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Washington University in St. Louis
Graduate School of Art

MECHANICAL COMMUNICATION GUTS

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By

Cole Lu
(Pei-Yu Lu)

A thesis presented to the
Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts
In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts
at Washington University in St. Louis
May 2014

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ABSTRACT

Aesthetics can be proposed through language. Metaphysical experience through technology is an accumulation of information. My practice accentuates the failure of languages that are mediated through technology. Using readymade objects as a signifier for collective experience, I create sets for films that have never existed. Rooted in the conceptual terrain, I seek to concretize the intangible, my sculptural installation was assembled by objects conceived as unknown, or coded messages, and largely applied the color matte black. Matte black, for its non-color, accomplishes openness – freedom. The immersive experience of darkness also echoes with the cinematic environment. Ultimately, my work functions as a loop from language to film and back again. Open-ended, interactive, and resistant to closure, the objects in my installations exist as tangible plots, and viewers can create their own filmic narrative by threading together the evidence of this invisible film in their own minds.

Thesis Advisor: Jessica Baran

Title: Professor of Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis

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“You who read me, are you sure of understanding my language?”
— Jorge Luis Borges, *The Library of Babel*¹

I. FROM LANGUAGE TO FILM AND BACK AGAIN: AN INTRODUCTION

I read. I read everything that can be held in my hands, everything that comes into my vision. Everything is formed into text: news, reviews, posters, subtitles. Everything appears on screen with captions. The subtitles on the screen provide a sense of comfort. In a way, it confirms what I have heard and what I have seen; it reassures the accuracy of the content that I have perceived. I read everything that is within my partial knowledge in three languages and try to interrelate them without contradiction.

To express emotions without restrictions, to perceive expressions without limitations: this is the ambition of visual art. Visual art is the language of universal expression. Therefore, art can be understood as a language; and film- while displaying all creative media- can be seen as the ultimate form of art. Film combines graphic design, cinematography, moving image, sound, painting, and language. Film viewers position themselves in a black box, so they may be immersed by the experience. These conditions draw me to film. Coming from a background of linguistics and photography, as well as installation-based art involving video, sound, sculpture, and photography, my practice is markedly influenced by the idea of a constructed immersive environment and the creation of a narrative illusion that has been traditionally viewed through filmic language.

Through small details, I create sets for films that have never existed. By focusing on coding and decoding systems, illusion and space, my practice is comprised of installation-based projects that produce improvised relationships between

objects and their surroundings. Open-ended, interactive, and resistant to closure, the objects in these installations exist as tangible plots, and viewers can create their own filmic narrative by threading together the evidence of this invisible film in their own minds.

An essential inquisitiveness prolongs the viewing experience of my work. My interest in the inability to communicate through technology sets up the tone of this potential film, this black box installation. In this space, the inner struggle of understanding these unknown languages begins. Verbal and nonverbal signs, appropriated objects, texts, and self-composed sounds seek to address such issues as the impact of display and the appropriation of illusive concepts, such as originality, novelty, and mystery.

II. THE INVISIBLE L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E

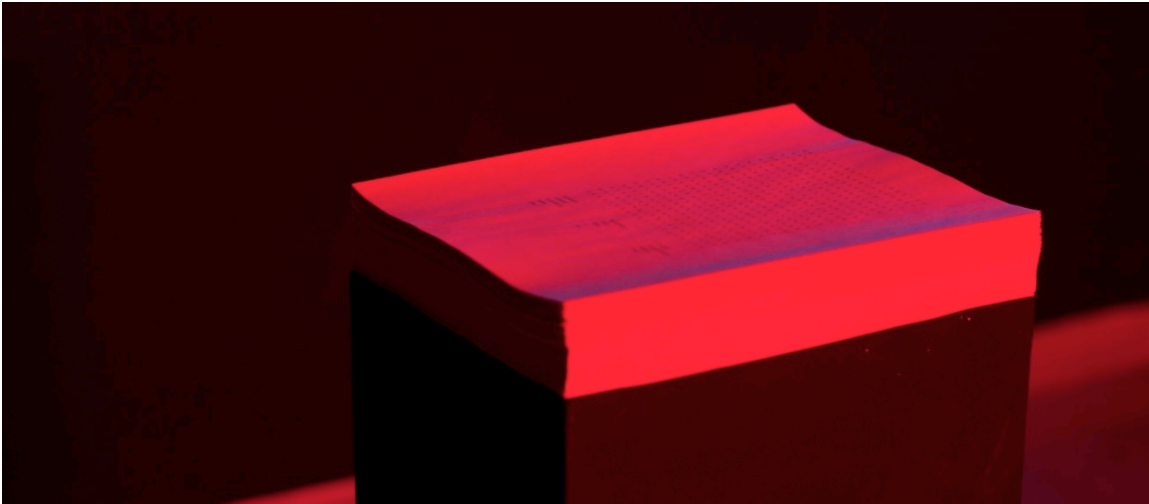


Figure 1. Cole Lu, *(World) Search*, 2013.
Installation view, 2013.

In the beginning, there was only one language. Objects, things, feelings, colours, dreams, letters, books, newspapers were this language. I couldn't imagine that another language could exist, that a human being could pronounce a word that I wouldn't be able to understand.

-Agota Kristof, *The Illiterate (l'analphabete)*²

In an ideal world, language should not exist in any specific linguistic system, but, rather, should be a built-in system that all beings share without a particular logical structure—in an ideal world, indeed. In truth, all communication is haphazard and multimodal. We see language not only as a tool of communication, but also as a medium, a form of expression. In *Silent Message* (1971), Albert Mehrabian concluded that ninety-three percent of all communicative language is non-verbal.³ If visual art is to be a kind of language, then like any other language, it can be used or misused. Language works on several levels, endlessly flipping back and forth between the meaningful and material: we can choose to weigh it, and we can choose to read

it.⁴ Thus, the medium should not be held responsible for the way it is generally perceived and employed; it is simply a conduit, a way of facilitating meaning.

