

PRESS RELEASE

Confusion of Tongues: Art and the Limits of Language

The Courtauld Gallery, 16 June – 17 July 2016



Susan Hiller, *Midnight, Baker Street*, 1983, c-type photographs on Agfa Lustre paper 3 1/2, 3 parts, each 71 x 51 cm. Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London. © Susan Hiller; courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London/DACS 2016.

AN EXHIBITION CURATED BY THE TWELVE MA CURATING THE ART MUSEUM STUDENTS OF THE COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART

UNITING MAJOR ARTWORKS FROM THE COURTAULD COLLECTION AND THE ARTS COUNCIL COLLECTION, OPENING THOUGHT-PROVOKING DIALOGUES BETWEEN ART OF THE PAST AND PRESENT

INCLUDING WORKS BY SUSAN HILLER, IMOGEN STIDWORTHY, PAVEL BÜCHLER, MOHINI CHANDRA, DAVID ROBILLIARD, HAMISH FULTON, FIONA BANNER, MAARTEN DE VOS AND OSKAR KOKOSCHKA

PART OF UTOPIA 2016: A YEAR OF IMAGINATION AND POSSIBILITY AT SOMERSET HOUSE

Confusion of Tongues: Art and the Limits of Language, on view at The Courtauld Gallery from 16 June to 17 July, is curated by the twelve students of the Courtauld Institute's MA Curating the Art Museum programme. Drawing on The Courtauld Gallery's own collection and the Arts Council Collection, this display brings together a selection of noteworthy works from artists who explore the power of language to construct, complicate and withhold meaning.

This exhibition is part of UTOPIA 2016: A Year of Imagination and Possibility, at Somerset House – a vibrant programme of special events, exhibitions, new commissions and activities celebrating the 500th anniversary of Thomas More's *Utopia*. In this famous tale a traveller retells his experience of a perfect island society called Utopia. As a complex and multi-layered narrative, riddled with verbal

games and paradoxes, *Utopia* has repeatedly evaded its readers' attempts to grasp its meaning. *Confusion of Tongues: Art and the Limits of Language* is inspired by the ambiguity of More's book.

This exhibition takes its title from another story – the biblical account of Babel. At the start of this tale the whole earth speaks one language. The building of the tower of Babel is driven by the utopian aspiration to reach the heavens, which in turn leads God to scatter the people's speech so their community is dispersed. Two striking seventeenth century engravings by Maarten de Vos depict the beginning and end of the Babel narrative. They act as an entry point to this exhibition, which is about the power of language to build up and break down common understanding.

All the works invite the viewer to imagine through and beyond the written word. Hamish Fulton's *Untitled Australia (from portfolio Fourteen Works)* (1982) and Fiona Banner's 'wordscape', *Superhuman Nude* (2011), transcribe physical and visual experiences into verbal descriptions presented as images. Some works are the result of playful, experimental processes. David Robilliard's *A Candle in the Dark is Better Than Nothing At All* (1988) is, in the artist's words, 'an attempt to mix poetry and images'. His idiomatic phrases appear familiar yet escape our understanding. Susan Hiller's *Midnight, Baker Street* (1983) is an enigmatic self-portrait triptych, overlaid by indecipherable automatic writing that simultaneously incites curiosity and prevents understanding. Mohini Chandra's *Album Pacifica* (1997) is a remarkable installation of one hundred images of the backs of photographs that prompts the viewer to imagine the pictures through the writing and marks on their reverse sides.

An intimate space within the exhibition showcases a group of lithographs from Oskar Kokoschka's *The Dreaming Youths* (1907) in which the artist subverts the conventions of children's storytelling and invents his own typography to reflect his own fantasies and secret desires. Pavel Büchler is concerned with the limits of visual languages. He made his drawings of the British Sign Language alphabet, *How to Find a Way in the Dark?* (1983-4), whilst wearing a blindfold. Elsewhere in the exhibition, his letterpress works, *Nothing More* and *American Irish* (2012), reveal the limitations of the artist's chosen tools—a 124-piece letterset. The sound of Imogen Stidworthy's video piece, *Barrabackslarrabang* (2009-10), is audible throughout the exhibition; the strange indecipherable speech of back slang complicating the visitor's encounter with the surrounding works.

Confusion of Tongues: Art and the Limits of Language highlights the limits of language as a means of communication, yet it also suggests that within misunderstanding, difference and distance there exists a powerful space for creativity and imagination.

This exhibition runs from 16 June – 17 July 2016 at The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, London, WC2R 0RN.

@macurating

#ConfusionOfTongues

#Utopia2016

Website coming soon courtauld.ac.uk/gallery



-ENDS-

Contacts

For further press information about the exhibition please contact:

Clara Chivers, MA Curating the Art Museum

clara.chivers@courtauld.ac.uk

+44(0)7796 951412

India Lewis, MA Curating the Art Museum

india.lewis@courtauld.ac.uk

+44(0)7712 514154

Notes to Editors

Location:

The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, Strand, London, WC2R 0RN

Tel: +44 (0) 20 7848 2526

Opening Times:

Daily 10am – 6pm (last admission 5.30pm)

Closed 25 and 26 December, last admission at 3.30 on 24 December

Admission

Included in admission to permanent collection

£9* (concessions available)

*Price includes a £1 voluntary donation to The Courtauld Institute of Art

Events

A programme of talks and events surrounding the exhibition will be available shortly

Please visit our website for more information: courtauld.ac.uk/gallery

Also at The Courtauld Gallery

Georgiana Houghton: Spirit Drawings, 16 June – 11 September 2016.

