THE COURTAULD Gallery

Linguis confusis Nimrodi diſsipat auſus,   Infectumque Deus vult opus eſse virûm   Geneſis. Ca.11. Vers.7.   3

Confusion of Tongues
Art and the Limits of Language

The Courtauld Gallery, 16 June – 17 July, 2016

INTRODUCTION

This exhibition is a response to *UTOPIA 2016: A Year of Imagination and Possibility*, a year-long programme of events and exhibitions at Somerset House celebrating the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*.

In *Utopia* (1516), Thomas More imagines an apparently perfect island society. Citizens share a common language and way of life. Yet it is a text riddled with ambiguities, paradoxes and verbal games. 'Utopia' itself translates as both 'good-place' and 'no-place'. Enigmatic in tone, the book has repeatedly frustrated readers' attempts to decipher its message. *Confusion of Tongues* brings into dialogue artists who – in ways similar to More – explore the power of language not only to communicate but also to complicate and withhold meaning.

Two seventeenth-century engravings of the story of Babel act as a starting point for this exhibition. In the Bible, a community united by a single language built the Tower of Babel in their aspiration to reach the Heavens. God destroyed the Tower, scattered people across the world and introduced multiple languages. Direct communication was lost; distance and difference were brought into being.

This 'confusion of tongues' has often symbolised the impossibility of reaching utopia, a 'no-place' alive only in the minds of those who imagine it. But can confusion be a cause for celebration rather than regret? Can frustration give rise to creative thought? Through unconventional uses of language – at times apparently straightforward, at times subversive and complex – the artworks in this exhibition resist immediate interpretation. As viewers, we are invited to imagine through and beyond the written word, to think and re-think, to look and look again.

CURATED BY

Kristin Brisbois / Clara Chivers / Martha Ellis Leach / Lydia Figes / Wells Fray-Smith / Samuel Glanville / Catlin Langford / Mathilde LeCoz / India Lewis / Claire Mead / Emily Riddle / Gabrielle Schwarz

Confusion of Tongues: Art and the Limits of Language has been co-curated by the twelve students of the MA Curating the Art Museum Programme led by Martin Caiger-Smith at The Courtauld Institute of Art. After months of discussion and debate, we had the privilege to draw works from both The Courtauld Gallery's rich collection ranging from the early Renaissance to the 20th century and the Art Council Collection's exemplary collection of contemporary art.

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Cover Image: Maarten de Vos, after Jan Snellinck, *Confusion of Tongues (the Tower of Babel being struck down)*, 1674, engraving, 23.1 x 31.1 cm. The Courtauld Gallery. © The Samuel Courtauld Trust. The Courtauld Gallery, London.

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1: IDENTITY

Language, the way in which one communicates through writing, considering handwriting and shorthand, or through speech, noting voice, accent and slang, plays a significant role in the formation and conveyance of identity. This aspect unifies a selection of artists in *Confusion of Tongues.*

Susan Hiller, *Midnight, Baker Street*, 1983, c-type photographs on Agfa Lustre paper 3 ½, 3 parts, each 71 x 51 cm. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. © Susan Hiller. Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London/DACS 2016.

Midnight, Baker Street - Susan Hiller

Midnight, Baker Street (1983), a self portrait by Susan Hiller designed as a triptych. A triptych is a work of art that is divided into three separate sections. Most commonly associated with an altar piece. This particular triptych addresses concepts such as language and identity. As part of her process, Hiller went to Baker Street tube station at midnight and took these photos in a photo booth. She then wrote over the photos in her own form of automatic writing, based on a method famously used by the Surrealists, a movement in art and literature that emerged in the 1920s in Paris, France. Surrealists were inspired by the bizarre, irrational and the unconscious mind. Automatic writing occurs through a subconscious state of mind or from a diving power. Whilst the writing may initially appear as understandable, it is in fact indecipherable. No individual can understand the text written except Hiller, an expression of language significant to her sense of personal identity.

Barrabackslarrabang - Imogen Stidworthy

Imogen Stidworthy, *Barrabackslarrabang* (still), HD video, colour, 9"13, stereo sound English/Backslang.
Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. © Imogen Stidworthy and Matt's Gallery, London.

Stidworthy's artistic practice considers language as a defining factor in identity, and is concerned with the possibilities of a multiplicity of voices. In her video installation *Barrabackslarrabang* (2009-2010), Stidworthy shows people speaking Backslang and English. Backslang is a language used amongst some working classes communities in Britain. It is formed by the insertion of extra vowels within words, for instance the title of the artwork. *Barrabackslarrabang* translates to back slang, the language spoken in the video. The word "because" becomes "becarrabause." This language was created as a resistant language, a way to disguise conversations on illicit trade from the police. A language that not everyone can identify with, Backslang is exclusionary yet provides a place for a community to express its views freely.

2: PLACE

Language is often thought about in relation to place, the various dialects spoken, distinct accents, and colloquial terms that define a particular location. However, language is also able to effectively evoke a sense of place and culture.

