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Disobedient Words : A User's Manual

'I think it is time for you to hide yourself and keep a low profile for a while, just tell me where, so that people will no longer be able to find you so easily. This is a difficult operation and a tricky one, but it might be worthwhile to try.'¹

It begins as a love letter, one where art is advised to find a space for reflection, well away from the language that accumulates around it. It's a tender letter, a borderline desperate letter, suggesting something about the trickiness of resisting information, especially when language is part of a general economy driven by ideals of surplus and accumulation. If we don't lack information but rather have come to have 'too much of it', how might we be able to slow down semantic immediacy? How can we open up to the possibility of a certain resistance, allowing for what Guy Debord called the 'insubordination of words'? *Dirty Literature* is a series of readings and performances that look at the potentiality of a turn towards illegibility—from layerings of repetition to non-sequential juxtaposition and re-contextualisation. It looks at narratives that play with their communicative responsibilities — subverting the 'ecstasy of communication' by introducing their own.

CHAPTER 1 — IRREVERENCE

There is something stubbornly iconoclastic about turning to language in a place as intensely visual as the National Portrait Gallery. And yet words have certain tendencies in common with portraits. In his anthropomorphised alphabets and narratives, Henri Michaux insisted on the personality of words. They have their past, their familiar contexts, they work and at times they die. If we are to take Michaux' relationship between characters (as in A B C) and characters (as in you, me) seriously, it becomes tempting to ask about the kind of lives words live. For Debord, words work for the dominant organisation of life, they are employed 'almost full time, exploited for every sense and nonsense that can be squeezed out of them'.² The process is one whereby evocative words such as 'change', 'dialogue' and 'collaboration'

become removed from any real action – when words turn into what Paulo Freire liked to call, ‘idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating blah’.³ Despite the bleakness of this diagnosis of overused words, of what we might call the propaganda of semantic immediacy, there is still room for certain transgressions. Words still hold the potential of something that extends beyond their role as tools – words still contain forces that can upset the most careful of calculations. The question, of course, is how these forces can be brought out.

One possibility of introducing a hiccup in the smooth reading of familiar language is by allowing for strange encounters. In the writings of Tim Etchells there is space for literary infidelity: slang or blunt pub anecdote, for instance, might sit side-by-side with internet technical jargon, B-movie quotations or phrases from fairy tales. The collection *Endland Stories* (1999) and the more recent *The Dream Dictionary* (2001) both share this strategy of collision, in which multiple and seemingly incompatible areas of narrative and information are brought together. Suggesting something of the dual quality of the collage, the elements maintain a simultaneous reference to their original context as well as to the new hybrid composition into which they are introduced.

In many ways, Etchells’ contaminated forms, where multiple and seemingly incompatible, dictions are allowed to merge have an awkward relationship with traditional notions of literature. ‘Dirty’ means what is below, what cannot be harmonised within the governing idea of order and structure, and as such it also disrupts whatever sees itself as complete, singular and unified. We might be more tempted to call the outcome of such flexible and irreverent approaches ‘texts’ rather than literature. And yet, if text marks the necessary indeterminacy of all writing, then it also misses the point of literature by de-specialising it to some extent. If literature, as Maurice Blanchot suggested, ‘begins at the moment when it becomes a question’, then surely a certain level of defiance to the idea of ‘good writing’ is not merely a sidestep but a necessary transgression.

An essential part of Etchells’ approach is the allowance of a language that falls unambiguously outside a fixed idea of ‘good writing’. In his collection of ‘Voices’, monologues for performance and video work (2001–2003), Etchells’ writing unfolds as a stream of consciousness, as if it were quickly spoken. Like in his 2008 novel *The Broken World* it’s a language that is colloquial, that doesn’t shy away from the ungrammatical, from the half-finished sentence nor slang expressions. It’s an affectionate and insubordinate approach to language that also has a particular relevance to the writing of Tony White. White’s novel *Charlieunclenorfolktango* (1999) was written whilst working in a post office – it’s a work literally written at work. The book follows an alienated police force, locked into a cycle of violence and prurient self-justification, and uses language that unapologetically insists on its spoken, urban quality. To allow for a diction excluded from literature does not merely insist on living, changing words, but draws attention to the class structures implied in seemingly neutral literary conventions. The approach points to poet Bruce Andrews’ notion of ‘writing as politics, not writing about politics’.⁴ It’s a communication that contains its own critique: the question of power is not discussed in direct terms, but is embodied in the text itself. Reflecting on the writing process of *Charlieunclenorfolktango*, White has suggested that there was something about the rhythm of the text that changed when characters were speaking rather than being spoken for: ‘The speed I could write it was the speed the narrator could speak and think it – and further down the line that’s the speed you have to read it at.’ It slows everything right down.⁵

