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Language is defined as a verbal communication system to articulate thoughts. Far from being an objective structure system, language can reflect power relations, hierarchies, social differences, and historical problems. It works simultaneously as a cultural system of belonging that can open a way to indicate the loss or reconfiguration of certain kinds of identities. Quoting Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar in reference to his work *A Logo for America* (1987), “language is not innocent and reflects a geopolitical reality.”

This exhibition presents the work of ten artists that investigate an array of contemporary issues through the use of language in a critical manner, including subjects such as gender issues (Mely Barragán and Regina Galindo), immigration problems (Camilo Ontiveros, Luis Hernández and Beatriz Cortez), power relations and deficiencies (Marcos Ramírez ERRE), fissures of utopian ideals (Alexander Apóstol and Rubén Ortiz-Torres), epistemological matters (Gala Porras-Kim) and imperialism and postcolonial effects (Clarissa Tossin).

The artists in *Customizing Language* engage critically with local and historical issues using language as a strategy for creation, experimentation, and constructive dialogue. The title of the exhibition is a play on words that by alluding to familiar terms addressed some of the topics in the show—such as “custom” (cultural traditions), “U.S. Customs” (immigration issues), and lowrider “customization” (L.A. popular culture)—serving as an invitation for the viewer to understand the works as adaptations of texts and language that open up a space for dialogue and understanding.

Idurre Alonso & Selene Preciado

Alexander Apóstol
Mely Barragán
Beatriz Cortez
Regina José Galindo
Luis G. Hernández
Camilo Ontiveros
Rubén Ortiz-Torres
Gala Porras-Kim
Marcos Ramírez ERRE
Clarissa Tossin

C C S T M E N G
L N G G (CUSTOMIZING LANGUAGE)

January 6 – February 14, 2016

Curated by Idurre Alonso and Selene Preciado
The inaugural presentation of the LACE Emerging Curator Program

LACE LOS ANGELES CONTEMPORARY EXHIBITIONS

LACE EMERGING CURATORS

A (Very) Brief History of Art and Text

While text and language tap into the world of description and evocation, art has been traditionally tied to representation. Thus potential tensions and contradictions exist between the linguistic and the pictorial realms, two separate universes that started to collide and be explored and experimented with as the first modernist movements occurred in the beginning of the twentieth century. Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism and Symbolism utilized language with different purposes including the introduction of printed words as a symbol of modernity, creating unexpected associations, and as a disruption of traditional representations.

At the same time, Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro (Chile, 1893–1948), associated with the avant-garde literary movements in Europe and Latin America, experimented with calligrams as early as 1911. A calligram is a word or piece of text in which the design and layout of the letters creates a visual image related to the meaning of the words themselves. These literary forms represented a bridge between descriptive and representational forms erasing the limits between text and image and creating new approaches of hybrid nature. Other Latin American poets such as César Moro (Peru, 1903–1956), Carlos Oquendo Amat (Peru, 1905–Spain, 1946) and José Juan Tablada (Mexico, 1817–U.S., 1945) and literary movements including *estridentismo* in Mexico and *La Mandrágora* in Chile, dabbled on avant-garde written forms that play with language and formal representation, anticipating the transgressive creations arisen with conceptual art during the 1960s and 1970s.

Unlike Europe and the U.S., rather than pop art, experimental poetry played an important role in the emergence of conceptual practices that dealt with language in Latin America; concrete poetry in Brazil, *nadaísmo* in Colombia, *El techo de la ballena* in Venezuela and the *infrarrealistas* in Mexico, for example, were subversive and irreverent literary movements that pushed the use of language to create innovative works, impacting the production of some visual artists. Simultaneously, artists such as Edgardo

