

Jytte Høy

## Words, Objects and the Space Between

*All prepositions are virtually invisible. They uphold language as space holds up the planets. In their limited numbers, up, down, out, in, over, under, etc. they perpetuate the motion of consciousness like the movement of the world. They position all nouns in relation to each other, silently confirming our belief that we in this world are pre-positioned to be upheld by an inexhaustibly large, ever-existing frame of reference.<sup>i</sup>*

In this quote from the essay collection *The State of Secrecy* Danish poet Inger Christensen compares the immateriality of language to cosmic materiality, thereby indicating fundamental connections between language and the world. These are also the connections –discovered or devised– that characterize the work of Jytte Høy –the positioning of things in relation to other things. The fact that language is a highly influential factor in Høy’s production provides additional cause for quoting an author: Language is no mere generator or “object machine” but a work in its own right in this universe where proprietary right is maximized to connect all works, producing a long, aesthetic genealogy –a conceptual pedigree with each concept or object giving birth to the next one.

This book presents a selection of Jytte Høy’s recent works. The role of language has become ever more prominent in her sculpturally founded production. Høy has spent a long time working with language as part of her practice. Exhibitions and public commissions like *A Historical Alphabet for you* (2004) or *Alphabet City* (2012) quite literally treat language as sculptural material in the form of man-sized letters made from traditional materials like marble, granite, wood, metal, etc. Then there are Høy’s works on paper, which celebrate the ornamental value of language: Drawings of colour-coded capital letters emphasizing individual words and punctuating the significance of the sentences in favour of aesthetic expression.

Her latest works and exhibition projects demonstrate a development from the use of language as signs towards an emphasis on literary expression. Thus her exhibition *Quote; The Raven* (2010) takes its cue from Edgar Allan Poe’s Gothic poem *The Raven*. Selected sentences from the poem such as “And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming” and “Only this and nothing more” serve as titles for sculptures whose entirety constitutes a parallel universe to the literary point of departure.

Similarly the series *Words Found More Added* (2011-) takes a literary point of departure, but these are purely textual works. Furthermore Høy has radically embraced the principles of language by working systematically with fundamental semantic structures. Høy generally invents rules by which to work and *Words Found More Added* is no exception. The series is structured around

sentences gleaned from works of literature, which Høy isolates from their narrative context and augments with her own words: Sentences from modern literary classics –both expressive, experimental literature like that of Anne Carson and Hélène Cixous and classic works by Emily Brontë and Jules Verne– are treated as linguistic *objets trouvés*. Høy appropriates them and subsequently contributes new linguistic material.

Høy “steals” sentences that to some degree communicate the content or atmosphere of the book, such as the quote from *Wuthering Heights*, where Catherine exclaims: “I accepted him, Nelly. Be quick, and say whether I was wrong!” which summarises the moral dilemma of the choice between true love and social status. Høy answers Catherine’s existential question (of life or death) in two sentences that instantly violate all proper rules of communication: “Over the Top or Down Under. To the Right or to the Wrong.”

Instead of embracing the narrative premise of the sentence she has found, Høy responds with a kind of associative language game that follows its own, hidden rules. For example, prepositions defy conventional requirements by not relating to anything specific, hence losing their original function. This makes these “virtually invisible” prepositions highly palpable. They gain “material” value in their own right. Høy juggles linguistic conventions, violating them to change the function and significance of the words, suddenly highlighting “the space between the planets”. The meaning of a sentence is fixed only when it is complete –up to that point the significance of the signs remains fluid. On the face of things the questions appear to have no relation to the answers. Yet Høy’s directions, both physical (up/down) and moral (right/wrong), remain spatially and abstractly connected to their literary points of departure. In other words there is a certain structural method to the madness and the linguistic spin it confers on Brontë’s words.

Language is fundamentally decisive in our understanding of the world: It is a tool for creating order from chaos. In *Words Found More Added* Høy plays on the imagerial thinking of the human brain in its attempts to create cohesion. For example metaphors are the imagerial signifiers of language; they are cultural patterns of understanding that help us structure the world. Metaphors make it possible to discuss the abstract through the tangible, e.g. the frequent connection between “knowledge” and “light” or “sight”: A knowledgeable person is “enlightened” or may have a “bright” idea, gain “insight” etc. Metaphors are so engrained in language that they are usually used without much thought. Yet this charging of language with cultural codes –which are in no way neutral– is firmly anchored in our cultural heritage. Høy makes use of these instruments and our common linguistic ground –which Christensen terms the “ever-existing frame of reference”. *Words Found More Added* expands and utilizes these linguistic associations. There is no finite understanding of these works; they are completed in the mind of the viewer –assuming of course that he or she plays along.

