

To train the whole body as a tongue

SARAH BROWNE DISCUSSES THE TOURING FILM PROGRAMME SHE RECENTLY CURATED FOR AEMI.

OVER THE LAST five years or so, curating film programmes has become a surprising and important method in my practice, mainly as a way of researching into the production of new work. I was delighted when Alice Butler and Daniel Fitzpatrick of aemi approached me at the other side of this process, inviting me to curate a series of films around an existing work, *Report to an Academy*.¹ Vivienne Dick was also invited to curate a selection of films, and both programmes toured nationally, in partnership with Access Cinema.

Our respective programmes travelled to: the Belltable, Limerick; Garter Lane Arts Centre, Waterford; The Model, Sligo; VISUAL, Carlow; Glór, Clare, and PÁLÁS, Galway. Aemi travelled with the programme to each venue to facilitate a Q&A, most often with me or Vivienne. Sometimes this was also led by someone locally who had an existing connection with the featured artists, the concerns of the particular programme, or significant expertise in moving image practice – thanks to Ronnie Hughes, Orla Ryan, Dara Waldron, David Upton and Saoirse Wall who supported me, Vivienne and aemi in this way. Vivienne's programme, 'Delirious Rhythm 1936-2017', was also shown in the MAC, Belfast, in September, and my programme, 'To train the whole body as a tongue', was shown at CCA Glasgow in June, in partnership with LUX Scotland. As such, the touring programme aimed to support both the development of audiences regionally in Ireland, as well as the development of the individual artists.

'To train the whole body as a tongue' takes its title from a phrase uttered by the central protagonist of my film, a lecturer who has transformed herself from a human into an octopus. It names the process of transition she has undertaken and her motivations in doing so, which she recounts as her *Report to an Academy*. The film is an adaptation of the Kafka short story of the same title, exploring the pressures of the contemporary academic environment as a neoliberal workplace – including distortions of language that impact the body.² Where in Kafka's story, an ape delivers an address to a gathering on his transition into human life, joining human community by acquiring speech, the octopus who features in my adaptation describes her choice to surrender spoken language in search of other forms of articulation and agency. Searching for a 'way out' of her 'Kafkaesque' environment – where language can be a slippery, dangerous or even violent force – she delivers her report with a machine

voice (this is the Scottish-accented 'Fiona', who is installed with Mac OSX).

The other films in the programme are similarly concerned with practices of bodily exertion and effort in the service of learning, all working within and against certain constraints. Many use a technique of a frontal address to the camera, as a singular protagonist negotiates institutions of education, illness and beauty, pushing at the limits of our sense of the possible and what bodies can (or should) do. *Pedagogue* (1988, 11 minutes) was made by Stuart Marshall and Neil Bartlett during their break-time while lecturing art students in Newcastle. Through a parodic performance, it explores the implications of Clause 28, when the British Government took powers to outlaw the 'promotion of homosexuality' in education and local government: there are echoes of a different panic in the UK's contemporary Prevent duty.³

In *My Language* by A.M. Baggs (2007, 9 minutes) is an extraordinary video that was made as a piece of advocacy, distributed via YouTube.⁴ In this screening context, what initially seems like an artwork using the formal vocabulary of experimental film is 'translated' in the second half of the video into text and a machine voice. In this section, Baggs, an autistic person who does not speak, explains that 'this is not a voyeuristic freak show', and queries why neurotypical people assume it is only natural for her to learn our language, whereas we are unwilling to learn hers – and to recognise her as a 'real person'. This video is followed by *Sticky Encounter* (2016, 10 minutes) by Saoirse Wall, where the artist again addresses the camera directly. The cinema audience takes the place of an (un)listening clinician in a doctor-patient encounter. Proposing a response to the pain of not being believed, the camera/viewer is finally swallowed. Saoirse is an artist I first met when I was a lecturer and they were a student. They also appear as an expert performer (actually, a very distinctive tongue and set of teeth in close-up) in *Report to an Academy*. We shared research as we each made these works at the same time; to me they belong as siblings to each other in the screening.

Moving through the 68-minute arc of the programme, the significance of the voice recedes, and the other perceptual and expressive capacities of the body emerge. *Report to an Academy* (2016, 28 minutes) is followed by *Eyeballing* (2005, 10 minutes), by Rosalind Nashashibi as the conclusion. This intriguing piece of work is the only film included that is com-

pletely without speech, providing some kind of sensory and cognitive release at the end of the programme.

I approached the curation of this screening with a kind of sculptural thinking, rather than with the training or knowledge of a curator or film scholar. The format of direct address through the screening was reprised in a curious way with the Q&A format. Often it seemed that members of the audience identified more or less strongly with the 'speaker' or the (usually uncaring) 'listener' that had appeared through the series of films. These discussions in each venue were sometimes unexpectedly challenging and offered surprises and exposures I did not anticipate. The screening experience was of a different temperature and rhythm every time, with points of tension, humour, pain and pleasure being pressed on with different audiences.

Each screening event was a shared, live experience that brought a three-year-old artwork I'd made very much back into the present for me. Working on the programme with aemi has been a hugely enriching experience and I look forward to engaging with other artist-curated programmes in this way in future.

Sarah Browne is an artist based in Dublin.

Notes

¹ *Report to an Academy* was one of three projects commissioned for 2016 by the UK-based curatorial project Manual Labours, established by Sophie Hope and Jenny Richards, with the brief to explore the thematic of 'the complaining body' in contemporary work. manuallabours.co.uk

² The report that forms the structure of the film draws on my experience of working as a lecturer, but the experiences described in it are not limited to any one institution and they have not all been experienced by me directly. The reference to academics crossing picket lines of cleaning staff happened in UCD in the 1980s; the reference to educators being legally obligated to instil 'fundamental British values' and report 'students at risk of radicalisation' refers to the Prevent duty that forms part of the UK Counter Terrorism and Security Act (2015).

³ The Prevent policy was introduced in the UK in 2003 and became a legal duty for public sector institutions in 2015. Amnesty International explains: "Developed without a firm evidence base and rooted in a vague and expansive definition of 'extremism', Prevent has been widely criticised for fostering discrimination against people of Muslim faith or background, and chilling legitimate expression". The policy is under independent review as of January 2019. See: amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/open-letter-uks-prevent-counter-terrorism-strategy

⁴ See: [youtube.com/watch?v=jnylM1h12jc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnylM1h12jc)



Stuart Marshall and Neil Bartlett, *Pedagogue*, 1988; 11 mins; video still courtesy of Neil Bartlett and LUX, London. Featured as part of 'To train the whole body as a tongue', curated by Sarah Browne



Saoirse Wall, *Sticky Encounter*, 2016; 10 mins; video still courtesy of the artist. Featured as part of 'To train the whole body as a tongue', curated by Sarah Browne