

VIOLINS/VIOLENCE

March 16 – May 1st, 2023

Bruce Nauman, Cécile B. Evans, Ndayé Kouagou, Sung Tieu, Jesse Darling.

[Input:] this was never intended to be a descriptive text.

The exhibition's namesake, Bruce Nauman's *Violins/Violence* plays with the sonic correlation between the two words, teasing the instability and efficacy of language and juxtaposing the dualities of pleasure and pain, control and freedom. Nauman's linguistic game invites visitors to question the efficacy of language and its role in perpetuating systems of control.

This provides a conceptual framework for the other artists' explorations of control and resistance in various forms, offering a commitment to notions of transparency and mutability. Cécile B. Evans investigates the power and potential of control within the digital realm, while also highlighting the physicality of technological phenomena. Ndayé Kouagou uses text and performance to explore themes of territory, fear, and confusion, leaving the audience with unresolved questions. Sung Tieu's work draws attention to the minutiae of visual identity and wording, which blur the line between evidence and fabricated fiction, reflecting on the bureaucratic control of language, bodies, and ideas. The societal expectations surrounding both objects and bodies are central to Jesse Darling's work, which investigates the concept of 'disability' and freedom from representation, stemming from inherently ableist systems.

Walking through this exhibition I feel conscious of changing identities: not only as an individual or an art educator but as a society and the various communities which form one. A group show represents an ephemeral community of sorts and the fact this gallery is called Gathering is not lost on me when I enter.

First, I see Cécile B. Evans' work *For a Future Adaptation (Willis' battle of whatever forever)*, a mesmerizing multi-media installation which reimagines the Industrial Era ballet *Giselle* as a revolutionary eco-thriller. Set in a collapsing world, the work delves into themes of adaptation, change, and the struggle for survival in the face of oppressive systems. I feel challenged, as I am invited to consider how we can move forward without perpetuating violence and how we can commit to living with and through change. This work presents a bridge into the exhibition, reinforcing the theme of meaning's multiplicity and technological control. In *For a Future Adaptation*, Evans navigates the complexities of change, vulnerability, and resistance through a striking synthesis of video installations, film props, and collaged sketches.

Moving towards the next room, I am facing Nauman's *TUGENDEN UND LASTER (VIRTUES AND VICES)*, a sculptural installation consisting of seven pieces made of Belgian granite. The pieces are all engraved with the German words for each virtue or vice, and the lettering is designed to appear as if it is sinking into the surface of the stone. The seven inscriptions read: Fleiß (Diligence), Ehrlichkeit (Honesty), Freundlichkeit (Kindness), Geduld (Patience), Bescheidenheit (Humility), Habgier (Greed), and Neid (Envy).

Entering the backroom, I can hear Nauman's video *Lip Sync*. Phrases spoken in the soundtrack draw upon common associations between language and power dynamics, particularly around issues of obedience and control. The man's movements, which are synchronized to the soundtrack, create a sense of tension and unease, as if the performer is being controlled or manipulated by outside forces. On the walls are Darling's drawings, *VVHAT ME VVORRY/non nuntius interficere*, *Tiresias Suite IV*, *!Oooooooooo Tiresias/ don't think you know (Tiresias Suite II)*, *¡O PhARM a COn/HISTORY*. One of the artworks features a collage-like composition of various elements, including text, shapes, and images. The title of the artwork is included in the center of the image, with the words "VVHAT ME VVORRY/non nuntius interficere" written in large letters. Other text fragments and images are scattered around the central title, creating a sense of fragmented and disjointed meaning. Tiresias is known for his ability to shift between male and female form. It makes me think of the weight of meaning and cultural associations that Jesse Darling's works convey, comparable to Barthes' examination of the cultural myths that surround everyday objects in his seminal book, *Mythologies*. Then I hate myself for thinking of Barthes, as someone once told me to leave the dead knowledge where it belongs.

The neon sign *NO/NO* indicates the stairs; as I walk down them, *Saint Icarus (attributes)* is looking down at me.

