

DANGLING BY THEIR MOUTHS

A special one-night screening of international film and video
curated by Jon Davies

Friday, February 15, 2008 at 8pm

"Our cabaret is a gesture. Every word that is spoken and sung here says at least this one thing: that this humiliating age has not succeeded in winning our respect."

– Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*

CECILIA LUNDQVIST, FINDING THE RIGHT MOMENT (Sweden 2005 / 4 min)

CATHERINE SULLIVAN, THE RESUSCITATION OF UPLIFTING (USA 2005 / 16 min)

JENNY PERLIN, TRANSCRIPT (USA 2006 / 11 min)

JENNY PERLIN, INAUDIBLE (USA 2006 / 4 min / silent)

KÖKEN ERGUN, THE FLAG/BAYRAK (Turkey 2007 / 8 min)

KNUT ÅSDAM, FINALLY (Norway 2006 / 18 min)

KELLY OLIVER & KEARY ROSEN, FIRST FIRING (USA 2007 / 3 min)

CECILIA LUNDQVIST, DEAD END (Sweden 2006 / 5 min)

mannered ramblings • verbal diarrhea • vocal nonsense • perverse repetitions •
magic wordplay • possessed mouths • tongue twisters • oral gymnastics •
subversive speech • queer language • ventriloquists' dummies • brainwashed
automatons • talking in circles • chatty cathies • loquacious lips • blabbering
epiphanies • whispered secrets • motormouth paroxysms • aberrant utterances •
idle chatter • the politics of gibberish

Jon Davies holds an MA in film and video, critical and historical studies, from York University. His writing has been published in the periodicals GLO: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, Animation Journal, Canadian Journal of Film Studies, C Magazine, Canadian Art, Cinema Scope, Prefix Photo, NY Arts and Xtra! He has curated film and video for several venues in Toronto and elsewhere, sits on the boards of Gallery TPW and Pleasure Dome, and is currently working on a major exhibition of work by Colin Campbell for the Oakville Galleries that will open in December 2008.

IMAGE CREDITS

Köken Ergun, courtesy of the artist

Kelly Oliver and Keary Rosen, courtesy of the artists

Jenny Perlin, courtesy of the artist, Annet Gelink Gallery,
Amsterdam, and Galerie M+R Fricke, Berlin

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Köken Ergun, still from *The Flag/Bayrak*

Gallery TPW

DANGLING BY THEIR MOUTHS

By Jon Davies

Dangling By Their Mouths refers to a speech delivered by the eponymous woman in William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, after she has died:

That was when I learned that words are no good; that words don't ever fit even what they are trying to say at. When [Cash] was born I knew that motherhood was invented by someone who had to have a word for it because the ones that had the children didn't care whether there was a word for it or not. I knew that fear was invented by someone that had never had the fear; pride, who never had the pride. I knew that it had been, not that they had dirty noses, but that we had had to use one another by words like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching...

Just as Addie Bundgren's corpse draws our attention to the distance between those that do and those that talk – words are “just a shape to fill a lack” – this programme of recent international film and video art (from Sweden, Norway, Turkey and the USA) sees this opposition play out in the political discourse of the public sphere. As rational, “official” language is splintered further and further away from the material reality it ostensibly refers to, irrational language that harks back to Dada has resurged both in contemporary art and in cultural expression more generally to express the state of chaos and confusion in which we live. Language's fluidity permits both its abuse by authority, and its subversion by artists and other cultural witnesses. This subversion takes the shape of intellectual uses like irony and satire and more embodied, senseless forms of speech such as gibberish or grunts.

The spoken word currently occupies a renewed position of prominence in political discourse, with the concealing rhetoric of government and corporate doublespeak reaching shameless new heights. Take three (American) examples of the state of political speech: George W. Bush's oft-noted inarticulacy and frequent verbal mis-steps (catalogued on such website as www.dubyaspeak.com); the government's approval of torture through replacing the term with the euphemism of “enhanced interrogation technique” and thirdly, the National Security Agency's warrantless surveillance of phone conversations. Thus the speech of the global public – potential terrorists all – must be kept in check while the pronouncements of those tapping the lines are degraded so far as to be completely vacated

(inaudible)

(inaudible)

(inaudible)

(inaudible)

(inaudible)

Jenny Perlin, still from *Inaudible*

of reference to the real and spun into a state of pure fabrication, or what Stephen Colbert famously called “truthiness.”

