

*On the (im)possibility of a  
pure praise poem*  
21.06.13 — 27.07.13

*"Poetry all art is one of universal worships a l'insu of god the unknown."* Dom Sylvester Houédard

In an interview with Ian MacMillan in 2006, the poet Geoffrey Hill spoke about "the impossibility of a pure praise poem."<sup>[1]</sup> Hill's bold assertion forms the basis of enquiry for this exhibition, which brings together work by the late Benedictine priest, theologian and Concrete poet Dom Sylvester Houédard (aka dsh), with work by three contemporary artists: Alike Braine, Mark Dean and Anna Sikorska. The exhibition explores, in various media, whether the creative act and its product can ever comprise 'pure praise', or whether the incidence of a 'pure praise poem' (or equally of a pure praise photograph, painting, video or sculpture) is unattainable.

A number of intriguing symmetries occur within the exhibition, not least the fact that it includes work made by two ordained priests (dsh and Dean). dsh understood his visual poems and 'typestracts' as "icons depicting sacred questions,"<sup>[2]</sup> and Dean's video works, which have been described by David Curtis as "votive offerings,"<sup>[3]</sup> also function in the interrogative mode. In each case, there is a tacit acceptance that answers will not be forthcoming. For dsh, questions are met with mysteries, "to which the appropriate response can never be an 'answer' but has to be a growth of awareness and awe – gratitude, depth and pleasure."<sup>[4]</sup> This attitude of praise defines the creative act, but cannot necessarily be conveyed to the viewer who joins with the artist in constructing the meaning of the work.

dsh started experimenting with type-written art as early as the 1940s. The works included in this exhibition were all made between 1964 and 1976, during his most productive period. There is a progression from the earliest works such as 'Katau' (1964), which are more distinctly pictorial in their approach, through the works of the late Sixties, which are more recognisably 'poetic' forms of

1. Interview broadcast as part of the programme 'The Verb', BBC Radio 3, Saturday 14 January 2006, 22:00-22:45

2. First published in 'Art Without Boundaries: 1950-70', Gerald Woods, Philip Thompson and John Williams (eds), Thames and Hudson, London, 1972

3. David Curtis, 'A History of Artist's Film and Video in Britain', 1897-2004, BFI Publishing, 2007

4. First published in 'Art Without Boundaries: 1950-70', Gerald Woods, Philip Thompson and John Williams (eds), Thames and Hudson, London, 1972

writing and reflect dsh's growing interest in Oriental Poetry, the influence of Beat Poetry and the arrival of Concrete.<sup>[5]</sup> The work from the early to mid Seventies is more abstract and formal, and often endowed with iconic forms produced using rings, whorls and ziggurats. A number of works also reflect dsh's interest in theological ideas from Hinduism, Taoism and Tibetan Buddhism, for example, 'A Book of Chakras' (1968), 'Chang-Tse on Tao' (1971) and 'I come the Moon and supply the juice to vegetables' (1971), all explored from the unicity of his Christian faith.

dsh frequently affirmed the Dadaist principle that "the logos and the ikon are one."<sup>[6]</sup> Elsewhere, he wrote, "it is possible to think in images alone – in diagrams, models, gestures and muscular movements – as well as in words alone."<sup>[7]</sup> This recognition of the primacy of visual/tactile forms of language is also central to Dean's work, in which the categories should also be extended to include music. In Dean's work, the logos functions as a vessel or carrier of meaning, in much the same way as the ikon, whilst the juxtaposition of logos and ikon exponentially increase the possibilities of interpretation.

Dean's work relies heavily upon the appropriation of, often iconic, film and video footage and music. It introduces visual and aural puns that behave as the generators and interrogators of meaning within the work, setting up a series of disputations between the different elements being sampled. Although the work is always carefully constructed, the reverberations and analogies created by placing potent symbols side by side are myriad. The screen becomes a crucible in which layers of meaning are compounded, burnt and refined.

Dean's 'Ascension (nothing / Something Good)' (1999), bears a striking visual resemblance to dsh's 'Ken Cox Memorial' (1968). Both works deal with the tension between absence and 'something

5. In December 1963, in *Typographica* new series no. 8, Herbert Spencer, the magazine's editor and designer, published Houédard's essay "Concrete Poetry & Ian Hamilton Finlay." This is thought to be the first article about concrete poetry to appear in the UK.

