



Nicky Hirst, *Largish Tom (Slight Omar)*, 2019

Nicky Hirst: Algorithms

Exeter Phoenix, 13 July to 8 September

Nicky Hirst specialises in fluid linguistic games. Her work acknowledges the tension between language's parallel functions to denote and to connote: in the task of communication, her objects and images revel in problems of interpretation. By crossing the line between formality and freedom, she springs the viewer from the trap of semantic closure into liquid possibility.

The choice of 'Algorithms' as the show's title is symptomatic of the 'get out of jail' card she plays - an epistemological goal in this case - to keep her work aesthetically on the move. The word came about by chance and, like every other item on show here, was already in circulation. Hirst separates her material from its everyday uses by looking at them differently; abstract combinations of form, material, texture, scale and colour are as much what any work is about as any imported imagery. Although algorithms are now talked about all the time, their actual meaning at first eluded her. On further inspection, the word presented itself as ideal for gentle sedition. After all, an algorithm is a set of unambiguous instructions in the way that a recipe is the algorithm for cake-making. As humans depend more on computers, man-made algorithms are given more opportunity to inject programmers' biases into the solutions they increasingly provide. Generating points to reward regular shopping habits is a benefit; the penalties in gender-profiling and social postcoding are not.

So random serendipity supplants logical order in Hirst's three-room installation. She starts with her adopted keyword, spelled out across the top line of collaged text fastened to a wall in the first gallery. Spilling out of the 11 succeeding lines are anagrams of the first - 'A logs mirth', 'Loam's girth' and so on. These establish the creative circuitry leading to the artworks with these titles (all 2019). The phrase 'Grail Moth' sparked the five paper folios fixed to an adjacent wall. The first installation the visitor sees in full, the folios are full of blank sheets in muted shades with unevenedged, overlapping chunks missing. The concertina pages of the book below, its butterfly-winged profile projecting into the room, has suffered the same fate. The contents have flown, as if the words were eaten by insects. A plausible culprit crowds a few framed panes of the nearby tall gallery windows: *Solar*

Might comprises squadrons of colourful butterfly stickers that, illuminated by ravenous beams of sunlight, shower walls and floor with shifting silhouettes.

By working in series - although seriality is not necessarily her intention - Hirst searches for new relationships in place of discrete meanings. *Mistral Hog* is four sets of five upright, galvanised steel rods, arranged against the wall so that the fifth rod rests diagonally across the other four. They appear to count off a quantity - of those obscure Mediterranean creatures of the title, perhaps. Rolling in above the putative herd is *Shalom Grit*, a constellation of flat, four-pointed stars, like huge clip-art symbols, in a gritty, high-percentage grey. These are organised decoratively around the rods into an arcaded Middle Eastern pattern of repeated geometric forms.

More uprights crowd the walls in the second gallery like extras queuing at the stage door in search of a part. Cardboard letters, neatly cut from packaging, are nailed to wooden stakes like placards to be held aloft or rearranged by visitors against the one empty wall into new assortments of words. The anagram behind this open invitation to opinion sharing or creative absurdity is the bullish 'Moral Sight'. Overseeing the ranked elements is a lone sheet culled from a hoarding poster showing two eyes shifted towards that wall - a wry allusion to the ethics of modern marketing, perhaps, or a lucky find that stirs more ambiguity into the mix.

The art in this installation emerges from such encounters; the artist is content with putting only the first steps in place towards widely diverse outcomes. Conceptual artist Douglas Huebler's observation, first quoted in the late 1980s, seems relevant to this trust in engagement: 'Things are only things the same way words are only words. No thing is art! Anything, of course, may join with other things in a relationship that may be regarded as art. It is human intelligence that constructs such relationships or, put another way, produces languages.' While Hirst does not quite match Huebler's incisively insurrectional dialectic, like the American she takes on methods irrevocably tied to coherence by proposing another approach freed from any alienating rationalist system. Relationships are another order of facts; Hirst does not do away with order by gutting words of their definitions. An order is still operating, one of exegesis that is instinctive rather than imposed.

Humans fill the gaps with their own steps to interpretation. A miniature Alpine landscape of paper peaks pinned to the wall is called *Roams Light* and consists of pages of *National Geographic* magazine photoreportage gutted of content to leave only glossy margins as frames for the imagination to travel into. Yet the irony in Hirst's choice of keyword is that algorithms are the building blocks of artificial intelligence. That approaching revolution could render humans obsolete in the home and workplace, leaving only the imagination to fill their days, a future of armchair-bound exploration perhaps foretold by the last work seen, a folded paper on the wall silvered with gilding wax rubbed to its surface to obscure the map printed beneath. Pathways disappear into a shimmering mirror that barely reflects anything at all. It is called *Mortal Sigh*.

Martin Holman is a writer based in Penzance.