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Profile: Sarah Pierce

by Chris Fite Wassilak

In her 1981 essay 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde', Rosalind Krauss examined the 18th-century landscapes of William Gilpin and the sculptures of Auguste Rodin to find evidence of 'a bottomless system of reduplication'. For Krauss, the formulaic components of the picturesque landscape and the casts, re-casts and replication of figures in Rodin's work upset our accepted conception of artistic originality, finding only that this sense of originality relies in the first place on the modular, the copy. In excavating these postmodern moments from within the oeuvres of such supposedly defined and finalised figures of the past, there is some sense of opening history up and revealing the pores beneath the sheen. But there is also a decisive finality in the tone of her reading that speaks more of the power of the discursive anachronism, the handy ability to re-read the past according to the present.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke had for a period in 1905 worked as Rodin's secretary in Paris. Krauss mentions him almost dismissively as one of those who dotingly fortified the vision of the artist as a singular genius. Rilke's own strain of 'thing-poems' based on concrete observations of objects arose from his responses to the work of both Rodin and Paul Cézanne, and in a public lecture given in 1907 he set out an imaginative manifesto for 'things'. Presented as a talk ostensibly about Rodin, Rilke refused to mention the artist by name or speak directly about any of his work, instead asking the audience to think of their own objects they have experienced intimately. The thing, he claims, is just a surface we invest in



and so alter ourselves, and, in recognising this, 'art returns to its humble dignified place in everyday life, to craft'. Rilke stakes art's potency and relevance on an open-ended gambit: 'For the question as to whether something can come to life does not depend on great ideas, but rather on whether he makes of them a craft, an ongoing project that remains with him to the end.'

Sarah Pierce, *The Artist Talks*, 2012, installation view, The Showroom. Image courtesy the artist.

This statement was further refracted when Sarah Pierce spoke it in conclusion to the performance as part of her recent project at the Showroom, *The Artist Talks*, 2012. Taking Rilke's lecture as a script, Pierce developed a performance in collaboration with six London students. Rilke's abstract linguistic leaps about 'things' begin to cling to and reverberate around the props that the actors move and pass between each other: a stick, a length of rope, a tambourine and several sets of clay hands – replicas of fragments found in Rodin's studio. Speaking Rilke's words between them, sometimes in unison, they take on an imperative, almost

political urgency: when a curtain is pulled aside, revealing three of the performers while another states, 'There is really just one single surface, which undergoes thousands of shifts and transformations', the 'things' in question take on a more humanistic load, gently hinting at the possibility of community.

The strategic re-placement of the 1907 lecture could seem, like Krauss, like an attempt to re-read Rodin according to a contemporary sensibility. But Pierce staged the performance only twice; for the majority of the exhibition, the props remained inert. A few small photos reveal to us their erstwhile use as they sit within in the empty set – the stage, curtains, and props forming an installation which housed a video, also named *The Artist Talks*, 2012, in which six US art students describe their own works-in-progress. The students vary in confidence and eloquence as the camera roves over their clothes and hand gestures, interspersed with shots of the pieces they are describing, the description being sometimes an alarming distance from their elaborate claims as to what the objects are. Both Rilke's ventriloquised talk and the students' efforts manage to circle around their subjects without explaining anything, instead becoming something more like a cross-generational meditation on how objects begin to accrue meaning. One of the students in the video self-consciously chides, 'I'm talking like a detective or something', but as we stand there in the orange spotlights of the theatrical installation we are performers looking for something too.

The Artist Talks carries several strands common through Pierce's work: the combined layering of video, performance and installation; the re-staging of historical texts; the extensive use of dialogue and interview; theatrical stage settings; students and major art figures as both subjects and performers within her work. When describing her practice, it suggests a

series of negatives – not performance, not re-enactment, not installation, not moving image, not archival research, not discursive practice – but yet involving each of those in turn to form projects that address moments of potential and shift, reopening the past and through which to question the present. Like Krauss, Pierce recognises the myth of recent art history as something akin to a millenaristic cult, grounding Modernism's claims of parentless birth. Pierce has found in artists like Rodin, Eva Hesse and Robert Smithson, or in historical moments like the shooting of four student protesters at Kent State University in 1970, details and threads which unravel their perceived monumentality and established narratives. But Pierce recognises the allure of the revisionist and the impossible paradox of remembering 'correctly'. The curtain appears regularly throughout Pierce's installations, and might appear a ready metaphor for drawing back and peering into the past. But it doesn't just remind us that these people and events were in a similar state of flux, of restless unknowing, before they were categorised – usually in hindsight – as players in an arc of history. The curtains are there to deny any single dominant view, to make looking a difficult and self-conscious act; unlike Krauss, Pierce's tone is reflexive, and her efforts to contextualise the past are themselves contextualised and called into play.

'It's not just the seeing, you have to feel!', shout the performers acting within the *Campus* installation at Pittsburgh's Mattress Factory in 2011. The words are forcefully enunciated like marching slogans, but the phrases themselves come from the advice of an instructor in a sculpture class. In the video element of *It's time, man. It feels immanent*, 2008: rows of people chant a series of slogans drawn from bystanders at protests between 1968 and 2008; 'This has to count for something'; 'It is palpable in the air'. The chants are matched with stylised, exaggerated gestures. In both, the political protest is staged more like an existential play where the



Sarah Pierce, *The Question Would Be the Answer to the Question, Art You Happy?*, 2010, video still, image courtesy the artist.

actors don't seem entirely convinced of the efficacy of the words they are saying; whether it is parody or heartbreaking earnestness isn't clear.

The *Campus* performance itself was documented with a flip video camera, a digital medium identical to the weapon of choice for today's amateur journalist, the camera phone. Pierce's *The Question Would Be The Answer To the Question, Are You Happy?*, a project she has restaged in three cities since 2011, takes as its starting point a discussion of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's 1961 film *Chronicle of a Summer*. The film is seen as one of the first examples of *cinema vérité*, a roaming documentary style enabled by the availability of smaller, more portable film and sound recording equipment. Just in the way that Rilke's lecture came at a time when people were beginning for the first time to experience Rodin and sculpture more through the proliferation of the photograph than at first-hand, Piece seems to suggest the mediation – say, how technology alters and enables experience, perception, and lasting documentation – of a

moment, is equally if not more important in the production of meaning. Pierce is drawn to the potential of the transient and unfinished, hence the excavation of the political upheavals of the 1960s and 70s, and the recurrence of the student – a figure whose role in society is that of the nascent adult, the perpetual being-in-formation. The examination of that potential is always deliberately but ambiguously framed, to foreground the inevitable mediation. Thus in each city where *The Question...* was held, the recorded discussions respectively in French, Spanish and Danish between art, sociology and politics students was simultaneously translated live to English. Mediation, it seems, also involves distortion, loss and confusion.

Pierce's Janus-headed investigations are at once a mutual reveal, a relativising and problematising of the past – and of the present as it is becoming past. Her work recognises the archived past as something more akin to the brain in the way novelist Jonathan Franzen describes it in his essay 'My Father's Brain': 'One of the great adaptive virtues of our brains, the feature that makes our grey matter so much smarter than any machine yet devised ... is our ability to forget almost everything that has ever happened to us.' Instigating an active, consciously fallible and ultimately elusive view of history, Pierce suggests that the making of our narratives is an every day craft. In its performance of a living archive, hers is an ongoing project that, by necessity, has no end.