

Anne Charnock

CERTAINTY SUSPENDED



CASTLEFIELD GALLERY

publications

CERTAINTY SUSPENDED

artwork

given a choice, that I

struggle to scribble

~~UNDERMINED~~ MEASURED

~~WITH NECESSITY SIZE ALONE~~ ABSOLUTELY.

ext is ~~marginally~~ fairly

more important critical to in realia:

THE SPACE OF LANGUAGE

FIONA CURRAN

*The thing that most exasperates you is to find yourself at the mercy of the fortuitous, the aleatory, the random, in things and in human actions – carelessness, approximation, imprecision, whether your own or others. In such instances your dominant passion is the impatience to erase the disturbing effects of that arbitrariness or distraction, to re-establish the normal cause of events.*¹

In Italo Calvino's novel, *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*, the reader is implicated in the author's narrative journey. Calvino addresses the reader of the novel in a playful gesture that, from the start, combines traditional approaches to establishing a fictional world alongside a revealing of the narrative structure at work in creating such a fiction. A dialogue is set up that speaks to the reader directly seeking to 'second guess' their thoughts in response to reading the book, to question their expectations and their desires.

Revealing the invisible 'contract' between reader and writer (and therefore the basis of all fiction), the narrative strategies of this novel are as much a part of its 'story' as any idea of an imaginary

tale full of characters with a plot comprising of a beginning, middle and end. Akin to the filmic tricks of *nouvelle vague* directors of the 1960s where characters within the film turn to the camera and directly address the audience and where stuttering camera work and repeated shots of the same scene dispel any notion of our suspension of disbelief and destabilize the viewer's perceptual plane, so Calvino the novelist uses tricks to pull us into his narrative framework and engage us at the same time as laughing at our hopeless expectations.

The reason this book has always fascinated me is that it guides you, the reader, on a dizzying journey through a series of separate stories that interrelate without any clear sense of a continuous, unfolding plotline. Calvino adopts the strategy of an open text that both frustrates and excites. Each time you approach a climax in one narrative you are stopped in your tracks. Just at the point when you feel all the frustration of wanting to know 'what happens next', at this heightened point of irritation, the author spins you around and sets off in another direction. Suddenly

**It was ~~so~~ far from perfect
that ~~but~~ ~~no-one~~
everyone ~~dared~~ pleaded
to ~~leave~~ stay.**

Disparity Series No. 2, giclée print, 48 x 93cm, 2006.

you embark on another journey and you find yourself hooked, pulled into this new tale as the previous one recedes into the background, its force beginning to fade until you have, before long, forgotten who the characters were, what they were doing and why they seemed so compelling and important at the time.

Literature, in this format, undermines the certainty you expect to feel in your position as a reader and therefore becomes a threat to your self-composure. The closer you feel you are approaching the centre of the work – its meaning or message – the further the work seems to withdraw from you, and the author deliberately flaunts your frustrations back at you within the text as though he were standing behind you and reading the book over your shoulder...

*It's not that you expect anything in particular from this particular book. You're the sort of person who, on principle, no longer expects anything of anything. There are plenty, younger than you or less young, who live in the expectation of extraordinary experiences: from books, from people, from journeys, from events, from what tomorrow has in store, but not you. You know that the best you can expect is to avoid the worst...*²

There is a parallel here that can be drawn with Anne Charnock's *Uncertainty Series* and *Disparity Series*, both of which play with language to reveal and conceal thoughts and actions. The *Disparity*

Series is based on the artist's interest in utopian and dystopian fiction and the blurring of the boundaries between these two genres. The utopic impulse could be described as the search for unity and perfectibility and therefore the desire for a closed or contained system; the dystopian, however, cuts through this closure in the form of imperfection, dysfunction and openness. The two terms therefore co-exist as a necessary counterpoint to one another, functioning in a dialogic relationship that calls upon our broader cultural and historical notions of the perfect and the imperfect.

In the *Disparity Series*, a number of the texts refer in some way to journeying and place, yet, as with Calvino's novel, there is a twist in the tale as though the reader/viewer has reached a crossroads with signs pointing in a variety of directions. The routes we take affect our present and future journeys but the signposts intended to guide us are not always clear in helping us to reach our destination.

I started writing this essay during a long train journey that involved a diversion from Manchester en route to London. I arrived at the station to find that, due to signal failure, all direct trains were cancelled. Customers were advised to seek alternative routes yet each person I spoke to suggested a different journey plan. I could go via Sheffield, Leeds or Birmingham then via Reading, Banbury or Watford. I tried to work out which would be the quickest route

**THE
JOURNEY
CAUSE
IS
EVERYTHING
MISGUIDED.**

Disparity Series No. 3, giclée print, 59 x 50cm, 2006.

but this was difficult as the information I received was conflicting and seemed unreliable. Armed with a range of possibilities and without the means to distinguish the 'best' option I found myself frustrated, confused and, quite literally, dis-orientated.

