



UNCERTAIN CODES  
BY JULIEN BISMUTH

Hello everyone. Thank you for coming.  
I'm going to start.

And I'll just start by explaining what I'm trying to do right now. I'm basically recording the soundtrack for this video.

The words I'm going to speak are more or less improvised. Of course, I've been thinking about what I want to say.

And the reason I want to do it this way is because I've been trying to find a way to address or talk about this very specific thing that is very much at the heart of this exhibition.

Something about language, let's say, and something that I've been unable to say in a monolithic or unified way.

It's something that I've only been able to say in many different ways. And that's, in a way, part of it.

And I wanted to try and articulate this thought by speaking and I wanted to do it with words that I had not prepared or had not entirely prepared because I wanted that relation to speech.

2 I wanted that relation to language in which the words may and in fact will come out differently.

And so I'll start by describing what situation we're in for the people who will see this video elsewhere. We're in an exhibition. I'm recording the soundtrack for the video that's behind me. The footage of the video was mostly shot in Brazil last November in the town of Belém. I was there to participate in a conference on indigenous languages.

How I got there - the reason for my having been invited to show footage that I've been shooting over the past seven years in Brazil with indigenous communities and the researchers that work with, or as one of them said for them - is a very long story that I won't get into. I'll just say that it links back or stems from this thing that I am going to try to at least articulate, in part, in front of you today.

On the wall to my left - which is another aspect of the situation that will be lost to those who will see this video elsewhere - there's a quote by

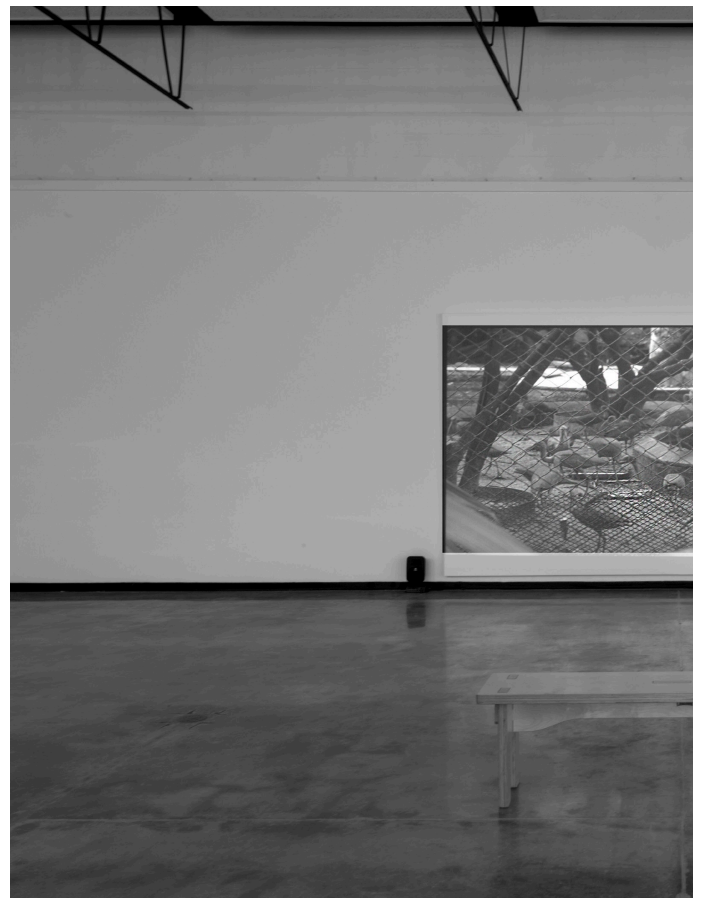
the Swiss linguist FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE, in which he says:

*"... in language, there are only differences."*

And that's maybe a way of saying what I would like to try and say. The difficulty lies in the fact that those differences are all in many ways different.

In fact, the different types of differences by means of which language exists and functions are in and of themselves different - different categories of differences we can say - and I'll try to name a few.

I just want to try and lay down some thoughts. Thoughts that I've gleaned here and there from other writers, other artists, other thinkers and propose them to you as a way of talking both directly and indirectly about my way of working, the work I've been doing in the past years, as well as the underlying thread that I've been following and pursuing in all the different endeavors and pursuits that I've engaged with over the past years.



When SAUSSURE says that “*in language, they’re only differences,*” he’s speaking specifically of the ways that words come to mean in relation to one another.

According to SAUSSURE, a word means nothing in and of itself. It means in contrast and in relation to the words that surround it. We understand the concept of absence because we have a word for presence. We understand what a tree is because we have other words for other plants like “flowers” and “bushes” but that play of difference abounds in almost every aspect of language.

Think of the languages that you speak. Language or languages that you speak. For example: English. There is not one English. There are many. English like every other language is not one but many.

Languages. We have languages. We don’t have a language that we all speak. That’s maybe the first difference. Yet each of those languages abounds in differences: dialects, sub-dialects,

idioms, slangs, or even the particular way that a particular person has of speaking.

But even in relation to ourselves, in the course of a day or in the course of a week, we speak differently depending on the context and the person that we’re speaking to. We speak differently to a colleague than we do to a child. We speak differently to a friend than we do to a lover.

And those levels and categories of speech are in turn things that we try to name and account for with language.

And maybe that’s part of what language does. If you think of something like the color spectrum, there are no differences within the color spectrum. It’s a continuum. It’s a continuity. It’s a constant variation without borders. The borders that we instill within the color spectrum are very much what language allows us to do. Language, to quote from another thinker, parts in order to impart. We part the world into different units that we name in order to be able to communicate them.

There’s a text that’s somewhere in this exhibition on that table by the 13th/14th century Italian poet DANTE in which he speaks of his decision to write in Italian, his maternal language, as opposed to Latin, which was the official language of culture and thought at the time. And he speaks of the feeling of debt, or rather gratitude, that he feels towards this language that he learned blindly, by imitation, and that in turn allowed him to see.

What he means is that it’s by means of Italian that he was able to articulate his experiences and communicate them, not just to others but also to himself. And that communication that we have with ourselves is, at least in my opinion, what we call thinking, and it happens by means of language.

And he has this beautiful image to describe the Italian language because the first difficulty he encounters is how to name and identify it because then, just like now in fact, there was not and there still is not one Italian. There are many Italians that are spoken throughout the Italian Peninsula. There’s a specific form of Italian



that's spoken in Florence and just as there are specific dialects and slangs spoken in Rome, Sicily, Calabria, etc.

He compares the Italian language to a panther, which leaves its scent everywhere, but is nowhere to be found. He comes back to that image and says that it's a creature that leaves its scent in every city, but resides in none. In that moment, he's not just speaking of the Italian language. He's speaking of language in and of itself.

I'm not sure what it would mean to grasp or identify or define language, but I don't think it's something that anyone has ever really been able to do.

But it's very much like the panther in Dante's quote, something that we can only ever pursue, track, follow, and that we can only ever encounter by way of the trail, the scent that it leaves behind.

**THE GOVERNMENT  
- A Brazilian Warns:  
Working, Studying,  
Eating, Dwelling,  
Being Healthy and  
Living are Detrimental  
to the People. Paulo  
Bruscky CP850.  
Recife PE 50010 970.**

So there are two, at least two types of difference in language. One names the differences between the words of a language. The other names the differences between languages or between the different variants of a given language.

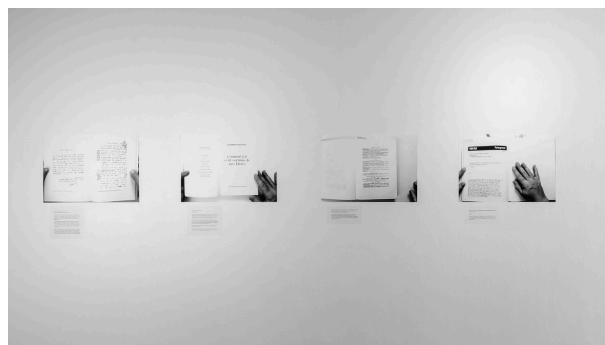
And another difference, which I'll touch upon quickly is the difference between language and the things that it names. To quote from another thinker MICHEL FOUCAULT, who I'm not sure how to define because every word that people try to apply to him whether it was historian or

philosopher, were words that he refused. He refused to be named in terms of what he did.

He says that there's a fundamental discrepancy between the world of words and the world of things. There are far fewer words than there are things and in fact, he says if there were just as many words as there are things there would be no need for language or language would be impossible to use. To go back to the example of the tree: we have a word for tree and we have a word for different types of or species of trees, but if we had a word for every tree that exists and every tree that ever existed we would not be able to name or we would not be able to retain or use language. It's like the map in LEWIS CARROLL'S *Sylvie and Bruno*: the map of a province that's made on a one-to-one scale, that the inhabitants of the province decide to keep folded and never unfurl because if they did it would block the light, kill the plants and they would starve to death. So instead, they decide to use their land as a map.

So the poverty of language, the incongruity between words and things is another kind of space, another kind of distance, another kind of difference or incongruity. And according to Foucault, it's that very discrepancy between the words we use and the things that we apply them to that allows us to speak.

And it's also, and this is something I'll come back to, the space within which something like poetry or literature can take place because what does poetry do if not play with the fact that, for example, a word can mean more than one thing or that the same phrase restated in a different context or situation can mean two very different things.



Installation view of *Uncertain Codes* (2023).  
Photo by MCKINNA ANDERSON.

And how one then negotiates or operates within that space is in fact something that I've tried to respond to from a very early age because ... Someone in this room was asking me about the role that chance or contingency plays in my work or in my way of thinking, and I think the first fundamental encounter with contingency is the fact that we're born into a certain situation.

We're born into, for example, a certain language or a certain relationship to language. I happen to have been born in a family that is plurilingual, in which many languages were spoken, some of them inherited, others acquired. I grew up surrounded by translation and it's very much become a part of how I work and how I think.

And this is another quote that I'll pose like a stone and it's a quote this time by WALTER BENJAMIN in his famous essay on translation. He describes translation as a moment in which one is facing another language and he describes this other language as a forest, a forest on a wooded ridge, and he describes the act of translating as calling into that forest without entering it, *"aiming at the single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one."*

In all these metaphors and all these images, these different thinkers and writers are not just talking about a difference, but they're also talking about something very spatial. A kind of distance. There's a distance, the distance that the translation has to travel in order to come back to its audience.

And to go back to that phrase very quickly, if any of you have ever done any kind of translation, you know that when you're translating you're faced with something in another idiom, and you're trying to find a corresponding sentence in your language.

And that process is very much like what BENJAMIN describes, it's a process of trial and error. It's a process of sending and receiving. And it works in the moment that you hear in your translation exactly what he describes as this reverberation of the original in the translation.

That phrase, that dynamic, that moment is what led me to Belém, led me to start working in Brazil, led me to start working in that realm. It was just a sort of enduring fascination or obsession with what happens when you step outside of your own world, when you step outside of your own language, when you then try to bring something of this foreign encounter back into your own world and back into your own language and you're able, at times with a lot of difficulty, to hear something like a reverberation of this other context.

There are too many things that I would like to say. There are too many things that this moment of trying to talk, trying to articulate a thought, and that even this exhibition evoke in me because they bear witness to almost everything I've done since I finished my studies or even when I was doing my studies. I think I've always been after, like DANTE'S panther, I've always been following these encounters with alterity and I've been following them in the space of language and in the space of languages.