The reading is one that partially resists the reader; it does not allow for an immediate or routine consumption but rather opens up for the possibility of reading as a form of production, and a laborious one at that. In many ways it’s exactly this friction, which is the focus of *Dirty Literature*, a friction that emerges less from a flirtation with opacity than a need to formulate something outside the norms and structures of narrative. Tom McCarthy has suggested that this hindrance is the very defining aspect of literature: ‘literature has to remain frustrating – to withhold

something, remain incomplete – or it's not literature anymore, but rather entertainment, edification or interpretation.⁶ In this sense, then, a certain resistance to the given structures of communication is at the heart of a form of exchange that moves beyond consumption. It's a matter of a writing that holds on to its own negation.

CHAPTER 2 — REPRESENTATION

For Debord a certain resistance to, or hijacking of information was an integral part of a more extensive 'misuse' of commodities, codes and environments, cumulatively suggesting the potential of a 'true communication'. Despite the undeniable and radically dislocating effects of this treatment of information (most recently seen in the form of *Wikileaks*), Debord's notion of an essential language is a problematic one. The idea of a 'true communication' takes us right back to the question of purity, and to a language that by necessity has to exclude – there is nothing worse, as Thomas Pynchon once wrote, than 'a sentimental surrealist'. In the work of Karl Holmqvist, the voice is too cacophonous to ever allow for the possibility of a pure language to emerge. Holmqvist's collage – like approach, allows political slogans, commercial jingles, modernist maxims, pop song lyrics – etc, etc, etc – to happily (and sometimes unhappily) coexist. This form of sampling has a tendency to make the ideology behind a certain register of communication strangely difficult to ignore. Holmqvist does not approach prominent ideological slogans using critical distance, irony, and rational argument; rather, he uses these slogans in an even more radical form – essentially repeating them – making their semantic emptiness emerge. The subversive effect of these marriages is their ability to take us right back to a more fundamental question of representation. The use of different vernaculars, different ways of writing, often existing together with images and more sculptural elements in space, opens up to the possibility of a certain level of disarticulation. Here the disruption of one element by another challenges the authority of one representational mode and allows for a more fundamental problematisation of representation itself. What emerges is a certain sense of language

also as a form of thing, one that can be approached from directions more traditionally associated with the way we deal with images.

If we think of language in these expanded terms, then the moment of production and reproduction of texts becomes an interesting event. In the work of Will Holder publishing is a conversation, a social event and a performance, far from a neutral process of (re)producing the written word. Holder has returned to existing texts on various occasions, reading or performing works like Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (2007). Here another level of subjectivity is allowed to enter the moment of publishing; the reproductive act involves not so much a position as a process of positioning. Within such an approach, the subjectivity and gender of the reproducer enter the text and complicate the meaning of the original. It's a process intensified in Holder's ongoing series dedicated to single mothers, a series including readings of works like Adam Pendleton's 'Black Dada' (2008/2009) and Alice Notley's 'Dr. Williams Heiresses' (2010). The process speaks of the very restlessness of the text, and the often small, local and personal transformations taking place in the act of delivery.

CHAPTER 3 — THE THING

To speak of a language in motion, one that never finally settles down is also unsettling. Baudrillard has suggested that the haunting aspect of language is its ability to 'render itself as an object, where one instead had expected to find subject and meaning'.⁷ If we are to speak of an object, and one that is adaptable to various uses and contexts, does that not imply a certain level of indifference? Does it not suggest a certain level of inadequacy in language as well – that there is no stable or prescribed way of communicating what we really, really mean? When Jean Luc Nancy revisited the question 'what is literature?' in his essay 'Genre' (1980) he argued that Romanticism marks the very beginning of modern literature exactly because of its acute awareness of this indifference. Romanticism was a moment when that which exists outside of language became a subject in itself.

