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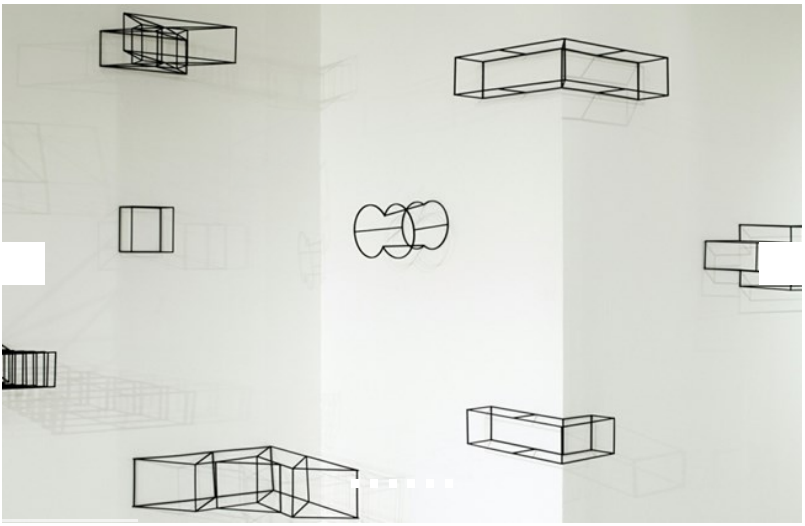
Of beauty and muddy language



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Jim Quilty | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Dropping a finger at random into Claude Closky's "Words of Value Dictionary," the column for works beginning with the letter F, the reader will find a listing for "Fuck the Police." "$229,000 Christie's, New York, 14 May 2008. 'Untitled (Fuck the Police),' signed 'Banksy' (lower right), acrylic and spray enamel on panel, 48 x 48 in (122 x 122 cm)."

The listing is one of several dozen in Closky's 2011 work, laid out on a facsimile of two pages of 10 columns apiece. Each listing summarizes the at-auction worth of a piece of contemporary art that renders words in some media.

Closky's work itemizes what was, by 2011, a commonplace. Insofar as contemporary artists set out to make work whose critical intent, aesthetic and media are antithetical to the international art market, that intent does nothing to prevent pitchmen from commodifying their work.

The power of "Words of Value" lay in how it transforms art to words. By adopting the classical dictionary form, it reduces each piece to a precis of relevant market detail.

The work's appearance – Banksy's stencil of a baton-toting copper, for instance – where the work's "meaning" is conventionally seen to reside, is absent.

“Words of Value” is among the works on show in “Space Edits,” the magisterial group show that’s graced the Beirut Art Center for the first half of the summer.

Curated by BAC Director Marie Muracciole, this exhibition – comprising over 20 works by 20 artists and collaborations – is a busy and intellectually engaging affair.

It thrusts together historic and recent works, pieces by artists from this region and others by their European and American counterparts.

Formally speaking, it runs the gamut from text (poetry, poetic film, art exhibition discourse, intelligence field reports, ruminations on grammatical patriarchy in formal Arabic) to architecturally inflected sculpture, sound art, experimental film and video.

The expo’s subtitle is “The trouble with language.”

It’s a resonant phrase, not least because critical interrogation of language – assumptions that it’s a transparent medium of communication, for instance – is pertinent to many of the works on show.

The “trouble” with how we communicate reflects, in part, contemporary art’s ambivalent relationship with narrative. This has stemmed from the contradictory desire for discursive relevance (or, some might suggest, artists’ need to use language to compensate for a failure to communicate their intended meaning through forms alone) and a yearning to liberate art from communication.

If this qualifies as a crisis in meaning, the art market’s been utterly indifferent to it.

BAC’s upstairs space is exhibiting seven artists, a mixture of 20th-century poets – William Burroughs’ “The Cut-ups,” 1966, Marcel Broodthaers’ “La pluie (Projet pour un texte),” 1969, Vito Acconci’s “Running Tape,” 1969 – and much younger artists.

Nested among Burroughs and Broodthaers is Nesrine Khodr’s 2018 performance video “Tahrik.”

