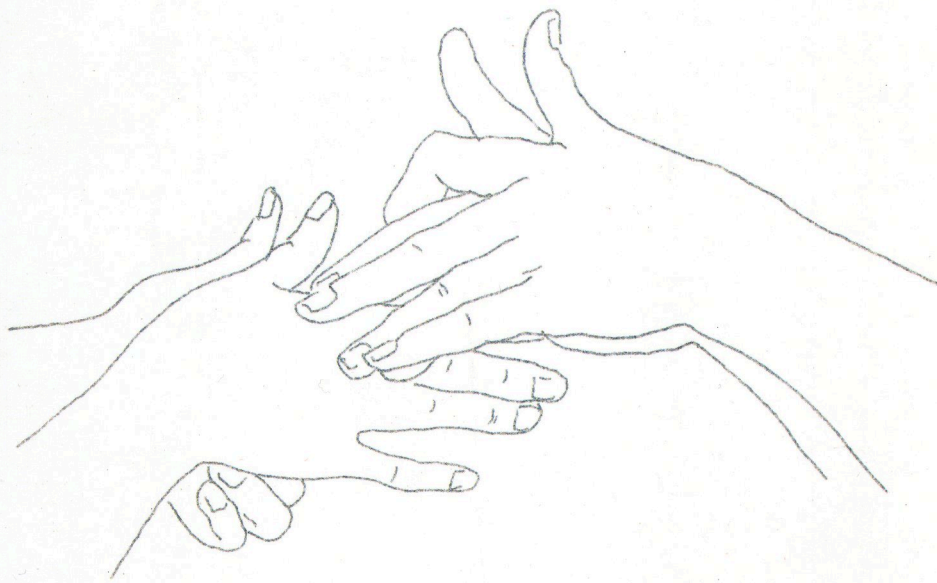


MARKING LANGUAGE



DRAWING ROOM

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Curated By Kate Macfarlane

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If there is neither machine nor text without physical origin, there is no domain of the psychic without text.”¹

Jacques Derrida is perhaps best known for his assertion that “pure perception does not exist: we are written only as we write, by the agency within us which always keeps watch over perception, be it internal or external. The ‘subject’ of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author.”² This suggests that there is no “outside of the text,” that all experience, including psychic, is experienced through written language. Drawing is similarly foundational to human experience—to make a mark, with whatever material is to hand, is an innate drive shared by all. As such, drawing and written communication seem natural bedfellows. Derrida talks about writing in very physical terms, about the tone and texture of letters and words, about repetition and fragmentation, about writing as compulsion, and using writing to think. He suggests that: “the letter, inscribed or propounded

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 2001), 250.

² *Ibid.*, 285.

speech, is always stolen. Always stolen but it is always open. It never belongs to its author or to its addressee....”³ Perhaps letters and words, even when scribed by hand, can thus retain an objectiveness that is a necessary condition of contemporary artistic practice.

Marking Language includes work by seven artists from different parts of the world: Pavel Büchler, Johanna Calle, Annabel Daou, Matias Faldbakken, Karl Holmqvist, Bernardo Ortiz, and Shahzia Sikander. The manner in which written communication manifests in the work of these artists is two-fold. On one level, written language has subject matter and meaning; on another, the physical characteristics of letters and words are used as formal devices. The artists in *Marking Language* use a range of means to divorce language from linear narrative, for example, by fragmenting words and phrases, or by including multiple and contradictory graphic languages and giving form to phonetic words and expressions. Whilst not necessarily overt, the artists share a preference for challenging authority, for adopting strategies that are variously anarchic, banal, and mute, and for exploiting both the multiple meanings that language has to offer and its visual richness. The work can be seen as a reflection of the fragmentation of our reality, despite the illusion of world-wide connection, and a yearning for intimate and meaningful dialogue.

