

ANNA BARHAM

Production still from  
*Liquid Consonant*, 2012

Arcade  
Frame - R2  
Frieze London 2012

Language is an inexhaustible subject and material resource in Anna Barham's process of making. Her fascination with the combinatory possibilities that systems of signs, such as alphabets, offer to produce language, have found in Plato's *Cratylus* a ground for further investigation and, in turn, new artistic production. In *Cratylus*, Plato sets up a fictional dialogue that investigates the 'correctness of names', wondering how a particular combination of letters came to be chosen to represent a given object. In a climactic passage of one of the text's central arguments, Socrates and Hermogenes, while acknowledging the vastness of the task, perform a methodological exercise allowing them to divide a series of words into letters whose pronunciations appear to somehow describe, through sound, the very object that the words stand for. And words suddenly appear to them as encoded descriptions of objects. Socrates thus compares the construction of language to painting, suggesting that "*it's just the same as it is with painters. When they want to produce a resemblance, they sometimes use only purple, sometimes another colour, and sometimes – for example, when they want to paint human flesh or something of that sort – they mix many colours, employing the particular colour, I suppose, that their particular subject demands*"<sup>1</sup>.

It is the discussion of the letter *rho* (P,ρ), which specifically motivated Barham in this new body of work. According to Socrates, *rho* imitates motion because "the tongue [is] most agitated and least at rest in pronouncing this letter"<sup>2</sup> and can thus be found in Greek words in which movement has an essential role (flowing, flow, trembling, whirling etc). In her own language Barham traced the presence of *rho* in the phonetic notion of a "rhotic consonant"<sup>3</sup>. In the artist's mind, "rhotic" subtly slipped into "erotic", leading her to appropriate the Greek words cited by Socrates in order to act out their pronunciation and hear their sounds through the sensual lips of a digitally animated mouth.

While *rho* shifts between words in Socrates' argument, lines made of combinations of words rhythmically germinate, letters playfully changing places, to reveal endless series of anagrams in Barham's texts, which she presents in the various forms of drawings, video animations, publications, performances and sound pieces. To elucidate his argument, Socrates manipulates a series of words and takes the reader

on a journey through which he demonstrates how letters are transformed by the mouth of the speaker into sounds that travel between different nouns, verbs and adjectives. The aural and gestural quality of words as they emerge in *Cratylus* undoubtedly resonates with Barham's labyrinthine journeys through anagrams that she has travelled numerous times, never able to exhaust the possibilities of creating new shapes, sounds and, in turn, meaning, out of a single sentence.

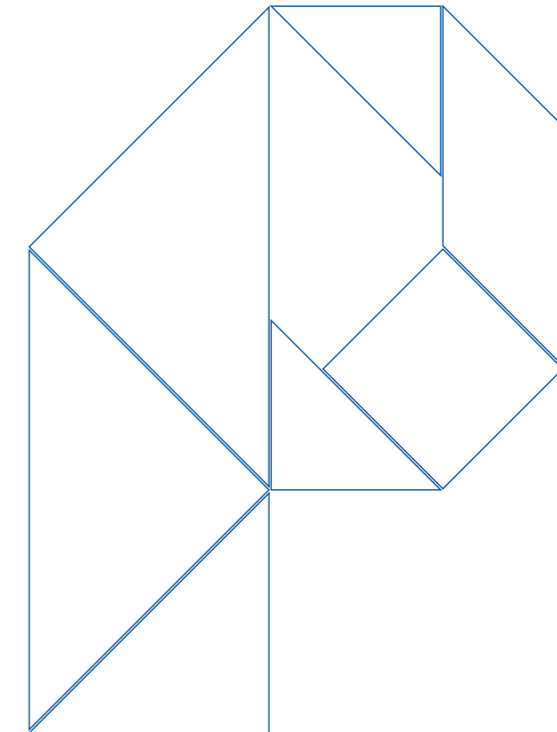
Socrates' search for the etymological origins of words appears as an endeavour driven simultaneously by the rigour of science and the creativity of poetics. Thought through the lens of Barham's practice, his attempt to "apply each letter to what it resembles"<sup>4</sup> evokes a performative act. Through his dialogue with Hermogenes and *Cratylus*, Socrates unfolds his argument as a trail of thought, questioning the possibility for his speech to make sense. He envisages the possibility that his ideas might be considered absurd. In this context, his rhetorical construction deploys itself on the edge between sense and non-sense. It might be this very possibility of lacking sense, of falling into the realm of fiction, which, from a contemporary perspective, positions his speech at the undecided limit between art and philosophy.

Vanessa Desclaux, 2012

- 1 . Plato, *Cratylus*, 424d
- 2 . *Cratylus*, 426e
- 3 . In phonetics, rhotic consonants, also called tremulants or "R-like" sounds, are liquid consonants that are traditionally represented orthographically by symbols derived from the Greek letter rho.
- 4 . *Cratylus* 424d

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