

## ***A splinter in the eye is the best looking glass***

**Centre of Contemporary Art Christchurch**  
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### ***A drum, a drum!***

Essay by Jeremy Marshall

Since 2007, Ina Johann and Victoria Edwards' have consistently questioned the structures designating the discipline of art making. Their collaborations explore the conditions of language and metaphysics, conceptual art and the practice of role play and responsibility. In Christchurch this April, armed with an arsenal of multimedia techniques and materials, they take on CoCA's North Gallery, transforming it into a theatre of broken utterances or a chamber of incantations. Collecting, assembling and installing materials with techniques ranging from drawing, photography, weaving and *bricolage* to vocal and video projection, their practice approaches performance, deconstructing the roles played by the artist and the media in the creative act.

As a principle of structuralism, *bricolage* was used to explain the grammar peculiar to lore, myth and ritual. It is described as having the attributes of a medium, improvising and assimilating found material; simulating chance by way of collage, pastiche or performance. *Bricolage* became essential to express a sense of the ephemeral nature of materials and the choices or chain of reactions that bring work of art into being. It also helped provide impetus to the Surrealist cult of the unconscious, and is embedded behind the birth of both performance art and conceptual art. "The bricoleur", according to Claude Levi-Strauss, "principally derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he 'speaks' not *with* things... but also through the medium of things".<sup>1</sup>

Marcel Duchamp expresses the structure of 'the creative act' in a similar vein. "To all appearances," he writes, "the artist acts like a mediumistic being... If we give the attributes of a medium to the artist, we must then deny him the state of consciousness on the aesthetic plane about what he is doing or why he is doing it."<sup>2</sup>

Johann and Edwards' installations mark a rupture with the raw "art coefficient" as described by Duchamp: they are decidedly planned and evoke their media like a rite. In addition to the found object and assemblage ethos of the Readymade – the show features a director's chair, ten scattered stones and a black forty-four gallon drum – they engage the senses through all manner of media, from photographs, sand, canvas and textiles to language and video projection.

In each recess on the North side, a canvas is attached to the wall, one black, the other white, while slits in the stretched material allow for the interlacing of threads into the work. These project onto found objects installed on two beds of sand. In *Part one*, they are weighed down by the director's chair, in *Part two*, to stones. Primed and sliced by the artists, the woven canvases on either side are loom-like and textile – a metaphor for the role of language in the text as a weaving together of materials.

*Pdpsp: the act Part one and the act Part two* (2009) are installed in the northern side galleries, where recordings repeatedly distribute dialogues in different languages, dividing and translating the social space into English and German. The condition of language in Conceptual art, a hallmark of the Art and Language artists of the 60's and 70's, makes way for a metaphysics of the spoken word; here the artists split up strains of text and apply them to activate space. Underneath the projector in the centre of the room, the texts collide and converge almost inaudibly, manifesting what Artaud referred to as the "full, physical, shock-potential" of language in its metaphysical role.<sup>3</sup> In order to describe the subjective experience of the work, language must be subjected to an exercise in translation.

On the left in English, the recording refers to the existence of objects and the relational arrangements spread between them, "the modes of access through the present to the past", the process of memory and the Real. On the right, the German version demands "a single/simple response" (*eine einfache wiedergabe*) to the work while determining its conditions. It will be "complicated through the response" (*kompliziert durch die wiedergabe*) and become "inexplicable" (*nicht erklärbar*). "It could take form" (*es konnte sich bilden*) but "art never takes form under rules" (*kunst besteht nie in regeln*). Art making therefore involves this paradox of responsibility. Broken

by the absolute (*zerbreche mit dem absoluten*), the injunction to respond is too much to answer for. Reinforced by repetition, the two tracks represent “language in the form of *Incantation*” and the theatre of presence takes on a religious, mystical meaning.<sup>4</sup>

For those that way inclined, Johann and Edwards’ visual vocabulary suggests textual references to the Bible, Kabala and Alchemy. *A Splinter in the Eye is the Best Looking Glass* comes ultimately from an aphorism found in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, subtitled ‘*reflections on a damaged life*’.

The splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass<sup>5</sup>

Here it evokes an abstruse pun on the word *beam* in a Christian allegory, meaning ‘stick’, ‘shine’ and ‘shaft of light’. In the Biblical story of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus improvises a parable of two brothers:

Wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me take the *splinter* from thine eye;<sup>6</sup>  
and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye?<sup>7</sup>

The video installation projecting into the centre of the show beams down a black drum, dramatising the action between the eye and the hand. Its title is a riddle: *Oh do let me help you undo it...* (2009) is Alice’s answer to the tale of the dormouse in Wonderland, which she mistakes for a knot in his tail.<sup>8</sup> Under the lid and over the verge, as if submerged deep inside, the artists’ gloved hands are at work with their colours, pulling strings apart while the two language tracks from the side galleries come together like mixed incantations. It can be read as a looking-glass or as an eye-to-eye diorama of the optic mechanism itself. The drum looks like the medium of sight, acts like a pupil: a black refractor channelling the images inside.

There is a fairytale about a Magic Mirror, “which made everything great and good reflected in it to appear little and hateful, and which magnified everything ugly and mean.”<sup>9</sup> Once in a while, a splinter would become dislodged and land in someone’s eye. In these cases, the eye’s object is both an aid and impairment to vision. Do you see the splinter? Look through it, not with it. The beam? Lean forward to behold the whole and you overshadow the image; take out the beam and all you see is the bottom of the barrel.

<sup>1</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage* (Paris, 1962), translated as *The Savage Mind*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1966, Chapter I, ‘The Science of the Concrete’, pp. 1-34 (pp. 17 and 21).

<sup>2</sup> Text of a talk given by Marcel Duchamp in Houston at a meeting of the American Federation of the Arts, April, 1957. *ARTnews*, Vol. 56, no. 4 (Summer 1957).

<sup>3</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris, 1938), translated by Victor Corti as *The Theatre and its Double*, London, Calder and Boyars, 1970, ‘Production and Metaphysics’ pp. 23 – 35 (p. 35).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 34, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt, 1951), translated as *Minima Moralia: reflections on a damaged life*, by C. F. M. Jephcott, London, Verso, 2006, # 29, ‘Dwarf Fruit’, pp. 49, 50 (p. 50).

<sup>6</sup> *The Emphatic Diaglott containing the Original Greek Text of what is commonly styled the New Testament*, an interlineary translation by Benjamin Wilson, New York, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1942, Matthew 7: 4, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible, Authorised King James Version*, Oxford University Press, Matthew 7: 4, N.T. p. 10,

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass and what Alice found there*, edited by Hugh Haughton, London, Penguin, 1998, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), pp. 9 – 110, chapter III: ‘A Caucus-Race and a Long Tale’, pp. 24 – 30 (p. 29).

<sup>9</sup> Hans Christian Anderson, *Hans Anderson’s Fairytales* (London, 1913), volume II, London, Pan Books, 1976, ‘The Snow Queen’, pp. 9 – 59 (p. 15).