



text + work

---

# MYCELIUM

GAVIN PARKINSON + DOMINIC SHEPHERD

---

**M**YCELIUM refers to mycelia: fungal strands that grow in the dark, spreading and thriving in the unseen. The largest and most ancient organism is a mycelial mat. The visible 'mushroom', is the fruiting body of mycelium, appearing time and time again in Shepherd's work. Gavin Parkinson, author and Lecturer at the Courtauld Institute, London, and Dominic Shepherd, artist and Associate Lecturer at the Arts University College at Bournemouth, both share an interest New Physics, Surrealism, Borgesism and the poetic forms of verbalizing and visualizing the metaphysical, all of which will form the core part this exhibition.

text+work presents Dominic Shepherd's recent body of paintings, created within and informed by his isolated location, surrounded by woodland, and by Parkinson's two texts: a theoretical piece and an original metafictional piece. The paintings and the written pieces aim to encourage critical reflection and discourse; artist and writer, observer and observed.

---

**BLIND SUMMIT  
(RAIDING, PSILOCYBING)**

---

**MIDDLE VOICE  
AND ART WRITING**

---

darker still but we are towards the end of December's foggy freeze thankfully for him (but not for you) and he stretches (himself) in front of the open window made impatient with the dense and stifling air knowing he has work to do and too much time in which to do it but compelled to watch the wood grow and to imagine himself changing with it and then he leans over the keyboard taking time the only way he knows and wondering (because it will never be certain) what changes are produced through writing in the one who writes

through a wall where the crystalline agent oozes out of the cracks in tentacles that spread thin and crooked in light red and green across its surface until it is smothered with overlapping jewel-like strands lit by the midnight sun coming through the trees from which you break off some of the crumbling bark behind me and throw it to the ground where it lies unexamined and someone says we should have interpreted it but today I don't see why we should subject all objects to close examination but rather feel them in the hand or in the eye

the blinds close and the dell is getting darker yes I catch sight of you from my prone position behind the splayed branches gathering mushrooms (they look like mushrooms) while Klaus goes ahead running always just beyond me searching for more but their sticky gelatinous surface sickens me and makes me afraid to touch them even though later (after falling) I am reminded of how beautiful they are in a perverse way like an unfathomable tortoise shell studded with jewels or a machine-made mosaic of teeth or a lake covered in green slime and peppered with petals of flowers

touching his temple with one finger and with the other the sap seeping out onto the tree's surface he enjoys the analogy it creates with the prickling beads of perspiration raising on his forehead that build and converge to create a wet layer across his face felt once again in 2006 in Italy when he is made to seek cover from the mad afternoon sun and travels across a plane to a distant lone tree on the slope of a hill by running over spongy thick dry grass covered in grasshoppers that leap around his ankles with every stride

The postmodernist, post-structuralist undermining of master narratives, essentialism, and foundationalism is evident in the priority given the marginal subject who 'attenuates the sovereignty of a "representative" human or world subject authorized in its mastery of events,' in the words of Homi Bhabha.<sup>1</sup> Such theories of the subject are now commonplace in the modern university, and they have made academics suspicious of totalistic, certaintist, political, philosophical, or cultural assertions; they are reflected awkwardly in the pluralist vocabulary of art history and cultural theory as 'art histories,' 'feminisms,' and 'Surrealisms,' for instance. But this undermining has been adopted by art history minus the styles in which that critique was first given: styles meant to point as much to the plurality and contingency of the subject *writing* as to difference 'out there,' in the world, society, and so on. Indeed, Bhabha himself repeats a frequently made gesture in theories of the postmodern: he retains the stable, univocal, unequivocal 'I' throughout his own text – and with it the essential integrity and totality of the academic, rationalist essay – pointing away from it towards the text of another – to a poem, not surprisingly (because academic writing juggles uneasily with postmodernist *writing*), by the poet Adrienne Rich, and a novel, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, as fragile postcolonial meditations on the subject, history, and memory.

The fragmentation of agency indicated in Rich's poem – 'I'm a canal in Europe where bodies are floating/I'm a mass grave/I'm the life that returns/I'm a table set with room for the Stranger/I'm a field with corners left for the landless.../I'm accused of child-death of drinking blood/I'm a man-child praising God he's a man/I'm a woman bargaining for a chicken'<sup>2</sup> – this unreliable postcolonial witness of Rich's shades into the "'anthematic subjectivity'" belonging to postmodernity,<sup>3</sup> a subjectivity and term derived from Vladimir Nabokov by Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth.<sup>3</sup> In an essay of 2001, Ermarth complains about the usage of some of the terminology of post-structuralism that, she says, 're-invokes the irreducible "founding subject" of modernity'. That imperial subject, like the imperial history it founds, exists to sustain a one-world hypothesis: the idea that everything submits to a single system of measurement.<sup>4</sup> Ermarth argues not just for what she calls the 'palimpsestuousness'<sup>5</sup> of the subject written about, but also for that of the subject doing the writing:

1 Homi K. Bhabha, 'Postmodernism/ Postcolonialism,' Richard S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (eds.), *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 307-322, 314.

