



**Sebastian Black and Robin Cameron:** \_\_\_\_\_  
Bodega, Philadelphia

A favorite Ed Ruscha painting of mine, from 1977, depicts a small fire burning in a red-brick fireplace with a plain wooden mantel, rendered obliquely in the single-point perspective typical of his famous Standard Gas Stations and set against an expansive field of earthy browns. Unlike many of the artist's works, this one lacks a textual element in the composition, and the painting's title—*No End To The Things Made Out of Human Talk*—precludes the need for words. With its warmth providing a gathering place, the fireplace symbolizes sociability in all its forms. Spinning a yarn, chewing the fat, or spilling the beans: what draws people together, Ruscha tells us, is a sustained, even universal engagement with conversation.

Two New York-based artists, Sebastian Black and Robin Cameron, seized upon that subject—conversation—for their joint exhibition titled \_\_\_\_\_ at Bodega in Philadelphia [April 5–May 19, 2013]. The gallery invited Cameron to do a show, who in turn asked Black to join her. Their “untitled” project—whose title is 10 underscores followed by a period—comprised two parts: assorted artworks made individually and collaboratively for the physical space, and an e-mail exchange between the artists in the months leading up to the exhibition, published as an unpaginated, saddle-stitched booklet (all works 2013). Black and Cameron are conversant in diverse media: he paints, writes, and runs an exhibition space in Brooklyn called Malraux's Place, among other things; she produces artist books, ceramic sculpture, drawing, photography, video, and other works. The discursive turn in contemporary art situates their work in good company: the spoken dialogues of Tino Sehgal and Liam Gillick, as well as the object-focused inquiries of Ryan Gander and Benoît Maire.

The booklet chronicles the evolution of the exhibition, informs the works in the gallery (more on them later), and presents the artists as equal partners. Black and Cameron recognize the eventual circulation of their correspondence and could thus be described as “performing language.” The published “quasi-philosophical speculation,” as Cameron calls it, meanders appreciably but contemplates purposefully many trivial but fascinating instances of human interaction, such as miscommunication through translation and humor-inflected linguistic jolts. “Have you ever tried to walk down the street and directly look everyone in the eye?” Cameron wonders at one point. “There's an aggressive body language to that.” Slightly imperfect grammar and the occasional typo appear, left uncorrected by a light editorial hand, and the unique characteristics of writing via e-mail come forward, such as itemizing a laundry list of Wikipedia links and hitting “send” instead of “save.” As the weeks go by, the artists deliberate over the exhibition's title, floating numerous potential names—including *Communiqué*, *Laymen's Terms for the Cayman Islands*, and, my favorite, *Shower of Babel*—without finding the perfect one. A Bodega staffer steps in eventually to advocate *Words for Art*, and by March 21 Black and Cameron settle on the remarkably perfect \_\_\_\_\_.

In the booklet the artists discuss the particular works for Bodega only infre-

quently; the real conversations about them, it turns out, took place in person, on the phone, and through other, unprinted e-mails. “I think maybe the objects,” Cameron muses, “are stand-ins for other larger conversations.” The installation in the gallery's three rooms offered conceptually based works that, if I read them correctly, explored obstructed or dissected communication. The two artists constructed the largest piece, *Tall Table and Vayse*, from ordinary plywood and two-by-fours; the simple, wobbly table measured more than 6 feet high and 27 feet long and extended through a doorway. At its midpoint rested a craggy ceramic vase with a decomposing arrangement of flowers, foliage, and twigs, blocking the sight lines of all who might hoist themselves onto the two high-seated chairs at the ends of the table. Here the tone and diction of such imaginary sitters would eclipse facial expressions and body language.

Two works by Cameron isolated individual graphemes. In *Ere hypocrisies or poses are in, my hymn I erase. So prose I, sir, copy here*, a continuous slide show spelled out that nonsensical palindrome letter by letter. In *Alphabet*, 16 characters constructed out of small geometric pieces of brass cut from thin sheets and tubes appear evenly spaced along one wall. Interestingly, she chose to exhibit less-frequently occurring letters, such as F, J, K, Q, V, W, X, and Z, ones that would score high in Scrabble.

Black addresses abstraction, erasure, and spatial dynamics in painting and collage. For *New Yorker Drawing (Hats)* and *New Yorker Drawing (Two Left Feet)*, he scrubbed the ink surrounding tiny photographic reproductions clipped from recent issues of the cultured magazine—among them a beret, an engineer's cap, and a fedora in the former work, and a dapper collared shirt, colorful paisley bow tie, and loafer in the latter—and scattered the snippets on a board, which was then matted and framed. These images underpin the notion that both clothing and reading material often conspicuously indicate a certain kind of status.

Black's painting *Green Top* is composed of arbitrary shapes and lines and casual splotches of mostly iridescent paint. He adds the letters T, O, and P across the upper part of the canvas, which might explain the work's proper orientation if not for the same three letters appearing upside down, with tighter kerning, along the bottom center. A similar painting, *Brown Top (Malraux's Place)*—a sloppy mess of chocolate, coffee, and nut browns onto which he centers a printout of the press release for a Fia Backström exhibition called *Post-Sensitive Rhetorics*—hung on the wall in a cramped loft area whose floor was littered with bright-orange foam earplugs.

Through the gallery and the booklet, Black and Cameron presented themselves as educated, clever, and articulate. Their writing rarely reveals biographical details and instead conveys a general sense of their personalities, perhaps indicative of relationships, in the art world and elsewhere, which are neither strictly personal nor entirely professional. Understood in a certain way, their artworks recognize how disruptions, slowdowns, and fracturing can snarl both written language and visual communication, while at the same time leaving open a buoyant opportunity for conversation to take interesting, pleasurable, unexpected directions.

—Christopher Howard

ABOVE, LEFT: Sebastian Black, *Green Top*, 2013, oil on linen; RIGHT: (left) Sebastian Black and Robin Cameron, *Tall Table and Vayse*, 2013, wood, ceramic, and flower arrangement; (right) Robin Cameron, *Alphabet*, 2013, brass [courtesy of the artists and Bodega, Philadelphia]