

'In Between', Rosa Almeida and Gavin Turk, Presenca Galeria, Porto, Portugal

Betwixt and Between

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The exhibition's title is drawn from a specific conversation – part of ongoing discussions – between Rosa Almeida and Gavin Turk. The two artists imagined a text-based installation by Lawrence Weiner. The middle line of this fictional work was the phrase 'In Between'. It's a peculiar origin for a show, and it reveals that, at its heart, the exhibition is bringing together several conceptual strands. There is the idea of the fragment (the title is a section of a larger text), the referencing of other artworks (in this case, fictional ones), and an interest in exploring different modes of representation, or – more specifically – methods of constructing meaning.

While the first two strands are self-explanatory, the third strand is less obvious but it relates to the title itself. If 'In Between' is the middle line of a larger text, then it is a phrase that describes its own state; it is actually in between two other lines. So the phrase is not just a piece of text in itself but it is also its own description: a closed-circuit loop that operates in two modes.

This is an important point because Almeida's text works, which operate as a visual analogue for the experience of language, also play on the edge of two orders of meaning: referential and linguistic. For example, in crowded, urban areas, we often pick up fragments of other people's conversations. Some of these will be indecipherable, while others will have poetic resonances for us. This latter phenomenon is what Almeida responds to with her spotlight installations, using coloured lights to literally highlight sections of her text-drawings in the gallery space. Hence a visual reference is used in place of linguistic meaning.

But it is not just the overheard snippets of conversations that have fragmentary qualities to them, as Almeida's drawings acknowledge. If you have ever transcribed a conversation verbatim you'll know that everyday speech rarely follows clear oratory standards, and therefore how tenuous the play of meaning in spoken language is. Much of the meaning is actually inferred in the non-linguistic utterances – the ums, ahs, and pauses – spaces that Almeida reflects in her installations through the use of apparently absent-minded doodling.

So it is the breakdown of the symbolic codes that Almeida is interested in: emphasizing the fact that meaning resides in the actual experience of spoken language rather than in the codified text itself. Taking this one stage further, Almeida then includes photographs of her own text-drawings in her installations. If writing has a peculiar relationship to the spoken word already (insofar as it is a symbolic translation of an existing code), then photographing this text adds a new order of representation to the mix, treating the written text (which is already secondary) as some kind of primary experience. Again, the gap between modes of creating meaning is explored.

Almeida manipulates viewers, mediating their experience of her texts in order to mimic the actual experience of spoken language. It is a spatial experience of language that requires a precise theatricality in order to convince. (Think about her use of holographic reflective paper; it literalizes our temporal experience of language – its meaning shifting through time.) This may seem odd, but consider another, related practice: the writing of Raymond Carver. Carver's choppy prose style is celebrated for convincingly conveying the experience and rhythms of natural dialogue, even though his prose style is in fact an utterly artificial construct. Both Carver and Almeida produce theatrical manipulations that operate on different orders to the speech that they are mimicking, but for some paradoxical reason this overt theatricality actually enables the works to be convincing.

Turk's works also flip through modes of representation, and this is particularly evident in his rubbish-bag monoprints. On one level they are direct, indexical images of bin bags (the bags are covered in paint and pressed onto the canvas), on another they are transformed representations of Yves Klein's nude monoprint 'Anthropometries' (on whose process they are based), and on a third they are displaced representations of the human body (i.e. the body understood through its waste).

But Turk's work is much more strongly connected to another root concept of the exhibition: the idea of referencing earlier artworks as shorthand for artistic concepts, a tactic evident throughout his practice. The ploy of utilizing borrowed logics allows Turk to give complex ideas seemingly simple expression, setting off conversations in the viewer's head (which is where all the work is done). So while the sculpture, *Duck Rabbit*, appears to be a relatively simple object, its web of references include: Piero Manzoni's *Achrome* sculpture; Meret Oppenheim's iconic

fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon, *Object*; René Magritte and Salvador Dalí's obsession with eggs; Joseph Beuys' *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* performance; and even Carl Andre's use of bricks in his 'Equivalent' series of sculptures. The work is a set of questions – Wooden bricks? A furry egg? Is this by Turk or Manzoni? – and its title is based on the optical illusion where a drawing appears to be either a duck or a rabbit, depending on how your brain chooses to interpret the pattern, begging the question of whether the pattern was initially drawn as a duck or a rabbit – or was it originally conceived as an illusion? This conundrum ties in with the egg motif because the egg is also inherently linked to the question of originality. It's another fundamental concern of 'In Between': in a world of cultural super-saturation, pretending to steal ideas can be an excuse to create.

In taking motifs from a range of artists' practices, Turk utilizes the power of another strand that runs through the whole show, that of the fragment, but he takes an almost entirely opposite approach to Almeida's. Where Almeida deliberately ensures that her artworks are seen as parts of a larger conversation, Turk presents sculptures that are whole, complete objects in themselves. The game of recognition that Turk sets off, as we have seen, is one of references; the fragments that his sculptures rely on are the fragments of art historical ideas that they embody.

Fragments necessarily have a direct relationship to their mother objects, but they can take many forms, and sometimes they are not easy to spot. Textual fragments are perhaps the easiest to recognize: languages have extremely strict rules codifying grammatical behaviour and vocabulary, and we immediately notice when these rules are not followed. This is why Almeida uses written text in her work. The fragments are obvious as being just that: snatches of discourse that the artist has set adrift, untethered from their moorings within a larger unit of language, be it prose, poetry, conversation, song, etc. Of course there is a further complicating factor, and that is the use of different languages. Almeida specifically chooses to work with fragments of the English language, which is not her native tongue. This raises the possibility of multiple languages within the work, and suddenly an uncertainty is introduced: Is this a fragment? Or a word from a language I do not understand?

Such questions are further provoked by Almeida's use of faux-archaeological panels. These connect to ancient forms of writing that are only known from such

tablets. Cuneiform, for instance, was long considered to be a form of decorative patterning before it was finally recognized as 5,000-year-old writing. The clay fragments that had been discovered went through a journey of understanding in the 19th century: from being considered decorative items, to chunks of incomprehensible but recognizably syllabic writing, to finally being deciphered as declarations, inventories, contracts, wills, histories, myths, etc.

So there is a clear difference in the two artists' use of fragments. Almeida's texts are like drops of rain from a downpour: single elements pulled from an endless stream. But for Turk, if all fragments are triggers, then his works might be considered conceptual hand-grenades; their perfectly finished, traditional sculptural forms are a deliberately incongruous condensation of the explosion of thought that they set off in the viewer's mind. These two approaches illuminate a broader conversation between the artists, and reflect two ways of presenting the same ongoing discussion. Ultimately, the diverging artistic practices allow us to recognize that the exhibition is, of course, both a duck and a rabbit.