

## Words of Selves (Word (For) Word)

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We are beings full of words. Everyday we artfully or casually construct communication – sentences, utterances, shouts, whispers, telephone conversations, poems, stories, jokes. Even when we don't talk – our silences 'say' something. Perhaps we take our words for granted, and sometimes forget the power of our communications.

The visual arts have traditionally been regarded as occupying a territory outside of language, outside of the exchange of dialogue. However, artists do often employ words or text in their work and are commonly engaged with the creation of a shared communication of some kind. It is impossible for any image, sculpture or photograph not to be informed by a narrative or dialogue, even if it is simply a discussion occurring in the mind of the artist as they work. While construed meanings will surely change from artist to viewer – or from viewer to different viewer, we cannot disregard the power of the image's ability to 'move' us in some way. We may never entirely agree on what we perceive, but perhaps this is one of the important roles that art plays within our lives. Art allows other kinds of 'speaking' – ways of communicating that provide spaces for unspeakable visions and stories to be imagined and realised and for different ways of perceiving and being, to be felt and performed.

While an image may remain obscure – words can be directional – they ask something of us. If we don't understand the meaning of a word we can, after all, "look it up" in a dictionary. Artwork, in comparison, may not offer its meanings up quite so readily. We may use words to escape the awkwardness we feel when encountering the call for contemplation such art demands with – "I don't understand art" or "I don't like it" or "It looks nice". Words included as part of an artwork can hold a key to help us uncover deeper understanding of what we are looking at. An artist may, for example, provide a title that will offer insight– a playful device perhaps not dissimilar to decoding the Cryptic Crossword. Or words may be used to bring us to an experience of unknowing, by evoking elusive meanings, in order to show us what may be hidden below the surface of a work.

Although a group show, the artists included in *wordwork* all use words quite differently, and to different effect. However, they are all actively engaged in seeking to communicate directly with their audience. I would like to suggest here that the artworks included in *wordwork* are almost entirely "performed". By this I mean that, as with any lived communication – these works both speak *of* and speak *to* their audience – and in so doing, embrace a particularly active engagement with the audience – one that seeks to move between listening and speaking and between knowing and questioning.

Arthur Watson's work reveals the pleasures to be found in the aesthetic forms of words. Singer, artist, and writer, Watson's multi-media works employ words not only for their meanings but carefully shaped and inscribed, the words appear like talismans, or portals

for archaic meanings and hidden memories. His works are informed by the indigenous culture of North East Scotland, and Watson employs the traditional practices of the artisan to reveal the voice of unrecorded folk memory. While Arthur Watson's works remind us to make a place for history and tradition they also direct us to a continuum within the present evoking 'a territory where psyche and physique find no border between them.'<sup>1</sup> For *wordwork* he presents the work "Goodman's Land" (2005) which hauntingly stirs up the unspoken. For the term "goodman's land" which Watson intones in the dialects of the North East including *Hellyman's Lye*, *Gudeman's Fold*, *Clootie's Craft*, *Given Ground*, *Black Fawlie*, refers to the strange plots of land and stands of trees in Scotland which remain mysteriously wild and "vacant". Within this work, Watson reminds us of the significance within earlier times to provide hospitality for invisible guests, in this case a literal devil's playground. Historic accounts suggest that these tracts of rough ground in various locations in Angus, Aberdeenshire and Speyside have never been ploughed or cultivated. The ground was set apart in the belief that the provision of such space would ensure the well being of the surrounding arable land, the livestock and inhabitants. Perhaps without Watson's work we would remain unaware of the subtle mark "Goodman's Land" makes upon the landscape of Scotland today.

Emma Anderson deploys a range of media to question the 'truth', in order to examine the ways in which meaning may be manipulated, either through human interactions or the mechanics of technology. She examines the shaping of deception, and the subsequent breakdown of trust between 'private' individuals and/or 'public' institutions. Her work has often employed written words – either as projections, prints or as vinyl cut lettering. Presented starkly, Emma Anderson's work directs our focus to the physicality of the written word over what she describes as 'the conditioned existence of the spoken word'.<sup>2</sup> She asks us to examine the processes we engage in when seeking to interact with and decipher written text. While some of Anderson's text pieces play wittily with our perceptions and responses, other works challenge 'easy' reading, suggesting much deeper and portentous meanings. Alternatively, we may be transformed into a voyeur, engaged in the witnessing of intense emotional outpouring. Is she telling us a tale or the "truth"? If this is the "truth", are the words she presents meant for us or for another?

Finola Jones's compelling film work "The pleasure of compulsive deconstruction" (2003) is based upon a narrative that employs voices without any spoken or textual elements. We hear a song without words, bubbling up periodically from the mouths of singers who otherwise perform soundlessly. We see young girls singing, from the Carlow Young Artists Choir, their voices have been scored, in order to "stand in" for the notes of musical instruments. We hear the familiar melody from a 1940's Tom and Jerry cartoon. The girls' mouths become mobile instruments intoning an old story - where brains overcome brawn, mouse beats might. We pleasure in the sounds (and in the silence). We pleasure in sounds that reveal the wonderful resourcefulness of human vocal chords and

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<sup>1</sup> Murdo Macdonald, essay "Bearings in an industrial landscape" in Watson, Arthur, Singing for Dead Singers and other works (2000) Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums: Aberdeen

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, Emma, from artist's statement, 2005

the playful, echolalic babble of childhood. We take pleasure in the way that the performance animates expressions and emotions in the body language of the girls. As audience, we partake in the narrative's spell and the shifting trajectories between cat and mouse, mouth and meaning.

