

Ellie Ga

OAR OF WORDS, RUDDERS OF SPEECH

Ellie Ga is a writer and artist from New York currently living in Stockholm. Following a conversation with the artist, she writes about Julien Bismuth's project *intet er stort intet er litet* (Nothing is big nothing is small).

We speak our way through a city and often become the accidental audience for others who speak their way. We overhear snippets of conversation and people talking through headsets – like a dialogue with one side missing. On rarer occasions people turn and address us directly. Like Julien, I don't wear headphones when I move through a city. I like to catch fragments of sentences – balloons snipped from the string of private conversations.

Julien is writing a series of texts for performers to speak while walking through Oslo. Some of the performers will be in dialogue with one another. Others will walk alone. They will stop to speak their texts as if talking to an invisible audience – a theatrical aside – a break from the ongoing play of life. Other performers will turn to address the accidental audience surrounding them at any given moment. As the performers speak their way through Oslo, they end the performances where they started. A circumscribed path.

In her collection of essays *Sidewalks (Papeles falsos)*, the writer Valeria Luiselli paraphrases Wittgenstein in comparing language to a city, always under construction: with historic zones, modern areas, spaces in the process of renovation, bridges and silent streets. In Julien's performances, the city itself is a metaphor for spoken language, a summation of historical drift, ebbing and flowing in order to remain current, to remain spoken.

Julien's texts include riddles and fables, jokes and anecdotes and ekphrastic descriptions of images. He writes with a constellation of references in mind – Norse literature, current events in Oslo, travel writing about Norway – and he generates a community of ruminations. What are the equivalent of runic inscriptions today? How can we create a confluence between the enigmatic *Prose Edda* or the Rune Poems and the world of the Oslo-dweller, while we negotiate signals from street traffic, cell phones, and others who join in conversation?

In one text, a narrator describes the particles that cover a city and its dwellers – from sprinklings of sugar on a fresh pastry to sprinklings of snow on a newly arrived visitor. Another entry in the series describes the joy of not understanding the language we overhear on the street in a foreign city:

I like walking in cities where I don't understand the language. I like not being able to understand the conversations that surround me. I like the music of foreign speech. Not music as speech or speech as music but the music of speech: its tones, its notes, its rhythms. Its silences.

While writing the texts that will be spoken by actors as they walk through Oslo, Julien has drawn inspiration from the use of riddles in works such as the Norwegian Rune Poem. According to the scholar Thomas Birkett, there are several stanzas in the Rune Poem that allude directly to the shape of the rune on the page.

I wonder to myself: What does it mean to read something that refers to its own shape and sound?

As I read Julien's texts, I keep returning to this question, especially as I think of Julien's previous work. On the metal gate of a storefront in Los Angeles is a mural by Julien called *See Me Sea*. The mural reproduces a page from a used 1920s handwriting manual. Shaky 'genuine' handwriting, in blue, follows the smooth flowing lines of ideal handwriting, in black. The shaky handwriting is trying its best to follow along. But it deviates. The sentence being spelled out is 'See Me Sea'. The line of esses – repetitions of the cursive letter s – looks like a series of waves, or sails disconnected from their boats. The flowing handwriting below – with a billowing s and gliding lines – connects the letters so that they merge with the horizon.

The handwriting becomes a picture and the picture refers to what is being written: the act of seeing the sea. Up, down, up, down, the s-sails moving along the horizontal plane of the schoolbook. When I say the sentence out loud, 'see me sea', the shape of my tongue produces a sibilant hissing sound that looks like the handwriting on the metal gate.

Julien says that while reading the skaldic poems and the *Prose Edda*, with its riddles and disconcerting humor, he has become enamored with their formal constructions, in particular the 'kennings'. Kennings are embedded in Old Norse and Old English texts. A kenning is a type of a circumlocution, a spoken phrase that circles round an object, a name or an idea. Instead of naming a person, place or thing directly, the narrator speaks around it using other words.

'Oar of words'

...or...

'Rudders of speech'

...are kennings for 'the tongue'.