Untitled.Australia - Hamish Fulton

Hamish Fulton's artwork *Untitled.Australia (*from *Fourteen Works 1982-1989)* (1982) directly links with the concept of place, as attached to memory. Fulton considers himself as a walking artist. Fulton says that "If I do not walk, I cannot make a work of art." However, he has also been characterized as a photographer and sculptor, working in Land art, an artistic movement where artists engage directly with the landscape. During his walks, he considers his surroundings, noting what he experiences. This work relates to an eleven day walk in Australia. He records the landscape features and nature's inhabitants such as 'water' and 'crow' and colours 'blue', 'black', and 'red'. The work is composed of eight columns with six words in each column, alternating between adjectives and nouns. In some sections, the colour does not correspond to the colour illustrated, inviting the viewer to imagine the journey Fulton experienced.

Album Pacifica 1 - Mohini Chandra

Imagination is important to Mohini Chandra's installation artwork *Album Pacifica 1* (1997). The artwork consists of 100 snapshots, or informal photographs, displayed back-to-front so the viewer can only see the writing, stamps or marks on the reverse of the photograph. In doing so, *Album Pacifica 1* asks the viewer to imagine what the photograph could look like, and form narratives between the other photographs featured. The photographs are sourced from her family's collection. As Chandra's family are based globally in places like Australia, Fiji and India, the artwork also evokes a sense of place, in both physical and an abstract sense, noting the migration of peoples across the world and the connection between family despite physical distance.

3: MATERIALS

The physical and material quality of language is an aspect explored by a number of artists in Confusion of Tongues. This promotes an analysis of the variety of techniques employed by the artists on display as their means of bringing to life their particular vision.

The Building of the Tower of Babel - Maarten de Vos

Maarten de Vos was a 16th century engraver who created the engravings *The Building of the Tower of Babel* (1674) and *The Confusion of Tongues (The Tower of Babel being struck down)* (1674).

The process of engraving includes the artist, de Vos, creating the image on a metal plate. To do so, he would incise deep grooves into the flat plate. When printing, ink would fill in the grooves and would be transferred on the paper. The intricate details, shading and design of the two prints highlight his skill. The engraving above depicts the building of the Tower of Babel in order to reach the heavens. However, God prevented this. He scattered the people and introduced multiple languages, an image that is illustrated in the cover photo.

Maarten de Vos, after Jan Snellinck, *The Building of the Tower of Babel,* 1674, engraving, 23.1 x 31.1 cm. The Courtauld Gallery. © The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London.

Oskar Kokoschka, *Dialogues* part of the publication *The Dreaming Youths*, 1907, lithograph, 28.6 x 24 cm. The Courtauld Collection. © The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London/DACS 2016

In contrast to de Vos' intricate prints, Oskar Kokoschka's lithograph, is bold, graphic and vibrant. A lithograph is a method of printing where a design is drawn onto a slab of stone or a different flat printing surface, including metal sheets. Kokoschka belongs to the Viennese Secessionist movement, the name adopted by groups of artists in Germany and Austria around the turn of the century (1890s-1900s). The term references the artists' action or breaking away, from the official art academies of the period. In 1907, whilst in art school, Kokoschka began work on *The Dreaming Youths*, a commission to create a children's picture book. Following completion of the first lithograph *Sleeping Girl* (1907), Kokoschka abandoned his brief in favour of creating a more personal poem dealing with his personal anxieties concerning love, sex and violence. The images and the poem appear to hold little connection, especially as the prints largely retained a child-like aesthetic, proving a confusing juxtaposition between image and words.

