

With Hidden Noise: Sculpture, Video and Ventriloquism,
Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 8 May – 8 August 2004



Asta Groeting, *Convention/ces poupées qui disent oui*, 2001, © the artist and Galerie Martina Janda, Vienna and Nam June Paik, *Buddha 21*, 2003, © the artist

A New Accent on Sculpture

Following a vicious encounter on his television chat show with Emu in the 1970s, Michael Parkinson spoke on a number of occasions subsequently of how much he hated Rod Hull's sidekick ('that bloody bird'). Strangely, Hull himself resented Emu, presumably once he realised he was fastened forever to the silent bird to which he owed his fame and which halved his celebrity. Hull's accidental death in 1999 made an odd kind of sense – he fell off his roof while moving the television aerial – and one imagines him hurling abuse at Emu before leaving the house, the unseeing bird slumped before the television, the interference on the screen increasing, the silence of puppeteer, puppet, and TV.

This scenario flickered into life behind my eyes while I walked around *With Hidden Noise: Sculpture, Video and Ventriloquism* at the Henry Moore Institute, which ostensibly takes



sculpture and sound as its theme. Michael Parkinson's remarks, Rod Hull's weird relationship with Emu, and my opening sentences all lightly evoke what is now commonly called 'the uncanny;' that strange feeling we get when a lifeless object is animated, and which according to Freud is experienced at its most intense as dread and horror.¹ Over the last thirty or so years, the *unheimlich* has provided philosophy, cultural studies, and literary and art theory with an endlessly recyclable concept.² Its influence can be sensed just off stage at *With Hidden Noise*, an exhibition which I felt was strongest where it dealt with the ontology of the three dimensional object, but started to look overstretched and nearly lost its footing when it started to fiddle about with television installations.

'The box' plays an important role in the exhibition, on show even before one enters in the form of a replica of John Logie Baird's extraordinarily primitive early television apparatus placed in the foyer. Constructed from a tea chest, biscuit tin, darning needle, and other bits and pieces, and including the head of the dummy 'Stooky Bill,' used because no human being would have been able to stand the powerful lights required by Baird, this 1990 copy of the 1925 original is meant to bring together the themes that shape the exhibition. Yet the show itself is titled after an object in the first room, Marcel Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise* (1916), on loan from the Philadelphia Museum of Art. A ball of string clamped between two pieces of metal secured by four long screws, Duchamp's work carries just-illegible messages in 'franglais' on its upper and lower surfaces and contains an unknown object. Duchamp had asked his friend and patron Walter Arensberg to place something in the space inside the ball of string before it was clamped between the plates, and he enjoyed the experience of not knowing that detail of the work. If it introduces notions of secrecy, lack, authorship, and noise, it is less easy to find a fit for Duchamp's object in the three divergent themes of the exhibition's subtitle – sculpture, video, and ventriloquism. The gap between Baird's TV equipment and Duchamp's object articulates both the ambition and the overextension of *With Hidden Noise*, which does not quite gel conceptually, I feel; because within the limited compass of a small group of only ten works (this excludes Baird's apparatus) it attempts too much, when a larger display would have allowed a more studied exploration and development of its themes.



This is not to say, however, that the slight tearing-at-the-seams sensation one experiences before such a heterogeneous set of works spoils the show. The Henry Moore Institute is to be commended not only for the very rare loan of Duchamp's object, but also for showing a related work that was inspired by it, Robert Morris's *Box with the Sound of its own Making* (1961). Morris's early conceptual works emerged in the wake of Duchamp's return to prominence in America in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the last years of Duchamp's life. The *Box* consists of a smooth, featureless, wooden box resembling a piece of furniture or a small scale Donald Judd, accompanied by the sounds of Morris constructing it played back on a concealed CD. Its absurd reordering of cause and effect – its inscription of memory in the present, of process in the complete – recall Spike Milligan's instruction 'open the crate with the crowbar you'll find inside,' and allow its alignment with Duchamp's *With Hidden Noise* along the axes of hidden-ness, noise, and (a)temporality. The curators have emphasised the relationship visually by constructing similar pedestals for the two, and approximately matching the dimensions of the small vitrine containing Duchamp's object to the dimensions of Morris's *Box*.

