Maarten de Vos after Jan Snellinck, *Confusion of Tongues (the Tower of Babel being struck down)*, 1643, The Courtauld Gallery © The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London

Cover: Detail from Susan Hiller, *Midnight*, Baker Street, 1983, Arts Council Collection. © Susan Hiller, courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London/DACS 2016

A WAY INTO UTOPIA

In his book *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (2005), Russell Jacoby describes what he calls 'blueprint utopias', where an authoritarian figure prescribes the exact measurements of a perfect society, down to its citizens' every action and thought. Thomas More's own *Utopia* could be read as such a 'blueprint', although there are many hints within the text that More did not always intend us to take his words at face value.

More recently, writers such as George Orwell have played on the sinister aspects of this kind of utopia. In Orwell's *1984* (1949), the actions of the protagonist Winston Smith are constantly watched and controlled by Big Brother and the Party. Language, too, is policed with the invention of 'Newspeak'. In Orwell's words:

> The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of IngSoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. [...] Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meaning [...].

As Orwell makes clear, this is no 'perfect place' but rather a dystopian nightmare. Today, 'utopia' could almost be taken as a dirty word, associated with state control.

This need not be the case. Instead, we can embrace the power of language to do exactly that which Newspeak vainly attempts to deny. A multiplicity of voices speaking in a multiplicity of tongues can suggest different ways of seeing the world. The slipperiness of language with its many meanings embraces ambiguity and even contradiction. Readers can make their own mind up about what they think and believe. In opposition to the 'blueprint utopia', this is a utopian approach to language that embraces difference – not a sanitised site of enforced agreement but a space for conflicting perceptions and ideas.

To celebrate the state of ambiguity – a situation in which words and ideas are open to multiple valid interpretations – provides us with a new and exciting model for utopian thinking, one which we invite you to embrace in experiencing the works in this exhibition.

GS and SG

THE LANGUAGE OF MATERIALS

in the dreaming youths kokoschka experimented with close set typography and a prose style eliminating all punctuation and capital letters even though in german nouns are usually capitalised this provides a challenge to the reader who is used to the grammatical structures of written language

The Dreaming Youths was published in 1908 by the Wiener Werkstätte, a print workshop associated with the Vienna School of Applied Arts where Kokoschka was a student. Kokoschka's teacher Rudolf von Larisch was well-known for his avant-garde typography which emphasised the aesthetic quality of typeface over its legibility. The close setting of words and lack of punctuation in *The Dreaming Youths* are directly borrowed from von Larisch's design style. Three years before the publication of Kokoschka's book, von Larisch had written about the importance of a text's materiality, a concept he described as the 'language of materials'.

In Büchler's *American Irish* the text refers to the probable origin of the type – from a US-made vintage letterpress set – and the probable Irish origin of the typecase used to create the work. Like von Larisch and Kokoschka, Büchler's practice often investigates the form and materiality of text; in this work, the tools of its making become both medium and message.

IN HIS LETTERPRESS WORKS BÜCHLER ELIMINATES ALL PUNCTUATION ALTHOUGH HE CAPITALISES EVERY LETTER THIS HAS A SIMILAR EFFECT TO THE LOWERCASE TYPOGRAPHY OF THE DREAMING YOUTHS

Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven* (1845), from which the text of Büchler's *Nothing More* is derived, has set formal qualities. However, in Büchler's print all rhyme is denied and the poetic lines turn abruptly into a series of repeated letters.

Because Büchler used a finite set of letter blocks, by the time he reached the final phrase he had exhausted all seven 'O's; the words must be completed in the reader's mind. The disruption of Poe's composition results directly from the medium of the letterpress.

For both Kokoschka and Büchler the process of reading is emphasised by the fluid relationship between typography and text, between medium and message.

