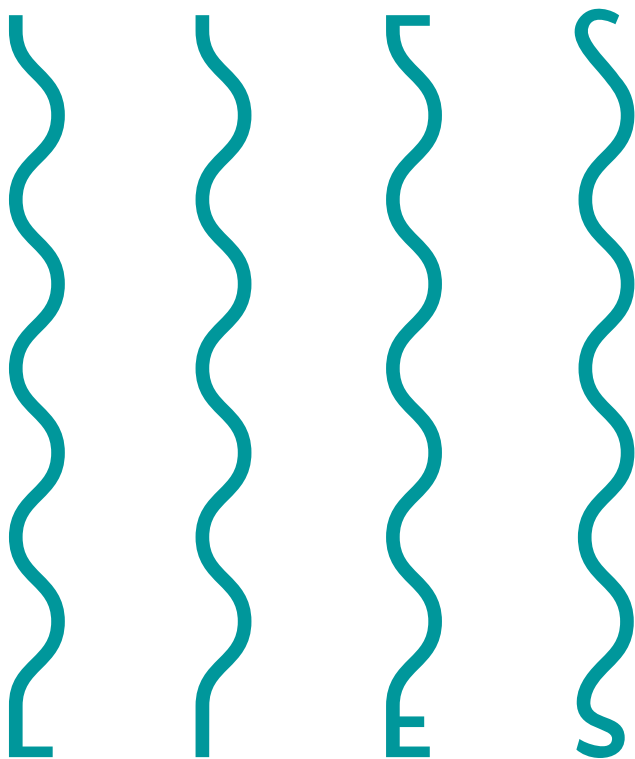
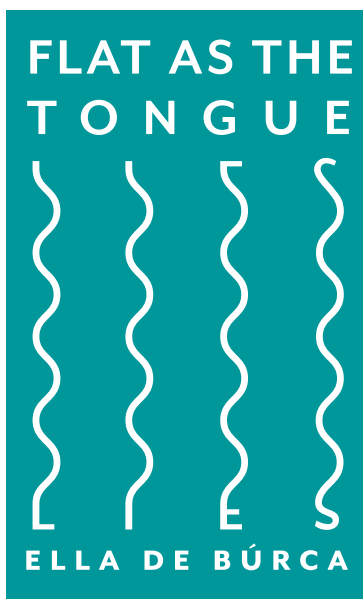
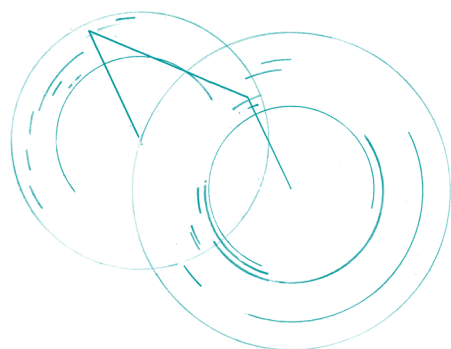
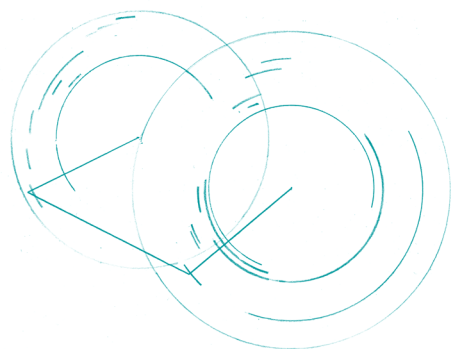


FLAT AS THE
T O N G U E







LANGUAGE, WRITING, SPEECH

Allyson Unzicker

LANGUAGE

There will be a new form, and this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates. To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.

