

NELSON HENRICKS
MONTREAL

will have passed. Will we manage to say what we say before it does? Fear of the empty page, the action of another's presence, typos, telephones and conflicting internal desires are just a few examples of an endless list of obstacles to effective expression. Curated by Steve Reinke, *NELSON HENRICKS. TIME WILL HAVE PASSED. LE TEMPS A PASSÉ.*, Nelson Henricks' mid-career retrospective brings together two recent video-installations, a single-channel video from the last sixteen years, several still photographs [Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, September 1—October 16, 2010]. Taken together, the works offer the opportunity to see how Henricks negotiates the task of sorting through one's desires and intellectual will and embedding them in a specific form with its own history and agenda.

Henricks' 2010 four-channel video-installation *Unwriting* takes as its subject writing and its compositional—and existential—struggle. Interspersed between rapidly alternating still-images of various tools for facilitating communication—such as typewriters, microphones, rotary dial phones, and pencils—are images of written text: "There is a gap between what I want to say and what ends up being said. I think of what to say, choose the wrong words." The soundtrack fills the space with rhythmic clapping, typing, and ticking while words struggle to find their shape: "Find a better way to say it. Say it again. Say it better. Rewrite it. Rewrite it. Get to the point." But the point never sharpens and the pencil lead breaks repeatedly. We are left with the promise and the impossibility of reaching the end of our/the writer's thoughts.

In the two-channel video-installation, *Map of the City*, we read the narrator's running commentary as he navigates an unfamiliar city, Rome. Rather than filming his ambulations, however, Henricks compiled thousands of still-images of all sorts of things: maps, relics, marble sculptures, neon-lighting, and graffiti, as well as old post-sized photographs, small toys, game pieces, keys, coins, matchbooks and other trinkets, each

small enough to carry in the palm of one's hand. The objects are photographed against brightly colored backdrops, stressing the particularities of their character and material surface, while also concretizing the resulting image into an object itself. In some parts of *Map of the City*, images and text are paired like a story book; in other parts, the objects are shown beside sketches of them. And in yet other "chapters," the images, thematically grouped, follow each other in quick succession, pausing only long enough to offer a passage of text. For example, while details of maps flash by, the text reads "Arriving in the city, you are a stranger... Each person you meet is a possible point of entry." Images of entranceways follow: "Each face leads to a room. Rooms open onto other rooms. In this way, you will walk the city from end to end." The task of the visitor, therefore, is reading, not only faces but also the memories embedded in objects, their latent potential for expression, and the autobiographical tenor of individual spaces.

In an earlier work, *Time Passes*, 1998, this emphasis on chambers for thought and the fight for survival by way of writing come together. While the sound of a pen hurriedly strokes paper with "swirls, dots, crosses, dashes," we see graceful shadows of plants in a sunlit room and clouds rushing by outside in fast-forward. "No place is as real as this room," writes Henricks: "This is a considerable task. To transfer one's self on to paper." Indeed. Finding form is always confrontational and perpetually arbitrary. In Henricks' hands, however, objects, photographs, gestures, personal narratives, sound, and moving-images collide in ways that highlight their integrity while successfully broaching intimate questions: belonging and alienation, desire, memory and its failure, and the daunting task of composing one's life.