Aesthetics can be proposed through language, and visual art can be seen as a language. It is possible to receive information at any time and at any location. Imagine all the invisible languages that exist in the air: the electromagnetic radiation and radio waves, the analogue and digital signals, the wireless Internet and cellphone frequencies. Our culture is the encrusted linear accumulation of mediated information through these invisible static languages. If we apply Mehrabian's theory of nonverbal language, we lose ninety-three percent of the communicative language through technological mediation. We are constantly creating gaps through our inability to communicate. There are always inevitable gaps in mediation and how we perceive any language.

As a non-native English speaker, I confronted the language at the age of seven; there have always been failures in understanding this language through communication. I have spoken English for more than twenty years, I have written in English for more than ten years, but I still don't understand it. I don't speak it without making mistakes, and I can't write it without consulting dictionaries. Consequently, the languages that I have acquired and learned are canceling each other out—the second and third languages are the killers of the mother tongue. Driven by the personal experience of multiple language acquisition as a disability, my work accentuates the inherit paradox in understanding mediated languages.

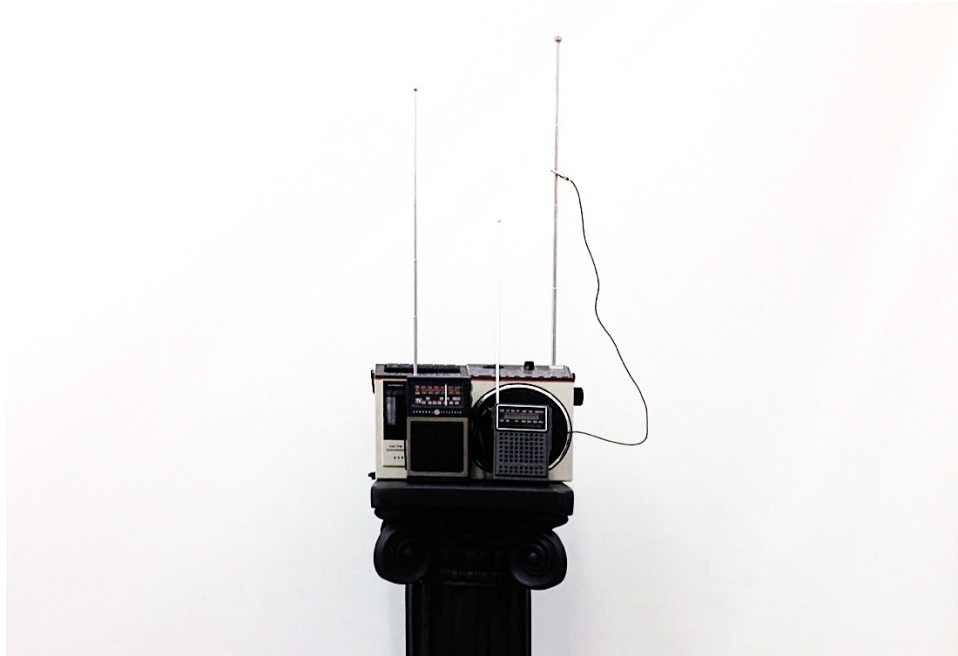


Figure 2. Cole Lu, *The Never Ending Fugue*, 2014.
Theremin made by three rewired AM/FM radios on matte black Ionic fluted pedestal column.

The Never Ending Fugue (2014) (Figure 2.) is an attempt to physically visualize that gap. This piece is a theremin assembled by three radios that are rewired together. By tuning three different frequencies on the radios, it essentially cancels out the radios' original frequencies. The sound that is generated through this process transforms the assemblage into a musical instrument. The viewer becomes the musician, standing in front of the instrument and controlling the sound without any physical contact. By simply moving one's hands within proximity of its antennas, the viewer can control the frequency (pitch) that is emitted from the instrument. The movements of the thereminist's hands can be seen as a non-verbal language. Its intention is to create a platform for those who are trying to express emotions through musical notes. The piece is attempting to emphasize the physical connection between viewers and the artwork without having actual contact. The viewer is challenged to experience the potential failure of mastering this instrument.

The dual nature of linguistics is language (speech) and code (message). The content in written text or visualized text can be viewed as restated thought; on the other hand, the unconscious expression is often verbal.⁵ The intangible quality of verbal language is manifest when language evaporates once it has been pronounced.

By attempting to visualize the process of meaning-making and to challenge preconceived notions of the idea of game, *(Word) Search* (2013)(Figure 1. &3.) is a designed word puzzle that contains a quote by Wisława Szymborska. The puzzle was printed on a stack of letter size paper and placed on a custom 8.5" by 11" pedestal, forming a seamless continuation between the paper and pedestal. The hidden message in the puzzle is the first stanza of Szymborska's poem "The Three Oddest Words":

*When I pronounce the word Future,
the first syllable already belongs to the past.*⁶

The word search puzzle, in essence, breaks down each letter into separate, fragmented pieces, facilitating the act of searching. Like these puzzles, finding meaning in works is the essence of the viewing experience. The practice of finding precise words is a common act, a mundane experience. This then becomes an unconscious behavior that we take for granted, and the frustration that comes along with this goes unacknowledged.

How do we contextualize the unknown gap between language and visual perception? How do we externalize internal thoughts? And if the very essence of some languages is invisible, how can we detect them? Through pieces like *The Never Ending Fugue* and *(Word) Search*, visual art becomes tangible evidence, expressing those internalized ideas. By contextualizing those invisible, intangible thoughts, art serves as a language, capable of being understood without preconceived knowledge.

