PARADOX IN LANGUAGE:

what i look at

is never

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CURATED BY
ALLYSON UNZICKER

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UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY,
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"The perceived thing is not an ideal unity in the possession of the intellect, like a geometrical notion, for example; it is rather a totality open to a horizon of an indefinite number of views which blend with one another according to a given style, which defines the object in question. Perception is thus paradoxical. The perceived thing itself is paradoxical; it exists only in so far as someone can perceive it."[1]

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

"Man looks at the world, and the world does not look back at him"[2]

—Alain Robbe-Grillet

In representation, there is always absence. We might think of this absence as one of the forces that drives the search for meaning in imagery and language. The exhibition *Paradox in Language: What I look at is never what I wish to see* explores this gap, following Lacan's well-known formulation of the gaze and its description of the conditions of perception. We can never see all that we desire to see; and we are unable to see from the other's point of view. In this way, perception is always paradoxical. In viewing an image we desire to

[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences," from *The Primacy of Perception*, (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 15.

[2] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For A New Novel*, (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1965), 58.

comprehend it, yet its meaning constantly falls out of reach. This exhibition culls together a selection of artwork by Charles Gaines, Benjamin Verhoeven, and Erika Vogt. The three artists form a constellation of varying practices that consider the aesthetic strategies of both Conceptualism and Structuralism. In viewing these works together, representation and non-representation are held in tension. Through these practices we witness the challenges that lie in bringing this paradox into visual form.

Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 film, *Blow-Up*, reads as a semiotic narrative displaying the slippages that occur between perception and memory when we interpret signs. The film follows a young fashion photographer whose voyeuristic methods lead him to unknowingly photograph the scene of a crime. Upon further inspection of a photograph he has taken of a couple in a park, he notices what appears to be a corpse in the bushes behind them. This discovery leads him to enlarge and crop the photograph in his darkroom

in order to "blow-up" the content of the image. However, in doing so, the more he enlarges the photograph, the more the corpse becomes illegible, appearing merely as photographic grain. The meaning he attaches to the traces of the photograph amplifies a desire within him to obtain more knowledge from the image. However, the more he seeks clarity through enlargement, the more the image is abstracted, rendering its purpose useless. Finding the truth behind the photograph in this story functions like an *objet petit a*, what Lacan describes as the unobtainable object of desire. The photographer's desire to understand the image constantly slips out of his reach and can never be fulfilled.

This Structuralist-semiotic analysis of *Blow-Up* connects directly to the year 1966, which was also an important moment for the development of Structuralism and Conceptualism as we understand these movements today. Concurrently, Barthes' writings were vital to the formulation of Structuralist thought as well as Jacques Lacan, who was largely influenced

by Saussure. It was a time when the investigation of signs and systems became increasingly relevant to artists and their practices. Saussure stated that all signs are dyadic consisting of both a signified (concept) and signifier (sound/image). An object does not necessarily have a natural relationship to the word used to describe the object. Regarding language and time, Jorge Luis Borges wrote, "All language is of a successive nature; it is not an effective tool for reasoning the eternal, the intemporal."[3] An image, like a single word, is a sign and has no intrinsic meaning alone. Thus, language is metonymic and its meaning continually shifts; it is successive and depends upon context.

Often considered one of the fathers of conceptualism, Douglas Huebler relied heavily on the use of text alongside his photos. He described the photograph as a support for the text and declared his camera to be a documentation device.[4] To create a barrier against aesthetic subjectivity, Huebler's methods for shooting were based upon systems of chance. Huebler's *Duration Piece #31*,

Boston, 1974 is a candid photograph of a nude woman partially covering herself (a play on the swaddled New Year Baby). The text accompanying the photo reads, "On December 31, 1973, a young woman was photographed at the exact instant in time determined to be exactly 1/8th of a second before midnight. Inasmuch as the aperture of the camera was set at '4', (1/4th of a second) the image on the film became "complete" 1/8th of a second past midnight: put another way, after the first 1/8th of a second of 1974 had elapsed." The operation of the camera forever fixes the woman in time as she is caught traveling between 1973 and 1974. The paradoxical relationship between the signifier and signified creates a dichotomy between fiction and reality. Huebler was more interested in the act of perceiving than what was perceived, claiming there was a "third language" in which the viewer's perception continues a dialogue of interpretation with his work.