In 1916, dressed in an eccentric cardboard outfit, Hugo Ball recited his first “poems without words” at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich. His verbal nonsense was a *cri de coeur* against a complacent public supporting a war whose mindless bloodbath was couched in the rhetoric of nobility and reason. Speech that refused to serve utilitarian ends was a visceral means of shocking people out of their stupor. (Ironically, blasphemy and obscenity charges over his earlier poem *The Hangman* were dropped due to its very incomprehensibility.) In the Reagan eighties, Bruce Nauman made *Clown Torture*, an assaultive multi-monitor and projector installation featuring a grotesque, hapless clown forced to endure uncomfortable and tedious indecencies over and over again, the most maddening being the endless repetition of the riddle: “Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off; who was left? Repeat. Pete and Repeat were sitting on a fence. Pete fell off; who was left? Repeat...” At the turn of the twenty-first century with the globe racked by conflict and millennial angst, Candice Breitz turned to the story of the Tower of Babel with her *Babel Series*, in which pop songs by the likes of Madonna, Freddie Mercury and George Michael are reduced to



Kelly Oliver and Keary Rosen, still from *First Firing*

single, basic syllables as if the first words of a child, such as “pa,” “ma” and “me” respectively, which are looped to create a cacophonous stutter. The idea of globalized Western pop as a utopian universal language – to replace any sort of deeper geopolitical consensus or even authentic communication – is burlesqued by these comically infantile guttural sounds that Breitz traps her stars in. Nauman, Breitz and many other artists exploited the capacity of recording media like film, video and audio tape to, as Liz Kotz has suggested in her *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art*, “treat language as a material that can be broken up, isolated, compiled randomly, and collected in quantity.”

The artists in *Dangling By Their Mouths* similarly use media to make mincemeat of the absurd turn that authoritative language has taken through mutating verbal speech into strange and ridiculous forms, evolving new, occasionally pathological languages that capture more accurately the perverse sounds of power. Call it the politics of incomprehensibility or alienation’s garbled speech: talking in circles (to death) and howling with love for one’s country, whispering behind closed doors and spouting brainwashed white-collar drivel, waxing poetic one’s urban ennui and rhyming with encyclopedic, world-making wordplay.

Language as a social organ can be destroyed without the creative process having to suffer. In fact, it seems that the creative powers even benefit from it [...] Spit out words: the dreary, lame, empty language of men in society. Simulate gray modesty or madness. But inwardly be in a state of tension. Reach an incomprehensible, unconquerable sphere [...]

We tried to give the isolated vocables the fullness of an oath, the glow of a star. And curiously enough, the magically inspired vocables conceived and gave birth to a new sentence that was not limited and confined by any conventional meaning. Touching lightly on a hundred ideas at the same time without naming them, this sentence made it possible to hear the innately playful, but hidden, irrational character of the listener; it wakened and strengthened the lowest strata of memory. Our experiments touched on areas of philosophy and of life that our environment – so rational and so precocious – scarcely let us dream of.

– Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*

Sound travels effortlessly, which makes it a handy tool both to instigate chaos and to control it. The human voice is no different: projected through megaphones, it intimidates; whispered to a confidant or through the window of a confessional, it inspires sympathy. Where the visible world enforces conventional understandings of distance and depth, the voice is elusive, ignoring boundaries, collapsing distance.

– Claire Barliant, *On Transcript*

In Catherine Sullivan’s *The Resuscitation of Uplifting*, a component of her ambitious multi-screen installation *The Chittendens*, convulsing, puppet-like characters are stuck in loops of physical and oral gestures and emotions that follow a notated score. This rigid set of instructions transforms her actors into abstracted stereotypes rather than specific subjectivities, automatons easily programmed by those in power (whether artist or president). They perform “attitudes” ad nauseum on location in a decrepit, chaotic office in Chicago, and their hysterical paroxysms and glossolalia dramatize the psychosis that results from attempting to standardize messy human behaviour (the modus operandi of most contemporary workplaces). “The process of the piece was to build a mise en scène in which the characters were modeled after twentieth century middle-management and nineteenth century leisure-class archetypes. The performers’ movements are not alienating in and of themselves. It’s what happens to those movements once they’re in the environment of a particular regime. It is to the regime that judgment is to be directed versus judgment being directed at the individuals within it... It’s more that any judgment is to be directed at the situation that asks them to behave and perform in this way.

So there's a place in the work where automation and mechanization is like a kernel of mindlessness" (Catherine Sullivan).

