

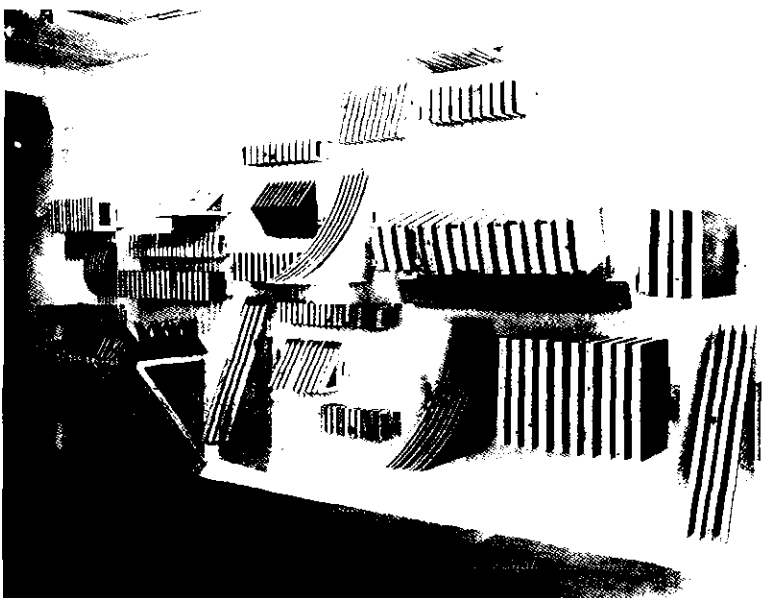
■ History of Art, the

David Roberts Art Foundation London 7 May to 10 July

'History of Art, the' asks what it might mean for 'art to be understood and historicized on its own terms'. In a climate that remains oversaturated by theory this seems a welcome, if potentially conservative, move. In his essay 'Art History, Interrupted', curator Mihnea Mircan dreams of 'a discourse of the present, a present that does not adhere to the past as an inexorable condition or to a future as a necessity of confirmation'. His statement articulates the appeal of the contemporary, but also its attendant anxieties. For him, art history's attempts to reinvent itself have led to an impasse – to the writing of an endless series of prologues to unwritten and unwritable histories. Contemporary art, for its part, seems to him to suffer from a 'historiographic compulsion', remaining mired in its attempts to prove its lineage from art history. Can the curator come to the rescue? He sees the exhibition as 'a locus where two distinct ways of imagining the future converge and are tested against each other: art's and art history's ability to figure – or fabricate – the future'.

The show brings together an aesthetically appealing but suspiciously mute assortment of works in many media. They provocatively anticipate our interpretation but deliver only some of the desired clues. When meaning is not forthcoming we inevitably start rilling through the default art historical back-up drive, if we have one. Nina Beier & Maria Lund's – to my mind horrible – clay bathers (*Calling – The Sunbathers*) *Loss and Cause*, 2010, begin to seem to refer to Picasso, for example, while the series of four grey monochromes that punctuate the exhibition begin to rework Robert Ryman, and so on. An intriguing installation of rows of geometric shards in plywood, part painted red, suggests a suprematist city waiting to be taken down from the rack and assembled – Alon Levin, *Or Why Not Celebrate the Past Before the Future will Come (accounts of happenings I, II, III)*, 2010. Clearly, it is up to us to make something of all this, but it is hard to

Alon Levin
Or Why Not Celebrate the Past Before the Future will Come (accounts of happenings I, II, III) 2010



forge the links. A flickering TV screen of white noise installed on the floor provides a diversion. What could the girl in headphones standing watching it possibly find so amusing?

Then it is my turn to smile at the flickering screen. Benoit Marie's *Spider's Web*, 2006, is really a great pleasure. We are listening to what sounds like a private conversation between two voices – one drawling, American, the other French. The artist has asked Arthur C Danto to say something about a painting that he has never seen before. The conversation is entirely conjectural. Danto decodes the iconography adeptly, but admits that he has no idea what it is that he is looking at. 'I don't know the name of the painting and I don't know who did it.' 'I have no idea, myself.' 'Clearly this is an allegory of some kind.' Danto: 'I really admire the work ...' Marie: 'It's not a work ... it's just an image to have a discussion about.' After all, Marie says he has no idea either: 'For the moment, I don't know what I'm doing ...' Danto is unfazed: 'You don't know what you're doing? That's really nice.' These awkward moments smoothed over are full of charm. The earnest artist has met his match in the tact of his interlocuter, who succeeds in drawing out the artist's ideas, from nothing. The process is quite wonderful to witness and all the better for being non-visual. 'Anyway, congratulations!', Danto masterfully concludes. A successful verdict then – but for whom? After 16 minutes of conversation neither artist nor critic has accepted responsibility for producing meaning. But at least there have been no major indiscretions by either party, each politely suggesting that it is the other that knows what there is to be known.

