

purple ART

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Hammersmith Poem / Malevich Dancing



## AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST ROBERT MONTGOMERY

I meet ROBERT MONTGOMERY at Cob Gallery in London's Camden, where just the night before, he had the opening of 'Hammersmith Poem and Love Letters to Kazimir Malevich'. It's been a busy autumn for the artist and poet, Who has aussi recently unveiled a series of public billboard poems qui Were shown in Shoreditch During Frieze week, and the latest addition to the Parasolstice - Winter Light series at Parasol Unit , His First Light poem to be commissioned by a public institution in London.

JETHRO TURNER - Can you explain the context of the show here?

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - The context of the show comes from this audience that I did for Hammersmith and Fulham town hall. Or more specifically, the Brutalist annex of the town hall, which has always been a subject of local controversy. It's basically this little bit of High Brutalism, like a bit of the Barbican that's been torn off and stuck on front of the Georgian facade of the old town hall. So it's always been a question of local architectural traditionalists and modernists. Essentially, the texts are arguing that modernism is not a style, but a social movement, a continuation of the humanist culture that begins with the Renaissance. Then, what is modernism ends up doing in the country for example in the 1940s that gives us the NHS, free public libraries, free university education.

JETHRO TURNER - Is this the most explicitly didactic, political that you've ever been with your work?

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - It's the most that I've ever worked on one theme, and within a contemporary art perspective it's an important debate too, because we got bored of the idea of Modernism, then we went into three decades of post-Duchampian irony, and a set of post-Structuralist theory that talks about post-Modernism, which may be in retrospect of a kind of red herring.

JETHRO TURNER - So Modernism is an unfinished project?

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - Yes. Because Modernism has been constantly redefined. If you do not, then you're not refreshing your idealism for the times that you live in. And we need to have an idealistic, utopian edge to the vanguard in art, architecture, social housing, social planning, ecological planning. There is a form of idealism, so I'm arguing for that. But from an art perspective, the funny, post-Duchampian art-about-art, the generation of artists like Maurizio Cattelan, Mike Kelly, Jeff Koons, seems like it's suddenly irrelevant in an age of ecological crisis.

JETHRO TURNER - You've done a few big projects recently.

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - I've been taking the texts from the Hammersmith project and

making murals. So here's a giant wall on the side of a university building in Aberdeen which is about three stories high.

JETHRO TURNER - And then you did the Shoreditch billboards project.

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - The Shoreditch billboards were the first time I used multiple panels to make kind of extended graphic poems.

JETHRO TURNER - I'm very interested in the topic and the typography, the marks you're using in the text. That seems like something new for you too.

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - I've been using those more and more graphic devices to punctuate the lines. They also seem to evoke urgency, like the double arrowhead mark, which is actually stolen from the logo of the Accenture consulting firm.

JETHRO TURNER - It's also like the fast-forward symbol.

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - Yeah it's these misused punctuation marks. So the slash symbol is used as a line break. These long lines on the keyboard.

JETHRO TURNER - But unlike a fixed page size, you're in control of the space size, how big the canvas is. Yet you're still using these lines as it's a fixed page.

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - Totally. I like the idea of the poetry going over the page. I've been looking at a lot at the Vorticist movement. The back of our building is the place where WYNDHAM LEWIS published Blast Magazine in 1914. And when you look at an issue of Blast, the text comes off the page, like a giant poem. It's a really amazing example of a British rewiring of Futurist graphics, but I think there's a real sense of urgency in the way that Lewis uses graphics in that magazine.

JETHRO TURNER - This work is poetry that stands alone, and is published in different ways as pamphlets and billboards, as well as the paintings. What can you do with the paintings that you can not do in the other places?

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - You can be a little bit more sensual. I studied painting for my BA and my MFA was drawing and painting. But I was not making paintings because I had no good ideas for paintings. But then, the MALEVICH reference in the Hammersmith billboard is that between 1917 and 1925, he made four versions of the Black Square painting. So I kind of jumped off the road and started working on the lines of other MALEVICH compositions.

JETHRO TURNER - You mention "idealistic utopianism" - how can we use poetry to get there? That's one of the things that I think is very interesting about the public art commissions especially. On one level we have never been so far from a society that embraces poetry. Today, people's exposure to different types of art has never been bigger, but poetry seems to just exist in advertising copy and hip-hop - in little chunks of the mainstream.

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - I've definitely wanted to do that, to use the techniques and formats of advertising copy, and ask that to deal with poetry. It's a challenge to constantly modernize the way you go about writing poetry. When I'm writing texts I use the language of social media, to use modern, idiomatic shortenings of words. I think you have to deal with the language of your time if you can. Then there's lots of ironic things in terms of the dissemination of poetry and art on social media.

JETHRO TURNER - The most popular poetry on social media is saying.

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - Yeah. It's kind of popular nonsense, kind of fridge magnet affirmations. And it's all for the self. Telling people 'you are great'. So it's this complete reinforcement of individualism. Self love, self confidence. It's quite frightening.

JETHRO TURNER - You've had a kid. Has that changed how do you think about your poetry should you operate in the world?

ROBERT MONTGOMERY - It's interesting. I have not really thought about it consciously, but I think it has made me think more about the future. I'm trying to 'future-think' a bit more, instead of wallowing in the existential angst of the now. It's also about having a kid and thinking: Do you think it's a good idea? And I do not think his generation really does. Which is probably part of the background to modernism.

On view until November 25th, 2017 at COB Gallery , Royal College St 205, NW1 0SG London.

Text by Jethro Turner and photo Flo Kohl