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tenderpixel.com

Tenderpixel



Anna Barham  
Olivier Castel  
Iñaki Garmendia  
Mónica Restrepo  
Katarina Zdjelar

Curated by Sabel Gavaldon  
23 Jan - 28 Feb 2015

**I HAVE BUT ONE  
LANGUAGE**

**YET THAT  
LANGUAGE IS  
NOT MINE.<sup>1</sup>**

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## M/Other Tongue

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Anna Barham, Olivier Castel, Iñaki Garmendia,  
Mónica Restrepo, Katarina Zdjelar.

Curated by Sabel Gavaldon

*PV Thursday, 22 January, 7 to 9 pm*  
Exhibition 23 January to 28 February 2015

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Tenderpixel  
8 -10 Cecil Court  
London WC2N 4HE  
Wednesday – Saturday  
from 2 until 6 pm  
and by appointment  
tenderpixel.com

## Events programme

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*Saturday, 24 January, 6 to 8pm*  
Gauaz parke batean (In the Park at Night...)  
Performative lecture by Iñaki Garmendia in collaboration  
with Itziar Bilbao Urrutia

*Saturday, 31 January, 6 to 8pm*  
Reading by Olivier Castel followed by Skype  
conversation with Mónica Restrepo

*Saturday, 14 February, 3 to 4pm*  
Guided tour by the curator, Sabel Gavaldon

*Saturday, 28 February, 6 to 8pm*  
Anna Barham: Production reading group

*Thursdays, 5 March, 7 to 9pm*  
Social choreography – an ecology of collective  
experience Screening programme with Julie Born Schwartz,  
Priscila Fernandes, Adelita Husni-Bey, Rosalind Nashashibi,  
Katarina Zdjelar. The screening programme plays  
continuously 6 and 7 March from 2 to 6pm

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## TO BE A STRANGER IN LANGUAGE



Acts of language can be acts of violence. It's often said that history is written by the victors. Just as troubling is the question of whether our mother tongue is actually the language of the masters. "Mastery begins through the power of naming, of imposing and legitimating appellations", writes Jacques Derrida in what is supposed to be an autobiographical essay, and yet he is borrowing each of these words from Nietzsche. But there's something else: "All culture is originally colonial". You could think of Scottish writer Alasdair Gray and his *Five Letters from an Eastern Empire*. This outlandish piece of fiction brings together a series of letters dictated by Bohu, the emperor's honoured guest and great tragic poet, addressing his soon-to-die parents who live in the capital and belong to the servant-class. Abducted from his family at an early age to be trained as an official poet, Bohu finally receives an order-to-write by the emperor: he is to dictate a great poem, his sole poem, which will be painted above the door of every townhouse, school, barracks, post office, law court, theatre and prison in the land. His poem, Bohu is told, must celebrate the emperor's omnipotent justice as expressed in the construction of a new palace and the destruction of the old capital, along with people deemed unnecessary — including Bohu's parents — killed by the thousands. Bohu betrays the emperor by dictating a poem that condemns his terrible act, only to discover that this poem is



exactly what the emperor needed to command the destruction of the capital. Ironically, it is Bohu himself who gives voice to the emperor's order in a superb example of ventriloquism. Much to his surprise, Bohu learns that ventriloquism is the key instrument of power in the empire — for the emperor is not what he thought. Old, fragile and unseeing, the immortal Hyun is merely a puppet made of the remains of the deceased emperor, whose corpse was boiled by the doctors, reassembled with wooden joints, and given a papier-mâché skin. This, of course, doesn't undermine the emperor's authority. If anything, the opposite is true. The emperor's dead body is both animated and obeyed by a board of councillors; they simultaneously dictate each of his orders and religiously follow them. Whenever the emperor speaks, it is a ventriloquist who reads his words.

Ventriloquism is central to the mechanisms of power imagined by Alasdair Gray. Perhaps the same ventriloqual mechanisms operate in our daily lives as well. Whatever language we speak, and no matter how proficiently we master that language, the truth is we never quite own it. Language is always an implant as much as it is a product of discipline and domestication. It is a foreign body within one's own body. The language we would like to refer to as native or maternal isn't, in fact, natural, proper, or inhabitable. A voice speaks through us but its source lies elsewhere. You could think of Jean-Luc Godard's film *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*. There is



a fascinating scene where Marina Vlady appears to be standing on the balcony of her flat in the middle of a housing estate. Her back is turned to the light and she says, “Yes, to speak as though one were quoting the truth. Old Brecht said so. The actors must quote.” Are we still listening to a fictional character that goes under the name of Juliette? Is this actually Marina Vlady's own voice? Or is it Godard himself who speaks? Whoever that voice belongs to, she knows that one is not at home in one's own language. Likewise, it's hard not to notice that there is a good deal of ventriloquism operating in an exhibition. A ventriloqual mechanism takes place as long as I keep on writing these lines, crafting and at the same time concealing an authorial voice of some sort. What is true for actors might well be just as valid for curators. Perhaps curators must only quote, letting other voices in so as to inhabit them and letting in first those voices that speak from the shores of language — that which is allegedly ours. An exhibition can be a place from which to conjure up those voices that sound the most alien to us, not because they belong to another language, but because they are foreigners in their own language and so they make ours foreign to us.

