

# IN THE COMPANY OF FLESH & BLOOD

Approaching sincerity via poetry and art  
*by Matthew Rana*



Natalie Häusler  
*Aykan/Cosino*, 2013, stained glass,  
speakers, mp3 player,  
sound, book page from 'still life',  
78 x 48 x 16 cm

It was a question of sincerity that, in 1964, prompted then-poet Marcel Broodthaers to announce that he was becoming an artist. For the first time in his life, he claimed, he wanted to make something *insincere*: 'I, too, wondered whether I couldn't sell something and succeed in life,' he declared in the invitation to his first exhibition. 'I had, for quite a little while, been good for nothing. I am nearly 40 years old [...] The idea of inventing something insincere finally crossed my mind and I set to work at once.' Broodthaers's rhetoric doesn't just suggest visual art's compromised status, sold as a commodity or an instrument of the culture industry or institutions of state. It also implicitly elevates poetry as neither false nor hypocritical – an invention of the utmost integrity. Unlike artists, poets don't (or can't) sell out.

Whether you read Broodthaers's words as prescient, cynical or naïve, variations on this debate still play out 50 years later. For example, in a recent panel discussion at the Audiatur poetry festival in Bergen, artist and publisher Jason Dodge (who is featured in this issue) remarked that, whereas the market for published poetry is non-existent in comparison, the vast amount of wealth circulating in the art economy has the potential to fuel all kinds of unscrupulous behaviour. Of course, exposure within an art context can help poets reach new and possibly more lucrative markets. During the same discussion – albeit on a somewhat different register – Italian Marxist theorist and art-camp follower Franco 'Bifo' Berardi advocated for poetic ambivalence against capitalism's 'techno-linguistic automatisms' and cynical attitudes that suppose ethical

action to be impossible. While neither Dodge nor Berardi addressed sincerity explicitly, their comments nonetheless described a tendency to exalt the reading and writing of poetry as a possible counter to greed, disillusionment and meaninglessness – a resistant, if not altogether anti-capitalist, position. On the economic periphery, poetry makes the development of a renewed ethics possible, a solidary stance toward other human beings.

Paralleling these sentiments, poet and painter Etel Adnan, in 'Letter to a Young Poet' (a text commissioned in 2013 for the Serpentine Gallery), advises that when a person begins to write poetry, 'you have put your life on the line [...] not metaphorically, but in a kind of a tragic honesty'. Tragic, she cautions, because poetry is a sort of destiny; no one would actually *choose* such a difficult, impecunious existence. Reminiscent of Michel Foucault's later writings on the Greek concept of *parrhesia* (or fearless speech), Adnan paints a compelling picture: a young poet embarks on a hero's journey, and is saved precisely because he or she is damned.

As someone who came to poetry through working as an artist, I'm sympathetic to these ideas. It's emboldening – although ultimately misguided – to think that writing poetry is a critical solution (if anything, it opens more questions). It's advantageous to imagine that the reading and writing of poetry can constitute a kind of linguistic rupture in the central nervous system of contemporary capital. Indeed, this emergent politics likely gives a partial account for the enthusiasm with which artists have rediscovered poetry in recent years. The contemporary art

## RENE MAGRITTE ECRIT



1898-1967

world has shown a renewed interest in concrete poetry and 'conceptual poetics', fostered in part by Kenneth Goldsmith, poet and founder of the internet archive UbuWeb, as well as the inclusion of work by poets such as Adnan, Susan Howe, Eileen Myles and Ariana Reines in the most recent Whitney Biennial (the latter two as part of the contribution by the publisher Semiotext(e)). While it's heartening to imagine a multitude of readers experiencing the challenges and thrills of poetic language, I hesitate. Especially when I see exhibition announcements written in confessional fragments or elliptical free verse.

Since William Wordsworth's claim in 1802, in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, that 'poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling', the demand for a coextensivity between avowal and sentiment has become, if not a major poetic value, then at least a premise whose popular acceptance remains contested. In a series of lectures from 1970 titled *Sincerity and Authenticity*, literary critic Lionel Trilling argued that sincerity as a dominant literary standard had been replaced by a 'more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in'. In other words: authenticity. Whereas sincerity can be motivated by social norms and relationships – such as considering the demands of another, a public, a market – authenticity emerges instead from the imperative to be true to oneself. (Obviously, as Trilling himself was aware, the ideal of authenticity produces its own norms, such as nonconformity and idiosyncrasy). Marshalled against things like academicism, intertextuality and appropriation, sincerity in writing often appears as an ethical stance of emotional honesty, fidelity to individual experience, and transparent, demotic speech: expressions of one's being and sensibility. Of

course, the way individuals read and appropriate text is partly how a sense of self is constructed. Think of how we receive, interpret and restate different cultural 'texts' on topics such as gender, class and race. Boundaries between something like self-realization and external, normative prompts are fluid. Even Wordsworth admitted that poets must occasionally 'slip into an entire delusion' while writing.

