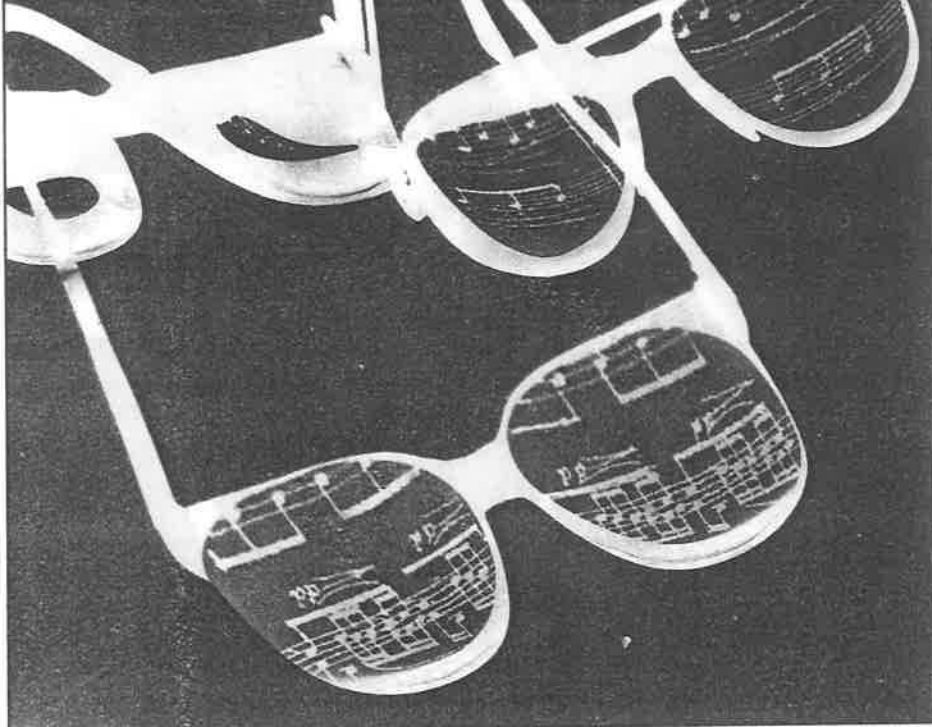


# UNTTITLED

A review of contemporary art

SPRING 1993



Jane Mulfinger: Rayogram (detail)

## JANE MULFINGER

Berning & Daw

Jane Mulfinger's latest exhibition brought together a number of recent bodies of work, including *Common Knowledge*, a set of nine etched glass panels which had originally been shown at St.Pancras Station as part of the rather ill-fated 'Northern Adventures' exhibition, and, in another room, etched spectacles, rayograms and combination braille and photographic pieces. At first glance widely divergent, they were all in fact linked both formally and conceptually. The formal link was of course that of projected light, the conceptual (and more interesting) link that of secret languages - secret, that is, both in the form of restricted access codes such as braille or morse, and that of an excluding cultural discourse.

The glass panels in *Common Knowledge* were engraved with brief ethnic jokes in a variety of European languages; these reproduced the kind of anecdote familiar to all cultures in which members of a neighbouring national group are put down or, more rarely, in which the teller's own group is flattered. The put-down, in most cases, seems to involve accusations of laziness, stupidity, or dullness; the largely inoffensive anecdotes range from a predictably yobbish English xenophobia ("Q: How do you tell a French aeroplane: A: It's got hair under its wings") to a delightful reverse Irish story from Dublin: "An Irishman goes to apply for a job at an English building site. The foreman asks him, 'What is the difference between a joist and a girder?' The Irishman answers 'Joyce wrote Ulysses and Goethe wrote Faust'".

In its first exposure, *Common Knowledge* suffered from a problem common to most forms of non-monumental and reflexive art when placed in a public space; even though Mulfinger had specified that the panels should be placed above the ticket office at St.Pancras, most people either ignored them or lacked the time and inclination to be anything other than mildly puzzled by them. Among those baffled was The Economist magazine, which accused British Rail of wantonly offending paying customers, and commented plaintively that "it has proved impossible to get BR to explain whom it is trying to offend, and why".

In the gallery, what the work lost in terms of direct confrontation it more than gained in presence. With each panel hanging a few inches off the irregular white surface of the walls, the light from the windows opposite threw another, shadowy version of the texts just behind the etched letters; as the light shifted, first one version and then another would become legible, then blur again. Inevitably, the appeal of the more exotic European languages was that they added a second obscuring filter to the private discourse of cultural chauvinism.

The delicacy of the shadowed letters was echoed by Mulfinger's second-hand spectacles, their lenses engraved with fragments of musical scores or rows of morse dots and dashes which were similarly projected onto the wall behind them. Apart from the conceptual elegance of modifying optical devices so that their basic function is completely inverted, these pieces played upon the paradox of inscribing coded texts upon objects meant to clarify rather than obscure. They also introduced another of Mulfinger's concerns, that of the relationship of vision with memory and its processes, the torn labels of long-dead Angeleno optometrists still present in some of the spectacle cases seeming a echo of the fabulous slow glass of the alchemists, wherein one might see an event unfolding years after it had occurred.

Glass, memory and secret writing also came together in another body of work, the untitled photograph and braille text pieces which, in their quiet way, are amongst Mulfinger's most successful work. In these pieces, the artist combines found photographs with texts embossed in braille. Designed to be 'read' by the blind with their fingertips, these texts are now doubly impenetrable; to the sighted through ignorance of the code, and to the blind because the very sheet of glass protecting the artwork is a barrier to touch. On the other hand, the photographs, though they commemorate events we never knew or had any part in, come burdened with a haunting familiarity: like the braille texts, their meaning hovers tantalizingly out of reach, cut off from us as by a sheet of glass.

JOHN STATHATOS