The activity of Charles Gaines's visual practice has always taken up the challenges and slippages that occur within

[3] Jorge Luis Borges, *New Refutation of Time*, (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc.,1966), 188.

[4] Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality,* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 135.

language and representation. Using conceptual strategies to remove his own subjectivity, for instance in *String Theory* and *Randomized Text* series, Gaines invents a set of pre-established rules for randomizing texts sourced from post-war writings by Edward Said, Franz Fanon and Georges Bataille. He then draws the words out meticulously by hand. In this context, the act of drawing functions as a rhetorical action. The systematic process of arranging the texts is juxtaposed by the physical labor involved in drawing them. When the rules of language are altered, the way in which meaning is constructed begins to surface through its unraveling. In rearranging the texts, the sentences retain their grammatical integrity, yet turn toward incoherence. Through this undoing of language, the original meaning of the text is reconstructed, allowing a space for the viewer to re-interpret them. By breaking down the structure of language, Gaines' two series reveal what language is made of—a system of interconnecting signs. Regarding this separation he states, "One thing that made me different from other conceptual artists is that I was not

shying away from language or meaning or content. Those things are part of the art, whereas for the most part, conceptual art was phenomenologically based." [5]

Gaines' work is driven by race, identity and politics. In 1966, Italian filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*, a chronicling of the bloody revolution between Algerian nationals and French nationalists, was released. The film was studied heavily during the 1960s for its thinking on colonialization. During this time, the writings of Algerian revolutionist Franz Fanon, whose writings Gaines pulls from in his series *String Theory*, became a focal point for study as well. Fanon's *Black Skin*, White Masks is a psychoanalytic study of racism. In his piece *Rewriting Fanon #6*, Gaines has us read, "It told all that the sexuality of the Negro is pre-logical." The words are ambiguous, perverted and obscure. This is emphasized by the gray smoke screen appearing behind them like the aftermath of an explosion. The metaphoric presence of smoke creates an unexplainable space which mirrors the ephemeral nature of

language and the way meaning fluctuates within context.

Dealing with abstract space and time, Erika Vogt's work is influenced by her own experience and the material processes of Structuralist film. *Geometric Persecution* (2010) is a fifteen–minute video, a mise-en-abyme, in which the perspective fluctuates from first person to third person perspective. Its subject is a wandering traveler who is constantly slipping in and out of time - reversing, disappearing then reappearing. The title *Geometric Persecution* is a neologism coined by the artist to describe the longstanding debate between pictorial representation and abstraction. The video consists of multiple layers created through digital and analog techniques. Vogt's process is intuitive and defies any logical or direct narrative. The non-narrative aspect of the video is a visual experience of metaphor. Objects are exchanged as words; film is made equivalent to drawing; and sound performs like memory. Intermittently objects are transferred between hands like information from one mouth to another.

The objects are made equal to words. The reflective surface on the wall of the projection creates a glare or blind spot for the viewer, further mystifying the video.

Armors for Chorus and Players (2010) is a series of painted sticks and sculptures that can be recognized as props from the video. The objects can be handled, yet have no utilitarian purpose. They occupy a symbolic space of potential value and exchange. A series of nineteen drawings titled *Studies for Conversing Figures* depicts an indecipherable conversation repeated between two figures. Like the objects in *Geometric Persecution*, this is a symbolic exchange. Language both precedes and exceeds our relationship to value and is bound by the temporal conditions of linguistic structures.

Benjamin Verhoeven's video *Somebody Was Trying to Kill Somebody Else* (2014) is a six–minute, twenty-five second clip from Antonioni's film *Blow-Up*. The film is produced by scanning the original film through a scanner bed, digitally recapturing it in real time. Due to the lag

[5] Charles Gaines to Malik Gaines, "Remember the Grid," 2001.