In the gallery space and in the attractive catalogue, the 'box' idea is extended to relate several of the works and themes: Morris's *Box*, the 'box in the corner of the room,' the one that houses the ventriloquist's dummy, and so on. This is continued in Juan Muñoz's *Gracias* (1988), consisting of a large crate open on one side and at the top, upon which is perched a papier-mâché ventriloquist's doll, its top half concealed by another box. Pushed up against the wall, the main, wooden construction is built to the dimensions of the adult human body, inviting entry into the space of the 'sculpture' while suggesting the cacophonous performance of a Punch and Judy show, in spite of its stillness and silence. The uncanny aspect of the relationship between ventriloquist and dummy that I introduced earlier – that discomfiting filiality suggesting a kind of compromised authority that might be reversed at any moment – is raised here in the absence of the human: the dummy looks like it has been told off and forcibly silenced.



In their pre-emptive circumvention of facile interpretation, these three non-sculptures by Duchamp, Morris, and Muñoz provide a powerful introduction to the exhibition, which is not really sustained by the other two works in this room. Tony Oursler's *Underwater (Blue/Green)* of 1996 looks like a classic example of 'gag art.' Inspired by those pedagogical museum exhibits where, for instance, a human face is projected onto a Roman bust to make it speak about everyday activity in the Roman Empire and 'bring history to life' for bored schoolchildren, Oursler has projected a film of his own bemused-looking face onto a smooth Brancusi-like stone lit in blue and green and submerged in a perspex TV-sized box. *Underwater* is technically attractive and, like much contemporary art, fine as an amusing one-liner, but when we seek out its depths we recover only clichéd flotsam and jetsam to do with the corrosive effects of television, blocked communication, and the media's banalisation of events. The visual arts tend towards over-simplicity when making (or provoking) statements about the 'society of the spectacle,' and seem critically redundant in the face of the discursive strain of cultural theory from Debord to Baudrillard which has analysed provocatively the issues involved. At least Oursler's disembodied-head-as-self-portrait fits in well with the theme of ventriloquism, which cannot be said for Bill Woodrow's *Songs of Praise*, constituting rather an awkward presence in the show. Consisting of found objects like washing machines, painted to resemble amplifiers and connected to microphones made from strips of metal, Woodrow has recreated on a human scale the space of a stage awaiting its performers. Obviously, the anticipated amplification and performance are the point in the context of this exhibition, but *Songs of Praise* is closer to an installation than a sculpture (though it could be used productively to question the nature of sculpture). It does not square at all with the idea of ventriloquism, which starts to look a bit strained here. Unfortunately, too, Woodrow's contribution to *With Hidden Noise* has the disjointed appearance of an art school project, lacking the conceptual sophistication and poetic indeterminism of the better works on display.

The logic of the exhibition becomes clearer in its second half, for if the first room gestures critically at traditional sculpture, this is less obvious in the other two where television and photography take over. Lucy Gunning's *Malcolm, Lloyd, Angela, Norman, Jane* (1997) consists of five televisions facing in different directions. Each screen shows one of the people



named in the title of the work – all of whom stammer and who appear in these videos having responded to an advertisement placed by Gunning – reading a text or being interviewed. The piece is deliberately coarse in its method and appearance and far from being ‘compelling,’ as suggested by the exhibition catalogue, is something of a turn off. Overly-literal and self-consciously alienating, its message that ‘communication is difficult’ and ‘television is a slick and deceptive medium’ is pretty conventional, provoking little more in the way of a response than a ‘Yes, I know.’ Nam June Paik’s *Buddha 21* of 2003 (another impressive loan) uses similar video technology to greater effect, facing a statue of the Buddha towards a TV screen which displays the head of the statue itself in real time, filmed by a video camera behind the TV. Bringing together East and West, the traditional and the modern, religion and technology, Paik’s work has a simplicity and depth that Gunning’s lacks, demonstrating that conceptual work need not carry its content so crudely in its method (uncommunicative works of art about non-communication, boring works of art about boredom) to draw an audience to reflect upon that content.

A third exhibit in this room is a photograph *Convention/ces poupées qui disent oui* by the German artist/ventriloquist Asta Gröting (2001), showing a gathering of delegates (with dummies) at the annual ventriloquists’ convention held in Las Vegas. Under the rubric *The Inner Voice*, Gröting has produced a series of works over the last ten years dealing with ventriloquism. The dummy she made acts as the focus for her other exhibit in *With Hidden Noise*, a set of five films of ventriloquists scripted by Gröting entitled *The Inner Voice/Las Vegas* (1999-2000). Ventriloquism is evoked literally here, but also more obliquely in the sense that Gröting created a doll for others to speak through and wrote a script for others to read from. This is an interesting and entertaining enough work in its own right, but it brings back the nagging dissatisfaction around the exhibition’s central concept of ventriloquism. Like the notion of the uncanny from which it seems to spring, the concept loses its nimble acuity and conceptual value when it becomes blunted by a multitude of sub-meanings to do with voice, noise coming from hidden sources, reading a text written by another, television, role playing, dialectics, any splitting, twinning, or loss of control (which serve to expand its flexibility further through its easy adaptation to various psychoanalytic themata), and so on.



Some would argue that this accommodation of *anything* from Pygmalion to Postmodernism actually signals the strength through its usability of a given theme or concept. But my argument here is that unless reasonable limits are observed in any interpretative, critical, or curatorial endeavour, the distinctive cutting edge of a concept is lost and the project becomes a victim of limitless possibility, overburdened by *potentially* inclusive material and missing its own point. I feel that this happened at an early stage of *With Hidden Noise*, where the 'bright idea which animates this exhibition: ventriloquism'³ was adhered to with insufficient rigour and compromised by proximate themes.

This is to say that the idea of ventriloquism would have offered a perfectly coherent, central strand to the exhibition, able to withstand the internal bickering that an over-expanded deployment of that concept brings. The remarkable film that ends the show, *Dummy* (1998) by Imogen Stidworthy, demonstrates this, making evident the haunting potential of ventriloquism for art. Projected onto both sides of a screen set up in the centre of the final room, on one side of the divide we are shown a speaking ventriloquist's mouth reflected in a small handheld mirror, while on the other the camera lingers on the dummy and the spaces it occupies, not allowing it to attain to convincing animation. The voices of ventriloquist and dummy emerge from either side of the screen creating a single reality out of two perspectives that weave and intertwine in our imagination. These shifts, transpositions, and blendings are exacerbated by the use of subtitles, which run forward on one side of the screen and back to front on the other. Mysterious and uncanny, Stidworthy's film is like the ventriloquist's art itself, presented as a unified act whilst yet displaying its disturbing fissure that we explore with our eyes and ears as well as our bodies, for we must walk around the screen to get a 'full view' as though it were a sculpture.

While there is much to engage with and enjoy in *With Hidden Noise*, in a different, more critical sense, Stidworthy's film also rehearses the exhibition's not-quite-coming-together as a unit. This is echoed in the exhibition catalogue, where Stephen Feeke's interesting essay on Baird's early experiments with television seems ill-at-ease with the sculptural context, and also with its catalogue companion, Jon Wood's excellent account of sound and ventriloquism



in sculpture.⁴ Again, one views a kind of double act dialoguing in different registers and disagreeing a little with itself, rather than a homogenous entity speaking in unison which a sharply defined, unitary concept or a larger scale exhibition could have facilitated and worked through, sealing over divisions instead of staging them.

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¹ Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny,"' *Art and Literature* Harmondsworth, 1990, 335-76.

² Martin Jay, 'The Uncanny Nineties,' *Cultural Semantics: Keywords of Our Time*, London, 1998, 157-64, 234-5.

³ *With Hidden Noise: Sculpture, Video and Ventriloquism*, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2004, 6.

⁴ Stephen Feeke, 'John Logie Baird and Stooky Bill: Ventriloquism in Early Television,' 9-13, Jon Wood, 'With Hidden Noise: Sculpture, Video and Ventriloquism,' 15-26.