KB and ER

Oskar Kokoschka, *The Dreaming Youths – Dialogues*, 1907, The Courtauld Gallery, © The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London/DACS 2016

POLITICS OF RESISTANCE

David Robilliard's *A candle in the dark is better than nothing at all* and Imogen Stidworthy's *Barrabackslarrabang* relate to two different subcultures – London's gay community and the working class culture of Liverpool and Birmingham – through different forms of language. They engage with tropes of class, race and sexual orientation, confronting the norm through resistant language both written and spoken.

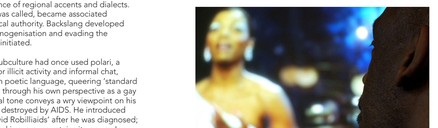
With the introduction of inter-city railways throughout England in the 1830s, an 'official' version of English began to emerge, slowly eroding the presence of regional accents and dialects. 'Standard English', as it was called, became associated with economic and political authority. Backslang developed in response, resisting homogenisation and evading the comprehension of the uninitiated.

Although London's gay subculture had once used polari, a slang traditionally used for illicit activity and informal chat, Robilliard created his own poetic language, queering 'standard English' and reclaiming it through his own perspective as a gay person. His conversational tone conveys a wry viewpoint on his life and community, both destroyed by AIDS. He introduced himself to people as 'David Robilliaids' after he was diagnosed; this same dark humour and irreverence retains its power. In speaking out candidly, cynically and poetically on the epidemic in his paintings, both satirical and intimate, he broke taboos surrounding stigma and unspoken tragedy.

In *Barrabackslarrabang*, standardised English is interwoven with Backslang. The overlapping masculine and feminine voices – at times singing, at times speaking – seem to demonstrate a desire to break free of imposed social convention. The film demonstrates that voices possess a political power; tones, languages, means of expression and accents disclose culture, gender, class and identity. As such, Backslang acts as a political agent to preserve rights of confidentiality and difference in resistance to the mainstream.

While Stidworthy's indecipherable chant might frustrate the listener, Robilliard's paintings can inspire the reader. Both works convey the power of subverted and coded words to enable marginalised communities to find their own voice and identity within language. Reclaiming language from the standard usage of mainstream culture becomes a political act.

MLC and CM



Imogen Stidworthy, *Barrabackslarrabang*, 2009–10, Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London © Imogen Stidworthy and Matt's Gallery, London; courtesy Arts Council Collection

PERFORMING WORDS

The idea of performance might seem irreconcilable with two-dimensional artworks. Yet what brings together many of the artists in our exhibition is an understanding that language is also theatrical, a kind of performance. There is a social dimension to speech and language, concerning the body and senses as much as the activity of the brain. The ways in which individuals communicate their experience of the world is framed through different forms of language and creative process.

Hamish Fulton combines the linguistic with the sensorial. His *Untitled. Australia (from Fourteen Works 1982-1989)*, allows colour to merge with language so that the experience of walking through the Australian outback is conveyed more fully. Fulton's physical encounter with nature is the inspiration for the work; he describes himself as a 'walking artist'. The artist places his own body and its movement at the centre of his practice.

Fulton has often been associated with Land art, placed alongside artists who use the earth's materials to create their work. However, throughout his text-based and photographic work, Fulton aims to leave 'as little trace of my passing as possible', moving through the land but without making changes to it. Instead, he creates text pieces such as *Untitled. Australia (from Fourteen Works 1982-1989)* or photographs of walks to fix his engagement with nature. The gap between his walk and the representation of it announces his work as a temporal performance.

Just as Fulton activated his own body to produce a work of art, Pavel Büchler's *How to Find A Way in The Dark?* is also a kind of performance, reminiscing upon a childhood activity. As a child in Czechoslovakia, Büchler and his schoolmates conversed in sign language to pass messages behind their teacher's back. The work recalls the secrets once covertly exchanged. It recounts the unique language of performative-play that had been used amongst young schoolboys. The work is an unrehearsed performance from memory, drawn freehand by the artist who was blindfolded. This meant that his creative process came from muscle memory and a familiarity of gesture.