Douglas Huebler
Duration Piece #31, Boston, 1974

in scanning the film, a staggering effect occurs. The distorted movement acts as an echo to the original film and sound. As with Structuralist films, it has a material presence, retaining particles and residue from the scanning bed which create a screen between the viewer and the projection. Further, Verhoeven reverses the filmic process by emphasizing the structure of film itself: a series of still images. The film acts as a mnemonic device, retaining and rewriting memory performed externally through the operation of the film as well as internally within the plot. Memory constantly deteriorates; when a memory is recalled from the past it is reconstructed in the present. In the film, the protagonist looks at the photo but never sees what he wishes to see. This is the paradox of the slippery slope between imagery and language. There is always absence in the presence of the viewing subject.

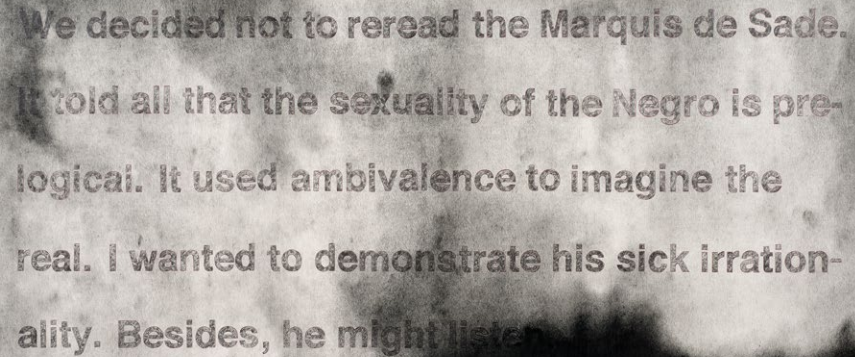Barthes postulates that the paradox of a photograph lies between its illusive present and representable absence. "Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see."[6] Barthes claims that a photograph can only be read through a mask, which creates a gap or discontinuity between the viewer and photo, thus a photo represents a desire to return. It is this mask or screen which functions like the layers of consciousness. Huebler's New Year Baby acts as a sliding signifier, constantly shifting in time and meaning. The smoke screen in Gaines' *String Theory* emphasizes the obscurity in trying to derive meaning from randomness. The mise-en-abyme of Vogt's video as well as the visible surface of the scanner bed in Verhoeven's video creates a space between the eye and the gaze.