However convivial and open things appear on the surface, though, there is power at stake here. The highly self-conscious works in the show frustrate certain critical futures while promoting others. Mladen Stilinovic's wonderfully shoddy pink canvas, with its simple red Serbo-Croatian hand-painted declaration, *An attack against my art is an attack against socialism and progress*, 1977, serves as the historical rallying point for the show. For it is a reminder that apparently solipsistic conceptual statements can have real critical weight. Stilinovic demonstrates how art can inoculate itself against attack with recourse to ideology. By including this work, perhaps Mircan's exhibition also becomes immune from attack. It seems unadvisable to attack; after all, I too want to be progressive, radical.

What concerns me in all this is that the curator himself seems to get off very lightly. Are curators really just spokespersons for 'art'? Surely curating is now a discipline too. When exactly did the artist and curator form this coalition and designate art history as the new enemy? Mircan announces that 'artistic and curatorial action' are united. And together they unite in denouncing the 'formerness' of art history. Of course, art history's parasitical success must be a continued source of annoyance to those that feed it. And it must be very annoying for curators that art historians can curate exhibitions. So they have conspired to do away with the meddling mediator. If she cannot be entirely discredited, then she can at least be co-opted into the curatorial frame or the artistic project. Why should those who neither make artwork and only infrequently take the trouble to organise shows have the last word? They must be made to play their part in recharting the 'territory between work, criticism and

their participation to (a future) art history'. I have therefore been compelled to allow my work to be swallowed up by the exhibition. Critics are instructed to send in their reviews for display – but first they must do the artist one small favour. He wishes to have the last word. I decide to let him have it. I therefore do as I am told and replace my full stop with Navid Nuur's phrase: *Where you end and I begin*, 2010. ■

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■ Caroline Bergvall and Ciarán Maher: Say Parsley

Arnolfini Bristol 8 May to 4 July

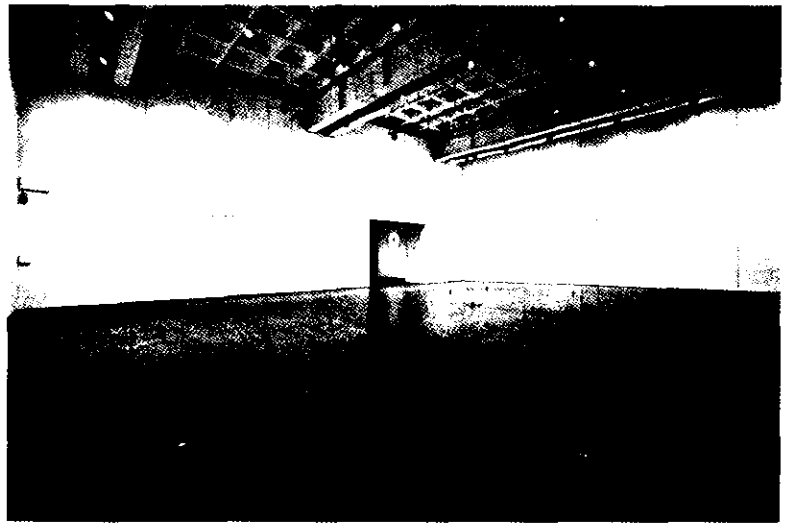
'Say Parsley' is a collaborative sound and poetry installation over three galleries in which previously exhibited yet ongoing artworks are developed and transformed for the Arnolfini. The viewer as composer/interpreter/writer is invited to conceptually and experientially fill in the blanks, in a sparse 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 (all works 2010) 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*, the texts 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



Caroline Bergvall
and Ciarán Maher
Alpabet 2010

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.

Maher 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 *Ampersand*, 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 any 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, producing a sparse exhibition with much of the richness of Bergvall's poetry edited out is perverse. ■

STEPHEN LEE is a sculptor.