
Ricardo Nicolau

VISUAL SPEECH

QUE SAIS-JE?

Que sais-je?, considered the first pocket encyclopedia, was begun in 1941 by Paul Angoulevant (Le Mans, 1899 – Auxerre, France, 1976), founder of the publisher, Presses Universitaires de France. There have now been around 3,900 titles published in the series, by over 2,500 authors. Translated into 23 languages, *Que sais-je?* is held to be one of the most important current sources and means of transmitting world knowledge. By 2004, more than 160 million copies had been sold worldwide. The variety of issues dealt with is truly encyclopedic, covering practically every field of knowledge, from the most academic (philosophy, social sciences, etc.) to the most practical (sport, cooking and self-help, for example). What, however, is knowledge actually? What, furthermore, is the connection – beyond a few titles dedicated to the subject – between this obsolete collection and contemporary art?

41

LA LEÇON¹

Atlases, dictionaries, encyclopedias – all forms of storing and transmitting knowledge – have all been replicated (and parodied) by art produced since the early vanguard movements of the twentieth century. Interest in such volumes continues but today is connected with the desire of many artists to rethink what we usually consider knowledge, information, communication and the sharing of data. Schools, academies and classes are models frequently used by artists and curators, which are applied in the organisation of workshops, seminars, conferences (often accompanied by slide shows or PowerPoint presentations), cinema cycles – all eminently pedagogical in their nature. The possible answers to *Que sais-je?*, a question increasingly asked by artists, set before us various perspectives on what it ultimately means to teach and learn, questioning the relation between their respective activities and models for the transmission of knowledge, returning to teaching models, pedagogical methods (and the materials and supports associated with them), to texts by authors who dedicated themselves, not necessarily exclusively, to pedagogy: Charles Fourier (Besançon, France, 1772 – Paris, 1837), John Stuart Mill (London, 1806 – Avignon, 1873), John Dewey (Burlington, Vermont, USA, 1859–1952), Bertrand Russell (Wales, 1872–1970), Loris Malaguzzi (Correggio, 1920 – Reggio Emilia, Italy, 1994) and Paulo Freire (Recife, 1921 – São Paulo, 1997). These are just some examples, among artists and thinkers, that repeatedly come up whenever the relationship between art and education is considered: Boris Charmatz², Jacques Rancière – particularly in his text *Le Maître ignorant* –, Robert Filliou, author of *Enseigner et apprendre* and the young French artist Aurélien Froment, who has based many of his projects on the figure of Friedrich Froebel (Oberweissbach, 1782– Schweina, Germany, 1852), the inventor of the kindergarten and author of various pedagogical games used in teaching children. Joining this interest in pedagogy, which has even

spread into curatorial production³, have been ideas linking art and research, setting up artistic activity as a legitimate form of producing knowledge.

Knowledge and its limits has been linked to contemporary artistic production to such an extent that artistic study programmes have worked, somewhat tautologically, towards turning students and potential artists into co-organizers of events that analyze and replicate pedagogical models. To give just two examples: in the Artists' Institute, New York, the curator Anthony Huberman and his students from Hunter College carry out intensive research into the work of a particular artist and the best way of presenting the artist to the public through an exhibition, for six month periods; secondly, there is the Office for the Unknown, organized by the Piet Zwart Institute, in Rotterdam, which tested, for a year, the potential of the unknown.⁴

42

SCHOOL

These were fundamental issues when choosing the space where the invited artists could work during the first edition of the artist's residency programme organized by Sonae and Serralves: Charlotte Moth and !Von Calhau!. The location eventually chosen was a former school for deaf-mutes, in the centre of Porto.

The Araújo Porto Institute was founded in 1887 thanks to the legacy of José Rodrigues de Araújo Porto. His will, dated 1883, expressed the wish to create a school for deaf-mute children in Porto (a 'School-Home, or Deaf-Mute Institute'), at a time when the city had no institution dedicated to teaching such young people. The school, provisionally located in an already existing site was inaugurated in a ceremony presided over by the then Head of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia do Porto, Francisco de Azevedo Teixeira de Aguiar, 2nd Count of Samodães, and was officially opened on 26 February 1893. The number of children wanting to attend the Institute soon grew so high that new sites had to be found. The solution, in fact, proved to be the building of a new school which was inaugurated on 27 June 1904.

Educational inclusion policies, which eventually replaced the expression 'handicapped students' with 'students with special educational needs', led slowly but surely to the integration of all children with hearing problems in regular education. This meant the building that had housed the school since the 1910s, and which belonged to the Santa Casa da Misericórdia do Porto, was now redundant and virtually empty. When I visited it for the first time, last April, I found an abandoned mansion, although there were traces of fairly recent usage: in the school kitchen, for example, you could see packets of food. I also came across details that suggested how the space had been organized like any school (a large kitchen and canteen, various bathrooms designed for younger children), as well as the particularities of a boarding school (a large laundry area). The building had been adapted following pedagogical models (tile panels for teaching the alphabet) and safety measures appropriate for deaf-mutes (there is still an electronic panel on the ground floor, which shows exactly where teachers and auxiliaries should go in response to an alarm signal).

Beside the main building, there is a kind of annex, apparently built in the 1960s, and used for parties, social evenings, concerts, gym classes, as well as the rehearsals and performances of plays. This pavilion, which has a small stage, is still equipped with curtains, sound and lights, and seems strangely like some of Charlotte Moth's pieces – especially those in which she uses curtains and light systems which we associate with stages. Indeed, it immediately seemed the perfect location to me not only for Moth's experiments with sound (who, as we shall see later, finally decided to learn to play the drums during her stay in Porto) but also those of !Von Calhau! (whose musical careers don't prevent them from producing films and installations).

