

Veronika Hauer: Who is not a fool?

By Natalie Ferris

1) Ludwig Wittgenstein always sat in the front row of the cinema. Frequently observed to lose himself at screenings of American films, he expressed a dislike for the intrusive manoeuvres of the camera in European film. It was the calculated movements of Fred Astaire's feet that held him in greatest thrall, submitting to the 'showerbath' of tap, song and high spirits. In the sharp, expressive taps or slow, studied turns, commanding the entire field of vision, Astaire was in conversation with Wittgenstein.

2) What, we may ask, is the nature of a conversation? Let us consider this question by asking, first, another question: what forms of communication permit a conversation?

3) With (1) and (2) in mind, let us consider gesture, graphics, sound, all emitting their own peculiar resonances. Conversations as conducted by the artist Veronika Hauer are not merely from body to body, mind to mind, but take place on placards, motioned in figurines, spoken through flags. She is at the margins of a perceivable discourse.

4) We could say that Hauer is a performer. That would be to suggest that she presents a form of entertainment to an audience. We could say that Hauer is a choreographer. That would be to say that she composes sequences of steps and movements to convey a particular thought, scenario or emotion. I may acknowledge either option, or both, but that would be to sidestep her authorship of narratives, poetic statements and parodic one-liners, to ignore her manipulation of graphic or visual systems of communication, to disregard her fascination for the phenomenal experience of performers and viewers.

5) Astaire had a deceptive light-footedness. Impish in his compulsion to move, he was nevertheless meticulous in his compliance with countless sequences of exacting steps.

6) In *Semaphore Dance* (2014) Hauer anatomises the game of communication. Semaphore is by definition a telegraphy system that delivers messages from a distance by means of visual signals, with hand-held flags, paddles, rods, discs or gloved hands. It is a system typically used at sea. The viewer need not be literate; the message is here deciphered – letter by letter – by an invisible narrator. As is made apparent, each letter corresponds to a particular movement of the arms, a distinct positioning of the large white flags at either side of the body. The assembly of movements signify letters, which build to form words. The aggregate of words forms a poetic scene:

*She runs forward and returns in a curve
Her tail wagging dance recurs
This is her message
I am an insect not an animal
My body conquers speech
Speech is to be looked at*

*We walk barefoot over carpets, backgrounds, islands, shipwrecks
Three women
Click Click*

7) Now consider this explanation: the dance of the honey-bee is known to impart to other bees information about the direction and distance to sources of nectar and pollen. The waggle is a device in the shape of a figure eight, by which the bee's movements point the way in accordance with the height of the sun in the sky.

8) In *The Blue and Brown Books* Wittgenstein considered language acquisition 'strictly analogous' to animal training.

9) If we try to decide whether Hauer is a) guided by physical signs, b) guided by visual signs or c) guided by vocal signs, we will be forced to concede that she is captivated by all three. This forms a complex of signals, apparitions and allusions to be relayed between artist and viewer.

10) If we return for a moment to (6), Hauer's body is static, except for the raising and lowering of arms.

11) Here one might point their finger at the fool. Hauer's jesters are of two types: 'natural or artificial fools', as encountered in *Cuckoo*. They are either blessed with the ability to entertain, or blighted by a humorous physical affectation. They carry props, mirrors, bells and clubs, and hopes of civic rights. The audience of *Cuckoo* is unpredictable, both agitated and impassive, while the jesters wheel around their subjects in a blithe dance. The *Cuckoo* figures remain fixed in vague postures, gesticulating to one another in their own performing circuit.

12) In *The Blue Book*, Wittgenstein describes a language-game in which a person A gives commands to a person B in a series of dots and dashes. B understands these written signs as a figure in dancing with a particular step, the dot a hop and the dash a tap. There is a limited range: the compass of the game is in the combination of its marks. For Wittgenstein, play is a fundamental aspect of language acquisition. For Hauer, light-footed with language, play itself can be an act of mimicry.

13) Hauer articulates the absurdity of meaning, spelling out her enigmatic lines of verse. There is also silence. The *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* famously ends with the claim that what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. Hauer's silence is never still, presenting forms of visual resistance that challenge the integrity of the page, space or her own body.

14) I should like to make it plain: Fred Astaire held court as something of a jester when backstage. He traded wisecracks, fooled around with his co-star Ginger Rogers and would play practical jokes on crew members.

15) Hauer's *speech is to be looked at* (2015) satirises a limited range. Each of her canvas plates, foisted up by her foot, symbolise either a letter or a concept. The letters are portrayed by images of hands signing the alphabet of international sign language, although this equation is swiftly disrupted by the inclusion of images that have taken on greater import than that registered by the eye. We recognise a pipe, but we also recognise the stylisation of the pipe, the specific rendering of a very particular pipe, and all of the art historical associations that preclude its depiction. This is not what it claims to be. The cards are at an angle.

16) 'Is this foot *my* foot?' 411. (2) *Philosophical Investigations*.

17) Wittgenstein performs an act of revelation: words are not defined by reference to the objects they identify, nor by the mental processes one may associate with them, but by how they are put to use.

18) My aim is, claimed Wittgenstein, 'to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense'. Hauer performs something quite different, passing through systems of manifest iconography to subvert the insistence of her own body.

19) This is her message.