



AUTOITALIA SOUTH EAST APRIL 2018
WORDS FAIL ME

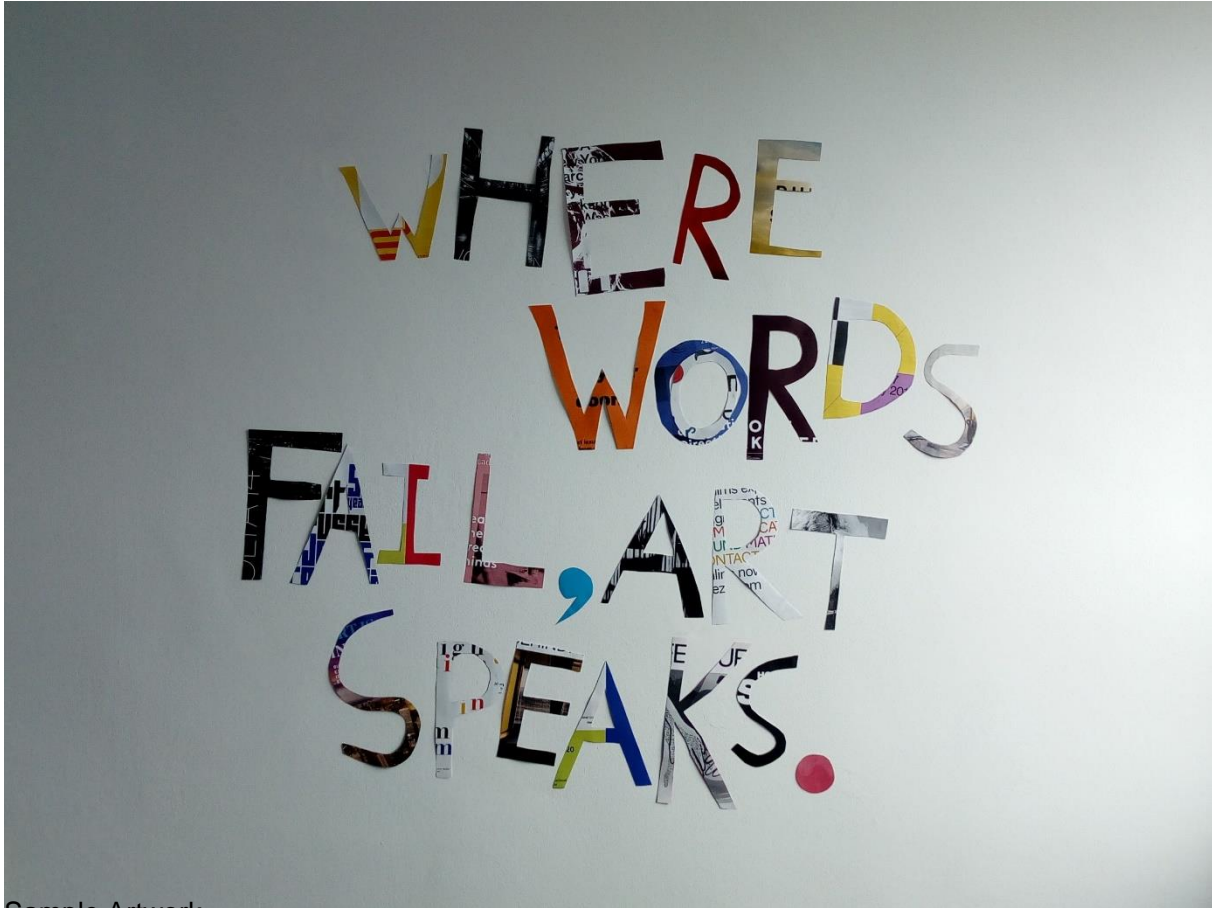
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This document was put together after the exhibition in May 2022



CLARITY OF EXPRESSION BY ARI SKANDA



Sample Artwork

The artwork above presents itself as a question. And that is how it speaks. The now-idiomatic expression “where words fail, art speaks” - a revision of “where words fail, music speaks”, a phrase originally penned by some highly gifted canonical writer which has quickly entered popular consciousness and become a kind of common sense or conventional wisdom - is presented as a question, in the form in which it is materially expressed in the commonplace: the activities corner of the community centre, the stargazing teenager’s bedroom, or wherever else a supposedly genuine enthusiasm for life and its creative possibilities is to be had. To be precise, the artwork does not simply ask “where words fail, art speaks?”, but presents that common sense in the way in which it typically manifests in reality as a question. The work places a question mark on itself, its reality-artified self, and that is its speaking. The ultimate fantasy here, of course, is that the statement “where words fail, art speaks” as a magazine cut-out montage on the walls of the community centre will be a question to itself. It will be self-critical and speak its own self-questioning. In this, the community centre montage will start to find its own idealization of art’s magical powers amusing and deeply heartwarming.