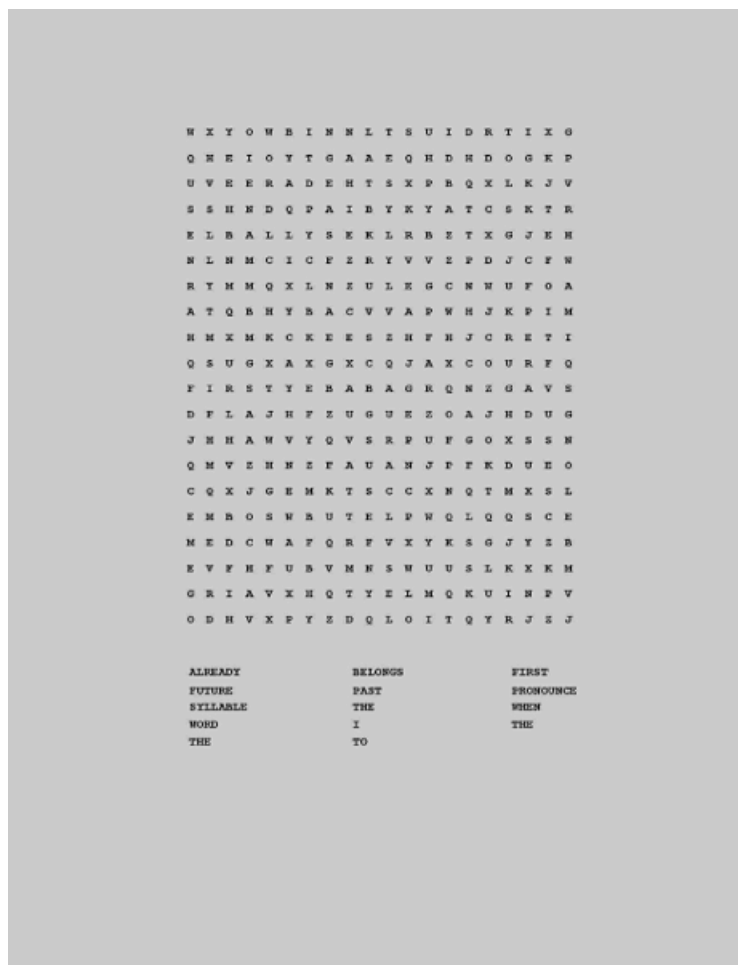


Figure 3. Cole Lu, *(Word) Search*, 2013.
 1.5 by 11 inches Xerox paper, word search puzzle,
 quote from *The Three Oddest Words* by Wislawa Szymborska.

III. APPROPRIATION/ MISAPPROPRIATION/ ASSIMILATION

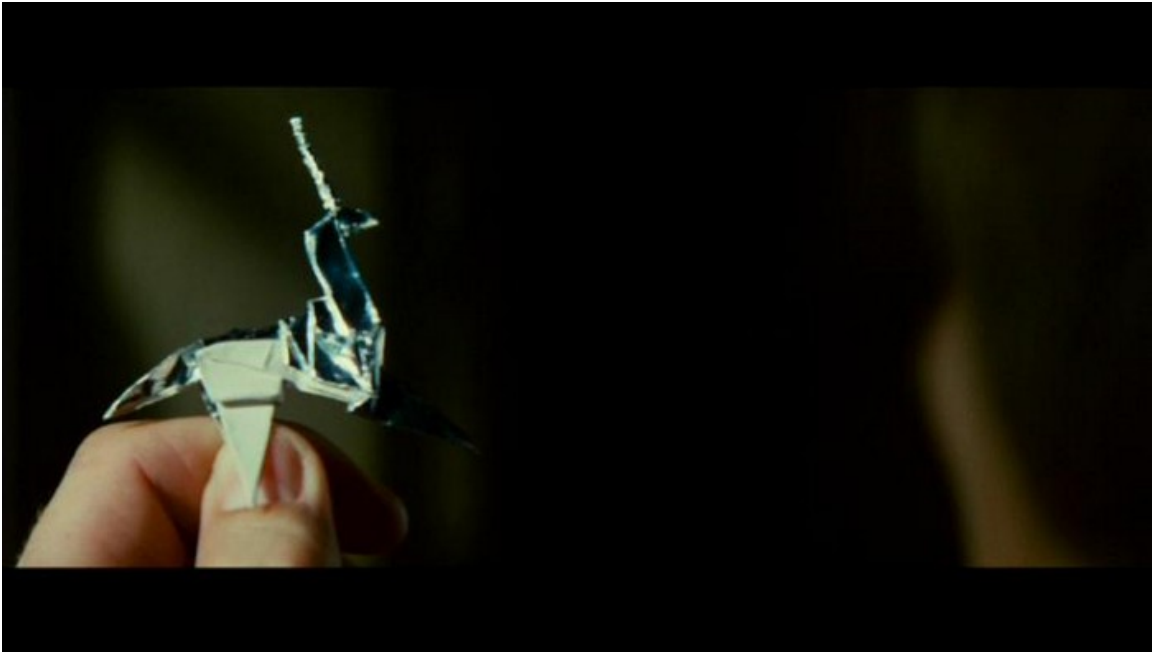


Figure 4. Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*, 1982. Drama/ Sci-Fi/ Thriller, 117 min, USA.

Nothing comes from nothing.

- Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things (De Rerum Natura)*⁷

Appropriation underscores the primacy of individual expression, as it foregrounds the mere act of selection as a creative decision. Self-suppression is impossible. The images we choose to crop, the footage we choose to show, the objects we choose to make—the decision-making process comes with specific reasons; they may not be intellectual reasons, but they are expressions of self, and it is the decision-making process based on personal expression that is precisely the essence of art making.