Vigo (Argentina, 1928–1997), Clemente Padín (Uruguay, b. 1939), Leandro Katz (Argentina, b. 1938), and Ulises Carrión (Mexico, b. 1941) were part of experimental poetry and literary movements before working on conceptual artistic forms. These type of multi-disciplinary experiences allowed the creation of radical forms of art—including the emergence of mail art and Xerox art—in which the used language was an integral part of the artistic strategies.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the suppressive and convulsive situation in Latin America with dictatorships occurring in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Chile impacted the production of numerous artists who moved towards political approaches in their productions. Language became then an effective tool to challenge the conservative established systems and create a critical conscience in the viewer. In 1970 the Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles (Brazil, b. 1948) produced *Insertion into Ideological Circuits: Coca-Cola project* in which he modified Coca-Cola bottles adding text to them with political statements or directions to transform them into Molotov cocktails. The bottles were then put back in normal circulation. This iconic piece confronted the regular exchange of information creating a new anonymous system that could disseminate information avoiding censorship. Following the use of the American brand, Antonio Caro (Colombia, b. 1950) created *Colombia* in 1977, a painting of the Colombian flag that included the word Colombia written with the typography of the Coca-Cola logo. The piece referred to the commercial and economic power of the U.S. in Colombia and its effects on the local identity.

Photography and performance also offered a space for experimentation with language. With a direct allusion to the subjacent ideology under language, in 1980 Carlos Ginzburg (Argentina, b. 1946) produced *Le Dentier Occidental A Fés*, a photographic work based on a quote by Marshall McLuhan in which he

addressed the hegemonic power of Western civilization through language. The artist placed a fake denture with the alphabet in different locations in Fez, Morocco. The quote – “[...] teeth are emphatically visual in their lineal order. Letters are not only like teeth visually, but their power to put teeth into the business of empire-building is manifest in our Western history” – added to the back of the photographs, was visually transformed into a performatic action that alluded to post-colonial problems.

Artists today continue to use language to analyze and expose contemporary issues, while they employ artistic strategies embedded in the experimental practices of the past. The works of art presented in *Customizing Language*—drawings, paintings, video art, installations, performance and sculptures—are a testimony of the different ways in which language can be transformed into a powerful tool to question local and universal topics.

Idurre Alonso

Flags, Words, Monochromes, and Other Abstractions

It was discovered recently that Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, 1915, has "secret paintings" hidden underneath. One of the images found underneath the black monochrome *Black Square* is none other than a handwritten inscription that references French poet and humorist Alphonse Allais's *Combat de Nègres dans une cave pendant la nuit*, a print from 1897 representing a racist joke on the vain of the French art movement Les Arts Incohérents (1882–1896), to which Allais was connected to. But Malevich's 1915 *Black Square* is not a reference to the humor or the racism of a joke. The significance of the underlying phrase is Malevich's own though process in discovering the power of the monochrome, of how a lot and nothing could be packed in the use of a single color contained in a flat geometric shape.

Just as this [art] historical reference reveals itself underneath *Black Square*, pointing at a legacy while also referencing back at itself, the works of three artists in *Customizing Language*—Rubén Ortiz-Torres, Marcos Ramírez ERRE, and Luis G. Hernández—offer similar revealing effects through the use of language in (and as) abstraction. Ortiz-Torres's *Bandera magonista (Magon's Flag)*, 2013, and *Ceci n'est pas une Machine that Kills Fascists*, 2015, have underlying text that "magically" appears through the technique and the specific material the painting is made of, but also by the interactive element of touch. The materials used are a double allusion to traditional oil painting and car customization painting, specifically that of lowrider cars. Both works "hide" phrases drawn from history (the motto "Tierra y Libertad" in *Bandera magonista*) and art history and popular culture (René Magritte's famous painting of a pipe with the inscription "this is not a pipe" in French, and a political slogan in Woody Guthrie's Gibson guitar). The composition of the elements—monochrome + words—is full of symbolism and meaning, in the choice of the color red, which has historical, political, and poetic connotations, as well as in its critique of the value system and hierarchies in art. Even though

these interactive paintings are inviting, they simultaneously contain elements of subversiveness and violence, as they are not only disrupting the medium of painting with the technique, but touch is also a subversion to the medium and to the sacredness of art.

Violence and destruction are concepts that are intricately interconnected with the legacy of abstraction and the monochrome. The infamous knife attacks on Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* and *IV*, are demonstrative of the effects that the "offensiveness" of monochromatic abstraction brought on viewers. These examples are not of mere vandalism but of something beyond, which is connected both to politics and emotion. Historically, words have triggered this type of reaction, but what happens when they are hidden away under a monochromatic abstraction and never come to the surface like the words appropriated in Ortiz-Torres's chromo-luminescent paintings?

