

REVIEWS

was difficult. As the artist said in a recent interview with *Artforum*, the piece is “meant to make your listening feel unfamiliar and like you’re learning a skill.” Walk too slowly and you only hear sporadic words—too fast, and you miss the Velcro. The third time around, I managed to moderate my speed-touch coordination so as to hear more text—“In my head it’s the artists’ voice . . . but in the same place . . . it’s like a game . . . relationships with another person . . . As an artist I always feel I am possessed to . . .”—presumably representing Kim’s thoughts on her role as an artist. The action of walking to operate the device emphasizes the fact that in deaf culture, movement is equivalent to sound.

Close Readings is a four-channel video work displayed on small flat-screens. Each contains a series of partially blurred excerpts—from



View of “Christine Sun Kim,” 2015–16. Foreground: Viewers interacting with *Game of Skill 1.0*, 2015. Photo: Robin Reeve.

films such as *Ghost*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Addams Family*, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, and *Dogtooth*—that relate to a moment in which a voice or sound plays a leading role in the narrative. Kim invited four deaf friends to add further on-screen subtitles that run above the existing subtitles. In *The Little Mermaid*, for instance, as the main character Ariel sings to her human prince in order to bring him back to life, Kim’s friend adds: “The sound of something beautiful coming out of the beautiful woman’s mouth.” The indeterminacy of translation is something Kim has emphasized in relation to working with ASL interpreters; the nuances of expression and language become theirs, she believes, rather than hers. Perhaps the artist’s use, in her TED Talk, of self-help clichés such as “empowerment” and “ownership” reflects her sense of that particular audience. Kim emphasizes that communication is more than just words or sounds; it is embodied in all our actions and relations.

—Kathy Noble

GATESHEAD, UK

B. Wurtz

BALTIC CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

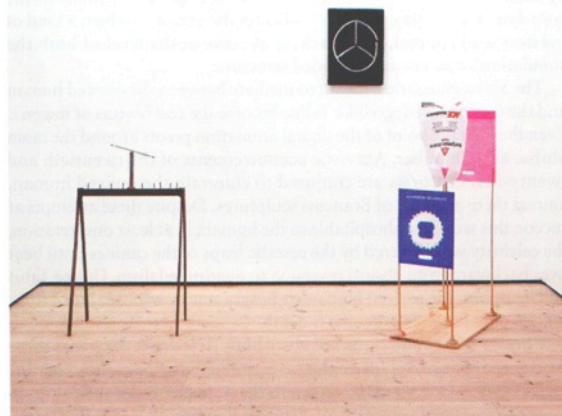
KNOW THYSELF, reads a 1992 B. Wurtz assemblage, *Untitled (sock piece #7)*. The Delphic maxim is scrawled on a piece of canvas flanked by a pair of mauve tube socks. Is the artist talking to us? Or to the artwork itself? It might well be a question of the work’s own self-examination, for this quality is evident throughout the more than three hundred pieces—eighty-two objects, eight early videos, and 216 paintings on the bottoms of aluminum pans—on view in this first B. Wurtz retro-

spective, “Selected Works: 1970–2015,” curated by BALTIC chief curator Laurence Sillars.

Wurtz says that he chooses materials based on three things: sleeping, eating, and keeping warm. That is, the bare necessities. Or as the New York-based artist put it to me: “What else do you need to be happy?” Yet, ironically, day-to-day survival provides the platform for Wurtz’s real interest: celebrating the quotidian through the structure of sculpture. His earliest pieces are to some extent documentary in form, for instance *Untitled (today I cut my hair)*, 1973—the artist’s shorn locks collected in a bottle—or the video *Paintings*, 1980, in which the artist chooses “the best” of two flat, colorful objects that resemble paintings. The work is kind of like *Sesame Street* for art lovers. Next to the monitor on which we see the video hangs a plastic checkered object with holes. Perhaps it’s the base of a board game? This piece highlights the fact that Wurtz always foregrounds qualities already inherent in the elements he chooses for display. However, the earlier works are often endowed with a trace of his own autobiography. For example, *Relics*, 1974, consists of a group of simple wooden blocks—his childhood building blocks, each stamped RELIC—glued together in architectural configuration, while *Untitled (Autobiographical Sculpture)*, 1972, looks like a four-legged trestle with a symmetrical T-shape structure and matchstick-like protuberances. The anthropomorphic structure is both formal and funny, suggesting at once an AT-AT walker from *Star Wars* and a four-legged plinth with a grouping of mini-monuments poised on top of it. In fact, Wurtz says, “It represents my age at its making (twenty-four).”

Wurtz’s instinct for miniaturization, wit, and whimsy has blossomed as his work has evolved. The more recent *Untitled*, 2012, consists of three plastic bags, two of them held up by wooden sticks in the middle that allow the plastic to crumple a bit. With the blue, white, and pink sacks at varying heights, the piece suggests celebratory flags, banners, and pennants, and plays with hierarchies of height and scale, as quite a number of the pieces here do. Such works feel like large monuments shrunk to room or table size. Ultimately, Wurtz advocates a domestic-scale art and the use of bricolage to make something out of not very much. Rather than referring to their former functions, Wurtz’s chosen objects are used as neutral materials—it’s the way they add up together, rather than what they are in themselves, that makes them. His is a kind of small-scale revolution: humble, whimsical at times, but always meaningful.

—Sherman Sam



View of “B. Wurtz,” 2015–16. From left: *Untitled (Autobiographical Sculpture)*, 1972; *Untitled (Lampshade)*, 1986; *Untitled*, 2012. Photo: John McKenzie.