Too close to the sun I encounter Ndayé Kouagou's video installation *A Change of Perspective*, where his body becomes a site of performance and a means of subverting established systems of control and communication. I think he looks a lot smaller in this frame. Stuck in front of a life-size character addressing me, enjoining to have a grown-up talk, I realize how Kouagou's concrete poetry delves into the visual and sonic qualities of language. The ambivalent and contradictory nature of the texts and performance work can be compared to Beckett's play, where characters wait endlessly for a mysterious figure who never arrives. Both works play with themes of uncertainty, confusion, and the search for meaning. Language can be a powerful tool for control and manipulation, and he uses it here as a form of performance to subvert or challenge these systems. This might involve playing with the meanings of words, using non-linguistic forms of communication, or creating entirely new languages that resist dominant forms of expression, a futuristic grammar, beyond academical induction. I can't help thinking of early 2000 Lunatic lyrics: *Et à l'école ils me disaient de lire / Voudaient m'enseigner que j'étais libre / Va te faire niquer toi et tes livres*.

Stepping forward, I am now facing Jesse Darling's *Virgin Variations*. The thirteen cabinets stacked on top of each other create a graveyard of exhausted and disposable items, yet remain loaded with politicized associations to comment on the fragmented and chaotic nature of modern life. The objects in the cabinets have lost their original function and meaning, and now exist in a state of limbo, with multiple associations and meanings. To me it is evocative of the notions Rosalind Krauss unfolds. As an art theorist who has written extensively on the relationship between art and the institutional frameworks that surround it - particularly in relation to poststructuralist theory and the medium specificity of different art forms - in her essay "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," she proposes a model for thinking about sculpture that goes beyond traditional notions of form and materiality. The use of disused fabrics and trinkets in the *Virgin Variations* cabinets also expands the field of sculpture, challenging notions of what constitutes "art". It feels Darling's focus on the societal expectations surrounding both the object and the body also aligns with Krauss' interest in how art engages with its environing context.

My eye is caught by Sung Tieu's work the right corner. The title, *"From PSYOPS to MISO, A look back at the infamous department's history,"* references the history of the United States military's psychological operations (PSYOPS) and military information support operations (MISO). I dive head first in the ways in which language and imagery can be used to manipulate and control individuals, inviting me to consider the ways in which propaganda operates. I experience for the first time in a long time the literary technique of close reading, which involves a deep analysis of text to uncover hidden meanings and nuances. It seems Tieu's installations encourage viewers to question the ways in which power and control manifest in seemingly innocuous details. Drawing attention to the minuscule aspects of visual identity and wording. It mirrors the method of quiet, subconscious control, using the language of minimalism to evoke institutionalized spaces. It blurs the line between evidence and fabricated fiction, and implicitly perform complex histories of political agency, at its core the notions of identity, intimacy, vulnerability, migration and displacement.

Moving along the walls, Nauman's works *Use Me* and *Malice* remind me of the concept of "différance" coined by Jacques Derrida. Basically, it refers to the inherent instability and indeterminacy of meaning in language. According to Derrida, language is not a fixed system with clear and stable meanings, but rather a network of differences and relationships that constantly defer meaning. In this way, meaning is never fixed or absolute, but is always subject to interpretation and context. Meaning is always slipping away just as we try to grasp it, meaning is constantly deferred and never fully present, as words and concepts can only be defined in relation to other words and concepts. This leads to a proliferation of meaning, as each definition relies on a web of other definitions, and no meaning is ever fully fixed or stable.

[Output:] this was intended to be some kind of poetic thread of thoughts, oops failed -.-/'

After show notes to myself –
embracing the shimmering energy of change and the endless possibilities of a "whatever forever".
seeking to dismantle oppressive systems and reimagine a more equitable and adaptable future.
to envision a future defined by change, liberation, and collective purpose.
as well as generating further discussion around issues of power, agency, and resistance, always.

–Asma Barchiche