



## LIBERATING LANGUAGE

by Mary Paterson

You are invited to stand at a lectern in a white walled gallery space, to take up a pen, and to write. Your handwriting curves from your fingers into the pages of a ledger: your rounded a's, your yawning y's. Do you admire your handwriting? Does it reflect well on your education, your class, your literacy - this passage of shapes that flows from your body? Does it represent you? Or are you embarrassed by your childish scrawl?

Imagine I told you that you're here to write down swear words: one profane and one, more polite, alternative. Does this change the way you feel about putting things here, on the record? Does your writing still look authoritative to you? Or does this whole setup transport you back to school: scratching forbidden words into hidden places, writing secrets into the margins of where you belong?

This ledger and this lectern are both part of *Liberating Language* (2019), an installation by Caroline Wilkins that also comprises a handmade book, a series of figurative prints, and a heap of badges. While the ledger invites audience members to write down swear words – things you're not meant to say – into its blank pages, the book is filled with the consequences of this kind of behaviour: or more specifically, the consequences that some people face.



Liberating Language Installation with The Excluded Alphabet book |Caroline Wilkins|

The book is called Excluded Alphabet, and its pages write out the alphabet in a unique font, derived by the artist from the handwriting of children who have been excluded from mainstream schools. Alongside each letter is a short exemplar of how the letter can be used, as in all children's alphabets. But instead of innocuous descriptors like 'I is for Igloo' or 'J is for Jump', these letters are used to spell out the steps of a child's exclusion, and its effects. Here, J stands for Jail, and the fact that over 50% of the people incarcerated in this country were excluded as children.

Liberating Language was first shown in 2019 as part of Wilkins' MA in Printmaking at Plymouth College of Art, but its origins stretch much further back in the artist's imagination. After training in photography at the Polytechnic of Central London (PCL) during the 1980s, Wilkins developed a career as a teacher, first in secondary schools, and then in units for children who have been excluded from the mainstream. She spent 16 years teaching excluded children Art and PSHE (personal, social, health and economic skills), before returning full-time to her artistic practice. "It's the same bit of politics," she says, of her work as a teacher and as an artist. "And that bit of politics is to say: every one of us is accountable for society."

Before she left her teaching post, Wilkins asked each of her pupils to write down their ABCs. At the time, she didn't know why – she often works like that, collecting parts of life, waiting for the moment when different ideas will speak to each other. Entwined together, these handwriting samples became the font for Excluded Alphabet, just as the story of their writers' exclusion became its conceptual frame. And while the book spells out the means by which a child is forced out of the mainstream system, it also enacts the way this movement makes the child disappear. The sanctions a child will face are laid out here, page after page: a telling off, a letter home, removal from a class or group ... As the sanctions grow more serious they increasingly fade from view. By the time the final sanction is reached, the words are so faded they are impossible to read.

In this way, Excluded Alphabet demonstrates the fundamental importance of language as part of our social system. Language is not just a form of communication, but also the manifestation of the power t

communicated through it. For many of the children Wilkins taught, handwriting was a source of anxiety and stress and this, she says, is connected to social pressures of standardisation. As our lives become increasingly digital, our tolerance for the non-mechanised, the personal, the misshapen or the badly formed, fades like the pages of a disappearing book. And this, warns the Excluded Alphabet, applies to people as much as to handwriting.

But Liberating Language is not about children who are excluded. Indeed, as Meg Ravenhill writes in the context of homelessness, the ways in which a society forces people out reveal more about the people who are still allowed in, than it does about those who are ejected. And this is where we – the viewers – come in: standing in a calm white space, handcrafting swear words into a ledger, pulling our backs straight to meet the demands of the lectern.

“I wanted to bring swearing into the gallery,” says Wilkins, by which she means not just the crisp white walls of Plymouth College of Art, but also the psycho-social space of art as a framing concept: art as contemplation, art as ideas, art as a form of cultural capital. Swearing is a controlled activity, and the power of swear words is derived from the ways in which they demonstrate or subvert this control. If someone in a subservient position (for example, a child) swears at someone in a dominant position (for example, a teacher) they will be punished (sanctioned). But the opposite is not true – the child cannot punish the teacher for swearing. Some people are free to swear, and others are not.

When art audiences swear inside the gallery, we are making use of art as a space to try things out, and we are demonstrating our freedoms to do it. The pleasure and thrill of this small act of rebellion is derived from the fact that for us, in this space, swearing is a type of play. And we manifest ourselves – we appear – as audience members, as adults, as independent people, because we play along. This manifestation is, of course, in stark contrast to what happens to those who are less free: children, for example, and particularly children already considered disobedient or out of control. For them, swearing is one of the reasons they may disappear from (our) view.

In this way, Wilkins uses swearing as a central metaphor that also points to the wider politics of language and freedom. She recalls childhood holidays visiting her mother's family in Holland. There, they all spoke "farmer's Dutch" – a local, working class dialect – that Wilkins' cousins were reprimanded for speaking at school. This, of course, is a form of control widely used to curtail working class expression, but it also polishes the potency of un-authorised speech. We all internalise a form of this double-talk: the informal language we speak with our close family and childhood friends; and the more clinical language we speak in public, cleaned with compromises and shaped by the social roles we play.

In *Liberating Language*, Wilkins brings a playful awareness of the public and private relationships we all have with language into the very material of the installation. The lectern that makes you stand up straight, that imbues your posture with power and makes you feel important for a moment, is in fact "made out of three things from B&Q": an umbrella base, a broom handle and a plant carrier. Wilkins describes this as "a working man's lectern" which is true in two senses: it is both the kind of thing her dad might have cobbled together from spare parts in his garage, and a sculpture that lays bare the spoils of cheap, distant labour.





Language in the form of a scattering of screen prints, dressed in workmanlike dungarees, producing badges that read 'I swear.' For Wilkins, the Russian-constructivist style of these prints recalls the political movements of the 1980s, when she first started photographing marches and picket lines. Then, just like the photographer Jo Spence (who graduated from PCL a few years before her), Wilkins learnt the ethics of putting herself in the picture. In these prints, she makes an ironic nod to the commodification of nostalgia – how failed revolutionary politics become design features for things we can buy – at the same time as she makes explicit the role of her labour in the entire process.