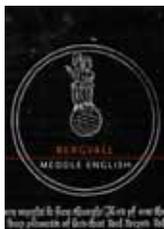


and more controversial assumption, was the idea that by factoring in the structures of our perception one could “bracket” them out so as to enable the perception of “naive” experience. Voegelin’s adoption of phenomenological practice and terminology enables her to flesh out a defense and portrait of hearing that is strikingly intuitive.

Voegelin’s readings (hearings?) of famous and often not so famous works of sound art—grounding her, at times, heavily theoretical writing in a more unassumingly journalistic arts prose—are the most enjoyable aspects of the book. In a chapter on noise she jumps from a description of noisy neighbors to a rave in 1993, to a noise show with Otomo Yoshihide, to the minimalist composer Charlemagne Palestine. Here, she writes on Peter Cusack’s *Chernobyl* (2008), a work of simple field recordings from the site:

Peter Cusack records dangerous locations to produce a sense of place through sound. [...] Where at first I fill [Chernobyl’s] sounds with cultural references, abundant on the subject of catastrophes, nuclear and otherwise, those get relinquished in a close hearing, and all that is left is what I hear. [...] The act of evacuating cultural references leave the birds sounding odd and different no more like nature recordings but laden with the evacuation that made them audible in the first place. [...] Phonography needs to be talked about not for its sounds, but for the effects its recordings produce.

For Voegelin, hearing is conceived of as a counter sense to the rigid hegemony of sight. Engagement with sound is “worked out in the agonistic moment of [its] perception.” Which is to say—sounds, unlike the concrete objects of sight, are less objects than processes. Listening itself is a process: connections are built rather than destroyed. In the moment of hearing, sound shifts the philosophy of critical listening from an Idea (or Ideal) to an engagement. In so doing, Voegelin argues, listening becomes an ethical action, one of engagement with, rather than estrangement from. All sensing becomes ethical. All aesthetics become political. Giants become fulling hammers.



Meddle English: New and Selected Texts

New and Selected Texts by Caroline Bergvall
Nightboat Books, 2011
128 pages

REVIEWED BY MARY WILSON

Meddling, in colloquial terms, is not usually a good thing. There’s something threatening about it, something that suggests unwanted or unwarranted intrusions. To meddle is to complicate, to create or uncover tensions that may not have been visible before. Yet in *Meddle English*, the latest book from writer and performance artist Caroline Bergvall, meddling is not only desirable, it is also necessary. It becomes a foray into the very foundation of language, the very tools

of speech. And speech, in her words, “highlights the social machines that underpin the work of writing: the voices, the languages, the pleasures, the complex nexus of cultural and literary motivations with their access markers, their specific narratives.” Meddling, for Bergvall, is writing. It’s writing that calls language itself into question—writing that searches endlessly for hints of word origins, geographic markers, class structures, and sonic or syntactic associations. It’s writing that won’t leave language alone.

Meddle English brings together a broad sampling of Bergvall’s linguistic experiments. The book combines both published and unpublished texts from the past decade, including work that originated in some of Bergvall’s many text-based multimedia installations. These have been exhibited internationally at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, The Museum of Modern Art and Dia Art Foundation in New York, London’s Tate Modern, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp, to name just a few locations. Yet while the context of these exhibitions may be lost, *Meddle English* makes it possible to encounter Bergvall’s writing for its textual qualities alone. The encounter does not disappoint.

Bergvall’s work occupies the middle ground between concrete poetry, collage art, and essay. Her close ties to performance art and the sonic aspects of her writing allow her to think of language as something embodied, to think, in her words, “of the body as always having an accent.” This concern could easily be traced back to her own biography. Bergvall was born in Germany in 1962 to a French mother and a Norwegian father, and so from the beginning she was no stranger to linguistic and national complexities. She spent parts of her childhood in Geneva, Paris, New York, and Oslo, and currently works in England and the United States. Although she can (and does) write in several languages, her work is aimed primarily at an English-speaking readership.

Bergvall is very familiar with the linguistic middle ground. Accents, slang, verbal and grammatical slips, idiomatic expressions, and nonsense words become for her a point of entry, a site of meaning that writing is particularly well suited to explore. For this reason, Bergvall’s writing may seem forbidding to readers who are unfamiliar with “experimental” contemporary poetry. She shifts frequently between English, French, and Middle English, or blends languages together in a seamless string of sonic or typological associations. In “Middling English,” the essay that opens and conceptually unites the book, Bergvall lays out the terms of this unique, polylingual poetics, offering as an example the work of artist Gordon Matta-Clark, who cut holes in a condemned Paris apartment building, exposing its insides to passersby. In this case, writes Bergvall, “what gets revealed is history and ground. Or rather, ground history, compost, history as compost.”