LRF and IL

Pavel Büchler, *How to Find a Way in the Dark?* ('A'), 1983–86, Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London © Pavel Büchler; courtesy Arts Council Collection

In *Utopia* (1516), Thomas More imagines an apparently perfect island society. Citizens share a common language and way of life. Yet it is a text riddled with ambiguities, paradoxes and verbal games. Whilst the word 'utopia' itself translates as 'no-place', its close relation 'eutopia' means 'good-place'. Enigmatic in tone, the book has repeatedly frustrated readers' attempts to decipher its message. *Confusion of Tongues* brings into dialogue artists who – in ways similar to More – explore the power of language not only to communicate but also to complicate and withhold meaning.

Two seventeenth-century engravings of the story of Babel act as a starting point for this exhibition. In the Bible, a community united by a single language built the Tower of Babel in their aspiration to reach the Heavens. God destroyed the Tower, scattered people across the world and introduced multiple languages. Direct communication was lost; distance and difference were brought into being.

This 'confusion of tongues' has often symbolised the impossibility of reaching utopia, a 'no-place' alive only in the minds of those who imagine it. But can confusion be a cause for celebration rather than regret? Can frustration give rise to creative thought? Through unconventional uses of language – at times apparently straightforward, at times subversive and complex – the artworks in this exhibition resist immediate interpretation. As viewers, we are invited to imagine through and beyond the written word, to think and re-think, to look and look again.

Confusion of Tongues: Art and the Limits of Language has been curated by students of the MA Curating the Art Museum programme at the Courtauld Institute of Art. The exhibition has been conceived in response to *UTOPIA 2016: A Year of Imagination and Possibility*, a year-long programme of events and exhibitions at Somerset House celebrating the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*.

QUESTIONING PORTRAITURE

> *Portrait* (noun) – a painting, drawing, photograph or engraving of a person, especially one depicting only the face or head and shoulders; a representation or impression of someone.
>
> *Oxford Dictionaries.* Oxford University Press.

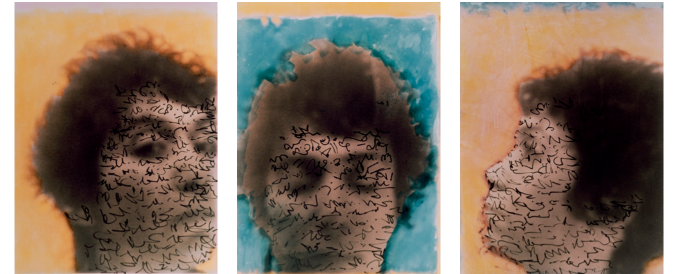
A portrait claims to present a person's appearance and character. The subject's clothing, attributes, setting and posture contribute to how he or she is perceived. Through representing these external details, traditional portraiture is thought to reveal a subject's identity.

Fiona Banner's *Superhuman Nude* and Susan Hiller's *Midnight, Baker Street* break with the conventions of portraiture. The artists use words as well as image to reveal or confuse a subject's appearance, thoughts and feelings. Both works incorporate language in playful ways to explore the limits of fully capturing a person's identity in portraiture.

In Banner's *Superhuman Nude*, written descriptions invite the viewer to imagine a Paralympic athlete. Banner offers a fragmentary impression of the athlete's body. Rather than describe the athlete's overall appearance, she records unique features from head to toe: 'toes curling [...] one calf bulging muscle.' In this portrait, Banner moves beyond the face, head, and shoulders of the subject, yet his identity – race, sexuality and personal history – remains unknown, leaving it to the imagination.

Hiller's *Midnight, Baker Street* goes beneath the surface, probing the psychic self. At midnight – a moment in time between wakefulness and sleep, dream and reality – Hiller took three self-portraits in a photo booth. As in traditional portraiture, Hiller presents her face, head and neck. Yet, by overlaying these self-portraits with automatic writing that stems directly from the subconscious, Hiller questions how, and whether, a subject's true identity can be presented. Is the script a presentation of her authentic self, or does it efface the images of her authentic 'I'? Either way, Hiller's identity is inscrutable. The automatic writing obscures her face, but the script is also indecipherable.

