James Brooks
The Information Exchange
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DOMOBAAL

by Lucy Newman Cleeve

James Brooks' practice uses radio, film, television and paper-based media sources of varying cultural status, as starting points to make works within drawing, print, audio and video. The diverse elements of this practice come together in a strong conceptual unity. Much of Brooks' work is concerned with notions of information exchange. With a nod to relational aesthetics he describes his interest in the ways that information is mediated and received, and the role of an audience within this process. And yet there is an implied critique of some of the mechanics of this exchange.

The title of the exhibition references an early manual telephone exchange, and this metaphor provides an important key to interpreting the work. At times we might conclude that Brooks' sees the artist's role as being a conduit for the viewer experience, akin to the role of the telephone operator. At other times, he appears to identify with the viewer, or with the person placing or receiving the call.

Brooks' work also examines how the utopian beliefs and aspirations of Modernism are challenged, altered or subsumed by our present Information Age. This critique of modernism is implied in a series of visual allegories that adopt the language of different modernist art movements. The work recognises the futility in replacing one set of utopian beliefs with another and questions the limitations of our present Information Age, in particular our ability to access and transfer information freely.

One of the most recent works included in this exhibition is *Stripped Biographies*. This work consists of 26 hard-backed biographies purchased from charity shops. Brooks has removed their dust jackets and assembled the books side-by-side without gaps in alphabetical order of the subject's name, to create a large modular canvas. The work appropriates the language of the ready-made, whilst also making a direct visual allusion to the principles of De Stijl and to later Hard Edge painting.

By removing the dust jacket, Brooks challenges the presentation of intimacy within each biography. He has spoken previously of resisting the "obligation of authorial content" to concentrate on "procedural invention rather than autobiographical revelation"[1]

1. James Brooks, in conversation with Jeremy Cooper, Eleven Times James Brooks, Trinity Contemporary, 2010

and this tendency is clearly evident in *Stripped Biographies*. Brooks is not interested in the narrative detail of these personal accounts, but rather in the means through which the information is communicated. With their branding and typographic personality removed, the books become anonymous and the extent to which their content is dominated by their form becomes apparent. Personal histories are manipulated to fit the template and constraints of saleable units of measure.

The dominance of form over content, as dictated by the market, is explored in other work. *Global Editions* represents a schematic of the week's news as published on the front pages of 6 consecutive days of the *International Herald Tribune* (the global version of *The New York Times*). The text has been omitted and the images obscured by a series of black squares. This schematic is reproduced at 1:1 scale on six individual sheets of vellum, layered on top of each other. The black squares and rectangles become more prominent or opaque depending on their placement front to back. This tonal gradation – working from black right through to the lightest grey - intentionally references the geometric abstraction of early international modernism, and attempts to critique the utopian idealism of much of this period of art production in light of the current realism regarding global economies and infrastructures. The combined front pages become a diagrammatical simulation of internal and external relations between countries, corporations, companies and individuals.

The differently shaped squares and rectangles reveal the underlying homologous template to which the print designer and journalist must adhere. Image size, column width, text length have permission to vary only to a limited extent. Each one is confined by rules, be they editorial, graphic, copyright or socio-political censorship. The work demonstrates in visual terms the fact that the very structures that govern our 'free-press' are in fact inimical to the possibility of a free-press, and acquires greater resonance in the context of the current Leveson Inquiry and prosecution of former *News of the World* employees.

Global Editions has a politically subversive quality in revealing the semi-autonomous nature of the media, and in its obliteration of images. In his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord talks about the image as the final form of commodity reification. There is

a sense in which Brooks' work resists this reification. His work rarely involves representational images and even his *Background* series of needle drawings, which are reproductions of images found online or in newspapers, involve the partial obliteration of the original image.

The clue to this subversive intention is also found in the news-story cycles or significant dates that Brooks chooses to use for *Global Editions*. Series 1 of *Global Editions* was made using newspapers from the seven weeks of Lent 2011, which introduces the idea of abstaining from images. *Global Editions No.4* was made using front pages of *The International Herald Tribune* published during the week of the 10-year anniversary of 9/11. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag critiques our numbed response to images of horror, as exacerbated by the proliferation of these images in the media. She argues that, "shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value." By removing the images, Brooks appears to be taking a stance against this source of consumption.

The seemingly abstract squares become symbolic of information being eradicated, erased or covered up. The very potency of a particular story is lost and replaced with the ultimate 100% colour saturation of a surface. Brooks intentionally plays on this derogation to draw attention to our relentless consumption of media information that quickly renders the newspaper published today as waste paper.

The International Herald Tribune also provides the basis for *Saturates*, a sculptural work produced by drenching each individual page of a week's copies of the newspaper in black ink. This repetitive, time-consuming process purges any specific narrative of current affairs from the work, whilst allowing it to retain its physical presence as an object. Such loss of functionality evokes a carcass, and is visually reinforced through the low-lying horizontal presentation of the work, suggestive of a sarcophagus or mausoleum. *Saturates* invites us to mourn the displacement of paper-based media in favour of digital readers and screen-based reception. The title also emphasizes our 'saturation' with news, and the profound information overload caused by free-newspapers and 24-hour breaking news.

The time-consuming process of making *Saturates* is typical of much of Brooks' practice. Often painstaking and performative, it is as

much about marking time as it is about marking paper. There is a sense in which 'time spent making' is equivalent to 'time as a measured unit of value'. And yet, Brooks frequently disrupts this position by making work that requires from him a more immediate intervention. If anything, Brooks' treatment of time is similar to his treatment of images, in that he chooses to resist its commodification. This may be understood as a political stance underpinned by democratic ideals, that also finds expression in Brooks' frequent use of the grid as a stable structure of equality; the repetition of small marks combining to make a whole; and in his acceptance of ready-made 'asymmetrical' compositions in preference to self-elevating aesthetic decision making.