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (Figure 4.) poses the question: at what point does simulation merge with what has been simulated. In other words, at what point does a

reproduction cease to differ from its source. The only difference between the human and the android in the film is the former's capacity for empathy. But if memory is implanted, and the replicant carries the capacity for empathy, what constitutes the actual difference? Appropriation from other sources leads to at least a temporary revitalization or renewal. Nothing in this world is original, or unique. Jorge Luis Borges wrote, the perfect definition in his story "Book of Imaginary Beings" (1957). His definition coincides with the meaning behind the scene of the origami unicorn in *Blade Runner*:

It is universally held that the unicorn is a supernatural being and of auspicious omen; so say the odes, the annals, the biographies of worthies, and other texts whose authority is unimpeachable. Even village women and children know that the unicorn is a lucky sign. But this animal does not figure among the barnyard animals, it is not always easy to come across, it does not lend itself to zoological classification. Nor is it like the horse or bull, the wolf or deer. In such circumstances we may be face to face with a unicorn and not know for sure that we are. We know that a certain animal with a mane is a horse and that a certain animal with horns is a bull. We do not know what the unicorn looks like.⁸

Experimenting with sound-emitting technical devices, including homemade robotic hands, popular holiday toys, radios and analog TVs, I translate language stripped though a range of found, eerie objects and sounds. *Furby* (2013) (Figure 4.) is a piece that was made with a rewired, retouched and repainted electronic robotic toy, *Furby*, coated with matte-black paint, and placed on a custom pedestal that physically elevated the height of the piece to the level of a human chest. A *Furby* is an electronic robotic toy that resembles an owl-like creature. Following its launch during the holiday season of 1998, this once-popular toy went through a period of being a "must-have" item for children, and its speaking capabilities were translated into 24

languages. The fact that this fictional language has been translated into 24 different languages demonstrates the failure of language. Through the misappropriation of a children's toy, the work emphasizes Furby's absurdity, thus upsetting the viewers' expectations of normalcy in regards to understandable communication. As stated by Mike Kelly:

"I wanted...an artwork that you couldn't raise, there was no way you could make it better than it was. Its function as art actually makes it more uncomfortable."

-Mike Kelley⁹

Common values and near-indecipherability became my central focuses in this piece. By attaching a motion sensor to the toddler wagon, the Furby could be triggered once the viewer put their hands on the wagon handle. A natural gesture towards this electronic, surrogate pet produced the unknown, an enciphered language.



Figure 5. Cole Lu, *Furby*, 2013.
Rewired electronic toy, toddler wagon/walker, birch.

Many of the electronic elements and sounds I orchestrate are the result of the activation, manipulation, amplification, and distortion of various devices used in popular communication. The devices are often fundamentally related through indistinct coded messages. The code/message often exists in assorted forms, including printed text, sound and video. Discernible quotations and phrases from various fiction and poetry, including works from Jorge Luis Borges, Alan Lightman, Wisława Szymborska, and Elizabeth Bishop, are emitted by these devices, which are activated without specific sequences. The sounds and moving images are activated from deconstructed analog TVs and “skinned” toys to create an overwhelming polysensory experience in a closed environment. Each object functions as an interdependent element in a large-scale sculptural installation.

Like all of the compulsive makers that follow in Mike Kelly’s footsteps, we obscure the familiarity of common objects and imagery, increasing the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.¹⁰ Thus, art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The coding system can be viewed as a form, as part of the technique that can constantly cue the viewer’s self-conscious. The process of decoding is to create a state of mind, in which audiences take part of the meaning making process.

The act of searching for readymade objects and displaying them in an art context recasts these objects as artwork. One such example is in the work of Berlin-based artist Alicja Kwade. Alicja Kwade’s practice reveals no trace of the artist’s hand

and offers an elementary level of accessibility. All of her objects are polished and factory-made, but her approach places her objects within the open language of appropriation. In her piece *Singularität (Uniqueness)* (2008) (Figure 6.), a clock covered by a convex mirror reduces the passing of time to a pulsing tick - a heart beat of sorts - that reverberates through the dense and rather cryptic structure.

The convex mirror exists as a material for reflection, but if we strike out the visual aspect and leave only the audio, which indicates time ticking, self-consciousness and the passage of time are emphasized. The audio component heightens our attention to time's passing, which is further amplified by the mirror. The clock sounds are emitted through the speaker that builds up a sense of internal anxiety. As with much of reality, the day-to-day existence of anxiety is not so sensationalized as commonly seen in literary descriptions. The reality of this captivated reflection and the understanding of how objects simulate their surroundings do not provide contentment, but rather, the piece, with its audio input, is thick with tension.



Figure 6. Alicja Kwade, *Singularität (Uniqueness)*, 2008.
Atomic clock, black paint, mirrored-glass, microphone, mixer, speakers, neon.

IV. BLACK AS (NON) SPACE, CONCEPT AND AESTHETIC



Figure 7. Cole Lu, *Portal*, 2013.
Single channel video, rear projection on black bed tent.

Reality does not conform to the rules of etiquette, subscribe to exclusive values, or wear a tie; it has a vulgar set of relations and is frequently seen slumming among the senses with other antithetical arts.

-Brain O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*¹¹

As a tangible element, a work's material can be measured, weighed, picked up and collected; however, color and space are excluded from this physicality. Due to the impalpability of these two features, the integrity of visual art is unseen. The unseen parts can be easily taken for granted, and viewers need to be constantly reminded of their presence. In certain works, artists consistently excavate the anxieties of color and space to create ingenious and psychologically charged installations.

The value system of justifying a work of art as "art" has been fundamentally influenced by the exhibition space. The white cube was the transitional device that attempted to wash out the past and meanwhile control the future by appealing to

transcendental presentation.¹² We as viewers have been taught to accept this scaffold as a norm of appreciating art. In contemporary art display, the white cube and the pedestal insert the immediate authority *without further ado*. The problem of transcendental presentation inside the white cube is that it does not just bleach out the past but it creates a hierarchy for viewing art, which creates inclusiveness that is only accessible for certain groups that speak that language.



