

## OWAIN TRAIN MCGILVARY

I'm finally using my body for  
what I feel like it's made to do

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# Count me in

## Ronnie Angel Pope

In her 1993 essay 'Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body', Kathy Acker sets out to write about body building.<sup>1</sup> In the midst of the process, she encounters a problem. In the context of heavy lifting, 'ordinary language', as Acker puts it, doesn't seem to cut it. The function of language is called into question as the usual roster of expressions begin to feel awkward, cumbersome, and clunky. 'Ordinary language' gets in the way. So, Acker embarks on an inquiry probing the 'antagonism between bodybuilding and verbal language'.<sup>2</sup>

What she finds in place of 'ordinary language' is a 'language of the body' – 'a method for understanding and controlling the physical which in this case is also the self'.<sup>3</sup> This language is minimal, comprising mostly of numerical repetitions and sets of nouns – 'one of the simplest of language games'.<sup>4</sup> The limitations that the language of the body imposes upon itself work to its advantage. Clarity of meaning is the name of the game. Brevity reflects favourably.

Elias Canetti writes about the seduction that lies in 'reducing everything to the simplest kind of repetition'<sup>5</sup>, and Acker begins where Canetti left off by counting reps, sets, and squats. But is it possible to take this logic of reduction one step further? To think beyond the units of sound which comprise a language as being the only vectors for meaning? Instead,

might we consider the space in between words – the gaps in language – as the space where the action happens, insofar as meaning-making is concerned? Continuing this line of enquiry, the language of the body is no longer a language of words alone. Instead, it's shaped primarily by the spaces in-between the words. Lifting this bar off its rests, then down to my lower chest, I count '1'. I am visualizing this bar, making sure it touches my chest at the right spot, placing it back on its rests. '2'. I repeat the same exact motions. '3'... After twelve repetitions, I count off thirty seconds while increasing my weights. '1'. The identical process begins again only this time I finish at '10'.<sup>6</sup>

The flailing ergonomics of time would be enough to squeeze the words of their weight. It's as much about intuition as it is about nanoseconds. What counts is the hung period of dead air. The pause between each instance, as the mouth arranges itself and the lungs inflate to push out the vowel sounds, airing out the plosives and fricatives to form 'ones', 'twos', and 'threes'. The language itself counts for little in comparison to its pace and distribution. The rest breaks, the tile spacers in wet grout. Rhythm and measure are vectors for meaning. Like the beat of a familiar gait, or the dance of the people who live on the ceiling.

<sup>1</sup> Kathy Acker, 'Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body' [1993], in *Bodies of Work*, London and New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997, pp. 145-46.

<sup>2</sup> Acker, p.21.

<sup>3</sup> Acker, p.25.

<sup>4</sup> Acker, p.23.

<sup>5</sup> Elias Canetti, *The Voices of Marrakesh*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1979, p.25.

<sup>6</sup> Acker, p.25.

What assembles itself within Acker's text is a nonverbal system of communication, which is particular to the world of bodybuilding. This system is identified as 'a geography of no language'<sup>7</sup>. In Hermann Rorschach's Inkblot tests, symmetry occurs as sprays of pigment seep along the centrefold, between leaves of paper which touch under the pressure of the side of a fist (the part of the hand that left-handers get mottled blue with biro when writing). Similarly, this 'geography of no language' can be mapped onto the world of wrestling, which Owain McGilvary's film, 'I'm finally using my body for what I feel like it's made to do', takes as its subject.<sup>8</sup>

McGilvary's work weaves Acker into its very fabric. Overlays of text from 'Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body' forge a way of thinking through themes of gender, class, and sexuality. The text exists as a precious layer sandwiched between slides of pink, as if part of a filmic palimpsest. Conversely, this layering of ideology and image creates clarity, rather than opacity. Acker's text clarifies McGilvary's narrative, and brings the film's thematics into focus. The text is the common thread that feeds through the film's warp and weft, via which a collective 'I' is established. First, on McGilvary's behalf, as the text is reproduced in his handwriting. Second, on behalf of the members of the wrestling group, as their narrative is cut with, and refracted through, the text. And third, on behalf of the viewer, who sits in remitting dialogue with the text and its directives – "Imagine that you are in a foreign country."<sup>9</sup>

McGilvary's film begins with the act of counting. An act which here, is often accompanied by hand gestures. Counting out time, not via bell tolls, but rather, on the fingers – an additional non-verbal mode of communication which draws

upon the body. Somewhere on the internet, there is a clickbait article that details exactly 'how to tell if somebody is American or European'. The hand sign given for 'three' is the giveaway, apparently. One gesture involves the middle and index fingers, with the thumb forming a Nike tick. The other invites the participation of the ring finger; little finger and thumb banded together to form a threesome of a scouts honour. A silent code. 'One' is always the most exciting. A lone, pointed finger is the weightiest gesture. Ask Sir Sugar or Jacques Dutronc. The point motions towards birds in flight. It puts pressure on the leader of the opposition. A public schoolboy point, a headmaster's point, a politician's point. Wield it with caution; it can say so much. In the context of wrestling, the single finger signifies one of two things: 'you're in' or 'you're out'.

