

on the Language of Things at City Hall Park

The show offers all visitors a chance to consider some serious ideas



Claudia Comte, *The Italian Bunnies* (2016). Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. Photo: Jason Wyche, Courtesy Public Art Fund, New York

In bustling cities like New York, public art fights for attention with a myriad of stimuli: construction noise, street performers and towering architecture, to name a few. The Public Art Fund, the non-profit responsible for many of New York's outdoor contemporary art installations (such as Elmgreen and Dragset's *Van Gogh's Ear* at Rockefeller Center, until August 16), conscientiously faces this challenge in its newest group exhibition, *The Language of Things*. According to its organisers, "this exhibition in City Hall Park invites visitors to take a step back from this overwhelming environment and to think about the very nature of communication, from its most common form—the human language that enables us to name and categorise everyday objects—to its original state free of any translational process: the language of things." To break urban park visitors out of their routines and into a state of aesthetic contemplation is a formidable challenge—one the works on view are largely capable of meeting.

Taking its title from *On Language as Such* and *on the Language of Man*, a 1916 essay by Walter Benjamin, the exhibition brings together works by Carol Bove, Claudia Comte, Michael Dean, Adam Pendleton, Tino Sehgal, Chris Watson and the late poet Hannah Weiner. The works explore written, visual and spoken language and how they augment daily experience and offer us a chance to pause and consider the type of conversations one can have with a work of art. By mixing abstraction with forms less common to public spaces, like sound, performance and poetry, the exhibition pushes the boundaries of what kind of work is acceptable for public spaces and eases a broad viewership into an appreciation of its subject matter.

This poses a truth about the nature of public art in general: that possibilities for experience are varied and that highly visible public art can exist as tourist attraction, photo op, or even as a site of genuine aesthetic reflection. Some of the works are immediately identifiable as public art, such as Claudia Comte's *The Italian Bunnies* (2016) and Carol Bove's *Lingam* (2015). Both are sculptural installations with phallic symbolism that is comfortably recognisable. Comte's pairs of sleek marble prongs reach casually upwards, while Bove's jagged log rests rigid against a taller rusted beam. Both thrust towards the sky, in communication with one another, the history of Minimalist sculpture and the surrounding trees and buildings.

Hannah Weiner's poems are a particularly surprising inclusion. Printed on placards that are posted at the perimeter of a small flower garden, *Weiner's Code Poems* (1968) are accompanied by images from *The International Code of Signals for the Use of All Nations*, which served as her inspiration. The layers of language in Weiner's poems provoke reflection on what can and cannot be communicated, which is particularly pertinent to the exhibition's theme. A set of internationally accepted symbols and signs employed as a poetic language that mixes something universal (many nations agreed upon these codes) with something particular (after all, most of us lay readers don't understand them). Furthermore, the visitor is tasked with reading these poems in relation to the exhibition at large and its environment.

The same is true for Tino Sehgal's *This You* (2006), the only one of the artist's "constructed situations" that is meant to be staged outdoors. The work consists of a female vocalist unobtrusively serenading park dwellers during select daytime hours. Unless one knows to look for it, one could easily slip right by this piece, as strangers singing in public are no rare occurrence in Manhattan's public parks. However, for individuals visiting specifically to see the exhibition, the discovery of Sehgal's piece is like winning a game of "Where's Waldo"—at least at first. Upon making eye contact with the singer, one might wonder how long the "work of art" has been standing outside in the summer heat, or how exactly she is being compensated for her time. These are questions which are no doubt part of the piece, and which are especially pressing for that reason. This constructed situation, set in a public park, is both more and less disarming than Sehgal's indoor works. In contrast to the gallery or museum, the park is a place where social interaction is encouraged and even occurs naturally. In this case, we know that the performer is a conscious, thinking person, one who is having a genuine experience that parallels our own. Its form is directly moulded by her physical exertion and conscious participation. This is unnerving, but also touching.

Now that curating has become a medium, one can consider an exhibition like this as a complete work of art. Like many shows, its subtleties and layers of meaning may be best understood by those already in the know. But the language of these works becomes stronger than what is immediately apparent. Read in relation to each other, the pieces offer a rich reflection on the history of form, language, naming and the shifting of agency between work and viewer. Perhaps an un-expecting park visitor would not consider all these ideas, but creating the conditions for possibility for such an experience may be enough.

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The Language of Things, City Hall Park, New York, until 29 September

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