I want to end with a statement, for what it's worth. A statement of the possibilities and limitations of my way of working. I've only ever been able to work within these spaces. Within these distances. Within these differences. I have never encountered anything like a congruity or a relationship of identity.

Even in relation to myself. If I think of the person I was in the past even a few years ago and the person that I am now, I see differences. I see a differentiation.

And there's a moment in which you realize that that space, that gap, that interval is in fact a space in which to work. It's a resonant space. It's a space that allows one to produce not just reverberations like the ones spoken of by Benjamin, but to speak, to live, to work, to engage with the possibility of doing something different or doing something differently, which is very much, I think, the life or liveliness of any endeavor.

That's it. Thank you.

Transcript of the audio from the video *Idiom* recorded on January 20th, 2023 during the opening of *Uncertain Codes* at the Gary R. Libby University Art Gallery, Gainesville, Florida



Installation view of *Uncertain Codes* (2023). Photo by MCKINNA ANDERSON.

## CONVERSATION(S)

This publication is focused on the different conversations that happened around the exhibition *Uncertain Codes* organized by JULIEN BISMUTH and held at the GRL University Galleries at the University of Florida from January 20 through March 4, 2023. The choice of the word “conversation” here is relevant because I am referring not only to the post-facto conversations that BISMUTH sustained with four different actors reproduced here, but also, in a metaphorical sense, to all the other aspects that were part of the exhibition.

For me, these conversations are inspired by a belief in the idea of dialogue, which still today is the main goal of language. Strangely enough, Wikipedia defines “conversation” as a term “often defined by what it is not.” Wikipedia then clarifies, “A ritualized exchange such as a mutual greeting is not a conversation, and an interaction that includes a marked status differential (such as a boss giving orders) is also not a conversation. An interaction with a tightly focused topic or purpose is also generally not considered a conversation.” For a conversation to be such, it can be inferred from these examples of what it is not, it must be deregulated, free of protocols. However, it is known that language works because of a complex set of rules. Meaning, the process of signs slipping through the interstices of confrontation between different ideas and finding ways to articulate them, is accomplished through an exceedingly precise structure to which it remains attached. From another point of view, even speaking to stones could be considered a conversation.

6

**ARTEARONIMBO t7 –**  
Aleatory composition of Colored  
Clouds in the Sky of São José dos

**Campos. The Bruscky and Santiago  
Team, responsible for the idea, is  
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Departing from a more ontological definition of conversation as “a talk, especially an informal one, between two or more people [or any other combination of subject/object relationship], in which news and ideas are exchanged,” I would assert to think that the artist’s books and related video, *Idiom*, the video voiceover monologue, the photos, the reading table, and the newsroom’s “promotional” pieces that constitute the “objects” displayed in the exhibition, were conversations in and of themselves. I am thinking of how the visitors could interact, for example, with the artist’s books that were exhibited inside a vitrine, thanks to a video that functioned like a manual explaining what was beyond the mere cover of each book; the only part of the books that was visible in the vitrine through the transparency of the “don’t touch” de *rigueur* glass partition. This, according to a less orthodox definition, was a conversation between the books and the video. Elsewhere in the exhibition, through a series of black and white photographs, a conversation was held between the artist and very specific quotes from thinkers, other artists, semiologists, critics, etc., about their definition of language. A “diptych” comparing a doodle on a book’s endpapers with the graphical explanation of stenography in the *Pitman Shorthand Exercise Book*, is the most eloquent example in this series of how these images (or signs, if you will) are nothing but dialogues developing in front of our eyes.

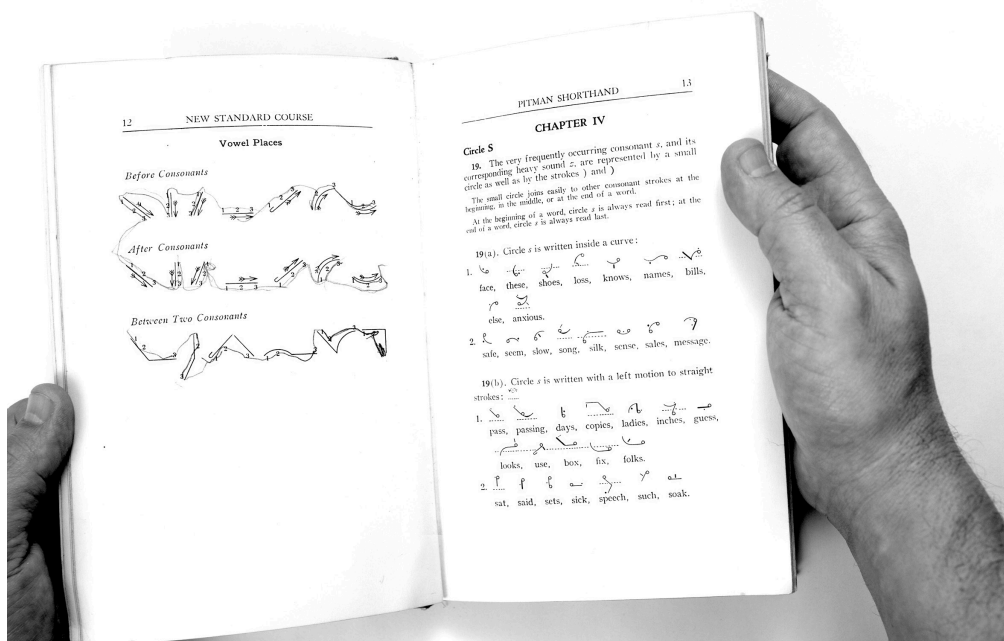
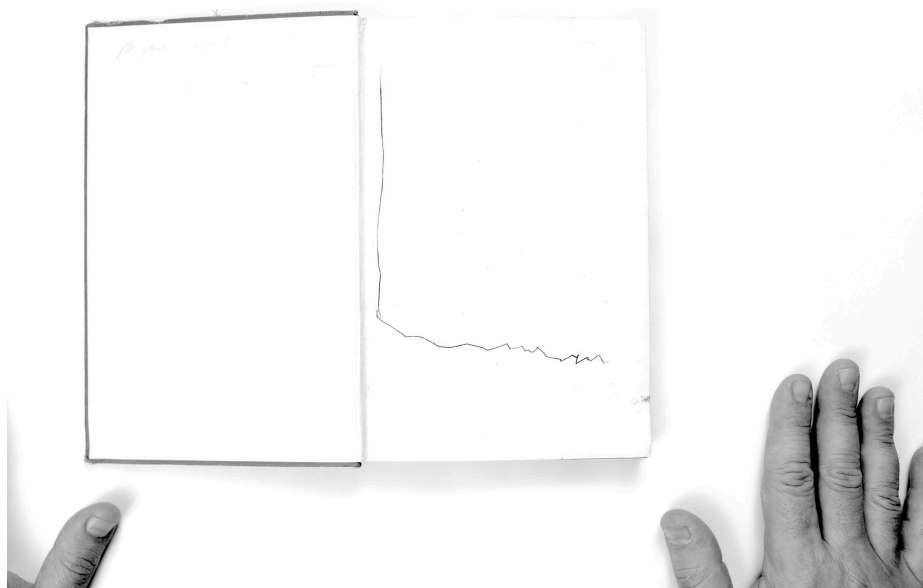
The most evident form of conversation in the exhibition occurred between selected videos by CONSTANCE DEJONG and HANNAH WEINER, two artists who use language as their raw material through which to work. A similar interest in dialogue can be detected in the exhibited books of other authors that also celebrate different ways to use language such as *Sonnet(s)* by ULISES CARRIÓN ; FÉLIX FÉNÉON’S *Novels in Three Lines*, DANTE’S *De vulgari eloquentia*; or GERTRUDE STEIN’S *Stanzas in Meditation*; to name a few of the voices populating the experience of visiting this exhibition.

A less evident but still powerful conversation was happening in the newsroom, an area within the gallery space displaying announcements published in newspapers by people advocating for freedom of speech in the face of oppressive political regimes.

Lastly, a monologue that was recorded during a performance by BISMUTH on opening day, was placed in direct conversation with a non-related and completed disconnected video of a visit to a zoo in Brazil. The audio of the artist's performance was later laid over the video to provide a soundtrack of sorts. A definition of language, according to BISMUTH in this case, could have been a deaf dialogue between image and text, but still a conversation, even if not one defined in terms of exchange of ideas.

Discussion, talk, chat, gossip, tête-à-tête, exchange, dialogue, parley, consultation, conference, chitchat, colloquy, converse, or conversations: it was the structural condition for transforming an idea into an exhibition. This is also what this newspaper tries to do in a moment when it shouldn't be so difficult to do so. I hope it comes through as it is.

JESÚS FUENMAYOR  
May 15, 2023



*SHORTHAND MANUAL: I found this doodle on the front inner flap of a stenography manual. Stenography is another word for shorthand writing. The doodle resembles the signs and markings inside the book, but made by another hand. It reminds me of the scribbled marks my sister and I left behind in many of my parents' books. I remember pretending to write before knowing how to. Language is learned by imitation, and imitation is often most eloquent when it errs.*

CONVERSATION I  
[RACHEL SILVERI]  
+ [JULIEN BISMUTH]

Dear JULIEN,

Thank you for inviting different voices (mine included) to be a part of the newspaper for *Uncertain Codes*. On the eve of its closing, I spent the afternoon in the exhibition for one last time. I couldn't help but feel your presence in the gallery—partly the memory of you being here for the installation and opening, but also the grain of your voice in the annotated video essay, emanating from the speakers and acoustically filling the space of the room. And your hands! There, in the suite of photographs holding open a series of books, a physical presence making the language of the page visible to you, visible to the camera, visible to us. I guess this brings me to my first question, which is this: What, for you, is the role of the body in this play with language?

I'll end with a few quotes: TRISTAN TZARA once wrote, "*Thought makes itself in the mouth.*" Twenty-seven years later he repeated himself, but with a difference: "*Thought is made by the hand.*" I'm not sure which version I like better.

