

NEWS APR. 25, 2011

Duchamp's Zoo: Studio Visit With Bethan Huws

by David Ulrichs



The conceptual and linguistic focus of Welsh artist Bethan Huws's work—sculpture, video, wall-text and vitrines—means she spends a lot of time in her studio at a desk, reading and taking notes. The in-depth research into the various words, objects and materials that she employs often incorporates the space in which they are shown, making them almost site-specific. Since mid-February, those studies have proceeded in Berlin, blocks from Berlin's fastest-growing gallery street, Potsdamerstraße.

The 50-year-old Huws moved to the city from Paris after 20 years. There her storage and flat were crammed into a 400-square-foot unit—"social housing that was part of a government effort to keep artists in the city's center," she called it in an interview with *A.i.A.* Her belongings arrived shortly after the opening of a recently closed solo exhibition, "Capelgwyn," at London's Whitechapel Gallery. Before she could unpack she was off—this time to France—to open another major show, a mini-retrospective, "Black and White Animals," at the International Centre of Art and Landscape in Vassivière [on view through June 19].

Installation view courtesy Museu de Serralves, Porto (Portugal), 2009.

In an opening performance in Vassivière, Huws showed 29 live animals with natural black and white color schemes in a lush green field in front of the building. The eclectic mix included llamas, goats, Dalmatians, and a few sheep. Inside the institution's main hall, *Forest* (2008–09) comprised 88 variously sized bottle racks. At the bottom of a winding stairwell in the art center's impressive circular tower, Huws installed *Etants Donnés* (2008), a sculpture consisting of a disembodied arm made of fiberglass holding a Bec Auer lamp, a

"human" element that nonetheless emitted cold, uninviting light in the otherwise dark interior. Huws's piece shares with Duchamp's canonical work of the same name (1946–66) the posed limb of a half-nude female figure. Huws's sculpture refers to a French idiomatic expression, "*tomber sur un Bec de gaz*," which means "to hit a snag." The Welsh artist explained that the idea of an obstacle, be it illumination or form, "lies at the root of this piece."

Huws' show in London comprised three parts. In a first long room, an about 7-inch-high platform covered three-quarters of the floor. "I change the orientation of the space. Its length becomes its breadth," she said. The walls are lined with seven large texts in a light grey, sans-serif font from Huws' *Reading Duchamp*, 2010. Each consists of the title of a work by Duchamp, a factual description of the original work and Huws' analysis of title, with an emphasis on the older artist's sensitivity to puns, idioms and word-plays. The snag, for Huws, can appear as a historical reference whose continuing genius defies a sense of progress.

Back at Huws's Berlin studio a bookshelf holds hundreds of books, but a copy of Raymond Roussel's 1910 novel, *Impressions d'Afrique*, stands out. A 1912 stage adaptation of that book famously inspired Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass*, and this library reflects a systematic interrogation of the artist's impact. Huws keeps the collected works of Apollinaire, she explains, because "Duchamp was taken by Apollinaire to see the play of Roussel." In and on the floor of her living room stand two "readymade" bottle racks, the smaller one of the same dimensions as Duchamp's famously unsigned and lost *Bottle Rack/Egouttoir* (or *Porte-bouteilles*) (1914, 64).

Duchamp was an early a fascination for Huws. The first work directly dealing the artist was a watercolor titled *Duchamp's Turn* (1996). Subsequently, Huws's video *Fountain* (2009) investigated the poetic origins of the Duchampian "readymade" by filming a selection of water fountains in Rome at a pre-selected time of day. The water fountain is an element that crops up regularly in Duchamp's oeuvre, not just as a urinal, but notably in *Etants Donnés* (1946–66), where it's visible in the background and communicates the passage of time.

Huws' studio is full of stacks representing 800 6-by-3-foot sheets of grooved rubber. These are the ground of the artist's "word vitrines," a mode of presenting text inspired by the tablets in Parisian bistros to announce the "*plat du jour*." Belgian manufacturer Grafityp recently ceased production of the rubber. "So we had to buy the entire run—1000 sheets," said the artist, whose studio was overwhelmed. "Luckily we sold 200 to a company in England." How long it will take, if ever, for Huws to fill the many empty vitrines? Depends, in part, on the legacy and the silences of Marcel Duchamp.