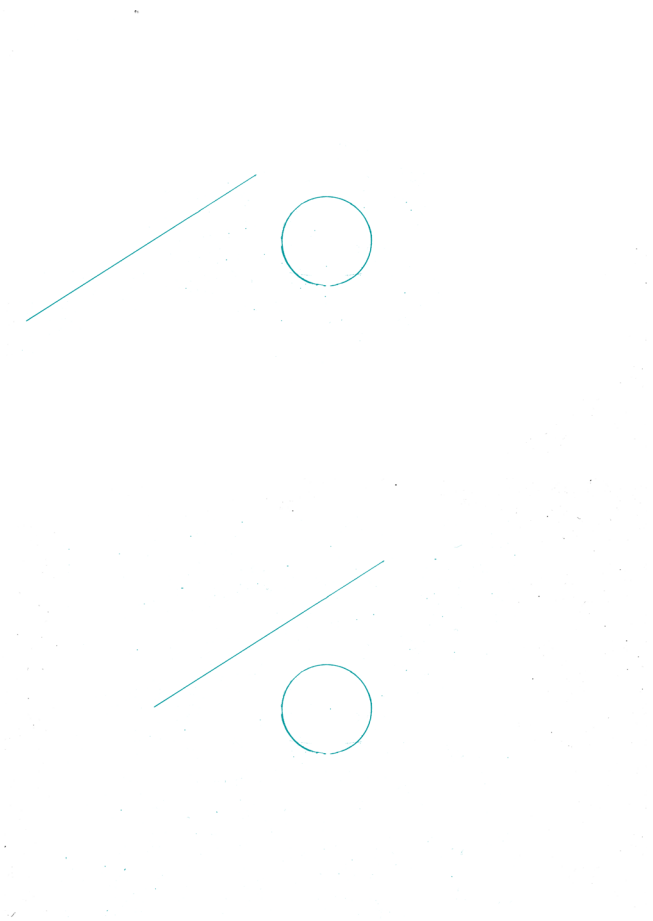
—Samuel Beckett

In eighteenth-century England, closet dramas—plays intended to be read alone or in a small group, rather than performed—provided playwrights the freedom of an alternative space in which to subvert the politics of the commercial stage, which was heavily censored by the British government. For female playwrights, closet dramas provided a means of expressing political and philosophical stances

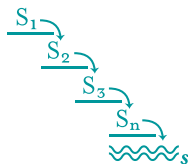
without facing discrimination. *Act II (Mouthing)* (2018), by Ella de Búrca, is a singular play within a three-act play/installation titled *Flat As The Tongue Lies*. Printed recto-verso, the play is available as a handout that nods to this theatrical anti-form. *Act II (Mouthing)* depicts a conversation between two characters, named X and Y, and a narrator, named O. They discuss etymology, perspective, performance, spectatorship, and critique. In the play, X recalls the famous Zodiac mural of Grand Central Station, which was accidentally inverted, distorting the constellation's location in the sky. The characters then discuss etymology. They remark, for instance, that the word *sky*, in Middle English, originally meant *cloud*. Prior to that, the word *cloud* in Old English was derived from the term *mass of rock*, due to the lumpy formations clouds make in the sky. The meaning of words can morph over time, and orientation alters perception. Like the etymology of these words and the reversed Zodiac, the narrator's role in *Act II (Mouthing)* shifts. Over the course of the play, O ruptures the role of narrator by introspectively asking

questions of the audience, breaking the fourth wall between the performer and reader. The sliding consciousness of the narrator mirrors the slippages that occur in language.

The parallel between the characters and the reference to etymology performs a cascading chain of signifiers. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan inverts the signified and signifier of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistics, giving the signifier primacy. In Lacan's diagram, the signifier (sound/image) sits above the bar as the conscious self, and the signified (concept) sits below the bar as the unconscious self. This illustrates the split subject, whose reality is unconscious to her or him. In a chain, as seen in the illustration below, meaning is derived from the relationship between signifiers. Alone, a signifier is senseless; thus, in the chain, one signifier must efface the next signifier in order to create meaning, causing a cascading effect. Yet, in this motion, with the signified constantly slipping under the signifier, the signifiers can only correspond with the signi-

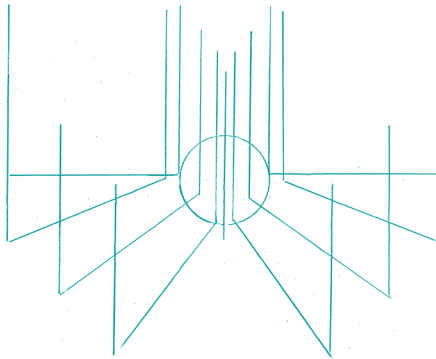


fied below the bar, at the point of eternity. This is why a slip of the tongue can occur: an unconscious thought slips past our conscious filter. A flat tongue performs an impediment to communication. Like a flat tongue, the separating bar between signifier and signified indicates the resistance to signification. This ungraspable waterfall depicts how meaning is a horizon line, eluding our grasp. Language always begins with a void, and it is never filled. As such, there is no last word in the realm of meaning; it is always yet to come and unfolded by its preceding signifier. De Búrca's play/installation *Flat As The Tongue Lies* enacts this paradox of language with each of the three acts unfolding toward the next, resisting orientation.