Hernández's pencil "drawing" *Untitled (Understanding the Immigrant Situation)*, from 2011, is another work that contains words—the phrase "understanding the immigrant situation"—written letter by letter on the paper, until the image and the words become abstracted in a gray graphite monochrome. The metaphor of the action, of spelling out each letter points to the intention of trying to "understand the immigrant situation" and also the inability to do so. The poetry of this intention becomes aggressive in its concealment, because the phrase is not a secret that wants to be kept, but a reality that demands to be uncovered so the viewer also confronts the failure of the incomprehension of the mentioned situation. In a way, reading the parenthetical subtitle of the piece points out not only the discovery of what the monochrome hides underneath and its ineligibility, but also a visual translation of the abstraction.

In ERRE's work, the power of words is particularly important, because they often substitute and become the image. *Tolerancia, confianza, respeto*, are three words that were

peeled off the drywall in ERRE's installation for *Customizing Language*. The three words are the background image, almost ineligibile, and they work as the support for the eight steel shields which contain another phrase that defines what "repression" means to the artist. These two phrases are superimposed on each other, not as a contradiction but an invitation (or demand) for dialogue. Because of the specific circumstance of the presentation of the work in a U.S. museum context, the representation through language—Spanish—becomes an abstraction since it needs to be translated. Nonetheless, the phrase that defines repression as "the irrational outburst that occurs while protecting what has been lost" functions as an interpretation of meaning and a poetic political message. *Tolerancia, confianza, respeto, (y una definición de represión)*, 2015, contains a very direct message that is not quite abstracted but broken down literally and metaphorically, which forces the viewer to digest the meaning of each word and their juxtaposition.

While abstraction is the abandonment of reality, language is a set of signs and symbols that represent it, and the visual representation of these signs is an abstraction of language in itself. In the works of Ortiz-Torres, ERRE, and Hernández, the question of language is not a semiotic one, but a political one. To them, abstraction is a tool in which meaning is spelled out through the use of words, and these words become the image in the absence of one.

Selene Preciado



Alexander Apóstol

(Venezuela, b. 1969. Resides in Madrid)

Yamaikaleter | 2009

16mm transferred to HD video, color, sound, 8:15 min.

Courtesy of the artist

Alexander Apóstol has been interested in addressing the fissures of modern utopic political ideals in Latin America and more specifically in Venezuela. His work often investigates the relationship between history, art and power pointing out to hidden ideological discourses. Apóstol started his career in the 1990s focusing his production on photography to then move into complex projects that involved extensive research and a combination of media including photography, video and installations.

In the video *Yamaikaleter*, “The Jamaican Letter,” a pivotal document written by the liberator Simón Bolívar in 1815, is read aloud by a series of leaders from lower classes in Venezuelan political organizations. The original document was written in English and outlines Bolívar’s ideals for a united Latin America. The readers, who do not speak English, “read” the letter phonetically, but really cannot understand what they are reading. The viewer is thus also excluded, as the document’s reading is “lost in translation.” Paradoxically, Bolívar’s text refers to ideas of inclusion. The artist states that this exercise demonstrates how “everyone is excluded” yet still is a part of what he refers to as an “empty discourse.” He asserts that this video “exemplifies what Latin America is today.”



Mely Barragán

(Tijuana, b. 1975. Resides in Tijuana and Beijing)

Macho | 2009

Soft sculpture (black felt and stuffing)

Courtesy of the artist

culture to address gender issues, particularly imposed feminine archetypes by our patriarchal society. She utilizes various media including collage, painting, printing, and sculpture, such as in her most well-known work from 2004, *La cadena* (The Chain), in which a plaster sculpture of bride and groom multiplies in a row of eleven, but the top of the figure of the bride is gradually shaved off from sculpture to sculpture until she almost completely disappears. This work reflects her preoccupation for the role of women in contemporary society, which publicly promotes and encourages an image of a strong, independent, woman, especially in the workforce, while the economic system is not yet balanced in terms of equal pay or fair treatment of working mothers, and in the private space often traditional gender roles persist.

