

THE COMMON GUILD
Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Image by Ruth Clark

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COMMENTARIES

Robert Barry

04 September – 06 November 2010



Robert Barry 'Words and Music'

The Prose of the World

You pace slowly through Robert Barry's 'Word and Music', an installation of individual words cut in mirrored vinyl and installed in the Glasgow town house now home to The Common Guild. Words angle across ceilings, spread over walls, occupy windows, invade a mirror. You have to watch where you step, crane your neck to turn your head in unanticipated directions. No wonder Barry eschews the label 'conceptual art', this work is physical. I step around a word on the floor URGENT as if it were an obstacle or object in my path, which is precisely what, for Robert Barry, words are: objects. The words ENCOUNTER, MEANWHILE, TENUOUS, UNKNOWN, DESPAIR, EXTREME... adhere to the architecture they inhabit to the extent that I am reminded of Heidegger's claim that: "language is the house of Being, that we reach what is by constantly going through this house. When we go to the well, when we go through the woods, we are always already going through the word 'well', through the word 'woods', even if we do not speak the words and do not think of anything relating to language."

Heidegger makes this claim in a meditation on the purpose of poetry. With this in mind we might be invited to 'read' these words (accumulated by the artist over a number of years), which form unexpected associations and elective affinities, as a concrete poetry installation. But for all its mirrored surfaces it is not the character of poetic reflection which is invoked by these captive — and captivating — words but the chance refrains and open rhythms of prose.

But to whom are these words addressed? Like those who encounter them - and the video of a piano recital which is obscured beneath a further series of the individual words - each word is 'perfectly individuated' yet at the same time interconnected in potentially unquantifiable couplings.

The installation attests to the vital promiscuity of language and to the nameless and numberless ghosts who inhabit its house. It is a celebration of multiplicity worthy of Spinoza for whom, according to Deleuze and Guattari, 'each individual is an infinite multiplicity, and the whole of Nature is a multiplicity of perfectly individuated multiplicities.' The infinite contingencies of nature (in the form of sunlight and shadow) are integral to the experience of the work, moving us away from reflections upon the interior forms and rhythms of poetic register to acknowledge — as we look through the words adorning the windows like lost ivy and out across the rooftops of the city and listen to its distant promise of continuous flow — that the traffic of language exists in infinite exteriority. Barry himself explains: "We almost never encounter a single isolated word. It is always part of a flow of some text. If a word is upside down or manipulated to fit a corner or around some architectural detail, or cut off by the edge so you can only see one or two letters and can't even know what it is, well then you have to deal with it on its own terms. Any specific meaning is negated. All meanings and even no meaning are possible."

In the end, it is not the poetic voice that silently intones these words as we pass above and within and beneath them. Rather, Barry's installation speaks to us - the nameless and the numberless — in the unquantifiable prose of the world.

Ross Birrell is an artist, writer and lecturer at The Glasgow School of Art. Martin Heidegger 'What Are Poets For?', Poetry, Language, Thought, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 132.

Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia, translated by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988) p. 254. Robert C. Morgan, 'The Return of Arthur R. Rose', 'Interview with Robert Barry', Art Into Ideas: Essays on Conceptual Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 43-44.

The art critic Arthur R. Rose is a Duchampian invention by the artists Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner.