



animal/object #4, 2009. (14 x 20 x 12 cm) steel, felt, thread. (photo credit: David Grinly)



Front cover image: *The DILATE Archive, Act 1: Stepping Out*, 2009 (video still)

Lyndsay Mann participated in Stills' Residency Programme in 2008 / 09
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Twenty Four More Hours of Progress..., 2008. (video still)

Essay by Kerstin Mey

Object Rehearsals – Études on Lyndsay Mann’s Art

We are the bearers of skewed, not quite flat, unreplicated surfaces, deserts over which consciousness passes fleetingly, leaving no memory. Consciousness belongs to those singular moments when the body is tangential to itself.

Michel Serres, *The Five Senses*

In the moment where skin gets into contact with itself, when it folds in on itself, consciousness of the embodied self comes into being, asserts Michel Serres in his seminal text *The Five Senses* (1984, English 2008). Lyndsay Mann seeks to provoke and trace such moments. Her phrase ‘It gives rise to the hope that physicality can compete with ideology’ maps out a programmatic framework for her recent body of work that has unfolded in multi-media directions around central sculptural concerns. This somewhat cryptic and contracted statement ‘surfaces’ as laser cut-out in a classical serif typeface on a grey cloth. The unhemmed fabric carrier is suspended over a wooden slat in a seemingly makeshift fashion. It dissects the exhibition space between a steel column and the wall boarding. Its appearance poses as a contradiction in terms. The void of the lettering through which the fold of the fabric shines takes on a powerful presence over the smooth tactility of the textile skin. This at first sight rather laconic intervention gradually reveals its ideological heavy weight when it is grasped as covert reference to the foundations of Christian belief: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ (John 1:1); and ‘And the Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us ...’(John 1:14)

Text-based displays have played a prominent role in Mann’s aesthetic strategy, where writing forms an integral part of her exploration of self and reality. Her creative inquiry is particularly occupied with the hegemony of language over the sensory body and the material world. Language as a locus of signification and as the preferred tool for analysis has taken the place in ‘advanced’ society as the dominant site of knowledge production. Yet, the word can be inhibiting and destructive to the variable compounds and confluences to which the senses are attentive, an argument that Michel Serres has elaborated on in *The Five Senses*. Cognition occurs in tension to experience. Rational thought produces frictions and contradictions to an awareness of what it means to be sentient and human.

For another exhibition Mann developed the text-based work ‘Ich habe dich vom Schiff aus angerufen. Ich war auf See’. Rendered in matted typeface on translucent gauze, the piece was placed over the doorway that led to her other work. The English text version ‘I called you from the ship. I was at sea.’ appears below on the other side of the fabric lettering. The back of each element of the italicised serif font has been covered with its mirror writing in beige ‘felt’, highlighting not only the haptic and material character of the morphemes but inserting an endearing softness and vulnerability. The juxtaposition of the German with the English statement ‘lacks’ of an obvious motif that can be inferred

by the narrative itself or the display strategy. Rather, it serves the artist to explore the feelings of fear and exclusion that unfamiliarity and otherness (expressed for instance through a foreign tongue) can breed. The friction between language system and actual(ised) speech opens up spaces for poetic imagination, cultural provocation or ideological manipulation.

There is another interrelated side to Mann’s interest in the workings of language nourished by her understanding of the fatal role that its capacity to abstract and objectify has played in history, as evident in the enslavement of people, in genocide, and in totalitarianism. She confesses a particular curiosity regarding closed societies and the friction between complicity with these social structures and (the potential for) resistance to them. Her extensive reading and research is directed at an understanding of how these ideological attitudes become manifest in the physical behaviour of the human body.