*Words Found More Added* is constituted by sculptural language-acts. They are text works that mimic the classical sculptural process by adding and subtracting material. Høy uses language as a

kind of raw material —chiselling away the excess and adding new literary material. Her work takes its cue not just from the narrative contents of her material but also from material qualities like texture, sensuality, colour, weight, and not least from the sound and rhythm of the words. Høy's Emily Dickinson and Marcel Proust pieces function particularly well as sound poems.

Thus the text works contain a clear parallel to a corpus of work, which Høy refers to as “small objects”. Like *Words Found More Added* they resist all attempts at unambiguous interpretation. They are absurd, banal and irrational juxtapositions of found and processed material, yet they also present an inner visual logic. Through simple means and ill-concealed irony they invite the viewer to join in a sensual game of associations in the same way as Høy's linguistic compositions. Both *Words Found More Added* and the small objects work by somehow personifying or animating otherwise inanimate objects and nouns as is the case with *Vertical Blue (2014)* and *Is blue still the ultimate colour? (2014)*, which play on art-historical references, but their thin wire legs also render them somewhat reminiscent of a pair of elegant ladies preparing for an evening out. In Høy's Baudelaire piece: “I am a cemetery loathed by the moon” she joins in the game by personifying the moon (and a very rude moon at that): “I am the moon pissing in your backyard.”

*Words Found More Added* also works as an “object-generator” for three-dimensional abstractions of individual textual works. For example the works *Wrong Way (2012)* and *Wrong Way Machine (2012)* are related to the Brontë-piece. *Wrong Way* is a photograph of a New York street sign warning of one-way traffic. *Wrong Way Machine* consists of the same photograph multiplied to create a veritable forest of signs in the form of a motorized mobile. In both cases the words “Wrong way” have been robbed of their functionality and in the case of the mobile this effect is exploited to the point of absurdity. Once again Høy plays on the double nature of the words and by robbing them —or rather freeing them— of their context she literally frees the signs to orbit like planets in the cosmos.

In *Words Found More Added* Høy's voice often contributes a temporal and spatial dynamic to otherwise static scenes such as the Laurence Sterne quote: “I can't get out, - I can't get out, said the starling” succinctly answered by Høy's: “ “Jump”, said I”. The sculptural counterpart is constituted by a black-and-white photograph of a starling mounted on a grey block with a cut-out grid dissolving the bird into fragments while simultaneously acting as a grate, holding it back like an ironic reference to the modernist sculptor's cliché commanding the artist to liberate the innate creature within the stone. Or the reference to the fantastic universe of Jules Verne in the quote from *The Green Ray* in which the love-struck protagonist exclaims: “My horizon has gone!” which Høy raises with the word “SPACETIME” to catapult the reader from the three dimensions of everyday life into Einstein's four-dimensional space-time-continuum. Høy's linguistic and sculptural tricks do not attempt to dissolve meaning for the reader. Their aim is quite the opposite:

They seek to create possibilities. Høy stretches and bends the meaning of words and objects to create a space of maximum meaning, which she prefers to call the “space of possibility”. The collapse of meaning is not a goal in its own right. Rather it is a means of creating spaces for thought and possibility.

Høy’s sculptural approach to language is paralleled by her linguistic approach to sculpture. The formal language of her sculptures is as simple and concise as her textual works: short, pithy and audacious. Both forms of expression put subtle, curious questions of the world, to the world, and both are characterized by a simplicity matched only by their complex associative significances. Many years ago the writer G. E. Lessing asserted that poetry has a temporal aspect, which is lacking in sculpture. Hence he argued that sculpture should refrain from “action-packed” topics better represented by poetry since this is an art form that unfolds words sequentially over time, whereas painting and sculpture unfold instantaneously. <sup>ii</sup>

In fact language and literature confer a certain dynamic on Høy’s works: a form of temporality that would never be possible in sculpture. Yet as three-dimensional objects sculptures are not entirely devoid of temporality, since they cannot possibly be experienced from a single angle. They require the viewer to move in space over time. However, as physical objects they are subject to the force of gravity, whereas language can perform temporal quantum leaps in mere seconds, moving effortlessly between past, present and future in the space of a single sentence. Words and objects each have their own aesthetic and signifying strengths, but in combination they open a space of possibility infinitely greater than the sum of the two parts.

Jytte Høy works in a field between collapse and cohesion, the abstract and the concrete, the logical and the absurd: Exploiting the infinite potential for possibility in the betweenity of words and objects. To quote the work from which the title of this book was gleaned: “In the world there are doors - Hello Everybody!”

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i Christensen, Inger, “Silken, rummet, sproget, hjertet” in *Hemmelighedstilstanden (The State of Secrecy)* Gyldendal, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2009, pp. 30-31 (Quote translated by the translator of this article)

ii Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim, *Laokoon. Oder: Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, Reclam, Stuttgart, Germany 1994. Originally published in 1766.