

THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



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COMMENTARIES

“You seem the same as always, –”

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“You seem the same as always, –”

Claire Barclay, Kate Davis,
Olafur Eliasson, Hans-Peter Feldmann,
Douglas Gordon, Gabriel Orozco,
Yvonne Rainer, Richard Serra
and David Shrigley

“*You seem the same as always, –*” was a group exhibition of artworks in which hands are variously photographed, cast, filmed, drawn, painted, or printed, but almost always presented in isolation from the rest of the body. If this simple theme might seem to offer the hand as a universal touchstone, in practice the exhibition didn’t canvas a consensus, rather, it allowed the show of hands to raise questions. David Shrigley’s *Parts of the Fist* (2000-2011), the first work encountered in the show, opened this questioning with a problem fundamental to many of the works here—can the hand be read, does it have a language? His satire of palmistry, a fist drawn on the wall and annotated in his inimitable style, claimed to locate such tell-tale parts as the ‘line of hidden meaning,’ ‘the artless voice,’ or ‘the Welshman’s burden.’ Shrigley’s characteristic celebration of hamfistedness, of the fallibilities of the draughtsman’s hand, was used here to point to the absurdity of reading hands as if they directly indexed personality.

Whilst Gabriel Orozco’s *My Hands Are My Heart* (1991) and Olafur Eliasson’s complex filmic installation seemed to celebrate the creative potential of human hands as organs which shape and offer works, or which measure, articulate, and point towards possible forms, the exhibition as a whole gave as much consideration to the inarticulate, grasping or sinister as it did to the giving, signing or dextrous hand. In Claire Barclay’s works on paper, the artist’s hand is used as a template to create forms that are all fingers and thumbs, revealing the act of making to be both more and less than a display of manual dexterity. Douglas Gordon’s photographs of broken casts of his hands, and his video work *Scratch Hither* (2002) also complicated the reading of the theme of the hand. The latter work showed the artist’s hand beckoning the viewer beyond the gallery and into the

private part of the house; by its placement in the space it became an invitation to transgression, an effect already encoded in its insistent, endless repetition of an action which renders the expressive, gesturing hand as a sign of obsession or pathology.

Film works by Yvonne Rainer and by Richard Serra grounded the exhibition’s theme in the formal and conceptual ferment of the 1960s avant-garde. Serra’s suite of films presents the sculptor’s hands engaged in activities which might refer, by analogy, to his sculptural practice: trying to grasp falling lead, scraping and gathering steel filings, or struggling, Houdini-like, to escape from constraints. Rainer’s *Hand Movie* (1966), an important influence on Serra, eschews recognisable gesture and brings the viewer’s attention to the hand as living matter. Rainer’s work also provided inspiration for Kate Davis’s “*You seem the same as always, –*” (2010), which shows the artist’s hand engaged in a series of enigmatic motions, and whose title offers a link to Eva Hesse. Davis’s hand is engaged in an effort to replicate the gestures of a ceramicist who interpreted a series of verbs associated with Hesse’s work, so that in the resulting film an emphasis on the physicality of materials and of the body, so central to much major work of the 1960s, goes hand-in-hand with the mediating effects of history, photography and language.

Such historical subtlety was at work also in what was possibly the crux of the exhibition, a group of prints by Hans-Peter Feldman showing the palms of iconic figures such as Marcel Duchamp and Alberto Giacometti. These works re-present an astonishing group of hand prints made by pioneering chirologist Charlotte Wolff which found their way into Feldman’s hands when they came up at auction. One reason these prints are exemplary in this exhibition is that they point to the transformations in artistic labour throughout the twentieth century, so that art need no longer be thought of primarily as a specialist form of manual work. Another is that Wolff’s project is deeply ambiguous: undertaken by a radical figure, an exile from Nazism, who nonetheless used typologies disturbingly redolent of fascist thought, as when in *The Human Hand* of 1942 she captions a print of the “hand of a male

idiot” with the comment that it “resembles that of the gorilla” and juxtaposes it with a print of a gorilla’s hand for good measure.¹ A huge amount, then, might be at stake in what we think the hand represents.

For Martin Heidegger—with whom Wolff had studied—the hand is not just a bodily organ, a tool for grasping things: “Apes, too, have organs that can grasp, but they do not have hands . . . Only a being who can speak, that is, think, can have hands and be handy in achieving works of handicraft.”² The artists in this show complicate the distinctions Heidegger makes to support his claims. In “*You seem the same as always, —*” we don’t encounter a celebration of the liability of hands to become entangled in language, formed into fists, employed as mere tools, to paw at or grasp material. Our hands only seem the same as always, these works seem to say, we only think we know we know them like the back of our hands.

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1. Charlotte Wolff, *The Human Hand*, Michigan, 1943 (reprint), p. xiii.

2. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* (trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray), New York, 1968, p. 37.



Title page
Douglas Gordon
Fragile hands collapse under pressure..., 2011
C-type prints

Bottom Left
Hans-Peter Feldmann
No title, 2010
10 unframed prints

Right
Yvonne Rainer
Hand Movie, 1968
8mm film transferred to DVD
Camerawork by William Davis