2 Adrienne Rich, 'Eastern War Time,' *An Atlas of a Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*, New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991, 35-44, 44.

3 Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, 'Agency in the Discursive Condition,' *History and Theory*, vol. 40, no. 4 ('Agency after Postmodernism'), December 2001, 34-58, 40.

4 Ermarth, 'Agency in the Discursive Condition,' 46.

5 The poet Michael Alexander quoted by Ermarth, 'Agency in the Discursive Condition,' 47.



*I am not first a parent, then an author, later a consumer. I am all simultaneously, each interlaced with the other so that what I do as a parent influences what I do as a consumer...*

*This idea of a distributed subjectivity, far from being a loss or a lack, allows for the actual complexity of conscious life more fully and precisely than the modern 'subject' ever did. A complex, multilaminated subjectivity actually seems a fairly common sense [sic] description of lived experience in our time: more than does the abstract cogito or 'miserable treasure' inherited from Christian and Romantic absolutes. It seems particularly pointless, even wrong, to impose that monadic idea of 'the subject' upon a personal knowledge that is more random and radical than that traditional model allows.<sup>6</sup>*

Driven by debates around post-structuralist and postmodernist history, Ermarth's turn to fiction to repudiate this monadic idea of 'the subject' giving its unbroken narrative can be traced back to Hayden White's call in 1966 for historians to refer to the French New Novel as a model for narrative, and his famous complaint that '[t]here have been no significant attempts at surrealist, expressionistic, or existentialist historiography in this century (except by novelists and poets themselves).<sup>7</sup> If the discourse of history has benefited from White's discussion of new forms of representation in historical writing that ultimately acknowledge what Ermarth calls the 'differential subjectivity of the discursive condition,' then, in art history, we have thoroughly theorised, domesticated, and routed modernism and postmodernism, advocating plurality, fragmentation, and inclusiveness in every direction, whilst holding on to the undivided, positivist 'I' of the ubiquitous author narrating his or her unitary truth, including the truth about postmodernism.<sup>8</sup>

Yet there are alternatives to certainist rationalist narratives that co-opt, conceal, or concede authorial agency with the aim of objectivist mastery. Middle voice, for instance, accommodates *both* the content *and* the form of post-structuralist theory and makes irrelevant the object/subject separation that has always been crucial to art writing, enabling us to speak of certain objects (like paintings) in voices more attuned to their non-reason than current rationalist art historical narratives, which tend to regulate and domesticate objects through deterministic strategies of circumscription, co-ordination, and explanation.

<sup>6</sup> Ermarth, 'Agency in the Discursive Condition,' 47.

<sup>7</sup> Hayden White, 'The Burden of History' [1966], *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 27-50, 43-44.

<sup>8</sup> Ermarth, 'Agency in the Discursive Condition,' 50.

a thicket you could get lost in (and I once nearly did just as you were lost once in the woods on your horse) both threatening and frightening because nature has a separate existence to us that makes it seem cruel but that is just a humanist projection and a good reason to avoid analogy yet the comparison is irresistible between this drowned world with hidden noise concealing a deep pool of fresh water in a clearing with patches of oil glistening on its surface and this journey in words making a maze of writing these exercises in style

by groping blindly through the gloom and black suffocating mud the tips of his fingers finally make contact through the wet soil with the loose ends of the spores by which means he make his way slowly along the network of branching germ tubes in search of the centre but he soon finds that the whole inner body of the mass is missing because in pursuit of further nutrients at its expanding radial edges the parasite has cannibalized its own now-useless interior (killing itself to live) and in doing so has made untraceable and extinct its source and origin

cold wet moss covers the top of the wall on which rests a man's head and hands while some way behind him there is a great glass dome lit by weak yellow electric light that shows through his slowly drawn breathe freezing in the night air and giving evidence of the only human presence for miles around though there is plenty of vegetation and animal and insect life undergoing its usual nightly struggle to the death in almost total silence to the human ear in the dark field beyond the wall from where a hummingbird once saw Richard Dadd

