Allow the Gaps to Speak – Review by Christopher Collier, March 2010, published in a-n

On Monday night I attended the an exciting opening that I had been looking forward to since I found out that it would be happening as it involved one of the contributors that we had worked closely with at The Gallery, in recent months. Artist, curator and Goldsmiths graduate Sandra Erbacher's new work comprises a site specific series of interventions in the library building at Goldsmiths that conspire to create an unfolding disruption that seems to uncover a hidden plurality of significance within the seeming singular structural unity of the library's architectural and institutional space. This series of varying interventions, both subtle and stark, appear to promise the audience a narrative journey, leading them onward and upward until ultimately abandoning them without a punchline, lost in its labyrinthine networks that seem to sprawl out from each piece like rhizomatic stems reaching from a plant. I do not wish to connotate a negative sense by employing the word lost here, this is the getting lost of play, of daydreams, free floating through a network of signs that inflect each other, not quite making sense alone but resonating across the building as a whole, with each other and with the architecture. This disruptive process seems to suggest getting lost, drifting through the city, surfing the internet, channel hopping, or ultimately idly wandering through a library, dipping into books that on their own are stories, textbooks, images, signs, but together produce something quiet different. It is hard to get a firm grip on the work, hence the analogies of losing oneself, the architectual elements seem to suggest the linguistic without words, the various and varying interventions like the letters that constitute a word, the words and stanzas that constitute a poem. Language provides me with a model for comprehending it, the pieces leading the viewer on an apparent narrative and yet setting them adrift in a tangled network of signification that seems fluid and slippery and unable to be pinned down. The whole piece feels like a deconstructive analysis of the library itself.

Erbacher's introductory quote within the accompanying text 'The primary function of language is not communication but the assertion of power' gives us language, gives us Deleuze, but also typically immediately takes this from us and undermines it. With further quotes that randomly interrupt the placid computer screens of the library with irony and affected gravity, its apparently serious, yet seemingly playful words at once cite critical theory and yet step back, ironizing, casting doubt upon any potential theoretical handle that we might venture. We are decentered, our reading of both the library's 'text' and of its texts is disturbed. We are lost.

The work certainly interogates its purported resonances between language, learning and power through its uneasy interventions in within the usually banal and passive library architecture. To a largely student audience, the library signifies authority, the weight of the authority of the dead generations of thinkers, as much as the authority of the fervent librarian and their threatening hush. It is a space of seriousness and convention which feels uneasy with playful intervention or potentially subversive interruption. 'Allow the gaps to speak' does precisely what it claims, it occupies the gaps, architecturally, ideologically and within the received social conventions that surround it in this specific space in order to interrogate these very functions. It calls into question the discourses and performativity of academia, authority and the architectural and social language of the institution.

If we read the institution of the library as a metatext, containing its myriad constituent texts, Erbacher employs deconstructive strategies to analyse and disrupt this language of power within the institutional space and ultimately the academic discourse itself. The physical interruptions in our reading of the architectural space draw attention to its inconsistencies, its gaps, reading the text of the space against itself. Using packaging tape in differing colours she transgresses and destabilises what we thought were the building's solid features, interfering with the architectural

structures and furniture of the library in simple and playful ways. Through this she draws attention to the position of the building both in and of itself, physically and as signification, as a textual entity, drawing the viewer in multiple directions in undermining expected structures and hierarchies. We pass by almost unheeding the earlier interventions on the ground floor; one could be forgiven for mistaking them for the over-zealous actions of a health and safety conscious librarian, taping off dangerous areas. As we read the space more closely however we are increasingly aware of the 'inappropriateness' of the interventions, at last reaching the top of the stairwell, visually entangled in the arching vaults of a sprawling web of bright yellow tape. In doing so we are forced backward to reconsider our previous judgements, what we may have overlooked, the resonances and disjunctures between the stanzas of this narrative. We are forced to read the space against itself, not in a linear or hierarchical fashion but rhizomatically, each intervention almost a hyperlink to the next. The text of the institution has had its grammar disassembled, its syntax entangled and yet untangled.

Erbacher extends these concerns through the simultaneous subtle appropriation of the screensaver messages on library catalogues and open-access computers throughout the building. Employing this visual language of the hacker, the social signification initially appears clear and clearly subversive; the authority of the academic institution is detourned. And yet, we are not offered some alternative ideology, some radical departure, our expectations are merely brought into question, undermined and deconstructed. The messages cast doubt upon any unified voice or identity for their author as they appear to open up an alternative social, cultural and psychological space within the institution that seems to challenge its hegemonic systems. The messages purport to promise profundity, repel with a potential pretentiousness and yet pull back and pull away the ground from under us in the process. Their ironized and remote tone in fact undermines themselves as much as the power discourses that they appear to interrupt. In so doing these textual interventions suggest an elusive playfulness that operates much like the work as a whole, seeming initially to deconstruct the institutional 'text' of the library, whilst in fact allowing it to deconstruct itself from within.