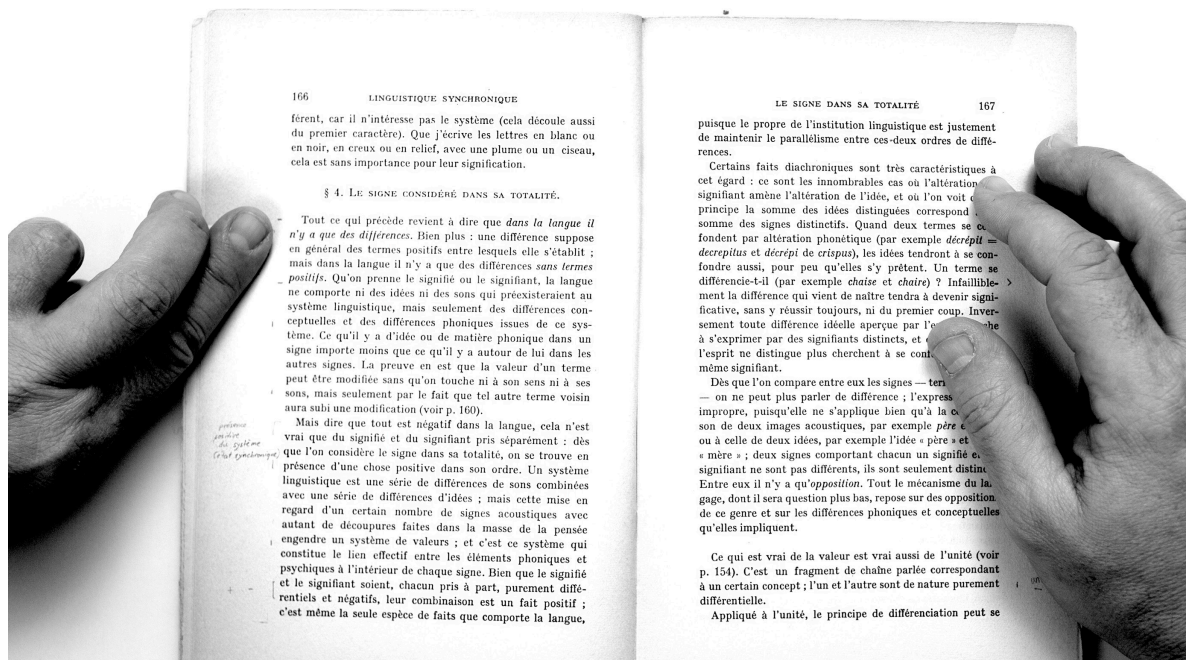
With warmth,

RACHEL

[JULIEN BISMUTH] Thank you for a beautifully worded question. I would agree with both of TZARA'S statements, and I would only add that thought makes itself in the mouth or by the hand, but always in language. I don't think there is what we call thought outside of language, and I don't think there is language outside of language. I have never encountered such a thing as a language of images or things or colors. Language is language, and language consists of words that are spoken or written, heard or read, and by means of which we distinguish and give meaning to everything, including

language. In a famous text called "*The semiology of language,*" ÉMILE BENVENISTE gives a clear and succinct explanation of why FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE and his successors ultimately failed in their attempts at developing a general semiology that could apply to extra-linguistic modes of communication such as gesture or art. BENVENISTE doesn't say that artworks or gestures do not "mean" or do not "communicate." Rather, what he shows is that they can only do so *in relation to* language. If we see a work by an artist or from a culture or historical period that we know little or nothing about, we can still appreciate or even interpret the object in question, but we will definitely understand it differently once we learn more about it. We read the world through a web of words. Language is a medium not of perception, but rather of nomination, distinction, and partitioning. Thought names a movement from within that space, always with an eye to what is taking place outside of it, to the reality that language names and maps.

8



"... in language there are only differences..."

FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

*This is an image of a book that first belonged to my mother. Her annotations sometimes meet mine on its pages. All of the images in this series were taken from books I own, books that I keep coming back to. This short phrase names the underlying thread that ties all of the objects in this room together: the play of difference that defines and constitutes language.*



A very eloquent example of this dynamic is color. There's a whole realm of linguistics that studies the different ways in which the color spectrum is differentiated and named in different idioms. Think of a rainbow: it's a continuous modulation of color. There are no limits and boundaries within a rainbow, only continuity. Yet in order to be able to navigate within it, humans use words to divide the spectrum into colors, shades, hues, etc... The invisible lines we draw to break up the spectrum and transform it into a color chart are words that, as Saussure points out, only mean in relation and distinction from one another.

That said, words are enigmatic and elusive objects. The Austrian writer KARL KRAUSS wrote that "*The closer the look one takes at a word, the greater the distance from which it looks back.*" A word can communicate a distance, but a persistent engagement with a text, for example, can also show something else. MICHEL FOUCAULT speaks of pushing language to reveal or expose something of its "outside." Though I am fascinated by this medium, I still believe in the idea of prose, that is to say of a language that speaks to the realities that lie outside of it. And I am also fascinated by texts that push language almost to its breaking point, in an attempt to convey that which it otherwise leaves unsaid.

To return to your question, and as the two quotes by TZARA point out, thought is embedded in the body of the thinker. That means that we think in relation to our perceptions, sensations, desires, emotions and affects; but also that our thoughts operate within the situated body that we are born into. In linguistics, that embeddedness is addressed in the field of sociolinguistics, a discipline associated with the linguist WILLIAM LABOV, and also YUEN REN CHAO, who is present in the exhibition. Both were interested in how languages are shaped and altered by cultural and social factors, and Labov in particular provides a profound insight into how linguistic change and variation (the way English, for example, is constantly splitting into different slangs, idioms,

dialects, etc.) is determined by splits and differentiations within its population of speakers (geographical dispersal, class or professional distinctions, cultural and sub-cultural groupings, etc.). That is something that I have engaged with in different projects, including a performance I did in Switzerland with an actor who spoke Romansch, a fascinating language that has no standard form, only "variants." It also led me to start working in Brazil in recent years, with indigenous groups and the anthropologists, linguists, and activists that are working with them to preserve their languages, cultures, and environment. There's a creativity to language, to its variation and constant experimentation, that I find fascinating because it isn't tied to individual authorship. Its authors are innumerable and anonymous. MARCEL DUCHAMP said that artists operate like psychic mediums or radio antennas, picking up things that are floating in a common cultural ether. Language, as a medium, channels and registers similar currents and eddies within the culture at large.

Returning to the TZARA quotes, the poet DAVID ANTIN has been an important influence on my work and on my way of working, in part because of how he foregrounds this embeddedness of language in a singular body in his *Talk Poems*. My "performed" text for the video is an homage of sorts to ANTIN. Like him, rather than compose a text and read it, I improvised the monologue that accompanied the video in front of an audience (that included you) and overlaid the recording onto the footage. I thought about what I was going to say, but I didn't write anything in advance. My insistence on performing and improvising was a way to elude or escape the semblance of authorial authority that one can more readily convey when one is composing a text at a desk, with the added support of books, the web, and other resources. I wanted to use what in French we call "*les moyens de bord*" (my available means/ ressources). In doing so, I wasn't conveying a personality or personal language, but instead, the limited realm of the knowledge I carry within me at all

times, the thoughts I have developed over time, and my ability to articulate both in language. But I also wanted to show a thought process and cast light on the peripatetic path that the mind takes to articulate and formulate an idea.

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Dear JULIEN,

I think one of the aspects I like most about the exhibition is the full range of language that is on display—the poetic, the philosophical, the scholarly, the everyday, the bureaucratic, the illegible, the political. This last one is interwoven throughout many works, with references to the loss of Indigenous languages, the politics of speech under the former military dictatorships in Brazil and Argentina, and the creative protests within the pages of Hong Kong's *Apple Daily* and the A4 Revolution.

Such references couldn't be timelier, given the current political situation in Florida. Right now, there is a proposed bill that would upend many aspects of the public education system, seeking to ban "any major or minor in Critical Race Theory, Gender Studies, or Intersectionality." I asked my colleague what might happen to the Center for Gender, Sexualities, and Women's Studies Research here on campus. The colleague suggested that maybe we could just change the name. Do you have any suggestions for us? Perhaps the Center for Feminist Theory could work. Or maybe, the Center for the Sex Which Is Not One. The Program for Witches and Hysterics. The Bureau of Sapphic Reeducation. A major in the Laugh of the Medusa. A minor in Alice Doesn't. The Office of Abject Mothers. The Program for Bodies That Matter. The Department of Beings Always Yet to Be Defined and Who Will Never Be Caught. We will read books of blank paper and teach students to write in invisible ink.

I think my real question is: When is it important to hold onto a name?

Sincerely,

A CONCERNED READER

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[JB] I want to say that in the face of such grotesque and repulsive attacks, one has to hold on to the censored or demonized names. But there is a beauty, a humor, and an undeniable efficacy to dissimulation and encryption, as in the A4 protests or Hong Kong ads I included in the exhibition. And sometimes dissimulation is simply a way to avoid actual censorship or violence. I am still unable to believe that the DeSantis bills can hold up to an actual legal challenge. And if they can, then there's a structural and systemic issue in the American legal system and constitution. I use these words deliberately, because they have also come under attack. I'm not a legal scholar, and though I have lived here for some time, and studied in the United States, I am still unable to understand how all of this is possible from a legal and constitutional standpoint. But in the meantime, I do believe that it is important to hold onto a name, whether overtly or covertly. If in *The Department of Beings Always Yet to Be Defined and Who Will Never Be Caught*, the beings in question can continue to name themselves as they wish to be named, that is already a victory. In Hong Kong, the protest movement adopted a famous phrase by BRUCE LEE to describe their adaptability: "be water." Water is not just an ungraspable and fluid entity, it is also (to quote the poet OVID) that which "hollows out stone, not through force but through persistence."

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Dear JULIEN,

And what about these animals? I kept returning to them during my visit to the exhibition. If *Uncertain Codes* is about the differences in language, does this include the language of animals too? Growing up, I used to be told that one of the qualities that differentiates humans from animals was our ability to use language. But as the years have passed, I have become much less certain in that distinction, and indeed have grown doubtful of any distinction that seeks to hierarchize one life over another.

We all have our languages and, after all, the jaguar pacing its cage can communicate with us, just not with our written system of signs.

Watching your video essay, I found myself continually surprised and at a loss for words. That big cat in the Brazilian zoo - is it a jaguar or a leopard? (A jaguar, I am almost certain). Those brilliant pink birds - what are their names? (Ditto for their feathered friends flying around outside the enclosure). That rodent wandering the trails - an agouti? (I truly have no idea). What is a group of turtles called? (A bale, it turns out).

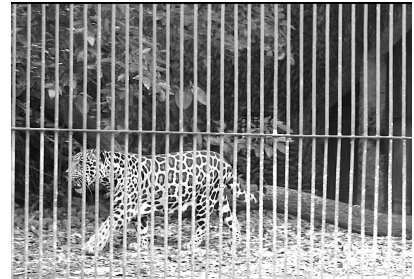
Once I read a delightful interview with JUDITH BUTLER in which she was describing the experience of teaching JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU'S *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. She wanted students to rethink the perhaps common understanding of onomatopoeias—that the word *meow*, for example, exists pre-linguistically because it supposedly mimics the actual sound made by a cat. To rupture this assumption, she asked her students to name the different languages they spoke. And then the students took turns announcing what cats "say" in each of those languages, producing a wide array of different onomatopoeic sounds that they all thought were the "natural" noises cats make. "Cats say various things (or speak various ways or make various sounds) in various languages," Butler explained, "and it's more the case that the word we have for the sound prepares us to hear the sound in a certain way... Cats say, 'mah.' Cats say, 'mew.' They say, 'eee.' Cats say lots of things. You have no idea what they say."

Her point in the interview was ultimately a pedagogical and sociopolitical one—that we should neither presume a "common language" nor romantically long for one (either in the classroom or the so-called "public sphere"). But I suppose my concern in this ambling letter goes back to the animals: what about their languages? Uncertain, certainly, but then so too are our own...

Yours,

RACHEL

**BIFOCAL PAINTING - Visual Artist inventor of the Bifocal Proposition, is looking for people who use bifocal lenses to paint the two planes of visibility on canvases. They will be paintings with fields of vision, and during the opening of the exposition the public will have to use bifocal glasses. write to PAULO BRUSCKY. C.P. 850 - RE - PE.**



Still from *Idiom* by JULIEN BISMUTH (2023)

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[JB] It is a jaguar, and the red bird is called a guará. I think the bird you see outside of its cage is a type of kingfisher, and the rodent is called an agouti, you're right! I filmed that footage in Belém, at the Museu Goeldi. I used this footage because it shows something of what language does, or rather, of what we do with it. I had seen flocks of guará a few days earlier in the wild, and seeing them caged felt absurd. A zoo is an embodied discursive construct. The animals are literally contained in boxes that in turn reflect the classic Linnaean system. Walking through a zoo is not unlike walking through a natural history museum, except that the animals are stuffed into cages rather than stuffed with wool and wire armatures.

