

MCMLXVIII – Ben Sadler

Magnus asked me at an opening at an art gallery, where he was soon to hang some of his work, if I would write something about his paintings for his upcoming show at International 3. Later on in the evening I dropped him off at the train station. The next day I found a copy of Roland Barthes' 'Writing Degree Zero' tucked under the passenger seat of my 2002 Fiat Punto. The book has sat on an IKEA coffee table in my living room for a few weeks. I have studied the book's cover quite thoroughly. It is a simple design: 'Roland Barthes' is printed in large dark maroon letters under which 'Writing Degree Zero' is printed in black at the same font size. Below these letters are the lines 'Translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith' and 'Preface by Susan Sontag' in the same colour as the author's name. Behind these letters is a flat background of magnolia. I say behind but I realise that the letters and the background colour are all printed on the same surface.

The book was published in France in 1953. It is Roland Barthes' first book and was first published in English in 1968 by the American publishers Hill and Wang. 1968 is an important date. I don't know how many numerical keypad door locks in art galleries and institutions use 1968 as the code but I think it is probably quite disproportionately high. I have encountered a few. 1984 seems to be the other popular code.

'Year 1968 (MCMLXVIII) was a leap year starting on Monday (link will display full calendar) of the Gregorian calendar.' ¹

The above sentence is perhaps as much as or more than we need to know about 1968 to understand the images that Magnus chooses to paint from that year. It is a year loaded with significance. Type '1968' into Google's image search engine and you will see what I mean. If you are disgusted at the suggestion that you might have to even look 1968 up to have an idea of its importance then I apologise. But do it anyway. Amongst the riots and the raised fists you might find two men looking at a crack in a road caused by an earthquake in Inangahua and next to that image a scanned newspaper clipping of Miss Iceland. How do these images relate to one another? What is their importance? It's hard to know whether these questions are even worth considering. Google provides us with language in a particular style. What we choose to do with this is up to us.

I am not sure whether Magnus left his copy of 'Writing Degree Zero' in my car deliberately or not. I can choose to see significance in this act. I might see further significance in the fact that this edition of the book, first published in 1968, was released in 1977, the year of my birth. Or perhaps I am giving myself too much importance. Things happen, coincidences occur, details gain importance, people leave things in cars.

1. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1968>

Commissioned by The International 3 to accompany the solo exhibition, 'As Long The Pain Lasted' by Magnus Quaife. 7th November – 13th December 2008