In addition to drawing inspiration from some of the earliest preserved forms of the English and Scandinavian languages, Julien's own perambulations in Oslo and his readings of Norwegian literature have helped him to generate a portal for the narrator to fall through in the performance texts. For example, one of Edvard Munch's written sketches is transformed into a runic script on the back of a traffic sign:

The inscription was written in black paint marker, like graffiti, on the back of a traffic sign indicating the presence of a town on the left. The letters looked like sticks. Broken sticks, clumsily rearranged. The phrase said:

"nothing is big nothing is small"

Or those were the words that came to mind when I looked at it. As if the scrawled signs had spoken.

In *Sidewalks*, Luiselli writes that a city has its holes. Sometimes we literally fall into holes in the pavement. Other times we use our imagination to fill in the holes—the gaps between buildings, between translations, as we think in one language while surrounded by another. Often the narrators in Julien's texts fall into word-portals that no one else appears to understand. Take, for example, an excerpt of a text that Julien pasted on building facades throughout the Ecuadorian city of Cuenca.

Imagine that you are the only person who can read this text, the only person it speaks to and who speaks for it...you just happened upon it and happened to be able to read it.

Is this like peering into the mind of Oluf Opsjon, the Norwegian immigrant who tried to convince the world that he had discovered runic writing in Washington State in the 1920s? Julien sent me a newspaper clipping from the Brooklyn Eagle, dated 11th July 1926. The clipping includes a photo of Opsjon sitting on what looks like a forest floor, holding a slab of stone for the camera.

It's an image of a felled tree, "a tree felled by lightning on the ancestral farm" is the caption under the image [...] At the base of the tree, embedded within its roots, is a large stone slab [...] The slab is covered with inscriptions, but the inscriptions are illegible.

This text is part of a series where Julien uses random images and text messages received by phone for a series of ekphrastic writings. Ekphrasis is the detailed description of a scene, more specifically a work of art, but in contrast to the classical Greek urns and easel paintings that are often the subject of ekphrastic poetry, Julien applies this form to the quotidian experience of scrolling through a smartphone. As a performer walks through Oslo, inspired by low-resolution photo attachments, ekphrasis is broken down to its original word blocks: ek + phrasis = out + speak.

Julien – I say – have you ever read the poem *Musee des Beaux Arts* by WH Auden? I remember reading the poem in high school literature class as an example of ekphrastic writing par excellence. Auden's poem describes a painting by Breughel called *The Fall of Icarus*. A farmer and a shepherd walk down a road, and the sea dominates the right-hand side of the painting, but in the lower section of the sea, human legs are sticking up from the water. It's Icarus – having flown too close to the sun. In the poem, Auden writes that Icarus' failure isn't important enough for anyone in the painting to notice. Like the farmer and shepherd, with their backs to the sea, one of the actors in Julien's performance will speak the following words while walking down a street in Oslo.

Many are the day's eyes. I am turning to face you but your eyes and your ears are turned elsewhere. Many are the day's voices. My ears were once large enough to sleep in, but my eyes have always been this small, this focused on this or that thing. Many are the days, and fewer are the nights. Fewer and shorter.

I say to Julien that I worry. When the performers recite their texts, or when they turn to address a passer-by, will the ears of the audience be elsewhere? You know – I say to Julien – everyone is walking around with those funny white sticks coming out of their ears. Talk about broken sticks clumsily arranged. Your texts about fables and runes and kennings and myths and dust and snow – spoken by performers while walking through the city of Oslo – are like wings in the corner of a painting.

But then again – I say to myself – is the success of public art measured by its noticeability as literature, performance or intervention?

Julien's performers will be walking in Oslo over the next five years, talking in fables, riddles, jokes and ekphrastic descriptions that you – the accidental audience – might just overhear. The actors will join a flow of speech in the comings and goings, ebbs and flows, of words that are launched across the city. Julien's texts will slipstream into a delta of speech. Words, phrases, snippets released. Language in a city, like a city unto itself, with its dead-end streets, historical developments, gentrification and segregation, resistant to containers and navigated by resonance, all with the sibilance of a speech rudder.