Mann’s creative endeavour is admittedly motivated by an acute sense of the deteriorating rootedness of (human) existence in the material world. Such perceived loss of objecthood has been triggered by the ever-increasing reach of the digital ether and the impact of virtual and augmented realities on all aspects of life. What happens when the physical grounding of our environment disappears? What are the consequences for the work of a work of art when its material basis disappears? What does this do to its power of communication and to its agency in a(ny) relational exchange? These are questions that have become central to the artist’s creative and philosophical considerations. Therefore it is perhaps not surprising that the juxtaposition of material display and sound and / or audio-visual performance has evolved recently as a powerful trajectory in Mann’s spatial in(ter)ventions. Indeed, the sound of her own embodied voice and the experimentation with its expressivity and performativity has brought an altogether new dimension to her deeply material practice. Reciting her own writings, she rehearses every word, re-forms the hard won utterances, anecdotal recountings and emotive declarations with a resonant voice that embraces the rich modulations of longing and desire. Yet the sources and destinations of these affects in question often remain deliberately covert, refuse to be located through logic operations. Instead, the seductive voicescapes lure the imagination and in some instances invoke mysterious narrative associations.

The woven carpet of noise generated in the audio work ‘Greater Than’, where the speaker voices intimate, strangulated sounds based on the recording and editing of individual words that have been reformed into conversational rhythm yet beyond the point of comprehension. Their synthetic sampling and layering creates an expressive acoustic spatiality that invokes an echoing and absorption of utterances saturating the exhibition space and enveloping the viewer. By refusing to adhere to a clear audibility and by wilfully obstructing a recognition of the lexical units the work fends off conventional routes of logocentric signification. Instead it directs emphasis to the spaces between the semantic and syntactic building blocks of the linguistic order, and to the emotive dimension of speech. Its realisation echoes Julia Kristeva’s attempt in her work *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974, English translation 1984) to open up spaces for the manifestation of female subjectivity inbetween the hostile and exclusive symbolic regime of representation and signification based on the Laws of the Father.

Those interpellations and pauses, intonations, the pitch and rhythm of the female voice – her own – are as rupturing as they are suggestive. Mann’s ‘resoundings’ may propose proximity and possibility, and yet they could also intimate excess, chaos and provoke irritation or indifference in which true poetic invention is swallowed up or ground down. The work deliberately remains within significant ambiguity. A similar effect is achieved when the artist captures the throwing of rocks from Dean Bridge – an infamous suicide spot in Edinburgh in her video work ‘Twenty Four Hours of Progress ...’. Rhythm and repetition are foregrounded with subtle differences between each sequence.

Sound’s ubiquity and emotive veiling suggests a contraposition to the formalist geometry and rationalist containment of the physical objects on site and in sight of Mann’s recent exhibitions. The sculptural entity demands circumnavigation in order to be grasp in its entirety and thus requires an interaction from the willing viewer and their bodies. Such physical exchange depends on space for the body to manoeuvre, and on distance to direct the screening gaze and haptic sensing.

To the recent group show *Heavy Influence* (Edinburgh, 2009), the artist contributed a small object on a pedestal covered by a perspex display case and set in proximity to a video work. In the latter, the artist hosts a part scripted, part improvised dialogue in a 3-way interview dynamic, where the viewer is unsure whether the primary character is talking to herself or conducting an experimental conversation.

Her handmade exhibit consists of trade quality metal brackets, nuts and bolts crudely screwed together. Its mechanically engineered DIY ‘body’ is largely concealed, wrapped and stitched snug in skin-tone fabric. Speaking eloquently of its process of assemblage the work oscillates between rehearsed craftsmanship and calculated improvisation. As it stretches along a main diagonal axis, it resembles a reclining human figure in which the tradition of this motif from Titian’s prized paintings to Henry Moore’s coveted bronze sculptures reverberates. According to the artist, this ‘object lesson’ symbolises her brain; a potent associative link that comes to bear particularly when its virtual image appear sequentially as semi-transparent overlays on Mann’s face in the accompanying video piece. This insertion and partial ‘cover-up’ interferes with the artist’s direct on-screen address of the viewer.

The sculptural invention is remarkable in another way as it converges Mann’s software and hardware approaches into one almost ‘animate’ body with a dual existence: formally as self-contained object of appreciation and symbolically as conceptual gesture. Gesturally, the montage, which vacillates between part for the whole and whole for its parts, embodies and exemplifies the artist’s conviction to integrate rather than separate sense perception and lived experience with surgical cognition and analytic reasoning. It acknowledges the importance of the senses, of the sensual and the corporeal, and that which lies beyond verbal language – the instinctual, the subcutaneous and the tacit – in the construction of human knowledge.

Kerstin Mey (2009)