

Susan Steudel, *New Theatre*, Coach House Books, 2012

Helen Guri, *Match*, Coach House Books, 2011

Stuart Ross, *You Exist. Details Follow.*, Anvil Press, 2012

Susan Steudel's title, *New Theatre*, and the structuring trope of the whole book come from Nikolai Punin, a museum curator, who saved art collections from destruction under Lenin and Stalin. He states in Steudel's epigraph, '*New theatre can exist; judging by many signs, it is near. It is symptomatic that, instead of directors' theories, plays appear; instead of productions we get dramatic works which dictate how they are to be produced.*' With her second epigraph from Lisa Robertson—'*There were so many things that didn't exist*'—Steudel's focus emerges: How do the theatres of speech (the things assumed before sound comes to our lips) permit or erase perception? How can we make theatres that do not act like repressive political regimes? Thus Steudel continues the work of Erin Moure's *Little Theatres*, which comments, 'The protagonist in little theatres is most often language itself,' and argues that reading means seeing the theatres or framing contexts that shed light on some things while making others disappear. Steudel's investigation of Lenin invokes the violence and destructiveness of our frames of meaning, which we play out largely unconsciously every day.

The book consists of four sequences: 'New Theatre' (a marvelously intricate exploration of stagings for utterance), 'Birch' (a meditation on Lenin inflected by poetic forms uncovered in 'New Theatre'), 'Scenes' (an autobiographical series investigating theatres for everyday life, 'me,' 'you,' 'father,' 'mother') and 'Notes Forward' (beginning with formal homage to Moure's play with book structure). But before we get to the first sequence we encounter the dramatis personae: the actors in this new theatre are lists of words for various sounds, given in the Cyrillic alphabet and anglicized Russian. The arbitrariness of these stand-ins for meaning is thus made visible. Steudel deploys her words like the actresses and actors in Moure's little theatres, where 'The actor or actress is, in a sense, a costume,' which must be abandoned as soon as it is taken up. In a similar vein Steudel writes in 'Manifesto,' 'Maybe I am imagining a different country/or non-action.' Then she immediately follows this by remarking, 'A lie pulls a scarf from my mouth./It has never been proven that such a world exists,' suggesting that words themselves and our habits of using them create falsehoods which we must abandon.

The signature 'New Theatre' series is exhilarating to read as we watch how each page not only explores different ways in which words make theatres of light and darkness for other words and ideas, but also creates a theatre for the next pages in the series. Rather than

a collection of occasional poems, the book unfolds a developing arc of research as compelling as a good novel. Steudel explores times of day (Night, Morning, Noon, etc.) as stage-sets for various phrases. Then she explores the materiality of writing as a setting, how paper may be a ‘break in cloud’—how the fire of desire must be translated through caked ink and quill, likening the process to listening hard for someone pressing a cup to a wall, that is, listening to listening. ‘City’ suggests (foreshadowing Lenin) that ‘revolutionary poems’ are akin to ‘old venue[s]’ that ‘creak under our feet,’ and reality is ‘a roofless house.’ Treating this as stage set, Steudel writes,

A small dog wanders into the poem,
slinks out.

Some dogma makes out with itself.

In ‘A Modern Painting,’ she considers a painted scene depicting theatres. On the facing page she paints a scene by pasting on cut-out words, leaving us to see that a lot is invisible in the white spaces between, but also showing us the pasted-on relationship of words to all that is possible. These poems teach the reader to focus on the staging of words, the regimes of sense-making operating them, not to look through words as though they were transparent windows. Steudel’s investigation of Lenin and his painful legacy continues and deepens this focus, continually asking, how could I make sense of Lenin, and of Lenin making sense to himself, and what, indeed, is the making of sense, given cultural dictatorships?

One such cultural dictatorship is the focus of *Match*, Helen Guri’s debut collection, which looks at courtship and marriage as dehumanizing institutions. Alive with fresh language and provocative metaphors, the book unfolds the three-part, poetic novella of Robert Brand, narrating his failed marriage and subsequent purchase of a 110-pound sex doll: ‘One: In which I am largely unrequited’; ‘Two: In which I find my match, light it’; and ‘Three: In which I burn at both ends of the afterlife.’

He likens his early marriage to Frankenstein’s notion that ‘we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another.’ The sex doll becomes a trope for human technologies that escape our control and enclose us in their mechanical grip: the hive of the workplace, for instance, where in ‘Cubicle Land,’ ‘people went to work as afterthoughts,/the individual consciences of molars.’ Interactions with Brand’s co-workers and their comments on sex dolls make a sardonic but disturbing

backdrop to Guri's investigation of the complex way in which male desire projects a 'girl machine' that then separates Brand from his own pulse so that when he looks in the mirror he sees something,

Not human after all, my mug
more like a volleyball, more like a waning,
swamp tuber dug from peat, scrubbed
and peeled....

Quoting Louise Glück—*'The beloved/lives in the head'*—Guri's Brand imagines objects coming alive, confuses his ex-wife with a table lamp, and imagines the doll's impressions of him. Thus male desire creates an inert object to hold against a male body, a 'Girl Machine with whirling gears of crinoline' displayed in a theatre, 'Where an audience waits, swollen as an artifact, /to be released from its ice age of watching.'

In a mad search for something warm and breathing in his techno-industrialized world—the 'thought factories in the sky'—Brand writes letters to the doll-factory's Angela,

...an angel
making copies of herself
on a conveyor belt,
a kind of statistical paradise.

Guri's text fascinates with its tour of the cyborg, the *Blade Runner* automaton, and the horror of human artifice.

Stuart Ross's *You Exist. Details Follow.* also addresses this horror as it canvasses a world where one's self is lost or submerged in cartoon characters offered by social institutions (school, nuclear family) and commodity consumerism, a world where we have festivals for things as meaningless as pulled pork and where Warner Bros. and TV commercials show us how to be. We are haunted, Ross's epigraph suggests, by some inaccessible memory of ourselves beyond the cartoons, and we thrash about searching for it in the limited menu options available. Failing in our efforts, we trace it only in the thrashing itself, such as we find in Ross's poems.

The source of Ross's well-known surrealism is a profound concern with the disconnections felt by the pasted-together self, and his poems often investigate self as a medley of human artifacts:

Henry emerged from the basement,
cradling something in his arms.
His face was painted
onto the oval of his wooden head
by the guy who drew those bubble-gum comics.

Another poem, 'The Topic,' asks, 'What is telling me something/from inside a badly sewn dog suit?'

The form of his poems echoes this concern with patchwork selves, in for instance his use of the cento, a literary work made of lines written by other authors. His tightly structured pieces often use two or three key nouns interchangeably or as random substitutes, highlighting the limited and repetitious nature of human knowledge or communication. 'Please write/a thesis about my behaviour—/I mean my grandmother,' he writes in the title sequence; later, he notes,

Once I was a sofa, lost
in the wind.

Now I am a horse,
I mean a house, swimming
through the waves of a useless sky.

The words 'furniture' and 'ground' pop up throughout to great effect in semantically odd contexts as the poem investigates how his attempt to write is already written by many other forces which are the furniture and ground of our being. Ross captures well the violence, uncertainty and angst of childhood and the instability of life in our systemized world.

— *Meredith Quartermain*