

Texte zur Kunst

Lang, Colin: A Chirographic Imaginary

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"Edmund de Waal: A Sort of Speech," Max Hetzler Berlin, 2019, installation view

REVIEWS

A CHIROGRAPHIC IMAGINARY

Colin Lang on Edmund de Waal at Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin

The British artist and writer Edmund de Waal is known for his delicate objects made of porcelain, as well as for his recent work on the archive of the Venetian Ghetto, which just closed as a parallel exhibition to the Venice Biennale. De Waal has a writer's touch when it comes to the visual, and his recent exhibition in Berlin testified to that fact.

In two shows concentrated in mostly black-and-white objects and displays, de Waal highlighted the power of coloristic restraint: a rare phenomenon in an art world obsessed with the loud and noisy. The hush of de Waal's two simultaneous shows also had much to do with writing and the act of reading, where the two were brought together to give a linguistic depth to the visual.

Writing is a recording medium. And like other recording media, writing also finds a certain resting place as storage: files, indexes, and archives filled with words written, waiting to be read by someone, or no one. The process of writing assumes an addressee, whether that is the writer herself, or some future reader or readership. As both record and storage, there is of course writing that will never be read, some of which is simply unreadable because of the way it was produced. Such is the case with the so-called *Microscripts* of the late Swiss writer Robert Walser, who recorded stories and notes in near-illegible miniature on scraps of paper, business cards, and the like. Walser's unique writings recently served as models for British artist Edmund de Waal's exhibition at Galerie Max Hetzler, "a sort of speech," which was spread across both of Hetzler's Berlin spaces.

De Waal's own connection to language as a writer precedes and informs his practice as an artist, highlighted by his uncanny work in both porcelain and prose. The blank page is a kind of model and matrix through which the present show was organized, where one large wall of the

gallery was covered in kaolin (a material native to porcelain production), under which a barely visible script was inscribed from an original work by de Waal that stretched across the gallery. Buried beneath the white kaolin, the invisibility, or unreadability, of the text engendered a kind of agnosia, though de Waal's process is not aimed at highlighting some kind of magical power of language to resist meaning. Rather, the large-scale story on display is meant to echo the submersion of text beneath handwriting and history: a homage to the inscrutability of Walser's *Microscripts* and their very personal mode of transmission. Once these tiny manuscripts were found in the Walser estate after the writer's death, they were painstakingly transcribed by two experts who subjected the original documents to exposure under extreme magnification. In the foreword to the English publication of these enigmatic texts (which were written while Walser underwent therapy at an institution), the translator notes that mistakes and omissions in the rerecording of Walser's hyper-miniature handwriting were unavoidable. It is these lacunae, then, that permitted a kind of entry into the Walser works for De Waal, underscoring his own sense of language's permeability and rifts.

De Waal's work on archives, most recently his piece on the Venetian Ghetto, on view parallel to the current Biennale in Venice, provides a somewhat different lens through which to understand these "holes," which for the artist are always both phenomenological and historical. The process of reading, or trying to read, these *Microscripts* is tethered to the unrecoverable voids that haunt any archive (personal or official). What's more, de Waal reconnects the very intimate, private act of reading to the larger, peripatetic body that

engages with his text, such that the scale of the wall writing in “a sort of speech” allows for a kind of sculptural, somatic experience as well as a readerly one. Additionally, de Waal has encased some of Walser’s works into porcelain and exhibited them as quasi-sculptural bodies, carefully posed inside of vitrines on pedestals throughout the show (*somewhere and somewhen, kleine prosa I & II, response to a request, im walddau I & II, and a sort of speech*, all 2019): a reminder that the desire to read and decode is always one that assumes a kind of space in which one can move. The claustrophobia of Walser’s *Microscripts* is here given room to breathe, to walk through, and read or not read.