6. Hugo Ball 1916.

7. From *CHRONOLOGY*, duplicated appendix to the catalogue of the exhibition 'Between Poetry and Painting' at the ICA, London 1965.

good'. dsh produced his memorial in response to the untimely death of the illustrator, poet and musician Ken Cox. The design of the print includes all the letters of the alphabet, except for those from the name 'Ken Cox' as if to reflect the fact that he is now absent from the world. The remaining letters cascade out from a central point in eight colourful spokes or letters. The visual design hints at mandala, and the natural inclination is to look for a pattern or meaning in the placement of the letters, but there is none to be found. There are no answers to this death and absence, only a visual celebration of the good that remains and an opportunity to reflect.

In 'Ascension (nothing / Something Good)', seven spokes of animated white type emanate from a central void and appear against a black background, each one spelling out the word 'nothing'. The text disappears off the edge of the screen, and this continues in a never-ending loop. The accompanying soundtrack is a brief sample of Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer singing the love duet 'Something Good', from the 1965 film version of Rogers and Hammerstein's 'The Sound of Music'. This sample is also looped, so that the words of its title are repeated endlessly but the pitch is sequentially modified so that they are constantly ascending the scale.

The lyrics from 'Something Good' themselves appropriate an excerpt from 'De Rerum Natura' ('On the Nature of Things') by the Roman poet Lucretius, which describes how 'nothing can come from nothing'. Lucretius wrote the poem as a didactic against the prevailing 1st century tendency to explain away natural phenomena as the 'will of the gods'. In place of this, he argues for the fundamental logic of material cause and effect. In 'Something Good', Maria and the Captain also appeal to a system of cause and effect, albeit romantic, but one which hints at redemption through the intervention of grace:

*"Perhaps I had a wicked childhood. Perhaps I had a miserable youth. But somewhere in my wicked, miserable past there must have been a moment of truth. For here you are, standing there, loving me whether or not you should. So somewhere in my youth or childhood I must have done something good."*

When the work was first exhibited in 1999, Michael Wilson

commented that, "Dean seems to be directing us inwards and outwards simultaneously; inwards towards a psychological fatalism, outwards towards a resolutely materialist scientific world view. Thus, despite the easy elegance with which the two constituent parts of the work coexist in formal terms, their theoretical foundations are irredeemably – but productively – out of alignment. While both present versions of a causal ideology, these originate in such different cultures that they would seem to verge on mutual exclusivity. However, in bringing them together as he does, the artist successfully wrong-foots any rational expectations of a coherent argument and counter-argument by allowing a hypnotic visual and auditory aesthetic to interrupt continually the construction of inter-textual meaning... Dean flaunts a certain archness in risking his work being read as a paean to nihilism, or at least to art as the emperor's new clothes but, as its title suggests, *Ascension* rises above such interpretations through subtle allusions to faith and portent."<sup>[8]</sup>

This approach, of holding two contrasting ideas in juxtaposition and allowing each one to interrupt and refine the other, is typical of Dean's work. It is a form of disputation that consciously appeals to earlier Biblical and religious precedents including the rabbinical practice of *g'zerah shavah*. In *g'zerah shavah*, similar words from different Biblical passages are associated with each other in order to reason by analogy. In so doing, the meaning and related context from one verse is imported into the other. This kind of rabbinical disputation is not just a component of the interpretation of the Bible, but of the Bible itself, as seen in the accounts of the Prophets taking issue with their culture, or of Abraham and Sarah arguing with God (Genesis 18:10-15; 22-33). It is also found in the Psalms in which the author often moves from a position of despair and distress to one of praise within a few lines or stanzas. The psalms reflect honestly the full range of human experience and often question God as to why he has abandoned his people or forgotten his promises. They express doubt and confusion, but they also offer up praise.