De Búrca's characters share a similar cadence to Samuel Beckett's characters. For instance, in *Act II*

(*Mouthing*), X and Y recall the banal act of digging a hole together—a symbolic gesture for being in a difficult situation. Likewise, Beckett's characters are often depicted as stagnant or facing a creative block, oftentimes to an extreme. In Beckett's *Happy Days* (1961), the main character, Winnie, is stuck inside a dirt mound for the duration of the play. As an interrupted and detached being, she is cemented to



her past, adapting to the hole rather than trying to escape it. With her body split in two by the ground, she is a divided being, lacking self-awareness and left to her own repetitive devices. As a critique of solipsism, *Happy Days* resonates with the currency of social media existences that perpetuate a distracted and misinformed public. Whether interrupted or immobilized, Beckett's female characters evoke the struggle to have a voice. Beckett's play *Not I* (1973) was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre by Billie Whitelaw, the playwright's longtime muse. She performed alone, completely obscured on a darkened stage with only her mouth illuminated. The monologue recalls fragmented memories and utilizes short stanzas spoken with urgency, alternating between a loud whisper and a scream. The relentless Mouth negates her existence as she speaks of herself in third person, presenting a state of mind—an inner scream—that her spectators cannot escape. The Mouth and Winnie's disjointed monologues border on absurdity, a reflection on the limits of language.

line

word

work

draw

division

output

form

style

one

decay

labouring

part

WRITING

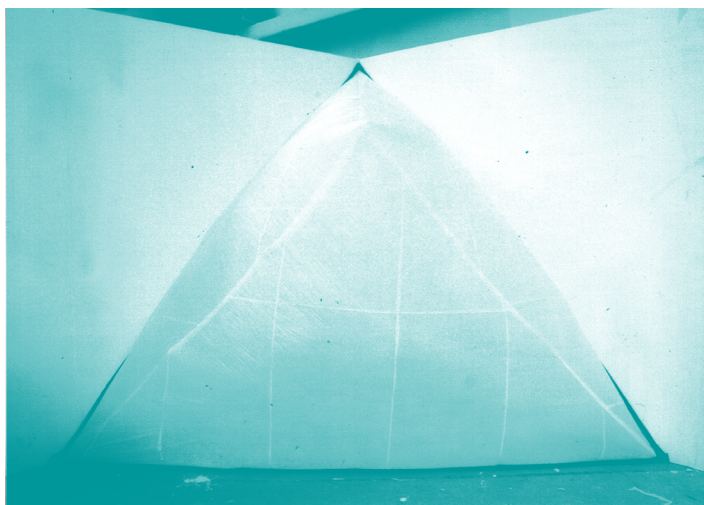
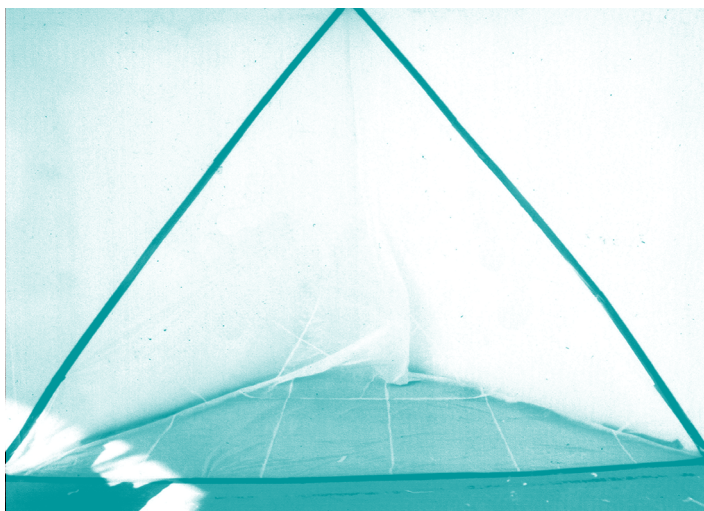
Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word “silence,” the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word “impossible” and writes it as “the end.”