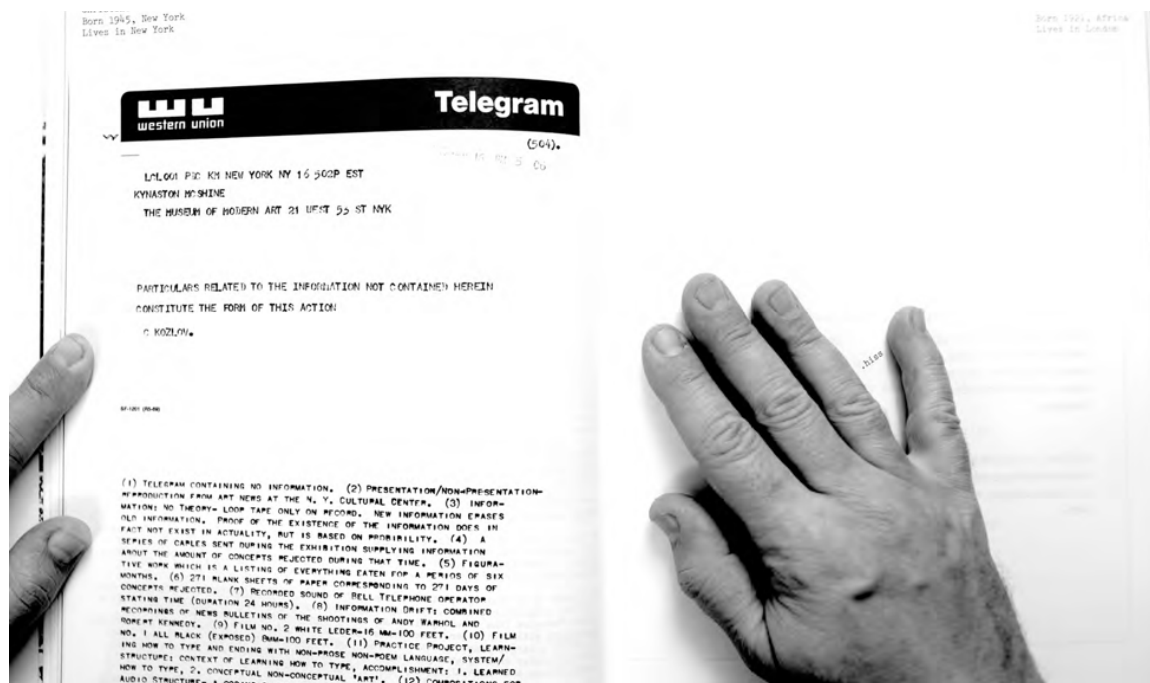
I think both of the things that BUTLER touches upon are important and related: how we use different sounds for the same things in different languages, and how animals communicate. They are both also very vast and complex topics. On the topic of animal language, I'll refer once again to BENVENISTE, for whom the distinction is that human language consists of signs, whereas animal communication

only relies on signals. But I think there is research being done today that was not being done in his time, and I would defer to what it reveals before coming to any conclusions. That said, I don't think that saying that animals do not have what we call language is a hierarchical gesture. It can also be a distinction. Different species experience the world differently, and we still have a lot to learn about how other species experience the world. I was recently reading an article on bird migrations, and the enduring riddle of how birds steer themselves over such vast distances. They are able to do on their own what we can only replicate with a monstrous infrastructure of radars, satellites, and other devices, including language.

As for the phonetic "particularities" of specific languages, it brings to mind a famous text by another brilliant linguist, ROMAN JAKOBSON, on infant speech and aphasia. JAKOBSON shows that when infants learn to speak in their maternal languages, they forget how to make certain sounds so as to better learn how to make the sounds

of their own language. Each language is a specific microcosm of sounds, into which we translate the sounds of the world and of the other beings that populate it. By the same token, each language is a specific world of words and syntactic rules and structures. The question is neither to erase these differences under the umbrella of universalism, nor to reify them under that of something like the SAPIR-WHORF hypothesis, or of its more extreme offshoots today, namely those which seek to claim that speakers of different languages not only think differently, but that these differences are unbridgeable. I think we are always translating, even within our own languages, we are always in between idioms, starting with our own. Language is not a place. Nor is our relationship to language or culture one of identity in my opinion. Neither people nor languages nor cultures are stable entities. They all evolve, shift, split, change, fragment and self-differentiate continually, albeit at different speeds and intensities. Our maternal language shapes who we are, but that relationship also

evolves. When I feel a sudden pain, I still say the French "aïe" rather than the English "ouch." To me, that remains the sound of surprise at pain. Yet when I speak French in a more informal setting, my slang comes off as dated, and marks me as belonging to a specific generation. What I am trying to say with all these examples is that, whether we are looking at human or animal languages, language in general or a specific language, the languages we speak or the languages that are foreign to us, our perspective can only ever be partial, contextual, positional even. The linguist JEAN-CLAUDE MILNER says that linguistics is a science without an observatory, without a neutral or objective observational point, because we can only ever study language with language, i.e. by writing or speaking about it. As such, to think about language or languages is to think from within, rather than to observe from outside. And when you're aware of that difference, the cacophony of human idioms becomes as eloquent and captivating as a chorus of birdsong.



*Particulars related to the information not contained herein constitute the form of this action*  
C KOZLOV

*The artist CHRISTINE KOZLOV sent this telegram to the curator of the exhibition Information in 1970 as her contribution to the show. Below the statement reproduced above is a list of her entire body of work up to that point. The statement is to the list as a shadow is to the object that casts it.*

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**CONVERSATION II:**  
[JESÚS FUENMAYOR]  
+[JULIEN BISMUTH]

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[JESÚS FUENMAYOR] At the beginning of our idea exchange for the exhibition, there were two main issues in my mind. The first one was more epistemological: Is Art the right “place” (space, field, site, discipline, practice, etc.) to hide messages? The second, more political issue was how to deal with such a problem from an individual point of view. After investing so much of your energy in trying to deal with the question about the construction of language in this exhibit or in general throughout your entire work and research (as if it was possible to separate them), what do you think of art as being the right (convenient, appropriate, accommodating, suiting, fitting) place to hide messages? If so, is it the site to reveal the meaning of those messages?

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12 [JULIEN BISMUTH]: Your question touches upon the difference between art and activism. While the communication of a message by other means is an essential, even vital, aspect of the A4 protests and Hong Kong ads, I don't think that the purpose of an artwork is to convey a message. In fact, I think artworks sink to the realm of illustration (and I love illustrations, but for other reasons) when they are fettered to a defined “meaning” or content. Instead, I believe that an artwork is effective when it functions like a sounding board. A sounding board can either be a board that “reflects the voice of a speaker towards the audience” or it can be an instrument for sounding the depth of a body of water. An artwork functions in a similar manner. A painting, for example, has no voice. But in the moment when someone stands in front of it, they voice the thoughts that the painting inspires or provokes in them. Artists, including myself, often speak as if their work somehow embodied their intentions. The truth is that once we release a work into the world, we become just another viewer, just another reader of

a work whose vitality rests in being open to interpretation. That isn't to say that all interpretations are equally valid, but rather, that we lose something essential when we affix a determinate meaning to an artwork, when we close off this space. We've lost sight of that because we have become so accustomed to having works explained to us in advance by wall texts, and press releases. To me, art should aspire to return to the same dynamic that still exists in other arts, like poetry for example. Poets don't write press releases for their poems, their openness to interpretation is precisely what makes them poetry rather than prose. I think art is and has always been more interesting when it aspires to the condition of poetry rather than prose.

In the case of the Hong Kong ads, there is a subtext to each ad that may be a pun, an allusion or reference, but to the knowing reader, it signals support for the protests. With the PAULO BRUSCKY ads, for example, the interpretation of the message is more open, and extends outwards to larger questions about language, politics, and art. That is a difference between these two sets of works. The means may be the same, but the ends are different. To make that distinction is not the same as making a value judgment, I don't think that one is less interesting than the other, or that something is better or more elevated when it is called art. Their purposes are different. Politics and activism are about taking a side. There is a lot of activist art being made today, but I find artworks to be more “political” and “active” when they create a space for viewers to think on their own, rather than telling them what to think, not just about the work, but about the reality it addresses.

In art we often confuse what a work communicates on its own with what is communicated by its discourse, i.e. the various “paratexts” that surround it, from captions to press releases, interviews with the artist, essays by specialists, etc. Art comes into its own when it engages with these processes by calling them into question. In GUY DE COINTET'S books, for example, which I included in the exhibition, many of them are

composed in coded or invented languages. Some of them contain, at the end of the book, a key that allows the reader to decipher the book. Others do not. In an interview, de Cointet explains that not all of his books contain a secret or coded content, but that he would like his readers to think that they might, and that there might be another work within the work even. That's precisely the sort of message that I aim to convey in my works: not a predetermined content (be it overt or covert), but rather its potential for other readings, other interpretations, other extensions of an artwork, not just for the viewer, but also for the artist. An artwork should always retain the potential to differ over time. There's a beautiful short text by WALTER BENJAMIN titled “*The Medium through Which Works of Art Continue to Influence Later Ages.*” That medium is perhaps something like the preservation of its potential to remain open to interpretation, especially when contexts and audiences change and evolve.

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[JF] In the exhibition there were many voices apart from your own. In fact, we didn't announce the exhibition as an exhibition by or of the artist X or Z, it was announced as “organized by” you, highlighting the presence of other voices that were participating. However, some visitors saw it as a solo exhibition maybe because of your prevailing presence. How do you prefer to see it? As a solo effort or as a collaboration? (Choose one...)

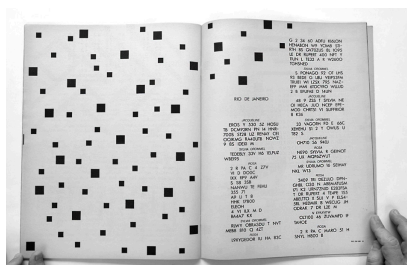


Installation view of *Uncertain Codes* (2023). Photo by MCKINNA ANDERSON.

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[JB] Well, I think it is a solo effort in the sense that I didn't collaborate with the other artists. What I was doing was citing, showcasing, referencing. I spoke with CONSTANCE DEJONG, and let her choose what she wanted to show of course, but other than

that, the decisions were made by me, in close conversation and dialogue with you, especially for the curated part. I say this not to take more credit but to clarify the roles. That said, when I bring other people into a show in this manner, I don't want to be representing them, speaking for them or in their place. Rather I want to present them to the viewer and let that conversation unfold on its own. I think that's a big part of what artists, authors, but also curators do. At the end of the day, we are communicating our thoughts of course, our ways of writing or making art or curating an exhibition, but we're also speaking up for the things that have inspired us. I imagine that must be one of the most exciting things to do as a curator. I know that I have discovered several artists through you - such as ROBERTO OBREGÓN - and it's one of the most thrilling aspects of being a viewer or reader.

