Feminist Hieroglyphics

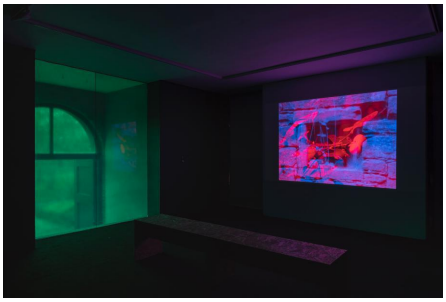
I write from my stomach

by Louise Lever

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Sriwhana Spong, *A hook but no fish*, 2017. 16mm transferred to HD, HD video. 24:50 min. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland.



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Sriwhana Spong, *Oirclamisil (ear cartilage) #1*, 2017. Paraffin wax, wood, clay. 545 x 650 x 40mm approx. Installation view: *A hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (2018). Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.



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> *"I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the top of my words."*[01] – *Roland Barthes, 1977.*

I absorb the long takes between short sips of coffee. Sriwhana Spong's film *A hook but no fish*, 2017 is punctuated by untranslatable titles that interrupt (and trickle into) alienated landscapes. Leaves softened with still-falling rain, a tree engorged in a brick wall, echoing non-diegetic footsteps. The film gets

underway with shots bolded in red and blue filters. The light tattooed on the grass. This film is presented within the context of Spong's research into Hildegard of Bingen's *Lingua Ignota*, a secret language invented by a mystic 12th century abbess.

In the second section of the film (*Zamzia,*) a woman with a plastic veil over her head, sits alone on a chair. A dialogue begins across centuries between the artist and Hildegard. The screen is then dominated by a pixelated jpeg. It looks like a neck. Seconds later, the subtitles confirm my guess. The camera pans right in mechanical movements. The subtitles contextualise the images. A man has taken photographs of an ex-lover and asked her if he can use them in an exhibition. She declines. He then re-stages her exact poses with another woman.

Importantly, Spong's soundtrack designed by Claire Duncan affects the way the film's images are perceived. Many voices (in the subtitles and soundtrack) speak in a cacophony of ways that complicate what we are seeing, like in the communication between the woman and her ex-lover. Duncan has selected sound reminiscent of an old dial up phone that is off the hook. It feels like we are on call-waiting. The tone falters, mutates, there's interference on the line. The subtitles evoke the woman's perspective, she feels "like she's exposing an unknown part of herself (/) through the body of another woman". How might this unnerving decibel suggest possibilities for intersubjective communication? She finds it impossible to recognise her own body through the photographs. Yet, it is through the sound that we see the double property of subjectivity: how we are seen and how we see ourselves. We are reminded that "society is likewise the condition of human language[02]" and at stake here is a secret language that must be transformed into what I term feminist hieroglyphics: who gets to speak in our society today?

In other sections of the film, whispers phonate; fire fizzes; water trickles; a drum sounds; restless worms wiggle in manure. The disconnect between the montages and soundtrack relate back to the title of the film - something is missing - we expect coherence. An unknown language with no fixed meaning. Woods with no people. A memory with no blood. A body with no words. A hook with no fish.

The presence of these two women, drained of the spectacle of the feminine, heightens the importance of women's voices and draws attention to the sense of alienation felt by those who are repressed or unheard. We only get to see the first woman through the plastic veil, the other woman is pixelated beyond recognition. This sense of isolation, the empty landscapes, are redolent of Michelangelo Antonioni's films. The plastic veil feels like a glaze, for me it brings up The Handmaiden's subservience (Park Chan-wook, 2016).

My concern is not to ask about what these shots mean, but to bring into the conversation how Spong cultivates new ideas about the connection between women and language. A woman with her upper body bent towards the camera is the first image we see in the section *Guia*. An exposed neck. Black hair water-falling forward into sencha-toned leaves. The shot cuts to a high-angle of the same woman, now sidewards, positioned on the floor between two potted plants. As the film progresses, we cut back to the woman wearing the plastic veil, a crowd of pigeons, a prophetic black cat wearing a plastic vet cone and two herons. The phantasmagorical 16mm visuals yawning their light through the screen. Through filmic language, Spong frames women with social agency. We are forced to look again.

