

Winston and the Awakened Text

(Review of exhibition at Royal Festival Hall 2007) –By Niki Seth-Smith

Volume, a striking exhibition by the young writer cum graphic artist Sam Winston, is currently being housed in the Saison Poetry Library. Viewers will initially be halted, mid-stride, by the work Full Folded Dictionary (2004). Each book of a twenty-one volume Oxford English Dictionary is displayed splayed open, its pages folded into triangles in order to create a series of jagged ridges along the middle of the books. What Winston has given the viewer looks like twenty miniature alien mountain ranges, disguised as reference books. It is print split open, innards provokingly on display. Dictionary Story, print on a wall nearby, attempts to assert the pictorial logic of the dictionary onto a fairytale. Storybook words are constricted into columns alongside their definitions, 'once': one time and no more, 'bedtime': a time for going to bed, 'trouble': put into confused motion. Winston has the columns of printed word fracture and tumble across the page, breaking out as if alive from the ranks of the manageable list. In a simpler line drawing Silent/Listen these two semantic antagonists - 'Silent' marked out in white, 'Listen' in red - leer at each-other across 70 x100 cm black paper.

The specificity of material is essential to Winston's work. Aspirations to become a writer and a talent for graphic design has lead him by the nose to a peculiarly effecting hybrid of design execution, fine art and word play. As a young artist launching his career in the mid 90s he began writing, designing and publishing his own artists' books. These books are now highly collectable art objects, forming part of special collections at MoMA in New York, the Tate and the Getty Research Institute in LA. Viewing his new work at the National Poetry Library, the importance of their materiality is made evident by the white woollen gloves the viewer must wear to turn the pages of A made up / true story.

What are we to make of these word-art creations? First hint, as often is the case: don't ask the artist. Volume is fan-fared by the declaration: 'There is...

...a fascinating world beyond the printed word, alphabets of type, paper, colour line and form.' Winston trumpets himself as exploring this visual language that 'speaks volumes long before any words have been read'. A workable statement at face value, a little puerile as an expression of intent behind such forward looking and provocative work. Volume does, indeed, 'look behind printed words' for the 'visual language'. However, if Winston is claiming this type of exploration as new ground he must be walking in a perpetual blind-fold. The 'fascinating world' of type, paper, colour and line is that of the marketer, the media consultant, the magazine editor. It is the realm of the commercial graphic designer. What I find perverse is Winston's seemingly unqualified celebration of the tendency of visual language 'to speak volumes long before any words have been read'. I am going to propose that Volume, whether wittingly or not, in fact works to challenge this method of reading, prevalent today, in which presentation takes staggering precedence over the absorption of meaning in words.

Let's look at the London Paper, as an example of the 'fascinating world' beyond the printed word. The text in this publication is designed to be scanned and discarded before the buyer reaches his/her destination. Quick de-coding of the text requires the full employment of what Wilson has called 'the alphabets of type, colour line and form'. On page four we find a 12 x 10 cm insert. The text is titled in large, black letters RWANDA HILTON and set alongside a typically bimbo-ish picture of Paris. A caption underneath the picture reads, 'No, she's still as vapid as ever'. The accompanying text is clearly a dialogue – any reader can tell this through a quick glance at the formatting. Short chunks of type alternate with even shorter chunks of bold type. The reader, or shall we say the looker, can guess that there is some kind of Q & A structure and that the interchange is rapid. The style will be quick, bitchy, as vapid as Miss Hilton herself. Of course, we have no doubts about what opin-

ions the paper holds on Paris doing charity work. The act of reading, in fact, is rendered redundant. We can laugh at the piece without actually having read the words.

I am suggesting that Winston's poetry cum graphic art works against this trend in reading/looking, forcing us to question the way we process meaning. The viewer is so intrigued and startled by Volume because the exhibition works to block our well-honed skills of de-coding the text object. There is no way to tell that the columns of data collapsing in on themselves and spilling across the page in Dictionary, print hold a fairytale story in it's tortured midst. The pictorial language doesn't present the meaning. We must draw closer and focus ourselves on the rich, organic content of the words. Equally, Full Folded Dictionary forces us to re-think the twenty-one volume Oxford English Dictionary and its potentials, as its content is presented to us strangely divorced from the layout we have come to expect. We are unable to dismiss the lunar landscapes that now confront us and must think again about the living, proteate meaning that the Dictionary books contain.

Winston complements his dedication to poetry/art objects with a steady line of work in advertising. In a modern world increasingly saturated by print it is no wonder that such companies as outdoor gear specialists North Face have looked to Winston's talent for reclaiming words and thus reawakening their effect. Straplines, such as North Face's Never Stop Exploring are prime examples of texts whose meanings have been fore-grounded, altered and ultimately nullified through their presentation to the public as slogans. The question is, does Winston recognise the repercussions of his work for the world of literature? It is fitting that Winston's new exhibition should be held in the National Poetry Library. Poetry, one could claim, has suffered most at the hands of the scan, consume, discard culture of looking/reading. By re-instilling a sense of mystery between visual display and the world of content, Volume plays an exciting role in putting poetry back on the map - or rather, allowing poetry exist off the map, in a space of possibility where it always should belong. So, a word of warning before you go to see Sam Winston's Volume. There is no opportunity to take a glance

at the works, guess what the artist is trying to say, buy a postcard and leave. Put aside a couple of hours in your diary for this bold and cannily effecting exhibition.

Volume is showing in the Saison Poetry Library in the Royal Festival Hall, 16 October 06 – 15 Jan 08.

By
Niki Seth-Smith