As a qualitative measure, sincerity also runs aground. It would badly miss the point, for example, to question the sincerity of artist and poet Jimmie Durham's 'I Want You to Hear These Words About Jo Ann Yellowbird (Ars Poetica)' (undated), an elegy for the Native American activist who committed suicide after a police officer's kick to her stomach caused the stillbirth of her child. On another level, measuring the sincerity of a text by an artist and writer such as Caroline Bergvall, whose work often deals with etymology and changes in language use over time, doesn't really make sense given the complex historical and performative concerns embedded within it. These kinds of failings are, perhaps, also why today the word 'poem' tends to resonate with more dubious ones such as 'unsophisticated' or 'escapist' or, somewhat less harshly, 'quirky', 'romantic' and 'sentimental'. Certainly, many writers lumped under the new sincerity moniker, such as Dorothea Laskey and Tao Lin, can read this way. Others, instead, offer sincerity not as an end but as a means – a lifestyle urging readers to 'be more awesome' because 'you only live once'.

Counter to such practices, the sincerity that I'm interested in makes itself felt as both a rhetorical value and as a mode of address: to paraphrase Wordsworth 'from one speaker to another'. In this sense, it's useful to think through how sincerity is modulated, especially in contemporary art, where it tends to appear as both disavowal and appropriation. As in the work of Broodthaers, whose status as an ex-poet tacitly authorized his artistic work, sincerity is full of contradictions, inducing linguistic slippage

and opening poetic fault lines. It can even become ironic, as it did during the opening of the exhibition 'Poetry will be made by all!', recently on view at the LUMA Foundation in Zurich and organized by Goldsmith, Simon Castets and Hans Ulrich Obrist as part of the 89+ project. This two-day event comprised a series of readings by an array of artists and writers from the 'generation of innovators born in or after 1989', as well as their older and more established counterparts. Among the younger group of invitees, American artist Dena Yago's reading was the most overtly sceptical. Wearing an outfit printed with the word 'SALE', Yago read poems from her forthcoming book, *Ambergris* (2014), that she had printed out and affixed to unopened plastic food wrappers, including bags of organic salad and leafy green vegetables. While suggesting that her own writing rests squarely on the surface of things, Yago's performance also comically rebuked the links to freshness, wholesomeness and even purity that her participation represented. More poignantly, however, Yago – who is also part of the trend-forecasting group K-HOLE – hinted at what is at stake in contemporary art events such as these: namely, the reduction of poetry to a label, a brand, a sign-value.

Admittedly, the art world isn't wholly to blame for this reductionism. Much can be attributed to the spread, during the last decade or so, of the aforementioned 'conceptual poetry' practices that, like conceptualism in visual art, tend to give preference not to the solitary act of reading but rather to devising systems, distribution channels and virtuosity in performance.

In a rebuttal of such moves, German artist, poet and co-founder of American Books, Natalie Häusler, envisions a poem's performance not as a demonstration of the author's individual expertise, but as a readerly agency that is given form when spoken aloud. Seldom performed live, Häusler's poems are typically heard as looped recordings within an exhibition context, either embedded in individual works or as part of a larger installation; the readers are acquaintances and friends who are identifiable only by the sound of their voices (and sometimes their initials). Yet, while composed with others' voices in mind, Häusler's poems don't read like instruction works or scores. Her long poem 'Impressionisme' (2013), for example – a 12-hour sound piece featuring several readers from various places around the world – is a quasi-phenomenological investigation that employs a straightforward,

1  
Marcel Broodthaers  
*Charles Baudelaire peint 1821-1867;*  
*René Magritte écrit 1898-1967*  
(Charles Baudelaire paints 1821-1867;  
René Magritte writes 1898-1967)  
1972, diptych (detail), letterpress in blue  
ink on paper, each 68 × 78 cm

2  
Jimmie Durham  
*The Doorman*, 2009, mixed media,  
162 × 85 × 70 cm

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1  
Dena Yago, 2014,  
performance documentation,  
"Poetry will be made by all!",  
LUMA Foundation, Zurich

2  
Caroline Bergvall  
Gong (8 July 2003, 21 lines),  
2003, graphite on paper

3  
Karl Larsson  
'Torrent', 2010, from the  
book *Parrot*

4  
Karl Larsson, *Ostomachion  
Carpet (Stage For Poetical  
Assumption)*, 2013, hand-tufted  
carpet, dimensions variable