A relative of artist/filmmaker Jenny Perlin was a lawyer who successfully fought for the release of thousands of FBI documents related to the case against Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, including records of surveillance conducted on hundreds of people after the couple were executed in 1953 for espionage. In her film *Transcript*, we are put in the uncomfortable position of FBI informant NY-964-S desperately trying to make out the words uttered by the muffled voices behind the closed doors of an apartment in the West Village in 1953. Actors perform the FBI transcript of a jovial dinner party with two couples who had been friends with the recently executed Rosenbergs, and we hear their conversation (or try to, it is covered by radio) but cannot see them, we lurk on the stairwell and outside the door instead. Are we hearing mundane conversation – the Rosenberg execution was so shocking because the couple looked so "normal" – or revelations of anti-American Commie muckraking? It's unclear, but the situation of surveillance casts every word as suspicious, the form insinuates that their words are incriminating. *Transcript* is accompanied by *Inaudible*, one of Perlin's many hand-drawn, text-based 16mm films, where she hand-copies and transcribes written stories and ephemera that she finds. "*Inaudible* is an animated film that makes visible all the words that the FBI could not hear or imagined were being spoken in the film *Transcript*. Most of the discussion, inaudible, is dutifully transcribed, as the word 'inaudible' comes up again and again on screen" (Jenny Perlin).

The Flag is a quite remarkable short video by Köken Ergun of children breathlessly delivering patriotic anthems in Turkey, here state power exerts its force through the violent, nationalistic tongue twisters that the children deliver as emotively as possible in front of a large audience. Rather than being mere puppets, the children perform their roles lustily, becoming not merely receptacles of ideology and puppets for the words of their elders, but warriors in the struggle of history. "*The Flag* offers a glimpse of annual ceremonies held in Turkey to celebrate the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the nation's parliament. April 23 is Children's Day, and kids from all across the nation are brought to Istanbul to take part in solemn ceremonies honoring their nation, flag and government – presentations that the kids have no role in creating" (Köken Ergun).

In Knut Åsdam's films, urban youth speak in a highly mannered poetic verse that seems at odds with their dingy concrete surroundings, especially as the young protagonists are posed in very formalized ways within the spaces of these contemporary Western cities. Their behaviour, in particular their

speech, seems dictated by the cityscapes in which they find themselves, and their words are almost embarrassingly lyrical, personal and revelatory. Åsdam is interested in the playful, performative quality of language and how much it contributes to constructing subjectivities. "*Finally* looks at the theme of the emotional impact of history and violence... The film is a game with spatial and architectural placement and also with the languages of the protagonists, rather than a linear story" (International Film Festival Rotterdam). Set in Salzburg, Austria, *Finally* features three main characters, all friends, who physically fight with each other – viciously and repeatedly – without apparent provocation: "It seems rather to be a reaction to the setting and the architecture" (Knut Åsdam).

The charming *First Firing* by Kelly Oliver and Keary Rosen juxtaposes found footage images with a poetic list of words on the soundtrack. In a few short minutes, the artists manage to somehow link together the entire world through rhymes, alliteration and word play, collapsing every object and sign into a speech game. The piece is about the pleasure of drawing words and images together (through listing, through editing) with no regard for meaning, speech as joy in itself rather than exploited for programmatic ends.

The screening is bookended by two works by Swedish animator Cecilia Lundqvist that are based on the same sound collage that obsessively returns to the word "now," forcing us through a seemingly endless cycle of false starts, evolving an irritating though hypnotic poetics of deferral. Running through dozens of phrases, all with the word "now," leads not to the purposeful action that the word denotes but traps you in a state of pure anticipation. *Finding the Right Moment* is colourful, poppy and mischievous, while *Dead End* utterly transforms the emotion and spirit of the soundtrack of two people talking at cross-purposes and never successfully communicating into something much darker and far more menacing in tone, souring the "right moment" into a decidedly wrong one, with two protagonists who are trapped in a deadly confrontation. The word game becomes something far more sinister and we are no longer waiting for something to start, but rather dreading a violent end.

Dead End reduces the problem of language and power to its bare bones: a zero-sum game. Its communication breakdown engenders a perpetual state of paralysis that could snap into crisis at any moment. It is perhaps the most extreme example of what eventually happens to bodies when communication stops. With no means of speaking in terms that the other can understand, no way of making one's needs or desires known through speech, chaos and violence soon follow.