ORAL METHOD

43

From its earliest days, the Araújo Porto Institute applied innovative methods in teaching students with hearing problems, particularly the 'oral method'. This was considered the most appropriate by the scientific community which, since the Congress of Milan in 1880, had favoured the oral (or German) method over sign language (or the French method), in teaching the deaf.⁵ Throughout the last century, the Institute witnessed the advent of various educational methods, as well as gradually closing its doors to male students and being renamed the Araújo Porto Institute for Deaf-Mute Girls.

At the time of the Milan congress, Alexander Graham Bell was one of the champions of the oral method. World famous as the inventor of the telephone, few know that his wife, Mabel Bell⁶, was deaf and that his father, Alexander Melville Bell, taught deaf-mutes. His father, indeed, developed methods and invented instruments which helped Bell conceive the telephone. It's interesting to note that Alexander Graham Bell, once settled in America, opened a school in Boston to train teachers of deaf-mutes, at which he taught Vocal Physiology. It was not by chance that Bell worked on the transmission of the human voice, symbolized by the telephone, as well as the total absence of its sound in deafness.

FIRST THEY NEED TO BE TALKED TO

Whilst preparing the residency, obsessed by the possibilities and deficiencies of transmitting sound, as well as the overwhelming presence of pedagogy in contemporary art, I decided to return to some films dedicated to such issues: *The Wild Child* (1970) by François Truffaut, in particular.

Lesson number one from the film: for a child to learn how to speak *first they need to be talked to*. This is the prime, indispensable condition for the acquisition of language.

Let's consider the wild child taken in by Professor Itard. Having lived, probably since birth (or almost), among animals in a forest, with no human contact, this child

has acquired no spoken language ability whatsoever in terms of either production or understanding. Despite the considerable efforts made, the boy has not even managed to master basic verbal expressions or comprehension. This phenomenon has been seen in the cases of numerous ‘wolf boys’ or of ‘children who have somehow been abandoned by human society’.⁷

The basic plot of the film is as follows: Jean Marc Gaspard Itard who, in 1825, was appointed head doctor of the L’Institution Royale des sourds-muets, in spite of not having had any professional pedagogical training, puts his educational theories into practice when dealing with the famous case of Victor de Aveyron. Victor is a wolf boy who is at first thought to be deaf, although his being dumb is finally recognized as the result of years of isolation. Itard, dismissing sign language and mime, believes that deaf-mutes should be given a voice and tries to teach the boy lip-reading and oral expression. His method of ‘mental orthopedics’ aimed at educating the senses, was described by Itard in two texts which inspired Truffaut’s film: ‘Mémoire sur les premiers développements de Victor de L’Aveyron’ (1801) and ‘Rapport sur les nouveaux développements de Victor de L’Aveyron’ (1806). His meticulous descriptions were, some argue, the first essays on experimental pedagogy.⁸ What is beyond argument, however, was that the 19th century had a wealth of stories dealing with children removed from society; two examples being Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan* and Rudyard Kipling’s *The Adventures of Mowgli*.

44

HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

Scientific curiosity was clearly tied up with moral imperatives, with the wolf boys being seen as irrefutable proof of all the fine congenital human qualities existing prior to the irreparable damage caused by civilization. The good savages were, like Victor, the perfect guinea pigs for putting innovative and experimental pedagogical models in practice: the deaf and their education were always seen as an opportunity to study speech. The methods applied, however, were often cruel. There is the story, for instance, of ‘the experiment carried out by Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, who would not stop at cruelty when it came to satisfying his curiosity! He ordered a certain number of mothers to be separated from their newborn babies. These babies were then looked after by nannies who were officially forbidden to speak with the babies. The outcome was that those children never learned to speak’.⁹ Nonetheless, the result of these experiments showed that you cannot speak without hearing speech, with the ‘babbling of a *deaf child* [being] identical to that of a child that can hear’.¹⁰

Deafness and muteness certainly add to our knowledge of speech, of language. In the same way, blindness enabled philosophy to increase the number of problems it was dedicated to: the eighteenth century witnessed the success of eye surgery, mainly on cataracts, which returned sight to various blind people. In this period, various

philosophers – Locke, Leibniz, Diderot and Voltaire among them – were fascinated by blindness, and particularly interested in the intellectual problems set by the new surgical techniques. It was not by chance, that the blind man whose sight was restored became a paradigmatic figure of enlightened thought.¹¹

The eighteenth century also provided an answer to a problem posed in the seventeenth, and that had occupied many philosophers: ‘Molyneux’s problem’. In 1688, the Irish politician and scientist William Molyneux, whose wife went blind during their first year of marriage, sent the following question to John Locke: could a man who had been born blind and who had learnt to distinguish and name a globe and a cube by touch, be able to distinguish and name these objects simply by sight, once he had been enabled to see?

Linking blindness to deafness, and looking particularly at photos of Helen Keller feeling the bodies of Martha Graham’s ballet dancers or ‘listening’ to Enrico Caruso on 24 April 1916, in Atlanta, Georgia. There are also the photographs showing pedagogical systems for the blind and deaf-mutes, obviously based on touch.¹² We can reflect on the role that these ‘handicaps’, these lacks (of vision, of voice) had on the style of language in pedagogical development – two, as we have seen, of the issues most explored by contemporary artists.