[JF] When you see how the exhibition brings together the ideas of others represented by artists' books or edited books, videos, or reference to other books, in relation to the subject of how language is constructed, maybe the answer to my first question is ambiguous. There are as many instances where the revelation of the hidden message's meaning will ruin the work or render it unnecessary, as there are instances where the ultimate purpose is to unencrypt the ciphers, and everything in between. How do you relate to this permanent tension between ambiguity and transparency that seems to define the way we construct language within almost every artistic practice? How do you make it a productive tension?



Still from video documentation of books from JULIEN BISMUTH'S collection (2023). Image of CUY DE COINTET'S *Mrs Newton* in FILE magazine (1980).

[JB] There's a phrase by the poet ROBERT DUNCAN that I really like: *"I want to compose a poetry with the meaning entirely occult, that is with the meaning contained not as a jewel is contained in a box but as the inside of a box is contained in a box."*

There are artists who are interested in secrets or the occult. There are artists who are interested only in revealing, showing, shining a strong light on even the most hidden or obscure or obstructed spaces. And in between, there is a small constellation of artists who have understood how to work with the tension between these two polarities. In your words, they make it a productive tension, and that's the best way to describe it. I agree that in the moment when we reveal the message of a coded text for example, the original text disappears. What remains is the hidden message. That is why I am less interested in works that convey or conceal a message, and am more drawn to works that engage differently - more speculatively or critically - with communication. Works in which your attention is made to dwell not on hidden content, but on the opacity or ambiguity of any communication. To return to de COINTET, I believe that the actual content of his coded books is less important than the encounter with the opacity of the original text. When I hear someone speaking in a foreign tongue, I feel like I am hearing language. I hear clusters of sounds that repeat, distinguished and demarcated by silences of varying lengths. I cannot access the meaning of what was said, so I am made aware of the formal structurations of speech, but I also become aware of all of the other dimensions of the spoken word (from intonation to tone, emphasis, speed, rhythm, etc.). Its opacity speaks.

We live in a world of increasingly telegraphic, consumable, and reductively determinate messaging. Things say what they are supposed to say and when they don't, then there's a glitch, a problem, or a failure. If art has anything to offer that "entertainment" or "information" do not already provide, it is a space of resistance to this terrifying logic,

which is nothing more than an extension of consumerism to the sphere of language. "Cute" images of cats apparently account for 15% of internet traffic, and it is estimated that there are around 6.5 billion images of cats circulating online. Yet how many of them invite their viewers to reflect on what the word "cute" means, or what "cuteness" is? Or the fact that humans are the only species to domesticate other species as companions or pets? Or the relationship we have with our pets? Or the fact that we waste so much time looking at enormous quantities of images of the same thing, over and over again, just so we can click a button to mark our appreciation and move on to the next image in the series? I believe that the reason why we find Chatbots so "uncannily" human, is that we have been moving closer and closer to thinking and communicating like algorithms. The option to like or swipe past an image on Instagram is nothing more nor less than a reduction of thought and language to a binary code.

[JF] I'm always amazed by how some artists (and people from other disciplines or backgrounds too) engineer incredible language contortions to evade censorship under dictatorial or authoritarian regimes. Like the A4 protests, which we registered in the newspaper room inside the exhibition. There are so many creative people that feel it is a civic duty to react to abuses of power. What kind of responsibility do you think is more proper, useful, or relevant to assume from the artistic practices today?

[JB] This is a difficult question, if only because art and politics are words that have been and remain open to interpretation and discussion. As you say, there are lots of creative people the world over who engineer (I like this choice of word) language and image to convey political messages, often under threat of imprisonment, violence or even death. What is the role or responsibility of art and artists in this equation? I think every artist has to decide that for themselves.

Personally, I find that the most politically effective work does not wear its politics on its sleeve. An artwork that is basically a protest sign transferred to a linen canvas is not very interesting, and I can think of some that I actually find disrespectful or even offensive in their instrumentalization of political discourse for what are essentially commercial purposes. The PAULO BRUSCKY ads engage with a political situation by way of humor, poetry, allegory, and the subversive use of mass media. The CILDO MEIRELES *Insertions into ideological circuits* are more overt in their messaging, but their hijacking of commercial distribution chains exceeds their content, calling attention to the wider socio-economic factors behind the rise of the military dictatorship, such as US support of dictatorships in Latin America at that time, capitalism, and consumer culture (MEIRELES used currency bills and Coca-Cola bottles in this series of works, bills and bottles that he would reinsert into the consumer chain). Yet neither of those works are prescriptive. They provoke or question but they do not dictate a response to the reader.

I am unable to answer the last part of your question on responsibility, because once again I think each and every artist has to answer that on their own. Sometimes the most seemingly frivolous and “irresponsible” artists are in fact the most deeply - and for that reason the most discretely or obscurely - engaged in what is going on around them. I also feel as if I am still trying to define that responsibility for myself, in my own work, and that maintaining this irresolution is a deliberate choice on my part. I make art also so as to think about these questions in a more profound and extended manner. I know that when I vote, I have to make a choice. But when I make an artwork, I want to probe, question, and unmoor the ballasts of our so-called “givens.” I don’t want to start from or work towards anything like a conclusion.

I’ll give you an example of a political work that I admire and perhaps even aspire to. ROBERT FILLIOU once proposed an artwork (as yet unrealized) in which towns in France

and Germany would exchange their monuments to fallen soldiers from either of the two WORLD WARS. To paraphrase Filliou: when someone gazes at a list of names of dead soldiers from their hometown, they feel anger and desire retribution. By seeing the losses on the other side, perhaps that anger can instead shift to the horrors of war in and of themselves, in all of their monumentalized absurdity. It is precisely this shift of focus that art can bring to politics.



Installation views of *Uncertain Codes* (2023). Photos by EMILY OSTRANDER.

• **CONVERSATION III:**

[PETER GOUGE]  
+ [JULIEN BISMUTH]

[PETER GOUGE] There is a lot to think about in your show, but I’m primarily interested in talking about the experience I had of bringing the class I’m teaching in to talk to Jesús about the show. I’ve been thinking about it through that lens—the context of the gallery as attached to a teaching institute. Is this specific audience something you were thinking about in the construction of the show? If so, how did it affect what was included, or left out?

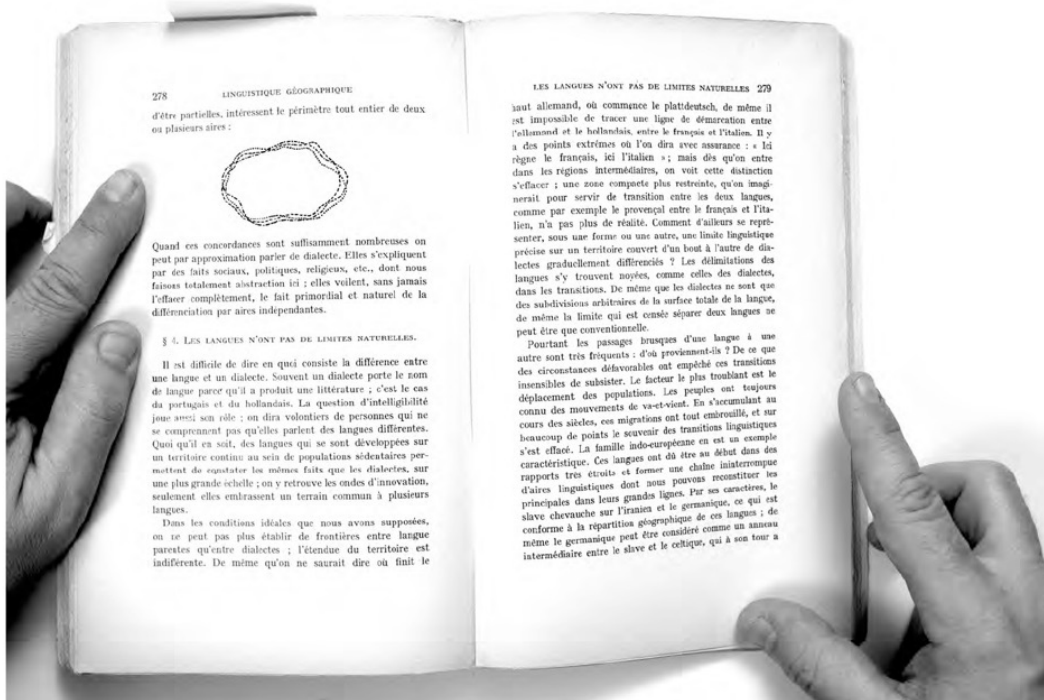
[JULIEN BISMUTH] It is a more discursive exhibition, and I did want to revisit and address some of the authors that many of us have had to read during our studies, such as Saussure, and dwell on specific

passages or ideas. But in general, when I work on a show, I try to take into account various types or categories of viewers, and to provide for different experiences, different ways of entering into the work. The information or references in the work are always readily available, and the complexities I introduce, I try to make accessible. I vividly dislike work that aims at a semblance of sophistication or complexity by leaving out some of the necessary background information or reserving it for a select coterie of viewers. That said, this show has a lot to do with what I take to be the most fundamental aspect of an education: learning to read carefully, slowly, interrogatively, critically, both on and off the page. That skill is only becoming more important these days, when even facts are being politicized and manipulated.



[PG] The course I’m teaching revolves around the incorporation of research into our work and explores ways we might communicate that to the viewer. Obviously this involves a lot of editing, and traditionally involves synthesizing our references/research in the pursuit of creating something ‘new’, whatever that means. It was refreshing to see an alternate approach in your show, the presentation of the work of others as its own thing—not quite appropriated and not hidden through synthesis. Maybe not standing on the shoulders of giants, but as part of a crowd speaking. I’m interested in your methodology here—is this a function of your interest in literature/anthropology or something else?

[JB] I love that phrase: “*part of a crowd speaking.*” That is exactly what I was aiming for. I have a background in academia and I love research, or more generally speaking, learning.



*“Languages have no natural limits.”*

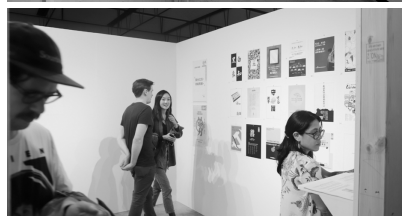
FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE

*How do you name or define the diversity of a language? What is the difference between a language and a dialect, a dialect and a slang, a slang and an idiom? The limits of any language are defined by the words used to define it. Like the overlapping lines of the illustration, those delineations tremble and proliferate the closer you look at them.*

Yet I'm also keenly aware of the difference between art and scholarship. When I was in academia, I knew that anything I wrote would be subjected to a very intense process of examination and discussion by my professors and peers. That simply does not exist in art, neither for artists nor for critics and curators (though it obviously does for art historians). To be honest, some of the research-based art projects I have encountered seem to emulate actual academic research yet without the same rigor. Yet there are also artists and collectives that propose a relationship to research that is both rigorous in its standards, and yet “unconventional” (with respect to the clearly defined conventions of academia) in its approach. The filmmaker HARUN FAROCKI, the poet DAVID ANTIN, or the artist ELLIE GA use knowledge as a means to other ends. Not that one doesn't learn things from their work, but rather that we are also led to think about other things, such as the specific qualities of an image, the contingency of certain encounters, or the formal qualities of a thought

process (as if a thought process were a shape or a path).

