

Caroline Bergvall, *Fig*. Cambridge: Salt, 2005. 148pp. \$15.95

Unpredictable and at times taxing, French-Norwegian poet Caroline Bergvall's latest book catalogues her continuing exploration of plurilingual and mixed-media poetic practices. Best described as a transcript of twelve of Bergvall's "performance writing" projects, *Fig* slips from the modest single lines of "16 Flowers" (a collaboration with poet John Cayley) through a canon of translations of the first tercet of Dante's *Inferno*, and eventually into the loosely procedural or (as the poet herself describes them) *gently obtuse* scores of "Gong."

The visual properties and possibilities of language feature heavily in *Fig*, and the deft minimalism of Bergvall's arrangements—paired with her theoretical/procedural approaches (as evidenced by the book's contextualizing introductions)—reveal the significant impact of conceptual art practices on her writing. The motto of the poster "Dog" (*WRITE AS A DOG / NOT LIKE A DOG*) sources the punch of a billboard advertisement, while—arranged on pages facing the poems of "8 Figs"—multiple large ampersands shift from font to font and signal the reader's progress through the piece. Read in conjunction with the recto pages of "8 Figs," *Ampersand* inevitably conjures associations with works like Joseph Kosuth's 1967 Photostat text "Art as Idea as Idea." Those who are less fond of conceptual art, however, shouldn't shy away from Bergvall, as she tends to counter the potential disaffection of idea-based creative practice with amply material, fleshy language. Even her solo ampersands intimate the sweet bulges of figs.

"In Situ" is a perfect example of this *mélange* of physical familiarity and rigorous formal experimentation. The piece blends rows of punctuation with unabashed corporeal phrasings like *nding/br.eaksin.the.flesh::: so.me'times.chew.th* and *s jam.again.pore.by.pore.eating.jaw*. In running her colons and full-stops one after another and letting them replace the usual gaps between words, Bergvall asks readers to become intimate with punctuation, its rhythmic contributions and silent interjections. How do we read across a colon? A semi-colon? A full-stop? How do the implied pauses inflect or negate each other? As visuals, the rows of colons funnel their silences into a paced flow of *moving on* that is redirected only by the sudden angle of a semi-colon, or the lopsided interference of a full-stop. Or a prompt word. A congestion of words. Finally the punctuation of the piece yields to thicker and thicker stretches of text. "In Situ," like many of Bergvall's multifaceted projects, invites its audience to negotiate compound semantic, visual, aural, and/or participatory readings specific to the text at hand.

Born in Hamburg in 1962 and raised among various languages in Geneva, Paris, New York, and Oslo, Bergvall now lives in multicultural London. It is then not surprising that the most frank and directly moving project

presented in *Fig* is “Say Parsley,” a multimedia installation developed with Irish composer Ciarán Maher. Mounted at Spacex Gallery in 2001 and at the Liverpool Biennial in 2004, the text of “Say Parsley” comprises words that spark variant pronunciations. Center-justified in *Fig*, these include:

Say: “turtle”  
Say: “myrtle”  
Say: “mortal”  
Say: “portal”  
Say: “portly”  
Say: “partly”  
Say: “parsley”

A cross-section of Londoners was recorded speaking words like the above, and the mastered audio was then installed along with printed texts and, initially, a grid of plumb-lines (replaced by hanging light bulbs in the Biennial incarnation). “Say Parsley” is a sensitive, timely exploration of how a tick as minute as an accent torques language to suit a pecking order, and suggests the brutality of stigmatizing difference. Bergvall cites one of the most extreme cases of such discrimination in her introduction to the project: in the Dominican Republic in 1937—under the dictatorship of Trujillo—tens of thousands of Creole Haitians were massacred for failing to roll the letter /r/ in the word *perejil*, or “parsley.”

Given that *Fig* documents projects initially produced as multimedia performances, a CD-ROM, an artist’s book, public posters and postcards, hand-drawn scores, and even installations, the book inevitably surrenders the physical allure of these originals to the standards of re-presentation and mass reproduction. Some material—for example, images showing works like “Say Parsley” and the poster “Dog” in situ, and reproductions of pages from “Gong”—has been included to indicate Bergvall’s off-the-page practice. But the transcript-like feel and revealing introductions mean *Fig*’s adaptations—especially of projects like “Flèsh,” first printed by London-based Gefn Press as an artist book and later reinvented as a digital poem for *How2*—do generate a desire for “the real thing.” Even so, Salt’s effort to portray Bergvall’s mixed-media practice should be commended, as such writing too often lacks proper record (and thus attention) thanks, ironically, to the very performative or ephemeral condition that makes it so engaging: that invitation to enter—in Bergvall’s words—the *Here in the sense of making*.

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