stilted sincerity

Shane McCarthy *Stilted Sincerity* Digital drawing and wall colour (Edition of 3)
Dimensions variable 2013

alluring
token

Shane McCarthy *Alluring Token* Mixed media installation Dimensions variable 2013

WORDS, SOMETIMES, GET IN THE WAY OF MEANING

As the truism of Shane McCarthy's exhibition title suggests, words, of course, do often get in the way of meaning. It is curious, on that note, to perceive just how full of words McCarthy's work actually is. They encroach upon the material support of the work, and at each point tantalise, proffering forms of explanation or finality, and yet, they never quite carry out this task. Words, and language more generally, instead are posited here as performing a positive complication of meaning: McCarthy's work, in so much as it embraces this emancipatory dimension to language, at each point refutes the desire for a semantics of ease.

In conversation with the artist, talk skirted vertiginously around subjects such as mathematics and music; simulation, Baudrillard; cinematic looping and Douglas R. Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach*; we also talked about the renowned American physicist Richard Feynman. In the BBC documentary *The Pleasure of Finding Things Out* (1981)[1], Feynman recounts the way his father used to teach him as a young boy, not by imparting to him a barrage of information, but rather by demonstrating, actively and patiently, how nature worked. Feynman, here in his later years, puts forward the crucial distinction, inherited from his father, between "knowing the name of something, as opposed to *knowing* something." This thought stayed with me, for it holds a specific weight to art. To name superficial components - unified in an artistic composition - as art, could well be a *learned* skill: the challenge to know *why* art springs forth through this composition is an altogether more formidable task. To denote an object or act *as* art is not to understand *why* it is constructed as art: linguistic denotation is not the same as comprehension. So too with McCarthy's work: it speaks to a gap in language that cannot be surpassed through language alone. Words, indeed, can get in the way of meaning - by trapping impossibility within the remit of a sentence.

Indeed, a preoccupation with language, however slippery, runs right through McCarthy's work. The titles, most particularly *Stilted Sincerity* and *Absent Presence* (all 2013), explicitly point to an unresolved relationship with language, with its demands and faulty assurances. Jacques Derrida refers to language as a form of absent or deferred presence: language always points outside of itself, exceeding itself; it means nothing in and of itself, an empty shell. Indeed, this is the coup of post-structuralism: to rethink language as a system, contingent and always in flux with respect to other, equally complex, systems. So too the translation of the idea into the artwork: the finalised work always points outside of itself, towards something not beholden to its material basis. McCarthy's work *Absent Presence* is aware of this fact: comprising two small televisions atop similar wooden sideboards, they interact with one another without speaking. The phrase 'absent presence' emerges from a black background on each screen, attempting to make present something that it has lost. To step into the space between the two televisions is quite literally an attempt to appease absence, but the viewer will come and inevitably leave this space. For however long absence is negated, it will surface once again: language is forever pointing to what has been lost, or will come again.

Another key feature of McCarthy's work is of course obsolescence. Throughout, there is a preoccupation with the idea of neon, and with all the modernist utopianism, the radical newness, that it entails. However, here neon is but a semblance, a neon *'in-the-wake-of'*[2] neon, as Hal Foster might call it. This simulation of neon has been excised of all promise, exploded and recalibrated by computer program. This semblance – what McCarthy describes as a 'digital drawing' - is then projected onto the gallery walls. The work *Alluring Token* is perhaps most illustrative of this gesture. Here, a projector rests within an ergonomically absurd, purpose-built table in the center of the gallery space. From this, a digital depiction of neon reading 'Alluring Token' is projected onto the gallery wall. From the wooden table are outcroppings of plastic cord that lead to two separate sculptural components. Another semblance of neon, the LED lights that populate this work, further attest to its unattainability. By creating a tripartite structure into which the viewer can enter into and navigate, McCarthy sets up the conditions for a meditation on the promise of neon, and by extension, any kind of utopian or wholly autonomous, *tabula rasa*, thinking.

There is a playfully testing quality to McCarthy's work. Nowhere is this more evident than in the central video work *Untitled*, which comprises an extended video work projected from its resting place of a small stool – modified also to house the projector – onto a roll of carpet curled back on itself so as to comprise a makeshift screen. The video's content comprises a long text piece, which slowly emerges from the white background, only to sink back and be replaced by more text. Furthermore, to enter into the work is to enter at an uncertain point: the viewer cannot know at what stage it is at, just beginning or at some stage towards its culmination. In such a way, the entire narrative of the piece is one of disjuncture: it begins and ends without any visual cue. Though the text piece is pitched as an address to *someone* – 'we' and 'you' pronouns punctuate it frequently – it paradoxically estranges itself from that *someone*, for whom the viewer stands in as a proxy. The format of the work – that of the circular (strange?) loop – acts reflexively towards its concept: there is no beginning or end, no root point or culmination. So too with the appearance of the text. According to post-structuralism, also, the *palimpsest* acts as the most fitting descriptor of language: that is, a piece of text written atop a multitude of previous inscriptions, subsequently erased. No language is essentially pure or fixed, but bears the marks of other discourses and languages: neither is it static, but bears a definite temporal dimension.

