

STAMMER AND RUSTLE: THE POLITICAL USE OF LANGUAGE

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Although all artistic manifestations imply a political stance (even the absence of one denotes a position), not all art has the same kind of connection to the political. Differences exist not only regarding the role of art and artists in public affairs (political manifestations including everything from overt activism to subtle decisions made in the studio), but also regarding how these interconnect.

From the historical vanguards of the first half of the twentieth century onward, work by artists has encompassed distinct ranges of action: some have favoured research contained within the borders delimiting the autonomy of a specific field, while others have crossed these borders in order to become involved in other fields of thought and human activity.

Although the autonomy of the visual field has tended to dissolve (social and scientific projects are considered works of art), we can still distinguish between formal proposals that tend toward procuring abstract knowledge somewhat distanced from the reality surrounding us, and other proposals that seek direct connection to social happenings.

However, the social reality that envelops us is no longer a rigid structure. The entropy of human displacement, unstable and mutable city living and the dynamic nature of contemporary society have all incited changes in the way art confronts the

aforementioned reality.

If we define art as a symbolic mediation –a representation– between reality and the individual (and at the same time as a semiotic act in which a thing stands in place of something else, thereby speaking for it in its absence), we can observe two important changes. The first of these changes is the reduction of indices of mediation in which reality is “presented” rather than “represented”, in the hopes of achieving a better fidelity to the variable nature of reality (although it is true that in art it is impossible to arrive at a zero point of symbolic mediation). The second change is the use of new mediation tactics distinct from the symbolic convention: simulacrum, irony, analogy and parody as new ways of reflecting an annihilated reality and a rupture in the logic of reading works of art.

In her latest exhibition, *Stammer and Rustle...And Other Word Games*, Dianne Pearce shares with us new work created in the past few years, fortifying –and at the same time weakening– symbolic mediation between the individual and reality by means of surprising, partializing and simulating this reality. The contradiction is due to the fact that although she indeed secures mediation, she does so by employing other tactics that modify the symbolic.

Her preoccupation with public issues is evident in her complex syntactic catalogue: didactic illustrations (*Polyphonic Novel* and *Sublime Alienation*), anonymous and institutionalized assertions on feminine nature and behaviour (*Words of Wisdom/Verbal Abuse*), pejorative names used to marginalize people (*Better Left*

Unsaid), graphics and language on flyers (*Vast Regions of Dominion*) and cut-out floral letters with decorative wainscoting (*Wallflowers*) interweave with pictorial features that connect objects with concepts in a variety of ways, running the gamut from arbitrary proximity to elaborate encounters.

The amalgamation of images and words from diverse origins and natures construct, semantically, an inert context that this Canadian artist activates with veiled associations and glimpses into her personal experiences (all the while involving the spectator, as we will see below). The personal references are not intended to be autobiographical; rather, they are a matter of perspective. Zadie Smith, writing about authors, makes an affirmation that is also true of artists: she states that the writer (or in our case, the artist) must “*express, in the most precise way, their way of being in the world*” [emphasis mine, *Reforma*].

Family experiences, medical practices, a penchant for wallpaper used to decorate the family home, along with her condition as a twin and her first adolescent social experiences are but a few of these references, and although they are hidden from the general public (they appear as indecipherable elements), they contain syntactic and semantic insertions that infringe a specific meaning upon the public terrain.

The eventful and heterogeneous social material resulting from this intersection recognizes “culture as a place of conflict” [Foster 103], much like a field upon which battles for social equality can be enacted (battles that humans have not yet been able

to resolve).

Gender inequality, marginalization according to race, ethnic group or sexual preference, and the socio-economic effects of neo-colonialism on diverse populations are but a few social themes the artist presents in the visual field for our analysis and reflection. Here, within the hegemonic codes of cultural and social representation of these phenomena, she finds the necessary material to articulate her discourse (for it is here that difference and inequality are converted into concrete forms).

Although her codes of “presentation” comprise images, gestures, conducts and human acts, Pearce centres her exploration on linguistic codification, and in particular on two premises: first, on the aforementioned relationship between the nature of both language and social structures and interactions and, second, on the creative aspect of this relationship.

The connection between language and social structure is explored in pieces such as *Words of Wisdom/Verbal Abuse*, where phrases cut from plasticized floral tablecloths reference the patriarchal condition of male-female interaction. In *Better Left Unsaid*, hurtful words in three languages (two of which are official to Canada) –like puñal, franchute, tortillera, red skin, trailera, noire, pata rajada, bimbo, chacha, yuppie, etc.– mark relations of dominion, establish distance from the “different” and speak of the segregation, through language, sought by groups in power in order to ensure protection from the “other”. Finally, in *Vast Regions of Dominion*, Pearce points to the association between power and knowledge.

The ways of mediating this reality appear to move in a direction opposite to that of the conventional symbolic approach. Parody (the racist lexicon on the punched plastic is converted into something that vacillates between joking and aggression) and simulacrum (due to their material and superficiality, we believe the phrases about feminine behaviour to be far from reality, but they are indeed real –or more than real) acquire a sense of counter-messages.

To explore the creative possibilities of language, Pearce employs different strategies. The participation of the spectator and the inquiry of his or her distinct levels of involvement in the process and finishing of the work are the artist's principal concerns. To incite the visitor to create diverse expressions or messages, *Polyphonic Novel* offers 516 rubber stamps with didactic images from the New Ninth Webster's Collegiate Dictionary as minimal units of a pseudo-language, and as elemental components required for constructing sentences.

And in the seven wooden panels with wallpaper and acrylic that comprise the series *Sublime Alienation*, she invites the spectator to participate in the process of weaving shoelaces through the drilled holes, thereby tracing the outline of painted figures and thus finishing the pieces. But on this occasion, although the public is given a task to do, the very intervention of the spectator calls into question one's liberties. The rigidity of the game's rules and the reduced free will that they imply (the spectator is only allowed to weave in the existent holes) can either refer to the freedom permitted by the restrictive laws of language (where, contrary to what one

might believe, freedom can not exist without rules, as long as it is understood as the capacity to realize significant acts), or can question the creative liberty of language resulting from society's inertia and power relations.

Both of these aspects –the suitability of language to the processes and inertias of social interaction, as well as the creative aspect that allows language to adapt to the conditions of eventuality, chance and mutability present in contemporary societies– make evident that language, as with art, is always subject to political use.

Whispering and stammering are two modalities of speech that distort messages by making them confused or unintelligible. Dianne Pearce uses them as analogies in her process of destabilizing language, to make evident its internal tensions and its condition as a symbolic system of expression and communication: inconclusive and open, always subject to new inter-social relations, and always as a vehicle of thought.

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References

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