MEL and WFS



Susan Hiller, *Midnight, Baker Street*, 1983, Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London © Susan Hiller; courtesy Arts Council Collection/DACS 2016

JOURNEYS ON THE PAGE

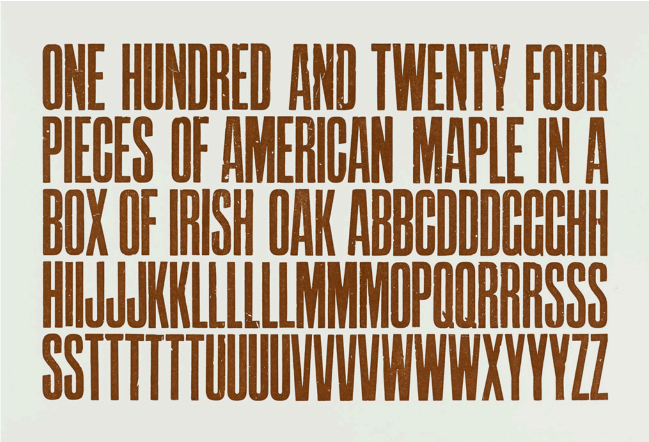
Descriptions of sights, smells, sounds and colours conjure imagined experiences in our mind's eye. In Thomas More's *Utopia* the written word creates a fictional account of an island for the reader to imagine. This place is simultaneously perfect and non-existent; the word *utopia* translates to 'no-place'.

Hamish Fulton's typographic works take their reader on a visually-led walk. No walk is the same, but they are all defined by a certain rhythm, marked by the passage of time and framed by a beginning and an end. Fulton's experiments with words, typeface and colours evoke the continuities, breaks and surprises associated with walking. *Untitled. Australia (from Fourteen Works 1982-1989)* recalls an eleven-day wandering with a friend in the Australian outback in July 1982. Fulton's shifting perception of the landscape around him during his time spent walking is distilled into eight columns of twelve alternating adjectives and nouns; the words conjure images of the place over time.

Chandra's *Album Pacifica* is informed by the traces of place that are tied to memories, time and imagination. An installation of 100 photographs, it moves beyond mere photographic representation of place. From afar, it looks like a cluster of clouds, or birds in flight, recalling features of the natural world. On closer inspection the collection of marks recorded on the back of the photographs, including text and stamps, reveal memories: Australian beer, an uncle in the US. These are traces of times and places, some of them recurring such as the Prasad photographic studio in Suva, Fiji. Only the backs of the photographs are displayed, encouraging the viewer to imagine a narrative, triggered by the reassembled memories of a family scattered across the globe.

Imagined experiences of place are malleable and permeable; they are unique to each of us and change over time. The memories of place that inform these works are reimagined by the viewer in a shared experience that transports us beyond the gallery.

CRC and CL



Pavel Büchler, *American Irish*, 2012, Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London © Pavel Büchler; courtesy Arts Council Collection

David Robilliard, *A candle in the dark is better than nothing at all*, 1988, Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London © The Estate of David Robilliard/DACS 2016; courtesy Arts Council Collection

Confusion of Tongues: Art and the Limits of Language has been organised by MA Curating the Art Museum students at The Courtauld Institute of Art in collaboration with the Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

This exhibition has come together thanks to the generous support of Ernst Vegelin van Claerbergen, Head of The Courtauld Gallery, and all The Courtauld Gallery staff. Special thanks are due to curators Barnaby Wright, Karen Serres, Alexandra Gerstein and Rachel Sloan for their guidance and knowledge; registrars Julia Blanks and George Mogg for their practical assistance and patience; Jack Kettlewell for his installation expertise; and conservators Graeme Barraclough and Kate Edmondson for their advice and care. Thank you also to Emily Butcher for her marketing help, and Caireen McGinn for making sure we put the visitor first.