Chad McCail's images are already narratives that can be read without need of a text; however the words he includes suggest a direction with which we are to take his story. His works for "Life is driven by the Desire for Pleasure" (2003) represent a utopian vision where humans live in balance with nature and each other as well as a dystopia - a hierarchical and cynical world where social injustices, ignorance, violence and apathy abound. By presenting these two contrasting worldviews, Chad McCail asks us simply to attend to the consequences of our actions and to awaken and revitalise our human potentials for love, for pleasure, for connection, for community. For *wordwork*, and in recognition of the particular experiences people may be facing when they enter a hospital, Chad McCail has agreed to exhibit, in an edited version, some of the most utopian visions developed towards the final work of "Life is Driven by the Desire for Pleasure". These images remind us of some of the most important aspects of life: the joy, vitality and sheer wonder of life in "everything is alive", of the roles we play both as individuals and as interconnected to community within "courage is stronger than fear" and, of each unique place within the continuum of life as revealed in "no-one ever really dies".

These artists in *wordwork* reveal that both words and the process of communicating can be gifts. In response, may we seek to speak and to listen with the same wisdom and care.

## About the Artists

### **Emma Anderson**

Born in Edinburgh, 1981.

Emma Anderson recently graduated from Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen (BA) Hons (2003). She was awarded The Cross Trust Arts Vacation Award (2002) to undertake a research project to Documenta 11 in Kassel, Germany and The John Gray Legacy for Fine Art (2003). Anderson has been involved in a number of group exhibitions including 'Magnetic North', Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen (2003) a group exhibition by emerging artists working with electronic media. She has also participated in a number of group exhibitions at Limousine Bull Artist's Collective, Aberdeen including "Zero3" (2004), "XX1V" (2004) and "Talking To My Teapot" (2003).

### **Finola Jones**

Finola Jones studied at Centre for the Arts, University of Tasmania, Hobart, The College of Fine Arts, University of New South Wales [Postgraduate, 1989], and the National College of Art Design [MA Research Fine Art Media, 2003].

Finola Jones' well-established art practice is firmly based within the broad parameters of sculptural installation and ephemerality. She has restlessly explored this territory through an expansive range of media, ranging from the found, manufactured and hand-made object to her more recent investigations into the less concrete realm of audio and video works. Her fluid and explorative practice is strongly driven by the conceptual benchmark of the idea dictating the medium and form, but all her works share the commonality of focus on detail as well as presentational and engagement strategies.

She has exhibited in both group and solo exhibitions in New York, Sydney, London, Belfast and Warsaw amongst others and represented Ireland on the P.S.1 International Studio Program (1994-5). Finola Jones recently exhibited an extensive work, entitled 'Artificially Reconstructed Habitats', a 22 channel video & sound installation, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Australia (2004).

Finola is Course Co-ordinator of the MA in Visual Art Practices at the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire, Dublin.

### **Chad McCail**

Born in 1961.

Chad McCail, born England, 1961, lives and works in Edinburgh. Chad completed a BA in English at the University of Kent before undertaking a BA in Fine Art, Goldsmith's College, University of London. He reads extensively and his practice is informed by literature - from psychoanalysis to science fiction. He has exhibited extensively throughout Europe and internationally. Recent solo exhibitions include: "Life is Driven by the Desire for Pleasure" at the Fruitmarket, Edinburgh (2003) and Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade (2004), "Chad McCail", BALTIC, Newcastle (2003) and at the Laurent Delaye Gallery (2000).

He has participated in many group exhibitions in Germany, Melbourne, New York, Mexico City and was selected for Beck's Futures in 2000. Chad has also worked on numerous artist in residence projects and commissions. 'Life is driven by the desire for pleasure' was initially developed and exhibited at Glen Lyon School, in Tayside Scotland and was further developed within an eight-month artist in residence and subsequent exhibition at the BALTIC, Gateshead.

### **Arthur Watson**

Born, Aberdeen in 1951.

Arthur Watson is one of Scotland's most significant artists, whose practice, commitment and influence in the arts has been sustained and wide ranging. After undertaking both undergraduate and postgraduate studies at Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen (1969-1974)

he founded Peacock Printmakers, an open-access workshop and gallery in Aberdeen. Arthur Watson worked at 'Peacock's' as it is now affectionately known in Aberdeen, from 1974 to 1995, as Artistic Director and collaborative printer. An extensive researcher of the folk traditions, languages and cultural history of the North-East of Scotland, Arthur Watson's practice embraces all manner of creative expressions and outputs. To give an example of his wide-ranging oeuvre, in 1995, he produced the Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection with Peter A. Hall, a series of 21 concerts with academic contexts that was commissioned for the Edinburgh International Festival.

Watson has exhibited his work extensively both across the UK and internationally. In 1990, Arthur Watson represented Scotland at the Venice Biennale. He has his work in a number of collections and has received considerable awards including The Chicago Prize, John David Mooney Foundation 2004 and Publishing Award, Carnegie Fund for Scottish Universities.

Arthur Watson is Head of Graduate Studies, Fine Art, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee.