Art & Language Paints a Picture II

Chateau Montsoreau

the event

It was an unsettling coincidence that on Wednesday 8 April, the very day that Trump threatened to fulfil his threat that 'A whole civilisation will die tonight', an audience gathered at Chateau Montsoreau in the Loire Valley to watch as his portrait was painted by the performance group the Jackson Pollock Bar in a collaboration with Art & Language. This performance was different in kind to the protest art of 'march against kings', being based on a script written in 2017, a year into Trump's first Presidential term, by Michael Baldwin. At that time Art & Language comprised Baldwin and Mel Ramsden, however Mel died in 2024.[1] It proved to be an hypnotic act to watch. It is unlikely that such a performance could be staged in a public gallery in present day America, without funding cancelled, patrons lost and a siege by MAGA fans.

the collaborators

For over three decades Art & Language has scripted a dozen performances for Jackson Pollock Bar, the Freiburg group (invented by Christian Matthiessen) who stages these conversations on art by commissioning actors to mime to a pre-recorded soundtrack. Baldwin has explained their move to performance: 'we had to abandon our puritanism in relation to our status as among those who began Conceptual art.' These collaborations have travelled to art venues like Documenta, ZKM and Getty, performing a uniquely conversational form of intellectual black comedy, frequently alongside Art & Language exhibitions. This performance was staged in the context of a major exhibition of A&L portraits, in the contemporary art museum housed in a vast Renaissance castle at Montsoreau.

the studio

All of their collaborations with the Jackson Pollock Bar have been set in some version of the studio, beginning in 1995. Four years later at the Fundacio Antoni Tapies, during the exhibition 'Art & Language in Practice' they recorded '*Art & Language Paints a Picture'* in 1999. The 'artists' mime the audio of the script while working on a painting, except the

[1] The original 2017 script had three parts that of Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden and Charles Harrison, the third actor C, only enters to read intermittently from 'a lengthy ekphrastic description of a conventionally painted description'. In the 2026 performance the third part was cut along with the readings of the extended descriptive passages.

actors were standing in, or rather, most of the time kneeling, for the artists. In the new version of '*Art & Language Paints a Picture II' a* canvas was laid on the floor bearing a large, rough outline of Trump's head. Materials consisted of tins of acrylic paint in ivory black, titanium white, deep orange, dirty yellow or red, and long-handled brushes in a can. They bent down on knees, clenching the handle of brushes between their teeth and worked the paint onto the canvas in strained head movements. There were A4 sheets of paper with fragments of the Trump head which they checked from time to time as they worked across the canvas, heads down.

the conversation

The conversation the audience hears, being pre-recorded, is played on loud-speakers and is frequently interrupted by extended gaps as the two figures crouch down to get on with the painting. In between, as they reach up for a different colour or stretch a leg, the 'artists' reflect on their act of painting a portrait of Trump by mouth. But their speech itself is made more difficult by having a long-handled brush, most times, wedged between their teeth, in both the recording and miming. The audience can also catch an occasional missed timing in the synching of audio and miming. Seen live, the bad synching has an *unheimlich* quality, which is lost in a film of the performance. But what is said, however mismatched and garbled, matters as they reckon with their subject and the implications of painting by mouth.

The 'artists' speak of being brought low, as it is 'no erect artistic stance for us but a crouch on all fours', and of facing accusations of 'cultural appropriation' by those 'who have developed great skill and control in painting by mouth as a matter of physical necessity.' It is from this position that the 'artists' work hard for about an hour speaking, between bouts of painting, raising doubts about the portrait being 'easily misunderstood as expressive', about the 'rules of the genre that require some kind of resemblance' and the 'conventional signs, emblems or metonyms that exchange for political and social practices and indeed systems, both coherent and mad, or both.'

What is at stake is the subject, with 'an impossible comb-over' and 'painting a picture of a monstrosity using an insecure technique.' Thinking aloud, they question whether such technique 'makes an external relation to Trump – or rather to the need to hide and disfigure his image as well as a reflective reference to being in the artworld, or what dusty corner of it that we occupy.'

The performance

The viewers of this very physical performance are drawn in as the canvas is filled, gripped by the combination of the artists' demanding task and the maddening

questions they raise of a ‘genre that must transform itself into something trapped as a kind of liquified chaos… standing as signs for the mutually annihilating presences that political imagery produces.’ They compound the problem by imagining singing and painting by mouth, though it’s only a crazed thought, ‘a wonderfully fucked-up *Gesamtkunstwerk* - a union of all the arts practised as something hopeless and without a doubt, homeless.’ In a final act the massive portrait is defaced by a heavy application of black paint that forms large runs down through the dirty yellow hair and orange tinted skin, as the ‘artists’ with a flourish hold up their monstrous Trump to the audience.

Art & Language has a long history of disabling themselves by painting by mouth, dating back to 1980. In collaborating with the Jackson Pollock Bar, the artists are further compromised. For they are, in the first instance, the ‘ventriloquists’ in as much as they supply and via mediating voices, seem to utter the words on the soundtrack, but as they appear in the guise of actors they are sort of dummies, but dummies in actual human action. Moreover, the actors are not artists, but performers. It thus becomes very hard to characterise the roles of the *dramatis personae* neatly as ventriloquist dummies. The estrangement of the senses, beyond the linguistic, somehow matches the polymorphous perversity of their subject, whose arrested development allows him to run at the mouth, spewing forth threats and profanities on a global stage. The performance draws attention to a yawning gap between what is thought, what is seen and what is spoken. All contribute to what is enacted. Under these circumstances and in such times neither the studio (nor museum) is a safe space for either artist or audience but rather, in A&L’s dark phrase ‘a bad place’.