In the writing and performances of Francesco Pedraglio, the gap between what we intend to express and what we really can say becomes the significant in between, the abstract spot that cannot be fully resolved. What makes this gap even more palpable is the fact that Pedraglio writes in a foreign language (English) with a focus on narratives that are as straight and direct as possible. Yet in the process of formulating an absolutely linear narrative, the very impossibility of this task makes itself apparent. Rather than treating this gap between what is intended and what can be expressed as a mere frustration, Pedraglio leaves room for the very potentiality of that which cannot be fully articulated. In his writing, the silent point could be seen more as an experience than a particular meaning. The approach resonates in social theorist Brian Massumi's reflections on that which words cannot fully pin down – 'there are uses of language that can bring that inadequation between language and experience to the fore in a way that can convey the 'too much' of the situation – its charge – in a way that actually fosters new experiences.'⁸

CHAPTER 4 – REPETITION

This charge, the charge of the 'too much' is inescapable in the writing and spoken word performances of Sue Tompkins. In her work, language has an undeniable and hypnotic power. An excessive compilation process underlies the words: page after page of notes, observations, quotes and reflections are collected and then compressed into fragments. The distilling process leaves each word with an undeniable charge – each word is capable of *so much* meaning that it remains on the verge of becoming gibberish. Every word is already a text, as it were, long before joining other words in the flow of the spoken delivery. This also has an undeniable impact on her extensive use of repetition. When Tompkins in her 2005 text piece and performance *Elephants Galore*, repeats, 'help me information/help me information/help me information', it's never the same information, never the same help. The nature of the repetition is strangely reminiscent of the experience of being repeatedly confronted with variations of the same image. In the National Portrait Gallery collection

there are 89 portraits of Henry VIII. We recognise him immediately – the ginger hair, the black fur-brimmed hat, the small determined mouth – he is an immediately recognisable sign. Yet each time we see that same familiar face marks a new encounter; there are multiple and small variations, discrete liberties taken within the given form. In similar ways, Tompkins' work speaks of a tight framework within which language can start breaking its own rules. Repetition does not, in other words, mean a return of the same, but instead accentuates the very impossibility of things returning as they once were. Each repeated word arrives as a singular event.

The newness of the same takes on a distinct yet different quality in the writings of Tom McCarthy. Here small repetitions and doublings reverberate across multiple layers, pointing towards macro-iterations without necessarily explaining them away, or fully resolving them. The novel *Men in Space* (2007) is haunted by the image of a stranded cosmonaut silently orbiting the world waiting to return to a country that no longer exists. The image is in itself a strikingly painterly one: the world reflected in his Plexiglas halo evokes the infinite repetitions of a *mise en abyme*. It's an image that returns in the causal conversations at parties and gatherings in low-rent studios in Prague, and it's an image that returns and reverberates in the mind of the reader as our own relationship with the recent history of Soviet dissolution makes itself remembered. The repetitions continuously force their way beyond the page and into a more conflicted space outside of the text. The multiple layers of repetition, the sheer number of voices is overwhelming. This leaves the sense that the speakers never become fully aware of the voice of the others, that the characters remain partially unaware of what the other layers and voices are saying.

This breakdown of communication within what ultimately is a stream of communication can be sensed in Samuel Dowd's collaborative piece *Aphrodite's Left Turn*. Taking as a point of departure an unrealised screenplay by Austrian polymath Friedrich Kiesler, the script was realised in collaboration with four other writers, all of whom were writing in the voice of one of four assigned characters – 'the young

man', 'the choir boy', 'the cat' and 'Aphrodite'. Each soliloquy was written without prior knowledge of the other contributions, an individually developed narrative and voice. Read together however, the texts culminate in one multivocal and fragmented narrative, a musical score with Schoeneberg's feeling for chance. Nor are there any attempts to add coherence in the moment of reading; rather than staging a conversation between the characters each reader delivers his or her part, seemingly unaware of the sentiments or feelings that have been invested in the words. It's revealing that the original and unfinished script that was used as a point of departure for this writing exercise was found in an archive in incomplete condition, as if the only way of actually realising it would be to maintain the same fragmented, and partially mute quality.

CHAPTER 5 — UNCERTAINTY

There is something paradoxical about writing a form of narrative about the potentiality of a breakdown of narrative. And because of this it also becomes tempting to step away from the concluding remarks, from the final 'the end'. Yet as abstraction does not equal indifference, it becomes difficult not to care enough to be reflecting on the possibility of a language that remains disobedient. Rather than listening to Wittgenstein's words of warning that 'whereof we cannot speak there of we must remain silent', perhaps there is room for something else, a language that is aware of its limitations and insists anyway, with whatever means it can. Abstract language and irreverent games with narrative insist on the latency of meaning not out of flirtation with the unintelligible arcane, but because they cannot express what they need to in another form: if they could they would. At the end of the day it's a matter of narratives that open up to that which we cannot yet hold in our minds, that which is presently not given in actuality. The question is one of not being governed quite so much, and instead open up to the possibility of a language that hints at its outside. As Lewis Carroll's *Humpty Dumpty* observes on the use of words: 'The question is which is to be master — that's all.'

