

## Aphasic Notes on Public Texts

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Review:

*Public Texts: A California Visual Language*<sup>1</sup>

Art, Design, and Architecture Museum, UC Santa Barbara

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<https://www.museum.ucsb.edu/news/feature/1145>

A volume in bright light. Bedazzled, you are, or you are in, the inside of a book of scrambled texts, it is the book of books, library for processing a swarming language soon as you can read or even not read what it is your sensorium is tuning to, you are dropping out and turning on, it must be the summer of love, or not. Is that Van Morrison's face inside that psychedelic graphic from the Avalon Ballroom? (Wes Wilson, 1967). You are not attuned, then you are among objects laden with letters, phantoms, errata. Weeks later, you uptake: "it was great! It sparkled | With its unfinishedness | In the room of unfinished youth. | It sparked with unfinishedness, | it sparkled with its unevenness | in the evenness." (Yoko Ono, *Everything in the Universe Is Unfinished*, 2024). Even as her lines imprint on my brain, Yoko Ono, my avatar in absentia, will not have come with me except in spirit into *Public Texts: A California Visual Language*, curated by Alex Lucas at the AD+A museum. Generosity inflects this mood or tense of the future perfect, celebrating that which 'will have been' - and more, a sense that no matter the partial, the imperfect, the occluded, a revolt against speechlessness will win some of its battles. What we have here are the public texts of a minor literature, just in the sense of being from somewhere at a presumed periphery, which classically becomes the center: case in point, the somewhere-out-west-notion of 'California', northern and southern, is the mythic ground for an exhibition centering how artists here manifest texts. Why here: I think to myself, remembering Joan Didion's dolorous muse, as she asked the hardest questions about a state and a state of

mind at the so called furthest settlers' west. Didion writes about a speechlessness in her own pioneer folk, they'd hang up the phone without a goodbye. Put your head down, and keep going. The white settler posses colluded, from after the Gold Rush through to Jim Crow, with the state and the feds to murder the first people of this land, making for damn sure they'd be shut down and shut up about it. Some call this colonial aphasia. "Imagine your life is the thing that is trapped on the tip of your tongue, the word that is almost realized, but you can't quite think of," writes Xiao Yue Shan, in "Nation of Aphasia," (2019), on conditions of mute pain for everybody in this mess. "The metaphor of national aphasia in Xiao's piece suggests that it is not that the nation has lost its memory of the price of violence paid but that the body politic has suffered an irretrievability of vocabulary for its travails, having lost its apparatus of expression for a collective memory that would rally the people's telling against the erasures and fissures of what is available (or not) as public speech and collective national mourning." This a response to Xiao, by heidi andrea restrepo rhodes (2024). Maybe California's artists attune to text for good reason. In a landscape as vitiated by gigantic ag, the golden gulag, military and strip mall installation, Glen Rubsamen's votive-like paintings intimate haunting ("Unscheduled Departure," 2023). I'm trying to speak around something here, those somethings that are the shockingly elegant, mordant, sly works, print and book and sculpture and painting and installation, all in this show, whose cumulative effect is to, actually, 'rally the peoples' telling.' Here is how this 'minor' set of text-based works becomes the center of everything, and a center that will hold and will have held, against all predictions to the contrary. Yoko, for more: "I love your unfinishedness. Don't ever finish." You won't be able to. How many declarative directives can fit in one brilliantly lit room? "Dogma needs a chaperone" dryly intones in an anti-parental mood (Kameelah Janan Rasheed, "No New Theories," photocopied distributable on paper, 2019). "Siéntese Señora" (roughly translating in terms of idiomatic usage as "OK Boomer") (Georgina Treviño, stainless steel sculpture of a club chair and chains, 2024) messes with scaling up and dressing down. Posted, "Ghosted Notes (You Don't Know How Smart I Am In My Language)" (Christine Y. Kim, 2024) confronts that cinematic form, direct address: in this quasi-musical storyboarding, texts are like subtitles to a film score whose ASL track is fundamental. SAVE EVERYTHING-IT MIGHT COME IN HANDY LATER. THERE SHOULD BE NEW RULES NEXT WEEK: Sister Corita Kent's tenth rule speaks to our moment ("Immaculate Heart College Art Department Rules" (text, 1965), now so eloquently through the ventriloquist magic of Kate Laster and her hand laminated cut paper translations (2022). New rules next week might as well have been the rally for storied Chicano collective ASCO, in their tour de force "Spray Paint LACMA (Project Pie in De/Face)" (1972), wherein they signed the museum facade by night and photographed ASCO member Patssi Valdez with the

signatures for the record next day. Transcriptions of Octavia Butler's mother's stories of the Depression are copied by hand to 1968 bus schedules for the journey from Pasadena to downtown Los Angeles, in the meticulous re-stagings by American Artist (Octavia E. Butler Papers: mssOEB 1-9062 I (Only Dirt Roads), 2022). American Artist's homage to Butler could not be more timely. Ephemeral text, long lived in the archive, is a revenant. Welcome to collective memory.

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<sup>1</sup>*Public Texts: A Californian Visual Language* is organized by the Art, Design & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara and curated by Alex Lukas, Associate Professor of Print & Publication Arts. The exhibition is made possible thanks to the support of the University of California Santa Barbara's Art Equity Commons (a UCoP Advancing Faculty Diversity Initiative), the AD&A Museum Council, and the Academic Senate. Professor Lukas' curatorial research has been supported by a University of California Regent's Humanities Faculty Fellowship.

Artists in the exhibition:

American Artist  
Tauba Auerbach  
John Baldessari  
Lukaza Branfman-Verissimo  
Rose D'Amato\*  
Emory Douglas  
Ana Teresa Fernández  
Eve Fowler  
Alfonso Gonzalez Jr.  
Ozzie Juarez  
Corita Kent  
Christine Sun Kim\*  
Kate Laster\*  
Los Jaichackers (Julio César Morales & Eamon Ore-Giron)  
Barry McGee  
Kameelah Janan Rasheed  
Devin Reynolds\*  
Guadalupe Rosales