to be, how much it will be. But perhaps not to bid, haggle, not to acquire. Just to look. Just to wander. I'm feeling lighthearted. I don't have anything in mind.

Why enter? There are many places like this one. A field, a square, a hooded street, an armory, a parking lot, a pier. This could be anywhere, though it happens to be here.

It will be full of everywhere. But I would be entering it here. In my jeans and silk blouse and tennis shoes: Manhattan, spring of 1992. A degraded experience of pure possibility. This one with his postcards of movie stars, that one with her tray of Navajo rings, this one with the rack of World War II bomber jackets, that one with the knives. His model cars, her cut-glass dishes, his rattan chairs, her top hats, his Roman coins, and there. . . a gem, a treasure. It could happen, I could see it, I might want it. I might buy it as a gift, yes, for someone else. At the least, I would have learned that it existed, and turned up here.

Why enter? Is there already enough? I could find out it's not here. Whatever it is, often I am not sure, I could put it back down on the table. Desire leads me. I tell myself what I want to hear. Yes, there's enough.

I go in.





## About the Artist

Oriol Vilanova is a Catalan artist living in Brussels. By rummaging through flea markets, his favorite places for research, he built up a collection of postcards to create a “thinking machine” that provides the conceptual foundations for his plays, installations, and performances. His works have been exhibited at institutions including Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona; M-Museum Leuven, Belgium; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; MACBA, Barcelona; CA2M, Madrid; NMNM, Monaco; Centre d’edition contemporaine, Geneva; FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims; and L’appartement 22, Rabat, Morocco.

## Photographic Credits

All images courtesy the artist and Parra & Romero Gallery, Madrid/Ibiza.

p. 1: Detail of *Anything, Everything*, 2015–ongoing. Installation of vintage and new postcards, dimensions variable. Photo: Roberto Ruíz

p. 18–29: Details from *Anything, Everything*, 2015–ongoing

p. 30–31: Installation view of *Anything, Everything*, 2015–ongoing, at M-Museum Leuven, Belgium, 2016. Photo: Dirk Pauwels

p. 43: Detail from the photographic series *Reproductions*, 2018–ongoing

p. 44–45: Oriol Vilanova (at center in blue jacket) at Jeu de Balle, Brussels, 2019. Photo: Ingrid Sala

p. 46–47: Installation view of *Old Masters*, 2017–ongoing, at Albert Baronian Gallery, Brussels, 2017. Installation with jackets and vintage and new postcards, dimensions variable. Photo: Isabelle Arthuis

p. 48: Detail of *Old Masters*, 2017–ongoing. Photo: Isabelle Arthuis

p. 49: Detail from a 2019 installation of *Old Masters*, 2017–ongoing, featuring a postcard reproduction of a work by Andy Warhol

p. 54–55: Installation view of *To be Precise*, 2015–ongoing, at The Green Parrot, Barcelona, 2015. Installation of bundled vintage and new postcards, dimensions variable. Photo: Roberto Ruíz

p. 56–57: Detail of *To be Precise*, 2015–ongoing. Photo: Roberto Ruíz

Front and back cover: Photo: Pauline Hatzigeorgiou



Albright-Knox  
Art Gallery

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Catalan Language and Culture

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