"Mary is tampering with the expected sequence. First she broke the sentence; now she has broken the sequence."
- Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (1929)

As one enters the narrow make-shift hallway of Apex, immediately to the right one encounters two apparently uniform paragraphs, red on white, that make up Kay Rosen's wall text entitled Oh, Eau. At first glance, the texts seem exactly the same. Upon reading, the only difference between the text is an alteration of punctuation, but this difference creates two diverging narratives - one of an impending deluge, the other the tale of a broken heart. Through the subtle move of shifting commas and periods, Rosen blurs the boundaries between reading and viewing, setting them in flux, challenging the transparency of both words and images.

She makes a double move through time and space, much like Mary Carmichael, Virginia Woolf’s alter-ego in A Room of One’s Own. Rosen sets to work “to catch those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or half-said words, which form themselves, no more palpably than the shadows of moths on the ceiling…” Errant Gestures: Visual and Verbal Correspondences looks through and past these shadows, exploring the works of artists who wander outside established formal and conceptual limits in order to challenge the process of producing social meanings. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Janet Cohen, JonMarc Edwards, Rie Hachiyanagi, Mark Lombardi, Andrea Ray, Kay Rosen, and Leslie Thornton each perform an errant gesture: a strategic double play designed to interrogate the relationship between form and content, signer and signified.

These works collectively engage in a semiotic activity where at first glance visual and verbal signs collide and press against each other with no seeming syntactic progression. Upon closer inspection, however, each of the artist’s process reveals a sustained commitment to two sites of critique: formal and conceptual. Understanding how language relates to speech and signs, each of the artists in Errant Gestures in turn engages their formal medium with an aesthetic language. By doing so, a doubling occurs, in which the artist grafts one form of language onto another to produce a conceptual language, an interstitial site, through which visual art opens up traditional aesthetic categories, but also underscores the inherent ambiguities and slipperiness in language.

There are always gaps between what is seen and understood that point to a politics of language: how one’s particular location to language informs the way experience is organized. Who determines these gaps, these slippages of meaning? In other words, who controls the meaning of words or as Humpty Dumpty rhetorically poses the question to Alice (in Through the Looking Glass), “‘the question is, which is to be master - that’s all.’” The works in Errant Gestures also pose this question in an effort to reveal language’s shortcomings as well as its potential.

Inspired by Michel Foucault’s discussion of the calligram and Walter Benjamin’s notes on correspondences, Errant Gestures aims to look at works that point to the gaps, ambiguities and potentialities of language as well as challenge the hierarchy and binary between reading and perception, the visual versus the verbal. In a reading of
At first glance, the red and black clusters of notations in Janet Cohen’s Montreal in New York, 7-18-99 appear less about documenting an inning in a baseball game than a carbon copy of a statistics exercise that has been worked over repeatedly. Cohen’s shorthand for strikes, balls, and fouls—consisting of letters, numbers, exponents, shapes of diamonds and circles—however random, plots pitches that fall in the zone and the play that ensues. Her idiosyncratic visual language attempts to compress and manifest time, a passion for baseball, conceptual art and thought ally that of the pitcher’s and her own.

Lombardi’s large-scale drawing translates the collages of Banka Nazionale del Lavoro with the Reaangs, and Thatcher governments in the arming of Iraq into a trajectory of radiating arrows, small circles (players in one), larger acts, solid lines (the movement of fluid dotted lines (the movement of assets), and wavy masses of frozen assets). The intricacy of his “narrative”-a complex web condensed with connectives and made obscure—reaps and sows a proliferation of “public information” that takes on a life of its own.

At the beginning of the calligram may seem to render thought, an act of perception. That thought, a movement of influence, is beginning to be rendered in different ways, engaging in and out of the concept of the calligram through their gestures of art making.

JonMarc Edwards’ pictograms—compression of image, text, information and abstract painting via a textual device, what he calls a “monosyble”—function much like Foucault’s calligrams. The sensual lines and shapes of Edwards’ wordplay fulfill a visual plenitude what Foucault remarks as “shushed in the vision, hidden in the reading.” The smooth curves of lacquered wood unfurl meaning beyond its connotation that at the same time seems, in the case of Light, to illuminate the wall on which it hangs.

In contrast to Foucault’s concept of the calligram, Benjamin saw the world as language where mute objects with their “linguistic potential became legible to the attentive philospher who named them, translating this potential into the human language of words, and bringing them into speech.” The juxtaposition of these mute objects produces a correspondence: a dynamic relationship in which an artist and/or viewer appropriates and reconstructs an event, idea, and object, changing not only the “mute object” itself, but re-inventing it. Avery Gordon likens the process to “entering through a different door, the door of the uncanny, the door of the fragment…of the shocking parallel.”

The artists in Errant Gestures explore the dialectical of these displaced connections through the works of Thornton, Ray and Cha. In Adyana’s mise-en-scene of luminous colors, excessive imagery, overlapping soundtracks, found footage, and still images, Leslie Thornton explores the desire that underlies Orientalism and the mechanism that sustains it. The film begins with an attempt to mimic through gestures and dress the photographs of a Chinese mandarin couple and towards the end juxtaposes found footage of a 1950s science fiction movie and the blizzard of video and sound tracks of static, running water, and birds singing that block meditation and articulation. The disjunctive sounds and the blizzard of video snow that almost threaten to efface the disembodying language that names everything that is and in turn grants being. What follows is a sound track of static, running water, and birds singing that block meditation and articulation. The disjunctive sounds and the blizzard of video snow that almost threaten to efface the disembodying language that names everything that is and in turn grants being.

In Thresa Hak Kyung Cha’s video Mouth to Mouth, an oral-ifice appears like a void, attempting to enunciate the vowels of the Korean alphabet. What follows is a sound track of static, running water, and birds singing that block meditation and articulation. The disjunctive sounds and the blizzard of video snow that almost threaten to efface the disembodying language that names everything that is and in turn grants being.

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