

Caroline Bergvall and Ciarán Maher: Say Parsley.....

Arnolfini Bristol 8 May to 4 July

Say Parsley is a collaborative sound and poetry installation over three galleries in which previously exhibited yet ongoing artworks are developed and transformed for the Arnolfini. The viewer as composer/interpreter/writer is invited to conceptually and experientially fill in the blanks, in a sparse white-walled environment of text fragments, sound, objects and media projections of text.

The exhibition is characterised by mixed messages of play and violence. There is a sense of unease and ambiguity between aspects of the installations that are concerned with resisting the violent usage of language as control, and other aspects that refer to language as innate play. Caroline Bergvall suggested in a talk, presented along with various ‘performance writing’ workshops linked to the exhibition, that her deconstructive poetics aim to resist what she describes as a *Lingua Franca*, where English is the vehicular language of a global business monoculture (Bergvall is a

writer of French/Norwegian origin and Ciarán Maher is a composer of Irish descent). Dissociation from given identity in language, and its reconfiguration in new forms, is a central theme.

Parsley references a biblical ‘shibboleth’ as a prophetic example of control through language that ultimately led to a massacre. In the original event, the word, shibboleth, was used as a test to distinguish Gileadites from Ephraimites who were unable to pronounce the ‘h’ sound in ‘sh’ and were consequently slaughtered. In the Dominican Republic in 1937, thousands of Creole Haitians identifiable through their inability to say ‘parsley’ with a rolling ‘r’ were subsequently massacred. This dramatic example resonates in the synchronised sound and text installation *Parsley* in which the English derivatives of a list of Dutch and French words are heard spoken with slight mismatching of syntax and phonetics. Similar to a child’s chant, innocent yet provocative words – Pig, Fig, Borstel, Trompel, Parsley etc – are heightened as poetry through slippage, ghosting, alliteration and pattern.

For Walls in the adjacent gallery also uses the theme of dropping ‘h’s and mispronouncing ‘r’s to produce misspellings. Ghosted images of the dropped letters are seen as faint vinyl letters among the black letters of the text. Taken from Russell Hoban’s dystopian 1980 novel *Riddley Walker*, they have elements of

pared-down, crudely amusing phonetic slang: a less severe form of Orwellian Newspeak. Bergvall has used her poetic fragments, slips-of-the-tongue and ghosting to produce what appear to be didactic, prophetic warnings, seething with violent reference, that nevertheless could imply a reconfigured emergent identity like that of a rap musician: ‘dogs rr struck in my throtl rat de gates ov law’ (with ghosted ‘r’s).

Alpabet, situated in the same room as *For Walls*, consists of 25 plumb weights, vinyl letters and badges. This installation has the appearance of a game. The plumb lines are activated as the audience pushes them. Each plumb thereby moves around a vinyl alphabet letter attached to the floor. When activated by a crowd, the plumbs swing randomly in the room, revealing glimpses and patterns of the alphabet. This playing with letters and language, highlighted here but evident in all of the installations, reflects the belief that language is innately formed through play and has a universal grammar. Upon leaving this gallery the viewer/composer/writer may pick up a badge, apparently as an interactive token, which has the letter ‘h’ upon it, the letter missing from the game *Alpabet*. We are told in the brochure that accompanies the exhibition that the dropping of ‘h’s in language exposes the speaker by stigmatising socio-economic class or, with

reference to Irish identity, sectarian allegiance. Again we are offered the letter 'h' as a reminder of the shibboleth. The badge then is neither game nor token but a focus of the installation. It functions as a metaphor for the imprisoning effect of language as social stigma.

Maier has said that he believes human beings are hard-wired to construct meaning from minimal information. Some of the richness of Bergvall's poetry in her book *Fig* has been carefully edited in the exhibition. This is evident in *Ampers&*, in which 64 projected ampersands are viewed as visually interesting phenomena in themselves. An accompanying text makes use of the ampersand as a conjoining and shorthand device, stating the need to generate new connections and dissociate ourselves from given identity in language. Within the room, *Speakers*, a sound installation, floods the gallery with the sound of human voices. When transformed into low-frequency sound they form an audio phenomenon akin to birdsong. The curling, animal-like shapes of the ampersand forms complement the birdsong as it evokes human whispers. The concept of universal grammar is posed here again in the analogous pattern of innate grammar and syntax shared by birds and humans.

This sparse exhibition offers intellectual curiosity coupled with violent prophesy, yet has density by implication only. One problem with leaving the viewer/writer to complete the meanings is that, in art school language, for example, the response could well be that the exhibition is referred to as 'cool'. My point is compounded if we translate this into Newspeak: 'double-plus cool'. Having identified the levelling and simplification of language as problematic, then to produce a sparse exhibition with much of the richness of Bergvall's poetry edited out, is perverse.

Stephen Lee is a sculptor.