[6] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*: Reflections on Photography, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 6.
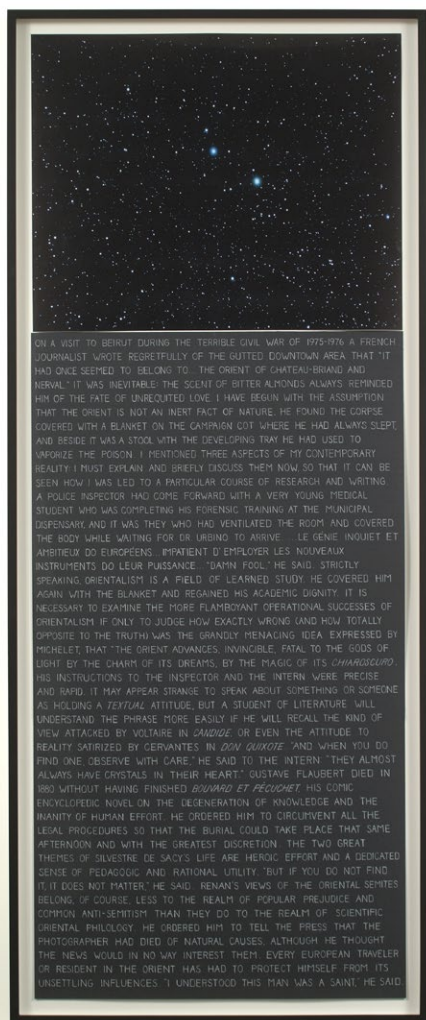
Charles Gaines
Randomized Text Drawing #1, 2006
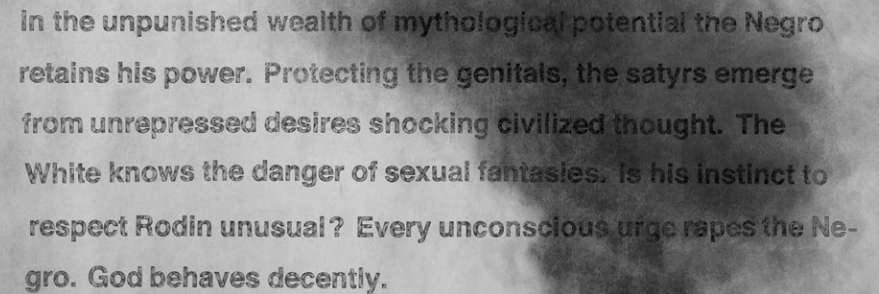Digital print and color pencil on paper
54.5 x 22.5 inches
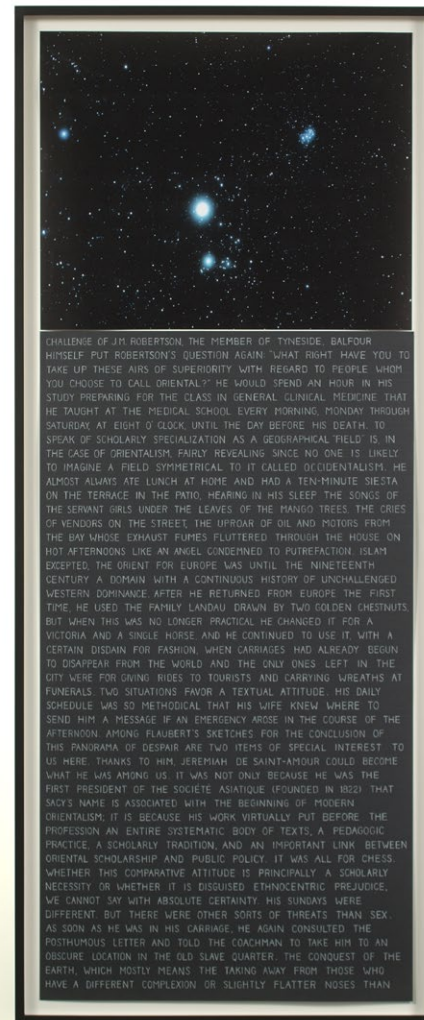
Charles Gaines
Randomized Text Drawing #3, 2006
Digital print and color pencil on paper
54.5 x 22.5 inches

We decided not to reread the Marquis de Sade. It told all that the sexuality of the Negro is pre-logical. It used ambivalence to imagine the real. I wanted to demonstrate his sick irration-ality. Besides, he might listen.

In the unpunished wealth of mythological potential the Negro retains his power. Protecting the genitals, the satyrs emerge from unrepressed desires shocking civilized thought. The White knows the danger of sexual fantasies. Is his instinct to respect Rodin unusual? Every unconscious urge rapes the Ne-gro. God behaves decently.
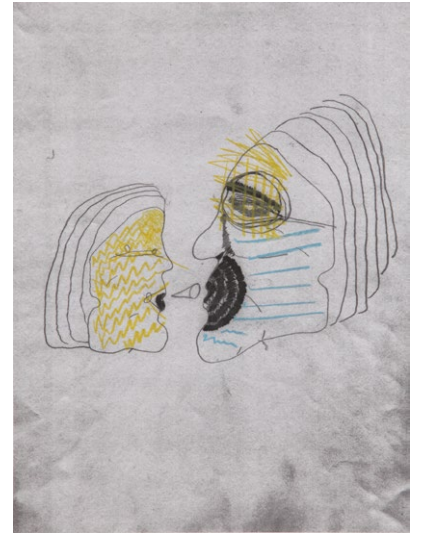
Charles Gaines
String Theory: Rewriting Fanon #6 (Pg 156) "Black Skin White Masks", 2010
Graphite on Rising Barrier Paper
24 x 53 inches