Figure 8. Klara Lidén, *Teenage Room*, 2009.
Installation view, Sammlung Boros, Berlin, 2012.

The absent elements in a work of art are generally more present to us; the absentness acknowledges our identity as a fiction and provides us the illusion that we are present through a double-edged self-consciousness.¹³ Klara Lidén's *Teenage Room* (2009) (Figure 5.) is an installation that featured a room that used the color black as an overarching visual element. Originally shown in 2009, *Teenage Room* was

presented as part of an exhibition in the Danish and Nordic Pavilions at the 54th Venice Biennale. Upon witnessing the piece, which was shown in Berlin at Sammlung Boros in 2013, the aftermath of space and color are predominantly effective in this piece. Different from other artworks that were featured in the untouched concrete structures in Sammlung Boros, Klara Lidén's *Teenage Room* was painted white and installed with a plush carpet. The room featured a manufactured bunk bed with denim quilts that stretched across the top like a hammock. The wooden structure was spray-painted black, and the trace of the spray paint residue on the wall provided a natural visual cue of how this bunk bed was painted on the site. Through utilizing an enclosed space in a WWII bunker and fabricating it into a completely modern domestic setting, *Teenage Room*, with its inclusion of an IKEA pendant lamp, creates the mundane atmosphere that accentuates the eeriness of the black bunk bed. A metaphorical visualization of the elephant in the room, the ingenious application of black spray paint underscored the impact of color and accentuated the uncanny quality of the space.

Our eyes perceive color and space as a grid, a measurement that grounds us to an unknown territory. Therefore, by using color to sculpt the space, the artist can provide new meanings to the environment.

Color, along with material, is one of the most loaded signs of the quotidian, with each color capable of connoting some sort of meaning. Consequently, avoiding literalness in the use of color has always been a challenge in art. The color black is a vital component in the composition of my work. However, my use of the color black

does not signify outer space, skin color or negativity. Rather, black obscures a dimension deemed extraneous and challenges the emotional perception of darkness. The expression “the dark of absolute freedom” is an idea of formality, an idea of aesthetic.¹⁴



Figure 6. Alicja Kwade, *Der Tag ohne Gestern (Dimension 1–11)* (*The Day Without Yesterday [Dimension 1–11]*), 2009. Installation view.

Although black is evoked by a total absence of light, it still carries a degree of difference through a spectrum of various blacks. Glossy black, with its reflectiveness, can be seen as unpredictable through its implied surreality.

Originally inspired by string theory, Alicja Kwade’s *Der Tag ohne Gestern (Dimension 1–11)* (*The Day Without Yesterday [Dimension 1–11]*)(2009)(Figure 6.) is an audio sculptural installation composed of eleven large, reflective black curved steel plates that divide the space and create various open compartments. A black speaker is placed in front of each plate, and each speaker is connected to fluorescent light

bulbs in the ceiling, amplifying electromagnetic waves against the curved steel plates. Her interest in material physicality and space can be seen in Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington's "The Nature of the Physical World" (1928), capturing its awareness of itself:

I am standing on the threshold about to enter a room. It is a complicated business. In the first place I must shove against an atmosphere pressing with a force of fourteen pounds on every square inch of my body. I must make sure of landing on a plank travelling at twenty miles a second round the sun- a fraction of a second too early or too late, the plank will be miles away. I must do this whilst hanging from a round planet head outward into space, and with a wind of aether blowing at no one knows how many miles a second through every interstice of my body. The plank has no solidity of substance...I ought really to look at the problem four-dimensionally as concerning the intersection of my world-line with that of the plank. Then again it is necessary to determine in which direction the entropy of the world is increasing in order to make sure that my passage over the threshold is an entrance, not an exit.¹⁵

The results of her work often appear as slick perceptual artifacts and the glossy black's surreal quality can be effortlessly associated with an outer space setting. The glossy black's reflectiveness brings the viewers' attention to themselves—they become self aware and entranced by their own reflection. In contrast, matte black, also known as flat black, absorbs all light and offers no reflection. It is void of hue, and it is the darkest possible color. Matte black applied on an appropriated piece homogenizes its preexistent values; as a result, the distillation of meaning from the objects can open them to interpretation. It reintroduces the meaning of matte black as a signifier of non-color, and it offers the potential for free expression.

In keeping with the open-ended interpretation, the installation *Palimpsestuous Prostheses* (2013) (Figure 9. &10.) was intentionally dark and was painted matte

black. It is a multimedia installation with five objects, three single-channel videos on screens and a digital audio loop in a space painted matte black. A single channel video rear-projected on a black queen size bed tent, *Portal* (2013)(Figure 7.) was originally made for a custom-made immersive viewing experience. It was adapted when it was shown in the installation project *Palimpsestuous Prostheses*; the piece was separated into two different components, a single channel video on a vertical analog TV and a black bed tent that was installed vertically at the entrance of the installation. The vertical TV was installed outside of the main installation space with the virtual reality video played on a loop, and the black queen-size bed tent installed vertically at the entrance created a transition space, like a tunnel that served its function as a visual buffer, for viewers to adjust their perceptions of dramatic change of light.

Rooted in the conceptual and physical terrain of personal history in communication, the sculptural installation was assembled by objects conceived as unknown, or coded messages, and largely applied the color matte black. The motive for the involvement of darkness and blackness are based on aesthetic and rationality. Matte black, for its non-color, accomplishes openness – freedom.

As a maker seeking a unified code, black is ideal. The ideal survival environment for art, in the context of extremity or darkness, is a social reality; one must assimilate themselves to it.¹⁶

If a larger-scale space is black, it generally applies to two common scenarios in day-to-day life: a cinematic experience or an electric power shortage blackout-voids of nothingness. Black or darkness representing negativity has been a long tradition in

various cultures. As a visual artist, I suggest an alternative viewpoint of blackness. Black has all different levels of darkness, different textures in which it can be perceived.