Let's take one example from an Irishman whose texts were written in French and German:





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Dear Axel Kaun,

[...] I am always glad to receive a letter from you. So please write as frequently and fully as possible. Do you insist that I should do likewise in English? Are you as bored by reading my German letters as I am in writing one in English? I should be sorry if you felt that there might be something like a contract between us that I fail to fulfil. An answer is requested.

It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the nothingness) behind it. Grammar and style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute.<sup>2</sup>



A second example, often quoted by Deleuze, from someone who never learnt how to swim:

“Hail the great swimmer! Hail the great swimmer!” the people shouted. I was coming from the Olympic Games in Antwerp, where I had just set a world record in swimming. [...] I felt compelled to speak, for there was much that needed to be said, both here and probably also elsewhere, for the public’s enlightenment. And so I began:

“Honoured guests! I have, admittedly, broken a world record. If, however, you were to ask me how I have achieved this, I could not answer adequately. Actually, I cannot even swim. I have always wanted to learn, but have never had the opportunity. How then did it come to be that I was sent by my country to the Olympic Games? This is, of course, also the question I ask of myself. I must first explain that I am not now in my fatherland and, in spite of considerable effort, cannot understand a word of what has been spoken. [...]”<sup>3</sup>

And yet another example from an Italian who set a minor dialect against his national language:

Language (of which sounds  
within you just a note  
at the dawn of dialect)

and time (to which you are handed  
over by your naive and motionless  
piety) are the walls

through which I entered [...]”<sup>4</sup>

Language is treacherous and slippery. While it constitutes us as subjects and citizens, it excludes others from the subjecthood and citizenship that is granted for some. This exhibition is to be experienced as a passage between languages. A proliferation of voices whose identity remains in question. Some of them appear to be thrown into absolute translation. Others may provide a line of flight from native culture and the politics of cultural belonging. Away from national identity and its dominant linguistic forms. A line of flight from the authority of the mother tongue. But this is to remind us of yet another wicked question posed by Derrida: “In what language does one write memoirs when there is no mother tongue?”

– Sabel Gavaldon





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#### References:

1. The opening statement, “I have but one language — yet that language is not mine”, which serves as a point of departure for the exhibition, is taken from an essay by Derrida that reflects on the loss of one’s mother tongue as a consequence of French colonialism in Algeria. See Jacques Derrida: *Monolingualism of the Other*. Stanford, California, 1998.
2. Samuel Beckett: *German Letter of 1937* in *Disjecta*. Grove Press, New York, 1984.
3. Franz Kafka: *Fragments*. Trans. Daniel Slager. *Grand Street* 56. Vol. 14, No. 4 (March 1996).
4. Pier Paolo Pasolini: *La scoperta di Marx* [The Discovery of Marx] in *L'usignolo della Chiesa Cattolica*. Longanesi, Milan, 1958. The English translation is my own.



A stylized, grey, blocky letter 'Z' with a small black square in the center of its horizontal bar.A stylized, blocky letter 'M' in orange and grey, with the orange part on the left and the grey part on the right.A stylized, blocky letter 'H' in orange.A stylized, blocky letter 'A' in grey.A stylized, blocky letter 'A' in orange.A stylized, blocky letter 'B' in orange and grey, with the orange part on the left and the grey part on the right.

## ANNA BARHAM



Barham's text-based drawings consist of intricate word architectures and arborescent structures made of anagrams of the phrase "Return to Leptis Magna". This enigmatic phrase refers to the archaeological ruins of Leptis Magna, a prominent city of the Roman Empire founded by Phoenicians, whose alphabet colonised the Mediterranean world through the expansion of sea trade routes. In the series of drawings *Ampler Tongue Transit* (2012), a myriad of these anagrams form an ever-proliferating network of verbal permutations, including bewildering combinations of words such as "mutant lisp generator", "replant mutating eros", "muttering anal tropes" and "stranger latent opium". Subject to a high degree of chance and unpredictability, Barham's improvised drawings are the recording of a thought process that involves venturing into the labyrinth of language. Barham's video work *Argent Minotaur Slept* (2012) presents an animated section of a large volume of text, of which we perceive nothing but shifting fragments. A quick fire succession of letters appear on screen and disappear from view at the same fast pace, challenging the viewer's capacity to generate readings as words break into pieces and language goes into meltdown.