—Hélène Cixous

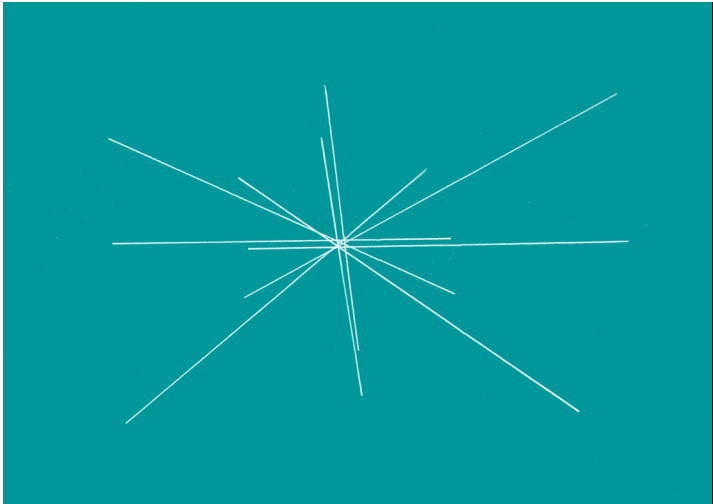
The writing of Algerian-born French feminist Hélène Cixous breaks the barriers that differentiate gender and identity. Rather than trying to master language, Cixous advocates fluidity through writing to reclaim language from the binds of societal constructs. In so doing, Cixous suggests that the woman must write herself into text. Cixous’s proclamation that when we censor the body our breath and speech is also censored is relevant today. For instance, within the climate of the Me Too movement in the United States and the I Believe Her movement in Ireland, women have utilized the platform of

social media to “call out” abuse and sexual harassment in the public sphere. Through these movements, those in power are finally being held accountable for their abuses. The perpetuation of such abuse relies on the silence of the victim. On May 25, 2018, Ireland voted to repeal the Eighth Amendment to end the country’s constitutional ban on abortion. Citizens of Ireland from around the world returned home to vote for expanding women’s rights. Despite the impact of these movements, many barriers block women globally from bringing their words to action. A recent study has shown that women’s voices have dropped in pitch over the past few decades. Since a lower pitched voice is a sign of dominance and a higher pitched voice indicates submission, this adaptation can be attributed to women’s changing roles in society. Although male-dominant discourse continues to frame women’s narratives in relation to their own bodies, women have the possibility of subverting societal structures by speaking and writing their own histories toward a movement of change.

De Búrca uses language in her text video *Act I (When The Flat Fell Down)* (2018) to explore the labor of the creative act as a private and public struggle. A handful of keywords are sparsely divided across a monitor: line, word, work, draw, division, output, form, style, one, decay, laboring, part. Then, more words appear, forming complete sentences. While the keywords remain, the text surrounding them continues to interchange. Alone, the words are empty; combined they create meaning. In *Act I (When The Flat Fell Down)*'s metaphor for the creative act, the utterance comes first: the initial line made when drawing or writing. Labor follows: the forming of the actual work. Subsequently, presentation: the work is displayed or published in the public sphere. Ultimately comes decay: the moment when a work is destroyed, discarded, or forgotten. *Act I (When The Flat Fell Down)* considers the shaping of ideas within an interior space and the separation of the artwork from its producer once it is presented to the public, where its reception cannot be controlled.



As a nod to Minimalism, which challenged the existing structures for viewing art, De Búrca's three-act play is accompanied by a sculpture titled *Stage* (2018), a kinetic form consisting of two components: plastic and fans. A large plastic triangular bag, protruding like a swollen belly from a corner of the gallery, sucks air in and out, inflating and deflating as if breathing. Taking a stylistic cue from *Robert Morris's Untitled (Corner Piece)* (1964), *Stage's* form and dimensions respond to its architectural surroundings. Art critic and historian Michael Fried described Minimalist sculpture as having a "stage presence," in that the sculptural object, like an actor, is always producing a theatrical effect between itself and its audience. Beckett's literary minimalism was reflected in the reductive stage design of his plays, which emphasizes this immediate present-ness. Building on this Minimalist tradition, *Stage* directs the viewer's awareness to the body. The synthetic material acts as a stand-in for the absent body of the artist, who does not physically perform in the space, while its motion focalizes the importance of the breath in speech.



SPEECH

Speech is irreversible: a word cannot be retracted, except precisely by saying that one retracts it... If I want to erase what I have just said, I cannot do it without showing the eraser itself... Paradoxically, it is ephemeral speech which is indelible, not monumental writing. All that one can do in the case of spoken utterance is to tack on another utterance... It is not by chance that psychoanalysis is linked to speech and not writing: dreams are spoken not written.