There is no denying this film raises compelling questions around women's place in culture both in the 1100s and today. Spong understands that by using the words of Hildegard's invented language, she is positing women as speakers, and then, only naturally, we must ask: what is the female voice? The pixelated and the veiled women, tell the story of the relationship between visibility, representation and subjectivity.

I am encouraged by the film's central question: what does Hildegard's language mean to women today? LGBT rights are eroded in the modern woman of *The Handmaid's Tale* (Margaret Atwood, 1985), showing us that fought-for-rights can be taken away, and we can move back into the dark ages. In a similar way, Spong questions the ideologies motivating social norms, women's roles and how inventing a new language is linked to freedom of speech.



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The following interview sheds light on the processes behind Sriwhana Spong's recent exhibitions at the Pump House Gallery, London and Govett Brewster, New Plymouth, New Zealand. They reveal the framework in which Spong conceptualises her work and why she is drawn to produce it.

LOUISE LEVER Can you describe the process of putting this show together? As your first solo UK show, was there a lot of pressure?

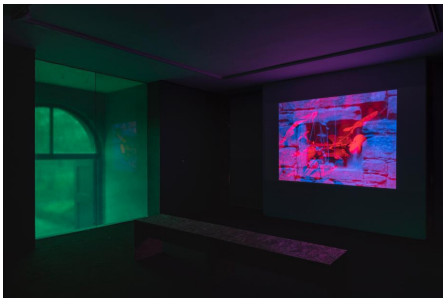
SRIWHANA SPONG I've been researching the writings of medieval women mystics as I'm interested in the somatic texts they produced, written at the intersection of survival and desire. I've been using the large collection of books on mysticism at the Warburg Institute in London, and that's where I came across Hildegard of Bingen's *Lingua Ignota* (secret language) in Sarah L. Higley's *Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language: An Edition, Tran*

slation, and Discussion (2007). Because I'm thinking through this idea of the 'un-disciplinary' as a way of thinking about these somatic mystical texts where you could say the un-disciplined body undisciplined the discipline of writing, I was immediately drawn to the *Lingua Ignota* as an example of this. Hildegard's language exists as a glossary of over 1011 words—nouns only—which Hildegard inserted into Latin sentences. So you have this wonderful example of the grotesque body (as women were read at the time) entering the classical (as men's bodies were read) home of high culture. Most of the words in her glossary name the things around her, close to her. So you also have this moment where the private breaks into an institutional language. My methodology is to research a subject, something that I am drawn to, and then take time to try and digest everything that I've read so that I can intuitively start making connections to things in my own experience and what is happening in culture around me. Because I was so enjoying learning about Hildegard, the main question became: how does this women from the 12th century still speak to us today? The connection was intuitive, but the real work was finding the thread. Being my first show in the UK did come with the worry that my work might not translate from a New Zealand context to a British one.

The rest of the show evolved out of a series of works that explore language. The wax and clay series *Oirclamisil (ear cartilage)* are made using wax covered supports on top of which I lay wet clay during the install. The rate at which the clay dries is always dependant on the atmosphere in the gallery—this rate affects its form (the quicker it dries, the more dramatic the forms). As the clay dries it shrinks, pulling away from the structure that supports it but at the same time depending on this structure for support. The clay both resists and relies on its support, a movement much like the way we experience language—as something writing us but also through which we find our own ways of speaking.



Sriwhana Spong, *Sigil Design (Rothschild's mynah) #9–#24*, 2017–ongoing. Indian yellow tartrazine pigment, water, honey, saffron, gum Arabic. Approx. 1800 x 750mm; *Design For a Horse Bit #2* (2018). Steel, lacquer. 2000 x 1940 x 30mm. Installation view: *A hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (2018). Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.



Sriwhana Spong, *A hook but no fish*, 2017. 16mm transferred to HD, HD video. 24:50 min. Installation view: *A hook but no fish*, Pump House Gallery, London (2018). Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Damian Griffiths.