45

These are days when no one should rely unduly on his competence. Strength lies in improvisation. All the decisive blows are struck left-handed.

Walter Benjamin

Charlotte Moth (United Kingdom, 1978) is an artist for whom travelling and residencies frequently lead to new work. She seeks out new geographies, typologies, architecture and even languages which force her into a constantly improvised dialogue with the unknown.¹³ Since 1999, she has been creating an image bank, made up of analogue photographs taken during various trips, which she calls the *Travelogue*.¹⁴ Most of these images are of buildings or details of houses and pavilions, and this bank is generally presented as ‘a phenomenological reading of architectural spaces’¹⁵, or ‘incentives to view architectures, spaces and sites in a phenomenological way’.¹⁶ Her first trip to Porto, in April 2011, in order to get to know the city and building which would be her next residency, led to the expansion of the *Travelogue*, through the addition, for example, of photos of the Araújo Porto Institute, as well as the Parnaso Building, designed in 1954 by the Portuguese architect, Carlos Loureiro (Porto, 1925), who was also responsible for other similarly iconic projects such as the Hotel D. Henrique and the Rosa Mota Sports’ Pavilion, which is better known in Porto, (despite having replaced the ‘legitimate’ one), as the Palácio de Cristal (or Crystal Palace), both in Porto.

Following this first visit, Charlotte Moth photographed various sites and buildings in and around the city. These included the Casa de Chá (The Tea Room) designed by Álvaro Siza Vieira (Matosinhos, 1933), the swimming pools at Leça da Palmeira, the Serralves Villa and the Bairro da Bouça (all also by Siza Vieira). The studio of the engineer Edgar Cardoso (Porto, 1913) and the Cafetaria Cunha also became part of the artist’s image bank. Accompanying her on visits to some of these locations, I realized she was fascinated by lighting phenomena, between particular refractions and shadow – concerns that inform many modernist buildings (it was not by chance that Le Corbusier said that ‘Architecture is the space under the light’) which made glass and transparent material recurrent phenomena. I also noted Moth’s particular interest in lamps and light projectors – everything that can contribute to altering, temporarily or intermittently, our perception of a certain space. Finally, I saw the artist’s fascination with a particular architectural past (set somewhere between the 1920s and the 1980s due to, on the one hand, its scenographic character – to the fact that they change dramatically according to the quality of the light animating them, or the view that records them photographically –, but also, and perhaps mainly, because they correspond to fragile, obsolete objects, to some extent displaced in time, but translators of ideas (defined as utopian) about how to see and experience, how to live and inhabit, that are yet to be exhausted, and from which we can (we must) learn valuable lessons: ‘For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably’.¹⁷

I also came gradually to understand the relationship between her stubborn, almost militant option of the semi-defunct analogue – which raises all kinds of logistical problems for those still dedicated to it (the hegemony of the digital means that there is a distinct lack of materials and laboratories) – and the objects Moth wanted to photograph: not simply because of the comic coherence of recording the obsolete through the obsolete, but mainly because the traditional photographic image, which is intimately related to ideas of loss (of ‘this was’) and the fragment, is perfectly in keeping with Charlotte Moth’s melancholy, anti-authoritarian and fragmentary project. *Travelogue* has no intention of showing exactly what the numerous buildings being photographed are like; it aims to underline the importance of atmosphere created by ‘details’ such as transparency and opacity, and phenomena based on the reflection and refraction of light.

In May 2011, almost immediately before her Porto residency, Charlotte Moth went to the Côte d’Azur and visited Eileen Gray’s famous house: E-1027. She stopped en route at Hyères to see Villa Noailles¹⁸, designed by the architect Robert Mallet-Stevens (Paris, 1886–1945). Commissioned by the well-known aristocratic couple and patrons of the arts, Charles and Marie-Laure de Noailles, Villa Noailles is an architectural milestone as it is a unique point at which various arts come together: from the decorative to painting and sculpture, by way of the cinema. Mallet-Stevens, at the time of the commission in 1923, was primarily considered an architect-decorator and was well-known for his geometrical and sober cinema settings, which were influenced by Fernand Léger and Dutch art and architecture, especially the De Stijl group (Theo van Doesburg, Rietveld, Mondrian). Throughout the conception and construction of the house, however, he was faced with the anti-scenographic view of the Count of Noailles, who refused to allow architectural considerations to outweigh the utility and simple practicality which he expected his home to have.

Charlotte Moth made a 16mm film of her visit and, as she filmed, constantly reminded herself of Man Ray’s piece that was set there: *Les Mystères du Château du Dé* (1929). In addition to the house, she filmed and photographed – again analogically – its garden, designed by Gabriel Guévrékian in 1925 and usually presented as ‘three dimensional cubism’.

During this trip, Charlotte Moth finally realized her long term project to photograph and film the house of Eileen Gray (Ireland, 1878 – Paris, 1976), who, as an architect, left a not particularly extensive group of works as her legacy. These were almost always done in collaboration with Jean Badovici (Romania, 1893 – Paris, 1956), and are highly significant and increasingly valued by architectural theorists (as well as by visual artists). Her best known work is the house E-1027, for strictly architectural reasons, although there is a famous story about it too: Le Corbusier – who, ironically, envied the house’s marvellous location – was swimming in front of it when he died, in 1965. What, however, lies behind that seemingly cryptic name, E-1027? Well, E is for Eileen, 10 is for Jean (J is the 10th letter of the alphabet), 2 is for Badovici and 7 is for Gray.