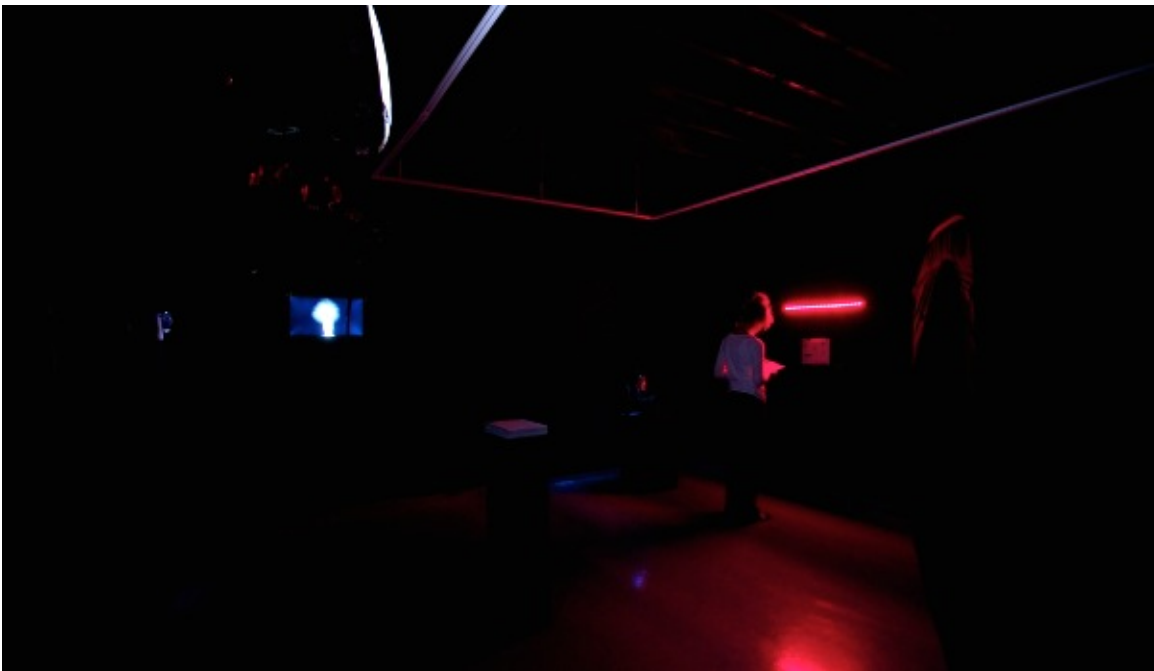


Figure 9. &10. Cole Lu, *Palimpsestuous Prostheses*, 2013.
Installation view, 2013.

V. EXPERIENTIAL FORMALISM: EVIDENCE OF THE FILM THAT NEVER EXISTS

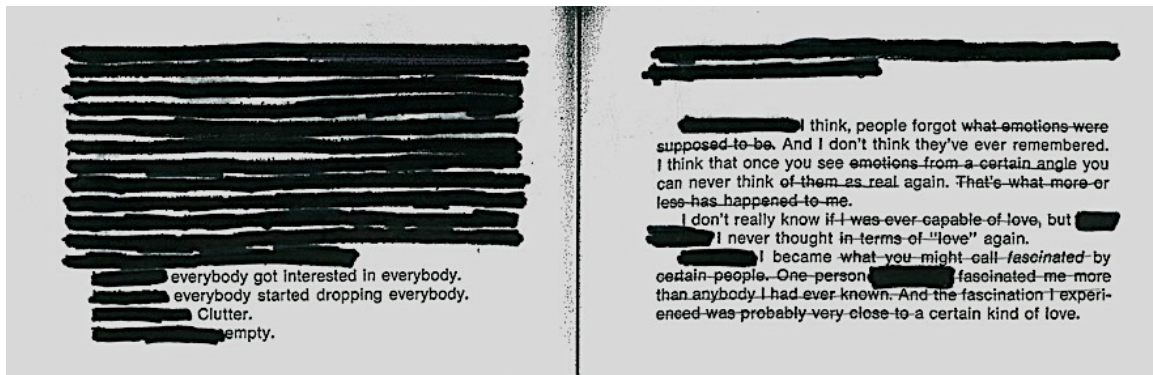


Figure 11. Cole Lu, *Palimpsest*, 2013. In collaboration with Dolly Laninga. Appropriated text from in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* by Andy Warhol, Xeroxed paper & envelope, United States Postal Service. Detail view, 2013

Like any artistic tradition, however antitraditional it may be, the avant-garde also has its conventions. In the broad sense of the world, it is itself no more than a new system of conventions...Disorder becomes rule when it is opposed in a deliberate and symmetrical manner to a pre-established order.

- Renato Poggioli¹⁷

The very definition of the term "film" has evolved progressively over time in response to environmental and cultural influences. In old English, *filmen* stands for "membrane, thin skin"; in the 1570s; it spoke from the sense of "a thin coat of something." It was extended by 1845 to mean the coating of chemical gel on photographic plates.¹⁸ It was not until 1905 that the term began to refer to "motion pictures" that allude to a foundation of movements and gestures; its vernacular name makes that relation even more conspicuous- movie, images that move.¹⁹ The term "film" itself reflects its evolution from a tangible object to an intangible medium.

When I started to watch films in the cinema, I was four. It was my father's weekend activity with me since I was born. Watching films with a kid in the theater is

not a fondly-regarded experience, as complete silence is required. I was persistently informed to stay on the chair and remain silent. We watched mostly foreign films. Before the age of seven, I did not understand any other language besides my mother tongue. So during these long hours of enforced silence, while rocking back and forth with my legs in the dark room with flickering images, I started to develop a series of signs. Signs to translate what I'd seen on screen to my imaginary friend in this dark space. The secret pleasure of this enclosed sign language didn't last long, but the impulse of translation remains.