What is likely the case however, is that the community centre montage already develops a kind of reflexivity on other terms. Ignorant to art and its fantasies. Within the present condition of ‘network sociality’, everyday observations and experiences become valuable resource for subjective formation and intensification. We no longer merely express an experience, but produce curated, stylized, and strategic rehashings of it, correlated to how exactly we want to present ourselves at any given point in time. For theorist Suhail Malik, consumption becomes “the demonstration of the subject’s each time singular cognitive-affective navigation of the complex configuration

of an open-ended social space.”¹ The community centre montage or the stargazing-teenager’s bedroom montage belongs to a reality that is constantly being creatively reconfigured by the subjective interpretations, interests, and tastes of its inhabitants. Within a scenario where the everyday serves as creative resource, something like “where words fail, art speaks” becomes many different things: it is misspelt, it is an ironic caption, it is part of some lame meme, it is an inspiring quote t-shirt, it is the backdrop for a photoshoot, it has morphed into “where words fail, emojis speak” or something a lot wilder, more out of this world. In such a sense then, this condition is one where: common sense goes viral all the time. Equally, the most common occurrences become artistic moments, or ‘ideas worth sharing’. The alleged commonness of the commonplace is identifiable, remarkable and shareable, in the space of the commonplace itself. The “where words fail, art speaks” magazine cut-out montage on the walls of the community centre - in its subjection to the forces of this new expanded creative field - has the potential to be interpreted, conceptualised, critiqued and artfied in ways that are scarily similar to the methods of the artwork above. In this sense, the community centre montage is radically questionable for simply being what it is. And it is appealing for that reason. For the artwork above, this is heartbreaking. And we can understand why.

Where the artwork that presents reality as a question was once understood to be the most profound artistic proposition, it is now quite possibly the most banal. New forms of capital accumulation already do the work of destabilizing the meaning of any given reality via a creative and critical repackaging of that reality’s contents. “Where words fail, art speaks” is the truest logic of this total creative condition. And we increasingly live our lives investing in that logic. If art then wants to have any purchase on such a reality, to work against this productive process of endless question asking, it will have to accept that it is anyway already worded in its constitution and operations, and be open to speaking on that very basis. The demand for clarity of expression is then less ‘leave no photo uncaptioned’ - which already serves as ideological inspiration for the press release, panic at the private view, and deeply enriching intellectual discourse at the artist talk and wherever thereafter - and more that the artwork has to be captioned in itself and set definitive terms for all the speaking that is done about it. It is then an art that is worded in, not despite, its creative being. As a highly visionary singer-songwriter once said: “If our reality’s creativity, art will be our clarity.”

¹ Suhail Malik, “Contemporary Art → Ex-art: Retro-transfiguration Into the Commonplace (Youtube)”.

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BUBBLES BY NIKHIL VETTUKATTIL



Jeff Koons, Michael Jackson and Bubbles, porcelain, 1988

The very idea of 'History' as looking back on the past and looking forward to the future, the whole investment in development and 'Progress', is structurally informed by the dynamic of the ascendant middle class, the historically bourgeois. This entire perspective is principally concerned with its own current position, which it understands through a firm rejection of its past (its dissociation with and from the lower classes). At the same time, it is marked by progressive values and ambitions, a total identification with its aspirations for the future. In historically 'new' technological and cultural developments, this class pursues fleeting promises of access to better conditions of social life. The middle classes have an imaginary and acquisitive (rather than symbolic and practical relationship) to objects of culture. The fluctuation between these modes of behaviour are manifest in those artists on the threshold, who alternate between struggling to simultaneously see art as valuable in itself and also an effective financial asset or economic means.

