

RELUCTANT NARRATOR

u Coleção Berardo, Lisbon

tuguese writer José Saramago told that the narrator does not exist, that, in every text, we are simply related by an author and several others. Portuguese curator Ana Teixeira Alvim de Sampaio, in her exhibition, 'The Reluctant Narrator', and 'Narrative Practices Across Media', explores ideas around the unreliability of the voice in visual art. Intrinsically biased, the narrator is a protagonist, a witness or a messenger. If knowledge relies on stories and turns, rely on narrators, what separates observation and interpretation? The work is cross-generational and international – born between the 1960s and the '80s, an exception of British artists John Burt Foster and Derek Boshier (born in 1952 and respectively) – provides insight. The show opens with one of history's narratives: Marxism. Gernot Wieland's film, *Portrait of Karl Marx as a Young Man* (1909), includes a video of childlike drawing of a voice with a Germanic accent. It is an unidentified document discussion that can be classified as Marxist: for example, the colour white apparently can't be made, as whites can. Wieland, through his seemingly neutral messenger, hilariously exposes the position as a potentially limitless means of assembling the fragments of a shattered world. Intertextuality is also at play in *Bebo Coca* (2011), Karl Holmqvist's painting of *Beba Coca Cola* (1957), the Brazilian poem by Décio Pignatari, the title (meaning 'drink Coca-Cola' in Portuguese) blends into the word 'cloaca', means 'filth' and 'sewer'. The Swedish artist wrote his version directly onto the gallery wall, replacing some letters with logos and symbols (such as an encircled 'A' for anarchy and the Chanel logo). If he pollutes the world's elementary tool – the alphabet – he is only to reassert its critical power as a linguistic symbol.

As far as the narrator – and his or her role, language – has clearly been steered by the artist. The viewer, however, has some choice to do in Boshier's *Change* (1973), in a sequence of postcard-sized images that move into one another by virtue of formal resemblance. A photo of a dog in the street, for example, is followed by a postcard of a Shetland terrier, then an ink drawing of a dog, which in turn, becomes a map of South America and so on. This kinetic use of image is on change: the formal concatenation gains and loses elements to create each pattern. Sustaining this suggestion of language as a vehicle for narrative is Armando's *Placa 1, 2, 3* (2011), three elements of the same semi-geometric shapes on the floor that recall fractured surfaces. The works that do not contain language, sculpture in particular, seem to transmute narrative methods such as cut-up and collage into sculptural techniques. Whereas the work is a demonstration of difference, the three equally satisfying configurations of the same fragments, Nina Beier's sculpture



Shelving for Unlocked Matter and Open Problems (2013) – a set of glass shelves held by found sculptures that have been cut to the same height – employs the cut-up with a sense of heightened visual violence.

Beier's sub-narratives, represented by the different styles of sculpture, are part of an authoritarian, but non-hierarchical, all-encompassing narrative (the whole sculpture) to the point where we wonder who exactly is telling this traumatic story. Nevertheless, some works embody resistance through alternative historical perspectives, such as Aleksandra Domanović's sculptures of futuristic hands holding symbolic objects like a relay baton – *Fatima and Relay Runner* (*Sanija Hyseni* 1979) (both 2013). These are inspired by the 'Belgrade Hand', the first artificial haptic limb, created in 1963 in former Yugoslavia, and were placed between two rooms. Like the viewer who is held between two spaces, the sculptures are caught between the past and the future. In the catalogue, Domanović offered an elliptical history of technology, whose opening entry is the creation of the first computer program by Ada Lovelace (Lord Byron's daughter) in 1843. Elsewhere, Hito Steyerl's video *Lovely Andrea* (2007) involves the search for a missing Japanese bondage actress whose identity becomes confused with that of the artist herself. Not only does Steyerl question the narrator's identity, she also obliquely asks who or where the 'hero' is – Spiderman and his web make several appearances.

A timely survey of storytelling in the visual arts, 'The Reluctant Narrator' is perhaps too misleading a title for this show. I would have preferred the term 'unreliable narrator', which the curator uses in her text, because the narrator, in any of his or her iterations, is both manipulative and manipulated, compromised and multiple. Everyone and everything here creates fiction from fact – and vice-versa.