Anna Barham (b 1974 Birmingham) lives and works in London.





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## OLIVIER CASTEL



Foreignness in language and ventriloquial strategies are recurrent elements in Olivier Castel's practice, an artist who has created over thirty different identities, presenting his works under heteronyms such as Côme Ciment, Raymond Roussel and Louise Weiss. For this exhibition, the artist has produced a work that connects the two adjacent gallery spaces of Tenderpixel — 8 and 10 Cecil Court — implicating the viewer in a play of reflections, echoes and doublings that extends into the reflective surface of his sculptures. Installed in the gallery storefront windows, *Melted Metal* consists of two blades floating at eye level, in which a series of cut-up phrases and oblique statements are projected, including citations by the likes of Paul Valéry ("What would we be without the help of things which do not exist?") and Édouard Glissant (whose surname, by the way, translates as slippery). Castel's use of double language puts the viewer on a slippery slope. It should come as no surprise that a notion such as forgery derives from the work of blacksmiths. Like metal shaping, language is a craft that involves a change of state from solid to liquid. In Castel's work, the artifice of language is made visible together with its violence.

Olivier Castel (b 1982 Paris) lives and works in London.



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## IÑAKI GARMENDIA



For the Taipei Biennial 2003, Garmendia invited a Taiwanese punk-rock band to perform songs by Kortatu and Zarama, two flagship bands from the so-called Basque Radical Rock scene of the 1980s. Beyond the cultural and historical specificity of these songs, intrinsically linked to the collective imagination of leftist pro-independence movements in the Basque Country, there is the transnational language of rock culture with its globalised gestures, sounds and rhythms, which are immediately recognisable for any audience. Intense working sessions were required in order to transcribe the Basque phonetics of these songs by using homophones from the numerous languages and dialects spoken in Taiwan. Conceived as a social experiment, *Kolpez Kolpe* [Blow by Blow] precipitates the process of deterritorialisation that affects political identities and subcultural styles. The performance is an exercise in radical translation with the potential to produce the unforeseeable. Alongside the video documentation of the rehearsals and the concert, which took place on a stage-like structure built by the artist, Garmendia presents a display of archival materials including the original lyrics, transcriptions, historical posters and fanzines.

Iñaki Garmendia (b 1972 Ordizia) lives and works in Bilbao.



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## MÓNICA RESTREPO



Somewhere between a documentary film, a dubbing workshop and a re-enactment, *Tacones (in the making)* recreates scenes from a lost film with a soundtrack that does not match. In this performance recorded in 2014, a group of the artist's friends and collaborators read out aloud a series of dialogues from a musical film produced in Colombia, intermingled with testimonies from the actors, technicians and salsa instructors that participated in the shooting. In a picturesque adaptation of *West Side Story*, Pascual Guerrero's film *Tacones* (1981) chronicled a rather unlikely confrontation between gangs of salseros and disco club-goers in the streets of Cali. The film sought to capitalise on the international boom of salsa as a trademark of Colombian identity, but ended up in commercial failure and disappeared without trace. The critics laughed at its naive attitude and self-exoticising portrayal of racial, sexual and class conflicts in Colombia, while the audience felt alienated by the Mexican dubbing. Deliberately anachronistic, Restrepo's remake is a ventriloqual tour de force: there is a confusion of times, voices and contradictory accounts, in which identity — to use Stuart Hall's elegant expression — reveals itself as an ever-unfinished conversation.

Mónica Restrepo (b 1982 Bogotá) lives and works in Cali.



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## KATARINA ZDJELAR

“Parapoetics” is a term employed by Zdjelar to describe the aesthetic effects resulting from frustrated attempts to fulfil social norms and conventional orders of meaning. Going beyond mere documentation, Zdjelar’s video works touch on the bodily and unconscious dimensions of language politics by exploring the labours of speech and calling attention to the power relations that affect speakers in the moment of the utterance. *Shoum* (2009) depicts two Serbian workers struggling to decipher the lyrics of a nineteen-eighties pop megahit. Cut off from the lingua franca of a globalised world, these men produce myriads of new words as they transcribe what they hear. Shot during the same year, *The Perfect Sound* portrays an accent removal class for immigrants conducted by a speech therapist in Birmingham, a city that is ironically best known for its strong accent. The therapist imparts an allegedly neutral English — the Queen’s English — to his student so as to eradicate the inflections that mark him as a foreigner in a highly stratified social context. As they mimic the same monosyllabic chants over and over, the disciplinary character of these vocal exercises is so obvious that the resulting document borders on the absurd.

Katarina Zdjelar (b 1979 Belgrade) lives and works in Rotterdam.

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