FRIEZE VIDEO  
Kenneth Goldsmith on the worlds of  
contemporary art and poetry

*In order to address an outside, artists and poets alike  
have to break with our identities and speak beyond ourselves;  
we need spaces and occasions for it.*

descriptive style. Shifting between English, French and German, it is personal and contemplative, containing passages such as: 'I leave a trace on the ground. I am / breathing, changing therefore the air around me. / All of this is happening at any moment, at least. / Er sagt in seiner Antwort auf den Rilke Text: / «Dieser Malte ist...» *Parisis Passes* «einfach nur / ein Kleinbürger.» Auch ich bin, denke ich dann, / eine Kleinbürgerin. *Nyami 54 passes*.' While listening to the recording, one hears the non-German speakers tentatively making their way through this passage. Conversely, one can also hear the German speakers negotiating with the English and French. Being myself a speaker of neither German or French, I receive them mostly as rhythm and tone. Despite its plain address, Häusler's work calls attention to the slippages of the voice and the poem's non-denotative meanings, the ways it is re-authored when it comes into contact with different readers. As happens with the names of the passing tourist boats that recur throughout the poem (such as *Parisis* and *Nyami 54* in the excerpt above), attention is paid to what takes place when a statement is displaced – when it moves through a foreign context, whether a language or a body.

Indeed, as the Swedish artist and poet Karl Larsson writes in his book *Parrot* (2010), 'to a certain extent / an assumed body / (like an exotic bird) / can hold almost any argument / it can be the screen of endless projections'. Also playing with notions of displacement and assumed identity (it was Larsson's first book

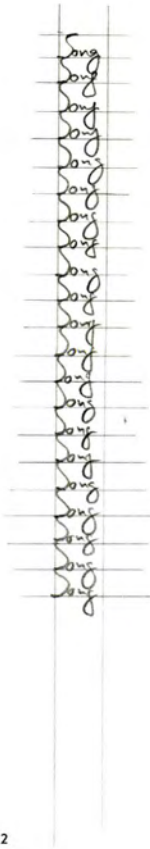
written in English), *Parrot* is both reverent and irreverent, a three-part poem on the artistic work of Broodthaers and, more generally, the application of literary methodology to artistic practice. Austere both in its language and design, Larsson's book is nevertheless dense with historical and literary references, appropriated text and echoes of the Belgian artist. However, Larsson's parrot doesn't speak nonsense; it doesn't just mimic, make allusions or (half-jokingly) point toward absence. No, this parrot is also serious; it has something to say. But how can such a bird speak for itself? Later on, in the same passage, Larsson provides one answer: 'it takes a long time / to learn the obvious / and to agree / with the standpoint / that poetry emanates / from silence / when casual living suggests / that all things become / what they are / by being spoken of / parrot / body of words.'

Clearly, the assumed body to which the poem refers is that of poetry itself. Here, poetry does not figure as a conceptual construct or an indiscriminate host for whatever utterance. Rather, in a continual state of emergence, poetry must always find its own form. That is, it not only insists on its materiality and presence, but also on its inheritance as a product of reading. Lines such as 'To be a poet is to be literal / unaffected by allegory and metaphor / just like a beast / myopic and bad', while undermining the poet's visionary status and claims to moral authority, also suggest that, as a way of doing and making, poetry is not always transcendent, but very much implicated in the present – however

mundane, messy or impure that may be. Indeed, in the last of the book's three sections, 'Torrent', Larsson reminds us that the concept of sincerity was once used to denote a measure of purity in things and not people: '*sine* (without) / *cera* (wax) / and the wonders of the hand that gives, / the hand that takes / sculptors / of ancient Greece or Rome / who were skilled enough / not to use wax / to cover the flaws / in their work / *sincerity*.' A sculpture can be considered sincere when all its faults appear deliberate. The sincere artist, far from being naïve, is a master of craft.

If sincerity can emerge through style and skilful performance, then this aspect, whether in art or poetry, does not merely take shape with reference to the tragic honesty of self or its ethical coherence. Rather, it gains definition through the complex relationship between author and reader. This is one of sincerity's most compelling contradictions and, as Trilling pointed out, one of its most enduring problems. It's also what Broodthaers was saying in his announcement. And Wordsworth too, each time he slipped into delusion. In order to address an outside, artists and poets alike have to break with our identities and speak beyond ourselves; we need spaces and occasions for it. I'm interested in these margins. I'll seek them in the company of flesh and blood. ♦

*Matthew Rana is an artist and writer based in Berlin, Germany. His recent chapbook, The Theory of the Square is forthcoming from Torpedo Press.*



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3



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