JOANA NEVES

1
Nina Beier
*Shelving for Unlocked Matter,
and Open Problems*, 2013,
installation view

SWITZERLAND

ISABELLE CORNARO

Galerie Francesca Pia, Zürich

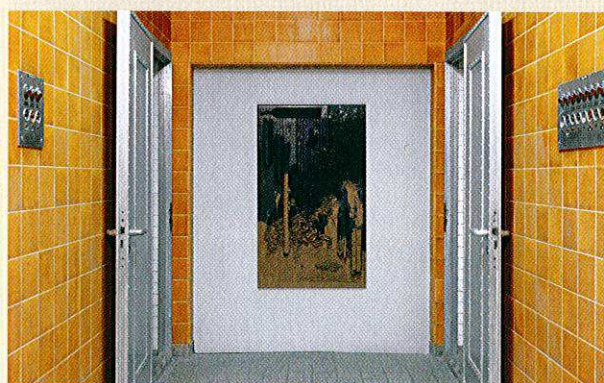
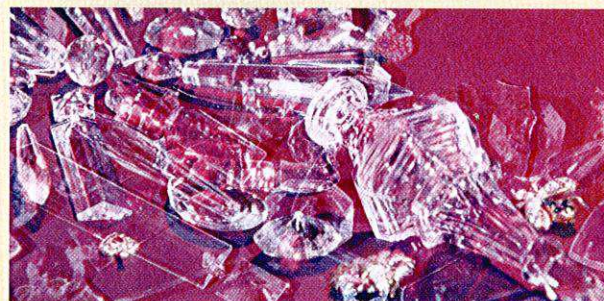
After her orderly, light-flooded exhibition at the Kunsthalle Bern in 2013, French artist Isabelle Cornaro's recent show in Zürich came as a surprise. Visitors to Galerie Francesca Pia were plunged into a dark room full of competing, urgent filmic impressions from 1941 to 1969 in the midst of which were three works by Cornaro herself. The films not by Cornaro – all but one from a programme curated in collaboration with Jonathan Pouthier and recently screened at the Centre Pompidou, Paris – were from the American cinematic and artistic avant-gardes that reflect the artist's own interests. For example, Jack Smith's *Song for Rent* (1969), in which a figure in a wheelchair, in drag, leafs through a scrapbook filled with Sarah Bernhardt clippings to the tune of 'God Bless America', or a 1949 reel demonstrating how Technicolor films illustrate goods like foodstuffs or carpets. Each of these films operates in relation and counterpoint to cinematic norms – mocking, disrupting or, as in the case of the Technicolor reel, using saturated colour to render its content almost unrecognizable. Francis Lee's *1941* (1941) has the most in common with Cornaro's films visually. In the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor – before he could have known its consequences – Lee filmed streaming red, white and blue paint, broken light bulbs and flames: minor events made catastrophic in close-up. A similar drama takes place in Cornaro's *Choses* (Things, 2014) in which a collage of spray-painted objects is engulfed by dripping viscous white, black and yellow pigment.

All three of Cornaro's looped films shown here are less than two and a half minutes long. Like *Choses*, *Figures* (2011) and *Amplifications* (2014) focus on small objects in close up and convey the artist's ambivalence to her found media. *Figures* pans and cuts over a selection of bric-a-brac: buttons, lighters, compacts, jewellery and torn money lined up on a grey surface. Occasionally these objects are bathed in bright, unseen lights; some of them are also subjected to an unexplained shaking. *Amplifications* features cut-glass ornaments and bangles lit by a range of filters, turning them blue, red and purple. In both films, Cornaro uses colour as an oppressive mask;

the lighting rendering the objects even less comprehensible. In place of the repetition of sculptural casting she is best known for, duplication here comes via the looping of the films, an endless circuit petrifying them just as readily.

Sculpture also featured in the exhibition, with Cornaro using a rarely used, low-ceilinged space in the building to show eight black reliefs. Made in coloured elastomer, a rubber-like substance, from three casts, the works employed the artist's customary technique of creating a mould from assorted objects: the portrait format 'Orgon Door I' series (2013) showed petrified ropes, chains, coins and wooden battens; the landscape format 'Orgon Door III' series (2014) featured horizontally arranged lines of rope and chain and 'Orgon Door IV' (2014) was a baroque frieze of jewellery, stones, printing blocks and trinkets that looked like beetles and rulers. 'Orgone energy' – a pseudoscience developed in the 1930s by Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich – is supposedly a life force that can be harvested in 'accumulators'. Cornaro's accumulation of junk into the language of decoration, in a material that renders it sumptuous, suggests her faith in the innate, extraordinary power of things to endure and withstand the vagaries of how we look and see.

