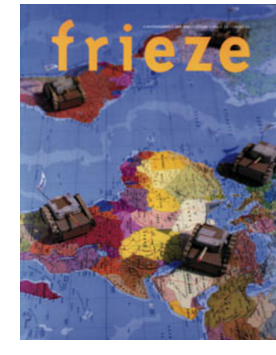


Lucy Gunning



J BY JENNIFER HIGGIE IN REVIEWS | 06 MAY 97

Featured in Issue 34

Fusing a bland Post-minimal aesthetic with the awkward poetics of ruptured dialogues, Lucy Gunning's latest installation of five videos showed five people with a common disability attempting to talk about disparate subjects. The gallery echoed with staccato soundbites as dislocated stuttering bounced from wall to wall. Three of the dusty, old-fashioned monitors were in the side gallery, on two wooden tables. Another was on the floor of the passageway, whilst the fifth was perched on top of a curved wooden staircase in the main gallery. When they were silent they looked like nothing more than small, slightly forlorn archaic televisions in a large gallery. When they flared into action, however, they revealed how paradoxically the stuttering activated the silence and emphasised what was frustrated in the process of its articulation.

Speech to the stutterer is the struggle to be articulate in a culture gorged on words. A symptom of the paralysis caused by the contradictory co-existence of an impulse both to speak and be silent, stuttering leaves behind it a trail of damaged sentences and a gulf of non-speech. Used metaphorically, however, the stutter can transcend the limits of its dysfunction to allude to the convoluted polemic that constitutes individual experience.

In Gunning's installation three men and two women 'inhabited' the monitors. For two of them speech was an agonising, constipated activity, whilst the others approached their self-expression with the apprehension of the only mildly affected. Their stuttering created aphorisms out of their broken narratives, for example 'I will do anything to keep quiet' or 'fluidity is an abstract concept' or 'you might have an audience but you're not emotionally involved with them'. Subjects as disparate as the army, poetry, singing and films were alluded to by four of the people, whilst the woman in the main gallery attempted, with much difficulty, to read out the addresses of various Universities. Speaking from a video monitor perched on the laboured metaphor of a displaced stairway, the formulaic quality of her monologue sounded and looked both more absurd and more coherent than the others.

The exhibition was designed to distort listening and to choreograph viewing as one monitor abruptly stopped mid-sentence another, after a few seconds, would start up, pulling the viewer around the rooms in an attempt to clarify what was being stated. It was as if the videos themselves were stuttering. The volume was pitched at different levels unless you bent down very close to some of the speakers it was difficult to hear what was being said. There were moments when all five monitors were silent.



Implying a desire to start again and empowering what is left unstated, nominal silence is the first base in any deconstruction of language. Framing dysfunction with absence and repetition, Gunning effectively undermined any criticism that she might be simply aestheticising someone else's pain. Like the atmosphere in a play by Beckett, the air was fraught with the impotence and anticipation of perpetual deferral. Speech was used to signify generalised thwarted expression, not the details of narratives or revelations. Her seemingly simple, understated approach, with its raw lighting, cheap domestic video monitors and furniture, gradually revealed a complex acoustics of frustration, an intimate aesthetics of silence. The paradox of restraint is that, used effectively, it can give ideas room to breathe and develop. The difficult, meditative quality of this presentation attempted, with as few means as possible, to reconcile and dignify the difference, hesitation and defeat implicit in self-expression.



JENNIFER HIGGIE

Jennifer Higgle is a writer who lives in London. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette – Rebellion, Revolution and Resilience: 500 Years of Women's Self-Portraits* is published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson, and she is currently working on another – about women, art and the spirit world.