I translate elusive expressions through tangible mediums.

By the time I first encountered my inadequacy to express myself through various spoken languages, I was engaged with film, the negatives, in the darkroom. In the darkroom, only infrared light is on. I worked days and nights to understand this medium. I continued to translate the process of expression, if I was in the darkroom, by the infrared light. Then, as I cry my frustration to sleep, images are born out of night. They circle around me, flickering, taking on forms and compositions; they condense- they become objects.

In my installation, each object signifies a tangible plot for a film that never exists. By appropriating these formulated elements, such as a dactylologic robotic hand (*Dactylology*)(Figure 12.), a rewired electronic toy (*Furby*), video on a deconstructed analog TV (*Petman*), a tesla-coil lamp, a poem translated into Morse Code (*One Art*), word search puzzles (*(Word) Search*), an audio installation (*Diary, 15 May 1905*), and appropriated text (*the Netherlands*) (*Palimpsest*) (Figure 11.),

the white cube installation model of displaying contemporary art is reconceived as a film set, planetarium or experimental laboratory.

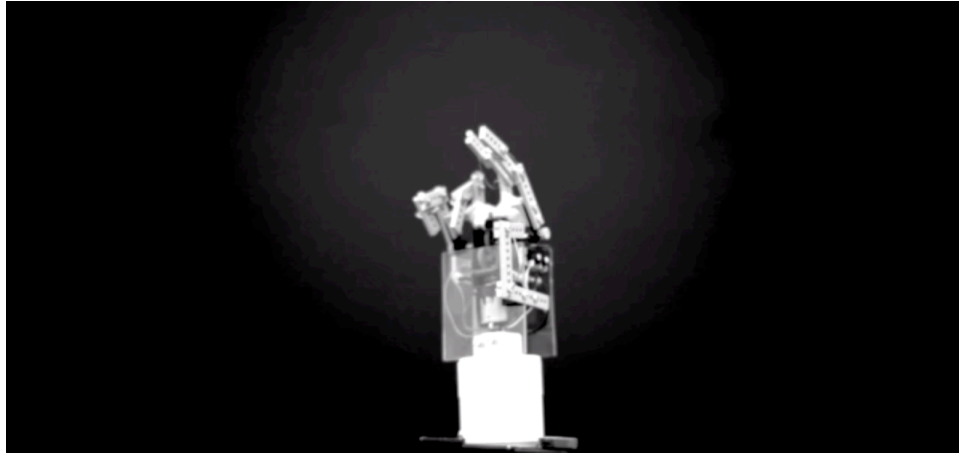


Figure 12. Cole Lu, stills from *Dactylology*, 2013.
Dactylologic robotic hand, single-channel video, 02:10 minutes, black & white, loops.
Stop motion video with robotic hand signing quotes from "A Weary Man's Utopia"
by Jorge Luis Borges.

Palimpsestuous Protheses (2013) is a multimedia installation with improvised relationships between the objects themselves and their surroundings. The term "palimpsest" is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "a parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing." Its extended meaning can be further elucidated as "a thing likened to such a writing surface, esp. in having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a multilayered record."²⁰ By experimenting with an adjective form of the term "palimpsestuous", the title

Palimpsestuous Prostheses of the installation presents various mediated languages inhabited in all of the fragmented and appropriated objects.

Inspired by Jorge Luis Borges' science fiction laden stories, "A Weary Man's Utopia", "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "The Library of Babel", the installation provides an immersive polysensory experience that overwhelms the visual. Open-ended, interactive, and resistant to closure, it is an extended, fanatic episode in an unnamed character's exploration of what is real and what is true. In the form of science fiction film, in which ordinary dialogue is transformed most pointedly, successfully, and significantly, satire, a form of humor and instruction, has a natural affinity for the utopian or dystopian realms. Through extrapolation, and through the creation of a time and/or place not present, science fiction allows the distance necessary for satire to function.²¹ The consistent mark of a slowly purified plot sustains playfulness and ironic affection in my practice, and reveals the aftermath of sci-fi film influences. We as viewers can be shown in the present, in the here and now, with our cultural, political and social eccentricities, manias, and phobias—our appealing idiocies. The displacement from a traditional gallery aesthetic offers an "otherness" quality to view art from a great spatial or temporal distance. To find the ordinariness of this film that never existed is not only unusual, but also could be unsettling.

VI. BACK TO THE FUTURE



Figure 14. Cole Lu, *Diary, 15 May 1905*, 2013. Digital audio loop, 07:43mins.
Texts from *Einstein's Dream* by Alan Lightman, performed by Dayna Kriz,
sound recording and orchestrated by Cole Lu.
Installation view, 2013

In general, I try to distinguish between what one calls the future and *l'avenir*. The future is that which- tomorrow, later, next century- will be. There's a future which is predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, *l'avenir* (to come), which refers to someone who comes, whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. To which is totally unpredictable. The other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future beyond this other unknown future, it's *l'avenir* in that it's the coming of the other when I am completely unable to foresee their arrival.

- Jacques Derrida, *Derrida* (2002)²²

In "Memory and Consciousness" (1985), Endel Tulving's theory of memory systems is divided in three types- procedural, semantic and episodic.²³ Procedural memory is connected with retention, and utilization of perceptual, cognitive and motor skills. Semantic memory- also known as generic or categorical memory - has to do with symbolically representable knowledge that organisms possess about the world.

And episodic memory mediates the remembering of personally experienced events.²⁴ It's the most flexible part of our memory.

Episodic memory implies a mental reconstruction of some earlier events that we extracted knowledge from and built up based on certain particularities, such as the principle characters involved in actions, setting, and emotional reactions.²⁵ The flexibility of memory progression from procedural memory to semantic memory is attained as episodic memory.

