

Nina Ross

The language between us



Nina Ross' The language between us

Jared Davis

A lot is expressed by the voice of Nina Ross in her short video work *The language between us*, though none of which is actually through spoken or aural language. In choking, convulsions and visceral vocal sounds, we witness a deeply personal performance by Nina of a body in distress. Although a short video at under two minutes, it is a difficult work to watch, in that we are left wincing squeamishly with feelings of discomfort, an unsureness regarding the gender power play and ambiguous intimacy on screen between Nina and a male other (who we know to be her partner Åsmund), and the reasoning for Nina's persistence in what appears to be a very uncomfortable action.

Nina Ross seeks in her work to understand the significance of spoken language on one's image of their own self, through exploring her personal experience of learning a new language for her partner, and how that affected her understanding of her own personal identity. In this short text I will address a few of the discussions brought into question by the work.

Language and meaning

There is a lineage of artists exploring verbal communication, meaning, and attempting to break down the nature of the human voice as

it is cultured by language. I think of projects like the Dadaist sound poetry of artists such as Hugo Ball, or the work of both Italian and Russian Futurists. These traditions continued with avant-garde music and artists from those within the Fluxus movement through to contemporary extended vocal technique performers. The Russian Futurists' 'zaum' experimental poems, through focussing on sounds and dissecting words into phrases that are linguistically unintelligible, sought to create a 'transrational' language for freer expression than that which 'common language' restricts.¹

It could be argued that the cultured complexity of verbal language makes for a degree of futility in attempts at 'pure meaning' through the deconstruction of words. We will always read all sounds and gestures as having some sort of meaning; meaning which will always be muddied by our cultural experience and prejudices, and which will never be totally unadulterated. Nina's analysis of language – by her use of self-portraiture, her inclusion of her personal narrative of learning Norwegian, and implication of her

¹ Kruchenykh, A 1921, 'Declaration of Transrational Language', in AM Lawton and H Eagle (eds.), *Words in Revolution: Russian Futurist Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, New Academia Publishing, Washington, 2005, pp. 182-183.



partner Åsmund in the work – announces itself from the get-go as loaded, personal and full of meaning.

Language and culture

The development of verbal language is symptomatic of and parallels the development of the culture around it. In Nina's producing of video works to explore her personal experiences in learning Norwegian, it was perhaps unintended that the work reflected gender power plays inherent in her own experience. Nina notes herself on gender and patriarchy in her work: "The fact that language is not gender neutral is reflected in my experiences of learning Norwegian. [...] Though I am not going to enter into a deep conversation on gender and sex in language, at this stage, I wanted to acknowledge the gendered nature of language and how this related to my situation and experience of disempowerment; learning Norwegian for a significant male other." That this gendered aspect of language was present in Nina's final observations on her work, without it being a particularly intentional focus of hers as she set out to create the piece, is testament to the fact that language sits within the overarching culture through which it is received, an overarching culture defined by social prejudices and power structures.

Otherness and not understanding

In considering the absurdity and confusion inherent in Nina's performance, I relate to a famous anecdote surrounding the crash of a Columbian flight bound for Madrid in 1983. It is known that that the pilot, frustrated or disregarding the foreign accent of the automated ground proximity warning system that told him in English to "Pull up!", responded by saying "Shut up, gringo". Shortly afterwards, the plane crashed.² This is an instance of one's foreignness and otherness in language (in this case the computer warning system), being perceived as an unreliability, or even stupidity.

Nina's performance video embodies this perceived absurdity or silliness of being unable to speak a particular language. Her struggle on camera is uncomfortable and seems to defy reason, and yet she persists.

Nina Ross' work is a simple yet clever and conscious discussion of language and identity. Her uniquely personal take on a topic of much fascination over generations of artists has made for a fresh and subtly complicated contribution to this lineage.

² Robinson, P 2006, 'When your sat-nav says 'right', why do you turn left?', *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 9 February.

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