

MATT SHERIDAN SMITH
WHAT A LAUGH, EVERYONE CRIED

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LET US IMAGINE A LANGUAGE...¹

At first it appears that the neat words of *Bye Convenience (The Forward Edge...)* (2012), vinyl lettering transferred directly onto the wall, present a neat question. Read closely, however (the size of text and its position at eye level makes this a physical as well as a semantic closeness) and the question itself opens into conundrum. It isn't a logical question posed by the artist to the viewer – the two halves of the phrase, linked by "isn't that" don't seem to fit together. Both relate to watery themes (sailing vessels and tears on either side of that questioning conjunction), but now I'm trying to search for reason that has been deliberately lost. Poetry perhaps, certainly it has that lachrymosity. A riddle to be solved? Or a musing, a reminiscent attempt to recall information from memory. Moving through to the main exhibition space, the words already take that doubtful form within the memory of the viewer.

Here, noise and more text compete for attention – to focus on any one work without the others requires an act of filtration and concentration – but it is the splash of organic and plastic green which draws the eye down to the ground. *Gardening threat (repotted dualism)* (2012) consists of 10 potted plants, arranged haphazardly across green plastic sheeting on the gallery floor. The title is no idle threat: half the plants are Ricinus Communis and the rest Datura; common names for the castor oil plant and angel's trumpet (or sometimes devil's breath); respectively more well known as sources of ricin and scopolamine. Their potential for causing hallucination, poisoning and death is paused in this untreated form; sceptical visitors are warned not to touch to avoid an unpleasant rash and inflammation. Raw nature – here, domesticized in plastic and under greenhouse-like gallery skylights – holds no instinctive nightmare in our unwild daily environment: a handful of pills and powder on the floor would be more immediately threatening. Yet the plants attack on all sides, a riddle as much as the text works, dominating the space with their devastating capability and harmless appearance. Not only do they hold the power to remove the will of victims, (either by assassination in the case of ricin, or for the drugging of tourists in South America)² the plants have a will of their own, growing into the gallery space with their own purpose. The artist chooses materials which wilfully push back, challenging even his own designs, and getting under the skin.

In this power play, the agitator who crosses the stage to threaten the plants' hold on the scene is a curious black robot. This is also the source of the noise which fills the space with its irritatingly domestic whirr. The 'Roomba' is a small vacuum cleaner, busily going about its set task of cleaning the gallery floor, nudging plants and visitors who get in its path³. Assuming a personality as it scuttles by, a humorous, happy worker; gregarious puppy, it seems a quasi-sentient being. A prevailing logic implies that it is simply programmed to behave in this way, but its ability to negotiate the small carpeted area within the gallery (a surface obstacle which should restrict its movement, but which instead the 'Roomba' eventually approaches from an elliptical angle in order to bump over the slightly raised edge) suggests that it is working out a solution with its own innate mind. This intrusive, affection-inspiring object is only one part of the work *Bye Convenience (A curve generated...)* (2012). While the 'Roomba' circuits the floor, its dock sits empty, a black plastic piece of equipment next to a text positioned low

on the corner wall. These separable pieces of electronic hardware form an equal riddle to be pieced together. Logic in this case follows through, but the problem of connection only deepens when these two puzzle pieces fit together: when in its dock charging, the 'Roomba's' central button glows off and on in an amber pulse. Again it seems to have life, and its purpose is even more obfuscated. Yet the list of parts of this work also includes the low text on the wall which, like the other proximity poems, is broken down into linguistic media: text found in dictionary, conjunction, false equivalence – each as an accredited part of the work as the vinyl of the letters.

Confusion of purpose continues on the wall, where five stretchers covered in metal-flecked vellum. The title, *If you see something say it five times clearly (soft shrapnel)* (2012), plays with the slogan used on public transport in New York in the ten years following September 11th and adopted by the American Department of Homeland Security in 2010.⁴ The surface irony is that there is nothing to see here, no painting on the canvas, no canvas even on the stretchers. Instead the incidental flecks of metal, which occur at random throughout this type of vellum sheeting, take on a loaded significance that is crucial and ridiculous in equal measure. In the changing light of the gallery, the vellum is at times more transparent, so that the stretchers appear as windows – objects to look through rather than at. Is the vellum the focus, or the wrapping, a blind pulled across? They attain a meaningfulness that is at a staged remove from their construction: the artist orders the vellum, the stretchers, assembles them, in a small-scale production line that ensures that while each one is identically made, all are unique. As such, they confound our desire to equate seeing with revealing, interpreting with understanding.

