

Herald St | Museum St

(Based on a conversation between the author and the artist in September 2017)

The city street and its complex accretion of human experience is fertile soil for Michael Dean. A palimpsest vulnerable to time's vicissitudes, the street is perennially overwritten by use, defiled by litter and the grey pebble-dash of gum, routinely effaced by smooth layers of cement awaiting fresh inscription.

For Herald St | Museum St's inaugural exhibition, Dean draws on many of the ideas and motifs developed for his recent installation *Tender Tender* (2017) in the historic courtyard of Münster's LWL-Museum, examining how our experience of text exists in the realm of the street. There, the central works allude to lampposts and paving stones amidst a chaotic field of urban residue bearing writing. The commonplace signs and symbols attached to the plastic bags, squashed cans, shutter stickers and police tape have been replaced by Dean's own typographies and nonsensical poetic fragments, emptying them of their original meaning.

The transformation of written words into a language of concrete objects is characteristic of Dean's work. Typically beginning with his own writing, he abstracts and deforms these texts into new typographies, subsequently materialised in solid, physical forms. At Museum St these concrete glyphs appear as four derelict monuments, wryly named 'four fucksakes'. "Just as you have a memorial to things lost, what about a memorial for things fucked?" Some of the sculptures appear to be violently bent back on themselves, a reimagining of public statues which, having existed for centuries, are now weathered and treated with disdain or simply ignored by alienated observers, "as if that is what they were there for, specifically to be fucked with."

Islands of tactile paving stones (first created for the Skulptur Projekte Münster) have now grown into vertical anthropomorphic bodies, continuous with the ground they emerge from. Having borne the unrelenting assaults of the human imprint, the street rises up to challenge us, becoming what the artist has called "vertical collaborators of my presence in the world." Often found on pavements or in train stations to assist the visually impaired, the typical pattern of tactile paving has been replaced by heart-shaped protrusions. Dean desecrates the concrete slabs with variations of his text 'fucksake', smashing out the pustule-like hearts to render letters, treating their gridded rows like a dot-matrix board. These hearts are at times overlaid with lattices of inverted hearts, as if the body has been contaminated by a new layer of script. Playing on the abundance of hearts in popular culture and their role as superficial emblems of love, he adopts these symbols to form his own composite language of urban debris.

Disfigured by the onslaught of language, grotesque casts of disembodied crossed fingers and contorted fists sprout from the steel skeletons of the fucksakes' bodies "like spores, growing fat on the dead flesh of the fucking bastard things". With *Fuck Sake (Analogue Series)*, the hearts that have been broken off the body lie congealing at the base, coloured like the industrial plastics one finds washed up in the mud by the Thames. These correspond to the crossed fingers, bleeding from the bare steel armature at the top. Some spell out the letter 'f', a recurring element in his work. The physical experience of withholding breath through the lips to make the sound 'ffffff' (which may culminate in 'fucksake') simultaneously evokes in him feelings of pain, sadness, exasperation, ecstasy or joy – moments of intensity with which we can all identify. Mangled pages of Dean's self-published books (such as the repeated fragments of the letters comprising 'I love you' or a dictionary solely comprised of 'n's and 'h's) are chewed up and pressed into the concrete bodies. Others are saturated with ink, resembling tensed muscles or enormous fossilised tongues. This visceral proliferation of signifiers resolutely evades coherent verbal translation as Dean concludes triumphantly, "It's as messy as nature."

There is no privileged position from which to encounter these monoliths: poetic resonances are born out of remnants of the everyday, trodden into the stratum of public space. "What's important for me is that my presence, my being in the world, can facilitate somebody else's presence on a symmetrical level in relation to a possible poetic." The seamless transition from the vandalised street floor into the concrete glyphs is a powerful indication of the fluidity between language and the world it names. Far from language failing us, Dean's work demonstrates its elasticity. Its physical abstraction gives voice to the dense materiality that forms the literal bedrock of our daily lives.

Text by Jessica Freeman-Attwood