

Message Communication Arts Research

Edition 1.6/6

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**Mapping Eclecticism
Through Practice**

Communication Design,
Graphic Design, Illustration,
Visual Communication etc.

Where if any do the mutual
theoretical frameworks and
methodologies lie?

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An Essay Concerning the Architecture of Conversation

The following are edited extracts adapted from a series of informal meetings, emails, notes and a public conversation, *Do Words Float?*, held between Lizzie Ridout (LR) and Maria Christoforidou (MC).

These formed part of Lizzie Ridout's exhibition *Ways to Talk & Yet Say Nothing or Ways to Not Talk & Yet Say Everything*, bringing together a body of printed works, drawings and objects known as *The Architecture of Conversation*.

Shown at Plymouth University in 2012, this exhibition coincided with the completion of a publication also called *Ways to Talk & Yet Say Nothing or Ways to Not Talk & Yet Say Everything*. The publication is the result of a collaboration with Women's Studio Workshop, Rosendale, NY, USA. It is comprised of a limited edition set of nine prints and booklet within a hard-back portfolio.



The design of this article is integral to the nature of the subject matter and reflects the non-linear and meandering nature of the various dialogues between LR and MC over a period of time. This wasn't just one conversation; it has been compiled from many exchanges and therefore attempts to align both linked and disparate thoughts on the nature of language and communication in relation to Ridout's art works. It is also a nod to the countless Word documents they created during this period, being sent back and forth, festooned with comment-bubbles. How you choose to read – and navigate your way – through the article is for you to decide.

By not using a more conventional footnotes system, the aim is to create a less hierarchical reading structure. Varnum & Gibbons in their introduction to *The Language of Comics: Word & Image* reference Gotthold Lessing's theory that whilst words are "spoken or written one after the other in time," i.e., temporally, "and are apprehended sequentially, the elements of an image are arranged side by side in space," i.e., spatially "and are apprehended all at once." Perhaps then this written article positions itself as part-essay, part-image.

An Essay Concerning the Architecture of Conversation

MC: *Let's talk generally about your project The Architecture of Conversation initially. One of my interests in it, apart from the subject matter, is that it seems to be exemplary of artistic practice as research. Can you tell us a little about what it's all about? How did it start?*

LR: *It started quite a long time ago when I found a patent at the British Library for a speech balloon that had been created for use in silent films. You blew the balloons up – they look a bit like those children's party-horns made out of paper – and the words emerged as the balloons unfurled. I became quite interested in this device that would put text directly into a film, physically right into the scene amongst the actors...*

MC: *So, you would blow the balloon up and the words would unfold and appear over time...*

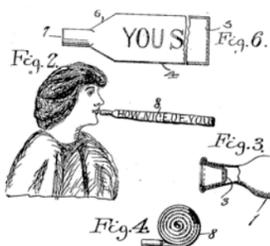
LR: *Exactly. There's an element of the ridiculous and comic in the idea somehow and it really caught my imagination. At that time, I was slowly gathering lots of different images together relating to how we visualize words and language in different forms. This happened over a long period of time – I'm always gathering disparate images, and it takes a while to begin to link things together and make connections.*

Later I also began thinking about my own relationships with people and was examining particular dialogues I had had with certain individuals. I was very interested in conversations that are difficult or fraught in some way or where there are miscommunications. And that's where a series of small drawings emerged from originally. I started thinking about different ways of visualizing difficult conversations, trying to visually represent what it's like to talk to somebody when it feels like everything you say is coming out wrong, or when it feels like your very words are being attacked, or when you completely lose confidence in what you're talking

MC: *We had a discussion some time ago about the fact that I call these devices speech bubbles. But you call them speech balloons. Both bubbles and balloons travel and they both have a connection with breath and the shape or form of your breath as you expel words. But how come you chose to use the word speech balloon?*

LR: *The sound of it is somehow less comic than "speech bubble". I grew up with "speech bubble," so my associations are with kids and cartoons. I'm trying to get away from that and give them the gravitas they deserve. When I was in the States working on the Women's Studio residency, people talked about *speech balloons*. For me, it just sounded a little bit more dignified, more intellectual.*

MC: *I prefer bubbles. They're somehow more versatile. And they sound more fragile. In the spirit of Derrida I like pondering this distinction: a bubble, which bursts almost immediately, versus a balloon, which has more weight.*



Motion Picture & Method of Producing the Same
Patent: 1240774
C. F. Pigeon
Patented September 18th 1917



Surrender
Lizzie Ridout
2012

about half way through and all the oomph from your words is lost. A larger series of drawn speech balloons followed.