The use of specific materials plays a key part in Barragán’s work, for example wallpaper prints, or those traditionally associated to domestic and female use, such as sewn felt, in the case of *Macho*, 2009. This work simultaneously alludes to the issue of machismo—defined as a strong sense of power or entitlement to dominate in males—while emphasizing the contradictions of an exaggerated masculinity with the use of the material and the cursive typography, both associated with female qualities.

Mely Barragán uses graphic elements and images from mass media, pop art, and popular



Beatriz Cortez

(El Salvador, b. 1970. Resides in Los Angeles)

La máquina de la fortuna / The Fortune Teller Machine (Kaqchikel edition, made in collaboration with the Kaqjay Moloj collective) | 2014

Multimedia

Courtesy of the artist

La máquina de la fortuna / The Fortune Teller Machine (Nomad edition) | 2014

Multimedia

Courtesy of the artist

The Books of Memory / Los libros de la memoria 2012–2015:

Burned (Burned book); *Clandestine Garden* (Book, soil, cornstarch paste, grass seeds, water); and *Mangled Book* (Burned book, cornstarch paste)

Courtesy of the artist

Left to right

Beatriz Cortez in an artist, writer and professor at California State University Northridge. By utilizing a wide array of media her work ex-

plores themes such as memory and loss, immigration issues, and the use of technology as new versions of modernity.

Based on the idea that words have power and can will the future into being, Cortez created two editions of fortune-teller machines. For the Kaqchikel edition the artist worked in collaboration with the Kaqchikel Maya collective Kaqjay Moloj to create a list of desires that the interactive sculpture prints out in Kaqchikel and Spanish. The nomad edition of *The Fortune Teller* is based on the ideas of collectivity and nomadic subjectivity by the Italian philosopher Rosi Braidotti. Cortez asked friends, contacts and collaborators, who were immigrants themselves, to dream collectively about what they would have done together in order to have a different future. The machine prints those collective desires.

The Books of Memory series explores censorship, persecution and violence addressing the power of written ideas. The series presents books that have been censored during specific historical moments altered by the artist. While the burned books represent a clear reference to repressive moments in history, the *Clandestine Garden* piece presents a hopeful and metaphorical concept by transforming a book into a living garden that keeps growing and evolving.



Regina José Galindo

(Guatemala, b. 1974. Resides in Guatemala)

Perra / Bitch | 2005

Video, color, sound, 5:30 min.

Courtesy of the artist

La verdad / The Truth | 2013

Video, color, sound, 70 min.

Courtesy of the artist

Left to right

Regina Galindo uses her own body to test her mental and physical limits, seeking to provoke

critical thought and reaction in the viewer. Through her performances, Galindo responds to socio-political issues, focusing on political crimes, social hierarchies, segregation and the oppression of women. Although most of her performances refer directly to issues specific to Guatemala, her work incorporates a universal component that alludes to fear, inequality, repression and vulnerability.

In 2005 several bodies of tortured women appeared in Guatemala. Their bodies had been marked by utilizing knives with words such as *malditas perras* (damned bitches) and *muerte a todas las perras* (death to all bitches). Based on these events Galindo created the performance *Perra*, in which she carved the word bitch on her leg with a knife. The artist adopted and marked the word on her own body as a form of resistance highlighting the recurrent violence against women in her country.

In *La verdad*, Galindo read during an hour testimonies of survivors from the armed conflict in Guatemala while a dentist injected her mouth with anesthesia. As the performance progressed and the mouth of the artist was numbed, the testimonies became less comprehensible. *La verdad* was a direct reference to the attempts to silence the crimes perpetrated during the war in Guatemala.



Luis G. Hernández

(Mexicali, b. 1975. Resides in Mexicali)

Untitled (el otro lado) | 2007

Plexi, wood, graphite, paper.

Artist Pension Trust, Los Angeles

Untitled (Understanding the Immigrant Situation) | 2011

Graphite on paper

Courtesy of the artist

Inaction | 2010

Acrylic on canvas

Artist Pension Trust, Los Angeles

Inaction | 2010

Acrylic on canvas

Courtesy of the artist

Left to right

Luis G. Hernández’s work is informed by his personal transcultural experience living between Mexico and the U.S. Staying in a muted

palette, the artist uses collage and text that at times are tongue-in-cheek commentaries on the real political value of art and the museum space. His ongoing series *Inaction* consists of paintings of the word inaction that comment on the act of endless repetition, being both useless and symptomatic of our current times.

At other instances, the text included in his works are more ambiguous and subtle phrases that nevertheless point directly at political problems such as border issues and bilingualism. For example, the sculptural installation *Untitled (el otro lado)*, is a freestanding wall with two identical “drawings” of a phrase in Spanish that translates to “the other side,” readable from both sides of the wall and being possibly lost in translation. According to the artist, this piece points to the similarities and differences on both sides of the border, and the bizarre but familiar feeling of being so used to navigate on both places. This topic becomes more evident in *Untitled (Understanding the Immigrant Situation)*, where Hernández draws each letter in the phrase “understanding the immigrant situation” on the piece of paper, superimposing each letter until it has become an abstract, illegible drawing, just as the situation itself when it comes to border policies and the understanding of our neighbors.



Camilo Ontiveros

(Mexico, b. 1978. Resides in Los Angeles)

Refugees. Welcome Signs | 2015

Welcome signs installation

Courtesy of the artist

Camilo Ontiveros is a conceptual artist whose work reflects his interest in sociopolitical themes such as immigration, power relations, underground economies and recycling. He often exposes the scarcities, tensions and inequalities within power systems. His work often involves the intervention of found objects as well as installations, whose conceptual nature is revealed through research and challenging proposals that are practically utopian.

For his *Refugees. Welcome Signs* installation the artist collected different types of signs from thrift stores that contained the word welcome. Interested in issues of value raised by the discarded objects, with this piece the artist questions the meaning and ambiguity of the word welcome in relationship to immigration issues in the US as well as in Europe with the recent crises of the Syrian refugees. Throughout his career, Ontiveros has produced several works on the subject of immigration, including an ongoing project on altering the caution sign of the immigrant family crossing the freeway titled *Caution Project: Wanted*. The artist states: “most of my work focuses on migration because it is a theme that is close to me. I am in an emigrational situation that I share with millions in this country and around the world; a reality that has been and will continue to be problematic.”



Rubén Ortiz-Torres

(Mexico, b. 1964. Resides in Los Angeles)

Bandera magonista (Magon's Flag) | 2013
Urethane and chromo-luminescent paint on aluminum
Courtesy of the artist

Ceci n'est pas une Machine that Kills Fascists | 2015
Urethane and chromo-luminescent paint on aluminum
Courtesy of the artist

Left to right

Formally trained in painting, Rubén Ortiz-Torres is well versed in different media, including photography, video, and installation. His work addresses popular culture and subcultures, and the complex and aesthetically curious objects these produce. Ortiz-Torres is particularly in-

terested in Los Angeles' lowrider culture. In the last few years, he has been developing a painting technique stemmed from his realization that car painting shares the same preparation process with that of classical oil painting technique, fusing both and working on metal panels sprayed with car paint.

Bandera magonista (Magon's Flag), 2013, belongs to a recent series of paintings that address how the destruction of symbols and iconography have a strong political meaning. The flag reads "Land and Freedom," the motto coined by Ricardo Flores Magón, more known as a Zapatista ideology. However, the phrase is almost invisible, making the painting to read as a red monochrome at first sight. This sort of abstraction or invisibility becomes part of the politization of the piece. Albeit aligned with anarchist and punk ideology, Ortiz-Torres understands the impossibility of art to transform society, and he comments on this matter through the work *Ceci n'est pas une Machine that Kills Fascists*. The work alludes to Magritte's "Treachery of Images" (1928–29) and a sticker with the slogan "this machine kills Fascists" that protest singer-songwriter Woody Guthrie put on his Gibson Southern Jumbo guitar in the early 1940s, believing that his music had the power to fight this evil.



