

Kunsthalle Wien

More Than Just Words [On the Poetic] 8/3 – 7/5 2017

Press conference: Tuesday March 7, 2017, 10 am

Opening: Tuesday March 7, 2017, 7 pm

“What makes a verbal message a work of art?” (Roman Jakobson)

The linguist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) distinguishes six functions of language that are necessary for communication to occur. The poetic function is the most important for him, since it transforms “the formal appearance of language into a form of special information.” Poetic language thrives on connotations and polyvalent levels of meaning. The addition of sound and rhythm enhances the way things are represented and privileges form over content.

Poetic language is (not yet) poetry or literature. When words are consciously perceived in their aesthetic and sonic dimension, when they aren't merely understood as a practical component of communication, then the poetic function of language is already at work.

More Than Just Words [On the Poetic] elevates the idea of the poetic function, turning it into a starting point for intellectual forms of expression that are situated beyond semantic clarity. The focus is on language as a source of morphological uncertainty and endless hermeneutics. This type of language can be found in films, photographs, sculptures, installations, and performance art. Such forms of art converge and integrate into an avant-garde display that can be read as though it constitutes the visualization of syllables in space.

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Language is more than words and the word is also more than just a mere string of letters. The American conceptual artist John Baldessari is on the right track toward the poetic function when, with witty humour, he portrays the artistic exploration of language: In *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet* (1972), we see the artist's hand hold up one flashcard after another to a potted plant. Each individual letter is shown in an uppercase and a lowercase version, and each card includes sample words for the letter.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, art has often sought to combine art and language, and aspired to show how writing becomes image. In addition, art has revealed a primary interest in language as something that resists algorithmic exploitation and simple translatability. In her work, *Finalmente solo, finalmente tutti* (2013), Elisabetta Benassi uses a language that is aligned with a sequence of codes, but is neither written nor spoken: Two Morse-code signal lamps are positioned facing each other in a dark room. They send signals to each other by alternately flaring up and dimming out in a rhythm that can be deciphered as a sequence of letters. The text that is communicated in this way was written by Mario Merz and lifted from his book, *Voglio fare subito un libro* (I want to make a book right now). In *Glossolalia* (2014), a 16mm film by João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva, a parrot slowly spreads its wings, turns around and opens its beak, a gesture that fills the viewer with anticipation. But the (silent) film ends when the beak opens, leaving us with the question: What language does a talking parrot speak?

It is not just the voice, but also the gestures that convey this sense of “more than just words”: Bruno Munari's collection of gestures in *Supplemento al dizionario italiano – I Gesti* (1958) shows photographs of about fifty hand movements, supplemented with explanations of how to use them and what they mean. Ketty La Rocca's photo series *Le mie parole, e tu?* (1974) also depicts hands as carriers of expression and as a symbol of the body. Unlike Munari, where hand signals function as a form of communication and are meant to be intuitively understood, Ketty La Rocca's pictures present hands onto which words and sentences have been applied – hands on which language has literally been inscribed.

The artist Erica Scourti spent almost a year working on her project, *Life in AdWords* (2012/13). She created a digital diary by using her computer's webcam to film herself every day as she recited keywords generated by an algorithm as though she were performing a type of word rap. The keywords were derived from the personalized ads that emerged in response to her digital diary. This led to the daily creation of a long list of objects, brands, emotional states, and wishes.

Various performative elements also define the exhibition, such as Jason Dodge's sculpture *Rose light to white light to rose light over and over by hand*. On different days throughout the duration of the exhibition, the neon tubes installed in the space are replaced with rose-colored tubes, only to have these replaced, in turn, with the original ones. The work exposes how a mere change of lighting conditions changes what we see. Fernando Ortega's work, *Transcription*, also involves a periodic shift in perception. Ortega had the buzzing sound of a mosquito translated into a musical

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composition. The piece will be performed by a violinist on random days during the exhibition without providing advance notice of the recitals.

Poetry is linguistic surplus. It is a language that defies the logic of effective meaning-making and the functional exchange of signs. It is a language that escapes the logic of economic abstraction and the rules of pragmatism. It involves combinations of semiotically liberated syllables and words that playfully create, jump over, and mix up meaning.

“Poetry must be made by all” is what Comte de Lautréamont announced in 1870: It is a collective act. This is reflected in the exhibition’s format where it surfaces as an interplay between the works and their presentation – both in the individual works and in the artworks taken as an ensemble.

Artists: John Baldessari, Elisabetta Benassi, Nina Canell, Natalie Czech, Michael Dean, Jason Dodge, João Maria Gusmão / Pedro Paiva, Ketty La Rocca, Bruno Munari, Olaf Nicolai, Fernando Ortega, Jenny Perlin, Gerhard Rühm, Olve Sande, Erica Scourti, Michael Snow, Mladen Stilinović, Artur Żmijewski

Curators: Luca Lo Pinto, Vanessa Joan Müller

Program

Workshops for girls and young women

The limits of my language are the limits of my world.

Often we lack the words to express what one wishes to say because of the limits of language. Poetry addresses those limits and shows that language is much more than the formulation of correct grammar and spelling. During two three-day workshops, you have the opportunity to explore the poetic and the joy of writing, experimenting with tone, and talking.

Fri 24/3, 3–5 pm, Sat 25/3 & Tue 18/4, 11 am–1 pm: **More Words**

Workshop with Barbara Kapusta

For young women ages 19 to 24

Fri 31/3, 3–5 pm, Sat 1/4 & Tue 18/4, 11 am–1 pm: **Speak up!**

Workshop with Yasmin Hafedh a.k.a. Yasmo

For girls ages 14 to 18

Registration: vermittlung@kunsthallewien.at

Press release

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#Poetics

Press

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