MC: *So you're investigating the awkwardness of conversation and the whole experience between human beings in their most normal exchanges and showing that it's actually quite difficult! In your work there's always something about the difficulty of communication...*

LR: Jackendoff (2005, pp.53-55) talks about language as a pairing of *expressions* and *messages*. Expressions are the *outer* or *public* element to language - the utterance or gesture that can be physically perceived by the person being spoken to. The message is the *inner* or *private* aspect of language, in other words the thoughts or concepts that the speaker transmits to the addressee, through the aforementioned expression. In order to convey a message, one needs to do more than just mentally represent it, one needs to be able to express it to the listener too. So a speaker will make a mental representation of what he/she wants to say, then this is in turn converted into a series of expressions or movements of the tongue, teeth and lips. These resulting noises are then converted by the addressee from expressions back into mental representations. So, you can see that there are multiple occasions in even a simple exchange when there is opportunity for understanding to go awry.

LR: Yes. It's a theme that keeps cropping up: how hard it is and how communication is somehow ineffective... it doesn't always work. A lot of the time, we communicate poorly actually, and what we're thinking and what we're saying don't necessarily always correlate. Perhaps we never had the words to say what we were thinking in the first place. So, when I talk, what I'm trying to explain may not always actually be clear to you for a number of reasons.

MC: *Yes. But also to think that somehow the speech bubble captures all this, and brings it all together, says something about all the different operations of language. And, it isn't just speaking, it's also tied in with listening, understanding, reading and writing and just generally trying to pass on information.*

LR: I think it's an interesting cliché to work with. It's just...

MC: *You say it's a cliché but I don't think it's a cliché. I don't think there are many studies on the speech bubble, are there?*

LR: Well, there have been analytical texts written from the perspective of creating comic strips, David Carrier's excellent *The Aesthetics of Comics* (2000) is a good example. Scott McCloud also discusses them in *Understanding Comics*, as do Robert Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons' selection of essays in *The Language of Comics: Word & Image*. (2001) But there's not so much that brings together this theoretical analysis with practice-based research that isn't tied back directly to comics - or not that I've found. I'm interested in what it really is to *say something* and the speech balloon seems like an everyday, yet curious graphic device that we've come to use very lightly, flippantly, just to state that *this is speech*. I'm proposing that there are more opportunities to explore tone, or cadence or emotion, or how language and communication function, via the speech balloon. Certainly the deeper you dig into this one device, the more questions are raised about the difference between words and images, how we look and read and interpret, and the differences between speaking, hearing and writing. This code that we understand from comics coalesces all these ideas into one singular, visual form.

LR: I'm not a comics artist, but I'm intrigued by the unique place that speech balloons in comics occupy, poised between text and image. As an artist/designer/

communicator working with words and pictures, it's this paradoxical quality that makes them so interesting and gives them such scope for both theoretical and practical enquiry. Khordoc (2001, pp.156-157) affirms this in her essay examining visual sound effects in Asterix: "...the balloon, one of the traits unique to comics, marks the intersection between image and word. This seemingly innocuous black oval is simultaneously the separation between the panel's illustration and its accompanying text, and the link between them." She goes on to state: "Speech balloons are in effect the link between the text and the image, but they themselves are also constituted of text, albeit implied, and image. If the presence of the balloon symbolises a message, then it can be considered a form of text, for as stated earlier, the balloon does not simply signal the presence of text, it actually implies the message, 'I'm speaking'. It is also image because the balloon's form is indeed a drawing - it is not made up of letters and words, but of a drawn, black oval" (Khordoc 2001, p.160).

MC: *Yes, beyond the spoken word, you've been talking about other issues relating to looking and reading, listening and sound. Another important thing is that your images of types of speech balloons demonstrate that it's not about what is actually being said, not specific narratives, it's about the position of the speech subject or the way that you're speaking.*

LR: Yes - it's not about specificity or telling people what the meaning of each speech balloon is, it's about allowing the viewer to create that meaning or narrative for themselves. Allowing it to become personal.

MC: *If the act of conversation is reduced to these physical bubbles, it allows us to attempt to tame speech. What are we left with if we take away the words? We are left with the ideas before they are made into words. And silence!*

This brings me round to the texts and theories that you've been reading. I know that certain ones that have helped form this project. Can we talk a little about them?

LR: Yes... Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas and his essay *The Problem of Speech Genres* (1953) has been very significant in this body of work. One aspect of the paper that is interesting is that Bakhtin criticizes the predominant 19th-century linguistic theories, considering them oversimplistic in their approaches.

