

Ruth Buchanan

HOPKINSON CUNDY

In almost all of her recent work, Ruth Buchanan has examined the physical spaces of language: books and the buildings that house them. In her book *The weather, a building*, 2012, for example, she traced the movement of Berlin's Staatsbibliothek—from its original location on Unter den Linden; through wartime Germany, when its most valuable items were dispersed through the Reich; and to its final resting place on Potsdamer Straße in 1978. Buchanan used the library, and hence the book as such, as a cipher for the shunting of ideas and values through



View of "Ruth Buchanan," 2013. Left and right: *An Image of a Solid* (detail), 2012. Center: *No Solitary Beat* (detail), 2012.

a city scarred by its complex relationship with books and the competing ideologies they contain.

The interrelated works that made up her recent exhibition "On or within a scenario" represented a major shifting of her practice, away from language's concrete architectures to its sculptural—albeit unseen—mass: its capacity not only to fill volume, but to *be* it. In *An image of a solid* (all works 2012), three curtains—one raw burlap, one a bright yellow, and one pale pink, its fabric sheer and stained purple at its base—divided the gallery, acting as choreographic parameters for viewers' movements through the space. *The History of a Room* is a vitrine containing lumpy, kidney-shaped bowls, hand-cut pieces of card, and carpet remnants. *Whole Days Inside* and *Only a certain hesitation* are both framed photographic prints mounted on tall, steel displays that resemble directional signs in a library. Cumulatively, these works emulate the ways in which institutions orchestrate our bodily encounters with knowledge. However, the most crucial element of the exhibition was *No Solitary Beat*, in which Buchanan puts language in dialogue with her haptic and visual interventions. The artist's voice filled the gallery, reciting a script she wrote about watching footage from the 1980s of children at New Zealand's Dowse Art Museum being given the rare opportunity to explore the collection through touch. The narration is remarkable for its evocation of the absent children's bodies: "The sound of many tongues as they smack the bottom of the mouth, the sound of many hands as they glide over the uneven terrain of an object. A rhythm is formed through touch and by touching, a tongue a lung a hand a foot." Its syncopations and repetitions are also like semi-hypnotic slaps: "One beat yes, two beats no, three beats, relax." And later: "Beat one yes, beat two no, beat three relax, say less, say more."

Paradoxically, the children's tactile experiences, which Buchanan describes with such manifestly physical force, were totally denied to her viewers. The handmade bowls, so clearly produced by the pressing of fingers and thumbs, were off-limits, under Plexiglas. The curtains acted both as teasing provocations (the prospect of something hidden), and as obstructions that viewers tended to skirt around rather than pass

through. In the center of the room, two chairs were turned slightly away from each other. They were ostensibly provided so viewers could sit and listen to Buchanan's commentary, but they hardly seemed inviting; it was as if they belonged to an absent couple, aggrieved and unspoken. And one didn't hear Buchanan actually watching children; one heard her describing the act of watching footage of them. For every promise of encounter, there was an equal and opposing sense of remove. *Only a certain hesitation* perfectly encapsulated this distancing: The work consists of a photographic print, mounted on aluminum, of an image Buchanan found in a book, which in turn depicted an aluminum frame being made for a photograph, the maker's hands in contact with it. Its chain of reference sums up an inescapable divide, between our very real experience of the world—of objects, of spaces, of each other—and language's constant failure to capture its full, sensuous force.

—Anthony Byrt