At the time of her visit in January 2008, the house was undergoing restoration work and access was therefore extremely limited. In May 2011, being given a guided tour by the Mayor of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin himself, Charlotte Moth recorded the fact that her host was using loose pages from a famous book about the building, *Maison en Bord de Mer*, to point out details, underline differences between the past and the present, and emphasise aspects making this house a truly outstanding piece of architecture.

When she finally moved to Porto and the residency officially began, at the end of August, Charlotte Moth decided to use her studio at the Araújo Porto Institute to build and then photograph a maquette. This model of the Patinoire de Saint-Ouen, a building designed by the French architect Paul Chemetov (Paris, 1928), was the fundamental part of her exhibition project for the Lavomatique, in Saint-Ouen.¹⁹ The relation between the exhibition space and the Patinoire only fully crystallized when she realized that, as a result of a fire in the architect's studio, the original models of the ice rink had been lost. After looking at photographs showing the different models for the building, the artist built a composite model. As the light in which the maquettes were photographed was a decisive influence on their perceived volumes, Charlotte Moth's model was effectively a three-dimensional translation of that immaterial element.

Having built the model, the artist photographed it in her work spaces at the Araújo Porto Institute. She wanted, in some way, to carry these spaces in Porto to Saint-Ouen, because publishing images of those rooms which were her temporary studio (for the three months of the residency) in the publication which is part of the brochure where this text can be read, and presenting them in the subsequent exhibition as another artistic object, is a similar gesture to that of the Mayor of Roquebrune-Cap-Martin when he showed her, in that *mise en abîme*, or poetic redundancy, pictures of a house when inside the house itself.

Two of Charlotte Moth's immediate decisions in terms of projects to develop during her stay in Porto were, firstly, to produce a book to accompany the exhibition (you're reading it now) as a tribute to Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici. She would use the E-1027 book as a reference point and inspiration for her own publication, and include projects parallel to those of her Porto residency. She would thus mix distinct geographies and architectures: Porto, Deal, Saint-Ouen, Hyères, Roquebrune-Cap-Martin and Otwock.²⁰

Secondly, and proving why her projects are highly anti-authoritarian, she decided to invite a series of people, virtually all artists with whom she'd previously collaborated, to come to Porto. They would share the space at the Araújo Porto Institute and effectively contribute to the form of the final exhibition and the various other associated events. For instance, the visual artist and drummer Sean Dower was in Porto for a weekend of intensive learning – on Charlotte Moth's part – about the basics of drumming. The artist wanted to record herself drumming and so create a soundtrack for a 16 mm film she was producing at the Institute. We'll come to that shortly,

but learning to play the drums was also an opportunity to use the stage of the pavilion annexed to the former deaf-mute school at an event after the exhibition opened.

Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici's book was a source of inspiration not only due to its content but, above all, by being made up of loose pages that could be continually reordered by the reader. These pages worked like files, resisting any permanent fixing of meaning, impeding the book from crystallising, taking shape. At the same time, the system is open to expansion: we can put in a new image at any moment, its internal mobility allows for constant reordering. This way of avoiding crystallisation interested Charlotte Moth, an artist whose work is constantly based on the aesthetic (and ethic) of discontinuity, for whom the fragment is a recurrent means of escaping emphasis, discursiveness.

Through the fluid form in which it mixes references, the diverse origins of its images, and its collaborative component (in addition to Sean Dower, the artists Peter Fillingham and Francesco Pedraglio were also in Porto), Moth's *Travelogue* aims to destroy everything which, in principle, makes discourse, any discourse, an element of authority. Charlotte Moth believes that the visitor to an exhibition, or the reader of a text are, must be, basically anarchic and violent predators who, in the healthy 'savagery of reading', fragment, select, frame and edit. When 'appropriating' and 'cutting' other texts, or when presenting fragments of buildings, Moth is more concerned with the effects of the light on the materials than their structure. As regards houses and buildings and pavilions, the artist is essentially avoiding laws, the arrogance of a point of view; escaping, as Roland Barthes would say, 'the violence of choice'. Her desire, frequently expressed by Charlotte Moth herself – and clearly borne out by her career –, is to be constantly in transit, 'jumping from residency to residency'.²¹ This always being out of place, this atopia (or absence of place) is equivalent, if we consider it well, to a premeditated voiding of power.

At the Araújo Porto Institute, more precisely in the pavilion annexed to the old school building, there is a group of furniture, mostly adapted to the scale and assumed tastes of children: small chairs and stools, and low, coloured tables. This building served until recently as a warehouse for some larger tables. One of Charlotte Moth's first initiatives, after establishing herself in the two rooms that operated as her temporary studio, was to take a lot of the tables to one of these large spaces – despite the coloured tops and being aware of their size – 'for adults'. The artist had previously used tables in her projects and given them a significant role in the presentation of objects, photographs and texts.²² Why such an interest? To start with, because, once again, they correspond to absolute anti-crystallisation: tables are normally seen as work surfaces, on which tasks are carried out – sites where, like a kind of stage, there is action. They are objects made to receive other objects, surfaces where things can happen (tables, at least potentially, invite a performance). They are also used because Charlotte Moth is interested in emphasising the role of display, of décor in the recep-

tion of the work of art, to the detriment of possible ontological qualities that distinguish the artistic object from so many other objects in the world.