On the top floor was an ongoing series of abstract watercolours depicting sigil designs, titled *Sigil Design (Rothschild's mynah) #9–#15*. The Rothschild's mynah is a bird, endemic to the island of Bali, that is on the brink of extinction due to poaching. Its huge popularity as a pet, has led to its radical decline. The works play with the relationship between 'to spell' (as in a word) and to cast a spell—both meanings conjure up the object being named. In this case, the ceaseless calling up is a fruitless exercise. The watercolours are made using Indian yellow tartrazine, a synthetic pigment primarily used as a food colouring, combined with saffron and honey, meaning these watercolours could also be explored/read through the sense of taste.

The bell plate *Instrument C (Claire)*, 2017, is the third in an expanding personal orchestra that develops over time, in different places, and in conversation with other people. I see the instruments in this orchestra as marking out a place—which is something I think about in relation to being half Indonesian but raised in New Zealand. When you are mixed heritage and also estranged from one part, 'place' can be a difficult idea to navigate, and I realised early on that I had to write the rules myself, which is actually rather liberating but also means you inhabit this idiosyncrasy that sometimes doesn't translate and can be a little isolating. The idea of a personal orchestra that inscribes place comes from the way in which the pitch of Balinese gamelan orchestras differs between villages. Each village uses slight

variances, meaning that the instruments from one gamelan cannot be used in a gamelan from another village. Therefore sound becomes an indicator of a community's unique relationship to place, history, body, and custom. And this orchestra functions in the same way. The way it is planned to slowly evolve over time, dependant on the different circumstances I find myself in, makes it like an organism, a community—one in which women predominantly feature as collaborators and performers. *Instrument C (Claire)* is a bell plate made by the cymbal maker Matt Nolan to which leaves from Battersea Park, where the Pump House Gallery is located, were attached. These leaves vibrated when the plate was activated, affecting and distorting its pitch. The leaves were taken from the subtropical section of the park—NZ flax and dwarf palm leaves.



Sriwhana Spong, *Instrument C (Claire)*, 2017. Aluminium bell plate, foliage, rope, wood. 930 x 635 x 5mm. Installation view: *A hook but no fish*, Pump House Gallery, London (2018). Courtesy the artist, Michael Lett, Pump House Gallery. Bell plate produced by Matt Nolan. Photo: Damian Griffiths.



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LL Can there be an architecture of repression in a society or in an 'unknown language'? Why did you decide to research von Bingen's *Lingua Ignota*? What was most compelling?

SS I was raised in a Pentecostal Christian home (glossolalia, faith healing, end-times theology etc, etc), and my own experience of escaping such a repressive system gave me an insight into the intense power of language—how words can be used to bind and how words can free. The sources that have sparked my current research stem from this experience. There is a connection I see between my methods of survival within the structure of fundamental Christianity and the writings of the medieval women mystics. I don't see the linguistic techniques they employed as being wholly specific to the medieval period.

LL What is the purpose of an artificial language such as von Bingen's *Lingua Ignota* with its 23 letter alphabet? Is language always supposed to be comprehensible? Is all language constructed?

SS Numerous historians have looked at the reasons why Hildegard might have developed her own language. Most important for me though is to listen to her own voice. I think this often gets forgotten, and the voices of these women writers get silenced through translation and interpretation. If anyone is the expert on her experience it is Hildegard (of course what makes up this voice—scribes, hagiographers etc is another story). She says that the *Lingua* was dictated to her by God. It was a language she received and that she passed on. That's Hildegard's take. Then one asks what function this might have had in her practice, in her world? Higley argues that it created a way for Hildegard to bring a freshness to the world around her. This process reflects Hildegard's theory of *viriditas* which sort of translates as 'greenness' and reflects the virility or 'greening power' that she saw permeating the world. Other historians have speculated that she might have given it to her monastic sisters to use between themselves as a way of communicating. A few men have denigrated it as pointless and groundless (ofc!)[03]. But if we consider that it was Western men who, through principles and constructions that are patriarchal, controlled access to Latin at the time Hildegard was writing, then there is something to be said for her act of creating a system (a personal glossary) that she might be the

author of and which might authorise her speaking. She gets to name things, and through this action we get to see things anew through her eyes.

