

ORLA BARRY

NOUGHT YTAUGHT TO SPEKE BY CRAFT E NOUËR BY KYNDE

4 JUNE – 5 JULY 2013

Originally made as part of the stage set in the last scene for the performance work *MOUNTAIN*¹, Orla Barry's *Shearling Felts*, epitomize her central artistic concern of "physicalising language"². Indicatively employing video, performance and sculptural materials, Barry's work in general rotates arrangements of words in time and space — arguably what Kristeva³ described as *intertextuality* — to mine exploratory seams of purpose, through direction, rhythm and form, underpinning, undermining, extenuating and/or at times, exterminating meaning. Pristine structuralist categories of language break down under the pressure of the *other* side of language; the irreverent, the mocking, satirical or *carnavalesque*, a context in which Kristeva insists upon the importance of the 'speaking subject' as the principal object for linguistic analysis.

"To investigate the status of the 'word' is to study its articulations with the others in the sentence and then to look for the same functions or relationships at the articulatory level of larger sequences. Confronted with this spatial conception of language's poetic operation, we must first define the three dimensions of textual space where various semic sets and poetic sequences function. These three dimensions or coordinates of dialogue are writing, subject, addressee and exterior text. The word's status is thus defined *horizontally* as well as *vertically*."⁴

Orla Barry's felts speak vertically and horizontally, as both subject and addressee. The felted words — soft, present, off-whites set against deep, recessive, chocolate space — function as both image/object against ground and inverted words to the page (negative reversals). In both the first and third person, acting as descriptions and commands; "Spit indigo and violet", they create an urgency and immediacy of the *other side of language* that is palpable in its physical proximity, yet dense and occluded in its elusive commentary⁵. Again in her own words, the *Shearling Felts* were eventually considered "too porous" for the set of *MOUNTAIN* and were edited from the work, with an abstract future desire for greater space and isolation, to both contain and resonate their presence and multi-directional meanings. Separated by approximately a kilometer from the venue of the restaged performance at Project⁶, their moment has come, free to vent their loving anger in an isolated resonance chamber.

On an intertwined personal level, crucial to the reading of the felt works, Barry has recently returned to her native Ireland after years of living and working productively in Belgium, and now divides her time between artmaking, teaching and (unexpectedly) working as a shepherd. Her studio in rural Wexford looks out onto meadows populated by pure-breed Zwartbles sheep⁷, whose wool (as well as individual names; *Marilyn, Patsy, Iris, Ivy* etc., and by inference their particularized personalities) have become the physical and psychological materials of the *Shearling Felts*. After each sheep was shorn, the fleeces are washed, dried, carded and felted by hand. This ancient, arduous and essentially seasonal process (none of which escapes the artist) involves rolling and beating the raw wool in different directions and combining it with grease or soap and varying degrees of hot water to produce the final, dense, protective (or as a Beuysian reference would suggest; lifesaving) material.

Barry's title for the privileged exposition of the felts refers to John De Trevisa's Middle English translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum* (On the Properties of Things)⁸. Written sometime around 1240, Anglicus' text is an early precursor of the encyclopedia, wherein when speaking of fauns 'crafte' is semantically contrasted with 'kynde', to distinguish between things that come through skill and training rather than abilities or traits naturally gained, inherited or intuited. Signifying a range of modern English words including artifice, craft and skill, Barry's suggestion in the use of 'crafte' suggests that the felts are 'not taught to speak by art or by nature', rather their language comes from a less well illuminated prelinguistic place.

¹ Originally installed/performed at South London Gallery in 2013 and being restaged for Project, Dublin with which this installation coincides.

² The artist's own term in practice notes.

³ Writing about Mikhail Bakhtin's central idea of 'Séméiotiké', in: *Word, Dialogue, Novel*, 1966-9. Reprinted in: ed. Toril Moi, *The Kristeva Reader*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986

⁴ *ibid.* p37

⁵ All the *Shearling Felt* texts are taken from a sound work by Barry entitled *Filling Egg Shells*

⁶ Mountain will be staged with two performance at Project, Dublin, 20th and 21st June 2014

⁷ Zwartbles; a rare breed of Dutch sheep from Friesland, with black coats that turn a deep chocolate brown as the wool is bleached by the sun.

⁸ John De Trevisa (1988). *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, de Proprietatibus Rerum: A Critical Text*. Oxford University Press.