Gradually in the first phase, and then rapidly from the moment when the artist mapped out the shops that interested her in the city, these tables became covered with the most varied objects. The commercial establishments to which Moth began paying frequent visits were, on the whole, retail shops selling objects it was difficult to know what to do with. Porto is still a paradise for all those interested in buying second-hand goods, or utensils sufficiently obsolete to satisfy only a parallel economy, the bizarre side of the commercial canons, dealing with 'relics' apparently stripped of any value. In these shops, as well as at the weekly markets with their buying and selling of 'treasures' coming directly from recently cleared houses or petty thievery, Charlotte Moth got hold of, and the following list is not exhaustive, a foam triangle, a round mirror, pieces of another mirror, an old aquarium, a sphere, a room divider, a wooden object that, detached from its original function, couldn't even be identified, and seemed like some minimalist sculpture (Charlotte Moth calls it her Carl Andre), parts of lamps, some decorative article made up of transparent plastic columns, at once kitsch and the direct heir of modern sculpture (or of the images that held her hostage).

For weeks, the artist became a true collector of the unlikely, finding objects in the city which, as we shall see, have as much to distinguish as unite them. Walter Benjamin argued that 'there is in the life of the collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order'.²³ Charlotte Moth found goods that few would look at twice and bought them for reasons seemingly as unfathomable as those which might explain their permanence in the world of objects for sale (disorder), and that were now reunited according to some criteria (order). None of these objects could be mistaken for designer goods, they are not – despite their humble scale – properly speaking domestic. There's nothing in them that, thinking of functions or markers, could greatly distract us from their form. For Charlotte Moth, the surface is not a kind of suspect periphery, strictly related to the superfluous (surface and physiognomy don't need to be the opposite of profundity, or the interior). If we look closely, we can see that her collection of objects are visually related to details of the buildings in *Travelogue*, and successfully convey the ideas of obsolescence and the latent and fragmentary archive which drive the artist. Charlotte Moth the collector corresponds well to another of Benjamin's definitions: 'collectors are the physiognomists of the world of objects'.²⁴

After arranging the objects on the tables, the artist took a series of light projectors and colour filters to the building, which enabled her to photograph all those forms, which were subject to the most dramatic transformations thanks to the premeditated as well as fortuitous changes in light. This room, which for months served firstly as a photographic studio and later, as we'll see, a cinematic one, is north-facing, being bathed in enough light to create the most remarkable reflective and shadowy effects. She also underlined her interest in theatre and décor by bringing variously coloured lengths of cloth to the space and hanging them up like curtains. Here, therefore, we have another criterion for including these particular objects in the collection to be

photographed and filmed and that allows for the justification of their forms and the materials they're made of: they have to be sensitive to luminous phenomena, changing according to the light as it crosses them, or as we are able to perceive them. This explains the amount of glass and transparent plastic, as well as the pleats and folds whose shadows, obsessed with the light, wax as much as wane, either helping to clarify the volume and contours of a given object, or making them completely indistinct. This collection of objects, the colours chosen for the 'curtains' (premeditatedly neutral), remind me of 'Le Neutre', Barthes' penultimate course at the Collège de France, in 1978²⁵, especially the part on the concept of 'discoloured colour'.²⁶ Charlotte Moth's commitment to forms and colours that change according to the perspective from which we look at them, corresponds exactly to the Neutral as defined (and defended) by Barthes, the perfect antidote to dialectical temptations, against the paradigms that are based on an opposition between the two terms of an alternative, and in which only one is fatally updated, legitimized.

The objective of this complex scene, however, was to make – in addition to producing some of the photographs in this book – a 16mm film (yes, analogue too) in which the objects are the main characters. Forgotten objects from second-hand shops took the principal roles, digging a gigantic ditch between their uselessness and the efforts to try to raise them.²⁷ This connects with another of Charlotte Moth's goals: to convey nobility to suspiciously viewed forms; to underline the way exhibition protocols clearly modify the manner in which we approach any object, showing that works of art are always polysemic signs, changing what they represent with each presentation, depending on the mood of spectators and the specificities of the circumstances in which they're seen.

This film, which unashamedly takes us back to modernist fantasies of pure colours and sinuous forms, banks on a grammar of contrasting relations between geometrical forms (exactly like the films of Hans Richter or Fernand Léger). Recording the transformations of visual forms through movement and illumination can only remind us of the supposedly 'pure' films (which aimed to be autonomous in relation to other arts) of the 1920s. The link is certainly underscored when we recall that the directors of those films frequently defined them as 'visual symphonies'. Charlotte Moth also created a soundtrack which, more than simply adding music, emphasized the musical character of the film: the importance it conferred to the rhythm, to the editing. Moth was interested in showing the objects and space in a fragmented manner – in basically making her film a whole that remained a fragment. We already know – it is one of the first things said and written when trying to distinguish between the cinematic and photographic image – that photographic images always document the past, and we always speak of them in the past. In contrast, a film is a kind of figuration of endless return, always being (potentially, at least) in a perpetual present. This idea of a present which can be lived in, a path exploring a support which allows images and objects to be saved from death, is one of the reasons justifying Charlotte Moth's choice of a 16mm film. The

fact that this almost defunct technique is today seen by some as a mere relic for collectors²⁸ has had little or no effect on this artist, as the reasons for her to use it in making her film are not very different from those that have led her to work with slides: the circularity and anti-narrativity linked to this technique (a slideshow ends only to begin again) are two of the characteristics that the artist decided to explore through that 16mm film. It's interesting, nonetheless, to notice that the movement of the carousel slide projector was, to some degree, replaced by a turntable that enabled the artist to rotate the objects being filmed, showing new facets of the same objects so that the two different sides were exposed to a myriad of luminous phenomena. Charlotte Moth must agree with Roland Barthes: 'what is fragile is always new'.

