

ULRICH NAUSNER
THE ARTIST AS LINGUIST

by Anna T., 2015

From the modernists, to the YBAs, artists have often exhibited their fascination with language employing diverse strategies to scrutinise meaning, deconstruct signifiers, and explore social norms. Whether one thinks of Mel Bochner's "Language is not Transparent", to Robert Indiana's "LOVE" installation in the spirit of the '60s, to Bruce Nauman's neon writings, language -in its written form- has extensively informed methods of re-conceptualisation, appropriation, and reclaiming in visual arts.

Vienna based artist Ulrich Nausner works primarily with language, playing with typography and graphical representation, and shedding light on the social often through humour, drawing from conceptual art. His sleek prints -bearing a from-a-distance resemblance to Balderssari's text paintings at first- soon make clear that there is little tactility in the making process, and digital technology is the main tool.

This choice is not only based on aesthetics, but seems to be rooted in his research as well, as most of it takes place online, employs search engines, online available documents, and their digital manipulation to the point of exhaustion. And I am not only referring to the deliberate unintelligibility of the work "Untitled (terms of use)", but the exhaustion of the machines as well, as he tells me that computers often have trouble processing his demanding commands. There is an interesting irony between projects that sharply comment on juridical documents that we sign without having read them in order to access services, their production taking place between Google's empire, and Apple devices, and how the latter often fail to follow through.

He plays with the material bearer of slogans from the advertisement industry, mashing familiar jingles and eventually turning them into rough surfaces good only to clean one's shoes. By doing so, he does not only force us to view each quote recontextualised, which is a common artistic strategy, but reminds us that grammar and structure, as least according to Heidegger, is what gives meaning to words, and that by manipulating them or re-contextualising them, Nausner attempts to tear meaning down, and re-appropriate it, in a manner incompatible with the consumerist mentality of Western capitalism.

Nausner uses language in the form of poetry -forever saved in banking archives- to comment on the financial system. He puts short rhymes in the place of the account name-holder, and convincing the bank clerks that it is a project for a loved one opens a series of bank accounts (in the bank that according to him has the most aesthetically pleasing booklets) each bearing the minimum amount of five euros. He then exhibits the booklets, framed, next to each other allowing the audience to read the rhymes as a continuous poem. In this work Nausner not only uses language to talk about numbers, but by substituting the field of financial ownership with poetry, subverts a banal transaction, to a pretend gift, and finally to an aesthetically "clean" artwork, which ironically enters the market itself fulfilling the cycle he started when first standing in that bank queue. It's not his intention to criticize the system he claims – although this often happens consequently- but to make banking "feelable" and question the normality of such processes, institutions, and systems. The conceptual process that led to this work, draws from German slang that refers to money as "coal" (Kohle), "small rocks" (Kies), and "Marie", all roughly translating into the English slang term "dough". He titles the project "Liebste Marie (Kies)" and incorporates the terms in his brief rhymes.

In another work, Nausner focuses on texts that are not to be read, and not because of minimal

importance, on the contrary. He collects “Terms of Use” texts, and instead of analysing the content, chooses to look at the aesthetic outcome of “compressing” these texts as much as possible, often superimposing lines, and shares them with the viewer in an unintelligible black and white document. The all-important text, which the authoring company intends signers not to read, is there not allowing to be read, almost ripping viewers from a sense.

In one work where his goal was a political comment on his home country, the tool was not a linguistic analysis per se, but rather a manipulation of a public document on his behalf. In this work (Suchbild, 2010) he condensed the Austrian state treaty in a single A4 paper, and made two prints, exhibiting one next to the other, omitting a small piece of information in one of them: the paragraph referring to the illegalised status of national socialism. He officially withholds that piece of information, only sharing it with the audience orally, while next to the two documents stand two pairs of glasses interlinked through their frames, constituting them merely unusable in the already lost cause of trying to read through the documents. Nausner’s practice doesn’t engage with materialising aurally, unlike Sharon Hayes’ “I March In The Parade Of Liberty But As Long As I Love You I’m Not Free” who has extensively used appropriation as a strategy in her work, but chooses to embody it in order to carry a political message in the public sphere. Instead he prefers letter forms, employing the contrast of black and white and chooses to occupy materials beyond paper and ink, including carpets and windows. He doesn’t incorporate any embodied notion of writing, as labor, or the art of calligraphy, the same way he keeps away from performing it and speaking it out. His experience as a musician -a rapper more specifically- is not often transferred to his current practice (perhaps with the exception of “Untitled [Background Vocals]” 2012). He also tells me he’s interested in grammar, although he doesn’t explicitly play around with grammar or syntactic rules, he does however make use of punctuation, and seems to be intrigued by the Wittgensteinian idea of meaning being within grammar.

The “artist as linguist” concept, as contested as it may be, continues a long discussion on the role of artists and artistic practice in the fields of social sciences, politics, and the social, where no matter what methods or tools are employed the outcome has great potential to spark or continue a conversation by elaborating on existing concepts or producing new precepts in the Deleuzian sense. The methods Nausner employs may reflect those of a linguist but very soon part ways, in a significant manner. He begins with questions over words, word classes, or the use of language and the immunisation it causes in certain contexts, and tries to analyse it, and figure out the inner workings. Then -and this is where I see him departing from linguistic processes- he makes leaps, creative ones, focuses on the format, the medium, the physicality and the visuality, and lets that be his vehicle. Unlike Jenny Holzer’s overtly political statements in her luminous or intangible writings, Nausner looks for ways to activate materiality in his, and chooses to focus on rhyming (“Liebste Marie [Kies]” 2011), repetition (“Untitled [Background Vocals]” 2012), and appropriation (“Reclaim One”, 2009 & “Reclaim One #2” 2011). He looks into forms, as non-narrative documents, or uses food additives’ E numbers to create conceptual rainbows, but unlike a social scientist, or a linguist, he doesn’t explore the social implications, and in the event that he does take a political stand, this has not been necessarily his main aim from the beginning, what is his intention is a playful reconceptualisation, and an affectual approach to language.