



Elisabeth McAlpine, 'Words & Music (Headlines)', 2010, performance / installation views

ELIZABETH
MCALPINE

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Laura Bartlett Gallery,
London

A group of five figures clad in black are huddled around an upright piano, their hands poised above its keys until, simultaneously, they play a short chord. The performers then scurry to assume new positions. Some stretch across each other, while another mounts the piano. Within a few seconds they have found their notes and are ready to sound the next chord. This procedure is repeated several times, with a mixture of consonant and dissonant chords, occasionally punctuated by individual notes, that ring out across the gallery. For those familiar with Elisabeth McAlpine's film works, this short performance, 'Words & Music (Headlines)', 2010, may come as something of a surprise, even more so

considering it is the central work in a show entitled *Works on Paper*, where the 'paper' here refers to the British media. It is the headlines of national daily newspapers that inform her musical scores, which in turn serve as experiments in aural representation of the present time.

McAlpine arrives at a score via an involved process. Having assigned each letter of the alphabet (including upper and lower cases as well as punctuation marks) to keys on the piano, she then collects major newspapers published on the day of the performance, translating frontpage headlines into a succession of musical chords. The number of letters contained in each word dictates both the number of notes and the length of these chords. For instance, when played on the piano, the word 'the' consists of three notes held for three beats. The length of the scores, derive from the length of the original headline, each one being annotated with various instructions to the performers. Comments such as 'majestic', or 'steady mechanical average', aid the interpretation of the music's mood and dynamics. Neither performers nor audience know what the original headlines were, nor from which newspapers they were culled. For the

viewer, however, there is a tacit understanding of the news of the day, whether ascertained from reading an actual newspaper or simply from seeing headlines around the city. So, as the performance progresses, patterns emerge, reflecting the pace and tone of the news of the day.

However, despite the fact that 'Words and Music (Headlines)' forms the major component of McAlpine's exhibition, the piece is performed on just three evenings. At all other times visitors to the gallery are confronted with a silent, static installation comprising an ebony upright piano and a pile of scores. There is no video or audio documentation. Punctuating the exhibition with a few select performances, the artist places emphasis on their temporality, a central motif of her practice. This concern is evident in works like 'Square Describing a Circle (10th May)', 2010, in which she attempts to capture a fleeting moment by filming a beam of sunlight as it passes through a square stencil over the course of a day, and also in 'Light Reading', 2005, where she compiles 1,500 frames of pure light taken from explosions in mainstream narrative films, into one minute. Newspapers, of course, are often considered an epitome of temporality. Over the course of this exhibition, McAlpine's headline scores accumulate in the gallery, not only serving to highlight the transience of daily news stories and events but also according permanency to that which is often forgotten and discarded.

The gallery basement also houses a number of works on paper. 'News Lines', 2010, is a series of delicate, schematic line drawings on newsprint that appear like architectural plans. In each drawing, squares and rectangles are drawn with different coloured pencils. They overlap and intersect each other. As with the scores upstairs, each drawing represents a single day's headlines, but instead of focusing on the newspapers' texts, McAlpine turns her attention towards the accompanying images, tracing the shape of each one and assigning it a colour depending on its dominant hue. One work depicts an abundance of red rectangles, and was made on the day when Ed Miliband was elected leader of the Labour Party. These drawings are an intriguing coda to this sparse yet captivating exhibition and a stark reminder of how rapidly yesterday's news becomes an evanescent memory.

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Courtesy Laura Bartlett London