What is also revealed, if we take Bergvall’s statement at face value, is her conception of language as a ground, as something that might be moved through, built on, or cut to reveal its hidden meanings. Perhaps it is this understanding of language that fuels her restless search for collaborators. For, despite the uniqueness of her own polylingual voice,

Bergvall is often inclined to seek other voices. She seems to prefer working in a collaborative mode, whether through actual exchanges with other living artists or through a process of collage, quotation, or conversation with another artist's work. One such collaboration occurs in *Goan Atom (1. Doll)*. Here, Bergvall conjures up the highly sexualized and objectified creations of Hans Bellmer, a German artist who was loosely associated with the Surrealist movement in 1930s Paris. In Bergvall's treatment, this process of objectification is enacted in the text itself. The resulting effect, however, is quite different than that of Bellmer's original. Bergvall allows language to be the driving force behind this objectification, revealing the violence inherent in words themselves. As Bergvall's text demonstrates, this violence is deeply embedded and deeply gendered. Language alone can objectify and implicate all genders, readers, and speakers. As she writes in the poem's epigraph, "Anybod's body's a dollmine."

While it is always both tempting and dangerous to say that a writer performs what she advocates, in Bergvall's case this assertion may be justified. Bergvall has a remarkable gift for borrowing. She is able to rework quoted texts from sources as diverse as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Keynesian economic treatises, news articles, papal speeches, pop songs, and science fiction novels, all without succumbing to the temptation of full appropriation. Bergvall's technique veers between collage and a constraint-based process that speaks to the Oulipo movement's influence on her work. Oulipo, which is short for "Ouvroir de littérature potentielle" ("workshop of potential literature") began in France in the 1960s. Its members used constraints or processes to generate artwork in a variety of media. The most famous result of these experiments was George Perec's novel *La Disparition, (A Void)* which was written entirely without the use of the letter "e."

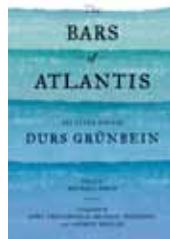
Bergvall composed "The Host Tale"—one of the "Shorter Chaucer Tales" in *Meddle English*—in a similar spirit, by extracting and reordering lines from the *Canterbury Tales* that refer to eating and drinking. The end result is an onslaught of voluptuous Chaucerian sensuality so excessive it makes even Chaucer's "Pardoner's Tale" look like an ascetic spiritual discourse. Other works in the series are more explicitly political. In "The Summer Tale," Bergvall relates the contents of a BBC News article on Pope Benedict XVI, all in a faux Chaucerian English. The article tells of a ban on liquor sales in Poland during the Pope's visit, a ban that would not apply to the Pope himself. As Bergvall notes, "Television advertisements for licour / have eek also been banned. / Along with those for contraceptives, lingerie and tampons."

Bergvall is a writer who seeks, in her words,

the indicators and practices of language in flux, of thought in the making: pleased language, pressured language, language in heated use, harangued language, forms of language revolutionized by action, polemical language structures that propose an intense deliberate reappraisal of the given world and its given forms.

As a result, her work is constantly experimenting, constantly calling itself into question. But to call Bergvall's writing "experimental"

would not do it justice. These days, "experimental" seems to be a catchall category for writing that is "new" and "different," as if to experiment were not an action but a stable condition of a work. Bergvall is not "experimental." She is a writer who experiments. She approaches language as a pliable medium, one whose rules, behaviors, and properties are constantly rediscovered in the process of her work. *Meddle English* reveals these discoveries and shows us a writer who understands fully the risks, pleasures, and possibilities of her art.



The Bars of Atlantis: Selected Essays

A Collection of Essays by Durs Grünbein
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010
352 pages

REVIEWED BY CHRIS BRUNT

It's possible that you overlooked this item amid the recent rush of news, but while the world watched revolutions in the Middle East, the Japanese tsunami, and a Libyan civil war, a team of scientists claimed to have discovered the site of the vanished civilization of Atlantis. Richard Freund of the University of Hartford locates the ruins a few miles north of the Spanish port city of Cadiz, in a marsh overlooking strawberry fields. In the 360 BCE dialogue *Timaios*, our earliest extant source, Plato locates the mythic island between the Pillars of Heracles at the mouth of the Mediterranean, which scholars have long identified as the stone formations of Jebel Musa in Morocco, and the Rock of Gibraltar. The team led by Dr. Freund has announced, not without controversy, that their dig is consistent with the clues from antiquity up to present research.

It's doubtful this news was overlooked by poet, essayist, and translator Durs Grünbein, one of the most celebrated writers in Germany today. Cosmopolitan in sensibility and temperament, he is originally from Dresden in the former East Germany but has lived in Berlin since 1985. He came of age as an artist after the fall of the Berlin Wall and has since been hailed as a leading voice of the reunified German nation. In addition to his essays, "Grünbein, not yet 50 years old" has published twelve volumes of poetry, an opera libretto, and several translations of Greek tragedies.

The essays here range from memoir to meditations on the intersection of biology and literature to formal essays on classicism, painting, philosophy, and the art and craft of the poet. It is an unerringly serious book, not overly dense but so fraught with erudition, abstract argumentation, insight, and feeling that the reader may find his endurance tested at times. It's the graduate seminar in a literary market of breezy undergrad surveys. And as such, it rewards the persistent and studious.

Grünbein doesn't traffic in much first-person colorization or surface humor. This is not "creative nonfiction." His prose is studied and earnest, yet the quality of his thought takes on its own kind of personality, and one not overly austere. Helen Vendler cites the