

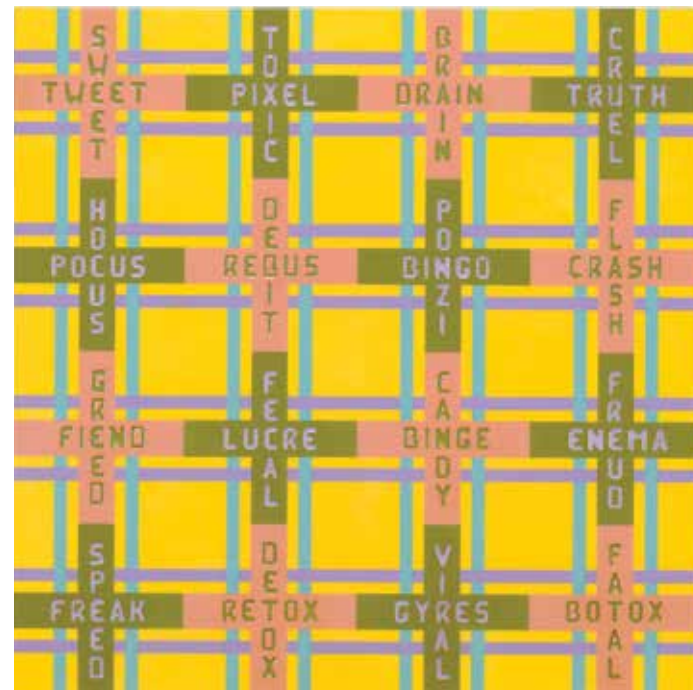
21ST CENTURY CYPHERS

Curated by Claude Smith



516 ARTS

May 12 – July 14, 2018
Albuquerque, New Mexico



Exhibition Curator Claude Smith from Silver City, New Mexico is the Exhibitions & Fulcrum Fund Manager at 516 ARTS and is known for helping artists and curators plan and install exhibitions. This exhibition gives him the opportunity to share his own ideas inspired by a life-long interest in language and code. His mother used to write shorthand, dictating messages in law offices, which captured his imagination about the subject early on. He has curated exhibitions at Tamarind Institute, Inpost Artspace at the Outpost Performance Space, and Santa Fe University of Art & Design. He writes for *New American Paintings* online.

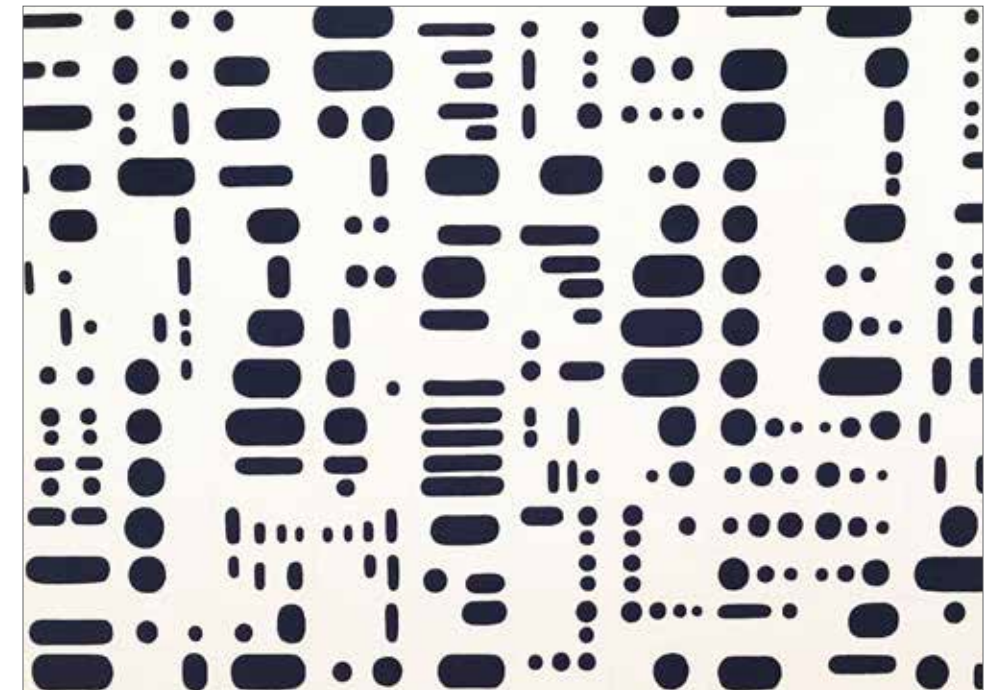
ESSAY ENDNOTES:

- 1 Richard Kalina, "STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN! MEL BOCHNER Strong Language" Brooklyn Rail, June 5, 2014.
- 2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivV8x2K_DSU
- 3 https://www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_txtng_is_killing_language_jk
- 4 "palindromic" means reading the same backward as forward.
- 5 https://www.ted.com/talks/john_mcwhorter_txtng_is_killing_language_jk, February 2013.
- 6 <https://www.languageconservancy.org>
- 7 Nina Stochlic, "The Race to Save the World's Disappearing Languages" www.nationalgeographic.com, April 16, 2018.

