

*Mis/Communication Highlights Artists Examining the Intersection of Language and Power*

By Anna Cahn, March 3, 2022



Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Mader, *Tables and Windows* (2016), two-channel HD video, edition of 3, 2AP. *Tables*: 9 min 14 sec. *Windows*: 10 min 16 sec (courtesy the artists and François Ghebaly Gallery)

# Christine Sun Kim & Thomas Mader

STONY BROOK, New York — *Mis/Communication: Language and Power in Contemporary Art*, an exhibition at Stony Brook University's Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery, examines the double bind of language: We need language to connect us, but at the same time language can make us feel isolated, fractured, or unheard. Curator Amy Kahng brings together a diverse group of 15 international artists who illuminate how English and European languages reify histories of colonial dominance, violence, and erasure. The exhibition centers culturally adjacent languages such as Indigenous languages, American Sign Language (ASL), and AAVE (African American Vernacular English).

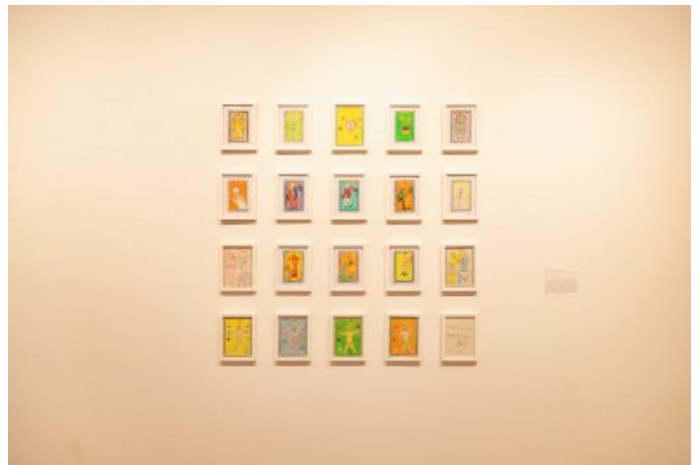
A central work is Martine Syms's video *Notes on Gesture* (2014), which features a young performer repeating short expressions with accompanying bodily gestures inspired by AAVE. The repetition removes these phrases from the context of conversation and instead loops them until they begin to lose their meaning. Phrases like *real talk*, *stop*, and *check yourself*, accompanied by a clap back, a lip smack, or a hair flip, are caught in an exhausting circuitous loop — much like the intense cultural circulation of AAVE and its manifestation on social media platforms as GIFs and memes, through which it becomes vulnerable to appropriation. Yet the glitching effect of the loop intentionally miscommunicates meaning, simultaneously refusing appropriation.

In the collaborative video *Tables and Windows* (2016) Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Mader take turns using ASL and body language to describe different objects. Based on a study that determined that deaf students are able to describe objects within rooms with more nuance than hearing students, the work exemplifies the intricate and emotive communicative powers of sign language. Decentering spoken word as the dominant mode of language, the piece presents sign language as a far more embodied and informed method of expression.

Other works address Indigenous and pictorial languages, such as the series *Connaissance du Monde* (World Knowledge) (2011–14) by Frédéric Bruly Bouabré's (also known as Cheik Nadro), a painted card set meant to illustrate his native language Bété, an oral-based language in Côte d'Ivoire on the brink of disappearance due to the colonially enforced use of French. Conversely, Jisoo Chung and Kim Schoen interrogate aspects of English, exploring

the dangers and pitfalls of speech recognition technology and "academic speak" respectively. In Chung's video, *Museum Manners for Siri* (2016), Apple's voice-recognition technology misunderstands the artist's voice, revealing the implicit bias of AI against nonnative English speakers with accents. Her attempt to act out the transcription results in a comically absurd performance. In Schoen's video, *The Horseshoe Effect* (2013), an apparently scholarly lecture on objects in a familiar but unnamed museum soon descends into nonsensical academic jargon, exposing the elitism and gatekeeping of academic rhetoric.

The exhibition champions many emerging and mid-career international artists, several of whom are yet to be recognized by major art institutions, perhaps because their work defies some of the linguistic and cultural hierarchies that museums often perpetuate. It is significant that a university gallery takes up these timely topics of colonialism, ableism, and Western supremacy as academia undergoes its own moment of reckoning. *Mis/Communication* holds a mirror to language's many blind spots, reflecting upon the cultural and political inequities that shape it.



Installation view of *Mis/Communication: Language and Power in Contemporary Art* at Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery, Stony Brook University. Pictured: Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, *Connaissance du Monde* (World Knowledge) (2011–14) (courtesy Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery, photo by Daqi Fang)

## François Ghebaly