Take for example her word *luxpompia* (eyeball), which Higley speculates appears to be made up of the Latin *lux* (light) and *pomu m* (fruit). So through renaming, these little organs are now juicy plump fruits of light, bringing the other senses to the act of seeing. And we get to see eyes afresh and to remember them anew. And underneath all of these theories as to the reason behind Hildegard's use of the *Lingua* lies the question of 'why not?' Which is how I think about it as an artist. Especially for a woman confined to such a small space in the world, initially interned in a cell, she would have had a lot of time on her hands, and it must have been important to keep herself occupied. Perhaps it was both enjoyment and curiosity, and as an artist (I view Hildegard as having what we today would call a multi-disciplinary practice) that is as good enough reason as any!



Opening performance by Vivian Wang. *Instrument B (Vivian)*, 2016. Aluminium bars, wood, Perspex, rubber, felt, brass. 470 x 760 x 260mm; Installation view: *Oceanic Feeling*, ICA, Singapore (2016). Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland.



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LL Language seems to be a focus in your work. It makes me think of how Roland Barthes described language as a skin. He wrote, "It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire." It brings to mind a previous work of yours called *Instrument B (Vivian)* 2016.

The piece is made of aluminium tone bars, and the way it was performed at The Institute of Contemporary Arts in Singapore brought a new dimension to the work. What do you think about the interaction between corporeality and something abstract like speech/language?

SS I studied ballet for years, and I think of my body as colonised by it, by this western system of movement. It formed my muscles, and I'll never be able to shed it; it's embedded in my skeleton, my bones. It's a very strict discipline but at the same time it's created to give a dancer the greatest range of movement and protect the body when it jumps, pirouettes etc. So as highly disciplined as it is, it is also about giving as much freedom to a dancer as possible. And I guess this can be the same with any discipline, even language. When I write, in the way that I like to write—less academically—it feels like I write from my stomach. It's a very physical feeling. And when I'm enjoying writing, in that moment, it reminds me of when I used to dance. I guess that sounds kind of corny. But I do feel like I make work, and I write from two very different locations in my body—I'm not sure what this is really about, but your question has triggered the thought that I should explore this—map out where these desires are sourced and located.

LL Why did you film *A hook but no fish* in 16mm and not say on digital? How do you see subjectivity represented in your work?

SS I used 16mm film, video-recording from my desktop, and iPhone footage in *A hook but no fish*. The reason I used 16mm was because I was doing a site visit to Disibodenberg, where Hildegard was interned from the ages of 8 till around 52. I wanted to use a process that really forced me to engage with the site; when working with film, I find I have to be much more open to the environment—checking clouds, forecasts, light etc. And I like this idea of me being open to the environment as being reflected in the mechanics of the lens, which literally opens up to the subject. This

moment of opening up to something outside of oneself was a process shared between my body and the camera, and the film was an imprint of this opening up. Also I taught myself how to use 16mm for this project—I have previously shot on super-8. So the film also documents my awkwardness with the process, learning something, grappling with something. There are quite a few blurred frames in the film and these serve as imprints of this process.



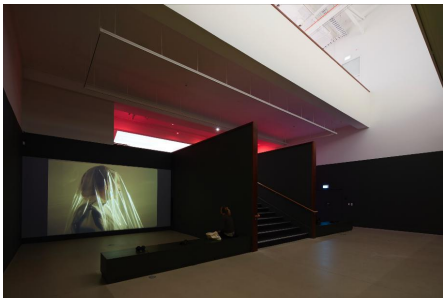
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Installation view: Sriwhana Spong, *A hook but no fish*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth (2018). Courtesy of the artist and Michael Lett, Auckland. Photo: Samuel Hartnett.

LL I find your musical instrument works have compelling messages. With a woman's first name as the title, do you think in some ways this is redolent of the objectification of women as instruments within a power structure or is this a bad question? I'm thinking of *Instrument C (Claire)*, 2017 and also *Instrument B (Vivian)*, 2016.

SS That's a valid observation, and I hadn't thought of that. The pieces are named after the people that I collaborate with on each instrument—Claire Duncan did the sound design for *A*

hook but no fish and Vivian Wang was the first to perform on the metallophone that bears her name, when it was played at the ICA in Singapore. The new instrument that I made for the Govett Brewster is named after Vera Mey, who I did a gamelan summer school with at SOAS in London.