ABOVE: Walter Robinson, *Tartan Wordcross (Cruel Truth)*, 2011, mdf, epoxy, metalflake, 48 x 48 inches, Courtesy of Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe, NM

RIGHT: Matt Magee, *516 Grapheme* (detail), 2018, site-specific mural, flat latex wall paint, pencil, 6 x 16 feet, Courtesy of the Artist and Richard Levy Gallery, Albuquerque, NM

COVER: Hayal Pozanti, *81 (Percentage of CEOs with high intuition scores who double their business in five years)*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches, Courtesy of Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, CA



516 ARTS is a nonprofit, contemporary art museum in the center of Downtown Albuquerque that celebrates thought-provoking art in the here and now. Our mission is to connect contemporary artists and diverse audiences. 516 ARTS presents relevant exhibitions and public programs, which feature a mix of local, national, and international artists and inspire curiosity, risk-taking and creative experimentation. Our public programs include collaborations with museums and organizations around the region and beyond, public art projects, guest speakers, public forums, the 516 WORDS literary series, workshops, youth education programs, performances and special events. 516arts.org

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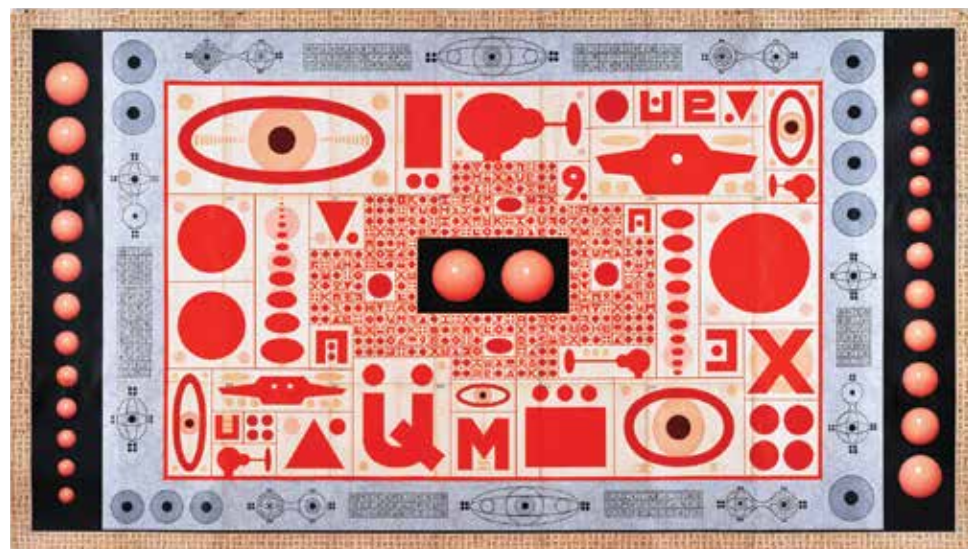
DECODING LANGUAGE AS FORM

“Language functions as the fundamental form of abstraction we engage with on a daily basis—so fundamental that we hardly see it at all, much less recognize it as an abstract and abstracting entity.”

--Richard Kalina¹

In 2015, “emoji” (officially ‘face with tears of joy’ emoji) was selected as word of the year, which was the first time such a designation had ever been given to a pictograph or symbol. Oxford Dictionaries President Casper Grathwohl acknowledged, “traditional alphabet scripts have been struggling to meet the rapid-fire, visually focused demands of 21st century communication; it’s not surprising that a pictographic script like emoji has stepped in to fill those gaps—it’s flexible, immediate, and infuses tone beautifully.”² Language is a complex melting pot of syntax, emotion and expression and it has become increasingly more common to express feelings in shorthand, using what linguist John McWhorter refers to as the “artifice” of speech.³ This might take a number of different forms, but due in part to the frequency in which daily correspondence is mediated by a screen, we now conveniently have immediate access to entire repositories of alternative language signifiers: texting, symbols, glyphs, memes, gifs and even video/sound clips ready for deployment as clever stand-ins for words. In *21st Century Cyphers*, artists engage with language as systems embedded in design, reflect on how technology impacts linguistic development, and explore language as a manifestation of memory and history.

Karla Knight’s symbols and glyphs offer map-like diagrams of imaginary written systems suggestive of language that can be interpreted as both ancient and perhaps



Karla Knight, *Red Spaceship (UR OM UM OX UH)*, 2018, colored pencil and graphite on paper, 50 x 90 inches
Courtesy of the Artist

extraterrestrial in origin. Similarly, **Matt Magee’s** minimalist, site-specific mural recreates a grapheme – or the smallest unit of the writing system of any given language, resulting in a patterned, code-like visual grid of dots and dashes. Referencing technology’s persuasive presence in our lives, **Hayal Pozanti’s** work addresses the contemporary human/machine relationship. She uses her invented alphabet *Instant Paradise* as a way to communicate meaning in response to increasingly common issues of privacy and encryption. Although **Mirtha Dermisache’s** work appears to be illegible, it examines the practice of writing as an impulse and a kind of poetic mark-making to convey information.