He felt that they presented only scenarios in which one person speaks and never considered the fact that there's a listener too; there's someone who perceives those words. It was always a single, individual saying something in isolation and, usually, completely alone. The suggestion is that the listener is an entirely passive person who simply absorbs and doesn't bring anything to the dialogue. Of course, as a listener, you interject, you become involved in a conversation. You're part of a dialogue. And importantly, as a listener you interpret.

Bakhtin also discusses the way in which words are interconnected and how we mistakenly believe that the way that we each speak is individual, but actually, the manner in which we express our words is dictated by our parents, our friends, our community, the TV, by what books or newspapers we read, by the working world that we live in: by everything around us. It's not that personal, actually. We're always repeating what we hear, or read, or have grown up with. We're part of a system of utterances.

MC: *For me, the important thing that Bakhtin introduces there is the concept of the atom. The atom is the minutest article of speech when you are trying to communicate, like the sound of the voice. And throughout the text he keeps introducing different aspects or qualities of the atom. He never gives a precise*

LR: Yes, that's interesting, as fragility and physicality are something I've considered a lot when creating my own speech balloons. Beyond comics, historically and culturally the spoken or thought word has been represented in images in different ways, some making words more tangible than others. Looking at European history alone, back in the 1400s significant maxims were referenced in paintings through the inclusion of objects with symbolic meaning. Actual words also adorn physical objects, adding information that would otherwise be impossible to "read" in an image alone. *Salvator Mundi / Christ Blessing* (Antonello da Messina, 1465) in The National Portrait Gallery, London, depicts a *cartellino* or *small paper* in front of the figure of Christ, with text stating: MILLESIMO QUATRICENTESIMO SEXTAGE / SIMO QUINTO VIII INDI ANTONELLUS / MESSANEUS ME PINXIT (Vigni & O'Sullivan 1963, p.23). This translates roughly as: "In the year 1465 of the eighth indiction Antonello da Messina painted me."

Later in the 1500s scrolls - called *banderoles* or *speech scrolls* - were used in paintings to represent speech or as a visual device to add an outside narrator to the story. There are several wonderful examples of the former, as a set of woodcut prints in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (Foxe 2009). One, entitled *The Execution of William Tynedale*, depicts Tynedale tied to a stake at Vilvorde Castle, Flanders. Tynedale translated the Bible from Latin into English, believing that God's word should be read by all. For his hard work he was charged with treason and heresy and sentenced to death. Tynedale's final words, spoken "at the stake with a fervent zeal, and a loud voice," were reported as: "Lord! Open the King of England's eyes" (Foxe 2009, p.20). These significant words are depicted in a typical

LR: Returning the idea of physicality and your earlier mention of breath as a container for words, in my own speech balloons some are definitely more breath-like than others. You can imagine them easing quite gently out of a person's mouth. And they're less comic. Ghostly even. *Surrender*, the pink piece with the white flag, is an exception and refers to those Renaissance *banderoles* and the sorts of religious paintings and dramatic scenes they often occurred in. *Banderoles* is also the name given to the streamer tied to the top of a knight's lance. So the piece endeavours to bring together all these different meanings. To me *Surrender* has a more comic-book feel to it - flat and solid and garish. And yet the act of waving a white flag of surrender during battle has an incredibly poignant potency to it. I imagined a white flag being thrown in the air amidst total carnage and devastation. Hence the choice of vibrant colour. Simultaneously that act of a floating flag of surrender *does* remind me of something that you might see in a Tom & Jerry cartoon after something dreadful has happened to poor Tom.

speech scroll.

[For a more detailed examination of the history of speech balloons read the essay 'Showing Saying?' (Ridout 2012)]

MC: *Speaking operates in a particular time, limited by historical specificity, or not. But something interesting happens when we see the speech bubble as a physical object. If in Hermeneutics art is reduced to its interpretation, or a description of form (image < language), in your work speech is reduced to visual physicality or a form of a description of ideas (image > language). You seem to be showing us how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than trying to show us what it means.*

LR: Below is a photograph I took in a former convent in Mexico back in 2007, of a less conventional portrayal of the spoken word. These old paintings - of which I only took a couple of pictures - were on all the walls of one room in the convent with no information about them anywhere. I couldn't speak Spanish, so I have no idea when they were painted, what they were called, what they were about or what the words are that are written on them. They show (I assume) religious characters speaking to God, and their words are depicted as Latin letters radiating from the speaker's mouths. But what was most interesting was that in this particular convent all the nuns would have taken a vow of silence. There's something intriguing about a building full of people who don't speak surrounding themselves with images depicting words and speaking. I have no idea whether the pictures had been put in there afterwards or whether they would have been there at the time the nuns were there. I've also not seen other paintings in which words have been shown in quite this way, without them being contained by *banderoles*.



