

Launch Pad: Amelia Crouch
Castlefield Gallery, 29 July - 7 August 2016

Text by Lara Eggleton

[annotations by Amelia Crouch]

Amelia Crouch attends to the illusive [I might use 'elusive'] power of language, with spoken and written words serving as her primary medium [not sure this first sentence is true, words often lie behind what I do, but are they the medium?]. For her Launch Pad solo exhibition at Castlefield Gallery, a selection of her linguistic experiments in video, print and wall text, are brought together for the first time. The works ask us to reflect upon how we use language, slowing down or isolating the act of reading words and images so we might better observe how associations are formed and meanings are processed [This sentence is nice, maybe it should be the opening...]. This approach is [maybe use 'recalls' or 'has echoes' of] the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), who developed a linguistic theory based on the premise that words trigger pictures in our minds. When we attempt to communicate, our words trigger different images or impressions for other people so that our intended message can be construed, half-understood or misinterpreted. What's more, this dependence on language means that we can only understand ourselves, others and the world around us as far as our words and phrases can stretch to describe them. A reclusive man with a pronounced stutter, Wittgenstein came to the conclusion that we should communicate more carefully, or not at all. [only my new work 'Attention is...' has a direct relationship to Wittgenstein. To be honest the majority of the pieces have been more influenced by popular linguistics books – e.g. 'The Stuff of Thought' by Steven Pinker and 'Through The Language Glass by Guy Deutscher are two sources].

Thanks to Wittgenstein and other linguistic theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure [also Charles Sanders Peirce – seen as the other 'founder' of semiotics], we now understand language as a socially produced tool comprised of complex signs and codes. Deciphering language requires an extraordinary amount of shared 'knowledge', an unwieldy repository of references and inferences that change according to delivery and context [Saussure had more focus on structure of language, Peirce more on use/context I think – also J.L. Austin and Roman Jakobson furthered this]. Emphasising this precariousness, Crouch often uses puzzles and games as her starting point. In her videos *Ifs & Butts* and *Ayes & Knows* (both 2013), double columns of tickertape words (if and but; yes and no) travel up and down the screen, intermittently becoming part of longer words as letters fade in and out. The viewer's attention is absorbed in the activity of reading each word as it materialises, and in processing the associations and 'mind images' that follow. As one set of arbitrary signifiers blends into the next, there is a natural desire to make associations between them, to make them into a sequence. The experience is both intuitive and physical, the mind and body acting as a conduit for receiving and interpreting signs. [Nice! – I like all the following descriptions of my work]

The body features more prominently in some works, mainly through the presence of the artist herself [is it important that it's my body? – probably not]. Her face out of frame, Crouch moves with calm dexterity to manipulate a range of objects in minimal, block colour settings. In *Sound Symbol Correspondence (Red & Blue)* (2015), the artist's disembodied hands deal a grid of square cards, face down, and then flip them over one at a time, as in a game of 'pairs'. Each reveals an image, photograph or pictogram that directly or loosely relates to the colours red and blue (and their transcribed equivalents, 'read' and 'blew'). The viewer is challenged to remember the pairings whilst not being distracted by secondary or tertiary meanings that crop up with each turn [This work might not actually make it into the show. I will make a decision when we come to install]. Similarly, *Double Over* (2013) captures the methodical working of a 'magic cube', its faces containing colours, words or images, a new set of meanings produced with each manual reconfiguration. Although the video is without sound, the messages are tapped out in a silent rhythm (Crouch listened to music when making the

piece), leading the viewer through a series of thoughts, phrases and aphorisms. How does each person read the sequence, and how do their individual mind narratives play out? The artist reminds us that free association, however abstract, always takes on a particular, subjective logic. Meaning, in other words, is context. [Is it interesting to say that the music was 'Abattoir Blues' by Nick Cave? It has a very clear rhythm that helped set the pace for my movements].

In **Untitled (Prepositions)** (2015) [wish I could think of a good title for this work], Crouch stands in front of a glass bowl of plastic balls (all white but one, which is orange), dressed in bright white against a white background. As she handles the bowl, at one point upturning it and spilling its contents, our attention is drawn to the position of the ball through a series of spoken prepositions: 'in', 'over', 'on', etc. In body and in voice, Crouch demonstrates the spatial function of words, asking us to test the validity of each new position and perspective. In direct contrast to the clinical setting and precision of Crouch's movements, the seemingly correlative relationship of the words to the changing position of the balls is approximate, sometimes vague. Is it the ball that is under or over? Under or over what, exactly? Certainty is deferred, undermining our determination to verify 'facts' and make causal relationships. [I hope the ball looks orange because it's referred to on the soundtrack!]

There is a formal simplicity that unifies this body of work, along with a playful brand of deconstructionism [if you're going to use this word, does it need a bit of explaining?]. **Bygone, Elsewhere, Meanwhile and Otherwise** (2016) are tongue-in-cheek nods to the Symbolist poetry tradition, which might be mistaken as Romantic in tone, until one realises that each line is in fact an anagram of the title. As in much of Crouch's work, words are one thing and they are also not that thing. Breaking down sentences and images into smaller and smaller pieces, the artist reveals the basic units that allow us to perceive and communicate our experience and perception, but which are nonetheless illogical and abstract elements. In the series of prints, **Sensible Objects** (2014), she adapts illustrations that appear to correlate the insides and outsides of bodies, colourful diagrams that, upon further inspection, make little or no sense at all. Crouch challenges our literal mindedness and asks that we take a closer look at the crucial difference, proposed by Wittgenstein, between 'seeing' and 'seeing as'.

Crouch's most recent work, produced for Launch Pad, crystallises her approach to language exploration. **Attention is rarely directed to the space between the leaves** is a meditation on pictorial and word association, with cats, dogs, and fowl as its main protagonists. A child is heard making the incorrect noise for corresponding animals (e.g. 'meow' goes the dog, 'woof' goes the duck); still frame shots reduce trees and vegetation to their constituent parts; leaves, trunks, branches, blossoms, etc.; and reminds us that the act of 'seeing' leaves a tangled impression made up of distinct and indistinct shapes and movements. Trapped in an endless loop of seeing/not seeing, knowing/not knowing, we are alerted once more to the uncertainty of language – its simultaneous ungainliness and insufficiency – and left marvelling at the extreme lengths to which we must go to understand one another.

Lara Eggleton is an art writer and historian based in Leeds.

CG is part of Arts Council England's National Portfolio and is a cultural partner of Manchester City Council 2015-18. CG's Launch Pad programme previews are supported by Soup Kitchen, Manchester.



A large print version of this essay is available