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Turner, Lynn

## Fort-dancing

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It annoyingly — again,  
I admit it — puts words  
in effervescence thus  
reminding these future  
major artists of the hard  
lessons learned during  
their studies: always be  
suspicious of the meaning  
of words and never  
invite lecturers to write  
introductions to exhibition  
catalogues. They will write  
about words and never  
about your works, thus  
delaying the pleasure of  
seeing and reflecting on  
the art produced. *This*  
introduction therefore  
stands *in front* of these  
well-deserving artists’  
works inviting the viewer  
or the reader to think  
the pointlessness of  
*this* lead when *the real*  
enjoyment takes place *in*  
the galleries when viewing  
the artworks on display  
and when browsing the  
artists’ pages to follow.  
Congratulations: *con*  
= together + *gratulari*  
= express joy.

Jean-Paul Martinon is  
a Senior Lecturer in the  
Department of Visual Cultures  
at Goldsmiths, (also teaching  
BA Course ‘Museums and  
Galleries: Framing Art’).

FORT-DANCING  
by LYNN TURNER

The tale is familiar. So  
much so it is often quoted  
without reference to  
the madness of the text  
from which it derives as  
if it conveys our entry  
into language with the  
easiest allegory.<sup>1</sup> In the  
absence of his mother, he  
plays. At least it is said  
to be a game; certainly  
he never cries. The little  
boy throws the spool  
away, but leashed by a  
string it is yoked back. He  
repeats. Sounds on the  
edge of words accompany  
the gesture. The two  
witnesses, mother and  
grandfather, affirm that  
these almost words  
approximate *fort* [gone]  
and *da* [there], doubling  
the boy’s actions. Soon  
he doesn’t even need  
the string. The words  
step in and he can play  
at sending himself away  
and reeling himself back  
with his mirror image. And  
this is how it is thought  
that we manage our  
immaturity: weak in the  
world we start a string  
of substitutions (mother,  
reel, self, word) that  
recharge this weakness  
with an eventual strength.

Moving the world with a  
tongue, we take ourselves  
for its masters. Alone  
we can speak, and we  
construe this as (a) power.

Without moving from  
‘he’ to ‘we’ so rapidly,  
another tale is told. This  
time there are no strings  
and her negotiation of  
weak circumstance is not  
overcome by substitution.<sup>2</sup>  
Her game comprises  
dancing, spiralling,  
gyrating gestures that  
mark out overlapping  
spaces, territories that  
she partly shares with the  
mother who is separate  
but not different from this  
girl. She does not utter  
staccato oppositions,  
she sings. Not just one  
girl, universalised, this  
is the pattern of all girls  
observed in analysis  
from the perspective  
of this witness.

Yet in order to take  
a different path from  
the boy’s story — one  
that does not reaffirm  
masculine-as-human  
dialectical mastery of  
the world, was the only  
option to affirm that the  
girl rhythms another  
pattern? Another reader

returns to the boy — but also to the writer of his story. Scientific credibility may prefer his neutrality, but Derrida insists upon Grandfather Freud's implication within the scene on which he ostensibly reports.<sup>3</sup> Simple bias is not the issue. Rather as Freud tries, and tries again, to identify a step beyond the pleasure principle, his non-progressive movements mime those of which he writes: those of Ernst, the little boy in question. He sends away [*fort*], he recalls [*da*], he engages in a postal relay that brings everything back home. Home, in this case, is where the institution is. Founding the House of Freud, even as he entertains such a devilish guest as the death drive, Sigmund overlaps the writing of theory and autobiography. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is not a species of autobiography (merely because Freud drew on that which was close to hand, his nephew for example), but without quite realising it, this text writes the conditions of autobiography itself. Worse, or better really,

the conditions of that autobiography are not that every toy, or word, or video installation is sent out on performative assurance of return to a consolidated self, all the while replaying the implacable logic of representation. The pleasure principle dogging Freud is a postal principle in Derrida's hands. The demon threatening Freud's account is not a stranger but is already at home. There is no fortification against death (when 'gone' is gone for good). The disappearance of *fort* can always not reappear. Our gestures, our words, our prints can always be signed by another, returning to us unfamiliar, if they return. Our autobiographies, in whatever form they take, *are* counter-signed by others.

The mastery of Freud's boy is not offset by the difference of Irigaray's girl, he is already off the rails. Her dancing is also affected by the vicissitudes of the post; delay, loss, the touch of another. Her spiralling gestures spring from a body that is already

configured in multiplicity (famously by Irigaray's 'lips'). Thus she need not defend against difference by always repeating the same *fort/da* 'game' and thus her 'entry' into the transmission of signs is not one that leaves the body behind, as in the narrative of a weak somatic state surpassed by linguistic substitution. Drawing these practices — playing, speaking, dancing — into autobiography and/or as art, is not tied to the received wisdom that everything is like a language. Rather, autobiography and/or as art tracks the shifting terrains of our bodies, bodies signed, but not ranked, by sex and by species. Students on this singular degree programme do not vie for old mastery but address the constitutive vulnerability in which we all share.

Lynn Turner is a Lecturer in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, (also teaching BA Course 'Sexual Poetics'. Currently completing her book *Machine-Events: Autobiographies of the Performative*, of which the present essay gives a sense).

#### NOTES:

- 1 Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920) in *On Metapsychology*, The Penguin Freud Library V. 11. London: Penguin, 1991, pp. 275–338.
- 2 Luce Irigaray, 'The Gesture in Psychoanalysis' in *Sexes & Genealogies*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, pp. 89–104
- 3 Jacques Derrida, 'To Speculate — on Freud' in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud & Beyond*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987. pp. 257–409