I think that most artists engage in some form of research, whether they make it explicit or not is another question. In my case, I always aim to make work that can resonate with someone who knows nothing about the topic I am engaging with, as well as with someone who does. And when I do include research, I try to place it in the paratexts (press release, etc.) rather than in the work itself.



Installation views of *Uncertain Codes* (2023). Photos by MCKINNA ANDERSON and BELLA EURY RESPECTIVELY.

This exhibition is different in that sense. It was more explicitly discursive, and I wanted to foreground these other voices. I don't think it's a question of appropriation, at least it isn't for me when it comes to ideas. I don't believe in the ownership of ideas. To cite DAVID ANTIN, ideas are like tools, and like tools, they unveil their potential when they are allowed to circulate freely and be used by a multiplicity of subjects. I was operating within a logic of citation for this show, which is a very specific gesture. To cite is to extract a fragment from a named text or work. So it's not a collage or cut-and-paste type of procedure, where a multitude of more or less anonymous fragments are used to compose a new work. Instead, the citations were isolated, but also named and attributed. WALTER BENJAMIN writes somewhere that a citation has an autonomous presence, but that its “torn edges” evoke the larger work from which it has been extracted. That evocation can also function like an invitation to read the original work. If I had to describe my use of research in my art, it would

be in large part to create this kind of evocation and invitation on the part of the viewer. I hope that some of the viewers were encouraged to continue reading the works and authors that I invited into this exhibition.

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[PG] Similarly, I'm curious about the inclusion of the posters and advertisements in the center room— I had a lightbulb moment while viewing the show for the second time and came away with quite a different read on the show. It's unusual to see the impetus for a body of work laid clear like that. I'm curious about your thoughts on the inclusion of it as part of the show—how did it come about, and perhaps, do you think the work speaks as clearly without it?

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[JB] The impetus or rather impetuses of this show were multiple. I was initially interested in pairing procedures of encryption and coded language by artists (such as GUY DE COINETET or HANNAH WEINER) with the use of similar procedures in other fields, namely political activism.

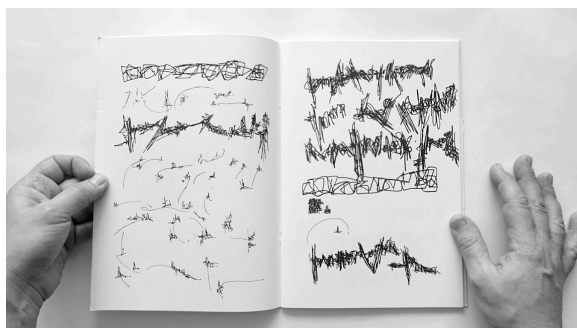
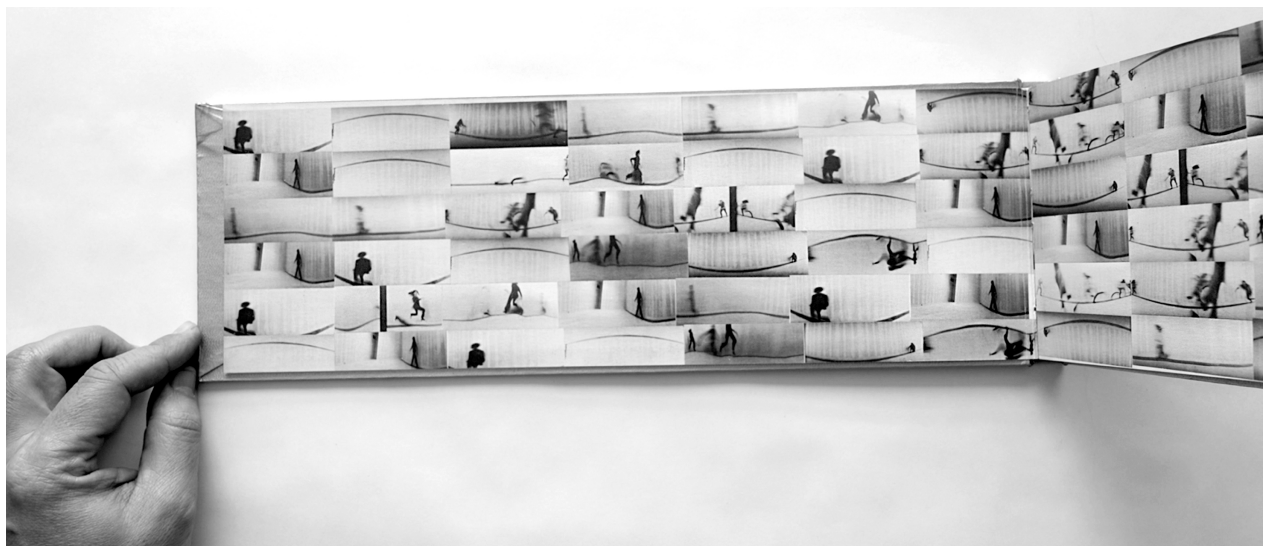
The project then transformed into something that was more generally or more extensively about my interest in language, both as a medium and as an object for thought. To borrow your earlier phrase, I was working from the idea of placing my work, my voice, in a room of other voices. I wasn't trying to subsume everything within an underlying thematic or formal structure, but rather to show a constellation of figures, works, processes, and perspectives. But I do find that particular concatenation of voices (PAULO BRUSCKY, CILDO MEIRELES, Hong Kong activists, and the A4 protests) to be a very compelling one, in that it shows how similar procedures can be deployed in art and activism or even, as in the case of the two Brazilian artists, both simultaneously.

**UNEXPECTED SOUNDS of Pulmonary Exams - Searching for patronage for the performance of a concert using pulmonary sounds (Cracklings and Wheezings). The combinations/ amplifications of the sounds will be done with a computer. Write to PAULO BRUSCKY. C.P. 850 - Recife - PE - 50.000.**

**CELULASONIC  
CONCERT Record 100  
cellphones ringing at  
the same time with  
100 different rings and  
send this recording via  
internet to Paulo Bruscky  
pbruscky@terra.com.br.**

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**CONVERSATION IV:**  
[DEVIN HARCLERODE]  
+ [JULIEN BISMUTH]

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[DEVIN HARCLERODE] Something that has always stuck with me in GUY DE COINETET's practice is that *ARCRIT* was first distributed in LA at newsstands without any additional information. The potential of illegibility in an otherwise legible place requires the reader to pause – to wait – to accept that they don't understand. This feeling, a slippage



Still from video documentation of books from JULIEN BISMUTH's collection (2023).  
Image of GUY DE COINETET and LARRY BELL's *Animated Discourse* (1975)  
and from MIRTHA DEMISARCHE's *Libro no.8* (1970)



of comprehension, is omnipresent in *Uncertain Codes* – but contextualized in a space where the viewer expects, to some degree, a suspension of comprehension. Can you speak to that difference? The language differential of context.

[JULIEN BISMUTH] The Austrian writer KARL KRAUSS wrote that an artist is someone who turns a solution into a riddle. You're referring to a newspaper-style publication by GUY DE COINTEP which he initially placed in LA newsstands, as you said, without any additional information. Some of the most impactful artworks I have encountered are those that elude or question facile identification or contextualization. So much of what we see today is explained for us in advance. Moreover, so much of what we read and see is framed as a fact, a given, a conclusion, or a solution... and we are often only given the choice between adhering to it (as in the "like" of social media) or saying nothing. I think the pace of consumption of images, texts, and objects has reinforced and exacerbated this dynamic. If there is anything that art or poetry can propose in our time, it is a space for other kinds of interaction, starting with questioning what we often simply take for granted, like context. De COINTEP's newspaper was at first shown out of context before being reclaimed by art history. Even if you show a work within its designated setting, you can still unmoor or at the very least interrogate the ready-made frameworks into which your work has been cast. CHRIS BURDEN once made a work in which every visitor that entered the museum had to pass through a turnstile which in turn activated a mechanism that applied pressure to the foundation of the museum. If a million visitors had come to the show, the mechanism would have collapsed the building. That's an extreme and very concrete example of pushing back against context. Artists like LAURIE PARSONS, ANDREA FRASER, JOHN KNIGHT, or PHILIPPE THOMAS have created similar tensions with the institutions in which they've shown, but in a more discursive and conceptual manner.

De COINTEP's newspaper does something similar in a newsstand. Procedures of subversion or estrangement are often simply a way to make people look, think, and consider the things they simply take for granted.

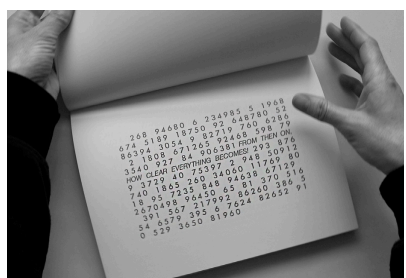
[DH] This exhibition is on view during a particularly tenuous time for public institutions in the state of Florida. Language is quite literally being pulled from curriculum that speaks truth to power. What are your hopes/advice/thoughts for the students who see *Uncertain Codes* and who feel unheard or erased by the *Ideological Circuits* currently at play in the Florida legislature such as HB 7 and HB 999.

[JB] I continue to be shocked, appalled, and frankly confused not only by what DESANTIS is doing, but by the fact that he is able to enact and enforce these clearly discriminatory, censorious, and even undemocratic bills. I want to say illegal even, and I hope that one day they will be judged as such in a court of law. My hope is that the backlash to these measures will extend farther and deeper than DESANTIS and his acolytes anticipate. As for thoughts or advice, that is more complicated. I do feel that one of the most pernicious and dangerous aspects of these so-called culture wars (I say so-called because I hesitate to dignify whatever Fox News is circulating as a "culture") is the depth and violence of the divide between the left and the right in the United States. My only advice would be to deepen the opposition when possible, and move beyond the rhetoric of hate to its conceptual or political underpinnings. It's one thing to condemn homophobia or xenophobia among a designated group of people, it's another to seek to undo the very mechanisms, ideological and linguistic, by means of which such discriminatory ideologies subsist and persist. If you find yourself using the rhetoric and tactics of your opponent, but simply applying it to other ends (i.e. targets and aspirations), you may not be as far removed from them as you think. Personally, I think

that to oppose racism or sexism or transphobia, one has to oppose any form of xenophobia, looking to its underlying mechanisms, starting with the idea that people that look or speak alike must also be alike. Or that certain differences of lifestyle or opinion are threatening, even when they are simply asking for the right to exist in the open. That said, when the opposition sinks to a certain baseness of tactics and rhetoric, it's difficult to not to seek them out on their own muddled field. There is so much that is under threat today, starting with the world we live in. How obscene and absurd is it that a substantial part of the population in this country would rather focus on threatening those who just want to live, think, and love differently from them?



Installation views of *Uncertain Codes* (2023).  
Photo by MCKINNA ANDERSON.



Still from video documentation of books from JULIEN BISMUTH's collection (2023).  
Image of GUY DE COINTEP's *A Few Drawings* (1975).

[DH] A notion that struck me in the exhibition is the invocation of play amongst the subtext of oppression. For instance, there is a clear dark humor in PAULO BRUSCKY's advertisements that really resonated for me. How do you define the importance of humor in protest gestures?