Photograph of a painting containing visualised spoken words
Photograph by Lizzie Ridout
2007

LR: According to Bakhtin, words always have a history, or a succession of what perhaps we could term as *pre-existences*. As he points out: "Any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe" (Bakhtin 1953, p.71). He also states: "Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another..."

convey not thereby their thoughts, and lay not before one another their ideas, which is the end of discourse and language" (Locke 2009, pp.68–69).

definition but he gives you this idea which I think is also expressed in your images: of trying to communicate, of trying to express yourself, of turning around to address and speak to someone. It seems that the atom is connected not with the words of a spoken sentence but the individual desire and effort to communicate every time we speak.

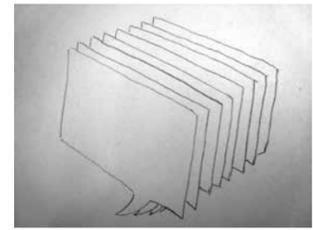
You mentioned earlier that Bakhtin seems rather angry about the way communication unfolds, and the essay is called the Problem of Speech Genres. Again, we come across problems when communicating. It's always problematic speaking, writing about speech and language. Anyone who investigates speech, bumps against certain barriers and gets stuck in the same areas because the tools used to solve the problem are the problem itself. This complication makes me think of Derrida. Can you talk a little about Derrida and his influence too?

LR: It's Derrida's approach, his methods of deconstruction that I find interesting. It encouraged me to think about breaking language down to its component parts, of scrutinizing words and questioning assumed meanings. To examine the machinery of language. Derrida interrogates the conventions of language itself. This seemed to be a strategy to apply to making images about how language works too. Derrida discusses the written word and how in conventional Western philosophy it is considered the enemy of speech. Derrida argues against the premise that speech is the purest way that you can express your thoughts and that the minute you try instead to write speech down, it becomes distant from the purity of the idea in your mind. Derrida also repeatedly returns to the etymology of words to form his arguments. With these methods in mind, a project emerged that examines words as images and images as words.

MC: Yes. Derrida deconstructs those ideas about the primacy (purity) of speech in Western metaphysics. Barbara Johnson in her introduction to Derrida's Dissemination says that Derrida is primarily a reader, "a reader who constantly reflects on and transforms the very nature of the act of reading," and deconstruction is a special kind of reading of theoretical texts; something which I thought your work does. You're reading the whole idea of the speech bubble and speaking in a way that examines elements that are normally ideas taken for granted. Deconstruction investigates the relationship between statements in a text, the language patterns beyond the actual words as well as a meticulous analysis of the words themselves to reveal a reality hidden in the text. He talks about presuppositions in a statement, not what it means but where is it being made from. What is propelling it outward? It's not about what is being said.

As I see it, Derrida relates to your investigation in "the connection between brain and mouth: the interrelation between the message and the expression of the message" (Ridout Forthcoming). What is actually being said, the message, is

Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication... Each utterance refutes, affirms, supplements, and relies on the others, presupposes them to be known, and somehow takes them into account" (Bakhtin 1953, p.91).



Our Speech is Filled with Others' Words [After Bakhtin]
Unpublished material from Lizzie Ridout's sketchbook
2010

Christopher Norris (1988, pp. 7–8) briefly summarises Derrida's theory: "Speech enjoys priority by virtue of its issuing from a self-present grasp of what one means to say in the moment of actually saying it. And when we listen to the words of another such speaker, we are supposedly enabled to grasp their true sense by entering this same, privileged circle of exchange between mind, language and reality. Communication thus becomes ideally a kind of reciprocal 'auto-affection', a process that depends on the absolute priority of spoken (self-present) language over everything that threatens its proper domain. And writing constitutes precisely such a threat in so far as it is cut off at source from the authorising presence of speech. Writing is condemned to circulate endlessly from reader to reader, the best of whom can never be sure that they have understood the author's original intent. Its effect is to 'disseminate' meaning to a point



Shadow of a Whisper from Beneath 1000 Pages
Lizzie Ridout
2012

LR: Shadow of a Whisper from Beneath 1000 Pages goes back to Derridean principles in some ways, I suppose. I wanted to produce a print whose material is true to the concept of the words. To me, a whisper isn't full, it's evanescent, it's diffused and it lacks the full personality of the speaker's voice. The OED describes whispering as: "To speak softly 'under one's breath', i.e. without the resonant tone produced by vibration of the vocal cords; to talk or converse in this way, esp. in

the ear of another, for the sake of secrecy." I wanted to try to represent that aspect in terms of the form of the balloon (it mimics a very common style of speech balloon used in engravings throughout the 1700s), but also how that form was printed, and what it was printed with. I guess on a very simplistic level I was trying to find a way to create a piece of work in which, when reduced down to its component parts of subject, title and material, it returned to one basic truth.