52

This turntable reminds us of the effort of shopkeepers or the window-dressers they hired to transform a display into the possibility of having access to an object from various angles – replicating, to an extent, the cinematic experience – or of films and literature which glorify objects, such as *Le Chant du Styrène* (1958), an industrial documentary commissioned by the plastics company Pechiney, directed by Alain Resnais (Vannes, France, 1922) and accompanied by a narrative in Alexandrine verse (ironic heroicisation) written by Raymond Queneau (*Le Havre*, 1903 – Neuilly sur Seine, France, 1976). We might also think of Francis Ponge's works (Montpellier, 1899 – Paris, 1988), in which the French writer describes everyday objects (both animate and inanimate) using apparently objective language.²⁹ In common with Ponge, and in addition to this love of objects, Charlotte Moth's work also shows a total absence of messages for humanity, and almost an aversion to ideas.³⁰

Be that as it may, the setting Charlotte Moth constructed for the photographic sessions and the making of the 16mm film is as close to window-dressing as it is to theatre, or its scenographic aspect. It's not the first time the artist has used curtains or projectors, which we immediately associate with stage performances.³¹ Such usage is a good illustration of how the paradigm of artists connected to the theatre and ideas of setting and décor have changed in recent times. The relation between the visual arts and the theatre has alternated, since the earliest vanguard movements, between fascination, absolute identification and the most complete rejection. In the 1960s and 70s, for example, bad art was, artists and critics stated, that which was most theatrical. Genuine, live art, the art of performance, should be free of any scenic effect, whilst the theatre was censured for the artificiality of its devices and preference for celebrating the immediacy of the body in action. The suspicions of visual artists, curators and art critics regarding the theatre have only recently begun to disappear: in the 1990s, for instance, expressions like 'too theatrical or 'dangerously scenographic' were still used to criticise what was considered bad art.

The generation of artists Charlotte Moth belongs to doesn't share this particularly restrictive view of the theatre. We can see today a renewed interest in the genre, quite in keeping with this phenomenon, in which there has been a return to the word, to orality. More and more artists are making speech a fundamental feature of their work: they are taking up the word and appropriating forms of discourse habitually

related to the skills of specialists, replicating pedagogical models like the conference and the seminar. Charlotte Moth has not taken her relation with text from the stage (or its translation into speech, into the pitch of a voice and the energy of the actors' bodies), but rather questions concerning scenography, and the different senses of the stage and the stalls upheld by diverse writers and directors. These have provided her with various ways of exploring the relationship of art, and sculpture particularly, with the problem of status for an artistic object; with the negation of its pretensions towards autonomy.³² The deliberate approach of Moth's pieces to the idea of décor, the investment of her research into technologies of display, in the architecture of exhibitions, her relation to certain architects (Moth, as we have seen, has delved deeply into the work of Mallet-Stevens and Eileen Gray) implies that her artistic practice not only researches into these ideas but also applies them to every project, blurring the distinction between Charlotte Moth the artist and Charlotte Moth the curator – or at least the curator of herself.

53

As an example of the blurred distinction between making art and finding ways of presenting it, the artist's work rooms, initially her provisional studio and later the space where she displayed the work produced during her time in Porto were, for decades, children's classrooms. One of the rooms still has its old fashioned blackboards; as well as a series of wooden shelves and cork boards, where students would put their work and teachers would make books available and put up exercises. Charlotte Moth decided to include the blackboards and shelves in her exhibition, and even replicated them in the other room, so as to represent the loose pages of her book. A cycle comes to a close: the photographs taken at Eileen Gray's house are presented beside photographs showing the space where they are being shown – the same kind of redundancy as seeing Gray's house simultaneously live and through the pages of the book used by her unlikely guide, the above-mentioned Mayor.

As Susan Sontag stated – highly critical of the weight of interpretation – when referring to the works that had most helped her in this struggle, and irrespective of any redundancy, technical explanation or sophisticated *displays*, Charlotte Moth's work makes us feel the importance of 'experiencing the luminosity of the thing in itself, of things being what they are'.³³ Continuing (and agreeing) with Sontag: 'I have no quarrel with works of art that contain no ideas at all; on the contrary, much of the greatest art is of this kind'.³⁴

- 1 Known as *The Lesson* in English, Eugène Ionesco's play from the 1950s is a hilarious satire on education, parodying teaching methods (particularly acritical learning by heart) and the imposed hierarchy between master and student. See Eugène Ionesco, *La Leçon*, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2010.
- 2 See Boris Charvat, *Je suis une école*, Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, 2008.
- 3 See Paul O'Neill & Mick Wilson (eds), *Curating and the Educational Turn*, London and Amsterdam: Open Editions and De Appel, 2010.
- 4 The Piet Zwart Institute, in Rotterdam, suggested to the curator, Alexis Vaillant, that he spent a year working with their postgraduate students. Aware of the Institute's interest in the unknown, and being uncertain about what to do exactly, the 'teacher' decided to create the OFU [Office for the Unknown], which operated both as a laboratory for the students, as well as a space where invited guest speakers could give papers on, among other subjects, the limits of knowledge, the roles of the esoteric and magic in contemporary art, etc. Papers were given by the curator, Anthony Huberman; the artists, Nathaniel Mellors and Lili Reynaud-Dewar; and the philosopher, Marco Pasi. When it was decided to publish the OFU papers, the volume included texts by the curator, Raimundas Malašauskas; the critic, Dieter Roelstraete and the philosopher, Aaron Schuster. See Alexis Vaillant (ed.), *Options with Nostrils*, Berlin and Rotterdam: Sternberg Press and Piet Zwart Institute, 2010.
- 5 The Congress of Milan lasted for three days and passed eight resolutions, only one of which (the third) was carried unanimously: Resolution 1. The oral method ought to be preferred to that of signs for the education and instruction of the deaf and dumb; / 2. Considering that the simultaneous use of speech and signs has the disadvantage of injuring speech, lip-reading and precision of ideas, the pure oral method ought to be preferred; / 3. Governments should take the necessary steps to ensure that all the deaf and dumb may be educated; / 4. The most natural and effectual means by which the speaking deaf may acquire the knowledge of language is the 'intuitive' method, viz., that which consists in setting forth, first by speech, and then by writing the objects and the facts which are placed before the eyes of the pupils; / 5. The teachers of the oral system should apply themselves to the

