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Review: Samuel Beckett, Judith Wilkinson, Centre Pompidou, Paris, March - June 2007

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Source: *Circa*, No. 120 (Summer, 2007), pp. 86-88

Published by: Circa Art Magazine

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25564817>

Accessed: 19/02/2010 17:35

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# *Samuel Beckett*

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(opposite)  
Jean-Michel Alberola  
*Rien*, 1995  
neon, 30 x 30 cm  
photo Florian Kleinfenn  
© private collection  
© Adagp, 2007  
courtesy Centre Pompidou

"Art loves leaps," remarked Samuel Beckett in his 1946 essay *La peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon*. Part of his postwar Parisian coterie Beckett lauded the work of the van Veldes for its ability to "force the fundamental invisibility of exterior things till the very invisibility itself becomes a visible thing." A bit of a jawbreaker admittedly, this statement embodies much of what Beckett was to think and write about art. Following suit sixty years later, Marianne Alphant and Nathalie Léger have managed to make visible many previously uncelebrated aspects of the Irish author's practice in their courageous Samuel Beckett exhibition at the Centre Pompidou.

The exhibition boasts several new commissions by artists such as Stan Douglas, Alain Fleischer and Jérôme Cômber and is accompanied by an extensive catalogue with responses to Beckett's work from a horde of international writers and artists. With a variety of events running throughout the summer, the Pompidou has also mounted an extensive music and film programme to honour one of France's best-loved interlopers.

Making Paris his permanent home in 1937, Beckett wittily declared, upon returning to his adopted city after a brief stay in Ireland, that it was "like coming out of gaol in April." Awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Médaille de la Reconnaissance Française for his efforts in the

resistance, Beckett wrote the majority of his work in French, spending a total of 52 years in France before his death in 1989.

Focusing on Beckett's lesser-known activities as a filmmaker and theatre director, the Pompidou exhibition aims to highlight both the significance of the writer's bilingualism and the pioneering nature of his artistic vision. With an astounding number of supporting manuscripts, letters, notebooks and photographs, Beckett's works are presented throughout the exhibition in both English and French.

Divided into eight interrelated thematic spaces, the exhibition moves conceptually rather than chronologically through Beckett's oeuvre. Exploring important motifs for Beckett such as *Voice*, *Eye*, *Cube* and *Remains*, the works of the almost thirty artists included in this exhibition in some way reflect the writer's ongoing philosophical and aesthetic preoccupations.

Beginning with *Voice*, we access the initial space through a dark narrow passage flanked by grey eerie light. Confronted by the unforgettable image of an isolated mouth, it is only as the viewer approaches that he or she realises that an image which first appeared still is actually struggling to communicate. Projected onto the wall the way one would expect to encounter a video work, Beckett's revolutionary teleplay *Not I* (1972) is no longer isolated as an experiment in dramatic form, but instead recognized as an early example of time-based art.

Although moving next to more familiar early practitioners of video and film, Bruce Nauman, Paul McCarthy, Andrew Kotting and Mona Hatoum, the curators avoid obvious choices from these artists and allow a whole new range of aesthetic correspondences to emerge. The work that Beckett was producing in the late

'60s and early '70s shared not only certain subject matter with these artists but also a very real and distinct method of working. The blurring, dimming and disintegrating images so familiar to us from early video art were appearing not only on Beckett's stage but also in the pages of his prose and in the flickering presences on his television screens. The sensitivity to light so important to Beckett's work is beautifully embodied in Nauman's *Gauze* from 1969. In it, the artist pulls slowly from his mouth a piece of fragile white gauze. Barely there his image fades into the background, bathed in the grainy intermittent light of a 16mm camera. Similarly, McCarthy's *Black and white tapes 1970 – 1975* shows the artist wriggling along a white painted line on his studio floor as the world is reduced to the Beckettian monochromes of black, white and grey.

Beckett's obsession with modes of perception and visibility is further investigated with the inclusion of his work *Film* (1964). Produced in NYC on the writer's only trip to the US, it stars Buster Keaton and is born out of Beckett's interest in the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley. In this black and white classic of avant-garde cinema, Berkeley's central tenet, "To be is to be perceived," is hilariously tested by the vaudeville antics of Keaton as he is relentlessly pursued by an unidentified eye. In a contemporary twist on Beckett's project, Stan Douglas, one of the specially commissioned artists, has made a new work entitled *Video* (2006–2007). Referencing the recent racial riots in Parisian suburbs, Douglas's work picks up on the more sinister aspects of the possibilities of constant surveillance.

In another space, dedicated to the *Cube*, Beckett's concerns with formalism, mathematics and logical games are explored. Sol le Witt's minimalist drawing *Geometric figures and colour* (1979) is so visually analogous to Beckett's teleplay *Quad* (1980), in which four figures robed in primary colours scurry repeatedly to the four corners of a square, it could almost be a preparatory sketch.

What emerges most forcefully from these innovative artistic couplings is the power of the image in Beckett's work. The same images re-appear in Beckett's prose, theatre, television, radio and film in continually changing configurations. Now-familiar scenes of fading, hapless wanderers, starkly lit truncated body parts (heads, mouths, eyes), disintegrating bicycles, ditches and trees, form a visual lexicon that can be traced across his experiments in different media. The importance of light for Beckett is also stressed, both in the unusual selection of works and in the sensitive exhibition design. Creating spaces where Beckett's artistic practice can be read in new

contexts allows even the old favourites of Beckett exhibitions, Avigdor Arikha, Bram van Velde and Jack BYeats, also present here, to be imbued with new meanings.

Returning to black, the exhibition ends as it began, in darkness. In the final section, a cacophony of voices resound as Beckett's late prose texts emanate from bell shaped speakers above clear plastic chairs. Beckett's ghostly presence that seems to stalk these chambers is finally given the last word in the only known recording of the writer's voice. As Beckett reads *Lessness* (1969), "Figment dawn, dispeller of figments and the others called dusk," tapping its regular beat on a now long gone table, images emerge, almost inevitably, in the mind's eye, as if "all coming out of the dark."

(below)  
Samuel Beckett  
*Film*, 1966  
35 mm film, silent, 30 min  
script Samuel Beckett, with  
Buster Keaton, direction Alan  
Schneider © Centre Pompidou,  
Paris, 2007 © The Estate of  
Samuel Beckett  
courtesy Centre Pompidou

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