In the States I managed to get hold of white carbon copy paper. (Over here we only have it in blue and black.) The beauty of copy paper is that it makes rather imperfect copies of typewritten text. As a kid I used to see how many copies of a text I could make at any one time, by putting a whole wad of paper and carbon paper through the typewriter. The copies at the bottom of the pile are almost illegible. It's like a visual form of Chinese Whispers. Information is lost.

I made relief prints using stencils, and rather than wetting the paper as you would normally do with a print, so that it holds the ink well, I left the paper completely dry. An essential ingredient was left out. The beauty of this was that the white copy paper left a chalky, dusty white impression on the white stock, and much of the detail, the real information on the stencil, disappears. You're left with the architecture of the speech, its structure, but no sense of its details.

When you touch the print, the residue comes off on your hands. So for me, not only is this speech balloon "parched", it also shows merely a suggestion of itself, and it's deteriorating all the time. Perhaps it shows spoken words that have been shoved in a box in your mind for a long time and forgotten about.

superseded by the overall expression of the speaking subject.

LR: Maria, you mention "revealing a reality hidden in the text." This issue of realities is important in this project. David Carrier, (2000) talks a little about it in his book. In comics, speech and thought balloons are the physical representation of spoken and thought words. And, they're flat within the image frame. If you accept this truth and proceed, and were to convert a cartoon world into our own actual world, our lived reality, how, and in what form would speech balloons exist? Would speech – and therefore speech balloons – be three-dimensional? Are they containers? Then they would have mass and volume, they could be solid or filled with air, they could be transparent or white. And would they – and the words that are placed within them – hang? Or would they float? In a way of course, this is just nonsense speculation, but it does make you realize that we just ignore – or simply accept – the fact that when you look at a comic strip it is filled with these big speech balloons that break up the image sequence. In comics, words become palpable. They are things. And can be treated as such.

This is intriguing then, because words – unless written – are completely non-physical. You speak them and they're gone. But also they do have real physical presence. Words can break you and beat you and...

MC: Also elevate you and make you glad! Yes, this idea of words' physicality really captured my imagination when I read your text for Ways to Talk... This suddenly introduces the question of where words go once they've come out of our mouths. What happens to them? They disappear. But in actual fact really they hang around and they can carry such a weight.

But of course all these things are also the expression of something else: the machinery of thought suddenly being made audible (and in your case visible) and entering the world. And so when you talk about containers I can't help but start to think about different containers where your speech might be captured. Although of course this is an oxymoron because spoken words do ultimately just disappear.

LR: We've talked previously about this, Maria. Would you talk a little again about the story of Midas with regards to the ideas of containers for words and the unlikely ways that words can be expressed?

MC: The remarkable aspect of the myth of Midas is the movement of the speech, but not by the means of a human or paper or a book, as we would normally expect. The words travel independently because they have physicality, a life of their own.

where the authority of origins is pushed out of sight by the play of a henceforth limitless interpretive freedom."

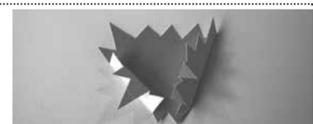
There's a wonderful series of comic strips created by Winsor McCay in the early 1900s called *Little Nemo in Slumberland*. Each story describes a dream that Little Nemo has, and as part of that dream-world, McCay also begins to question the physicality of the comic as a medium. In one particular strip a speech balloon grows and multiplies throughout the sequence, until the characters are almost drowning in speech balloons. They become actually physical. It's a very powerful image.

LR: ... You can break and beat words back. I keep thinking about how wonderful it would be if there was a device for speaking words but which could also somehow rewind or obliterate them all too. I started to imagine what this object might be. But I always tie myself in logistical knots! Pencils that write whilst simultaneously erasing? Or perhaps pencils that destroy themselves? I seem to keep returning to undoing things, or somehow deleting them. And the damage that words can do.

