

A woman sits on a swivel chair positioned between two glowing orange electric heaters in a white-walled studio. She is dressed head-to-toe in black, wearing nylon tights and a bulky puffy jacket that exaggerates her shoulders. Her blunt bob adds character to this otherwise inscrutable outfit, her hair swinging from side to side as she shakes her head. Casual but attempting confidence, she stares into the lens of the video camera recording her and begins to demonstrate a physical workout for the head. She asks her absent audience to repeat sequences of slight yet absurd gestures. Instructing them to "follow where the floor and the wall meet", the woman shivers her head from side to side tracing the physical dimensions of the room. Throughout the routine her speech stumbles, tripping over words, hesitating. Her rhetoric borrows phrases from amateur YouTube demos, motivational workout DVDs and officious Health & Safety training videos, creating a pedagogical verbal collage.

Like many of Lucy Clout's pre-recorded performances, the embodied mapping of the artist's studio in *Manual Non Manual Manual* (2010) reflects the conventions and legacies of video performance art. From her codified use of all-black outfits to the straight artist/studio/camera set-up and direct mode of address, Clout's attentiveness to the conditions of the camera exist partly as homages to her aesthetic predecessors: Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Bruce Nauman, Yvonne Rainer... But, through her insistence on 'low spec' production and aggressive undermining of her own protagonists – through their self-consciousness, awkward dress and hesitant speech – Clout critically interrogates the medium in which she is working, highlighting the problematics of presenting the (gendered) body in performance and its recorded formats.

As works made for projection, rather than performance, any sense of 'liveness' in Clout's work is inevitably compressed through the recording process. As a result, the figures in her videos, *Manual... and 3*, (*Buh Buh Buh*). *Proposal for a Collating Machine* (2008) are flattened out, reduced to functioning as performative façades on screen. In standard terms, Clout's figures exist as performative traces, their bodies levelled to the status of objects as they transition from present to past tense in their pre-recorded formats. Clout describes the resulting 'flatness' of her characters in terms of their 'readability', where the image of the woman in the video is "readable in a different way from the woman in the performance". Captured in moving-image, her figures become equitable to the other objects occupying the same representational video space: the office furniture, heaters and other props. The complexities of virtual 'readability' are also addressed in *Baby Baby Baby Oh Baby: On the Reading of Emoticons by Infants and Newborns*, 2012. (*Why the Fuck do Faces Need Noses?!?*) (2012). Here, a headshot of a reclining woman fills the screen. She performs a physiognomic semaphore, animating her facial muscles to enact a spectrum of expressions, from smiling to frowning and biting her bottom lip. Through abstract repetition her 'real' face is rendered un-readable and allied with the simplified semantics of digital 'emoticons' – the symbols used universally in text messaging, email and other typed forms of language.

Clout's sensitive and referential use of staging similarly serves to amplify "the nuances of other less charged objects" in her video works. Recording a static female body positioned against a minimal background allows subtle physical movements to find a surprising degree of expression; in *Manual... flyaway strands of hair catching in the draft become focal points. While in *Untitled* (2011) the camera crops to the bottom half of a woman sitting on a bedroom floor, cross-legged, bare-legged and wearing only a dressing gown. As she performs a series of deliberately lame party tricks for a web-cam device, Clout's intimate staging exposes the raw physicality and vulnerability of the performing body, pointing to the scarred legs and unpolished doughy toes; as well as, critically, a wider commentary on the free distribution of the (female) body over web-based interfaces. Clout's 'neutral' approach to staging emphasises "the ineloquence of the eloquent body", writ large in the nervy physical mannerisms of her videos; as well as the black clothing which paradoxically conceals and reveals the female physique.*

The physical awkwardness portrayed by the characters of Clout's mannered video works is similarly reflected in the artist's materially lo-fi sculptural work, in which everyday materials are reworked into contingent combinations that bear strange analogies to the body. Her series of *Example Laces* (2011), comprising chewy strips of Fimo clay stapled to gallery walls, are abject prompts for gloopy intestinal entrails, while her decorative hairdressers' bob weight, *Bob Weight* (2011), that rests on a plastic coat

