

LP covers for the Incredible String Band circa 1969.

Equally a live artist, graphic artist, sculptor, philosopher and fine art lecturer, Reeve's practice resists categorisation. Her work always succeeds in sidestepping the most predictable tropes of current live art and participative art. Particularly distinctive is the hands-on graphic framework of inked line drawings and handwritten texts within which her projects are framed. But she will also tell you, with only a touch of irony, that she devised this project solely to provide a means for her to read Plato properly. With YMEDACA, Reeve has evidently borne in mind Read's inaugural address as the first Fellow of Bretton Hall College in 1961: 'The only property I am asked to share with you is that of knowledge or experience, and I come to you with the intention, not only of giving, but also of receiving.' ■

Hester Reeve's YMEDACA was performed at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, Wakefield, 30 August.

DAVID BRIERS is a writer and curator based in West Yorkshire.

Caroline Bergvall: Drift

When poet Caroline Bergvall first read reports of what became known as the 'Left-to-Die Boat Case' in 2011, she had little idea this maritime tragedy would feature as the passionate core of a live performance and book project called *Drift*. She was translating an anonymous 10th-century Old English poem called *The Seafarer* but found that, when neither her native Norwegian nor modern English could source meaning, the word roots and syllabic stems led to the rich, associative play and sonic experimentation of a new version. What starts as a pulsating invocation to sail north and beyond north, beyond peril, using the medieval 'true tale' or *soppgiædd* as a template, becomes a multi-genre, elastic, athletic and magnificent sound poem, accompanied by the screen visuals of Swiss artist Thomas Köppl and live percussion by Norwegian musician Ingar Zach.

In an hour-long performance, Bergvall navigates the vastness, the lure, the connectivity and the dangers of the sea, moving through

maritime chronology and topography with great intimacy and awe. She hacks into the OE vaults, borrowing prefixes like 'ge' and grafting them onto contemporary English, adapting, adopting and ghosting words to create coupled meanings: 'gewacked by/ seachops gave up all parts of me on gebattered ship ... hail hagl hard nothing else geheard gehurt but/sky butting sea.' Her neologistic verve is exuberant, enchanting and estranging. 'Blow wind blow, anon am I' is whispered and droned as a tribute and a plea for change. Her allusive skaldic ballad sprays and spreads through history, evoking the women, like Gudrid Gudridur and Elizabeth Bowden, who cross-dressed to 'scarper to sea' and the *hafville* (from the Viking 'bewildered' or 'lost at sea') artists who have guided Bergvall's practice: from Li Bai and Arthur Rimbaud, to Jeff Buckley and Ingeborg Bachmann. Language eats itself as physical and/or spiritual fug sets in: 'The fog was sodense that they lost all s ense of dirrrtion.' The syllables shatter on the screen behind Bergvall, vowels sinking away as consonance emerges battered and bettered by the storm. 'Show me the wave ... Where will the wind come from?' Then the image slips and sways with multiple 't's swimming in and out of view: 't' for interminable tossing and the 'tick tick tick' of waiting for the fear of 'sea fodder' and 'gust ghosts' 'sucking everything in' to pass. Köppl's visual/textual palimpsests whiten into waveforms and dissolve into island groupings that accrue mass as Bergvall recites. His animated fragments of the lines of the poem overlap, resurface, loop and echo, acting as prompts and props to meaning and/or its lack.

Becalmed, Bergvall imagines the rescuing wind carrying with it 'a tempestuous hooley', environmental disaster or radioactive leakage. 'Timeholes' appear. She draws on many sources, including Vinland and Greenlander sagas, the voyages of St Cuthbert and St Brendan as well as Tim Buckley's 'Song to the Siren', which is sung as a threatening anti-song, magnified by the extraordinary sounds produced by Zach on the massive orchestral bass drum. Used as a vibrating membrane rather than something to merely beat, Zach moves his hands over the drum skin, creating the aching wind and wave sounds, the low-frequency thrum of boat engines, the beautiful sonorous rhythm of fog bells, the roll and swash of the tide, the high-

pitched metallic rattle of rigging on masts, surpassing a backing track, becoming more of an improvised response and elaboration. Something about the collaboration feels truly interdependent and mutually enhancing – a rare sort of space and skill sharing that seems imperative to Bergvall's developing practice.

In the final sections of *Drift*, Bergvall moves from chronicler to seer. In a matter-of-fact voice she recounts the chilling facts of the sea migrants' disaster, outlining how what seemed like untraceable occurrences have now been charted into evidence using advanced maritime technology towards an international court case. Seventy-two African migrants were crowded on to a rubber boat built for a maximum of 25 and sent towards the Italian island of Lampedusa with no food or water. They encountered a savage storm, ran out of fuel and drifted directionless for days. Drawing the perimeters of the tragedy in close co-ordinates of space and time, Bergvall reveals how passing fishing vessels, a helicopter and a military ship could have saved the starving, dehydrated and dying people. She refuses a dirge-like tone as if the despair and suffering of the migrants must be conveyed in the starkest, clearest syntax, a syntax that foresees the language of the trial, the delivery of justice and, ultimately, the responsibility to change.

Bergvall's *Drift* taps into the ocean as primal life source and sustenance. Deploying an inventive and captivating range of vocables, it moves nimbly and convincingly from enthralled sea adventuring, through 'heart humbling' terror, into what is at risk from chemical, biological and material pollution, overfishing, increasing temperatures and the violation of human rights. *Drift* marks a significant ethical engagement for poetry in these isles. It asks 'what is a safe place?' and extends to an urgent plea against drift and towards compassionate, courageous and interdependent resourcefulness. ■

Drift was performed 12 July at the Purcell Rooms, Southbank Centre London. Forthcoming performances take place at Milton Keynes, 2 October; Bournemouth, 3 October; Gateshead, 4 October; Camden, London, 6 October; and Liverpool, 7 October. *Drift* is published by Nightboat Books, 2014.

CHERRY SMYTH is a critic, novelist and poet.

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