publication of special works on the subject; / 6. The deaf and dumb taught by the pure oral method should not forget after leaving school the knowledge which they have acquired there, but develop it still further by conversation and that in their conversation with speaking persons they make use exclusively of speech, which is developed by practice; / 7. The most favourable age for admitting a deaf child into school is from eight to ten years. The school term ought to be seven years at least; but eight years would be preferable. No teacher can effectually teach a class of more than ten children on the pure oral method; / 8. The application of the pure oral method in institutions where it is not yet in active operation, should be – to avoid the certainty of failure – prudent, gradual and progressive. The pupils newly received into the schools should form a class by themselves, where instruction could be given by speech. These pupils should be absolutely separated from others too far advanced to be instructed by speech, and whose education will be completed by signs. Each year a new speaking class should be established, containing all the old pupils taught by signs who have completed their education.

- 6 'Mabel was deaf as the result of a childhood illness suffered at the house of her grandfather in New York shortly before her fifth birthday. Her parents, Gertrude McCurdy and Gardiner Greene Hubbard, never accepted the opinions of experts that it was hopeless to expect their daughter to continue to speak. Partially as a result of their efforts, she became a remarkable reader of lips, and in 1867, when she was nine, she stood before a Massachusetts legislative committee and answered questions as her father pressed the house for legislation to provide lip-reading education for all deaf children – today still a controversial option in the education of the deaf. Mabel had first heard of Alexander Graham Bell when she was at a school in Europe and he was a teacher at the Pemberton Avenue School for the Deaf in Boston. Soon after her return to America she went 'to see the teacher of whom I had heard so much but whom I privately considered a quack doctor. I both did not and did like him'. Mabel's feelings quickly became more positive. Her father helped the telephone along with financial and moral support, and she and Alec were married on 11 July 1877, a year after the telephone became a reality. As a wedding present, Bell turned over to his bride 4,900 of

the 5,000 shares he received when, two days before the wedding, he, his father-in-law-to-be, and others formed the Bell Telephone Company.' See Dorothy Harley Eber, *Genius at Work: Images of Alexander Graham Bell*, Halifax, Nova Scotia: Nimbus Publishing, 1991, pp. 43–44.

- 7 Laurence Lentin, *A Criança e a Linguagem Oral. Ensinar a Falar: Onde? Quando? Onde?*, Lisboa: Livros Horizonte, 1990, p. 44 [Original ed., *Apprendre a parler à l'enfant de moins de six ans – Où? Quand? Comment?*, Paris: Éditions ESF, 1987].
- 8 See 'Mémoire et rapport sur Victor de L'Aveyron par Jean Itard', in Lucien Malson, *Les enfants sauvages, Mythe et Réalité*, Paris: Éditions 10/18, 1983, p. 36.
- 9 Laurence Lentin, p. 44.
- 10 Ibid., p. 49.
- 11 Christopher Turner, 'Inventory/Blind Sight', *Cabinet*, no. 40 [Hair], Winter 2010–2011, pp. 13–15.
- 12 David Serlin, 'Learning at your Fingertips', *Cabinet*, no. 39 [Learning], Autumn 2010, pp. 70–73.
- 13 At a time when artistic residencies are taking on an unprecedented significance in the art world, it's important to distinguish between those artists for whom these residencies are really transformed into new pieces – artists whose work can actually be seen to be changed by the constant travelling, meetings with unknown situations, new associates, curious curators – and those for whom the residencies are merely another form of subsistence, or an advantageous encounter with artistic agents (namely curators) who will advance their careers. Charlotte Moth didn't believe she had gathered enough experience and information before beginning to produce her art, and therefore it is the almost constant exchange of information provided by the residencies that has allowed her to increase her 'baggage': the initial interests with which she started her career. In Porto, from the start of her residency, Charlotte Moth tried to visit as many places as possible, mainly buildings, whose characteristics she appreciated sufficiently to want to include them (as photographs) in her work. She also noted one of the characteristics least appreciated by locals: the fact that the city is a genuine time machine which, thanks to the poverty felt in recent decades and the associated difficulties in renovation, allows us to travel to past decades (this is particularly

evident in commerce, in which various shops could be part of sets for films depicting the period between the 1950s and the 70s and 80s). This might have been a major factor at the time in which the artist was trying to find objects that would satisfy her interest in the fragile, fragmentary and obsolete.

- 14 This expression is associated with travel writing as well as TV and cinema documentaries that frequently describe journeys from an eminently personal and anti-commercial point of view.
- 15 See, for example, 'Artist's Residency Programme, IMMA (Irish Museum of Modern Art), Previous Participants', available from http://www.modernart.ie/en/page_170749.htm [accessed 22 October 2011].
- 16 Available from http://www.kuenstlerstaette-bleckede.de/bleckede_html/stip_aktuell/stip_details/2009... [accessed 22 October 2011].
- 17 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', Hannah Arendt (ed.), Harry Zohn (trans.) *Illuminations*, London: Fontana/Collins, 1973, p. 257.
- 18 Cécile Briolle, Agnès Fuzibet, Gérard Monnier, *Rob Mallet-Stevens: La Villa Noailles*, Marseille: Éditions Parenthèses, 1990.
- 19 The exhibition, 'Proximité, une proposition au Lavomatique' ran from 19 September to 5 November 2011 at the Lavomatique Studio in Saint-Ouen.
- 20 Otwock is about 30 minutes away from Warsaw. Charlotte Moth visited the town in the summer 2011 at the invitation of Open Art Projects run by Magda Materna and Kasia Redzisz to work on a project they are developing with the artist Mirosław Bałka that focuses on his studio and hometown Otwock. The town has a rather sad story, linked to the Second World War. Charlotte Moth became interested in a forgotten part of the town, an area originally thought of – in the 1920s and 30s – as the beginning of a garden city. This is today still a residential area, with traditional wooden widermajer villas, and a number of modernist villas of which little is known about its architects and owners. One house in particular captured Moth's attention, and she photographed it obsessively whilst deciding on the project she would work on in Otwock. Some of these photos appear in this book.
- 21 In recent years, Charlotte Moth has been in residency programmes at Le Pavillon, Paris (2007–08) and IMMA, the Irish Museum of

- Modern Art (2008–09), Schloss Bleckede, Germany 2009.
- 22 In 2011, Moth had an exhibition at the Château de Rochechouart (Musée départemental d'art contemporain de Rochechouart). It was an installation in which various photographs and texts could be seen and read on a number of tables. As the Château houses the largest archive of the dada artist, Raoul Hausmann (1886–1971) Moth, after deciding to work on this archive, focused intensely on the section dealing with Hausmann's stay in Ibiza between 1933 and 1936. Having visited the island, where she photographed buildings also photographed by Hausmann, she decided her exhibition would be a kind of 'free show', spreading writings and photos over various tables. The texts were of her conversations and exchanges of emails with Alice Peinado, an anthropologist specialized in migration issues, notions of identity and citizenship. Open to the public between 2 March and 29 May 2011, the exhibition was called 'Noting Thoughts'.
- 23 Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library. A Talk about Book Collecting', Hannah Arendt (ed.), Harry Zohn (trans.) *Illuminations*, London: Fontana/Collins, 1973, p. 60.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 60.
- 25 See 'From the Neutral. Session of March 11, 1978' (translated by Rosalind Krauss), *October* 112, Spring 2005, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 3–22.
- 26 'The grisaille, figure that could be called the "color of the colorness", points to another way of thinking the paradigm: the opposition of primary contrasted colors (blue/red): it's the opposition par excellence, the very motor of meaning (phonology). Now the monochrome (the Neutral) substitutes for the idea of opposition that of the slight difference ... nuance becomes a principle of allover organization'. 'From the Neutral: Session of March 11, 1978', *October*, 112, Spring 2005, pp. 3–22, p. 11.
- 27 The tables are not simply a base. They are, at least in Western culture, surfaces on which activities can be carried out and where work can be done, at the same time as serving to elevate valuable, almost sacred objects, such as food and drink.
- 28 Hito Steyerl, for example, argues that 'Currently, the use of 16mm is a way to avoid the present while producing collectable "objects". But what are today's uprisings filmed on? A Bolex or cell phones?', *Frieze*, 141, September 2011, p. 193.
- 29 See Francis Ponge, *Alguns Poemas*, Lisbon: Edições Cotovia, 1996.
- 30 'No doubt I am not very intelligent: in any case ideas are not my strong point. I've always been disappointed by them. The most well-founded opinions, the most harmonious philosophical systems (the best constituted) have always seemed to me utterly fragile, caused a certain revulsion, a sense of the emptiness at the heart of things, a painful feeling of inconsistency. I do not feel in the least assured of the propositions that I sometimes have occasion to put forth in the course of a discussion. The opposing arguments almost always appear just as valid; let's say, for the sake of exactness, neither more nor less valid. I am easily convinced, easily put down. And when I say I am convinced: it is, if not of some truth, at least of the fragility of my own opinion. Furthermore, the value of ideas appears to me most often in inverse proportion to the enthusiasm with which they are expressed. A tone of conviction (and even of sincerity) is adopted, it seems to me, as much in order to convince oneself as to convince one's interlocutor, and even more, perhaps, to replace conviction. To replace, so to speak, the truth which is absent from the propositions put forth. This is something I feel very strongly. / Hence, ideas as such seem to me to be the thing I am least capable of, and they are of little interest to me.' Available from <http://maisonneuve.org/pressroom/article/2002/nov/18/my-creative-method/> [accessed 28 October 2011].
- 31 See, for example, her projects for the Bloomberg Space, in London on 28 January to 20 February 2010 and for the Carlier | Gebauer gallery, in Berlin, for the 'Displacements' exhibition which ran from 19 February to 12 March 2011.
- 32 'Today, there is no longer any 'ontological' difference between making art and displaying art' Boris Groys, 'Politics of Installation', in *Going Public*, Berlin and New York: Sternberg Press, 2010, pp. 50–69, p. 51.
- 33 Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, London: Vintage, 2001, p. 13.
- 34 Susan Sontag, 'Ionesco', p. 123.