Taking the most basic rhetoric of 'what is art?', this work replaces canvases with wrapped stretchers, but as part of this exhibition it contributes to the defying of expectation of what should be in a gallery at all. Deadly plants that cannot be touched ('Don't touch the art!'); and writing on the wall that does not explain the art, but is the art. The writing of an artist, even described by himself as proximity poems, is not read in a gallery setting as it would be in a book of poetry. As an explication, the format of the poems is at least traceable, originating from a game played by characters in the Julio Cortázar anti-novel *Hopscotch*.⁵ Two words, with some commonality, are taken, their dictionary definitions transcribed and joined by "isn't that". Reading them, the desire to uncover those two key source words becomes paramount, as if that information would reveal knowledge of meaning. As questions, they are by nature incomplete without their answers. The haunting absence that permeates much of Sheridan Smith's work here takes multiple forms – the infinite number of potential solutions to these poetic riddles, hovering just beyond comprehension. As poems, their preoccupation with the melancholic, the emotional tone, hovers on the brink of sadness in the tradition of Caspar David Friedrich's Wanderer and Keats's maid on St Agnes' Eve, but is balanced by the physicality of large functional lettering on gallery wall (the absence where the 'do not touch' sign might have been). As definitions, with their subject removed, the language of dictionaries is unsettled, its solid logic askew. Words set in dictionaries become unshakeable, definite fact, but here we are reminded of the fluidity with which they are used in reality; and

of the perversion of meaning that emerges through interpretation and translation. The texts the artist presents do not deal with the written, but rather with the read, a circumstance underscored by the remove at which the artist stands from his work. He does not directly address us, but expresses a personal pondering. The construction is derived from a minor language game played by fictional characters, read by the artist in translation, played inwardly and then delivered to a sign writer to produce, for a technician to apply on a gallery wall. Like the stretchers, an intimate production line creates the finished work. Language transferred from its origin, an idea transferred from the artist, transferred directly to wall – the process encapsulates two extremes of earthy physicality and theoretical intangibility. In reality, these proximity poems then most strongly resemble memory: from the medically-definable brain function through to personal foggy experience.⁶ The interpretation is stretched open and the solution unsolvable so that the control of the language game is thrust at us – the search for similitude of meaning amongst different signs. This moves us beyond a simple question looking for an answer, instead we imagine an individual logic, a visual language of meaning entirely: as Wittgenstein maintains, “To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.”⁷ These language games are intrinsic to our communication with, and our perception of, the world around us, involved in the acts of “making up a story...play acting...guessing riddles... translating from one language into another.”⁸ Without a start or end point, this exhibition engages us to play a game we are already immersed in.⁹

Sheridan Smith takes our instinctive judgements, diverts them with bewitching riddles, and subverts them by questioning even the way in which we judge. Moving up close to the vellum, cautiously avoiding the plants, standing back to read a text high on the wall, while being repeatedly butted in the toe by a black Hoover, a sensory exploration of the exhibition is utterly unavoidable. The overall impression might be of disorientation in a sea of sensory information, but this is clearly the artist’s intention. He forces us to filter and sift, as has become habit in a search for knowledge through an overload of information in daily life. But he offers us nothing so easy as answers, blurring the boundaries between art and poetry; he loosens the ties that bind an artwork to its interpretation, a word to its definition. His works specifically address what is hard to put a finger on, floating somewhere between intangible potential and conceptual idea: springing to their own life through a language that reverberates in the space between the imagination of the artist and the memory of the viewer.

“The word I forgot
Which once I wished to say
And voiceless thought
Returns to shadows’ chamber”¹⁰

Mai Blount

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Blackwell, 2001 (1953)), p. 2

² Where the devil’s breath is slipped into tourists’ drinks or simply blown in the eyes of victims to cause absolute loss of will, offering complete pliancy.

³ The ridiculousness of the trade name ‘Roomba’ also mirrors the various names of the plants – emphasizing the frequent (and often deliberate) insensitivity of language to subject.

⁴ The phrase is so ubiquitous that its use here highlights how little such common signage is really absorbed by readers; at the same time it speaks of a culture of daily fear, an unspecified threat that underscores the danger posed by the plants.

⁵ Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch* (New York: Pantheon Books Inc, 1991 (1963))

⁶ Interesting to note one of the features of the drug derived from angel’s trumpet: those drugged afterwards have no clear memory of what has occurred to them during the black-out; not because (as with other drugs or alcohol) the ability to recall is impaired, but because at the outset the ability to store information is impaired, the hippocampus is blocked. The memory cannot be retrieved because the memory is not there.

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Blackwell, 2001 (1953)), p. 19

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (London: Blackwell, 2001 (1953)), p. 23

⁹ Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986 (1934)), particularly Chapter 7 (pp.210-256) provides another useful exploration of thought and speech in development, in terms of the relationship between verbal thought and word meaning. In terms of communication, Herbert H. Clark, *Using Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 (1996)), pp. 125-154, discusses meaning and understanding in communicative acts and the cooperative engagement of speaker and listener, writer and reader.

¹⁰ Excerpt from Osip Mandelstam, *The Swallow*, quoted in Lev Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986 (1934)), p. 210

A fit of fever or shaking chills, accompanied by malaise, pains in the bones, etc; chill, isn't that an army on march, a throng, a crowd?



Small text label on the wall, possibly a title or description.



A wire netting fastened to the top of a smokestack of a locomotive to prevent large sparks from being discharged, a spark arrester, to make a monk of, isn't that pertaining to a coincidence of tides, or indicating a line connecting points at which high tide occurs at the same time?

To swoop down, as a hawk at prey, isn't that a basin for holy water, as at the entrance of a church, a pail or bucket, a drinking vessel, as a cup or tankard, of various sizes, the amount it holds?



Matt Sheridan Smith *If you see something, say it five times clearly (soft shrapnel)*
5 wooden stretchers and metal flecked vellum 46 x 36 cm each 2012