hanger is a makeshift proxy for female shoulders. By substituting corporeality for everyday objects, Clout invites the viewer to look beyond the fabric of the body and its representational limits. Her earlier sculpture *Untitled (Eyebrows)* (2008), fabricated from a length of MDF board that was equal in depth to Clout's head, provides a literal example of this. Suspended from the gallery ceiling with rope, this physical obstacle blocks eye contact between gallery visitors, whilst also preventing them from seeing the 'bigger picture' of the exhibition. Through such material incentives emerges a repeated questioning of 'what can the body do beyond the words we're given?' a concern particularly materialised, in *3, (Buh Buh Buh)*... where modes of 'making' stand in for 'talking'. Concerned with expanding the potential of "humans and their objects, (the things they make and their bodies)", the video work presents its female protagonist skipping around a square of empty space in a blank studio. Tapping her feet and crossing and uncrossing her hands, she imitates through performance the mechanical clunks and robotic actions of a paper-collating machine. It is both banal and extraordinary, with Clout using the character's body to physically conjure thought, the idea of an object, a proposal, into existence. As such, *3, (Buh Buh Buh)*... exemplifies the possibility to get beyond language, to make something out of nothing, to make words and gestures "more practical".

Clout's invested interest in immaterial experimentation is specifically evoked through the systematic dismantling of language across each of her videoed performances. Cumulative sequences of ummms, ahhhhs and errmms punctuate the narratives as "markers of an unedited thought". Described by the artist as 'hesitant speech', this stammering creates a vocabulary that surreptitiously undermines the representation of the body as a sleek, efficient and commercially motivated performance machine. It is a satirical position, critiquing the very tropes and marketed personas that her characters are drawn from. Significantly, verbal ineloquence extends to her alliterative titles: *Manual Non Manual Manual; 3, (Buh Buh Buh)*...; and *Baby Baby Baby Baby Oh Baby*... each one a deliberately staccato composition of syntax, compressing language to push it beyond the simple act of 'naming'. With this in mind, Clout's scripted verbal glitches readily invite a Deleuzian reading regarding the creative potential of stammering speech. Such stuttering, for the French philosopher, signifies "the limits of language, where it breaks down, but goes beyond, exceeds expression but with feeling (so to speak)". Peppering her pre-recorded performances with vocal blips, awkward pauses and bodily tics allows Clout to bring forward an edifying aesthetic of excess. By turning away from dominant regimes of signification and instead corrupting the commercially refined veneer of the body, Clout's video works suggest ways in which new kinds of stuttering subjectivities can be conjured into existence, uniquely iterated and distilled through performance art and its recorded formats.

FOCUS:
INTERVIEW

Lucy Clout

Soap-opera small talk and speech as a gesture

by Amy Sherlock



AMY SHERLOCK
What are you working on at the moment?

LUCY CLOUT
I'm working on a Jerwood/Film and Video Umbrella award commission that considers what happens when categories of speech, such as wittering or commenting, live on via digitization. These informal kinds of language are examined as a significant mode of communication in their own right. The new work will consider the consequences of re-watching and reinterpreting this speech, made possible by improvements in camera technology, data compression, torrent distribution etc. The test site for this is an image of the lips of an extra in a 1990s Australian soap.

The first piece of filming was an interview with a forensic lip reader. She described and acted out the consistencies of spoken speech. Importantly, for my purposes, she performed doubt about the preciseness of communication through the animated mouth. She also read the lips of one of the extras.

I use soap operas and extras as examples of a speech designed to disappear. After all, '90s soaps pre-date 'watch again' services or DVD box-sets. The plots are filled with redundancies – family members never mentioned again, deaths forgotten,

character ages that shift as required. Continuity errors are understood by the audience as somehow beside the point. There are no callbacks in these products to reward the keen-eyed viewer.

For me, the extras' mouths are the pinnacle of speech being used for continuity of affect rather than as argument. Extras actually used to be instructed to repeat 'rhubarb rhubarb' or 'whalla whalla'. In more recent shows, they're asked to discuss their journey to work or something else. I'm intrigued by that: is it a change in the language of believability, or a shift in how the extras want to be treated? That line between prattling and acting is interesting.

AS *We acknowledge the disposability of speech when we talk about a 'throwaway comment' as something meaningless. But this kind of 'empty' speech still performs a function.*

LC Yes, it's the speech we might not expect to be held to account. It isn't about creating a text but about another effect, so the close reading of that speech out of context has strange consequences.