Nothing More, Pavel Büchler

Writer and artist Pavel Büchler draws attention to the limits of language as a way of communicating which is evident in his choice of materials. In the artworks *Nothing More* and *American Irish* (2012), Büchler utilized a letterpress. A letterpress is a form of printing where pressure is applied on a raised composition, in this case letters. These two works are part of an ongoing series by Büchler titled Honest Work. By purposefully running out of letters whilst creating this work, Büchler provides an interesting perspective regarding the gaps and limitations of language.
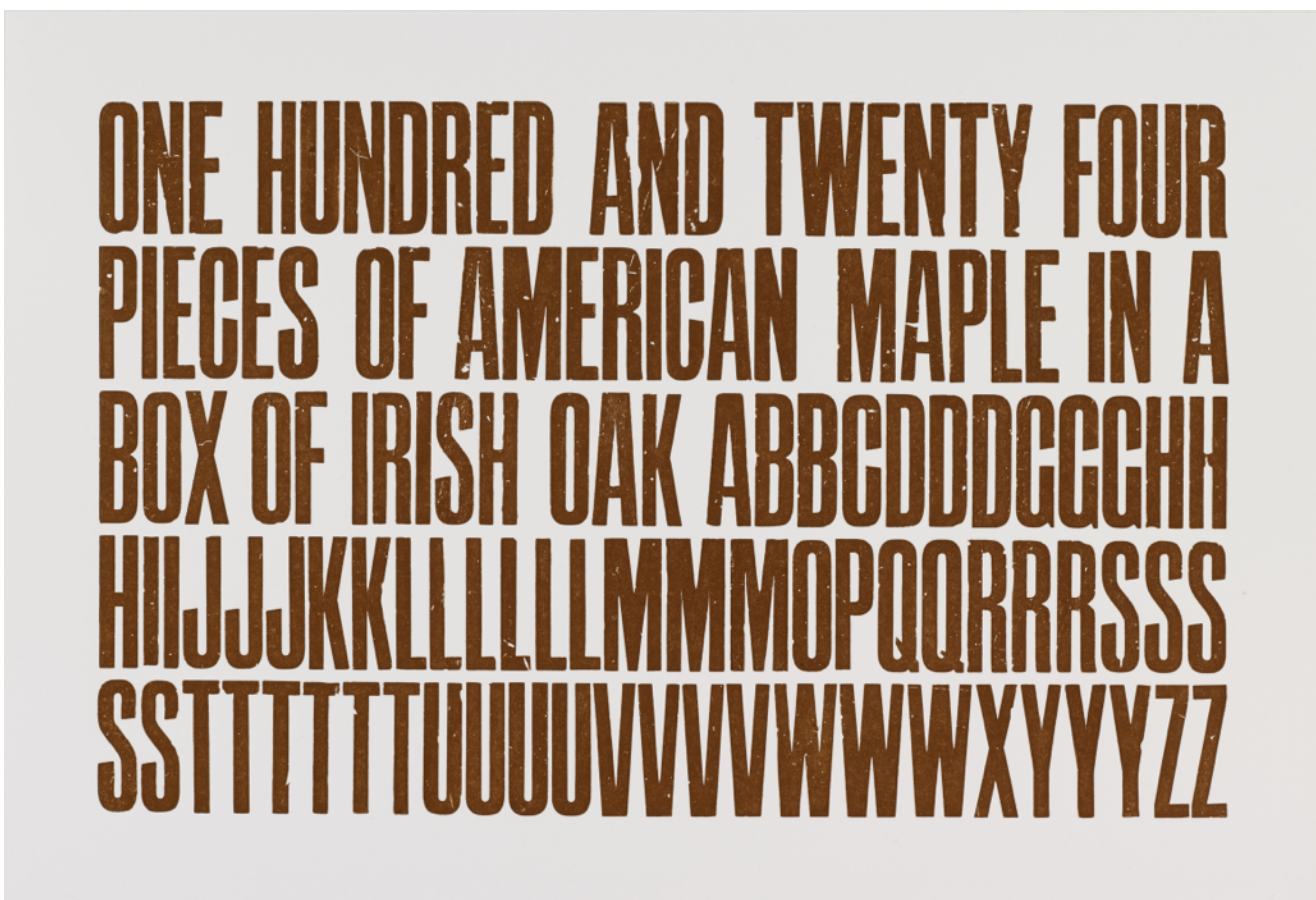
Pavel Büchler, *American Irish,* 2012, letterpress on Arches 88 paper, 35 x 50 cm. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. © Pavel Büchler.

4: GLOSSARY OF ARTISTS

FIONA BANNER (Born 1966) – British artist interested in the way language can be perceived in art. Many of her work challenges the possibilities and limitations of the written word, in a style known as wordscapes. Often there is no punctuation causing the words to bleed together. *Superhuman Nude,* is a portrait of a Paralympic cyclist created for the London 2012 Olympics.

PAVEL BÜCHLER (Born 1952) – Born in Czechslovakia, Büchler currently lives in the UK. Writer, artist and professor at the Manchester School of Art. He describes his practice as "making nothing happen." In his works he urges visitors to consider new perspectives of obvious subjects, whether that be hand gestures, video works, prints or painting.

MOHINI CHANDRA (Born 1964) – Fijian-Indian artists, based in Britain. Chandra originally studied sociology before becoming an artist. Her art explores with notions of identity, and the role of photography in memory and migration.

MAARTEN DE VOS (1532 - 1603) – Netherlandish painter and printer, based in Antwerp.

HAMISH FULTON (Born 1946) – British sculptor, photographer, and land artist born in London. Considers himself a walking artist. "No walk no work." He has walked all over the world including Australia, Japan, Peru, Iceland, Tibet and Wales. On his walks he records his location, duration, time what he sees and experiences in notebooks. The information in the notebooks are then translated into works of art.

SUSAN HILLER (Born 1842) – United States born artist who lives and works in the UK. Works with a variety of materials, such as postcards, photobooth photos and video installations. She often expresses her interest in the subconscious sate of mind through use of automatic writing.

OSKAR KOKOSCHKA (1886 - 1980) – Austrian painter and lithographer, associated with the Viennese Secessionist movement. His early artistic output explored notions of psychology. This later manifested in his more expressionistic and abstract paintings, consisting of broad, quick brushstrokes.

DAVID ROBILLIARD (1952-1988) – British painter and poet. in 1975, Robilliard moved to London from his native Guernsey. His poems and artworks, often depicting his poems in painted form, explore his navigation of 1980s queer London.

IMOGEN STIDWORTHY (Born 1963) – British artists, based in Liverpool. Stidworthy is known for her video and sound installations that considers identity through language. She states, "Language kind of pins the world together for us and holds certain concepts and understandings in place".