

ArtReview Asia



Carsten Nicolai lights up HK

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All Art Is Political: Writings on Performative Art

by Sarah Lowndes Luath Press, £9.99 (softcover)

In this short collection of five texts by Sarah Lowndes, four of which are on single artists, and one of which puts the musicians Mayo Thompson and Keith Rowe in conversation, the Glasgow-based critic and academic foregrounds the process of making – of performing the role of the artist for the benefit of the viewer – as an intrinsically social, and therefore perhaps political, action.

Dieter Roth's cataloguing of his life – as diaries, installations of his belongings and detritus from everyday life, and the hours of footage shot from a CCTV network in the artist's home and made available through various videoworks – which Lowndes details in an essay originally written in 2012, is the most obvious example of her point. Roth's work is about

'recognised and coded patterns [that] demonstrate the distance between self and behaviour', she writes. Thompson and Rowe, in a transcript of a 2008 panel discussion the author chaired, likewise agree on the intrinsic role the audience plays in giving their performance an 'excuse' to happen. Susan Hiller in a 2011 interview speaks of embracing misunderstanding between an artist and her audience. She discusses how over-explanation of an artwork, be it by the artists themselves, a curator or an educator, is a 'big mistake'. Hiller says she relishes the 'gap between intention and interpretation'.

Addressing the relationship between artist and viewer has wider resonance in that it's a relationship that feels analogous to the way in which we all relate to an audience – the rest

of society – in our lives. This is hinted at by the inclusion of the longest individual text of the collection, an essay on the work of Richard Wright, who is also the author's husband. While the text concentrates on Richard Wright the professional artist known particularly for his wall-based painting, Lowndes refers to Wright by his first name and suggests their relationship 'opens the possibility of writing about his work in a different way'. While that may be the most personal essay of the collection, it is Lowndes's 2009 text on Thea Djordjadze that is the best of the book. In it she talks about the Georgian artist's work in terms of translation and the attempts – ultimately impossible – to bridge the gap between self and the social collective. *Oliver Basciano*

Book from the Ground: From Point to Point

by Xu Bing

MIT Press, £17.95/£24.95 (hardcover)

The Book About Xu Bing's Book from the Ground

edited by Mathieu Borysevicz

MIT Press, £17.95/£24.95 (hardcover)

From Point to Point, part of Xu Bing's wider project *Book from the Ground*, is a 112-page novel depicting 24 hours in the life of an ordinary office worker, Mr Black, from seven one morning to seven the next, as he wakes, eats breakfast, goes to work, meets friends, looks for love online and goes out on a date. The book has punctuation marks, but no text; in place of words there are pictograms, logos, illustrative signs and emoticons, all taken from real symbols in use around the world. The artist has collated these over a period of seven years and used them to devise a universal ideographic language, in theory understandable by anyone engaged with modern life.

On one level Xu achieves his goal: it doesn't take too much effort for the reader – 'interpreter' might be more appropriate – to decipher the central character's day. Mr Black decides what shoes to wear (Lacoste, Adidas, Nike logos) and what to have for lunch (McDonald's arches, illustration of a steaming steak/bowl of noodles/sushi). He becomes increasingly stressed (series of anxious-face emoticons, each shedding an increasing number of drops of sweat) preparing for a work presentation. There's humour, too, some of it slightly odd and scatological, as when Mr Black is straining on the toilet (coiled turd with a red line through it, more sweat-shedding

emoticon faces). But perhaps this merely reflects the universality of toilet-related symbols.

The accompanying explanatory book, *The Book About Xu Bing's Book from the Ground*, includes documentation of the wider project when it has been presented in the context of an exhibition, and includes its development as a software program that translates Chinese and English text into pictograms and symbols. Essays and an interview with the artist put the novel in context, both in terms of Xu's previous work and in terms of historical and more recently devised pictographic languages – not forgetting that the Chinese also retains pictographic roots.

In relation to Xu's previous work, *Book from the Ground* is a companion piece to one of his best-known works, *Book from the Sky* (1987–91), the four-year project in which he created 4,000 'fake' Chinese characters, which he hand-cut into wooden blocks and printed within books and on scrolls. Instead of attempting a language understandable to everyone, here he created a language that was understandable by no one. When considering the implications of a global language for an increasingly global world, Xu's project is a highly relevant one. But when considered within the context of language and literature, the arguments become more problematic,

particularly when, in his introductory essay, Mathieu Borysevicz discusses *From Point to Point* alongside James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). As an overarching narrative, both books may be the story of a day in the life of one man, told over 24 hours, but pushing the literary possibilities of an existing language, as Joyce was doing, is not the same as attempting to tell a story through simplified signs and symbols. The artist himself is the first to acknowledge the limitations of his project by stating, in his interview in *The Book About...*, that the desire to 'pursue a dream that all humans can communicate freely without difficulty is a dream too big to realise'. The limitations of *From Point to Point* as literature are particularly highlighted when reading its English translation, given in *The Book About...* Here's an excerpt: 'Mr Black gets up, shuffles over to the bathroom and sits on the toilet for a long time. "En...er...ugh...en..." as much as he tries nothing comes out. "What's wrong down there?" He ponders.' Compare that to a few lines from *Ulysses*. 'Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it howsoever. I am, a stride at a time. A very short space of time through very short times of space.' Try expressing that in pictograms and smiley faces. *Helen Sumpter*