About the MA Curating the Art Museum Programme

The MA Curating the Art Museum offers an ideal entry point for a career in museums and galleries. The programme puts the physical object at the heart of curatorial training whilst placing specialist knowledge firmly within the context of the modern museum. Students are given a unique mix of seminars, hands-on experience and internship placements, all focusing on the expanding remit of the art curator in the twenty-first century. This MA provides a small group of students with unrivaled access to exceptional resources, drawing on the Courtauld's own academic faculty, conservation departments and the Gallery, as well as making the most of its close links with other London museums. Among the highlights of the curriculum are a field trip to Europe and an exhibition project that takes place in The Courtauld Gallery.

“This high-profile public exhibition is the culmination of the year, and a great opportunity to learn by doing. It is reassuring, as ever, to see students rising to the occasion and to the challenge laid down by great works of art.”

- Martin Caiger-Smith, Programme Leader

www.courtauld.ac.uk



About The Courtauld Gallery

The Courtauld Gallery is one of London's must-see art museums. Its collection stretches from the early Renaissance to the 20th century and beyond. It is displayed in the elegant setting of Somerset House, one of the city's most dynamic cultural venues. The Courtauld Gallery is renowned for its unrivalled Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings, including masterpieces by Monet, Van Gogh and Gauguin and the largest collection of Cézannes in the UK. It houses a major collection of Old Master paintings and is one of the few museums in the country to display such a rich selection of early twentieth-century art. The Gallery also holds an outstanding collection of drawings and prints and fine works of sculpture and decorative arts. The Courtauld Gallery regularly presents major exhibitions and special displays which are consistently acclaimed for their outstanding quality and originality. The Gallery is at the heart of The Courtauld Institute of Art, one of the world's leading centres for the study of art history and conservation. It plays an important role in the capital's cultural life and is part of London's Museum Mile.

“One of the world's great collections of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art”

- The Guardian

www.courtauld.ac.uk/gallery



About the Arts Council Collection

The Arts Council Collection began when the Arts Council of Great Britain was founded in 1946. It took over a small group of paintings from the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) and its aim was to promote and encourage the appreciation of contemporary art through touring exhibitions. The Collection has continued to grow, acquiring innovative works each year and includes paintings, sculptures, original works on paper, prints, photographs, film and video and installation works.

The Collection includes important, often early, work by many of the most influential British artists from the mid-twentieth century to the present day, including Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Victor Pasmore, David Hockney, Bridget Riley, Patrick Caulfield, Gilbert & George, Richard Hamilton, Richard Deacon, Antony Gormley, Mark Wallinger, Peter Doig,

Damien Hirst, Rachel Whiteread, Chris Ofili, Steve McQueen, Mona Hatoum, Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, Grayson Perry, Glenn Brown, Jeremy Deller, Keith Coventry and Wolfgang Tillmans.

Since 1986 the Arts Council Collection has been managed by Southbank Centre, on behalf of Arts Council England. It is now based at Southbank Centre, London and at our Sculpture Centre at Longside in Yorkshire Sculpture Park (the latter used on an alternating basis by the Arts Council Collection and YSP). The base at Longside enables the Arts Council Collection team to extend its sculpture conservation and research programmes and to increase public access to the sculpture collection through increased lending and exhibition initiatives. A diverse and stimulating range of exhibitions from the Collection, including displays of some of the most recent acquisitions, can be seen in the Longside Gallery, a unique space used on an alternating basis by the Arts Council Collection and Yorkshire Sculpture Park.

www.artscouncilcollection.org.uk

ARTS COUNCIL COLLECTION AT

**SOUTHBANK
CENTRE**

About UTOPIA 2016: A Year of Imagination and Possibility

UTOPIA 2016 is four seasons of activity celebrating the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's Utopia. Published in Leuven in December 1516, More's Utopia presented an imaginative and playful vision of the world as it could be at a time of great change. More's Utopia is deliberately ambiguous: both "no place" and "good place", he is clear that many other visions for society are possible. Through a series of exhibitions, events, new commissions, talks and workshops, UTOPIA 2016 will explore the broad cultural history of the idea of utopia and its relevance to 21st-Century cultural, ecological, and social challenges and opportunities. The year celebrates the pivotal role of the arts and culture in creating spaces where utopian dreams are possible. Throughout UTOPIA 2016 people from all walks of life will be invited to experiment with new ways we might live, make, work, play and dream.

UTOPIA 2016 is a collaboration between three neighbours: Somerset House, King's College London and the Courtauld Institute and Gallery, in partnership with the British Library, the AHRC, the British Council, London School of Economics and Politics, M-Museum in Leuven, Guardian Live and Verso and will also engage many of the 300 plus creative organisations, artists and makers resident at Somerset House.



UTOPIA 2016: A Year of Imagination and Possibility

www.utopia2016.com

#Utopia2016