I created *Deleted Exclamation* for the *Ways to Talk...* publication as a response to these thoughts. It was a far simpler way to approach this subject that I was confusing myself over. When you're dealing with ideas that you are almost drowning in, sometimes it really helps to return to something familiar, something you know.



Little Nemo in Slumberland
Winsor McCay
Published in The New York Herald, on Friday January 2nd, 1910
Image courtesy www.comicstriplibrary.org



Deleted Exclamation
Lizzie Ridout
2012

One of the asides of the whole process was that there were all these little pieces of carbon paper left over after I had finished printing. And they're just like little skeletons, all limp, used, with the life taken out of them.

So the story of King Midas is one we were told at school. King Midas, after he's had all the trouble with everything he touches turning to gold, goes and begs to have his gift taken back. And he's granted this. But then unfortunately, he gets himself into trouble again by offending Apollo, the god of music. Opinions vary on exactly what offended Apollo, but let's just say that he simply didn't like Midas's music. Apollo got angry with him and adorned him with a pair of donkey ears. As a result of this, King Midas had to go around wearing a turban to hide the ears and nobody knew the reason for this apart from his barber. Midas's barber swore that he wouldn't reveal the secret, but, like with any good secret, he just couldn't hold it in anymore, and one day he went down to the bottom of a field, dug a deep hole and shouted the secret aloud into it, "King Midas has a pair of big donkey ears," thinking that no one would ever know or hear. Unfortunately for him though, a cluster of reeds grew at the very spot where he had dug the hole so every time the wind blew, the reeds would sing out "King Midas has a pair of big donkey ears." And the river heard these words and carried them everywhere too. So everyone, even now, knows that King Midas had donkey ears.

MC: In reference to this, in Aldous Huxley's book *The Island* (1962) words become solid and independent when they inhabit a bird. An idealistic community who live on a secluded island have taught mynah birds, who are good at imitating sounds, one word - Attention. The birds fly around carrying that one word that often seems to come from nowhere, roaming freely in the woods.

This myth offers the idea that words can have presence, which can live on beyond the speaker; they can transfer and travel through space and time, without the need for any other device to carry them other than themselves.

LR: It's a wonderful story. I didn't actually know that part of it. I knew about Midas's touch of gold but not more than that...

MC: Now that the publication is complete, can I ask where you think you'll go next with this body of work? One thing I've noticed with the series of prints is that although you examine dialogue, you actually only ever represent one side, one speaker, a monologue in this... Can you talk about this a little more?

LR: It's a really valid observation. Maybe I've fallen into a similar trap as the 19th-century linguists that Bakhtin criticized! The pieces may be responses to another invisible speaker, or a comment thrown out to an invisible listener. But only occasionally do we get any impression of those listeners' presence. Two pieces sit apart from this, *Dialogue of the Deaf* and *Soliloquy*.



Dialogue of the Deaf is very simple, and represents two speakers. Each speaker is signified by a colour, one being a lighter shade of the other. Their speech is "back to back," in the fold of the print, but the "tails" from each speech balloon turn away from one another.

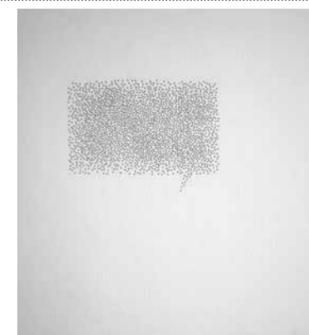
Soliloquy, though titled to appear like a monologue (a soliloquy refers to someone speaking their thoughts aloud, usually uninterrupted), does bring me back to Bakhtin's theories about dialogue. In his criticism

of me that's paper. I wanted to represent speech on paper somehow and then find a way to remove or destroy it, whilst leaving some vestige that implies its existence.

The pink "bang" represents something you would like to retract or that you even wish you'd not said at all. It's a pretty crass symbol, in fluorescent pink, mimicking those "sale" stickers you sometimes see in shop windows. I made many versions of these and put them through a printing press over and over again, only each time I crumpled them up a little more, so that the pressure imprinted the creases onto the bang. Over time and repeated pressings they began to look distressed and rather sorry for themselves, like a letter that has been screwed up and discarded because it doesn't read right. Banishing the word, orchestrating its demise in this way was somehow quite satisfying.



