

## Central Saint Martins Degree Show 2016

MA Art & Science; MA Fine Art; MA Photography 25.-29.5.2016

### MA Fine Art

One of my first ever lectures was titled "About About", and as I write this I am "about" to prepare a lecture titled "Everything I Don't Know About Photography". These two titles perhaps illustrate the fact that, to me, art education is not necessarily "about" the production or dissemination of knowledge. Rather art education is, primarily, a specialized milieu within which a diversity of practitioners and participants with varying perspectives, skills and experiences, exchange ideas, speculate upon and create possibilities. Artists create new possibilities by keeping art itself in question rather than reifying its identity, purpose, or outcomes as any form of instrumental, commodifiable or clearly "useful" knowledge. It is only by being permanently vigilant, and never complacent, even about the language used to describe and discuss art, that art can be kept in question and possibilities kept "in play". Of course the very word "art" is itself held in question and in suspense by this approach. Bringing two or more grammatical modes of the term "about" into proximity in the title "About About" above, both enables and promotes a refusal to decide upon which of the terms is the object of the other. Is the first "about" referring to the second, or vice versa? Their contiguity, their contingency and their tautology makes them "play about" and leaves them, and their relationship undecided and indeterminate. Any meaning that thus results from such a play must then be an event, not a fixed, knowable and reified structure but encountered differently on each occasion. Importantly, and perhaps profoundly, the lesson we learn from this tautological experiment may be applicable to all language. The artist, the writer, the artist who writes and the writer who "arts" never ceases to vigilantly maintain this playfulness in language. Meanwhile, and for the artist especially perhaps, "language" is more than words. Everyone who has ever made any kind of wordplay (every child does this); anyone who has decoded the wordplay in an advertisement or appreciated the wordplay in a joke is also embroiled in this constant disruption. We cannot call this play, this vigilance, this disruption "knowledge" or even the product of knowledge. Rather this disruption, play and vigilance is an undeniable and ineradicable function of language, its lifeblood, its means of keeping itself alive, healthy and renewed. I made another play (above) when I wrote "...the writer who arts...". In such a case we sometimes add inverted commas to the word, like little handles that render it provisional, as if awaiting its next move into or out of our sentence, into or out of language. In this particular case I also suggest that "art" appear, no longer as a noun describing a discipline, but as a verb describing an act. Art is not necessarily a thing, and thing-hood may be the death of play, the death of all that we need to keep in flux. As I said at the outset, it is keeping "things" in play that produces possibility, and without possibility we might despair. Better then to apply this rule to the language we used to refer to art itself, perhaps considering "art" as a verb. Henceforth we might say "Let's art" (as in "Let's Dance"), or perhaps "To art or not to art" (aping Shakespeare), both of which might thus become viable and grammatical enunciations. To play with language is always to refuse "knowledge" and thus to refuse authority, and perhaps this is what makes us laugh, as laughter appears to go hand-in-hand with the refusal of authority. To laugh is to refuse. To laugh is to be free, sovereign, even if only momentarily (we might, after all, laugh defiantly in the face of our executioner). It is somehow comic to bring "things" (reifications, knowledge, authority etc.) into question. To question authority is to transgress, and transgression allows us to risk, to test, to judge for ourselves in a lawless realm of speculation we might call "the beyond". As inexperienced children we are lawless and thus regularly corrected, "brought into line". But a child is, by definition perhaps, also uneducated and thus invites our sympathy, tolerance and lenience. We might then describe such a child as "Beyond Good and Evil", as Nietzsche titled one of his books. N.B. Not just beyond "good" but also beyond "evil", and beyond any such binary opposition too, occupying only a "beyond", a place or placelessness that is itself beyond words, beyond morals and more (even beyond beyond... perhaps?). As art is always active,

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acting, never a thing, never known, it might be more appropriate for art to be a verb. Art is, in this way, like Nietzsche's assertion, always "beyond". To "art" then is not to create a thing but to cultivate this very "beyond". Once again our grammar (that which makes us comprehensible to one another) creaks under the pressure of our insistence upon invention. However, Nietzsche bequeathed us another thought, also crafted in words, and also relevant to this brief meditation. He writes: "I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar". The death of God is an event heralding our modernity as no longer superstitious, but as knowledgeable, rational, scientific and secular beings. However, Nietzsche noted that even the phrase "death of God", and even the linguistic attributes of "God" as a noun, are caught up within the rule of a possibly greater god, the "god of grammar". Grammar was one of the "Seven Liberal Arts" that determined the highest level of classical education. Grammar survived as one of the three crucial aspects of the "Triumvirate" informing medieval scholarship and went on to form a central part of Renaissance learning, and the modern curriculum too. Today, children (at our better schools at least) continue to be indoctrinated with grammar that allows them to articulate, express and negotiate their way as social beings and coherent contributors to a shared world. However, as we have already implied, there are "grammars" other than the grammar of words. e.g. Owen Jones, the Victorian designer and theorist of design produced a famous "Grammar of Ornament" (before ornament was deemed a "crime" by modernism.) As artists, we might then wish to consider every kind of grammar, while reflecting on the implications of Nietzsche's deconstructive assertions. To play with language is to defy the god of grammar and to thus be heroic, even laughing in the face of all such risk and danger. For the artist, "language" and "grammar" might refer to any material, any process or form that we use or encounter – not just words. In this regard Nietzsche's assertion may appear to be one "lesson" that every artist needs to learn and "know", by rote and by heart if necessary, if only then to make a personal or collective decision as to whether it should be revered and preserved as "knowledge", or launched, as soon as possible, back into play.

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