

## Exhibitions

and Ouspensky's impact on Varo, is a touchstone for the majority of the entries in the catalogue.<sup>3</sup>

However, if there can be any criticism of the exhibition and the catalogue, it is the relative overvaluation of Gurdjieff and Ouspensky in the catalogue entries and wall texts, at the expense of an understanding of the way that Surrealism continued to inform Varo's process after 1947. Alchemy, analogy and the importance of discovery and transformation in more general terms were concerns shared by many Surrealists, and are not only a result of Varo's interest in Gurdjieff and Ouspensky. They are carried over from her direct involvement in the Surrealist movement, the ideas and practices of which she never renounced. This quibble aside, *Remedios Varo: Science Fictions* is an exceptional exhibition, which is both beautifully conceived and executed.

1 L.-M. Lozano: exh. cat. *The Magic of Remedios Varo*, Washington (National Museum of Women in the Arts) and Chicago (Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum) 2000.

2 Catalogue: *Remedios Varo: Science Fictions*. Edited by Caitlin Haskell and Tere Arcq. 184 pp. incl. 144 col. + 21 b. & w. illus. (Art Institute of Chicago, 2023), £30. ISBN 978-0-300-27321-2.

3 T. Arcq: 'In search of the miraculous', in A. Ruy Sánchez et al.: *Five Keys to the Secret World of Remedios Varo*, Mexico City 2008, pp.21-87.

### The Weight of Words

Henry Moore Institute, Leeds  
7th July–26th November

by GREG THOMAS

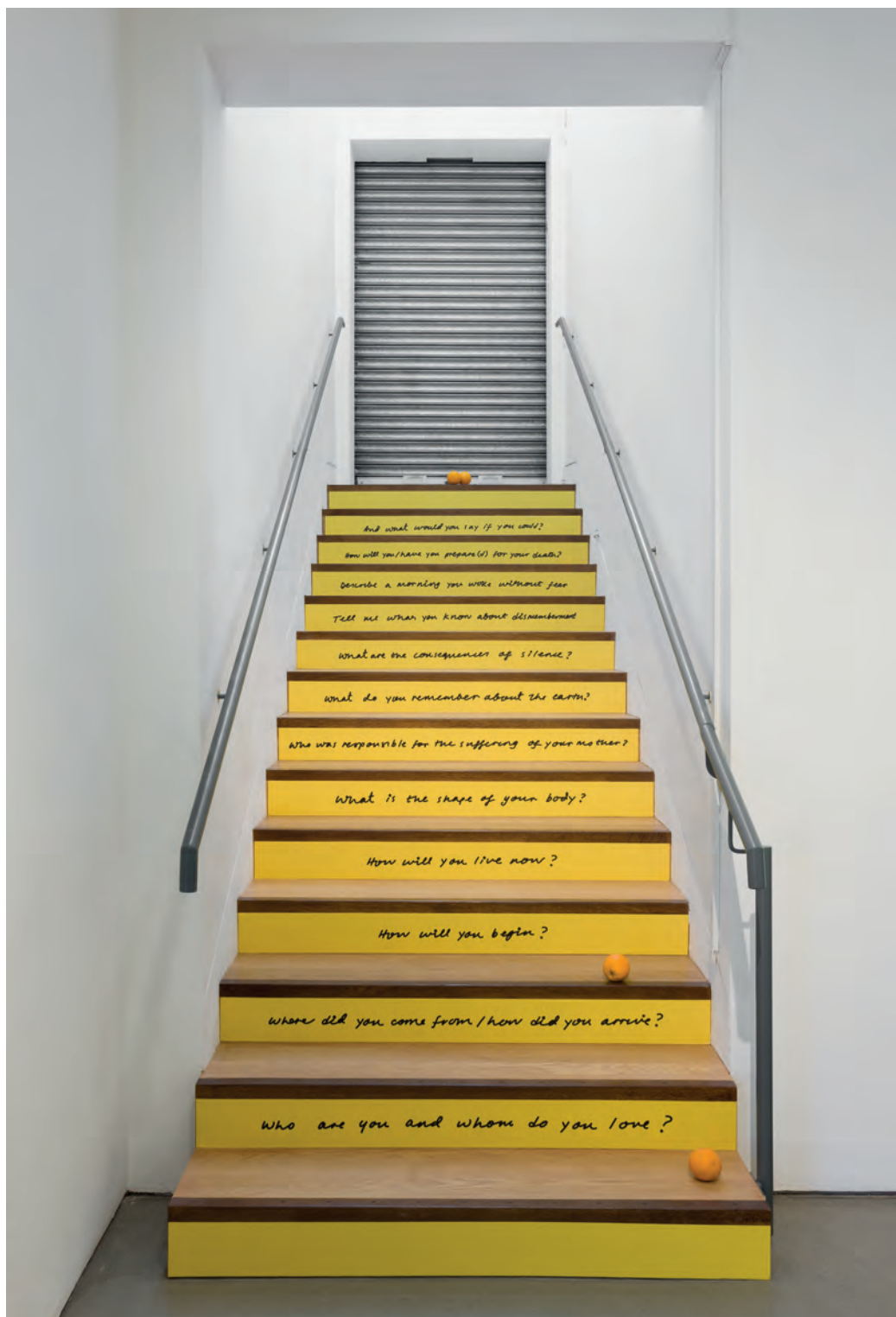
The graphic poem *Word fishing* (2023) by Anthony (Vahni) Capildeo (b.1973) swims across the façade of the Henry Moore Institute. The building is clad with Ubatuba granite, a stone quarried in Brazil, which has been highly polished, giving the surface a reflective, watery appearance. The poem incorporates illustrations by Molly Fairhurst that emphasise the aquatic connotations of the writing surface and the poem itself: lines are laid out in rippling cursive, interlaced with sinuous silhouettes of fish on which single words appear, while longer phrases by the Trinidadian