The audio installation *Diary, 15 May 1905* (2013) (Figure 14.) is my first attempt to trigger the emotional reaction of episodic memory that has been translated from a written text to audio compositions. It is a composition of 8-tracks of orchestrated voice-overs from chapter "15 May 1905" of "Einstein's Dreams" by Alan Lightman. In this fiction readers are asked to imagine a world in which time does not exist as an invisible fourth dimension, but rather a visual element through which life is traveled and measured. Each chapter is a different dream from Einstein and in each dream, time behaves differently and is understood in various ways. In the dream, "15 May 1905" is the world without time, only images. The composition of this dream is formed by phrases that describe various images that construct the world. The audio narrative composes this world through frozen images that are spoken. These spoken words float and fill the space and trigger the nostalgic emotion through audio perception opening up the imaginary vision of the world that once possibly existed-like building this imaginary world with episodic memories.

Alfred Korzybski emphasizes the limit of perception: only hearing is involved in this situation and leads, in that way, to a shared misunderstanding of the situation.²⁶ Different interpretations of the same clues create different realities. By perceiving the audio interpretation, the viewers may experience a free-form interpretation that penetrates the limitation of verbal thinking. Interpretation ultimately occurs by presumption and projection of imaginations, and it is possible to separate seeing from knowing, perceiving, from interpreting. As part of the installation *Palimpsestuous Prostheses*, the dark room mirrors the paradox that Derrida sees as a perception of blindness: blindness is the mechanism or condition through which one sees oneself. "The blindness opens the eye, is not the one that darkens the vision," he says.²⁷ Derrida sees invisibility as visibility, like in episodic memory; there are positive forms of the images, visible and invisible, superimposed one and another that generate a private medium and unique blindness. A seeing blindness.²⁸



Figure 15. Cole Lu, detail view of the mental time travel machine from *A Weary Man's Utopia*, 2014.

The typical definition of mental time travel involves an “episodic memory” of the past is more consideration of the future and an understanding of how these related to the self. Thus, mental time travel involves subjective reconstruction of past or future events. In the case of humans, researchers can clearly see and demonstrate the presence of episodic memory and future planning.²⁹

The installation *A Weary Man's Utopia* (2014) presents a situation that toggles between a 20ft by 10ft space and fictional time travel. Within the space is a mental time travel machine, a light box with a word search puzzle, an assemblage of an empty frame and a pair of working boots, a postcard-sized Xeroxed image, and an embossed label reading “the future”. The title “A Weary Man's Utopia” was appropriated from Jorge Luis Borges’ short story which corresponds with all of my projects, as texts and titles that are often repeated, serving as a continuous association

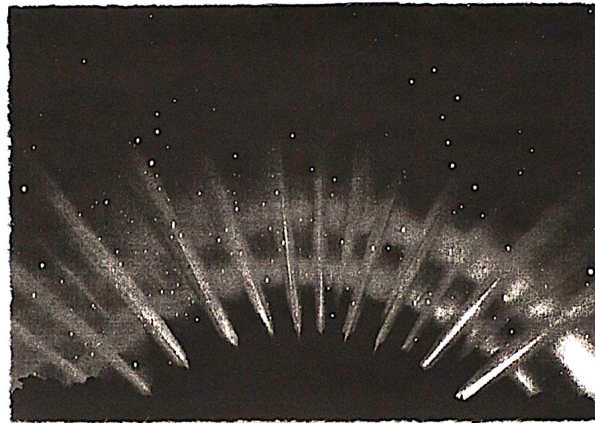
with a larger narrative. In this scope, my work has no pertinence as a mode of narration; instead, it is a mock setup for broader interpretation.

The phenomenological experience of remembering is different from merely knowing the fact.³⁰ The anxiety of escaping the present is the central concept of this piece. Hence the need for a mental time travel machine. *The Future* (2014) (Figure 16.), an element of this installation, is an assemblage of a Xeroxed (mediated) image from Étienne Trouvelot's astronomical drawing *Aurora Borealis* (1872) (Figure 17.) and a vinyl label with the text "The future" affixed to the wall across from the mental time travel machine. It is possible that language (written text) constructs reality, like the subtitles in a film. In *The Future* both the past and the present are the future, as the time in this installation space become an endless loop. Like the subtitles in the film, the text suggests a filmic narrative of a constructed and flexible time.

Ultimately my work functions as a loop from language to film and back again.

My practice can be summarized with Roland Barthes's definition with text:

To identify accurately language's image-reservoirs, to wit: the word as singular unit, magic, monad; speech as instrument or expression of thought; writing as transliteration of speech; the sentence as a logical, closed, measure; the very deficiency or denial of language as a primary, spontaneous, pragmatic force. All these artifacts are governed by the image- reservoir of science (science as image-reservoir): linguistics expresses the truth about language, but solely in this regard: "that no consciousness illusion is perpetrated": now, that is the very definition of the image-reservoir: the unconsciousness of the unconscious.³¹



THE FUTURE

Figure 16. Cole Lu, *The Future* from *A Weary Man's Utopia*, 2014.
Xeroxed image of Étienne Trouvelot's *Aurora Borealis*, 1872, vinyl label maker.



Figure 17. Étienne Trouvelot, *Aurora Borealis*, 1872. Chromolithographs.



Figure 18. Cole Lu, mental time travel machine from *A Weary Man's Utopia*, 2014. Amprobe recorder, Light box, appropriated Xeroxed text from "Einstein's Dreams" by Alan Lightman, Mylar paper, Braille, MDF, stainless steel, birch, two by four, oxygen tanks, binocular, leather helmet, motion sensor, grip tape, Electrical Metallic Tube (EMT) straps, casters. Life Science Library - "Man and Space" (1964)

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A: I'm sorry to hear about it. I just thought that things were magic and that it would never happen.

-Andy Warhol³²