My experiences as a traveller mimicked those of Calvino's reader – starting the journey/book with a clear sense of direction and then discovering that the parameters of expectation were being disrupted by a change of events. The standard rules that govern our lives enabling us to plan, reason, communicate with and understand one another, as well as structuring our environment to enable us to navigate our way through, are perhaps simply a series of myths that we choose to live by. In truth, as Lacan cautioned us, 'reality is precarious'.³

In Charnock's work it is this sense of the precarious that is given a voice through the use of text and the visual representation of thought/language. In the *Uncertainty Series* we find a number of works that lay bare the confusion inherent in the artist's practice and her decision-making process. These include choices regarding content, idea and aesthetic – colour, scale, format and medium. There is something in question then about the nature of authorship and about our prevailing notions of creativity. These works expose a troubled, uncertain origin and raise a question mark over the ability of both image and text to communicate a

clear, unadulterated meaning that will allow a single interpretation free from conflicting viewpoints or varying interpretation.

Charnock has described her text works as revealing 'stuttering thoughts', and these works lay bare this sense of fracturing discourse in their visual format, as colour and the strike-through are used to separate the different readings. Inevitably, however, words remain that hover across both interpretations combining both colours and a partial strike-through so that our ability to read either text in isolation becomes impossible. We are forced to read the two simultaneously and switch between them or to retrace our steps and go back to the beginning in an attempt to follow a single narrative.

It might be useful to introduce a term here borrowed from Michel Foucault in his introduction to *The Order of Things* where he writes about the notion of *heterotopia*. The origin of the term is a medical one used to describe a tissue that develops in a place that is other than normal; the tissue poses no threat but simply marks an anomaly, a dis-location in the organism. Foucault adopts the term to designate the idea of an 'other' space within language that enables us to think this and that, the same and the other, utopia and dystopia. Heterotopia would be the place/space where we are able to think contradictory categories simultaneously and therefore it represents a space of

impossibility. In Foucault's text, he famously uses an example from Jorge Luis Borges' essay, *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*, where he lists a classificatory system for identifying animals in a Chinese encyclopaedia. The system of thought illustrated sits so oddly with those of our Western imagination that it is a source of great humour as the categories include animals both real and imagined; those, for example, that 'belong to the emperor' and those 'that from a long way off look like flies'. What interests Foucault, however, is the fact that this fable exposes the 'limitation' of our own systems of thought. The juxtaposition of such contradictory examples linked by an alphabetical listing under a single category brings that which does not belong together into the same space that is the 'non-place of language'.⁴

In a sense, then, heterotopia embraces a notion of contradiction as a positive force that becomes productive in opening up new spaces within language to think what cannot be thought in our conventional systems; the given codes of our culture. Heterotopia, by opening a space within language, exposes the impossibility of closure and a resistance to the utopian impulse; it marks a space of uncertainty and disorientation.

**IN A MOMENT OF CLARITY
INSANITY, SHE PERCEIVED
DIVINED THE ROOT ROUTE
OF TOWARDS ALL THEIR
PROBLEMS DESTINY.**

Disparity Series No. 1, giclée print, 54 x 93cm, 2006.

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold. . . Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and opposite one another) to 'hold together'. This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabula; heterotopias. . . desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the very lyricism of our sentences.⁵

Charnock's text works embrace the disruptive force of a disintegrating narrative while embedding this very dissolution in a visual layout that communicates quite the opposite effect. The format of the works – whether produced as posters or in vinyl lettering – the choice of colours and typography and the slick, highly polished finish all mimic the classic conventions of advertising and its flagrant embrace of the utopian in the service of a commodity culture. The artist appropriates these tools in order to reassert a sense of certainty and a convincing aesthetic that masks the hesitation at the heart of the text itself. Sitting between the utopian and the dystopian then, in an *other* space that marks

the disjunction between word and image, these text pieces belong to a *heterotopia* that stutters, that stops and starts, that interrupts the narrative flow presumed to ensue between thought and speech. We are lured in by the perfect, candy coloured imagery only to find as we did with Calvino's novel, that all is not what it appears to be, that our expectations won't be fulfilled or our certainties confirmed.

*Are you disappointed? Let's see. Perhaps at first you feel a bit lost . . . But then you go on and you realize that the book is readable nevertheless, independently of what you expected of the author, it's the book in itself that arouses your curiosity; in fact, on sober reflection, you prefer it this way, confronting something and not quite knowing what it is.*⁶

1 Italo Calvino, *If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*, Trans. William Weaver, Minerva, 1992, p. 27.

2 *ibid*, p. 4.

3 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Hain Miller, Trans. Dennis Porter, Routledge, 1992, p. 30.

4 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Vintage Books, 1994, p. xvii.

5 *ibid*, p. xviii.

6 Calvino, *op cit.*, p. 9.