'Nothing Compares 2 U (Bas Jean Ader Mirrors Joan of Arc)'  
functions rather like a psalm in its presentation of human distress

8. Michael Wilson review of 'Mark Dean: *Ascension* (nothing/Something Good), Laurent Delaye Gallery, London 12th Feb - 25th March, 2000)', published in *Art Monthly*, April 20006.

and desolation co-existing with an expression of faith in God, even at the cost of martyrdom. Two video images are superimposed and offset so that the screen is divided into three horizontal bands, which appear and disappear as the video progresses. The top half is filled with a short extract from the silent film 'La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc' (1928) directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer and starring Renée Jeanne (aka 'Maria') Falconetti. The clip that Dean has selected is taken from Joan's trial, when she has been accused and asked whether she believes that God will save her from prison. Having replied 'yes', she is then asked 'when?'. At this moment a tear falls down her cheek and she replies, "I know neither the day nor the hour". The subtitles from the original film appear in French across the centre of the screen. The lower section of the screen appropriates the iconic work 'I'm too sad to tell you' (1971) by the late and much mythologized Bas Jan Ader, which consists of the artist crying in front of the camera with no indication of the cause of his sadness (although we may posthumously consider the title of his last work, 'In Search of the Miraculous', where he set sail across the Atlantic to return to his homeland, only to disappear at sea).

The title of Dean's work references Sinead O'Connors' 1990 cover of the Prince song, 'Nothing Compares 2 U', the video for which also references 'La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc' in its close-up shot of the shaven-headed singer in tears. The sound element of Dean's work is his remix (consisting of the superimposition of an original speed and a slowed down version) of a cover of Karen Dalton's acoustic ballad 'Something on your mind' (1971), performed by the English synthpop-revival band 'Mirrors'. It includes the lyrics, "*Maybe another day you'll want to feel another way, you can't stop crying.... well, you know, you cant make it without ever even trying.*"

The potency and prior signification of the original material Dean has sampled risks criticism. Indeed, given the iconic status of his sources within the canon of modern and contemporary art, he might even be accused of a kind of sacrilege. However, the question is complicated by his pointed use of other appropriations within the work: in the image, Bas Jan Ader mirroring Joan of Arc; in the title Sinead O'Connor doing likewise; in the sound, Mirrors covering an iconic 70's song in an 80's fashion; even Falconetti's extraordinary portrayal of Joan of Arc has become inseparable from her own identity. These actions pose the question of why Dean is doing likewise: is his appropriation in the service of his own artistic

ambition, or for some higher purpose? This question, within these layers of signification becomes part of the construction of the work, rendering it pregnant with cathartic possibilities.

Dean and dsh seem united by a priestly and artistic vocation that consists chiefly in asking questions as a means of understanding or defining the ineffable. These questions arise from an honest interaction with contemporary life and culture, and strive to resist the shadows of dogma and doctrine. This lived vocation is perhaps more akin to 'worship' than any extravagant expression of praise could be. In dsh's own words: "Our need to see how every time we grasp and define spirit all we are doing is to enlarge the universe – and thus define spirit as that much further off – if the visible is an ikon of the invisible then extending our sight doesn't mean we can now see the invisible – it means that we have just enlarged the ikon – the universe itself is (ℰ can be) the only possible ikon of the non-universe – but myths and poems which are inside the universe are its most useful paths to the tao."<sup>[9]</sup>

Symmetries also exist between Braine's photographs and dsh's typestracts in the extent to which both artists seek to release their content from the dictatorial and paternalistic constraints of language and symbolism. Indeed, Braine's work could be described as 'Concrete photography' in its attempt to allow the physical photograph to become part of the work, rather than simply the medium through which an image is captured. Braine has responded to the exhibition title by producing a series of black and white 'Pure Praise Photographs', made using non exposed-colour 120 film, with varying sized holes punched into them. This deliberate rupturing of the surface of the negative is one of several tactics (including hole-punching, pricking, drawing, sticking and blocking) that she uses in order to draw attention to the photograph as an object.

dsh's work 'Chang-Tse on Tao' (1971) depicts a red circular image produced from repetitive hatched lines that produce longer parallel lines falling at the same angle. It includes the caption "to know it is to cut it up", which seems to be a perfect summary of Braine's

9. Dom Sylvester Houédard quoted in 'Irony and the autonomous word', and essay by Anthony Everitt, published in *Ceolfrith 15*: Dom Sylvester Houédard, p.34

10. Aliko Braine, from a conversation with Chloe Steel, published in 'Aliko Braine, 'Black Out / White Out'', 2007, Galerie Fruela, Madrid.

process: It is only through cutting up the negative that the true meaning of the work can be known. If there is a creative act of praise going on here, then its object is the materiality of the photograph.