But in a historical moment where the economic foundations of belief in social mobility are eroded, this class, which through its combination of means and values, is most responsible for the status quo, is most likely to express a regressive and reactionary political tendency represented in the wider culture. When 'the middle class' is not acknowledged as a static identity, but understood as a dynamic economic relation, we find in periods of economic stagnation the dissolution of its semblance of identity and the cultural manifestation of a kind of inertia. Once development in general has been so closely interwoven with the narrative of the development of a particular class, we must work toward another concept of development, which can express another economic relation. If the whole idea of class seems a thoroughly outdated approach to culture in economically 'developed' countries today, it is

ironic in that only comparatively recently that culture has become amenable to class analysis at all. The illusion that class is not a useful category may be attributable to both the historical crisis of the ontologisation of the labour movement, as much as a self-preserving investment in arbitrary borders which seek to exclude the truly global character of social relations.

In our present historical moment, an individualistic outlook has dominance over more social forms of analysis. Prevalent accounts of social experience prioritise individual agency and responsibility as if social and political situations were only the complex aggregate effects of individual opinions and actions. By omitting the ways in which the space of individual practice is informed and limited by social conditions, the ideas by which we are given to understand ourselves restrict the extent to which we are able to alter or improve upon our own social environment and mode of life. It is as if we encounter obstacles and approach them again and again in isolation, as if working together was so obviously ineffective and collective approaches did not and could not exist. One of the spaces where this behaviour is exaggerated is the art world, where collective or unseen labour is often blatantly subsumed under the visibility of individual or corporate proper names (and in the case of some established artists, are sometimes one and the same). Time and again, individuals (whether they are artists or curators, critics or interns) encounter shared and similar frustrations and exploitations; but a discourse of professionalism, individuality, and self-sufficiency leads to any collective efforts to address these conditions to be foreclosed. At the same time the increasing availability of information in the absence of methods, leads to diminished expectations, and this can even form frameworks of representation: 'You knew what you were getting into and if you don't like it you can go elsewhere' is met by 'we are here and we are not surprised'.

It is unsurprising that the art world, and cultural production more generally, is the field where strategies of addressing social life in terms of representation and expression or 'voice' is privileged, even if this can obscure the situation of economic opacity even further. The increasing prevalence of the language of protest and resistance in the sphere of advertising might offer a case in point. We might know that symbolic solutions are partial and short-term substitutions for lasting transformations, even if in practice we are under compulsion to repeat our mistakes in new and different ways. The debate is open as to whether better representation is a signal of social change, or a sanction to a situation that can no longer be ignored. In cultural production it can take the form of a debate over whether representation is descriptive or productive of its object. When the style of Barbara Kruger's critique of advertising is appropriated promotionally to spread a message, the ambiguities of the relationship between advertising and its critique are made dynamic and are only partially stalled by looking at the intent behind them (Supreme). This is a historical outcome, a recuperation that indicates the outmoded and drives the sites of agency elsewhere. Beyond the individualistic 'either/or', an approach which can hold more than one idea at once is required. To acknowledge that resistance is in the structured absences of the discourse is not to abstractly doom the effort of representation to failure. It is to acknowledge that it is only out of the practice of expression that we are made aware of the limits of our self-understanding, by tracing the particular gaps that restructure the moment of the unexpressed. It is in the moments of convergence between the two failures of individual and collective articulation, between the act of speech and the conditions of language, that we re-cognise the 'Subject and its Others' as the Other that is in Us.

Through reference to a moment of racism masquerading as culture, ideology as porcelain, and simultaneously, its facile negation through a contemporary liberal outlook, the work in this exhibition seems to introduce a prohibition on the sensible and affective aspects of the objects presented. Appreciation, but more specifically judgement, of the way the sculptures are produced and the stylistic choices at play are barred by a political and ethical interdiction that opens the possibility for a palpable, yet problematic, sense of historical distance. By reversal, the reference of the sculptures which makes them intelligible, the Royal Doulton ceramics, are at the same time rendered irredeemably 'wrong', in both a moral and aesthetic sense. In this ambiguity between moral and aesthetic judgement the exhibition attempts to represent a movement of anxiety that borders on aggression. And yet this feeling is only seemingly so, we are confronted not by any actual judgements except through representation. In this way the sculptures emphasise the absence of a separation between aesthetic and political choices.

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I'd like to take the opportunity to say thank you to everyone that was a part of the exhibition, through collaboration, contribution, conversation and in support: Ari, Ben, Curtly, Ed, Marianne, Nikhil, Ray, Ruth. AdamX