But, to what extent should Brooks work be understood as making overt political statements? An interest in copyright law, freedom of speech and censorship is evident in the work, *Letter from the House of Commons*. In this work, Brooks utilizes a letter received from his MP in response to his request for clarification of current copyright and authorship law. He has translated the text into standardized computer code and then laboriously reproduced the converted code by hand, strictly adhering to the layout of the original reply letter. Brooks' intervention reveals the thin veneer of personalized concern contained within the letter. As with the *Stripped Biographies*, one assumes the words to have been ghost-written: the authenticity of the communication is called into question and with it, perhaps, the credibility of the whole political system.

A new series of ink drawings using the Penguin *Great Ideas* paperback books also explores the ownership of ideas, intellectual property and the politics of information and its exchange. *Great Ideas Copied and Covered* takes the text layout from each paperback book as a ready-made composition. Brooks has copied the text information from the title page on a new piece of paper the same size as the original book, including a central fold. He has then covered the title's surface area by blocking in the title and author's name with black inked geometric shapes to size. In doing so, he translates the original text areas into abstract skeletal manifestations of the book's content.

On one level, the work engages with the agenda of Russian Constructivist painting and design, questioning whether abstraction can ever clearly communicate ideas. And yet, the placement of

these drawings within the gallery space deliberately interrupts the formal vernacular of the exhibition, and is suggestive of a different interpretation. Each *Great Idea* is hung within a different horizontal and vertical plane, as if to reinforce the unique contribution and value of each text, over and against any hierarchical comparison. This arrangement is, at the same time, both democratic and individualizing and when considered together with Brooks' free appropriation of the original *Great Ideas*, provides perhaps the clearest indication of his political stance in relation to the exchange of information and ideas.

Brooks' recent audio vinyl work, *Wall of Sound*, openly appropriates the recordings of Phil Spector to produce an abstract and multi-layered audio composition that references Spector's 'Wall of Sound' production style from the 1960's. It comprises 21 Phil Spector records played and mixed together to form a density of sound. However, instead of the harmonious multi-layering of his production technique, the various songs clash with each other to form a cacophony. Brooks' composition has been mixed in 'mono' to emulate Spector's choice of mono over stereo for his 7" single releases. Spector believed that this production technique allowed him greater control over the listener, where nothing was left to serendipity in respect of the listening environment. Again, this work questions copyright law and the extent to which abstraction can communicate ideas. It also questions and the level of control the composer of a work can have in mediating content to an audience, particularly when that content can be appropriated, sampled and re-sampled by countless others.

Side B of this audio vinyl work includes a track called *Ending Silence (4 minutes 33 seconds)*. The work was inspired by Brooks' observation that the two songs, Simon and Garfunkel's *The Sound of Silence* and Depeche Mode's *Enjoy the Silence* both end with the word 'silence'. The final word and music from the two recordings has been sampled and layered together to the duration of 4 minutes 33 seconds so that just as the songs fade to silence, the ending words and music are repeated. This intended frustration and denial of silence is an attempt to counterpoint John Cage's seminal work entitled *Silence' 4 minutes 33 seconds*, where the score instructs the performer not to play during the entire duration of the piece. The reception of this work, which consists of the ambient sounds that the listeners' hear while it is performed, encourages a period of

introspection and reflection. In *Ending Silence (4 minutes 33 seconds)*, it could be said that the resulting looped audio becomes a mesmeric chant of the word 'silence' which is, in itself, a paradox of the word's content.

Silence is also used as a strategic device in the audio work *Half Ours*, in which Brooks has extended his interest in relational aesthetics and explores the notion of an audience's participation within a work of art. The work consists of a 30-minute episode of *Hancock's Half Hour*, in which Brooks has edited out the specific narrative content so that all that remains is the audience's participatory laughter, presumably at the moment in which a particular joke is delivered. In this work, it is unclear whether the laughter is genuine, or whether it is controlled canned laughter inserted in post-production to maintain the momentum of the episode. Within the exhibition venue, the staccato punctuations of the laughter become surprisingly unsettling, producing a counterpoint to the rest of the work that unsettles any prior reading of it. They are the last thing you hear on leaving the gallery, and in this sense they claim the last word. We are left wondering whether the joke is on us, and questioning the extent to which Brooks has orchestrated and controlled our viewing experience of *The Information Exchange*.

In each of these audio works, silence comes as a relief. The cacophony produced by *Wall of Sound* is oppressive, intruding upon the gallery space with the same volume of presence as a monolithic black sculpture. It behaves as white noise and suggests electromagnetic interference, from which small moments of clarity appear, before being engulfed again by silence. The laughter in *Half Ours* also has a repetitive jarring effect from which silence provides temporary respite. In this exhibition, Brooks has found a way to edit out the noise, giving space to the fragments of information he chooses to mediate. He takes the hympothetical position of the exchange operator of old, making very specific connections and enabling particular voices to be heard. He is also in the audience with us, making the work. Brooks' interventions enable our visual and auditory experience to be slowed down, so that the direct or perfunctory exchanges that the work describes give way to a lingering discourse in which awareness of the mechanics of information exchange is heightened, and personal connections between sources can be made. We are invited to take our seat in the audience next to Brooks, and join him in making the work.

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