**ANTHROPOPHAGIC RECORD: Selling a record that disappears when the needle of the turntable touches it. PAULO BRUSCKY C.P. 850. Recife.**

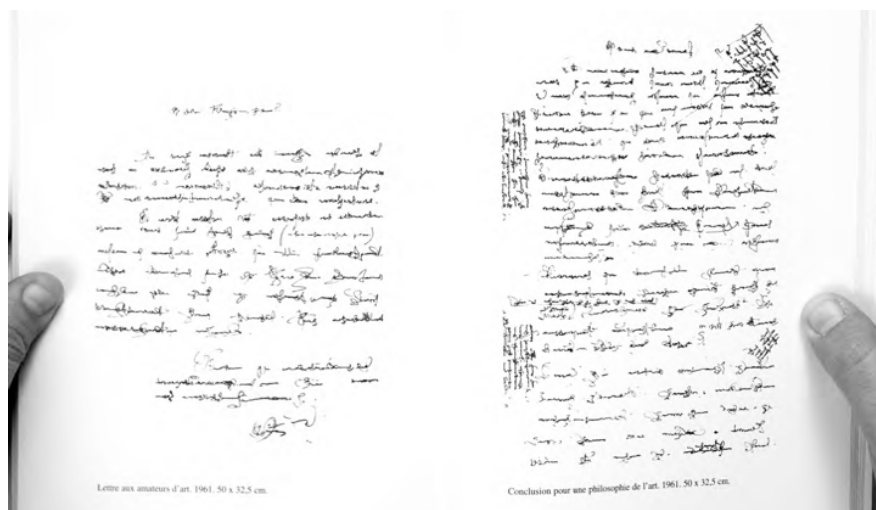
[JB] Humor plays a vital role in protest gestures, because humor is a medium for communicating content that certain audiences would otherwise refuse. It also plays a vital role in art, if only because so much of what the avant-gardes did is simply ... funny. DUCHAMP's urinal is funny. Elaine Sturtevant's entire body of work is both profound and hilarious. And I personally see a great deal of humor in minimalism, though I'm not sure that some of its protagonists, like DONALD JUDD, were aware of it. Humor has always been an incredibly effective tool for leading people to see things differently, and entertain other perspectives. It is always interesting

to see who "gets" certain jokes. There's a great story about PAULO BRUSCKY. On one of the occasions where he was arrested and taken in for interrogation, a policeman asked him to explain what he did as an artist. He then asked BRUSCKY if he was basically saying that anything could be art. Could someone take one of the floor tiles in the room, hang it on the wall, and call it art? BRUSCKY answered that if the policeman did it, then no, it wouldn't be art. But if he (BRUSCKY) did it, then yes, it would be art.

To return to the topic of humor, there are several different varieties of humor, from sarcasm or irony, to verbal jokes and slapstick. I have always been inspired by a very specific category of comedy, which I would align with BUSTER KEATON, JACQUES TATI, or even ANDY KAUFMAN. Theirs is a humor that is neither ironic nor sarcastic or mocking. Instead, they turn the barbs of comedy against themselves, by literally playing the "fall guy" in their slapstick routines. Yet we don't laugh at them, instead

we laugh with them at the modern world whose absurdity they both mine and subvert. BUSTER KEATON is like a cartoon character, his resilience is elastic. Houses collapse, ships sink, wars rage, and yet he glides through the chaos like the beam of a flashlight, casting a more lucid light on the circus of the everyday.

[DH] Something I like to impart to my drawing students is that the medium of drawing has democratic potentiality via the universal language of a doodle or a note. I see this sentiment in several of the works presented in the exhibition; annotations are a form of improvisation, Hannah Weiner's work loops and conjures the subconscious, BERNARD RÉQUICHOT'S *Illegible Letters* teases the line between text and image through a scribble motif. You reflect on the doodle in your annotations as well. What power do you feel casual or more improvised spaces of language hold?



*Letter to amateurs of art. 1961. Conclusion for a philosophy of art. 1961.*

These letters form part of a sequence of eight "illegible letters" produced by the artist BERNARD RÉQUICHOT for the catalog of his exhibition at Daniel Cordier gallery in 1961. The other letters include two letters to a "merchant of paintings," a letter to a framer, a letter of thanks, and a letter of insults. This is a passage by ROLAND BARTHES on Réquichot's illegible letters:

"...what is illegible is nothing but what has been lost: to write, to lose, to rewrite, to establish the infinite play of under and over, to bring the signifier closer, to make it a giant, a monster of presence, to diminish the signifier to imperceptibility, to unbalance the message, to retain memory's form but not its content, to make the impenetrable definitive — in a word, to put all writing, all art in a palimpsest, and to make this palimpsest inexhaustible..."

Réquichot committed suicide two days the opening of his exhibition and the release of his catalog. The temptation to interpret these letters in relation to his suicide is inescapable. Yet I would rather read them against Barthes's interpretation, if only out of respect for what can only ever be a private decision. These texts do not mean, or only slightly by way of their titles. Their opacity bears witness to everything else that language leaves behind.

. ———

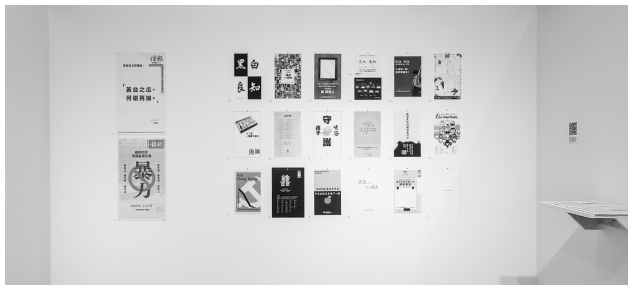
[JB] Drawing and writing are modulations of a line of ink on a page. I have always been fascinated by the moments when these authored lines drift into another space: when artists write or writers doodle for example. Automatic writing or doodling are things that any of us can do, it's another relationship to the medium, less controlled perhaps, but I'm not sure that it's more casual or even improvised. But then again I am not sure how to define or describe improvisation in a unilateral way. We're always, in a sense, oscillating between different intensities of planning and improvising. For example, when I recorded the soundtrack to the film on the night of the exhibition, I hadn't written the text in advance, but I had been thinking about it. I had been thinking about what I wanted to say and how to say it. When I started speaking, things happened and I had to take them into account. I used a metaphor or

example that led me to something I hadn't thought about, or at least not in that way. I had to keep going, but I had to do so in relation to what I had just said, as well as to what I wanted to say. But the ending was a surprise, even to me, because something happened. I found a connection between an intended thought and an example I had just given, I knew it was about time to stop, and that became my conclusion.

In the 19th and early 20th century, a lot of artists strove to develop other ways of drawing by relinquishing control, unlearning techniques, and deliberately introducing contingencies and accidents into their work. In short they wanted to unlearn drawing and start doodling again. Those forms of drawing are democratic in the sense that anyone can make an inkstain or doodle, just as anyone can make a drip painting for that matter.

It's interesting that those techniques seeped back into art and became a

way of engaging with contingency, chance, and the way things resonate when they're not intentionally composed. A text produced by randomly assembling cut pieces of newsprint will surprise even its author, the same goes for a Rorschach-style ink blot, or a JOHN CAGE chance-operation composition. The question then becomes how to interpret it. VICTOR HUGO saw his accidental drawings as a bridge to the spirit world. I prefer to see such contingent forms as yet another instance of autonomy of the world of things with respect to the world of language. We are always reading into things, even when they're things we have made ourselves, and sometimes things speak more forcefully when we allow them to slip out of our control. I am always carrying a small notebook in my pocketbook. I write and draw in it obsessively. A friend of mine says that I suffer from graphomania. Whether I do or not, seeing what emerges from the dance of the pen on a page is an endless source of inspiration to me.



Installation views of *Uncertain Codes* (2023).  
Photos by MCKINNA ANDERSON.



Installation view of *Uncertain Codes* (2023).  
Photos by anderson mc kinna.

## NEWSROOM

In April of 1970 during the military dictatorship in Brazil, the Brazilian artist CILDO MEREILES (b.1948) produced a series of works titled *Insertions into Ideological Circuits* which he defined in the following manner:

1. *There are mechanisms or circuits of circulation in society*
2. *These circuits clearly communicate the ideology of the producer, but at the same time, they are receptive to carrying insertions into their circulation.*
3. *This takes place whenever people trigger them into doing so.*

For *Insertions into Ideological Circuits*, MEREILES stamped political messages onto banknotes and Coca-Cola bottles which he then reinserted into the supply chain so that random consumers would find themselves with a banknote that asked "Who killed HERZOG?" (in reference to the death of the journalist VLADIMIR HERZOG in a military prison); or a Coca-Cola bottle adorned with instructions for making a Molotov cocktail.

The works on display in this room are also insertions into ideological circuits, namely that of the press, specifically newspapers. Rather than an overview, three specific interventions have been selected.

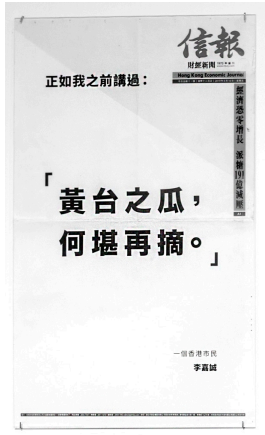
The first is a selection of coded political ads that were placed in newspapers in Hong Kong during the 2019-2020 pro-democracy protests. Most of the ads come from the now-shuttered *Apple Daily*. Their messages of support for democracy and resistance are often in yellow and black — the colors of the pro-democracy camp — and are encrypted in a playful and poetic manner. The power of whimsy that was the hallmark of the Hong Kong protesters has since inspired other pro-democracy protest movements throughout the world.

The second is the so-called "A4 Revolution" or "Blank Paper Protests," most recently seen in China, Hong Kong and Russia where demonstrators hold up blank pieces of paper to express both their dissent and inability to speak it freely. This wordless

display of defiance took inspiration from a Soviet-era joke in which a man is arrested by the KGB for distributing flyers in Red Square. When they discover that the flyers are blank, the KGB asks the man, “What is the meaning of this?” The man replies that there is no need for words because “everyone knows”.

The third and final examples are a series of classified ads by the Brazilian artist PAULO BRUSCKY (b. 1949), first produced in 1977. Like the MERIELES bank notes in the vitrine at the entrance of the exhibition, BRUSCKY’s humorous advertisements often conceal a subversive critique of the dictatorship in Brazil at the time, as in his advertisement for erasers that remove spoken words “in the air.” The ads were quickly banned from publication. BRUSCKY was jailed on three occasions for his activities by the military authorities.

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**HONG KONG ADS**

On Aug 16th, 2019, Hong Kong’s richest man, LI KA-SHING, placed front-page ads in seven of the city’s major newspapers, using poetry and cryptic language to deliver a nuanced message calling for an end to the political violence plaguing the financial hub.

The 91-year-old billionaire’s ads featured one of two full page statements – both using very few words to convey hidden messages – without expressing any explicit support for the government or the protesters.

In this ad, the billionaire invoked a line from the TANG DYNASTY poem, “The Melon of Huangtai”, written by the crown prince LI XIAN (654 - 684AD) before his suicide as a plea of mercy to his ruthless mother, the legendary Empress WU ZETIAN (624 - 705AD). The line reads:

“THE MELON OF HUANGTAI CANNOT ENDURE FURTHER PICKING”

A subtle message rich in meaning - if too many melons are picked from one vine, the vine will eventually die. The prince used an over-picked melon tree as a metaphor to describe the brutality of his mother, who would eventually ascend the throne by killing her own sons to become the only female emperor in China’s history.