poet slip between them, suggesting a simultaneous movement down into water and up into the sky: 'so let's find roots in air' and yet 'soon to be underwater'. The words that are rendered largest – 'dear heart breathe' – invite the viewer to slow down, to consider the play of language as if it

were liquid, with each word seeming to dissolve grammatically into the next.

Although the frieze primes the visitor for what follows, Capildeo is one of surprisingly few self-proclaimed poets included in *The Weight of Words*. According to the exhibition booklet, the curators, Claire O'Dowd

10. *Twelve questions*, by Bhanu Kapil. 2001/23. Printed vinyl and oranges. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Rob Harris; exh. Henry Moore Institute, Leeds).





and Nick Thurston, aim to offer ‘an international and intergenerational selection of contemporary artists and writers who explore the overlap between sculpture and poetry’. In fact, what they present is something rather more thematically expansive, if not nebulous. Many of the individual pieces are of great interest, by turns ‘humorous or haunting’, as their introductory text suggests, while cumulatively suggesting an emphasis on minoritised and migrant identities. However, the exhibition loses coherence at those points where a practice-defining engagement with poetic form on the part of a sculptor – or, conversely, with sculptural form on the part of a poet – lapses into loose affinity or analogy.

It is important to note here that the curators made a deliberate decision not to prioritise the genre often referred to as concrete poetry, which

is centrally concerned with the visual and three-dimensional possibilities of poetic language.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps this decision was predicated on a desire to showcase a wider and more varied array of work, or on the impression that works of art that too closely tread the line between poetic language and sculptural form can become blandly formalist. For whatever reason, this act of exclusion might explain why much of the work – despite its merits on other terms – seems only secondarily or tangentially to embody a connection between poetry and sculpture.

A number of the works can be roughly categorised as sculptural or architectural translations of page-based verse or prose, such as Capildeo’s intervention on the outside of the building, and *Twelve questions* (Fig.10) by the poet and author Bhanu Kapil (b.1968). The latter recasts the queries that serve as

chapter headings in Kapil’s 2001 book *The Vertical Interrogation of Stranger* on a series of yellow steps leading to a closed door: ‘How will you begin?’, ‘What is the shape of your body?’ It is a concise visual evocation of the themes of buried or misplaced identity that define the original text. The sound poet Caroline Bergvall (b.1965) is arguably more vitally concerned with the materiality of language than Kapil or Capildeo, in particular the sociopolitical connotations of voice and accent. The exhibition includes a new iteration of her searing audio-visual installation *Say parsley* (2001–23), which explores the ethnic, cultural and religious hierarchies ingrained in pronunciation. Its title references the Parsley massacre in 1937, in which tens of thousands of Creole Haitians were killed by Dominican Army troops when, upon interrogation, they did not pronounce the word *perejil*

11. Installation view of *The Weight of Words* at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2023, showing *Words come from ears*, by Shilpa Gupta. 2018. Motion flapboard, 43 by 244 by 13 cm. (Photograph Min Young Lim).



12. Detail of *Dark water, burning world 151 moons and counting...*, by Issam Kourbaj. 2016. Repurposed bicycle steel mudguards, extinguished matches and clear resin. (Photograph Rob Harris; exh. Henry Moore Institute, Leeds).

