

Ethan Assouline
tout va bien

Prosopopoeia, Vienna
11 April – 1 June 2025
Opening: 10 April 2025

When Ethan and I started talking about his exhibition, I was interested in his sculptures that contained laminated fragments of his poems. I saw his works in Brussels last fall and felt his texts, sewn in a chemise or fastened with pins on wooden figures, almost became the sculptures's monologues. In *tout va bien*, Ethan took a different path. *Not a lot of words in these works*, he wrote to me in an email.

Jacques Lacan called psychoanalysis a *discourse without words*:¹ *Last year, with great insistence, I distinguished discourse as a necessary structure that goes well beyond words, which are always more or less occasional.*² *He wanted psychoanalysis to produce a different sociality, one less predicated on the language of mastery, knowledge, and complaint. He suggested we could be more on the side of opportune silence, the falling away of fantastical expectations, the emptying of complaints and grievances, and an exit from social imaginaries. Stop all this noise pollution.*³

In the collaged book sculptures on the tables, Ethan has erased, inserted and reassembled words and images so that the original sentences and narratives are no longer recognizable. Using found children's books, recipe books, travel books and materials from his studio, he has created these works at a rapid pace. Drawing from his extensive archive of collected and stored materials and objects (which is based on his interests on critique of architecture and gentrification, childhood, decoration, sex ...) allows him to work autonomously and spontaneously. The space of a book, that is a collection of printed, written, painted or blank sheets of paper or other suitable materials, has been disturbed. Bright and playful colors are used to suggest a state of harmony and 'happiness.' It is an ironic gesture that imitates capitalist positivity: the performative joy, the feigned and superficial satisfaction of human needs—the lies that are told to pretend that *tout va bien*. Through imitation, language becomes separated from concrete reality: meaning to remove it from common meaning and creating a rather useless and ironic exchange. But the crux of irony becomes visible in these works: it runs the risk of going round in circles at some point. The moment that is supposed to be made visible through the ironic gesture threatens to become invisible. The loop that imitates the idea of a loss of meaning could at some point end in the loss of meaning and contradictions.

Ethan has created a space that seems structured at first: books on tables, clocks on the walls, reminiscent of a class room in a school. *When will the bell ring, and end this weariness?* writes D.H. Lawrence in his poem *Afternoon in School*, where it's the teacher, not the student, who cannot wait for the school day to end. What can be known and learned here? Through the disintegration of meaning and speech? Perhaps we do not find a loss of meaning here, but rather its multiplication.

In connection with the still but moving clock hands, the near absence of words, thinking about silence became a moment of reflection on Ethan's works. A silence in the midst of the abuse and manipulation of language as a way of resisting the *capitalist yes*.⁴ A silence as pause: *before* taking action, speaking up,

¹ <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/659928/silences>

² Jacques Lacan, Seminar XVII

³ <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/659928/silences>

⁴ Anne Boyer, *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate*

changing the narrative. I think of Anne Boyer who writes: *Some days my only certain we is the certain we that didn't, that wouldn't, whose bodies or spirits wouldn't go along. That we slowed, stood around, blocked the way, kept a stone face when others were complicit and smiling. And still we ghost, and no-show, and in the enigma of refusal, we find that we endogenously produce our own incapacity to even try, grow sick and depressed and motionless under the merciless and circulatory conditions of the capitalist yes and just can't, even if we thought we really wanted to. This is as if a river, who saw the scale of levees, decided that rather than try to exceed them, it would outwit them by drying up.*⁵

And:

*Our word for Satan is not their word for Satan. Our word for Evil is not their word for Evil. Our word for Death is not their word for Death.*⁶



⁵ ibd.

⁶ From Sean Bonney's blog, "Abandoned Buildings."