

Aviary, Jagna Lewandowska

The text does not “gloss” the images, which do not “illustrate” the text. For me, each has been no more than the onset of a kind of visual uncertainty (...) Text and image, interlacing, seek to ensure the circulation and exchange of these signifiers: body, face, writing; and in them to read the retreat of signs.

Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*

Through the simple form of the haiku, ‘an islet of epiphany’, Roland Barthes sought out a critique of the moralising Western system of symbols desperately defending itself against the ‘empty symbol’ or a lack of meaning. For in Japan, the language is made up of ‘empty words’, cities develop around ‘empty centres’ and the essence of ikebana is not the flowers, but the air circulating around the stems.

Anna Klimczak’s *Aviary* is the story of emptiness full of intangible meanings. Inspired in large part by Japan, the installation is to the viewer what *kōan* (a verbal riddle designed to focus the attention during meditation) is to the beginning student of Zen - a question with no clear, unambiguous answer, based on the paradox of a puzzle with no solution, to be struggled over for eternity. Superficially, Klimczak’s minimalist work consists of parts, which are easy to decipher; however, when the time comes to draw conclusions, all the meanings uncovered during the deductive process become blurred, without the culturally-imposed promises of sense ever having been fulfilled.

Resembling in shape the aviary, which gave the work its title, the installation at the BWA is visible through the gallery’s expansive window. The semi-transparent film hugging the entire irregular openwork frame does not give the impression of a solid wall, but is, nonetheless, substantial enough for there to be partial shade on the interior of the construction. Just like a traditional Japanese room, there is more of an ‘outline’, or a ‘notion of a space’ than a separate room.

As our gaze pierces the filters interfering with our clarity of vision (the film separating us from the illuminated images inside which entice us with their colour), we reach the interior of the structure, in the shape of a casket. When we look at the slides displayed on a screen suspended inside the *Aviary*, we notice that in the photographs (which document Japanese performance art by Klimczak), the viewers are watching the unfolding situation through a window. From the glazed interior of the gallery, they peek into the garden surrounding the building, where the artist as if in a fairy tale, lost in the lush vegetation, holds up signs displaying single words.

The words shown do not form a coherent narrative, but neither are they random. At one point they were obviously linked by a particular story (distant in time, belonging

to another space or project) of which only remnants in a fleeting sense now remain. The meaning of the individual terms dissolves into the greenery, a stream of references, and also due to the distance compounded by the additional barriers to be overcome by the image in order for it to reach the contemporary audience, whether they be material - the panes, screens, fabrics or walls - or audiovisual - performance, photography and video.

Made unreal in the chaos of the above mediations and lost in the resized, overwhelming forest, the figure of the woman (simultaneously the artist) plays with the viewer with a hungry stare, sending however only a rudimentary message - a story which disappears in mid-sentence. It is not known whether the girl, lost in the undergrowth, is looking for help or whether she is also indicating a problem in need of a solution: the alienation from the natural world which provokes modern phobias or the artist's reflection on the reception and influence of art.

Anna Klimczak's work needs to breathe, and have contact with the outside world. The transferral of the situation visible on the screen into the gallery space (with the viewers shut inside a glass cube, cut off from the world) provokes an interesting looping. We focus to the same extent on the installation, levitating and moving slightly in the airflow, as we do on the view outside the gallery window, where we unintentionally seek a further analogy.

The Aviary also deceives with sound. Transposed rustling noises coming from the interior of the construction may be both the wind blowing through the trees and an indeterminate industrial hum. Once again, however, we will not be allowed to find the source.

We observe an accumulation of meaning and complexity. In starting from the most direct of the arts - performance - Klimczak deliberately multiplies the obstacles to distance us from the original, simple meaning, which ultimately loses its importance. Perhaps the most important thing is precisely that discomfort which accompanies the viewer, the barriers, which painfully separate us from the world.

As the layers of the installation are progressively uncovered, further senses become involved. The sounds and images, full to the same extent of natural associations as the mechanical sounds which distort them, become, after a moment of intense analytical work, merely a suggestion, a background for the internal journeys of the viewers. Just as when contemplating *kōan* 'we must reject the desire for knowledge and unite with the spirit of [*the Aviary*]'.

*R. Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, Warsaw 2004

translation: Karen Sayce