Counting and gesturing are explicit forms of outwardly rejecting 'ordinary language' – hot and sharp in space. The other form of non-verbal communication, central to the wrestling world, results from a slower process, and can be best identified as the cultivation of persona. For wrestlers, persona is prerequisite; persona is BIG. Multi-layered and far from singular, a wrestler's persona is forged at the intersection between folklore, pet-names, personality traits, urban myths, youth cultures, and fashions. Out of the fire comes the heel or the face. The name plus the outfit. 'Persona', the thing once described by Bergman as 'a victory over silence', becomes a triumph over language too.<sup>10</sup>

The idea of a compost heap of experience that generates a persona is apparent in McGilvary's ink drawings. Bodies layer upon other bodies, rogue limbs, animals, and roses amalgamate, to tattoo, to imprint. Referents are arranged and

<sup>7</sup> Acker, p.21.

<sup>8</sup> Owain Train McGilvary, I'm finally using my body for what I feel like it is made to do, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Acker, p.21.

<sup>10</sup> Ingmar Bergman, Liv Ullman and Bibi Anderson, Persona [Stockholm, Sweden: Svensk Film industri, 1966].

rearranged in order to create a projected self, or indeed, multiple selves. There's a paradox between the dismembered and disfigured bodies arranged in McGilvary's compositions and the sense of a fleshed-out persona that they present. And yet each persona is fluid; dipping in and out of opacity, exposing itself as a site of constant interplay.

The greatest function of a persona's composite parts (whether personal artefacts, cultural references, one-liners, hair, or makeup) is that they can be continuously re-arranged to conjure multiple images of the self, both historically and presently. It's a post-Instagram, post-Anna Delvey world – Less Cult of Personality and its Consequences, More Cult of Persona and its Resequences. Latter day heroes exist for the purpose of playing dress up. Tailor their trousers, roll up a cuff, and observe them in the V&A. Pin something just so, attribute a quote, or a lipstick shade, and they become closer to us. Interaction builds intimacy, and intimacy makes the world a better place.

These processes of re-imagining and re-hashing are also central to McGilvary's relationship with Acker's text, which he repurposes, reanimates, and reproduces, snipped by snippet, in his own handwriting. What happens to the text's meaning when it undergoes a logic of disfiguration (as with Jenny Holzer's redaction paintings) or reconfiguration (as with William Burroughs' cut up)? What goes on, when one set of words are rearranged in order to make sense of another? Moreover, what happens to the 'I'? Where is the 'I', amidst all of this? There is a line of enquiry that suggests that the cut-up method must be about cultivating persona and forging an 'I'. Why else would Bowie do it? That's the delicious thing

about postmodernism, this 'I' concludes – the fact that patchwork and plagiarism are allies. Just as brevity and stuntedness are allies to the language of the body. The work wants to be disfigured, to be shape-shifted, and to be cut. It begs for it and it's all the better for it.

But more about that 'I'. When we talk about Acker, when we cut her up, which Acker are we talking about? When Olivia Laing writes an experimental novel from Kathy's perspective, [Crudo, 2018], a Trump-era, Twitter-ing Acker, lounges poolside.<sup>11</sup> When MacKenzie Wark writes a low-theory, a Philosophy of Spiders (2021), a trans Acker enters the frame.<sup>12</sup> No longer is it the job of the medium or the flagrant archivist to invent a singular, canonical self. There are Kathys in perpetual research and development, whirring through space-time. 'I, I, I, I, I, I... Kathy Acker.' Particles of Kathys are floating through the air like particles of Wonka's Mike Teavee. If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that Kathy actually is all around us.

A 'language which is speechless' forms in language's gaps, in time's passing, in gestures, and projected selves. This is to say that it exists in the margins of what is representable. And yet, the language of the body is direct and unremitting. Upholding a similar dichotomy, Acker writes that 'according to cliché, athletes are stupid. Meaning: they are inarticulate' and that the 'spoken language' of the gym renders this cliché real as 'The only verbs are do or fail.'<sup>13</sup> Yet if the object of language is to communicate meaning, there is no language more steadfast than the language of the body, with its economical, stalwart verbs. Verbs make things solid. Without

<sup>11</sup> Olivia Laing, *Crudo* (London: Picador, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Mackenzie Wark, *Philosophy For Spiders: On The Low Theory Of Kathy Acker* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Acker, p.21.

verbs, there are just vibes. Vibes shift sleepily, lacking immediacy and ubiquity. Such sentiment brings to mind the viral video from 2017, in which a young Liverpool FC fan turns to camera in his 50s and puffer jacket to say, sonorously: 'I don't do if, buts, and maybes... I do absolutes.'<sup>14</sup> The language of the gym (which is the language of the body) exists 'only at the edge of its becoming lost'.<sup>15</sup> It's here, on the edge, that language is in the sweet spot. Language itself begins to resist linguistic representation, because it's so inextricably tied to physicality, to action. It no longer exists as words, untethered from the body. It is the body. It operates in real time. Dynamic and fervent. It has slipped the baggage. It embodies the particular and immediate thrill of leaving the house with empty hands, and no bag. The language of the body has jettisoned the prefixes and suffixes, just for the kick of being empty-handed – of feeling purposeful and free. A slick monosyllabic outfit, moving like a knife through butter. Accruing points for time, technicality, and style.

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<sup>14</sup> The Redmen TV, 'I Do Absolutes', 2017 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2\\_05YHX4urE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2_05YHX4urE)>

<sup>15</sup> Acker, p.21.