–Roland Barthes

De Búrca's stop-motion animation *Lines* (2018) consists of pencil drawings by the artist. The video is inverted so that the background is black and the lines are white. Lines drawn across a black screen form geometric shapes, while dots move across the background, displaying a constellation of stars that recalls the reversed Zodiac mural mentioned in *Act II (Mouthing)*. As an abstract representation, the work resists interpretation. Before the line drawings can compose a recognizable image, they erase

themselves in a secondary movement, just as the erasure of speech requires an additional utterance. The animation begins, like language, with a void, depicting the start of the creative act from nothing. While *Act I (When The Flat Fell Down)* and *Act II (Mouthing)* center on language, *Lines* lies outside of textual understanding, attempting to escape the tyranny of meaning by progressing toward it, but never fulfilling it. The constantly moving lines mimic how meaning in the signifier is always formed in anticipation of the next signifier.

In an attempt to put into language that which is outside of language, writing often feels like a strangulation of words. The writer, like the artist, is tasked with creating something from nothing. Roland Barthes describes the writer as having a message that cannot be summarized, a condition shared with a madman and a chatterbox. Barthes explains that writing, unlike speech, has no “odor,” in that it is not subject to the direct magnetism created in person between a speaker and an audi-

ence. In this sense, speech always implies a listener and thus an exchange. Since speech is irreversible, it is violent in its directness. One cannot take back what one has said without revealing the tool of its erasure. In this way, speech can only be negated, as with the chain of signifiers. In order to write of speech, one can only do so in reference, pointing toward its remnants like an odor, an illusion, or a memory. Beckett uses the device of repetition in his plays in order to emphasize these limitations of language. The repetitive actions of the Mouth and Winnie place them outside of linear time, continually grasping toward the past. Their attempt to contain the chaos of their unconscious speech is never fully reconciled with their conscious reality.

Sigmund Freud made a famous case study of Dora, a woman he diagnoses with hysteria and whose manifest symptom is a loss of voice. Dora represents the archetype of the disempowered female hysteric—a stereotype that continues to be used to denigrate women who voice their opin-

ions and grievances. However, in Cixous's play, *Portrait of Dora* (1976), Dora breaks from the patriarchal discourse of Freud to construct her own identity. Cixous's narrative, which was originally produced as a radio play, denies any voyeuristic representation of the female body, directing attention to the female voice.

De Búrca shares Cixous's investment in theater as a conceptual tool. *Prelude (On Beginning)* (2018), a four-channel sound piece that begins de Búrca's three-act play, illuminates the voice of the artist. The piece starts with the artist using alliteration to try and form words repeatedly; for instance, "shh" becomes "she," then "shame." The more one speaks, the less one knows what one means to say, as meaning always happens retroactively. Language begins first as speech, which comes from the unconscious; thus, in *Prelude (On Beginning)*, de Búrca enunciates herself as the split subject coming into language. At the end of *Prelude (On Beginning)*, following her bouts of alliteration, she

poses these questions: “Is this how you read me? Read us? Am I writing or reading?” As with the narrator in *Act II (Mouthing)*, de Búrca addresses the audience directly. Rather than silence Dora, let us give her back her tongue.

Endnotes

- 1 Samuel Beckett, quoted in Tom F. Driver, “Beckett by the Madeleine,” *Columbia University Forum* IV (Summer 1961), 22.
- 2 See England’s Stage Licensing Act of 1737.
- 3 Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, “Linguistries,” in *Lacan: The Absolute Master*, ed. Douglas Brick (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 182, illustration.
- 4 Borch-Jacobsen, 182.
- 5 Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” *Feminisms* (1991), 334–49.
- 6 David Robson, “Capital—The Reasons Why Women’s Voices Are Deeper Today,” BBC News, June 13, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20180612-the-reasons-why-womens-voices-are-deeper-today>.
- 7 Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 155.
- 8 Roland Barthes, “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers,” *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 190.
- 9 Barthes, “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers,” 194.
- 10 Barthes, “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers,” 204.
- 11 Borch-Jacobsen, 182.

Artworks

P2 *Lines*, 2018. Pencil drawing on paper.

P6 *Lines*, 2018. Pencil drawing on paper.

P8 *Lines*, 2018. Pencil drawing on paper.

P10 *Act I (When The Flat Fell Down)*, 2018. Single-channel video. 4 minutes, loop.

P14 *Stage*, 2009. Inflatable sculpture, fans, plastic sheeting. Dimensions variable.

P16 *Lines*, 2018. Single-channel animation, black-and-white. 1:04 minutes, loop.

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