

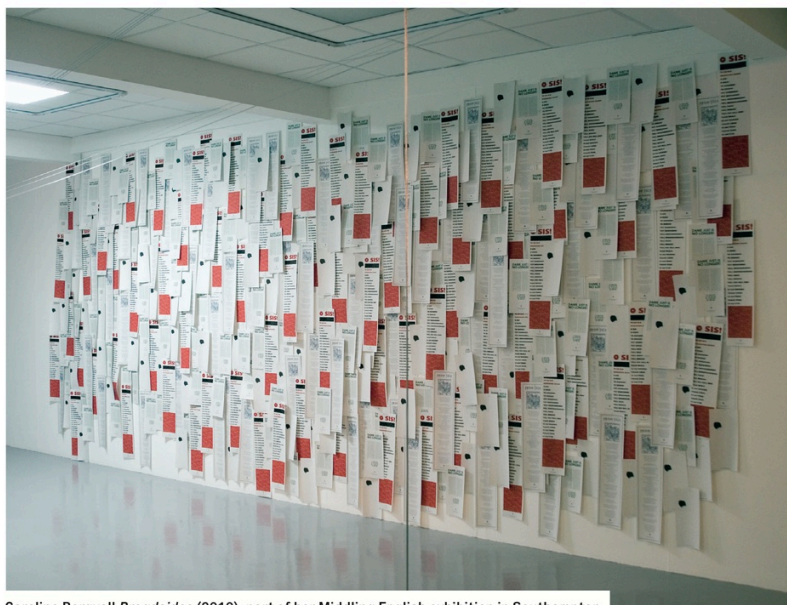
Cross Platform

Sound in other media

The text-based art of

Caroline Bergvall

forensically examines linguistic residues, puns and slippages of meaning in a quest to sound out the parameters of 'Middling English'. By Will Montgomery



Caroline Bergvall *BroadSides* (2010), part of her *Middling English* exhibition in Southampton

Caroline Bergvall's writing explores language as the restless, unstable shaper of cultures, places and identities. Every phoneme, tic and syntactical nuance in a given utterance, spoken or textual, is a potential vehicle for meaning. In the essay that opens her recently published book *Meddle English*, Bergvall describes what she calls 'Middling English'. The middle, for her, is a multivalent space that hosts residues of memory, history, song, poetry and politics. Like much of her work, the essay is sound-driven: the middle becomes the midden, the meddle, the Middle Ages and even the Middle Passage. Her writing's capacity to occupy 'middling' states (whether in books, installations, performances or sound works) is clearly influenced by her own translingual status: Bergvall is of French-Norwegian extraction, but has lived in the UK for many years. She writes in English, but other languages make themselves felt in her work. One of the most memorable pieces in last year's exhibition at Bristol's Arnolfini Gallery was the installation *Say Parsley*, which dealt with phonemic associations between French, Dutch and English.

"I'm fascinated by puns," she remarks when we meet in London. "The phonemic is one of the places where meaning can be manipulated sonically. The pun quickly leads to a world that Freud was very interested in, which has to do with the slip and the unintentional. All sorts of buried activities come out through these tiny sound objects. This has become one of the ways I really enjoy working: tapping into those almost childlike permutations and substitutions and then opening a piece up to more syntactically developed ways of punning across languages. I end up slipping across languages as well as between buried and explicit meanings."

Say Parsley dealt with sound as a matter of life or death: in the background to the piece was a 1937 massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic. Dominican government troops were sent to the border to execute Haitian incomers, who were identified by their inability to roll the 'r' in 'perejil' (parsley) in the

'correct' Spanish way. This is an extreme version of the meshing of language and power in a body of work that frequently homes in on the political sediment carried by the 'tiny sound objects' she describes. Some of her recent installations and texts have examined the warped usage that drives dystopian fictions such as Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* and Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*. "There is the old notion that a language view is a world view," she comments when I mention the novels. "Those books are thinking the world in terms of depleted social possibilities and a depleted language. The language is violent and syntactically very simplified. The political situation in England and continental Europe is extremely depressing. There are some nasty politics circulating and you can see that in some current uses of language. The triumphalist language of the media during the opening years of the Iraq war was unbearable. Patriotism, for example, can be force-fed into the way we speak. The readymade phrases around the Big Society are similar. It's always important to see how language works you."

Nightmarish futures are only part of the story for Bergvall. In recent years she has been working on a series of contemporary versions of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, literary texts from just before the dawn of Anglophone print culture. She says she is fascinated by the linguistic fluidity of the Middle Ages and the way Chaucer's works capture a largely oral culture just before print and its associated orthodoxies became prevalent. Bergvall's skewed medievalisms use humour to translate Chaucerian corruption and excess to a contemporary world of drunken financial speculators and Papal malfeasance.

Historical events – trauma, displacement, colonial violence – leave their linguistic residues in other ways too. Bergvall has shown a strong interest in the Martinican poet-critic Edouard Glissant and his theory of a 'poetics of relation', which seeks to respond to the linguistic experience of the

Caribbean. At a recent exhibition in Southampton and in *Meddle English* Bergvall reproduced the following quote from Glissant: "We no longer reveal totality within ourselves by lightning flashes. We approach it through the accumulation of sediments." Here, from Bergvall's perspective, is the link between middling/meddle English, the Middle Ages and the Middle Passage.

"He was an activist, intensely committed to the history, politics and the language of the Caribbean: how it starts with the void of the Middle Passage and its total memory theft," she explains. "He was arguing that you can't become aware of the politics of a language as revelation. It can only happen through a slow accumulation, acquisition and accretion between what you're acquiring, what you've lost and what you don't know. Step by step you surround yourself with these elements. Putting that quote of his on a gallery wall was a signal about how I work as a writer and how I think about knowledge, history and commitment in relation to the smallest sound."

For Bergvall the minutiae of human utterance – spit, clicks, rasps and stumbles – are an expressive dimension of speech, not a distraction from the ostensible meaning. "I'm very interested in lack of fluency," she says. "The motor functions of speech. The way the body makes itself felt in recordings. All this adds to the way we speak. A lot of my work deals with this microscopic detail. The body complements, extends, focuses meaning. There's always more, these extra little bits, with the live or recorded body. The process of recording retains some of these things but we often want to clean them up in the studio. There's something fascinating about it. That spit, those sounds caught in the throat, that hesitation – these details are really punctuating the sentence in a way that is more than the sentence itself." □ *Meddle English* is published by Nightboat Books. *Middling English*, the catalogue to a recent exhibition in Southampton, is published by John Hansard Gallery. carolinebergvall.com