

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



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COMMENTARIES

Always begins by degrees

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'Always begins by degrees'

Adel Abdessemed, Marcel Broodthaers, Pavel Büchler, Cerith Wyn Evans, Roni Horn, Philippe Parreno, Anna Gaskell and Marine Hugonnier

A conversation prompted me to recall *Always begins by degrees*: the first exhibition held by The Common Guild in the Victorian town house on Woodlands Terrace. I had seen the show eight years earlier. What would or could I remember of it? What remained significant and why?

I thought about the exhibition and, indeed, all the exhibitions I've ever seen. I wandered through the archive held in my visual memory. Why had some shows been entirely forgotten and others remembered vividly? Why did some works stand out whilst others could be recalled only vaguely?

Memory contains so much more than the fact of witnessing something. It somehow retains fine and subtle details such as the quality of light, the feeling of a space, the relationships between objects, the intensity of a colour and, not least, one's own state at the moment of looking. What is seen, thought or felt about an exhibition, then, is as much a reflection of one's own condition as it is about the quality of the work itself, and the act of looking at an artwork is a sensual encounter in which desire is provoked. The whole of one's being is involved; brain and body together lost in a moment of direct contact with something outside of oneself. That kind of presence with a work can, albeit briefly, alter the experience of time. This is art's power. It has the capacity to arrest you: for a moment, in a space or place; make you think and make you feel.

In the act of remembering, *Always begins by degrees* is an imagined return to the exhibition which takes me directly upstairs, to the front of the building. It's not that I'm not interested in the other works elsewhere in the show but somehow I'm drawn by the light I recall pouring in from the south-facing window into the room upstairs; also by something about the configuration of

works in that space. Through my mind's eye I recall the simple elegance of the Franz West sofa, commanding the room with its back to the bay window. By the smaller window to the left, I see the group of Philippe Parreno's black speech-bubble balloons, trapped by a dark net and devoid of text, of language; their blankness full of potential and of meaning. On the pale marble fireplace to the right of the sofa, in front of a large mirror is what I remember being the one spot of colour in the room—the intense pink of *Bengal Rose* (2006). Once simply a tube of colour found by Pavel Büchler, it has been splayed open and transformed into an evocative and poetic flower-object. Then, in my memory as I turn away from the fireplace, two other works re-present themselves: the leaning object-text work by Roni Horn that gives its title to the whole exhibition—the slender aluminium and perspex form that catches the light from the window, rendering language and text simultaneously material and immaterial; and, in the corner, a video monitor on the floor plays Adel Abdessemed's *Talk Is Cheap* (2006)—the sound and image of the act of crushing a microphone underfoot rupturing the silence and stillness.

In my memory of this one room, aesthetics and poetics collided with politics, and perhaps it is this that makes it so potent as a recollection. In this room the conceptual and the material world coalesced. Such experiences draw us both into and outside of ourselves. They arrest us and in turn we open ourselves to them. They can make us, and time, stand still—for a moment—and sometimes for longer. *Always begins by degrees*.

Always begins by degrees included works by: Adel Abdessemed, Marcel Broodthaers, Pavel Büchler, Cerith Wyn Evans, Roni Horn, Philippe Parreno, Anna Gaskell and Marine Hugonnier (works by the latter two artists addressing the veracity and texture of memory itself). The title of the exhibition, and of Roni Horn's work, is drawn directly from the writings of the American poet Emily Dickinson.

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