
BUILDING PICTURES WITH WORDS

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WORDS are Dominique Petitgand's primary material; sequences of words, repeated, cut, juxtaposed and interspersed with various sounds. Petitgand's words take shape both on the page, as carefully constructed verses, and in space, as sound installations composed of multiple speakers accompanied by screens displaying subtitles. In his installations, the artist constructs intriguing microcosms in which fragmented trains of speech form elliptical narratives, intercut by sound effects, ambient noises and carefully judged silences. By foregrounding the tonal qualities of particular voices and oral mannerisms such as gasps and breaths, the dry lip-licking and sticky saliva of a heavy smoker, and the hesitations of everyday speech, Petitgand draws attention to the space between spoken words; to that which 'writing sets aside, which speech lets escape', but which occupies a space that is by no means bare.¹ His titles often recall physical phenomena associated with speech, such as getting a dry throat (*La gorge sèche*, 1998/2004) or having something on the tip of one's tongue (*Le bout de la langue*, 1994/2003). These elements are the natural punctuation marks of speech. They are tangible evidence of the temporality of thought mechanisms. They hint at the simultaneity of thought and speech as twin processes, replete with the hesitations and frustrations of thinking in real time, and they occasionally embody moments in which a flash of understanding can literally take one's breath away.

Petitgand's narratives display a heavily fragmented quality; they betray the incompleteness and roughness that characterise the spontaneity of conversation. This foregrounding of the imperfection of real speech is the consequence of Petitgand's belief that finished sentences, as the synthetic outcome of thought processes, are less interesting than the processes that produced them. In his sound pieces, recorded speech and dialogues between multiple voices are carefully edited and composed to convey a unique rhythm, in which pauses can take on comforting or disturbing tones, and in which repetition and variation can lead to expectation and confusion. The logic of Petitgand's narratives generates ambiguous, often dream-like situations. Complex images are conjured up by works such as *Quelqu'un par terre* (Someone on the Ground, 2005) and *Il y a, ensuite* (There Was Then, 1994/2005), but in each case, the images belong to the realm of the listener's imagination. There can be no definitive documentation for any of Petitgand's works; there is only the given text and the listener's imagination, for 'in two sentences,

1. François Piron, 'Images Acoustiques', in *BlocNotes*, 1999, no. 16, p. 175, my translation.

one gains a better understanding of the work than with an image... sound is not reducible to an image.²

The same could be said about architecture in relation to the work of Tony Chakar. His writing practice has developed out of an acknowledgement of the shortcomings of photography and architectural drawings, forms traditionally used to represent buildings. Echoing the sentiments of the Viennese modernist architect Adolf Loos, Chakar is also unconvinced of the possibility of conveying reality and experience in photography.³ Loos observed this inadequacy in cases where people were presented with photographs of their own living spaces, but failed to recognise them. Architectural plans reduce to two dimensions the multiple dimensions of real life. The coded language of abstraction they employ renders them inaccessible to all but the initiated, trained architect. Chakar has pointed out that their very perfection makes them an entirely imperfect tool with which to handle lived space. In light of the ineptitudes of these two languages to render the reality of the built and lived environment, Chakar has developed a writing practice that describes particular spaces through the lens of the real and fictional lives inhabiting them.

Chakar's renunciation of the traditional languages of architecture in favour of verbal expression does not result in a mere comment on architecture; rather, he uses 'another form of language...to make architecture.'⁴ This architecture of words is a profoundly poetic one, haunted by the ghosts of experience, and sensitive to the markings, traces and echoes of people. It is through Chakar's attention to the details and minutiae of life that the reader develops an understanding of the way space as a general category and spaces in particular can function geographically and politically. Such is the case of *Martyrs' Square Revisited* (2007), which decodes 'the intricacies of the symbolic dynamics that transformed a specific place...into an allegory of an entire city, and through it, of an entire country'.⁵ Through a subjective approach and without recourse to images, Chakar's texts shirk the traditional objective ideals of architecture and invite the reader at least one step closer to an understanding of the realities of a particular lived environment, coloured with personal and political investment, with shades of memory and attachment.

While Tony Chakar uses the written word to compose a testament to real spaces, Kajsa Dahlberg's *A Room of One's Own*/

2. Nicolas Thely, 'Petitgand: "J'aime être là par effraction"', in *Aden*, 22 January 2003, p. 27, my translation.

3. Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime*, first published in 1908.

4. Transcript of *Public Time*, a symposium to coincide with the exhibition *Out of Beirut*, Modern Art Oxford, May 2006.

5. Tony Chakar, 'Martyrs' Square Revisited', p. 14 of this catalogue.

A Thousand Libraries (2006) visualises the spaces of reading and writing. What could variously be considered a book of drawings, a homage to a feminist tract or a collection of passages, is perhaps best explained by telling the story of its making. Some time ago, Dahlberg wished to offer a friend a copy of Virginia Woolf's seminal feminist text about the position of women writers. Finding that the Swedish edition was out of print, she made her own copy by borrowing the book from a library, photocopying it and binding it in a white cover. During this process, Dahlberg became interested in the underlinings and margin notes that had been left in the book by previous readers. She began collecting these notes by borrowing all the copies of the book available in Swedish public libraries. Eventually, she traced all the collected markings onto a master version of each page, an operation that was facilitated by the fact that all the Swedish editions of *A Room of One's Own* had the same page layout.

What results is an object imprinted with a complicity between the argument the original text conveys—Virginia Woolf's emphasis on the need for, among other things, a room of one's own in order to write—and the actions of its readers, who have deliberately carved out a space for their own markings and inhabited that room. The marginalia left behind exists both in the space between the meaning of the text and the page, and literally between the lines of Woolf's text. The complicity between reader and text denotes the act of reading as one of identification, appropriation and paradoxically of both communication and privacy. The text is a space shared by subjects who remain invisible, but whose voices and subjectivities are endlessly re-circulated among interested parties, thanks to public libraries, forming a chain of correspondence between invisible and ultimately solitary subjects.

The pages of Dahlberg's books have a dual status: they are copies of Woolf's original book and they are also wholly original compilations documenting discrete acts, each marking a territory of ideological identification or of linguistic appropriation. These acts develop into a kind of architecture of thought and deed, whose points are plotted in the realms of ideology, literature, the page and the reader. This architecture traces the thoughts and feelings provoked by the text, or at least those powerful enough to mobilise the reader's hand to create a lasting mark in the book. In transferring her collection of tracings and writings to a single record, Dahlberg has performed a personal re-enactment of each and every one of these moments, a mimetic act literally drawing on the experiences of individual readers.