Bethan Huws
Écoute

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The Enchanters' Domain

By Penelope Curtis

Bethan Huws asks us to LISTEN. ÉCOUTE. Her informal injunction at once confounds sound and vision: Listen and Look. It asks us to pay attention. The film of the same name shows us coots moving over the surfaces of various lakes, and plunges us into a soundscape which we can only ever partly interpret.

Setting off to write about this new exhibition of Bethan Huws I am more than usually hampered. I cannot travel to talk to the artist, and I may well never even get to see the show. As possibilities close down, others open up. Bethan is always salutary, warning us in advance that artists interpret the world, and that we interpret the artists. Our response can only be secondary.

Nonetheless, I have been invited to interpret, so I will. Bethan Huws' exhibitions have become increasingly pluralistic, as if they were compiled from the work of various artists, of whom Bethan is a directorial blend. These artists not only deploy vastly different media, but even seem to represent the different elements. Light, water, air, for sure, and perhaps even fire, and ether too. The whole is packaged into a kind of old curiosity shop, with different pieces metaphorically (or literally) offered up for our delectation (or purchase) across its various floors.

The 'carotte de tabac' is a sign that customarily designates the French 'tabac'. Its form probably derives from the shape of the roll of tobacco leaves and not because carrot was deployed to keep tobacco moist. This is less important to Huws than the fact that Duchamp used the trademark sign in the last Surrealist exhibition, but the slippage from carrot to tobacco is nonetheless the kind of elision, verbal and visual, which she enjoys. The elision of smells is secondary, but present. Duchamp's invocation of the air is unerringly material and spiritual.

This last exhibition, entitled Surrealist Intrusion in the Enchanters' Domain opened in Madison Avenue on November 28 1960 and ended on January 14 1961. Bethan Huws was born later that year, and it is a date which is relevant to anther work in the show, which pays homage to Kate Roberts, whose Y Lôn Wen (The White Lane) was also published in that year. Roberts came, as I understand it, from a background very similar to that in which Bethan Huws grew up, with its focus on the chapel, the fields, the lanes and the mountain. Roberts is a 20th century writer, who takes last place in the lineage which Huws sets up, even if she too was writing about a now vanished world.

Bethan's works are mostly made by other people; people with a whole range of skills, from different epochs: from local lace-making to neon light fabrication. If we see interpreting as something more mobile, and translation as something

more fixed, than I would suggest that Bethan is the interpreter, but one who is uncompromising in her efforts to seek out the most accurate translations of her ideas. She seeks translations from the Welsh, from Duchamp, from the beggar's outstretched drawing, from Galileo Galiliei. She chooses the new language into which her sources will be translated, sometimes making obvious transferences, other times not. She commissions her translations. She then finds a space, laid out for us here in the gallery, which connects them all, discreetly, but surely. They are all signs, made for doors and windows, signs which extend an invitation to us to step into her space.

In New York Duchamp placed the carotte over the D'Arcy Gallery entrance and a train set in the gallery window. Inside clocks and flags denoted different times and places. Other objects intensified the references to water, heat, light and time of day. I would hazard a guess that Bethan Huws' Ecoute installation has been inspired by this kind of (dis)cordant (non)sensical admixture, and that we can, if we choose, use Duchamp to help us understand Huws. (Huws certainly helps us understand Duchamp.)

However, we are not obliged to. We may not be taken up with this old 'enchanter' in the way that she is. And we may choose to find our own path to follow hers. In this case I would suggest that we think more about the dis/con/cordances between languages - Welsh, English, French - and about what is seen and heard. Bethan points out that Welsh and French have points in common which they do not share with English. Close your eyes and listen. Open your eyes and stop your ears. Sometimes the links are simpler than you think.

The coots on the pond are like dots of morse code on the screen; sometimes we see one, sometimes 3, sometimes as many as 30. They feed, they glide, they fly, they fight. They continue, like lines of calligraphy, to impart their secret message, flowing along like notations on a score. This aesthetic - a black and white formalism - was tempting to Huws, but she has in the end made a piece which is more about sound than about sight. These birds, this found filmography, join a growing series of films in which Huws collides sight and sound as if to test the limits of their cohesion. (She suggests that this piece, in its roughness, returns her to Singing for the Sea, a film made over 25 years ago.) Whereas her earlier film of waterfowl (2013) used Apollinaire's poem Zone as a 'voice-over', now the coots have their own sounds, and those of their own environment, super-imposed. The quality of this soundscape is, in itself, encompassing. It is unintelligible, and yet intelligible, and is a language, which, Bethan points out, knows no geographical borders.

The water's surface is placid, unlike the continuous plash of the fountains of Rome, which served as background to Huws' own account of Duchamp's Étant donnés: 1. la chute d'eau, 2. le gaz d'éclairage. The work now seems to have become simpler, the gap between hearing (the water) and seeing (the light) less complex, reduced to something soporific if not oneiric. Maybe now we start to let go. Maybe now we can even stop interpreting. Listen!