Khodr reads aloud from three texts reflecting upon the feminine condition (“On Motherhood and Violence,” by Egyptian-born Iman Mersal, “Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl,” by Tiqqun, a radical, collectively authored, French-language journal, and “The Laugh of the Medusa,” by French feminist writer and critic Helene Cixous).

All are written in, or translated into, fusha (modern standard Arabic). The title refers to the (unwritten but understood) diacritical marks that police a text’s grammar and gender. Their literal absence gives Khodr license to break the rules, gendering the words as she likes.

BAC has provided English-language translations of these texts, but native Arabic speakers will be most sensitive to “Tahrik.” That said, it’s obvious that Khodr’s work is far more than documented recitation.

Based on the performer’s body language, reading three texts in fusha in a single take is in itself a fairly demanding labor.

Complicating the exercise of liberating the texts from their gender rules are the grammatical interjections of off-frame voices and constantly shifting lighting.

As her pose moves from tension to amusement, "Tahrik" becomes a study in the strains involved in conforming to the language's formal restrictions and efforts to depart from them.

Downstairs, near the center of BAC's main gallery, Pallavi Paul's 2014 work "Burn the Diaries" remakes narrative as sculpture.

The story is that of British-Indian spy Noor Inayat Khan, who was active in Nazi-occupied Europe during World War II.

The principal source of her story is a series of personnel files issued by the Special Operations Executive of British intelligence.

There Paul found an array of contradictory accounts of Khan's field work, torture, death and escape. Consequently the longer you read these accounts, the more obscure Khan's person grows.

For "Burn the Diaries," SOE report entries have been printed on a long scroll and laid out across three tables as a landscape sculpture. Strips of paper have been selectively torn away from the scroll, as if to reveal a redacted text (actually showing lines of Morse code – the operational field language of dots and dashes).

While Khan's career in espionage was short-lived and fatal, what's known of her story is intriguing.

Paul isn't interested in biography.

"I'm not interested in verifying if she existed or died in this way," she told The Daily Star at BAC.

"My interest is more in the claim of truth itself and the relationship of power, language, invisibility – the kind of critical pressure on history that is created in instances of people becoming embroiled in historical circumstances beyond their choosing.

"I'm looking at this file as a claim to truth," she continued. "What I [concluded] is that you have to erase more in order to see more. [At this point,] it becomes a philosophical problem, one much larger than the amplitude of a single life."

Erasure, as Paul defines it, arises from the unreliability of textual sources. "If you start to look for certainty in a document like this – if you're working with the principle of the aggregation or accrual of information – you're going to get nowhere." If the premise is that language "actually conceals, rather than holding some essential kernel of the truth, then you begin to feel a sense of lightness in dealing with that material. ... The material comes alive with a certain kind of force.

"When you deal with its own inner logic in its own terms, you're not looking at it as a way to get someplace else. Then you immerse yourself in the world that it has to offer.

"Erasure is happening but you are cognizant of that erasure as a critical force, not as a betrayal," she reflected. "You begin to think of it as play. ... Then the writing of history or individual lives is not a big story of martyrdom. It's a playing field, a strategy. Then 'truth' doesn't become a value-laden term. It becomes a strategy, and you find yourself becoming very agile."

The material fragility and unreliability of documentation is a well-gnawed chestnut, inspiring some scholars to approach their source materials imaginatively – introducing a cautious element of fiction into the core of historical writing.

"We've been taught to think of 'meaning' as a closed system, when meaning itself can be quite a porous and gauzy surface," Paul said.

"When you see something at eye level, you don't know how far back it goes, only the possibility of expanse. Meaning is about the possibility of expanse."

Dominating one wall of BAC's main gallery, Baris Dogrusoz's 2018 work "Interstices, a dizzying array of combinations," takes its departure not from ruminations on text and meaning but architecture, yet the artist's series of geometrical metal forms suggests a formal disjuncture from source material that's not dissimilar to that of Paul's.

Dogrusoz has devoted some years to creating what he terms an indexed inventory of the fortified military outposts that festoon the landscape of Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, using them as models for this series of three-dimensional wire-frame "drawings."

Notwithstanding their origins in the security state infrastructure, Dogrusoz's pieces elegantly evoke a more elemental and mutable form – a skeletal shadow cast upon the landscape.

For more on "Space Edits," see www.beirutartcenter.org/en.