Gala Porras-Kim

(Colombia, b. 1984. Resides in Los Angeles)

Rongorongo text L (RR21), holding hands | 2015
Graphite on paper, adhesive, artist's frame
Courtesy of the artist

Rongorongo text S (RR16), by appendages | 2013
Graphite on paper, adhesive, artist's frame
Courtesy of the artist

Rongorongo text X (RR25), animate to inanimate | 2015
Graphite on paper, adhesive, artist's frame
Courtesy of the artist

Gala Porras-Kim has been interested in exploring the use of the potential of art objects as epistemological tools. In most of her projects, Porras-Kim researches the political implications of language using it as the ultimate and literal signifier of culture and revealing it as a tool of resistance within postcolonial power systems. Her work implies extensive interdisciplinary research, sometimes including collaborations with different communities in Los Angeles such as Zapotec and Korean immigrant communities.

The Mute Object and the Ancient Stories of Today series is comprised of hand-drawn diptychs in which the artist presents artifacts containing undeciphered scripts. In addition to Mesoamerican writings, the series include the rongorongo system of glyphs discovered in 24 wooden objects in Eastern Island during the late nineteenth century. Although several attempts to decipher the language have been made, this linguistic system remains undeciphered. Porras-Kim rearranges the symbols breaking down the language by utilizing different grouping methodologies such as the size or the shape of the signs. The new arrangements allow to project new personal meaning onto these unknown linguistic systems while at the same time engage the viewer into thinking about the potential decoding possibilities for the objects.



Marcos Ramírez ERRE

(Tijuana, b. 1961. Resides in Tijuana)

Tolerancia, confianza, respeto. (y una definición de represión) / Tolerance, Trust, Respect. (and a definition of repression) | 2015

Eight riot squad shields (steel, black polychrome paint) with vinyl text on drywall

Courtesy of the artist

policy, imperialism, globalism, and identity, relying on the use of written language borrowed from mythology, bible passages, historical or personal quotes, and familiar symbols such as road signs and flags, in a critical and humanistic way. Often addressing the complexities of the border, he also focuses on international and cultural issues. In installations such as *The Multiplication of Bread*, 2003, which explores the value of war, ERRE includes an element consisting of two lightboxes, each with a pair of eyes—of an American boy in one, with a quote in English, and in the other those of an Afghan girl with a quote in Arabic—confronting each other with a message of love and rejecting violence as an answer to political conflict.

In works such as the one ERRE created for this exhibition, text replaces the employment of images, as the artist believes that written language is a powerful aesthetic and political vehicle in art. The text in *Tolerance, Trust, Respect. (and a definition of repression)*, 2015, reads: “La represión es la explosión irracional al proteger lo ya perdido” (Repression is the irrational outburst that occurs while protecting what has been lost), a personal definition of repression to the artist that also speaks to our current political foreign policy and reactions towards conflict through prejudice and repression.

The work of Marcos Ramírez ERRE focuses on contemporary concepts of war, nation, foreign



Clarissa Tossin

(Brazil, b. 1973. Resides in Los Angeles)

Vogais Portuguesas / Portuguese Vowels | 2008

Five sugar casts

Courtesy of the artist

critical and poetic dialogue with power, desire, utopia, identity, and invisibility. She does so exploring the concept of place as part of personal memory and collective history, particularly in connection to Brasília, the city she grew up in, known to have an urban plan conceived to be transited by vehicles instead of bodies. Thus, Tossin’s objects often have the performatic presence of her body, tracing history through gesture and using materials that are always connected to the place and situation.

Her recurrent creation and use of the interiors of objects or bodies, including her own mouth—as in the case of *Vogais Portuguesas*—reflects a preoccupation for inserting the presence of the body in space. In *Vogais Portuguesas*, language functions as a marker of collective history and personal identity, since the material used, sugar, is a symbol of Brazil’s colonial past and post-colonial present. The material employed symbolizes Brazil’s sugar cane trade since the 15th century and works here as a metaphor of the Portuguese language and post-colonial identity in Brazil. A remnant of her body in the act of speaking—pronouncing each vowel in her native language—this work is also a reference to translation and the artists’ own identity as a transplant to the United States since 2005.

Clarissa Tossin’s practice addresses politics of space—geographical and cultural—exploring failures of modern history and engaging in a

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Customizing Language

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