AOIFE ROSENMEYER

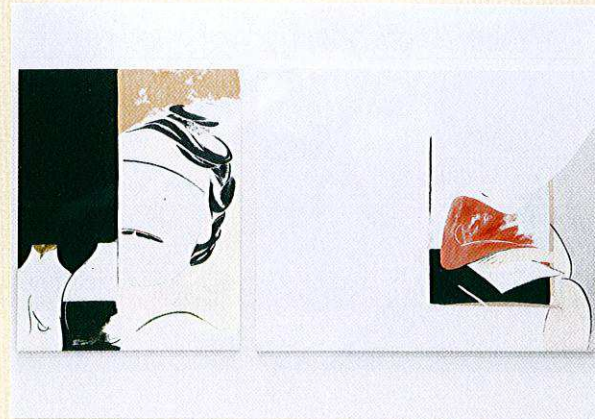


2
Isabelle Cornaro
Amplifications, 2014, digitized
16mm film still

3
Isabelle Cornaro
Orgon Door I (#5, brown splash),
2013, coloured elastomer,
132 x 79 x 12 cm

4
Julie Beaufils
Casse mass ass, 2014, and *Ex
sex expresses excess*, 2014,
installation view

FRANCE



JULIE BEAUFILS

Balce Hertling, Paris

In 1965, Andy Warhol turned his camera on Edie Sedgwick, pressed play and walked away. The result was *Poor Little Rich Girl*, a listless portrait of the model and socialite presented through an indecipherable array of documentary film and performance, video art and cinema. The first 33 minutes of the film, notably shot completely out of focus, present a weary Sedgwick slowly waking up, talking on the phone, applying make-up, smoking cigarettes and modelling various outfits – her existence thus publically exhibited as wholly unremarkable, stereotypically girlish and saturated with boredom.

Yet, somehow, situated amongst her possessions and daily rites – freshly squeezed orange juice, marijuana, the Everly Brothers, friends that remain strictly out of the frame – Sedgwick is mesmerizing, responding to the unadulterated, alienated desires of a society that increasingly demanded the commodification of private life. Sedgwick blends into her environment like an impeccably placed prop.

The instrumentalization of girlishness, youth and what Wayne Koestenbaum excellently coined 'boredom's erotics', is central to Julie Beaufils' exhibition 'Tu Vois; You Seek' at Balce Hertling – and invites comparisons to Warhol's 1965 production. The seven paintings, whose content is pre-empted by an image on the press release featuring a distressed looking Jared Leto from his days in the 1990s cult series *My So-Called Life*, are impressionistic renderings of feminine figures, arranged in subtle, muted postures across the canvases. These contemplative, nuanced characters are evoked through light brushstrokes and a coquettish palette, with an emphasis placed on cinematic compositions.

Respectively, the paintings are divided like a film reel stuck between frames, or split-screens depicting two equally fragmented portions of an image. Much like Sedgwick, the figures are melancholic, engaged in the vapid daily rites of girlhood: day-dreaming of boys rendered in thought bubbles, jotting notes in a journal, applying make-up, smoking cigarettes or simply lost in thought. The themes are familiar yet eschew any sense of nostalgia. Beaufils instead fast-forwards the image of the young girl into the '90s through a youthful patois expressed in titles such as a *crush toi* (a pun on the French 'accroche-toi',

or: hang in there!), *Ex sex expresses excess* and *How are you say I, just cool say he* (all works 2014). In these paintings, the cinematic is replaced by the sitcom, languid movement by quick-witted abstractions and the alienated desire that was Sedgwick's by a self-valorizing girlishness – a mode of being that permeates the paintings with a sense of both sadness and emptiness.

As a young, female French painter born in 1987, Beaufils's choice of subject is hardly surprising, particularly considering the recent resurgence of artists concerned with what the French collective Tiquun termed, in the late '90s, a 'Theory of the Young Girl'. Yet, whereas Tiquun discussed the 'Young Girl' as a genderless construct – embodied currency in a value system based on symbolic exchange – Beaufils's approach avoids the political, clinging instead to an artistic style that embraces the semiotics of girlhood as a strategy through which to flirtatiously – and all too easily – give itself away to the viewer. The result is an assortment of heterogeneous gestures and motifs (cinema, pop culture, beauty, melancholy, Jared Leto, humour, infatuation, melodrama, Modernism and make-up) that are abstracted into a single representation of value.

If, as participants in the art world, we are to accept our complicity with a knowledge-based economy, then surely Beaufils's expressions of girlhood and semiotic assemblages emerge as some sort of currency – their depth or significance notwithstanding. Beaufils belongs to a generation of painters, particularly those claiming an affinity with abstraction, who rely on semiotic excess and its contextual diffusion to legitimize their work. Painting, under this ethos, becomes somewhat generalized and its valuation process – as Tiquun suggested in *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young Girl* (1999) – surpasses that of traditional capitalism, instead entering into a realm in which value is determined purely by social relevance – or fashion.

The girlish patois of Beaufils's exhibition consists of visual idioms appropriate to a marketed image of girlhood. The apparent nonchalance of the figures' expressions and the subdued tones of the palette only contribute further to this: the sensual, living and, at times, almost comic gestures are abstracted into weary submission, forming a very similar relationship with the viewer as Sedgwick's dispossessed, idle demeanour in *Poor Little Rich Girl*. Considered in themselves, the paintings are vacuous and distanced (also forms of social currency, no doubt). Yet it is precisely their vacuity that functions as a catalyst for meaning. Instead of insisting on total meaninglessness, however, Beaufils imbues the works with a generational and fetishized ideal of girlhood; one that is critically, and aesthetically, beautiful, but empty.

SABRINA TARASOFF