(parsley) in the accepted Spanish manner. The piece consists of audio-recordings and visual projections of words pronounced in different dialects, with different installations responding to the linguistic characteristics of the region in which the relevant exhibition site is located. However, Bergvall is concerned with the sonic rather than the visual matter of language, and is, therefore, not truly engaged with the sculptural possibilities of poetry. By extension, the distinction between sound poetry and concrete or visual poetry is another topic elided as a result of the decision to sidestep the international concrete poetry movement and its offshoots.

More straightforwardly, the exhibition also includes artists whose work encompasses language. Among these are Parviz Tanavoli (b.1937), whose *Standing heech* (2007; National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh) is one of a series that the artist began in 1965. The Farsi word *heech* translates as ‘nothing’ and is made up of three Persian letters: he, ye and ĉe. For these sculptures, the artist manipulates the letter forms into different shapes and sets them in metal, which here comes to resemble a standing figure with beady eye. *Standing heech* wavers intriguingly at the threshold of semantic and pre-semantic presence, suggesting the origins of language in visual expression and alluding to the traces of figuration still evident in global writing systems.

The work that perhaps best realises the ambitions of the show is *Words come from ears* (Fig.11) by the Indian artist Shilpa Gupta (b.1976), which unfolds by increments across the squares of a motion flapboard. Through this analogue, mechanised form of signage, words are conveyed through the consecutive folding of hinged plastic letters. One phrase can thus cumulatively dissolve or evolve into another. The medium allows Gupta to play with misspelling, guesswork, portmanteau and wordplay to complement the themes of migration, borders and endless waiting evoked by her language. For the conceptual artist Glenn Ligon (b.1960) too, the material setting of language allows for a complication of semantic connotation. His work *Warm broad glow* (2005) is a neon sign displaying the phrase ‘negro sunshine’, which is taken from Gertrude Stein’s racist description of the Black character Rose Johnson in her novel *Three Lives* (1909). The glow around the letters signifies a reclamation of Black joy from the exoticising representation of African Americans by white writers.

Such works demonstrate the ways in which visual and material form – including qualities of texture, shape, size and visual symbolism – can enhance or be enhanced by semantic language. Unfortunately, this does not extend to all works of art included in *The Weight of Words*, especially those that simply gesture more generally

towards poetry, novels or language as a theme, without being truly a product of poetic, or even quasi-poetic, composition. Moreover, little attention is paid to the slippage between poetry and prose as medium or reference point. It is also worth noting that the curators have included photography and printmaking – such as Pavel Büchler’s delicate word-press piece *Still life with dust* (2017) – for reasons that are not made entirely clear.

This is not to deny the transportive qualities of the works themselves, for example the monolithic concrete and wooden sculpture *Untitled* (2008; private collection) by Doris Salcedo (b.1958). The artist’s *Untitled* works, begun in 1989, are

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made in commemoration of victims of political violence in her native Colombia. For this particular series, she pours concrete into items of domestic furniture, fusing them together. The installation *Dark water, burning world 151 moons and counting...* (Fig.12) by Issam Kourbaj (b.1963) comprises a fleet of boats made from bicycle mudguards and matches, each of which marks a month that has passed since the March 2011 uprisings in Syria. Salcedo, the exhibition material notes, is inspired by the writing of Paul Celan, whereas Kourbaj's vessels are created as part of a creative exchange with the poet Ruth Padel. However, is paying homage to a particular writer or collaborating with a poet sufficient to suggest that the artist in question is working with or through poetic form? *The Weight of Words* contains many sculptural works of intrigue and value, as well as innovative three-dimensional settings of poetry. Although it ultimately fails to maintain a coherent narrative thread, it nonetheless prompts discussion by broaching areas of ambiguity at the boundaries of the disciplines it explores.