—Anja Bock



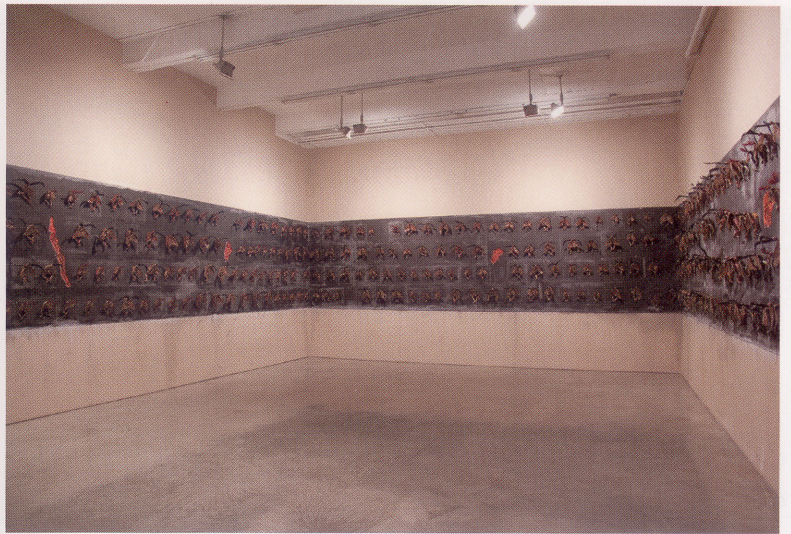
SIMRYN GILL
NEW YORK

Simryn Gill's *Holding Patterns* reminds us that letters and numbers are physical things as much as carriers of meaning [Tracy Williams Ltd.; November 5—December 23, 2010]. The spare arrangement in Williams' spacious new gallery invites us to approach each of Gill's three works intimately. Permission is explicitly granted to hold each of them in some way. This is much more than a dismissal of the rule not to touch; it actualizes Gill's assertion that language exists not only as a mental construction. In *Holding Patterns*, language is transformed into a physical experience to be negotiated by the viewer's body.

9 Volumes from The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, 2008, follows a recurring pattern in Gill's oeuvre. As before, she has reduced books to unreadable paper pulp balls. The books used for this particular piece—nine of nearly a hundred volumes by Mahatma Gandhi—were bought at Sydney University's annual library sale. Though the information they once carried has been rendered inaccessible, we are encouraged to hold each volume as an abstract form. In a gesture of humility and reverence, cushions placed on the floor encourage a quiet and contemplative experience of the objects. The reverential tone of *9 Volumes* is countered by the unrefined surfaces of the spheres, which are vaguely repulsive in both color and texture, as if they had been chewed.

From afar, a second work, *Breathing Out*, 2010, is a minimal composition moving like air across seven large sheets of paper. A closer look reveals insect-like fluttering pencil marks around torn pieces of paper. Only from inches away can these collaged bits be seen in full detail. They are letter combinations placed in patterns of sound: wh – woo – ooh – shh. While the word fragments appear ethereally poetic, they were taken from very definite sentences and paragraphs. They were, in fact, torn from a stack of self-published autobiographies resting nearby on the floor and available for the curious to flip through. The extracted groups of letters seem to carry the raw intention that must have birthed them, a plain-

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Nelson Henricks, *Unwriting*, 2010, synchronized four-channel video installation, 12 minutes [courtesy of the artist and Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montréal; photo: Paul Smith]; Simryn Gill, detail of *9 Volumes from the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 2008, paper, glue, dimensions variable [courtesy of the artist and Tracy Williams Ltd.]



WANGECHE MUTU
NEW YORK

tive exhalation escaping from the throat. As in *9 Volumes*, books were destroyed in the creation of the work; here, that process is marked as holes in the pages.

Of the three works in the exhibition, *Naughts*, 2010, is the least explicitly about language. Collected by the artist over time, a large number of ring-shaped objects are scattered across a small table. Visitors casually and continually reorder these objects by size, color, material, or some unfathomable playtime logic. The surface of the table is a record of multiple systems overlaid in time and space, bringing to mind Michel Foucault's description of schizophrenics's arrangements of pieces of yarn, from the introduction to *The Order of Things*. A little reflection on the title and the context of the show in general recast the objects as "zeroes," letterforms, uncovering a deeper meaning within the piece. *Naughts* is both a game and a representation of language as a structure, where the link between words and their meanings is ultimately arbitrary.

While this exhibition cannot be reduced to a single message, a sense of mourning does prevail. The books used in the works, even those by great thinkers, are little more than discarded waste. The disposal of bulk material is a kind of slow death as words, in the form of printed matter, are dismantled. *Holding Patterns* also implies an invisible opposite: electronic media in all its forms. Gill's work offers a meditation on what is lost as we move away from materially-rendered language—whether visual or verbal—into the fleeting bytes of information transferred across the electronic pathways. History, by definition the written record, is shifting more dramatically than we may realize. *Holding Patterns* insists that language is and always will be a complex and layered experience that cannot be reduced to a simple exchange of information.