Shahzia Sikander was born in Lahore, Pakistan (1969), and moved to New York as a young adult. Her work is informed by a mix of cultural references—Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Classical, both mythological and folkloric—which are combined with contemporary politics and popular culture as a means to sabotage a singular, culturally authoritative voice. At college in Lahore she received tutelage in miniature painting and developed an interest in the way in which text is segregated from image, especially in the Indo-Persian tradition. She has noted that “historical miniature paintings (illustrations) were often torn out of their original book context. This created a disjuncture and a visual unfamiliarity with the Arabic/Persian script accompanying the

³ Ibid., 224.

paintings...Often the use of writing for me draws upon such implications as I think about translation's relationship to a tradition, and tradition with all its inherent redactions."⁴

Sikander's practice is inspired by her reading of poetry and literature and text also takes shape in the work itself. For example, in her new work for *Marking Language* Sikander takes a verse from a ghazal by the Urdu poet Ghalib (1797–1870): "The cypress, despite its freedom, remains captive to the garden." The ghazal is a form of poetry that, according to Faisal Devji, is ultimately untranslatable.⁵ Much of Sikander's work explores ideas about translation and asks the question, "What is the distance between the original and its translation and at what point does the translation become an original?"⁶ The new work is made through the application of drawn layers that are built out of contradictory visual languages, including the abstracted Gopi hairstyle, swarms of arrows that oppose one another, and the verse from the ghazal, written in Urdu. In the artist's words: "The use of writing often plays upon the idea of exactitude and uncertainty. By repetition and layering, text becomes fluid and chaotic. In the process of translation, what is revealed, the fluidity of the language or the obscurity of the meaning?"⁷

The work of Karl Holmqvist (b. 1964, Vasteras, Sweden) takes the form of poetry, performance, installation, and photography. His poems are made up of quotations from diverse sources, including lines from songs, poems, slogans, and political speeches. These cohere—become his—through the lilting monotone that he adopts in their oration, and through the careful arrangement of the words he writes on walls in black marker. With reference to his work for

4 Shahzia Sikander, personal correspondence with the author, July 2013.

5 In a very informative essay about the poetry of Ghalib and the manner in which Sikander exploits its riches, Faisal Devji suggests that "such writing cannot be a medium for translation, universal or conceptual. As a form of representation, writing betrays conceptual authority, possessing instead a life of its own." See Faisal Devji, "Translated Pleasures," in Shahzia Sikander (Chicago: The Renaissance Society, University of Chicago, 1998), 11–15.

6 Shahzia Sikander, personal correspondence with the author, July 2013.

7 Ibid.

Marking Language, Holmqvist says: “I think of the graffiti, sculpture, and reading as different ways to have language occupy space. One of the things I’m interested in in working with written and spoken words is how language seems to be at least two things: the actual letters and the way they look, and the thing they describe that is then pictured in the reader or listener’s mind and that can stay on in memory.”⁸

Holmqvist was a punk rocker, and though poetry was very unfashionable in that scene—was somehow embarrassing, certainly to deliver—he saw it “as a vehicle for communicating with and between people. It’s basically something that anyone can do: you can use pen and paper, or if you can’t afford paper, you can just write on the wall...”⁹ Sarah Wood, in her commentary on Derrida, suggests that he perceives poetry as “‘access to free speech’; it frees language from signification...” and that he “identifies with the endurance of writing. The notion of a writing that *wants* something...opens a discussion...”¹⁰ Holmqvist often uses controversial statements, for example, “Women’s place is in the home,” to prompt the audience to think through the layers of meaning in such a statement. Holmqvist has said, “I consider myself more of an artist working with language and poetry, rather than a poet trying to have art shows...,”¹¹ which suggests that visual art and poetry are equivalent art forms.

Holmqvist borrows phrases and expressions to create his poetry in recognition that, “that’s what language is anyway. We learn to speak by imitating—our parents, other people, teachers—and it’s always about repetition.”¹² In the same vein, his Lettriste sculptures—words that are fashioned in an ad hoc manner from pieces of wood, covered in tin foil—nod to the Lettrism of Isou, whose poems broke language down to the letter.¹³

8 Karl Holmqvist, personal correspondence with the author, July 2013.

9 Kayla Guthrie, “Words are People: Q+A with Karl Holmqvist,” *Art in America* [online], June 8, 2012, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-opinion/conversations/2012-06-08/karl-holmqvist-alex-zachary-peter-currie-moma/>

10 Sarah Wood, *Derrida’s Writing and Difference* (London: Continuum, 2009), 40-1.

11 Karl Holmqvist, personal correspondence with the author, July 2013.

12 Ibid.

Lettrism evolved into the Situationist International, a movement whose disparate members attempted to find effective channels through which to critique consumer capitalism. Sharing similar concerns, Matias Faldbakken (b. 1973, Oslo, Norway) quotes earlier art styles as part of his multi-faceted strategy. For example, *Untitled (Canvas #26)* (2009) echoes Ad Reinhardt's series of square black painting (begun in 1963 and continued until his death). He adopts Reinhardt's 60-inch-by-60-inch format but otherwise uses very different devices to deliver a certain blankness of expression. This work is typical of Faldbakken's studied carelessness, which results in an ambiguity as to the meaning of the words. Drawn with a ruler and deliberately overlapping, the words can be read as either "THE HILLS" or "THE HELLS." The final letter, an "s" on its side, begins the transformation into a swastika, giving symbolic weight to the negative reading of "hell."

Faldbakken also writes fiction, and like his visual work, his *Scandinavian Misanthropy* trilogy is open to a plurality of meanings.¹⁴ Though his novels are written in a straightforward narrative style, his visual art exploits illegibility and irrationality as he searches for the in-between space of "uncommunicative abstraction."¹⁵ In *Untitled (Garbage Bag Grey #4, #7 and #10)* (2010), Faldbakken has daubed grey plastic garbage bags with a range of graphic marks. The serial nature of the work, and its blackness, again references Reinhardt. It is not clear whether the graphic marks are intended as diagrams or words, but their faltering characteristics nevertheless render them mute.

When Pavel Büchler (b. 1952, Prague, Czechoslovakia) arrived in the UK in the early 1980s he had hardly any knowledge of English.

13 Lettrism was initiated by Jean-Isadore Goldstein (1925–2007), known as Isou, a Romanian artist who arrived in Paris at the end of the World War II. He was first a sound poet, producing poetry reminiscent of the Dadaists Tristan Tzara and Raoul Hausmann. Later he developed a form called "hypography," a mixture of letterforms and symbols, which he believed could create a new kind of subjectivity.

14 Written under the pseudonym Abo Rasul, Faldbakken's *Scandinavian Misanthropy Trilogy* includes *The Cocka Hola Company* (2001), *Macht und Rebel* (2003), and *Unfun* (2008).

15 Matias Faldbakken interviewed by Luigi Fassi, "A Million Ways to Say No," *Mousse Magazine* (March 2009), 12.

He has described how at this time he “made drawings of deaf and dumb sign language, which I drew without looking, and this gradually helped me to find another way to subvert what we generally expect from linguistic communication and how to use various ‘surprises’ which emerge directly from the logic and structure of language—to one’s own aesthetic ends.”¹⁶ Emanating from this early work, *Conversational Drawings 1* (2007) is a series of fourteen drawings that straddle the London and New York shows. They show hands engaged in shadow puppetry, but the resulting shadows are withheld. This is one of a number of series in which the object of demonstration is missing. The motivation for making these works is the idea that demonstration or instruction is an incitement to conversation, which Büchler believes to be the role of art. The image is impermanent due to the nature of the carefully chosen “tractor-feed” carbonless copy paper; in time the images will deteriorate and eventually disappear altogether. Büchler’s investment of skill in his drawings is often meant to be construed as futile labour; his main interest is not in the production of artworks but in the role of the artist as “a catalyst for somebody else’s imagination—that’s the only meaningful role I recognise.”¹⁷

Bernardo Ortiz (b. 1972, Bogotá, Colombia) shares Büchler’s interest in riddles, metaphor, and ambiguity. Ortiz explains his approach as “exploring a territory,” which helps him get around the notion of the art work as a contained and finite object. One of his formal strategies involves pinning his drawings to a wooden structure affixed to the wall as “a way of keeping in touch with the gross materiality that many times a work of art tries to hide.”¹⁸ The individual drawings explore the page as both a material support and a “discursive space.”

Ortiz has suggested: “writing can also be a compulsive act. Not necessarily an act of meaning. Not necessarily a meaningful act.”¹⁹

16 Pavel Büchler quoted in Jarolsav Anděl, “Mr Büchler Wrote To Me,” in *Labour in Vain* (Prague: DOX Centre for Contemporary Art, 2010), 16.

17 Pavel Büchler in conversation with Charles Esche and Philippe Pirotte in *Absentmindedwindowgazing* (Rotterdam: Veenman Publishers, 2007), 165.