AS *This seems like a continuation of your exploration – in films such as Baby Baby Baby Baby Oh Baby: On the Reading of Emoticons by Infants and Newborns, 2012. (Why the Fuck do Faces Need Noses!?) (2012) or Shrugging Offing (2013) – of speech as a gesture, as something embodied, which is sensed or felt as well as literally understood.*

LC Totally. My interest in speech disfluencies isn't necessarily because of their opposition to literal meaning but because they are a different part of language, one which acts as context, intimacy and also, importantly, as an assertion of subjective presence.

AS *The embodied voice reassures you that there is someone there with you. Is this why a lot of your videos address the audience directly?*

LC There's an address and a gap in many of the videos: eye contact not quite made, specificities of audience not quite understood. The work must acknowledge desire, and the direct address is one way of claiming that. Whilst making *Untitled* (2011) and *Baby Baby ...*, I was thinking about Skype therapy, web-cam masturbation and the intimate possibilities of bodies being affectively addressed without eye contact.

Shrugging Offing talks of the overwhelming desire for the presence of others, for skin to be touched. In that video, we see those sensations being elicited, chronicled and bickered about online. I used exclamations from group spot-squeezing videos posted online (most often the males have the spots and the females squeeze or chronicle the squeezing). The more time I spent with them, the more apparent it became that the screams perform different functions: they might be a kind of flirting, an indication of gleeful horror or ecstatic teamwork. They are group activities, but are usually made with the understanding that the resulting video will be distributed online, creating a doubling of the audience. I always want to know how the body of the viewer is affected when viewing art, and whether this constitutes an aggression on the part of the artist.

AS *I feel like the notion of 'juicy gossip', which suggests that words are somehow tactile or sensual, characterizes a lot of the ideas around the pleasure (maybe guilty?) of social exchange in your work.*

LC In Robert Dunbar's (totally pop-science) book *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* (1996), he claims that humans created language not through hunting or arguing but as a more efficient way to implement social ties. Humans living in larger groups no longer had the time for the grooming rituals of their ape ancestors.

1
Snail Trousers,
2011, polythene, elastic,
digital prints on label
100 × 41 × 11 cm

2
Production still
from untitled work in progress
(Jerwood/Film and
Video Umbrella award
commission), 2014

3
Shrugging Offing, 2013,
DVD still

AS *So gossip becomes this kind of bridge between the tactility of chimps grooming and the symbolic register of humans talking? Tactile speech is the basis of autonomous sensory meridian response (or ASMR) videos, like those you use in Shrugging Offing, in which sounds are somehow supposed to provoke an involuntary bodily reaction.*

LC ASMR videos are created to evoke a particular (though disputed) feeling within the body of the audience. They are also touted as sleep aids. The videos tend to involve women who speak in low, whispering voices, talking in soothing if banal ways to the imagined audience. This can take the form of role-play, with the woman in the video dragging make-up brushes across the screen whilst playing a beautician. It could also be small talk, or the systematic exploration of particular sounds such as the wrapping and unwrapping of gifts. The majority of ASMR performers are women, but the audience contains women too. I don't read these videos as describing a gender essentialism, but there is obviously a performance of mothering and a form of eroticism within them. They speak to the societally sanctioned ways in which a women's desire to be seen can be realized.

Dunbar postulates that online interactions can never replace face-to-face ones; I think that humans are highly skilled in sourcing what they want emotionally and physically. The phenomena of ASMR forums, audiences and makers describe that. Importantly, though, he suggests that speech can replicate physical sensations previously generated through touch. I see this in the spot-squeezing videos as well as in the Australian soaps. The division between speaking and touching isn't all that clear-cut.

AS *And what role does the internet play in all of this?*

LC The internet is simply the site of encounter/liveness in some of my work. It's a place where I can observe and explore desire using search logarithms and conversations with strangers. I'm deeply interested in what humans want from other humans.

Lucy Clout is based in London, UK. In 2012, she had a solo show at Limoncello, London, and was included in group exhibitions at Oriol Sycharth Gallery, Wrexham, UK, and BACKLIT, Nottingham, UK. Her work is currently included in the Jerwood/Film and Video Umbrella Awards exhibition, 'What Will They See of Me?', which runs at Jerwood Space, London, until 27 April and Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, UK, until 21 April.

'The internet is a place where I can explore desire using search logarithms and conversations with strangers. I'm deeply interested in what humans want from other humans.'