—Annie Hollingworth

The brilliant thing about collage has always been its unique ability to put forth distressingly immediate juxtapositions. Kenyan-born, Brooklyn-based artist Wangechi Mutu brings an uncanny freshness to this time-honored shock. Choosing images from fashion magazines, pornography, and ethnographic photography, she builds works that point up the fetishization of the female form—by way of threatened or powerless situations as well as dismemberment, scarring, and mutilation.

When it comes to content, these works scintillate only a little less brightly. Mutu's concerns include the body, gender, and race. More specifically, she investigates the way in which culture is written, burned, scarred or otherwise marked on the female body. It's well-trod territory, but that's hardly Mutu's fault—indeed, to mention such explorations in an artist's statement is tantamount to declaring seriousness of purpose in contemporary art practice these days.

It's Mutu's meticulously tended aesthetic and inventiveness that set her work apart. She augments her compositions with a variety of materials that, in less unsettlingly skilled hands, could feel like a jumble. But somehow, Mutu combines incompatible elements into a seamless whole. She also uses paint and ink on Mylar to give her compositions a garish, unsettling brightness and depth of texture, which she expertly manipulates for disturbing effects. Glitter, jewels, beads, fur, and feathers make appearances as well, subtly disrupting the glossy surface that can render collage merely superficial.

In past works, she explored the female body as a site for illness and decay. Here, in the exhibition *Hunt Bury Flee*, her figures fall prey to more active, and thus more intentional, processes—as well as more destructive, be they self-destructive or other-imposed [Gladstone Gallery; October 30—December 18, 2010]. All this is to say that it's personal. This aspect of the show can lead to a certain mental fatigue. After all, many have convincingly argued that Surrealist images of mutilated, disfigured women are still sexualized and thus misogynist. How can a sexualized image of a woman's mouth spattered with blood and dirt—when shown in a contempo-

rary art context—not be exploitative? How can it pry a high-minded "challenge" to the "question of decency"—to quote the Gladstone press release?

Placing such fruitless questions aside, the viewer has many distressingly sexualized images of de-abasement, and mutilation to contemplate. In *Madonna*, 2010, a figure with exotic or tribal accoutrements strikes a sexualized pose on a couch. *Humming*, 2010, features two female figures surrounded by flies, including one very large tentacle bug—or fly-octopus-aggregate—that seems to have malicious intent toward one or both of them. *No, I don't love me. It's true*, 2010, shows a despondent figure with pendulous breasts and truncated animal limbs whose bloated, spotted skin is bound by uncomfortable cords. *Sprout*, 2010, presents an upside-down figure with arms buried in muck, whose disfigured head is pushed against the ground at an ugly angle, with a tangle of leaves and twigs sprouting from its anus and severed legs. Birds peck at its decaying skin; its eyes are gone. The image could be redemptive, suggesting rebirth or regrowth. But the foliage isn't lush, the birds appear particularly inspired. Like many others in the show, this image simply dwells on decay for its potential to distress, unsettle, and disturb.

Indeed, it almost feels as though Mutu herself is weary of her chosen discourse. But the difficulties of practice are neatly solved in the installation *Moth Girls*, 2010, the show's dark anchor and best success. The work entails a wall of tiny ceramic women who are shapely, naked legs are topped by dark leather wings and silky feather antennae. Their poses could even be dancing, struggling or sex. Despite the suggestion that these winged creatures have been captured and pinned in rows like so many bugs on a card, they gleam with a subtle menace, suggesting, if not a hopeful fate, at least a vengeful one.

—Lara Kristin Hernandez

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Wangechi Mutu**, *Before Punk Came Funk*, 2010, mixed media ink, paint, collage on Mylar, 52.25 x 50.375 inches; **Wangechi Mutu**, *Moth Girls*, 2010, mixed media porcelain, leather, paint, feathers, and chalk, 173 x 283 x 262 inches (images © Wangechi Mutu; courtesy of Gladstone Gallery, New York)