A Deleted Exclamation on the Printing Press
Photograph by Lizzie Ridout
2012



Excoriate
Lizzie Ridout
2012

LR: One of the things that I didn't include in this exhibition but which also touches on the idea of physicality were the speech balloons that I made using a rifle while I was making *Ways to Talk...* at Women's Studio Workshop. There's a man



Dialogue of the Deaf
Lizzie Ridout
2012

Silkscreen Stencil for Soliloquy
Lizzie Ridout
2012

of the imprecision of linguistics and also of the loose definition of the term *speech*, he asks: "But what sort of thing is this *speech flow* and what is meant by *our speech*? What is the nature of their duration? Do they have a beginning and an end?" (Bakhtin 1953, p.70). He goes on to talk about the boundaries of an utterance, the speaker's *speech plan* or *speech will* and the *intonation of finalization* (Bakhtin 1953, pp.71-77). As terms, these are interesting when thinking about creating an image on a page, and exploring the relationship between the creator (speaker) and the reader (listener and/or respondent).

For a start, *Soliloquy* is deliberately by far the largest of all the prints, is printed on both sides of the paper and has to be twice unfolded by the reader in order for the whole thing to be viewed. So it requires interaction. Perhaps initially we don't perceive the true length of the speech (image), but through interaction we soon do. In the way that you may plan what it is you're going to say (whether you in fact get to say it is another matter) you also plan the creation of a drawing on a page. You tend to think about the composition and how you want the image to balance with white space. In this instance the screenprint butts up awkwardly against the edge of the sheet, like it was ill thought through and badly planned. Perhaps this soliloquy is hurried, or cramped by the interjection of another.

MC: You also seem to be thinking in terms of three dimensions more recently. This has already begun with *Colloquy*, hasn't it? You've talked about these sculptures almost as if they are the characters as opposed to merely being the expression of something else.



Colloquy
Lizzie Ridout
2012

LR: Yes. With *Colloquy* I suppose I am creating characters, or caricatures, imagining the actual person - or people - doing the talking. A colloquy is a formal conversation between a group of people. It sounds rather formidable and serious. So I made these rotund, shiny, possibly slightly threatening balloons. But there's an aspect to them that is a little silly too: they rock slightly. It amused me to imagine suited businessmen - politicians maybe - a little portly perhaps, all caught up in their high ideas, pontificating with one another. And it's good to be working with something - resin - so reassuringly solid!

MC: By way of a conclusion, there's a poem that I wanted to share with you from the ancient poetess Sappho, which encapsulates many of these subjects of solidity, fragility, suggestion, breath and words travelling through space and time that we've been discussing today and previously. It reads:

"Although they are only breath, words which I command are immortal".
(Andreadis 2001, p.xiv)

"We embrace, understand and sense the speaker's speech plan or speech will, which determines the entire utterance, its lengths and boundaries. We imagine to ourselves what the speaker wishes to say. And we also use this speech plan, this speech will (as we understand it), to measure the finalization of the utterance." (Bakhtin 1953, p.77)

LR: One text that has prompted me to consider three dimensions is *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift 2003). In one part of the book, Gulliver writes about the Academy of Lagado where academics are developing a language that dispenses with the use of words entirely. This is presented as being better for the speaker's health: every word that we speak after all corrodes our lungs, and therefore shortens our lives.

The aforementioned academics of Lagado propose the use of objects to represent ideas, or even the real things themselves in order to communicate with one another. And so, everyone carries bags with them, filled with objects. In order to talk, they lay these objects down on the ground. So if you want to talk about stones, then you lay your stones out. But obviously this really only works on a simplistic level... one might

called Woody who works there and he's the one who seems to sort everything out. Any problem and he finds a solution - he's quite remarkable, quite a genius. One afternoon he came into the studio and he saw some laser-cut speech balloons that I'd been testing out for the edition on the wall. We started talking about how they had been made, and I explained to him about laser cuts and what laser cuts were, and he just said straight away "you know, we could do a really nice one where we could just shoot at the paper with a gun." And so that's exactly what we did.



Woody Practising His Aim at Shooting Paper in the Distance
Photograph by Lizzie Ridout
2012

We went off into the woods with an old rifle and shot at a wad of paper with the template of a speech balloon in wood over the top to act as a block. It was brilliant - I learned how to shoot with a real old rifle! This is something I never would have conceived of actually being able to do here in the UK. Perhaps more than anything this highlights the benefits of doing residencies and why in creative practice it is so important to leave the place you know. It's about acquiring new ways of seeing and positively altering views on subjects you think you know inside out. This comes through dialogue with people who are experts in different fields.

I Begin With a Thrill; I End Without a Shut

The word “conclusion” comes from the Latin *concludere*, which means *to shut up closely* (from *con-* meaning *completely* and *cludere* meaning *to close, shut*). This paper has been written as a means to bring together various strands of a project that has been in progress for several years. It is a piece of process in its own right. I do not seek a conclusion. As I see it, theory informs (my) practice; (my) practice informs (my) theory. And not necessarily in that order.

