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Ellen Moffat

Blow (Radical Poetry)

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**BLOW (Radical Poetry)**

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"In a desirable society which, as we are not in it, is a future society, each of us, its members, moves through life along some path composed of steps taken in preference to many equally desired steps not taken. The preference is with each of us, each member. It is directed, however, not by each of us contemplating one desired path, but by all of us contemplating the contribution of every step of every member to formations of relations. A step is preferred when found, beyond being desired, to also be desirable."

HERBERT BRIN, *MOUSSES MUTATIONS*, 1966
Composer Herbert Brin used the language of musical arrangements to explore the notion of a desirable society in which individual choice and collective action could fuse into harmony. Through steps individually and freely taken in relation to socially desirable paths, according to Brin, humans may form new types of relations and establish sustainable systems that profit the whole of society.

This mode of thinking, which can be characterized as utopian, seems to be out of date and out of place in the individualistic late capitalist world we inhabit, especially after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

But in her latest sound/light/text installation, Blow, Ellen Moffat attempts to revive this notion of utopian thinking by confronting viewers with the sensuality of early twentieth-century sound poetry, spatialized and mediated through light and technology.

Dadaist and Futurist poets and visual artists such as Raoul Hausmann, Hugo Ball, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov indeed used the modes of sound repetition, abstraction and deconstruction of language in their poetry meant to be read out loud, to provoke a change of consciousness, posting, as the Structuralist later would, that we live through language and the categories it imposes. Their work was part of the utopian modernist current that believed that activating language in radical ways could change the way humans relate to each other and to the material world.

**ÉVÉNEMENTS**

**Events**

On the gallery floor, twelve meandering root-like cables spread out from a single sound system, invading the space of the viewer. A small, raw speaker is attached to the extremity of each flex. From these twelve outlets (that refer to the range of twelve octaves audible by humans), emerges the sound poem Blow, a composition of breaths, phonemes, syllables and words, followed by a longer textual fragment borrowed from the work of Herbert Brin (see above). The sound travels through space emerging from one root ending at a time, forcing the viewer to bend an ear to follow the emission. It asks her to enter the network, walking over and between the cables, relating physically to the root system laid on the floor. A projection on the wall of the darkened room recreates Blow as concrete poetry, again, the poem is embodied by a root system or a nervous system disseminating textual fragments, words and sounds, recomposing its origin, providing new word and sound structures to shape human thought. The extreme sensuality of the...
eight-minute soundtrack, performed by Ellen Moffat and poet Steven Ross Smith, constructs for the viewer a narrative path that guides her into a specific experience. A particular spatial and temporal involvement are indeed required in following the poem, from root-ending to root-ending, to its chronological conclusion where deconstructed language re-forms into Brün’s utopian message. This time-based strategy is deployed as a means to re-enact the politics of engagement necessary in the building of a desirable society. Viewers make individual steps to discover the poem and the space it resides in. But as the looped recording guides the viewer according to a sequential path, different viewers find themselves choosing to make similar steps.

Moffat’s notion of community in the context of a desirable society is broad and flexible. Her community is one of engaged artists, active viewers and thinkers and responsible citizens, wherever they may reside. While she expresses herself in English, she also brings in the universal language of the body in the elemental utterances of the breath and the blow. In this layering of sound, light, text and objects, language is deconstructed into primary units to allow the viewer to understand how imperfect and imprecise it is; the temporary incompetence of language relocates communication. Moffat testifies: “my goal is to exceed the specificity of the local, suggesting resonances and associations rather than uniqueness.” Here, both the langue (as a cultural/linguistic system anchoring concepts) and parole (with its common sounds and inconsistencies) are mediated through spatialized technology. Yet parole takes over from langue and permits the reframing of values away from established structures. In other words, the acoustic image produced for the gallery by Moffat makes the political/utopian potential of parole visible. Is this what could be called radical poetry?

The term radical most often refers to progressive politics. And there are, in fact, historical links between the avant-garde forms of early-twentieth century sound poetry and the politics of change. But the term radical also defines the root. The importance of this visual metaphor in Blow cannot be understated. Indeed, while the root maintains a resilient link to its point of origin, its purpose is also to always grow outwards and in various directions, seeking nutrients. In this sense, the scheme exhibited here does not represent a suggestion of return towards modernist teleological ideals. It does not imply going back in time to invoke utopian social models based on the critique of nation states or economies that simply no longer exist. Yet, the utopian composition put on display allows the viewer to take steps re-making up the root system to the core of social ideals in order to better project outwards contemporary social desires.

This radicality is deconstructive. In Blow, formal modes of language are no longer contained in a single medium. They complete each other, perhaps even competing for the viewer’s attention and inviting her to walk through the space, decoding, but also adding—through the language of her own body—another layer of significance. Blow allows a multi-sensory system for thinking utopia to take shape, as well as portraying the workings of utopian thought as a potential producer of sustainable systems.

Is it possible, or even desirable to revive the languages of utopia? What Moffat suggests is that bringing back utopian vocabularies to criticize the state of our current society opens up new possibilities for conceiving ideals. Allowing language to be free, that is allowing citizens to think outside of established systems, may lead to potential steps taken towards a desirable society.

Michael Maranda

In the gallery, two beautifully constructed harpsichords stand on their elegant legs, silent, waiting for hands to bring them to life. Suddenly, haltingly, one hears the Aria from the Goldberg Variations, played on the harpsichord but not on the ones we see. Nearing the instruments one realizes that one could not in fact play on them as they are flawed in numerous minute ways. Painstakingly constructed and beautiful, they are nonetheless dysfunctional. Decoy: A person or thing that lures into danger, deception, or a similar trap.

Maranda’s previous work often rendered itself opaque. On 1,540 different drawings the artist wrote the word *Aufhebung* using various different grades of pencils, three per drawing, and never in the same combination. The word was written several thousand times per page so that all one was left with was a series of works marked heavily in lead, the word itself illegible. This is at once a loss of confidence in the ideas of the Enlightenment and a didactic theory in favour of visual practice.

On the walls accompanying the harpsichords are hand-drawn music scores of the Aria. They stand in for the less than perfect acoustics that sound through the gallery, sufficiently representing the Goldberg Variations, which are familiar to most. The instruments, too, stand in for ones better executed and fully functional. Within this context these latter are unnecessary. The idea has been made visible and therefore the concept has become art; it would be redundant, even gimmicky, to create instruments that were professional in their rendering of the utilitarian thing they were meant to be. In an attempt to address drawing, Maranda spent months making ink by grinding and mixing paste and filling a variety of glass containers with the results. The idea was that by paring the work down to its essential materials, ink, the drawing itself was no longer necessary. Continuing with his insistence on making words images, as in the Aufhebung piece, Maranda made the material, the idea, the image. This concept can be seen in some of the artist’s other work, like his retyping of all three Kantian critiques but omitting all but the grammatical signs, like commas, quotations, and periods. Maranda claims with a smile that he is trying to “get people to stop reading,” and yet this incredibly arduous task of recording punctua-