Charles Gaines
Randomized Text Drawing #5, 2006
Graphite on Rising Barrier Paper
54.5 x 22.5 inches
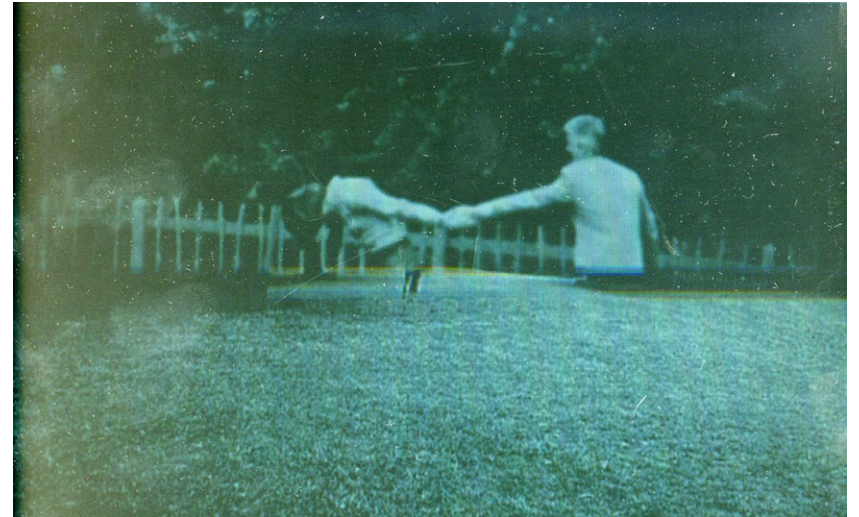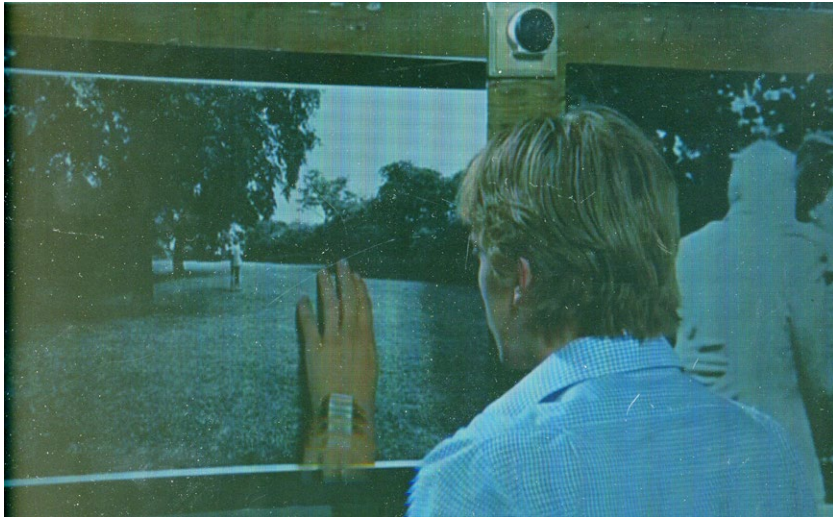
Benjamin Verhoeven
Somebody was trying to kill somebody else, 2014
Stop-motion video from scanned images, stills
6:25 min

Erika Vogt
Geometric Persecution, 2010
Digital video, painted screen, oil enamel,
wooden stand, acrylic latex
15 min.

overleaf
Erika Vogt
Armors for Chorus and Players, 2010
celastic, acrylic latex, oil enamel and
tempera on wood
dimensions variable
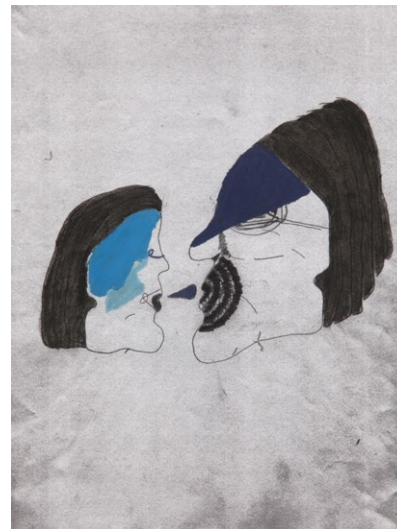
Erika Vogt
Studies for Conversing Figures, 2010
charcoal, pencil, crayon on printed paper
11 x 8 inches (each)
14 x 11 x 1 inches (framed)

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