The melon tree is Hong Kong. But who was the business tycoon addressing?

Was it an appeal to the pro-democracy protesters to stop the increasingly violent protests? Or was it a message for the HK government to stop the police brutality against the protesters? Li was deliberately ambiguous about which side he was addressing.

**ERASERS to EFFACE  
WORDS - Hear what  
you want and erase  
(in the air) what doesn’t  
interest you. Order  
from PAULO BRUSKY -  
C.P. 850 - RE - PE.**



# 黑夜之後 便是日出

一群愛看日出的市民

*An ad quoting a line from the song, "Do you hear the people sing?", from the musical  
Les Misérables adapted from the eponymous novel by the French writer VICTOR HUGO (1802-1885).  
The song was an unofficial anthem for the HK pro-democracy movement. The quote reads:  
EVEN THE DARKEST NIGHT WILL END AND THE SUN WILL RISE.  
From a group of sunrise watchers*



Installation view of *Uncertain Codes* (2023). Photo by MCKINNA ANDERSON.

#### ARTIST'S BOOKS

##### LIST OF PUBLICATIONS IN VITRINE

1. FILE magazine (Vol. 4, No. 4, Fall 1980). This issue of FILE (guest curated by SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER) includes a contribution from GUY DE COINETET, in which extracts from his various publications are assembled together, along with a fragmented narrative. The work is titled MRS. NEWTON.
2. GUY DE COINETET. TSNX C24VA7ME: A Play by Dr Hun. 1974.
3. GUY DE COINETET. A Captain from Portugal. 1972. This book was written in an invented alphabet, whose key is given in the last page of the publication.
4. GUY DE COINETET. Espahor ledet ko uluner! 1973.
5. GUY DE COINETET. Announcement card for a performance of the play "Tell me." 1981.
6. GUY DE COINETET. A Few Drawings. 1975.
7. GUY DE COINETET and LARRY BELL. Animated Discourse. 1975. A book produced in collaboration with Larry Bell. Each image is a letter in another invented alphabet, whose key is revealed in the long thin insert shown above the book.
- 8-9. A selection of publications by MIRTHA DEMISARCHE, given to me by the artist. The works are: Libro no.2, 1968, and Libro no.8, 1970. Demisarche has been producing works that oscillate between writing and drawing for several decades, starting during the years of the brutally repressive military dictatorship in Argentina from 1975 to 1983.
10. Jiří VALOCH. Die Bedeutung der Worte (The Meaning of the Word), 1997.
11. HANNAH WEINER. Code Poems. 1982.
12. ULISSSES CARRION. Cres. 1979.
13. Postcard from JACQUES VILLÉGLÉ. The artist JACQUES VILLÉGLÉ (1926-2022) sent me this postcard to thank me for contributing to a publication produced on the occasion of his birthday. He wrote it with his "Alphabet Sociopolitique" (Sociopolitical alphabet). Each letter in this alphabet is a symbol, culled from various social, political, and cultural contexts, such as the anarchist symbol or the peace sign.
14. GEORGES BRECHT. WATER YAM. 1963. Brecht referred to these short texts as "Event Scores," meaning they could be read but also performed. To perform one of these events, the reader must first interpret its score.
15. CILDO MEIRELES, Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Banknote Project, 1970. Ink on banknote. 2.6 x 6.2 inches (6.7 x 15.7 cm). Courtesy CILDO MEIRELES and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York
16. CILDO MEIRELES, Insertions into Ideological Circuits: Banknote Project, 1970. Ink on banknote. 2.6 x 6.25 inches (6.7 x 15.9 cm). Courtesy CILDO MEIRELES and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York

#### READING TABLE

- DANTE ALIGHIERI  
On the eloquence of the vernacular  
Cambridge University Press  
Cambridge, September 15, 2005
- PAULO BRUSCKY  
*Poesis BRuscky*  
Edited by Adolfo Montejo Navas  
Associação para o Patronato  
Contemporâneo  
São Paulo, 2012
- PAULO BRUSCKY  
Poesia viva  
Edited by Antonio Sergio Bessa  
Associação para o Patronato  
Contemporâneo  
São Paulo, 2015
- ULISES CARRION  
*Sonnet(s) (Lost Literature)*  
With contributions by Verónica Gerber Bicecci, Mónica de la Torre, Annette Gilbert, India
- JOHNSON, MICHALIS PICHLER,  
and HERIBERTO YÉPEZ.  
Ugly Duckling Presse  
December 1, 2020  
Brooklyn, New York
- GUY DE COINETET  
FREDERIC PAUL  
Flammarion  
Paris, September 30, 2014
- GUY DE COINETET  
Edited by Lionel Bovier, Clément Dirié.  
Preface by Larry Bell. Text  
by Marie de Brugerolle. Afterword by  
Gérard Wajcman.
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Zurich, April 25, 2017
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Rachel Valinsky (Editor)  
Primary Information  
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*Modern Love*  
Primary Information/Ugly Duckling Presse  
May 23, 2017  
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- CONSTANCE DEJONG  
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- JACQUELINE TOBIN  
and RAYMOND G. DOBARD  
Hidden in Plain View / A Secret Storie of  
Quilts and the Underground Railroad  
Anchor  
United States, 2000
- FÉLIX FÉNÉON  
*Novels in Three Lines*  
New York review of Books  
New York, 2007

BENJAMIN PATTERSON  
*Born in State of Flux/us*  
Edited by Valerie Cassel Oliver  
Contemporary Arts Museum  
Houston, 2012

N. H. PRITCHARD  
*The Matrix: Poems 1960–1970*  
Primary Information/Ugly Duckling Presse  
March 30, 2021  
Brooklyn, New York

LESLIE SCALAPINO  
R-Hu  
Published by Atelos  
Berkeley, California, 2000

JACK SPICER  
*The Collected Books*  
Editor Robin Blaser  
Black Sparrow Press  
Santa Rosa, 1996

JACK SPICER  
*After Lorca*  
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New York, May 11, 2021

GERTRUDE STEIN  
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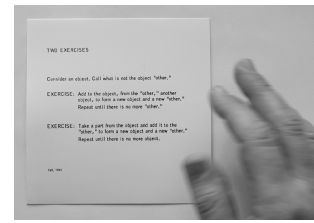
HANNAH WEINER  
*Open House*  
Kenning Editions; First Edition  
Berkeley, California,  
November 15, 2006

UNICA ZÜRN  
*The Man of Jasmine & Other Texts*  
Atlas Press  
London, 1994

**ARTE. CLIMA I  
propose to exhibit  
the days on which  
Porto Alegre has  
the 4 seasons of the  
year. Paulo Bruscky  
Cp850 Recife  
Pe 50010-970**



Installation view of *Uncertain Codes* (2023). Photo by ANDERSON MC KINNA.



Still from video documentation of books from JULIEN BISMUTH'S collection (2023). Image of GEORGE BRECHT'S *Water Yam*.

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 YUEN REN CHAO, COINGAROO,  
 KYO CHEN, GUY DE COINETET,  
 CONSTANCE DEJONG, MIRTHA  
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 RACHEL SILVERI, JACK SPICER,  
 GERTRUDE STEIN, JACQUELINE TOBIN,  
 JIŘÍ VALOCH, JACQUES VILLÉGLÉ  
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 BY JULIEN BISMUTH**  
 (January 20<sup>th</sup> - March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2023)

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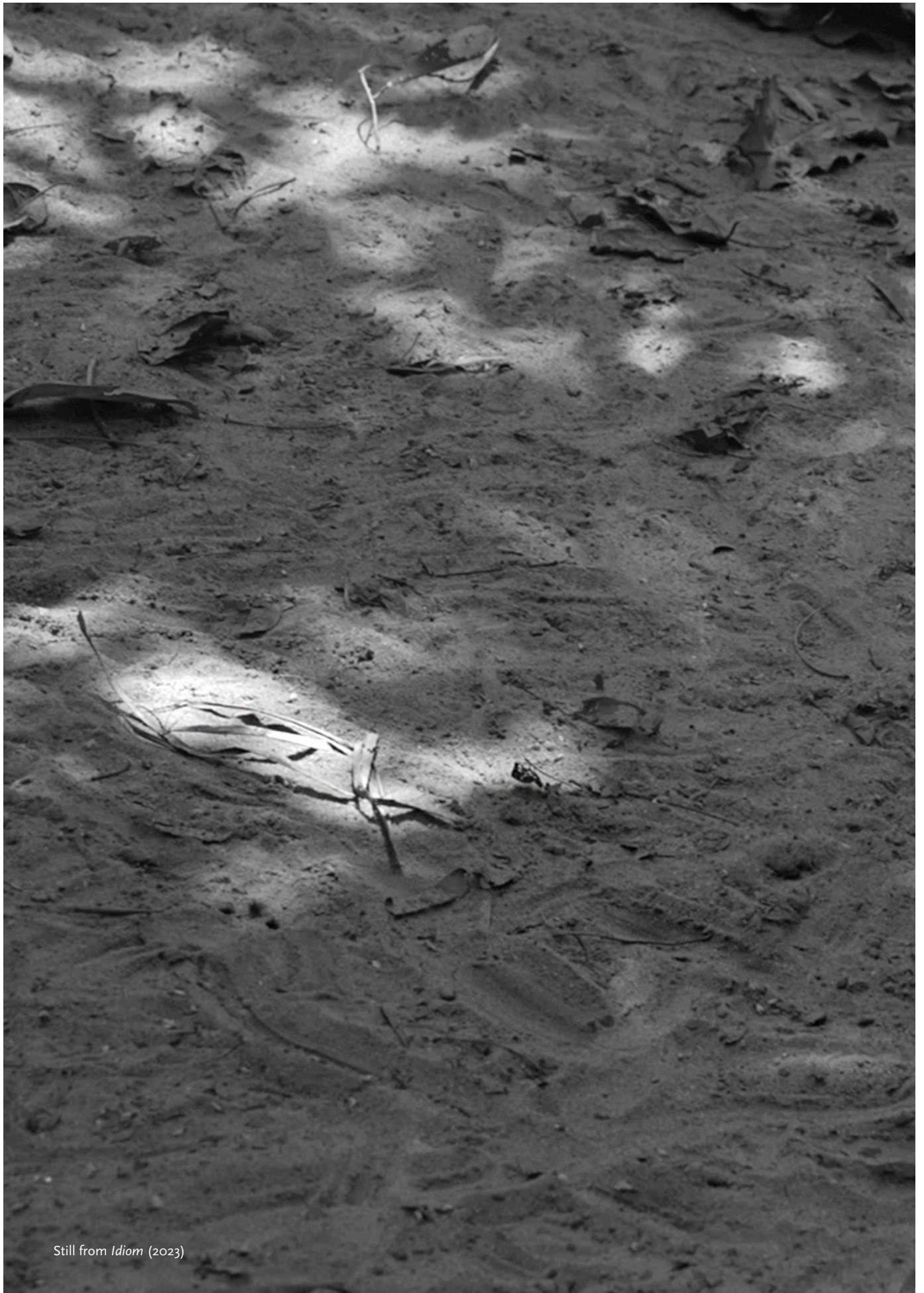
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**SOUND.SCAPE I propose  
 the joining of the sounds of  
 the Bars and Playgrounds  
 of Porto Alegre on a Saturday  
 morning Paulo Bruscky  
 Cp850. Recife Pe 50010 970.**

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Still from *Idiom* (2023)