

Disarming Language: disability, communication, rupture

Tallinn Art Hall 14 December – 24 February

‘Museum visits are hard on my body. Rest here if you agree,’ reads a seat cushion on a bench. Another navy cushion in an adjacent gallery states, ‘This exhibitions [sic] has asked me to stand for too long. Sit if you agree.’ These cushions, part of Shannon Finnegan’s ongoing *Museum Benches* series (2019–), are next to counterparts rendering the same phrases in Estonian and Russian. Here, language is not just a universal system of knowledge or expression; it is hyperspecific, both passive and active at once. Finnegan is one of 13 artists with disabilities included in *Disarming Language* (curated by Christine Sun Kim and Niels van Tomme), and her work exemplifies the show’s curatorial cornerstone: language is a system that has the ability to incite change.

The first room of the exhibition is soundtracked by *Live in Oakland* (2019), a danceable electronic mixtape by Dax Pierson, in which he declares at one point, “Don’t take your physical abilities for granted, for you can lose them, with the snap of the neck”. Wall pieces from Andrea Crespo’s series *Step Right Up* (2019) ask the audience to reconsider images, headlines and stories reproduced from various media outlets that perpetuate the idea of the ‘freak-show’. One memorable black-and-white print

depicts a line drawing of a suited teenage boy standing hand-in-hand with a girl in a dress and corsage who is seated in a wheelchair. Across top and bottom are the words: ‘He asked her to prom even in her condition / Like and share = respect’. Another blurred image of a woman running with prosthetic legs is overlaid with the text: ‘The only disability in life is a bad attitude’. While the written and spoken words in Pierson and Crespo’s works provide a seemingly straightforward entry point into the exhibition, nuances are revealed in an accompanying guide. Pierson’s techno, for example, comprises sound samples of his personal medical equipment and motorised wheelchair – parts of his daily life since 2005, when a car accident resulted in a spinal injury.

Three wall hangings by Gudrun Hasle are embroidered with pastel-hued body parts and what at first appear to be indecipherable phrases. But say these out loud and the message becomes clear: “brif in brif audt / repet in a cam tone / breathe in bref audt / lestend / brif in bref audt / repet”. Hasle, who has been diagnosed dyslexic, reminds us that disability isn’t always visible, and that language is never fixed in stone.

Other works, by Sunaura Taylor, Jeffrey Mansfield and Alison O’Daniel, explore the

language surrounding deafness and blindness and the divides between the disabled and nondisabled. A series of vinyl wall texts scattered throughout the show are extracted from Taylor’s 2017 book *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*, which argues that degradation and devaluation in human/animal and disabled/nondisabled binaries function according to similar language systems – systems built on, among other things, ‘ableist paradigms of language and cognitive capacity’ that ‘we must begin to examine’. In other words, liking and sharing do not equate to action or respect, but effectively degrade and devalue the life of a human and ‘her condition’ to that of a meme, and her existence to part of a freak-show. Additionally, running a marathon – with or without prosthetic legs – is indeed an inspirational feat. However, the idea that disability results only from a bad attitude thereby implies that physical or mental impairments can, and should, be overcome by personal strength and resolve – a resolutely ableist perspective. *Disarming Language* acts upon Taylor’s call for examination, proposing language itself as a methodology to disarm and reframe the status quo. *Emily McDermott*