gladed winged figures with hands lightly touching form a circle ready for the dance as dusk arrives along with the howls of unknown beasts and the world changes from yellow and green to grey and slate for all but the occupants of the coach house who are viewing the ritual through a bumpy window coloured green and red and warped and shaped to distort what lies beyond so that none of the figures outside can be viewed in their immediacy but are palimpsestically multiplied and supplemented by further figures like the little boy pissing in a lake over there



hear a murmur beneath the nearby copse now sunk in gloom and they instantly fall silent and turn their heads anxiously as one in that direction without any conceivable expectation but it is only the sigh and groan of the wood reorganizing itself in collaboration with gravity and not the long-dreaded emergence of one of those innumerable feared unnamables that they carry and cultivate in their minds like a myth or memory or photograph over which reason has no power (and which reason even developed to contain and quell) and that make the most hard-headed rationalist afraid of ghosts

had not heard that during carnival evening on Walpurgis Night and Halloween nothing less than the noose or invisibility awaits the careless walker so they tread clumsily even within sight of *Marasmus oreades* and walk hypnotically across the village square towards the church as day draws swiftly to a close and with masks over their faces they pass through the cemetery wall finally crouching behind the huge grave of John Jackson (who taught Lord Byron how to box) to wait for he who will show them how to serve the Fairy Queen to dew her orbs upon the green

set of deep footprints leading from the mulch into leaves and twigs I place my feet into them one after another and am taken out of this clearing towards a coppice where in the damp air I stop to hear the last traffic on the distant road almost silent now and then lying down I am drawn into the first stages of sleep through which appears (as a model of anti-knowledge) a vast door-less labyrinth made roughly from slender twigs slowly revolving clockwise on two axes containing another smaller version of itself silently spinning at twice its speed counter-clockwise

sliver of liquid on the surface of his eye takes on many shapes over the late evening beginning with that of a figure of eight before turning into a seagull then a human femur then a stirrup finally settling for now into the form of a knot in the damp trunk of a leaning oak tree half destroyed by age and crumbling away among hard wiry grass next to an abandoned cottage at twilight alongside a lake in Switzerland near which a young woman stands exposed to intense rain all evening holding together the flaps of her black overcoat

Middle voice is probably best approached initially through the writings of Emile Benveniste whose 1950 essay 'Active and Middle Voice in the Verb' provides a useful discussion and something close to a definition, and because Roland Barthes gave it significant credit in his own widely read discussion of transitivity and intransitivity in the verb.<sup>9</sup> Benveniste remarks that the active and passive forms of the verb can be conceived as, respectively 'action done' and 'action undergone,' noting that it is not an easy task to think of the action described by the middle from within a language that does not possess it.<sup>10</sup> The difficulty of thinking and objectifying middle voice from within our own linguistically circumscribed reason, then, end up giving it a peculiar value in addressing the things of Dada, Surrealism, and much of what came after and in conveying or 'performing' post-structuralist theory.

Benveniste goes on to list those verbs that are only middle: to be born, die, follow or yield to a notion, be master, lie, sit, come back to a familiar state, enjoy or benefit, suffer or endure, experience mental disturbance, take measures, speak, and so on. Whereas active verbs are concerned with processes that are carried outside of the subject with reference to something else, all of these middle verbs take place within the subject him or herself, without the absolute requirement for the verb to form a bridge from the agent to another person or an object. Because of that, middle voice is sometimes, misleadingly because limitedly, referred to as subjective and reflexive. In fact, one of its odd properties is that middle verbs do not really require a living agent or any agent at all in many cases, as they are concerned less with the substantive sense of making something shown or of being shown (active and passive, respectively) than with the more abstract idea of the showing of what is shown (the elusive movement of showing-ness).<sup>11</sup>

Benveniste is aware of seeming ambiguities and contradictions in the verbs he gives as examples ('to be,' 'go,' and 'crawl,' for instance, are active when they sound middle), and clarifies the middle as follows:

<sup>9</sup> Emile Benveniste, 'Active and Middle Voice in the Verb' [1950], *Problems in General Linguistics* [1966], trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek, Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1971, 145-51; Roland Barthes, 'To Write: An Intransitive Verb?' [1966], *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989, 11-21.

<sup>10</sup> Benveniste, *Problems*, 146.

<sup>11</sup> David C. Kress holds that the bumper sticker 'Shit Happens' is the best example of an agentless middle voice, because it specifies neither an active subject who makes it happen (God or fate) nor an object who is the recipient of it; rather the nouns dissolve behind the priority accorded the happening of shit's happening, see David C. Kress, 'Middle Voice Moves in Nathaniel Mackey's Djbot Baghostus's Run', *Callaloo*, vol. 23, no. 2, ('Nathaniel Mackey: A Special Issue'), spring 2000, 765-83, 769.



*Here the subject is the seat of the process, even if this process ... demands an object; the subject is the centre as well as the agent of the process; he achieves something which is being achieved in him – being born, sleeping, lying [helpless or dead], imagining, growing, etc. He is indeed inside the process of which he is the agent.<sup>12</sup>*

The shift from the middle to the active converts the verb into a transitive (causative or factive), as in ‘to sleep,’ for instance: ‘he sleeps’ is middle and (classically) intransitive as the subject is both agent and seat (he puts himself to sleep, so to speak), whereas ‘he puts (someone) to sleep’ (there is no English active verb form ‘to sleep’) is active and transitive, where the subject continues to govern the action as the agent (actor or doer) but ceases to be the seat of the process as the action is shifted outside of the subject to an external object or goal.

One of the most interesting aspects of the analysis of active and middle verb formation is that dealing with verbs with a double diathesis (those capable of being active or middle). As Benveniste shows, these were used widely and creatively in Greek for situating the subject in relation to the process (exterior or interior), and for determining agency or not ‘depending on whether it effects, in the active, or whether it effects while being affected, in the middle.’<sup>13</sup> Once translated, the wide range of verbs with a double diathesis may be used to demonstrate to an English-language audience how a culture’s linguistic conventions can work to exclude an individual from a process (described by a verb) over which he or she has mastery when the *active* voice is employed, by contrast with the potential for that agent’s inclusion within an act when *middle* voice is employed. In some verbs, this describes neither transitivity nor quite intransitivity (passivity), but a kind of semi-transitivity (one acts upon oneself).

This was a property of which Roland Barthes took careful note and expanded upon in his important 1966 essay ‘To Write: An Intransitive Verb?’ at the time he was writing about the operation of middle voice in the novels of Philippe Sollers and rethinking his own writing practice accordingly.<sup>14</sup> But it also affected *both* the theory and writing of Jacques Derrida, who wrote as follows in 1968 in ‘Différance’:

<sup>12</sup> Benveniste, *Problems*, 149.

<sup>13</sup> Benveniste, *Problems*, 149-50.

<sup>14</sup> See Roland Barthes, ‘Drama, Poem, Novel’ [1965-68], *Sollers Writer* [1979], trans. Philip Thody, London: The Athlone Press, 1987, 39-67.

note how this hyphal bundle (called a rhizomorph) emerges through the cracks in the woodchip covering the earth giving notice of an extended layer of similar activity in the dark dank soil underneath which has probably developed into the classic radial growth shared by fifty or so species of fungi that grow in forms scientifically taxonomised under the rubric of 'fairy ring' (once called *elferingewort* now sometimes 'elf circle' or 'pixie ring' or *rond de sorcière* or *hexenringe*) though scientists have not yet agreed on a single explanation for how this circular composition comes about so note that well

smiled anonymous people in photographs deceive us into believing in and wondering about a relationship and when these are decontextualised their power of intrigue is made even stronger but that smile is a convention performing the person for the camera (and therefore posterity) not made for the person behind it so sentiment is misplaced as is speculation on the 'inner' (or social) lives of such people yet this is one of the fallacies of historical writing in which it is often believed that something profound can be known about a person (or place) through a flat and fleeting representation

heraldic escutcheon constituting a mole on hind legs to the left and a seated eagle to the right whilst a puffin stands at centre atop a canvas on an easel (in place of the usual shield) which is divided into four quarters in one of which a boy and his father are racing on the beach at nightfall in another the sun is setting in a Welsh market town transforming the sea into a carrot-coloured object whilst the third and fourth panels carry images of Leda and the Swan on a September evening and a self-portrait by William Blake

Gavin Parkinson,  
March 2010

*We must consider that in the usage of our language the ending –ance remains undecided between the active and the passive. And we will see why that which lets itself be designated différence is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, an operation that cannot be conceived either as passion or as the action of a subject on an object, or on the basis of the categories of agent or patient, neither on the basis of nor moving toward any of these terms. For the middle voice, a certain nontransitivity, may be what philosophy, at its outset, distributed into an active and a passive voice, thereby constituting itself by means of this repression.<sup>15</sup>*

Of Derrida's styles in *Dissemination* (1972), his translator Barbara Johnson wrote, '[i]n accordance with its deconstruction of summary meaning, Derrida's writing mimes the *movement* of desire rather than its fulfilment, refusing to stop and totalize itself, or doing so only by feint.<sup>16</sup> In middle voice and its vicinity, alternatives to the rationalisation of art, visual culture, avant-garde practices, and even post-structuralism itself show themselves, and offer a response to the question asked by Derrida in 1979: 'How can one text, assuming its unity, give or present another to be read, without touching it, without saying anything about it, practically without referring to it?'<sup>17</sup>

Gavin Parkinson,  
March 2010

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Différance' [1968], *Margins of Philosophy* [1972], trans. Alan Bass, New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982, 1-27, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Translator's introduction in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, London: Athlone, 1981, xvi.

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Living On/Borderlines,' Derrida et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* [1979], New York: Continuum, 1994, 75-176, 50. For a book-length account of middle voice, see Suzanne Kemmer, *The Middle Voice*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1993.



---

## DOMINIC SHEPHERD

---

Dominic Shepherd, artist, completed his MA in Fine Art, Painting, at Chelsea College of Art and Design in 1995. He left London post millennium to live in relative isolation in woods in Dorset. He has exhibited widely in museums, public and private galleries, both nationally and internationally.

His work is held in major private collections worldwide. Exhibitions in 2009 included a solo show at Galerie Schuster Berlin; The Future Can Wait, London; New London School Berlin; Pulse Miami. He is exhibiting currently in Territories Galerie Schuster Miami and Demonology CHARLIE SMITH london, as well as working towards a solo exhibition at CHARLIE SMITH london, whom he is represented by, for 2010.

Awards include Oppenheim-John Downes Award, 1999 and 2000; in 2004, he exhibited at and was a prize-winner in the John Moores 23. In 2007, he was awarded a research fellowship by the Arts University College at Bournemouth where he is currently an Associate Lecturer and Active Researcher, being instrumental in the formation of the Natural Culture Cultural Nature research group.

---



---

## GAVIN PARKINSON

---

Dr. Gavin Parkinson is Lecturer in European Modernism at The Courtauld Institute of Art. He lectures and writes on European art and visual culture of the twentieth century, and has had a special interest in the connection between art and science in French art, 1900-1939. His two books are *Surrealism, Art and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology* (Yale University Press, 2008) and *The Duchamp Book* (Tate Publishing, 2008). His latest writing is concerned with the interpretation of modernism by mainly French writers from the 1950s to the present day, turned towards a discussion of linguistics and the development of the writing of art history.

---

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

**Dominic Shepherd and Gavin Parkinson would like to thank:** Tim Edgar and Zavier Ellis for loan of work, Ian, Karen, Rachel, and Katie Brooks, Lesley Bell, Alessandra and Greta, as always and forever. The Shepherd Family, Violet McClean, Sonja Stender and the text+work team, CHARLIE SMITH london for initiating this successful partnership between Dominic Shepherd and Gavin Parkinson

CHARLIE SMITH london for their unconditional support.

Dominic Shepherd is represented by  
**CHARLIE SMITH london**  
336 Old Street  
London  
EC1V 9DR  
UNITED KINGDOM

+44 (0)20 7739 4055  
direct@charliesmithlondon.com

Cover image: Grotto, 2010  
P8: Quark, Strangeness and Charm, 2010  
P11: The Golden Age, 2010  
P14: Dead Romantic, 2010  
P18: Black Knight, 2008  
P20: Grotto detail

---

## CREDITS

---

© 2010, copyright of the texts resides with text+work, the Arts University College at Bournemouth and authors, including the right to reproduce. The Arts University College at Bournemouth holds the intellectual property to text (s) and respects all moral rights. Images copyright resides with the artist Dominic Shepherd and named agencies, photography by Tim Edgar.

Disclaimer: The text/essay in this publication reflects the view of the author, and not necessarily those of text+work, the Arts University College at Bournemouth and editors.

No part of this text/essay may be reproduced in any material form (including photocopying or storing in any medium by electronic means and whether or not transiently or incidentally to some other use of this text/essay) without the written permission of the copyright holders.

A catalogue record of this publication is available from the British Library: British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data **ISBN: 978-0-901196-42-2**

**Edited by:** Violet McClean [vmcclean@aucb.ac.uk](mailto:vmcclean@aucb.ac.uk)  
**Design and Layout by:** Sonja Stender [www.jazznoons.co.uk](http://www.jazznoons.co.uk)  
**Produced and published by:** text+work, The Arts University College at Bournemouth  
**Printed by:** FWB printing, WINCANTON [www.fwbprinting.co.uk](http://www.fwbprinting.co.uk)

A Limited Edition of 1500 essay is printed for this collaboration.

---



text+work  
The Gallery  
The Arts University College at Bournemouth  
Wallisdown, Poole, BH12 5HH

**t** 01202 363272  
**e** [gallery@aucb.ac.uk](mailto:gallery@aucb.ac.uk)  
**w** [www.textandwork.org.uk](http://www.textandwork.org.uk)