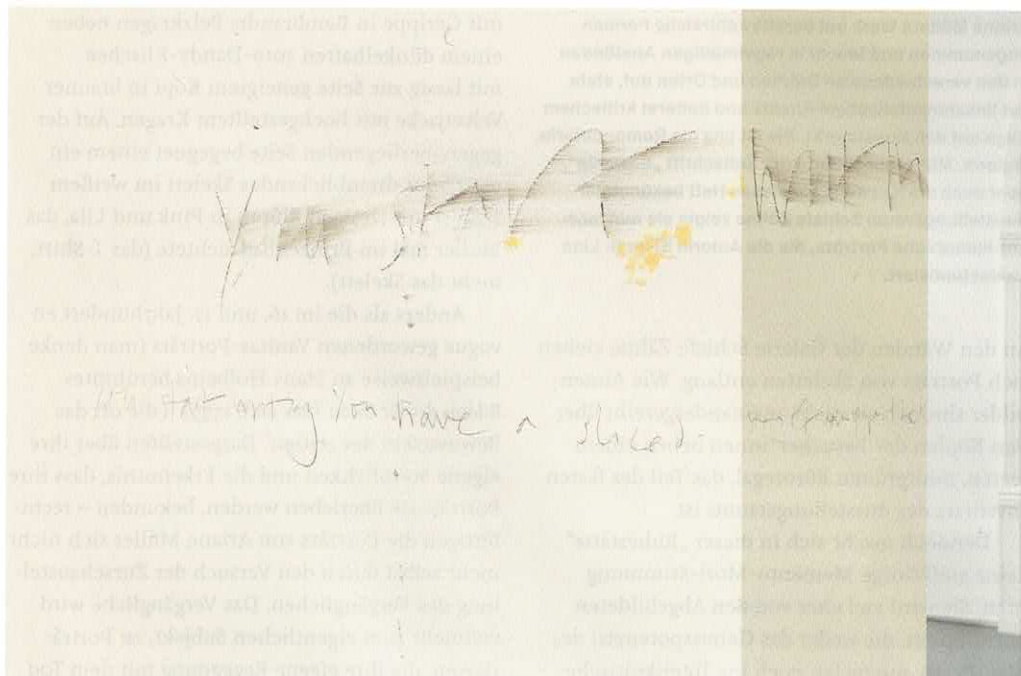
On the walls at Hetzler’s rooms in Goethestraße, the expansive and absorbent field of white is punctuated by charcoal words scrawled across like graffiti on the kaolin-covered script, which includes a one-to-one transcription of some of Walser’s tiny texts. The effect is deeply corporeal, like a surprise that one encounters before a defaced monument, though the orientation of reading quickly reanchors the body to the terra firma of the gallery. The brightly lit white of the walls is hard to “see,” too, for the blinding effect of the kaolin occasions moments of ocular contamination, putting a kind of pictorial spin on the familiar trope of the “blank page.” As viewers, of course, nothing is ever “blank,” and the visual interference of the yellow spots, set against the otherwise indifferent white cube of the gallery, provided a subtle reminder – performance, even – of this fact.

In the second part of the exhibition, at Hetzler’s space on Bleibtreustraße, black predominated, where the ghostly white of the first part of “a sort of speech” is contrasted with phlegmatic sables and subdued browns in the form of

small Cor-Ten steel sheets, arranged together in diorama-like boxes affixed to the gallery walls (*mnéma and mnemion I–III*, all 2018). Within these darker displays, as well as in the whiter objects, de Waal has layered the otherwise colorless veins of encased text with gilded porcelain pieces that radiate between and behind the stacked and leaning pieces, like pages out of an illuminated manuscript.

With all of the linguistic confinement that de Waal performs in these two spaces, the question of speech, of the voice, haunts the exhibition as a whole (reinforced in the show’s title). The haunting is not an omission on de Waal’s part, far from it. Instead, the absence of an utterance, or living thing, is precisely what makes “a sort of speech” so profoundly timely, for it is a preservation of language as writing pure and simple, even if the move to coat and cover its expression makes reading nearly impossible. There are gaps in language, spoken or written. That we know already, and it would be old hat to reinforce that point. But the gap between what is purposefully written and what can never find fulfillment as transparently legible text is one that is too often taken for granted. The question today is perhaps not one that should be formed on the parameters of content and meaning. In contrast, de Waal has managed to conserve something in writing, a possibility in which reading and not reading remain open, undecided. With recourse to the historical figure of Walser and his *Microscripts*, de Waal holds fast to a historical consciousness via the intimacy of writing and reading that can never be entirely effaced.

“EDMUND DE WAAL: a sort of speech,” Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, September 27–November 2, 2019.



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