This method of naming works after people has extended to other works. I was looking for a name for a sculpture when installing at the Pump House Gallery and Lou Marcellin, who had been busy painting the gallery all day, looked at it and said it looked how she felt, so I named it after her. I've also designed tables for people using their initials— sculptures that are given away to the person they were made for at the end of the show, to enter their lives and to be used as a space for them to make new work. I think this idea of works as homage comes from one of my favourite paintings, Florine Stettheimer's *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp and Rrose Sélavy*, 1923. I'm obsessed with this painting and the frame Stettheimer made for it.

LL What's been your favourite moment of the exhibition in London?

SS Perhaps it would be using honey to stick a musical score to the wall for *Cum vox sanguinis*, 2017. It was a deliriously messy process that smelled, tasted and felt good. It made me think I need to be a bit looser with some of my processes, more bodily.



LL What do you make of feminism in art today? Is it relevant to be considered a ‘woman artist’ or is that being stuck in identity politics or not even a relevant thing today?

SS The more my practice evolves, the more important the question becomes of what it means to make with a body that

represents something different to that of the white men who have largely made up “art history”. The game of Art with a capital A as Stettheimer called it may be the same, but the rules of engagement are different. I guess I don’t label myself as a ‘woman’ artist specifically, rather I see myself as part of a community of artists who are not the status quo, and who are all working in their own ways to authorise their own speaking in order to enact change.

LL What’s the most difficult work you made for this exhibition and why?

SS Definitely the film *A hook but no fish*. I was trying to incorporate some of the linguistic techniques used by the medieval women mystic writers, such as preference for experiential knowledge over institutional knowledge, humour, autobiography, fiction, and expressions of doubt. I wanted to create a film where all of these genres and techniques could hang together and create more of a constellation than a narrative that moved along a conventional timeline. I also wanted to avoid ‘telling' an audience and enclosing my subject as a historical figure. I wanted Hildegard to be able to speak to a contemporary audience. I wanted to keep her open and alive, "a means, and not an end" as Clarice Lispector thinks about herself as a writer—a body through whom things pass. A continuity. I didn’t want to enclose and present my research to an audience, to tell or explain anything. I wanted to speculate on the *Lingua Ignota* and use it to think about the relationship of the body to its environment and how renaming and thus re-remembering might help us write new futures. I wanted to point in a direction, to unveil an approach, to stir up questions. I wanted the film not to deliver up any one thing, tightly packaged, but instead to indicate, nudge, and allow the viewer to choose to connect or not connect. This was the hardest part—to get beyond the historical research to the electricity of Hildergard’s ideas that might be conducted through contemporary materials and bodies, if they so wish to be conductors of course—the viewer must be open to receiving!

Footnotes

01. Barthes, Roland. A Lover's Discourse. Translated by Stephen Heath. New York, Hill and Wang, 1977, pp.73.

02. Benveniste, Emile. Problems in General Linguistics. Translated by Mary Elizabeth Meek. Florida, University of Miami Press, 1971, pp. 54.

03. Sarah L Higley, Hildegard of Bingen's Unknown Language, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2007, pp 4–6.

Biographies



Sriwhana Spong's practice moves between film, painting, performance and sculpture. Born in Aotearoa and of Indonesian and Pākehā descent, Spong often works with everyday materials and offers installations that encompass sculptural, musical and performative dimensions that inspire moments of gathering, listening and transformation. Her recent work has focused on the relationship between the body, language and sound, as inspired by the practices of medieval female mystics.



Louise Lever makes films that prioritise minority voices and elevate women's stories. Louise is committed to engaging audiences with ideas that matter and compelling stories. Her feature film *Revolt She Said* is nominated for Best Documentary in the NYC Independent Film Festival, and has been accepted into many festivals in North America, Australia and Europe. The film takes focus on feminism and its lack of progress, featuring former PM of NZ Helen Clark and other inspiring women. Her next film, titled *The Female Gaze*, explores the gaze and perspective in cinema, focusing on contemporary and key women directors and the important stories they are telling today.

Louise established We Are Volcanoes, a production company based in Auckland/Melbourne in 2021, with a focus on feature narratives, and is a passionate advocate for enhancing the roles of women both on screen and behind the camera. She is currently in development with two films, a documentary on the gaze in cinema and a feature narrative. She studied the Creative Leadership course with Sue Maslin in Melbourne who continues to inspire.

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