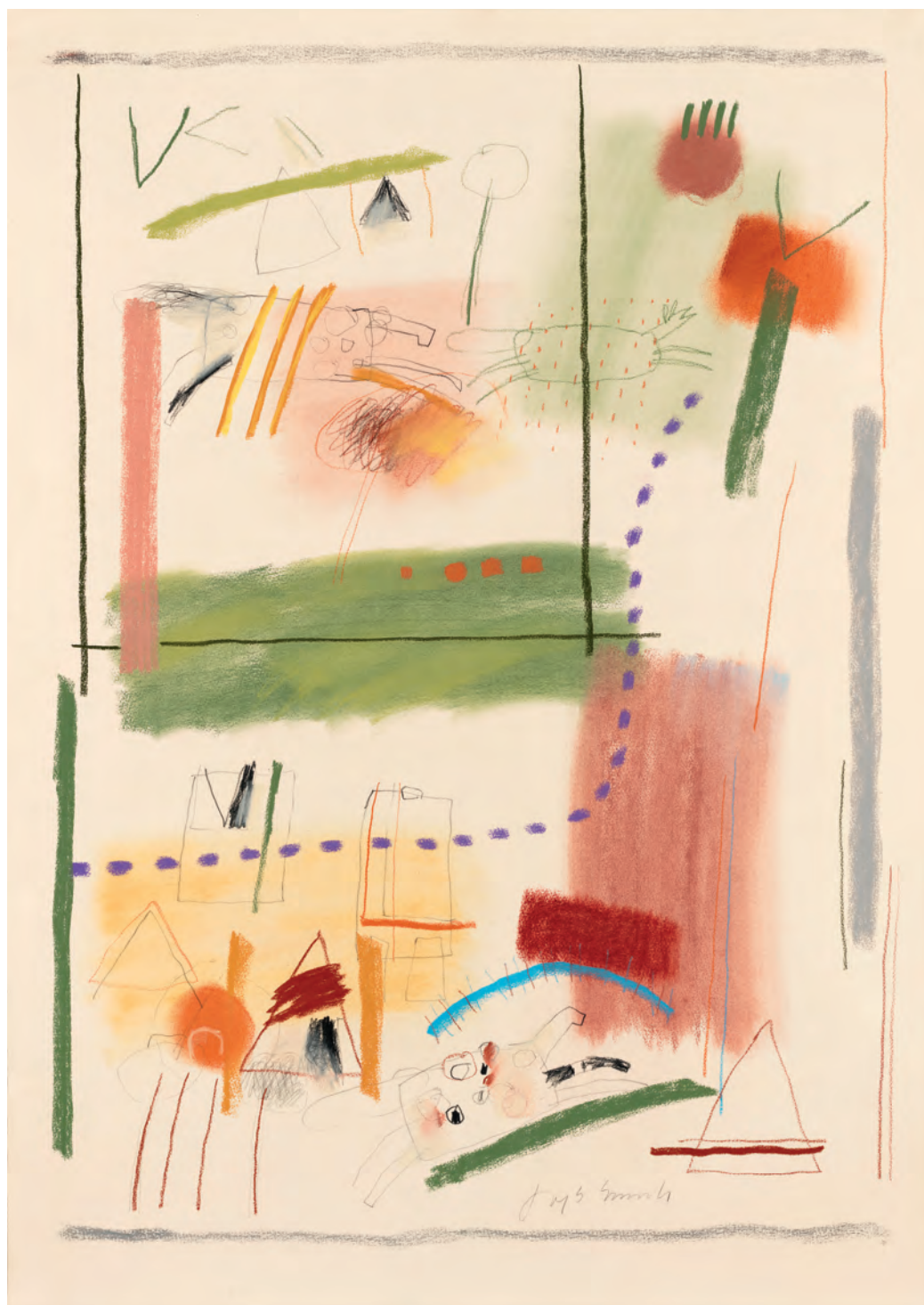
1 Nick Thurston, in conversation with the author, 5th July 2023.

### Jaune Quick-to-See Smith: Memory Map

Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth  
15th October 2023–21st January 2024

by CAROLYN KASTNER

In 2011 the artist Jaune Quick-to-See Smith said: 'my work is a diary or journal of my life. It starts with a message, it has layered meanings, but I like to bring the viewer in with a seductive texture, a beautiful drawing and then let them have one of my messages'.<sup>1</sup> However, Smith's life and messages are discussed more often than her seductive textures and beautiful drawings. This historical oversight has now been addressed in an authoritative touring retrospective that spans fifty years of her practice.<sup>2</sup> It demonstrates the breadth of the artist's imaginative powers to deliver her directives by exploiting a range of



artistic styles, techniques and media. Moments of arresting comparisons and connections abound among the 130 thematically arranged drawings, prints, paintings and sculptures. Curated by Laura Phipps, an associate curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the exhibition and its catalogue, with contributions by predominantly Native authors, present

a strong argument that the artist's abstract compositions, bold brushwork and calculated colours exceed the boundaries of American art with more than messages.<sup>3</sup>

As suggested by the exhibition title, *Memory Map*, Smith's artful maps transcend cartography. Her abstracted landscapes, inspired by Indigenous approaches to mapping,

13. *Kalispell #1*, by Jaune Quick-to-See Smith. 1979. Pastel and charcoal on paper, 106 by 75.2 cm. (Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; exh. Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth).