

Meddle English
New and Selected Texts
Caroline Bergvall
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by Cole Swensen

Caroline Bergvall's *Meddle English* is, on one hand, all about bodies, their variety and interdependence. She creates an archeology of language to search for the body of language, trying to pin down the linguistic body as it slips through the physical body, conditioning and delimiting it – while it, itself, passes on, sometimes leaving a trail, in the form of writing, as proof that it has passed. "Writing is a gesture across space, ski trails in a freezing landscape," she claims. Mapping the ways in which writing takes the necessarily and exclusively temporal event of language and transforms it into a spatial event is one of the leading threads that ties this book together, and from it emerges a second question: how can that event, once spatialized, be kept from freezing, from becoming static and capable of speaking only of the past (Ortega y Gasset: "Whenever you speak, you are speaking of the past"). Her "Shorter Chaucer Tales," which is in some ways the core of this amazingly varied, and yet amazingly attuned, series of texts, engages this directly in its focus on the essential problem of time, which is the mystery that Bergvall is always trying to write her way out of: we can step outside the body, be it the human body, the body of language, the body of work, or the body politic, allowing ourselves to delimit the problematic of space[,] but we cannot step out of time, and in this way, time refuses to give us access to its body, which in turn becomes the missing body that our own multiplicitous bodies are always trying to get a hold on and be held by.

By going back to Middle English and then, in a deft about-face, forcing that lost language back into contemporary life, Bergvall causes not a resurrection but a reinvention of a language, which takes a huge stitch in history, connecting us directly to a previously distant point in time through its contemporary translation into space – first the performance space, and then the space of the page. She makes that contemporary *our* contemporary by putting that language into our mouths. What is lost and what is reinvented is sound: we cannot pronounce the past. On the one hand, we have no idea, and never will have, what Middle English sounded like in the 14th century, while on the other, the act of pronunciation always anchors us in the present, underscoring the present as the only attainable aspect of time. To hear your voice die away is to hear **the** time in the act of becoming instantly and irrevocably out of reach. The second following an utterance is as distant as, say, 1380. And yet *the attempt*: to try to bring the complete alienation of the past into the present is to interject an edge of utter loss into the utterly present, inflicting it with an internal distance that allows for perspective: "the fruyt of every tale is for to seye": the slight twists, culminating in the ambiguity between see and say **and eye** enact the vertigo of a language that differs from itself, giving us a

swooning glimpse down time, which includes a fleeting recognition of the tremendous limitation of our senses.

All of Bergvall's work grapples with this vertigo, with the sublime awe at the cliff edge of our knowledge, which in turn underscores the nature of each of her works as an event, rather than as the record of one. Every piece in the book, in one way or another, directs our attention to the moment of the work as the tip of time's wave. Her careful tracing of sources and performances at the end of the book anchors each text in the performative act and emphasizes each as an intersection of conversations effortlessly uniting the living and the dead. The opening essay begins with just this conviction: "And a series of intersecting lines or tissues of lines. There are lines that draw from one node to another, one bell to the next, toward the architectonic structure." These lines are also lives, just as every life is in turn a line. This opening text introduces the series of ideas that become progressively more intricately engaged in the pieces that follow – not in a deterministically accumulative way, but in a clustering, overlapping, multi-perspectival way that depends on intersections of genre and media to create in-between modes and instantaneous and instantaneously dissolving composites that nonetheless add another archeological layer onto the "heap of language" we all build and share.

The particular responsibility incurred in contributing to this heap is one of Bergvall's constant concerns. As the title indicates, she's particularly attuned to, perhaps even wary of, the fact that making language is always a matter of *meddling*, that it always also has a hand in making people, their identities and possibilities – and that in the past [300] years, English has become increasingly and particularly meddlesome, working its way insidiously into the growing global linguistic network, imposing its values and perspectives. Bergvall's own multi-lingual background gives her English a particularly slippery surface that allows the reader to sense just how unstable this meddling language is, and by extension, how volatile and precarious any notion of a body of language must be.

And yet what she actually does with that meddlesome English, her insistent breakdowns and reconstructions, her neologisms motivated by complex logics and multiplicitous codes, her endlessly suggestive fragments – all these are instances of language's ability to be made anew from what is constantly and instantly its own refuse.

While the themes of linguistic intervention and instability reverberate throughout the book, each section is unique and honors its origin in performance, installation, critical commentary, collaboration, or graphics. Such diverse modes guarantee the animation of the work as a whole, while the different speeds and modalities constantly recalibrate the abiding question of "body" as not a single thing, but a nested structure in which society, individual, idea, impulse, memory, etc. all invest each other. And of this

interaction of bodies, language is both the map and the engine. Bergvall's different sections are stops on this map, including:

- "Goan Atom": haunted by Hans Belmer and his dolls, putting all the pressure on the combinatory on the one hand (how do which limbs go together?) and on the android, the stand-in, the cyborg, on the other (how can a given combination of natural elements result in an unnatural entity?) Her fusion of these two "hands" raises questions about natural language – is it even possible to recombine linguistic raw material in a way that is *not* natural, and would such a combination be then somehow less alive? Following the questioning back another step: is language alive in any case, in any way, other than the metaphoric?
- Collaborations with the work of Roberta Flack, Carolee Schneemann, and others: We feel the potential for a language living beyond the metaphoric in this connective tissue between Bergvall and other artists.
- "Material compounds": here she takes the question of connective tissue literally in a consideration of the living nature of writing surfaces: papyrus, paper, and then onto the much more obviously volatile materials of which much contemporary art is made: the body must necessarily change:
- "Cat in the Throat": through this expression, she suggests connective tissue as also inhabitation; how we are inhabited by others, how by words, and how by the words of others wandering aimlessly through us. Should we aim them? And if so, at what?

This is a question that haunts all language – in short, to what degree is language descriptive and to what degree is it constructive, constitutive? Bergvall renews this question by refusing to ask it, and by instead acting within and enacting language synchronically, helping it to become visible as a specific moment, thereby giving it its embodied instant.