The Arts Council Collection has provided this exhibition with exceptional artworks and support. In particular, we must thank Jill Constantine, Head of the Arts Council Collection; Bethany Hughes, Collections Curator; Jodie Edwards, Loans Coordinator and Grace Beaumont, Acquisitions Coordinator. Thank you also to Somerset House and the team behind *UTOPIA 2016: A Year of Imagination and Possibility* for providing the prompt and inspiration for this show.

Our teachers at The Courtauld Institute of Art have been a constant source of wisdom and guidance. Thank you to Elisabeth Reissner and Giles Waterfield for advancing our knowledge in the conservation of artworks and the history and theory of museums; and Minnie Scott and Joanna Woodall for making us such conscientious readers, writers and editors. Last, but certainly not least, thank you to our teacher, leader and guide Martin Caiger-Smith for his unfailing commitment to this exhibition and our success.

Catlin Langford
Claire Mead
Clara Rose Chivers
Emily Riddle
Gabrielle Schwarz
India Lewis
Kristin Brisbois
Lydia Rachel Figes
Martha Ellis Leach
Mathilde Le Coz
Samuel Glanville
Wells Fray-Smith

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ARTS COUNCIL COLLECTION AT SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Confusion of Tongues is part of *UTOPIA 2016: A Year of Imagination and Possibility*

UTOPIA 2016: Jeremy Deller and Fraser Muggeridge studio

CONFUSION OF TONGUES: ART AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE
16 JUNE–17 JULY 2016

courtauld.ac.uk/confusion-of-tongues
confusionoftongues.wordpress.com
@macurating #ConfusionOfTongues

LIST OF WORKS

THE COURTAULD GALLERY

Oskar Kokoschka, Selection from *The Dreaming Youths (Die Träumenden Knaben): Title Page, Sleeping Girl, The Distant Island, Dialogues, The Girl Li and I*, 1907, lithographs

Maarten de Vos after Jan Snellinck, *The Building of the Tower of Babel*, 1643, engraving

Maarten de Vos after Jan Snellinck, *The Confusion of Tongues (The Tower of Babel Being Struck Down)*, 1643, engraving

THE ARTS COUNCIL COLLECTION

Fiona Banner, *Superhuman Nude*, 2011, inkjet with one colour screen print and one glaze on 300gsm Somerset Photosatin paper. Edition of 150, produced by K2 Screen London

Pavel Büchler, Selection from *How to Find a Way in the Dark? (Title Page; 'A'–'K')*, 1983–84, pen on paper

Pavel Büchler, *American Irish*, 2012, letterpress on Arches 88 paper

Pavel Büchler, *Nothing More*, 2012, letterpress on Arches 88 paper

Mohini Chandra, *Album Pacifica 1*, 1997, photographs, fibre, wax and toner

Hamish Fulton, *Untitled. Australia (from Fourteen Works 1982–1989)*, 1982, offset lithograph

Susan Hiller, *Midnight, Baker Street*, 1983, c-type photographs on Agfa Lustre paper 3½

David Robilliard, *A candle in the dark is better than nothing at all*, 1988, acrylic on canvas

Imogen Stidworthy, *Barrabackslarrabang*, 2009–10, 9"13, HD Video

EVENTS

LUNCHTIME TALKS

22 and 29 June; 1, 4, 6, 8, 11, 13 and 15 July, 1:15pm to 1:30pm, The Courtauld Gallery

The exhibition curators will provide an insight into a selection of the works in *Confusion of Tongues: Art and the Limits of Language*. Free with admission to The Courtauld Gallery

ARTIST TALK

22 June, 6pm, Kenneth Clark Lecture Theatre, The Courtauld Institute of Art

A discussion with exhibiting artists on language in relation to their artistic practice. Free

EXPLORE THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

2 July, 12–3 pm, drop-in, Utopia Treasury, Somerset House, Embankment entrance

Join us for a book art workshop and spoken word performance about the works in *Confusion of Tongues: Art and the Limits of Language*. Free

THE COURTAULD Gallery

16 JUNE–17 JULY 2016

CONFUSION OF TONGUES
ART AND THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE