

Zac Langdon-Pole 'My Body... (Brendan Pole)' in *Meine Bilder* at The Physics Room

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There are two works in Zac Langdon-Pole's show *Meine Bilder*: "Pieces of Eight," a film and "My Body... (Brendon Pole)," a text work. The latter, which is the focus here, is a re-inscription and adaptation of a poem by the artist's deceased uncle, whose name makes up part of the title.ⁱ The poem's five stanzas are pasted across the walls in 297 photographs, one for each individual letter.

In her essay, 'Where Our Bodies Begin and End', Langdon-Pole's sister Georgina Pole discusses her brother's artwork and recounts the life of their uncle. Pole also describes the poem's genealogy and its influence, "by speaking at length with our mother [Cathy Pole] about Brendan's life, his identity, struggles living with HIV and AIDS, and his death, Zac's subsequent reconstruction and re-authoring of the poem tests the limits of intergenerational memory".ⁱⁱ Shortly before he died in 1991, Brendon Pole recited his poem to Cathy Pole, who relayed it to her son Langdon-Pole, who revisions, (re)inscribes, and installs it as a series of almost 300 photographs of elaborate medieval fonts.

While Langdon-Pole's work is 'of' a poem and even functions momentarily as a poem, it is not only, or even really, a poem. When you take the work home you will not find a poem but a collection of 297 photographs, each 100mm x 150mm. The poem becomes a pile of images to be put up, packed away, and put up somewhere else. This formal disappearance of the poem into a stack of photographs also reflects the artist's wider practice of 'montage, transposition, [time] travelling, testimony, reinterpretation, collaboration and appropriation [...]'.ⁱⁱⁱ Not only has the poem time-travelled, it has also been reinterpreted, appropriated, collaborated with via testimony, and then 're-remembered,' and so made into something else.

Cathy Pole said her brother Brendon was afraid he would not be remembered.^{iv} He was right to worry. In less than a hundred years most of the adults you know will be forgotten, or remembered only in fragments that are passed on by people who are themselves aging, changing, and forgetting. This year on my mother's birthday, I wondered who else remembered that it's been eighteen months since she died. Although we leave behind objects, pictures, and poems, the surplus of family

photographs that appear in auction houses and charity shops demonstrates what happens if no one is interested in the objects that remain, that is, if there is no one (left) to be interested in us.

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The letters are in medieval manuscript, and Langdon-Pole uses mostly the decorative and pictorial ones, the kind used to start a new passage of scripture.^v Georgina Pole describes the way these letters portray the 'seductive and alluring details' of Christian typography, and she points to Langdon-Pole's use of them to convey a non-heterosexual life and desire that the scripts' religion condemns. While they may seduce, the ornamental and difficult-to-read letters also invoke the distance and displacement that language produces as well as its tacit promise to make experience proximate. The medieval font is irregular because the artist has taken from different styles from across the centuries. The poem is dominated by these letters and they jostle for attention. This means you cannot see the whole picture or read the text without stepping back once or twice. We are not used to reading poetry like this, but then again, this is not a poem.

In this way, the text work highlights the automatic process of reading, of simultaneously looking at letters and reading them. In front of the text, and unsure of what to concentrate on, I become lost in interpretation. I imagine there is a secret in the words, which I want to glean, and an aesthetic to the letters that I want to appreciate. When I step even farther back I see something else, too. Some of the stanzas might form letters of their own. Is that a 'W' and is that an 'E'? I am reminded of Paul Auster's *City of Glass* in which a deranged detective storywriter follows an elderly man around the city. Tracing the man's daily walks into his notebook, the fiction writer observes the formation of large scale letters. He expects that the old man's steps will eventually reveal a secret message. Similarly, in the poem on the wall I see shapes that I fancy bear a concealed message. By stepping back to read around these words and lines, I am also trying to read between them.

Looking at the work I have a strong desire for extra meaning, perhaps this is because the poem is about dying and disappearing. So, I search for hidden formulae that might tell me how to live. The title of the work 'My Body (Brendon Pole)' contains the first two words of the poem and then an ellipsis '. . .'. I follow the dots (the points) that connect the artist and the poet. I follow the inhale and exhale of the poet (as I have followed the breath of every person I have watched die). I trace the dots from title to poem to work to story. I step across them carefully because there is also always the danger of falling through, and of missing the point. Of falling, I would like to be less afraid.

. . .

In much of the poetry I have read, like the art I have viewed, substance is not given head on, or given at all. If something substantial is suggested it is invariably off to the side by which I mean I can feel its presence only by its absence. This something which evades a poem or an artwork is conceivably a second life, a life that is private even from ourselves. The philosopher Jean-François Lyotard writes about a second life, which he describes by way of what he calls “the general line.”^{vi}

The “general line” is not the line of life in general, of life “such as it is.” The second existence is nonetheless sweet in relation to “the life everyone sees.” It dwells within it from time to time and sweeps it away, but without one knowing anything about it. The second existence does not really wrong the first one; it opens parentheses within it.^{vii}

Perhaps it is these brackets that hold Brendon Pole in ‘My Body (Brendon Pole).’ Lyotard explains,

You grant your hours of solitude to that existence because you have a need not to know more. That’s how it is that you can encounter what you are unaware of. However, you wait for it. And you can try to make it come. You read, you drink, you love, you make music, you give yourself over to the ritual of your little obsessions, you write.^{viii}

Disappearance. Appearance.

An account of one of Brendon Pole’s last days also serves as a description of how we resist and then negotiate disappearance by expressing it in the very moments that we and it are disappearing. In their beaten-up old van, Cathy Pole and her husband drive twenty-eight-year old Brendon to Auckland’s west coast. He is physically weak so they put a mattress in the back. They reverse the van to look over the water from a cliff. There’s Brendon looking out at the sea, which is framed by the rusty sides of the van’s back door. It’s here that Brendon delivers his poem. Georgina Pole writes, ‘[i]n his journey towards death, language seemed to become a space where he could resist what had been enacted upon him.’^{ix} When I picture this scene there is a fierce wind that carries his words ‘writ large’ out toward the roaring surf. Into the van, out to sea.

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Langdon-Pole’s work, both at The Physics Room and elsewhere, makes something of disappearance, and so keeps disappearance in mind, alive, and in play.^x

The poem and the work are also acts of mourning. Brendon Pole mourns his future, his body, his life while Zac Langdon-Pole mourns his uncle, his uncle’s past, his uncle’s life. ‘My Body . . . (Brendon Pole)’ retraces our links with one another, with objects, and with language. Near the end of “Where Our Bodies Begin and End,” Georgina Pole asks, ‘How can the living resound stories suppressed and untold?’

How do we become companions of the dead?' Langdon-Pole's 'My Body . . (Brendon Pole)' is a perfect answer.

ⁱ Georgina Pole, "Where Our Bodies Begin and End," *The Pantograph Punch* (2016), accessed April 21st, 2016. <http://pantograph-punch.com/post/where-our-bodies-begin-and-end-brendan-pole-my-body>

ⁱⁱ Georgina Pole, "Where Our Bodies Begin and End," *The Pantograph Punch* (2016), accessed April 21st, 2016. <http://pantograph-punch.com/post/where-our-bodies-begin-and-end-brendan-pole-my-body>

ⁱⁱⁱ "Artist-in-Residence," NTU Center for Contemporary Art Singapore, accessed May 1, 2016, <http://ntu.ccasingapore.org/residencies/zac-langdon-pole/>

^{iv} Georgina Pole, "Where Our Bodies Begin and End," *The Pantograph Punch* (2016), accessed April 21st, 2016. <http://pantograph-punch.com/post/where-our-bodies-begin-and-end-brendan-pole-my-body>

^v Langdon-Pole's work is not unknown to decoration. In 2012, he exhibited works of floral patterned fabric that Cathy Pole had made into clothes. John Hurrell, "Patterned Paintings from Textile Offcuts," review of *Nothing By Itself*, by Zac Langdon-Pole at Michael Lett 18 May-23rd June 2012, *Eyecontact*, <http://www.eyecontactsite.com/2012/06/patterned-paintings-using-textile-offcuts?external=true>

^{vi} Jean-Francois Lyotard "The General Line" *Postmodern Fables* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 115-122.

^{vii} Jean-Francois Lyotard "The General Line" *Postmodern Fables* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) 118.

^{viii} Jeremy Luke Hill, "Lyotard and the Secret Self," *From Word to Word*, April 11, 2008, <https://jeremylukehill.wordpress.com/2008/04/11/lyotard-and-the-secret-self/>

^{ix} Georgina Pole, "Where Our Bodies Begin and End," *The Pantograph Punch* (2016), accessed April 21st, 2016. <http://pantograph-punch.com/post/where-our-bodies-begin-and-end-brendan-pole-my-body>

^x The objects and processes that Langdon-Pole employs sometimes end up taking over his works. The idea of making a work that is only partly your own and of sharing the making of work with others appears in Langdon-Pole's '[Sic]', a show at The Blue Oyster Art Space 22 January – 22 February, 2014. The artist arranged for the removal of all the lights, fixtures, and other light-generating devices from the household of an unknown author's house and used them to light the gallery. As with the words from his uncle's story, the lights are transferred from their home to light the gallery. <http://www.blueoyster.org.nz/exhibitions/zac-langdon-pole/> accessed April 20th, 2016. Additionally, in *Pale Ideas* shown at Michael Lett 29 May – 11 August, 2013, sun-faded curtain fabric is stretched over frames. Just as he has Brendon Pole do the work of the poem, here Langdon-Pole lets the sun do some of the work. During the gradual process of drawing colour from fabric, the sun makes dark and light stripes adding something new to the disappearing colour. <http://michaelllett.com/exhibition/zac-langdon-pole-pale-ideas/> accessed May 15, 2016.