Other works engage with stylistic exercises that use letters, words and word forms as the basis for compositional structure including the curvilinear drawings by **Bart Exposito**. Inspired by design and typography, they combine a reduced interplay between geometry and figuration. Hands, faces, arms and other body parts dissolve into carefully executed lines resembling alphabet script or would-be letters using a process that calls to mind the stoic confidence and precision of sign painters. **Walter Robinson’s** work offers witty arrangements of text and word in game-like palindromic configurations or puzzles that mine tabloid headlines and suggest trending topics on social media.⁴

Tech giants are pouring money and resources into satisfying demand for smart assistants and artificial intelligence-driven applications with the promise of simplifying communication. While it remains to be seen just how the ubiquitous use of these applications and accessories will become, at this point, linguistic nuance is still a unique trait governed by human interaction. In a recent article in *The Paris Review*, technologist and AI programmer Marian Lin suggests, “the meandering, gentle, odd human-to-human conversations will fall by the wayside as transactional human-to-machine conversations advance.” Furthermore, she asks, “will these types of conversations rewire the way our minds hold conversation and eventually shape the way we speak with each other?”⁵

Nina Katchadourian’s video *Talking Popcorn* poses the question “Are machines secretly trying to communicate to us?” Using a popcorn popper outfitted with a custom computer, the sound of popcorn popping is translated to Morse Code and spoken aloud by a computerized voice. **Joel Swanson’s** customized computer program *Textual Automata* mines a thesaurus database to create “algorithmic concrete poetry” based on text prompts provided by viewers. Addressing language structure itself, Swanson’s installation, titled *Sol LeWitt’s “Sentences on Contemporary Art,” Diagrammed*, reproduces the iconic manifesto as a grammatically-mapped network of nodes and branches. With the omission of key grammatical identifiers (nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc.), the corresponding segments resemble a system of angular diagrams and could even be taken for a visual representation of the literal aesthetics of LeWitt’s text.

History and memory are invoked in works such as **Gina Adams’** *Treaty of Guadalupe of Hidalgo Broken Treaty Quilt*, which draws from historical events to question the language and integrity of law and executive order, using art and craft practice as a ritual for inquiry and healing. **John Phillip Abbott’s** diaristic process of reconfiguring text and word is rooted in his interest in memory and perception. Abbott’s paintings take on a still life quality in which important moments or places in his past are abstracted to the point of near illegibility and test the viewer’s ability to distinguish the read from the seen.



Examining the act of language translation, **Asuka Goto’s** three year project of translating her father’s novel from Japanese to English highlights the multifaceted challenges of language translation and posits the idea of translation as a series of choices. Goto’s translation itself exists only as a series of annotated notes in the margins of the original text and are perhaps more suggestive of an exercise rather than an earnest attempt at creating a fully realized translation.

Sky Hopinka’s film *Visions of an Island* documents the landscape and geography of St. Paul Island in the Bering Sea through the eyes of an Unangam Tunuu elder and local youth who are learning and teaching their native language with the goal of revitalizing it. Hopinka’s work is a stirring portrait that reveals how inseparable language and culture are for Indigenous and Native communities and the challenges they face as fewer and fewer native speakers remain to pass the language on to future generations.

Codex Espangliensis: From Christopher Columbus to Border Patrol, a collaborative artist book by performance artist **Guillermo Gómez-Peña** and illustrator **Enrique Chagoya** that juxtaposes pop culture and 500-year-old woodcut prints that depict European contact with the new world using the scroll-like format of the Aztec Codices.⁶ The reader embodies Gomez-Peña’s voice as he navigates between Spanish, English, French and Nahautl.

According to the Language Conservancy, of the more than 6,000 languages spoken throughout the world, 43% are endangered or at risk of being lost. It is estimated that in the next 100 years, more than half of all languages will become extinct.⁶ The UNESCO *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger* estimates that every two weeks a language is lost forever.⁷ As climate change, war, famine and global migration drastically reshape all aspects of society, language will continue to play a vital role. It will not only affect basic communication, but it will also impact the ways in which we experience the world, relate to those around us and share cultural knowledge with future generations. With the pervasive influence of technology influencing virtually all aspects of language, the potential for new avenues of communication remains all but certain.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Enrique Chagoya & Felicia Rice, *Codex espangliensis: from Columbus to the Border Patrol*. N.P., Moving Parts Press, 1998, letterpress printed from zinc engravings on Mexico amatl paper lined with Japanese shintengujo tissue, issued in a portfolio (24 x 30 cm), Courtesy of UNM University Libraries, Center for Southwest Research