

# Artists Space

COMMITTEE FOR THE VISUAL ARTS, INC.  
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## Cross-Collaborations



Kelly's *Tongue of Tongues*

### Ann-Sargent Wooster

#### Madeleine Burnside Artists Space

Madeleine Burnside: Seated in a row, three readers (Susan Barbash, Scott Bowron, Leanne Mella) each with a separate text — a modern day Greek chorus — are balanced against two standing figures (Madeleine Burnside, Andrew Kelly) producing humming and rattling sounds which serve to ritualize the performance. In *Glyphs* Burnside interlaces three discrete stories or tracks rendering them at once independent and interdependent. In one, a *Magister Ludic* type tale, set in the historic past but so strongly told that it seems like it is happening now, a young girl relates her coming of age, her first menstrual period, and training in an order which requires the human sacrifice of virgins. Her description of her life is filled with the blood and violence which characterized Pre-Columbian religious ceremonies (from which the material in part derives.)

Using a different type of narrative, the second text sensuously describes what seems to be the ending of a love affair in the kind of language or sound-track one wishes real life offered but which it never does: *"the hand loves arcs that echo the palm, a smooth glazed surface, a rock, her knee, her breast — all cool and dry, but with little areas of difference abrasive to any sensitivity. There are areas cruel to the touch, almost genuinely sadistic, but teasing because the intellect can form the hand to injure the surfaces it desires."*

The final track is the most abstract and theoretical. It posits a method of analyzing language and experience, all the while casting doubt on the existence of any ultimate truth. It is also, in part, a refutation of specific aspects of the current vogue for structuralist criticism — for example Jacques Derrida's statement that alphabetic writing should not be because it can not be encoded with spirituality, lyricism, ambiguity. All of Burnside's writing is an affirmation of these elements. She says at the end of the third track: *"The procedure of glyphs is to dominate language by recording ideas through the juxtaposition of other ideas. To ignore this essential element of writing is to mistake its purpose — writing records that which is expected to*

*be forgotten, or writing struggles to dominate the circumstance of forgetting but has only words to use."*

#### Andrew Kelly Artists Space

Andrew Kelly is one of a generation of emerging writers/performance artists who use language in a new way. In *Tongue of Tongues*, he criticizes the dense, obtuse language of structuralist criticism by a presentation of it not as the definitive explanation of an obscure text (exegesis) but as nonsense speech. It teases us into thinking we can hear something, like the use of writing in the *trompe l'oeil* still lifes of Peto and Harnett, where you think you are privy to the secrets of the persons of whom the letterboards are symbolic portraits by being able to read a letter tucked into their ribbons, but which is, upon closer examination, unreadable. The tension and trickery implied in Kelly's matter of fact monologues are essential to his sense of the structure of language. At their purest, they become sounds bouncing off each other, which has its own pleasure.

One of Kelly's greatest gifts is humor, and it is with humor he directly reaches the audience. Doing for punctuation what Edwin A. Abbott in *Flatland* did for geometry, Kelly takes black marks on a page and animates them, giving them a worldly mass similar to the way Abbott postulated a world populated with triangles and squares, etc.: *"There, he resumed his recitation, all the while the high pitched buzzing noises of the semi-colons fluttering against the screens around us filling our ears with a delightful music . . . and although the entire event increased the dimensionality of M's poetry, I was forced to ask the punctuations to leave before dinner as I had not a single period in the refrigerator."*

For what, in essence was a reading for three voices, Kelly's staging was extremely effective. Two figures (Leanne Mella, Andrew Kelly) sat under a lawn-size white net of the kind used to protect seedlings from birds. In a set of stations similar to a chess diagram, a dark clad figure (Madeleine Burnside) moved at regular intervals. Her harsh whisper and dark mass balanced the stationary voices; her movement caused the space to constantly change.