18 Unpublished artist’s statement, 2012.

19 *Ibid.*

His work for *Marking Language* is composed like a musical score that has recurring themes or motifs. The first theme is an inventory of eternally deferred actions, with one example taking the form of sheets of art paper that have grown mold. These sheets were given to the artist some years ago, in exchange for labor, and always felt too precious to use. The second theme is a “pictorial” Spanish translation of Frank O’Hara’s poem *Why I am not a Painter*, which aims to expose all the doubts that are implicit in the act of translating. In the artist’s words: “Like a painting in which you can see each and every layer. I transcribe poems regularly. They are a kind of drawing. Sometimes a verse might be repeated all over a page. Words that grow like fungi.”²⁰

On the day *Marking Language* opens, Annabel Daou (b. 1967, Beirut, Lebanon) will repeatedly write the phrase “I’m doing research for my practice” in chalk pencil onto a blackboard over a nine-hour period. Referencing John Baldessari’s *I Am Making Art* (1971), Daou’s durational work represents “Limbo,” part one of a series of performances collectively titled *The Punishments*, which take the themes of Dante’s descent into hell to critique the social and political aspects of making art today. The performance involves a task that is as meaningless as a school punishment, and it questions the idea of drawing as a preliminary or secondary medium as well as performance as art-making.

Civil Societies (2013) continues Daou’s exploration into the ways in which phonetic transliteration both aids and hinders cross-cultural communication. The work comprises a series of English curses and civilities transliterated into Arabic, alongside Arabic curses and civilities translated into English. These are written on correction tape, a fragile material attached directly to the gallery wall. It is only when spoken that sense can be made of these phonetically transliterated words. The material fragility of the support on which the words are written suggests their essential insubstantiality—as once uttered, they disappear, ensuring only fleeting relevance. Daou says: “The use of English and Arabic

²⁰ Bernardo Ortiz, personal correspondence with author, February 2013.

specifically is not intended as a statement about personal identity or a judgment on any specific culture. More important than issues of multiculturalism is the emptying out of meaning in a sound-byte driven society. This also pertains to the language used around art, which often relies on a conventional theoretical vocabulary evacuated of much of its ideational content....”²¹

LLUVIAS (RAIN) (2012–13) by Johanna Calle (b. 1965, Bogotá, Colombia) manifests as an accumulation, a gathering storm of letters, which are fragmented and stuttered onto ledger paper to form words. Each letter in *LLUVIAS* is made up of sections of typewritten words that are taken from texts about precipitation extremes, ethno-linguistics, and the situation of indigenous peoples in Colombia today. The letters spell some of the phonetic expressions used by these people, which are passed verbally from generation to generation, to describe different types of rain. Many of these tribes and their languages have disappeared, most during the twentieth century. *LLUVIAS* includes oral expressions from sixty-eight languages that are still in use and have rarely been transcribed.

Since 1998, Calle has adapted a range of manual typewriters to enable her to work on a larger scale and to create denser texts. The ground for *LLUVIAS* is found ledger paper, a rich source of both form and meaning that she has used for a number of years. For Calle, ledger paper represents individual powerlessness in the face of bureaucracy, particularly for marginalized and indigenous peoples. It is also susceptible to fading, erasing, and alteration; it is trapped by its material condition and resistant to reproduction. Typewritten words and ledger paper provide Calle with the means to explore her concern for environmental and social issues in an objective manner and without resorting to sentimentalism.

Derrida’s “Writing and Difference” consists of “readings” of texts by a number of authors, where each text is “opened” up by Derrida, used as a springboard to deviate, to wander some distance from the original subject. In a similar spirit, the works in *Marking*

21 Annabel Daou, personal correspondence with author, July 2013.

Language are inspired by a vast range of texts and both acknowledge and challenge conventional or shared meaning. These visually rich, multi-layered works invite their “readers” to seek a plurality of meanings that are personal to them and that can be a catalyst for their imagination. As Pavel Büchler has said: “Art only makes sense as an activity out in the world, in its social destination, it doesn’t make sense ‘in the studio’. But that applies to everything, to writing, of course, or I suppose language in general. There would be no language if it were not for communication.”²²

²² Pavel Büchler, “Hester Reeve - An Interview with Pavel Büchler,” in *Absentmindedwindowgazing* (Rotterdam: Veenman Publishers, 2007), 35.