

Bruised Stones, On the Work of Toby Christian

by George Vasey

A clenched fist. A bitten lip. Agitated hands kept busy with repetitive tasks. The body is kept mobile by an unconscious mind. We translate acts of listening, seeing and feeling into physical movement. Sigmund Freud would often caress objects during psychoanalytic sessions. Freud was a keen collector, and his study was filled with miniature artefacts from around the world. As the patient grappled with their deepest insecurities, the famous psychoanalyst would listen attentively, caressing the objects on his desk. His restless thoughts kept in check by his wandering hands. Words formed by the curling of the tongue and a pursing of the lips. The world made and unmade through the actions of our hands. Language is deeply embodied, working itself through our nervous system, organs and musculature.

When I look at Toby Christian's work I think about these acts of translation from the abstract into the material, from the symbolic into the actual. Across writing and sculpture, Christian explores the weight and material of language. In his book *Measures*, 2013, Christian describes a sundial that he first encountered at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Over a series of concise passages, the object – which we never see – is described in forensic detail. The book moves between intimacy and distance, describing the artefact and its surroundings. The room is painted with a “mushroom-coloured emulsion” that – according to an interior designer – looks like the “breath of an elephant”. Christian recovers the object through the intimate reading. He uses words like a sculptor chisels stone, finding the shape of it and materialising it through textual impressions.

I'm reminded of something Yuval Noah Harari says about human's ability to see the world in two simultaneous and different ways. We view our environment practically and symbolically. A forest is saturated with ominous symbolism because of our genealogy as hunters and gatherers. We tell survival stories to stop us going near threats. Money is nothing more than a story that enables us to trade with other communities rather than continually fighting them for resources. Unlike other animals, humans are adept at thinking in abstract and concrete terms and, I think, Christian's work often trades on this tension.

For his recent exhibition, *Burners*, at Alessandro Albanese, Milan, Christian has made a series of modestly scaled marble sculptures that evoke the shape of computer mice. These are displayed on old polling booths that act as perfunctory plinths. Christian elides two oppositional formal modes; cool and hard, worn and pristine, messy and clean, suggesting two very different relationships to the hand and to the process of making. The sculptures are the size of fists, and with their polished surfaces and impeccable ergonomic forms, they recall miniature Brancusi sculptures. If Modernist sculpture was often influenced by the machinery of the factory (and the battlefield), Christian's sculptures are informed by the prosthetic forms of technological interfaces. By shifting emphasis from the hand to the eye – from something we handle to something we see, Christian cools the object down. The computer mouse is porous and connective. Marble is cold, durable and hard and his material intervention reifies these objects.

While the marble sculptures are immaculate, the polling booths are covered with graffiti. Temporary occupants have carved the name of their unrequited love and scribbled intelligible and gnomic phrases. Carved at moments of reverie to puncture the boredom, the marks manifest unconscious minds and unproductive hands. The juxtaposition of the polling booth and computer mouse craves theoretical speculation. The invention of the mouse in the mid-Eighties, alongside the keyboard, put in motion a paradigmatic shift in how we use

computers. More latterly, the mouse has been replaced by the trackpad and touch screen. If the mouse is typically clutched, immobilising the hand, new interfaces rely on a lexicon of choreographic gestures including pinching and zooming. If the mouse suggested a type of digital prosthesis, it now feels increasingly redundant in a world of voice recognition and haptic interfaces that fully embed the body into the digital.

As computers have become smaller and moved closer to the body, written language has become more pervasive. We write and read more than we ever have done yet language is divorced from autographic and embodied practice. With communicative speed prioritised, words become truncated and fragmented. The emoticon replaces the nuance of handwriting and typography to suggest tone and temperament. Mandarin, Spanish and English have increased their hegemony as vernacular languages become extinct. In this context, words are emptied of meaning and take on new significances.

Words written on computers and smartphones are mapped and mined for data, the private space of conversation and social interaction is now mediated by some of the most powerful corporations in the world. This economic shift is mapped in Shoshana Zuboff's *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 2019, as industrial capitalism moves to what Zuboff articulates as the "third modernity", shifting from collective to more personal forms of enterprise. Google is to the early 21st century what Ford was to the middle of the 20th century, innovating new economic models that tie the self into communicative networks that erode privacy and monetise every ounce of content. While social media platforms often promote greater connectivity, they have adversely homogenised language and atomised social relations, entrenching and siloing communities.

The results have been far reaching as the individual is both territorialised and terrorised. In *The Twittering Machine*, 2019, Richard Seymour argues that the business model of social media is built on the idea that bad news travels quicker than good news. Anger demands a cathartic response that can never be resolved. Animosity is amplified, communities become dislocated and Facebook gets richer. In this communicate regime language becomes weaponised, magnifying its reach and destructiveness. The mouse, in Christian's installation, is a cypher for these emergent forms of cognitive and affective labour. With its juxtaposition of technological and democratic iconography, *Burners* symbolises the way in which divisional and populist politics have been given a megaphone by austerity, and accelerated by the network dynamics of this third modernity. We can think about the bruising political climate of recent times. People's anger channelled into fake promises, and hope abandoned at ballot boxes. We can think about soundbite politics mirroring the network dynamics of social media: words are polemic, abstract, and capricious. We can think about the difficulty of acting on the world when our ability to talk about it becomes divided and uncertain.

In stone carving parlance, a stone can be bruised when a heavy object hits it and crushes its surface. This anthropomorphism seems curious. Stone, just like skin, bears the brunt of repeated action. The relationship between the hard and impeccable marble and the littered wooden surfaces of the polling booths articulate the way that different forms of labour shape the surface of an object. Hands can punch and caress – and just like words – injure and restore. Likewise, stories and symbols can be destructive or creative, divisional or connective. Ultimately, politics and culture are just stories we tell ourselves about the perceived dangers and opportunities in the world around us. *Burners* reminds us that words are a technology of the body as much as the machine. Words, and what we do with them, have physical as well as symbolic consequences.

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