The undecidability of *Untitled* has certain art historical counterpoints, Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) being the most obvious example. This well-known work – comprising only the faint outlines of de Kooning's drawing, at first glance almost blank – at once flattens the concept of authorship and that of its natural partner, artistic singularity. Both, it would seem, bear the imprint – here explicitly traced – of an other, or indeed other-ness. At once a gesture of anxiety and rebellion, Rauschenberg nonetheless fails to wholly obliterate the trace of de Kooning's hand, to start truly anew. In such a way, Rauschenberg's work, much like McCarthy's, is shaded by Robert Morris's well known observation (regarding minimalism) that; *'The object has not become less important. It has merely become less self-important.'*[3] In the wake of high modernism, the possibility of autonomy has all but collapsed: artistic singularity – and indeed authorship – is seen instead as the productive result of a series of relationships, influences and styles. As in Nabokov's classic *Pale Fire* (1962), the author-function becomes muddied to the point of imperceptibility. However, as with McCarthy's work, this does not limit the capacity of the work to enact meaning: rather, it ushers in a freedom and open-endedness, which the work holds as its inner logic. A productive analogy with regard to McCarthy's practice is that of *heteroglossia*; that is,

literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's term, which describes the capacity of language to hold a multitude of contrasting – even contradictory – variants and inflections. For example, language takes on new meaning with every spoken utterance – by virtue of it being *spoken by* a subject - and yet preserves its self-same identity. In such a way, language accommodates heteroglossia, and indeed necessarily so: to deny the remaking of meaning through language would extinguish its creative impulse. McCarthy's *Untitled*, as it makes and remakes itself, speaks not to the negative annihilation of authorship, but rather to the transformative potential present therein.

In previous incarnations, McCarthy's work has borne the signifiers of some kind of theatrical set; its separate components acting in tandem to create some form of mutually defined logic. The relationship of individual works to one another is, however, complex. To treat them as cumulatively embodying a kind of overarching installation is arguably a mistake, and yet they are related in some way: materials and forms reiterate throughout, and indeed form some breed of uncanny whole. McCarthy spoke of each piece acting as though performing a score: different instruments, and yet the same score. A better metaphor, I feel is that of the musical canon. Douglas R. Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (1979), a key point of reference for the artist, offers a fantastic meditation on this musical device, particularly with respect to Bach. For musical neophytes, such as myself, the canon is a musical device often used in classical music. The most effective way of understanding it, in my experience, is the canon as given by 'row, row, row your boat…' Thus the canon is essentially a compositional device wherein the melody is mimicked following a specific rest. However, often they are more complex to ascertain, taking retrograde or inverted forms and employing a multitude of voices. In short, the canon is capable of reconciling seemingly heterogeneous voices within a unified whole. Taken separately, these separate voices often appear wildly divergent, even discordant. The canon, thus, appears to me an apt way to talk about the relationship between individual works within this exhibition. Sharing an internal logic, the works herein differentiate themselves by virtue of rhythm and melody: some enter into the composition later, and to a different beat.

Material motifs recur throughout *Words, sometimes, get in the way of meaning*, and the device of the canon is perhaps best thought of as a means of resolving these often divergent tropes: the modified everyday form (e.g. the stool/ projector hybrid of *Untitled*); the echoes of neon that punctuate the exhibition space; the particular vocabulary of materials used. All of these are reconciled within the canon schematic: not flattened, but rather given the space to retain singularity within the space and time of the exhibition. If McCarthy's practice might be described as a language, it is one that has multiple inflections and potentialities: a heteroglossia. His practice, although highly considered and carefully made, is at the same time not centred on an 'inside', at the exclusion of what lies outside. This line, rather, is tremulous and porous: open to new words, and ideas and people, never predicated on an overestimated 'I'. Words may get in the way of meaning, but in this perplexity lies the buzz and crackle of the boldly new, the strange potential of the Moebius strip.

[1] Available online at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXiOg5-13fk, accessed 25/10/13

[2] *Design and Crime* (2005) London & NY: Verso, pg. 125

[3] As quoted in Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (1998) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pg. 154

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Shane McCarthy *Absent Presence* Monitors, tables, drawer, digital drawings Dimensions variable 2013