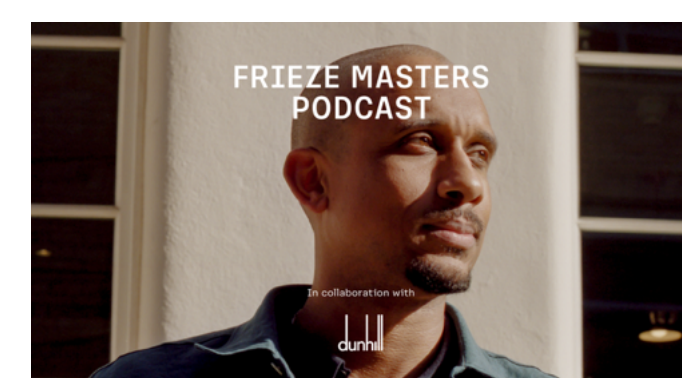
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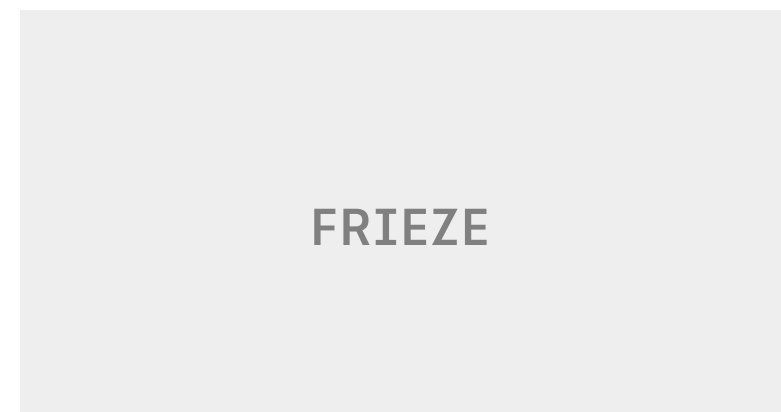


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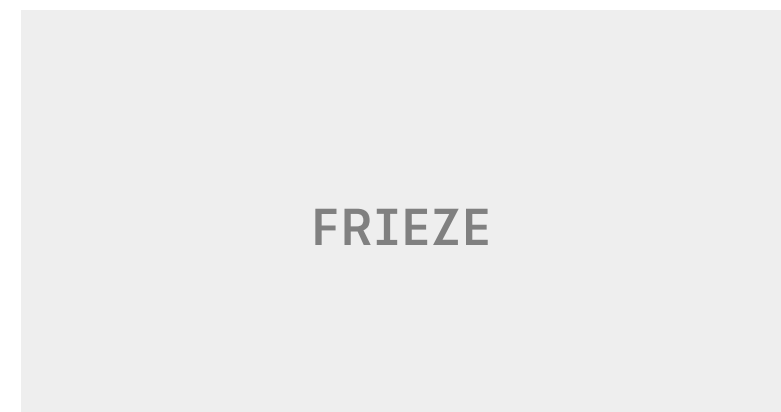


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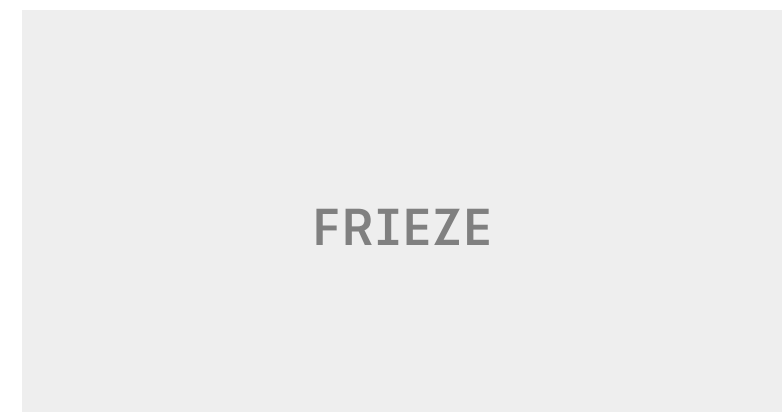
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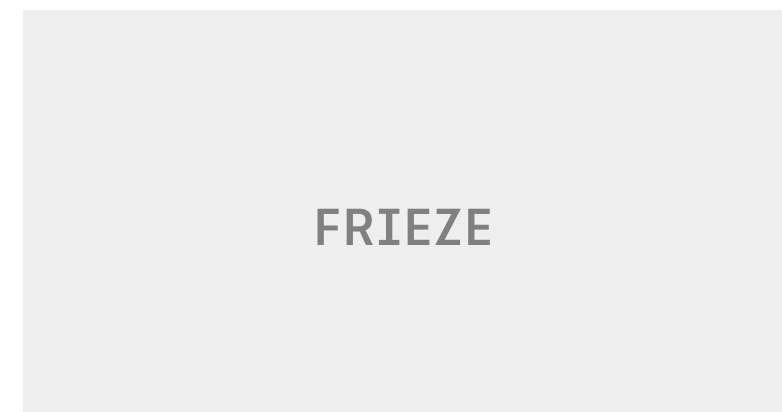
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