

# All Tension No Release

by Paul Clinton

Sophie Jung doesn't know what she's talking about. In performing her monologues she hesitates, prevaricates, anxiously and comically meanders until she stumbles upon an idea that will get her out of whatever impasse she's created for herself. A half-remembered bit of trivia provides a convenient but unsure bridge to the next thought, however unrelated, as she pushes on in search of her point. She repeatedly shuffles her observations in the same way she arranges and rearranges the objects that she discusses and displays: they could always be assembled another way, to different effect, and their form is always contingent and provisional. Her verbal strategies avoid the mastery of drawing conclusions (Flaubert said 'stupidity is wanting to conclude'). Instead, she offers an ethics of discussing objects and politics in which the speaker does not assume a position of authority 'about' or 'on' anything. Jung's work can be a bit literal. I'm not being unduly harsh; literalness is a position that she has openly affirmed. Her jokes are often so obvious as to be embarrassing. Take, for example, a step-like fragment of Carrara marble which, in her performance *Leader Abend* (2016) she names Carrara Ladder (career ladder, you see), soliciting groans from her audience. Finding herself stuck for a linking thought that will relate one sculpture to another, she uses the least imaginative methods to generate ideas: the rhyming of Donald and Ronald allows her to shift from Reagan's self-clasping squeeze to the early years of McDonald's. Deliberately following an obvious set of associations thrown up by objects and sticking to superficial connections is one way to avoid assuming the authority of the interpreter slathering an object in opinion, like too much ketchup masking the flavour of a Big Mac. (It is important to note that the literal is only one of her strategies: she throws everything into the mixer, refusing the idea any one thing solicits any one mode of address or tells any one story at any one time). But I don't think she imagines that this gives her sculptures agency to determine how they are discussed. Perhaps she's just suggesting that it affords her role as speaker a little bit less power. The thing is, even when she's stripping metaphor of nuance, making it more straightforward, things fall apart: a brief game of charades in which she smooches the air stalls when nobody guesses the name Henry Kissinger. You literally can't be literal, Jung signals in her performances, someone will always take something the wrong way, the joke doesn't always land. Jung isn't a grand theoretician. Instead her practice is attuned to a more anecdotal or occasional thinking. As Jane Gallop has argued, whilst overarching theories can be useful, the ideas within them can be too fixed, their set concepts simply applied to, rather than modified by, a dynamic and changing world. When Jung performs, what she talks about is apparently occasioned by the occasion, each idea shaped by and alive to the moment and location of its utterance. A chain of reflections sparked by something in the room, might lead Jung to recall Kissinger's concept of 'constructive ambiguity' – the tactical political use of obfuscation and waffling. It's an idea that could have been made to describe Donald Trump's current rhetorical style, but also seems like a fitting name for the artist's own loosely associative and unauthoritative monologues. She is both responsive to contemporary politics and critical of them and, in this brief instance, mirrors the thing she criticises, although her waffle isn't double-speak, and shows how it can be oriented to less authoritative or authoritarian ends. This is criticism without the distant superiority of the critic. In one performance she plays with the ambiguity of the word 'there' drawing attention to the problem of attuning text to time and place: is it the 'there' of the speaker, character or audience? What she says is located in the now, then, but decentered so that multiple versions of the now, multiple approaches to a subject are allowed to coexist. And no sooner has she alighted upon a timely idea than she moves on to the next one, aware that whilst each thought is useful in the moment, the moment changes. Jung talks too

much. This verbal flooding reminds me of a semiotic strategy described by Umberto Eco. He argued that there could be no art – no technique – of forgetting analogous to an aide-memoire, because any system of signs is referential and so would refer back to whatever it was you would rather forget. An anti-mnemonic would become a reminder, 'I must not remember X'. The only possible art of forgetting would be one in which an overabundance of signs distracts the mind. Similarly, any art work seeking to uncover ('aha, let me show you the truth!') the gap between literary representation and the world of things, ironically anchors a certain meaning and pathos in that very chasm. Instead Jung goes with the flow of signs and symbols unmoored from their referents, offering various ways of making things mean and doing so drowns her audience in words. If I've set about attempting to organise some thoughts on Jung's practice, proceeding by negation in order not to totally pin it down, I keep thinking I could and should have done it differently.