“I love the surface of a photograph, and that’s what I want people to enjoy. I am fascinated by the magic of celluloid, silverprint, not the mechanical 0’s and 1’s of digital images. In galleries I often want to touch the paint, to hold the edges of the frame though I know it would be damaging to the work. We’re so removed from the majority of images we see, we’re not allowed near them. Like the paintings of the Renaissance, photographs should be as much about surface as subject. The bitten edges increasing our awareness of the delicious skin of the photograph. Re-experienced vicariously, our eye travels not through the holes as you would expect, but across the surface so that the image is viewed as an object.”<sup>[10]</sup>

In ‘Surface I’ and ‘Surface II’ Braine has arranged a series of paper sticker dots on her negative in different arrangements. The resulting ‘polka dot’ images offer playful allusions to Kusama and Hirst, as well as to the Zen circles that appear in dsh’s work. On another more absurd reading, they appear as multiple moons in the night sky – almost, but not quite, placing the work into the genre of landscape, and inviting the viewer to consider which moon to use as a means of celestial navigation.

Sikorska’s work also resists hierarchies in its glorification of the physicality of mundane objects. A laundry basket is inverted and fashioned from lead to form a ‘Colosseum’, whilst a wooden drying rack is transformed and renamed ‘St. Andrew’ to create a sculptural relic that almost, but not quite, belies its humble origins. Like Dean, Sikorska employs visual puns that extend the meaning of her work, but the question lingers as to whether her creative action frees it from the contamination of its’ base associations. The laundry basket has a function to contain garments which are soiled and in need of cleansing, whilst the drying rack is designed to support that which has already been purified. An immediate dichotomy is established here between the sacred and the profane, and perhaps gives an insight into the artists’ own view about the objects she is representing.

In ‘Colosseum’ Sikorska has created a comic micro-monument that

questions our praise and elevation of monuments of human conceit. Set along side this, the potently titled 'Saint Andrew Unadorned' explores how we represent those things that are worthy of praise and adoration. A found drying rack has been dismantled and then reconstructed using some of its original drying spindles, plaster, bronze and lead. The damp-stained spindles are fixed to the cast plaster frame, which includes visible remnants of plaster bandage at the intersections. Along with the criss-crossed frame, these bandages are a visual allusion to the manner of death which Andrew is thought to have suffered: he died bound to a *Crux decussata*, or X-shaped cross, at his own request, as he deemed himself unworthy to be crucified on the same type of cross as Jesus.

The fragility and smaller-than-human scale of the work is in direct contrast to Michael Landy's large-scale kinetic sculptures of Saints, currently being exhibited at the National Gallery in London, which "visitors can crank into life with a foot pedal mechanism."<sup>[11]</sup> Sikorska's 'Saint Andrew' offers a playful critique of using this kind of spectacle as a means to represent or interpret an object of devotion, and seems to affirm the potential of mundane and fragile objects as a form of reliquary.

Hanging next to Sikorska's work is a print created specially for the exhibition by Alan Kitching, who printed with dsh in the 1960s. This work, which also references the role of water, was made in response to a 'performance piece for concrete canticle' by Bob Cobbing, which Kitching saw performed at Arlington Mill in 1968 by a group including Cobbing and dsh. The work was entitled 'Niagara' and the performance began with a shout and culminated in a whisper. Kitching has alluded to this decrescendo by reproducing the word Niagara and decreasing the font size consistently from N through to A. The work is printed on semi-translucent paper, in recognition of the fact that it is sometimes possible to walk behind a waterfall.

The work included in this exhibition does not offer a formal conclusion as to whether 'a pure praise poem' is possible or not. But each of the artists offers up work that asks pertinent questions

11. National Gallery website accessed on 20.06.13

12. From a review by Dom Sylvester Houédard of 'The Divine Bark (the literature and mythology of ancient Egypt)' ed. By Joseph Kaster, Allen Lane, p. The Penguin Press, 1970. Published in the Catholic Herald, 8th May 1970

about what might be worthy of praise, and how this might be represented. Borrowing from dsh's own words, perhaps a better question to ask might be 'what is there in this object or image that might be worthy of, or form an expression of praise', rather than 'does this constitute pure praise'?

"The function of myth and poetry and literature is to manipulate us into a truer world of the other – the need now for global culture has given us freedom to manipulate myth and liturgy and so erode this power. Like with a zen burning of the sutras we shall have to depend more in the moon and less on pointing-fingers and cultivate the respect of asking 'what truth is in this' and not the contempt of asking 'is it true or not?' People bewailing new insights and liturgies seem unaware of just how far tradition consists of stepping forward."<sup>[12]</sup>

## Biographies

**Dom Sylvester Houédard** was born on Guernsey in 1924. He studied at Jesus College Oxford and at St Anselmo, Rome. In 1949, after serving in British Army intelligence he became a monk at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire, and was ordained as a priest in 1959. Dsh was, along with Ian Hamilton Finlay, one of the two principal founders of the Concrete Poetry movement in Britain. He began experimenting with 'typestracts' in the 1940s, and developed a highly distinctive style of typewritten visual poetry, using coloured typewriter ribbons and carbon papers. When Concrete Poetry emerged as an international movement in the early 1960s, he became – through his legendary letter writing – one of its most active participants, advocates and theorists. In 1971, he was given a solo show at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Houédard wrote extensively on new approaches to art, spirituality and philosophy as well as collaborating with artists including Gustav Metzger, David Medalla and Yoko Ono, and the composer John Cage. He also corresponded with leading poets, theologians and philosophers including Robert Graves, Edwin Morgan, Allen Ginsberg, William S Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Mark Boyle, John Blofeld, Michael Horowitz and Ian Hamilton Finlay. Dsh spent the last twenty years of his life devoting himself to the activities of the Abbey and died in 1992.

**Aliki Braine** studied for her BFA in Fine Art at Ruskin School, Oxford University followed by an MA at The Slade School of Fine Art. She then went to the Courtauld Institute to do an MA in the History of Art. This grounding in both the practice and theory of art is combined in her work as she draws upon the recurrent themes of the historical painted landscape. Recent solo exhibitions include 'Wilful Damage', Galerie Raum Mit Licht, Vienna, Austria (2011), 'Black Out / White Out', Fruela Gallery, Madrid (2007), 'Dessine moi un arbre...', Jerwood Space, London (2006). Braine's work is represented in several collections including The Cleveland Clinic (Ohio), Hospes Hotel (Madrid), Penguin Books (London) and Simmons & Simmons (London). Her work is included in this exhibition courtesy of Troika Editions.

**Mark Dean** has been exhibiting video and sound works in the UK and internationally since 1992, when he began working with appropriated film and music. Solo exhibitions include City Racing (1996), The Imperial War Museum (1999), Laurent Delaye Gallery (1999, 2000, 2002), Casa de las Conchas, Salamanca (2000), Ikon Gallery (2001), Volker Diehl Gallery (Berlin) 2002, Sketch (2004), Beaconsfield (2005, 2010, 2011), Matthew Brown Gallery (2007). The 'religious' aspect of Dean's work has become more explicit since he was ordained in the Church of England, in 2009. He is interested in the historical and potential relation of art and religion, and in 2013 he was appointed as a chaplain to the University of the Arts London. However, he remains clear that there is no easy relation between contemporary art and religious faith, not least because there is no shared language with which to discuss it; this is the context in which he makes use of appropriation techniques.

**Anna Sikorska** studied at the Slade School of Fine Art (2004 – 8), incorporating study at Bezalel Academy, Jerusalem and Heythrop College, London, before gaining an MA in Sculpture from the Royal College of Art (2010). Recent exhibitions include 'Change of Heart', Leicester University Botanical Garden (2013), 'Tabu Registration', exhibition and journal publication, Tel Aviv (2013), 'I Heart 3D' at Christies, London (2012), 'The King and the Minotaur', Wignall and Moore, London (2011), 'Museums at Night', PumpHouse Gallery, London (2010), 'Rapidform', V&A Museum (2010) and 'Exchange and Harbour' solo show at the Corn Exchange Gallery, Edinburgh (2009).

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