As a creative I am not simply a maker: I gather, I listen, I read, I think, I discuss, I write. And these do not happen independently of one another, neatly, one after the other. This process is often neither coherent nor logical. I never begin with a question, or something to prove. I begin with *a thrill*, a thrill about *something*. It’s tangled and exciting – a mess of starts and middles that very slowly shift and change into something more solid, less slippery. The gathering, the listening, the reading, the thinking, the discussing, the writing aren’t about clarifying answers, solutions or conclusions but rather creating and (in)forming connections and senses of meaning. These senses of meaning are influenced by the academic and the intuitive.

In his essay “Force & Signification” Derrida mused on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s comment, “My own words take me by surprise and teach me what I think.” About this, Derrida wrote: “Meaning must await being said or written in order to inhabit itself, and in order to become, by differing from itself, what it is: meaning” (Derrida 2006, p.11).

Talking and writing are, for me, thinking – out loud, and on paper. Through articulation I piece this array of meanings together, but unlike in an essay, it grows outwards beyond the limits of the sheet it’s printed on. As suggested in the introduction to the above conversation between me and Maria, although it is words, it also bears a likeness to an image in the way that it can be read spatially. An image of words.

Invariably, however, there is also still a pile of snippets and oddments that don’t entirely fit that whole, but which remain fascinating and relevant. These fragments – images, quotes, half-formed sentences, small as yet undeveloped thoughts – that can’t quite be assimilated are often where the real and ongoing delight in a body of work remains.

And it’s these “unfittables” and “asides” that motivated me to write an article whose format would not require them all to be excluded. This process of mine, and the nature of the subject matter – of words, language, communication, speech, writing – begged and warranted an order and format other than a strictly linear one. The wealth of influences and ideas

somehow also need to articulate big, huge ideas and weighty premises about stones, for example, but only with objects that you can *carry*. How would one do that? You can imagine that people would end up carrying huge bags around, perhaps even require servants to carry things for them too. All in order for you to communicate.

Obviously, the more you probe into this concept, the more it becomes apparent that it is an entirely ridiculous notion. If you want to save straining your vocal chords, carrying a notepad and pen and writing (in one form or another) it is easier if you are trying to communicate with someone who understands your code. We’re back at the difference between – and value in – images and words again. Varnum & Gibbons (2001, p.xi) point out each of their limitations: “while images resemble the objects they represent, words represent objects only by virtue of custom or convention. They are arbitrary symbols that are useful only insofar as their signification is commonly understood.” In this instance it seems like written words beat carrying round bags of stones! But these different systems of signification, conveying meaning through images, objects and words are something I’d like to explore further.



Paper Perforated with Lead Shot Pellets from 60 Feet
Photograph by Lizzie Ridout
2011

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interjecting, rebuking and affirming one another all help me in shooting the subject through with a multitude of perspectives.

Everything doesn’t fit perfectly together or become fully realized: the loose ends, the still unravelled threads, these are the next chapter in an ongoing project. This is what *my* creative research is all about. Although there are multiple beginnings (in this case, the discovery of a patent in the British Library) and there are middles – all vast and tangled and also often revealing and fruitful – there has not been, as yet, a “complete shut” that makes this conclusion an end.

Lizzie Ridout

Biographies

Lizzie Ridout considers herself an artist, a designer, a writer, a researcher, a curator, an editor, a treasure hunter. Her work borrows working methods and theoretical practices from design, fine art and literary spheres. Much of her studio-based practice begins with recondite facts, tales, images and ideas discovered in historical source material and texts which she then examines and re-presents, creating new, interpretative pieces.

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Maria Christoforidou is a writer, curator, designer and artist. Art of any form has been an entry point: a boat in the vast sea of theory. Her sustained concern with questions of difference, change, oppositions and collaborations has developed alongside an investigation into the operation of language, its historical specificity and etymology set against its use. Apart from agonizing over words and sentences, she investigates ideas surrounding visual essays, the “performing” of art history and the documentation of performance.

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Women’s Studio Workshop is the largest publisher of artist’s books in the US. Copies of *Ways to Talk & Yet Say Nothing* or *Ways to Not Talk & Yet Say Everything* are held in repositories at The Library of Congress, Yale University, Rochester Institute of Technology, Vassar College, Indiana University Bloomington, University of Delaware and Virginia Commonwealth University.

www.wsworkshop.org

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