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CONSCIOUSNESS VIS-À-VIS THE RESTRAINTS OF LANGUAGE

Angela-Maria Martinez

A Senior Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements of the Honors Degree Program

May 2020

Faculty Sponsor: Dawn Roe

**Rollins College**  
Winter Park, Florida

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## Abstract

In my work, I explore the overlooked complexities of linguistics within the languages I speak and I examine the philosophical ideologies that surround the different perspectives offered by those languages I do not understand. As a bilingual, I have often pondered about the languages I speak fluently and how their differences allowed me to understand my surroundings in distinctive ways. Through the use of peaceful colors and audio, a combination of abstract and minimalist imagery, and a time-based medium, I seek to reveal the undiscovered possibilities of spoken language. It is through tranquil imagery and audio that I attempt to convey the individuality of each language, both in their structures and organization as well as their characteristic mappings of the world around us.

I incorporate Spanish and English phrases within the audiovisual component of my work to demonstrate the systematic function of language, the way in which we use verbal communication to classify and understand the world around us. I utilize video to illustrate the constant fluctuation of linguistic expression and to guide the viewer into a contemplative state of mind. By combining Spanish audio with English text, I draw attention to the communicative structure that binds all spoken languages, while simultaneously representing each language as its own individualistic entity. The imagery depicted alongside the video pieces reflects the systematic structure of language and the infinite ways of expression that are properly communicated due to its organization. Such an approach allows me to visually represent the unique possibilities for representation gifted by each individual language.

## **Introduction**

During the initial stages of researching concepts related to my work, I identified an interest in philosophical themes and subject matter, including a consistent fascination with ideas that dealt with the unknown, the unreachable, or the unfamiliar. What I found to be of great interest concerning the ideas provoked by philosophical thinking was their ability to add depth and intricacy to aspects of life that one would normally take for granted. Being raised as a bilingual speaker, I found the philosophies surrounding verbal communication to be personally fascinating. It is oftentimes easy to neglect the intricacies of language that allow us to experience the world in unique and interesting ways. Though it is accurate to assume that a word or phrase stated in one language can be translated or described in another, dialects also retain a certain individuality through their distinctive combinations of linguistic components such as syntax, grammatical structure, and verbalization.

In this paper, I will discuss the fields that have inspired my practice, the research that has informed my approaches, and the development of my art making process. After describing the execution of my final art project, I introduce the core of my research through an analysis of the philosophers and theorists that have informed the thinking around the ideas I present in my work. I will also provide an overview of neuroscientific studies that examine the brain's response to language along with a synopsis of linguistic anthropological theories that analyze the correlation between language, culture, and thought. These discussions will be accompanied by examinations of contemporary artists Louise Lawler, Joseph Kosuth, and Kadar Attia and their work in order to demonstrate how I connect my art to these pre-existing dialogues and integrate my work into the conversations initiated by these artists.

My artwork takes the form of large, black panels that display acrylic paintings and imbedded screens. Each ten-inch monitor loops video footage of blinds and skyscapes, which reference the painted imagery on the surface of the panels. The audiovisual component features a spoken Spanish poem and displays distorted and overlapped images of clouds, blinds, and the sky, often interwoven with English text, that reference the spoken language without directly translating its meaning. These pieces encourage others to make an effort to grasp what seems unintelligible, for it is that unknown that guides one towards the hidden complexities of the world around us.

Language, although an imperative part of the way humans communicate with each other, can influence an individual's potential to perceive the world in different ways. Being bound by the structure of the language(s) one speaks means they must interact with the world using only the words of the language in a way that constantly abides by that language's grammatical rules, which makes it more difficult to expand upon what you see through one language alone. By displaying a digital format alongside paintings in my work, the pieces I create showcase the magnitude of perspectives one is deprived of by not being included within all the structural complexities of other languages. It is through the paintings' replication of the imagery in the video that I depict the result of representing the same object through different perspectives. Much like the effect of translating from one language to another, the distinctions between the moving images on the screens and the physical, painted imagery on the panels demonstrates the unique results of representing an object or idea through different mediums.

In my art, I implement my experiences as a bilingual to investigate the implications of speaking two or more languages. I explore linguistics through Spanish and English phrases in order to reflect this. I engage with both written and spoken language to highlight the

underestimated importance of linguistics and the philosophical theories surrounding all linguistic forms of communication. I intend to convince viewers not of the existence of drastically different worldviews, but of the opportunity to understand the world in new ways through an exploration of other languages.

The visuals I include both in the video and the painted portions serve to establish the tone of the artwork and to demonstrate the impact of linguistic abstraction. I convey my intended discussion of language through color, negative space, scale, fluctuating visuals, and meditative audio to guide viewers into a contemplative state of mind. The use of clouds, skylscapes, and blinds coincides with the abstraction of language; I aim to utilize universal imagery to reference how these common entities change depending on the languages that describe them. By incorporating expressive visuals in ways that influence the way a viewer experiences them – whether through color combinations, stylistic implications, the orientation of the imagery, or distortion in the paintings on the panel – I reference the linguistic abstraction that allows speakers to communicate theoretical ideas and thoughts. It is through the inclusion of precise imagery in the artwork that I showcase how all languages have the ability to interpret the same concepts and objects in unique ways. As such, it is my main goal to offer new perspectives on such an essential communication tool in order to encourage others to recognize the value of understanding the world through languages that they may not readily comprehend.

### **Execution**

In this section, I will delineate each component that comprises my final series. I have organized this section according to the order in which each aspect of the completed works

emerged throughout their development. This section will also justify the formal qualities of the work and the relationship between the visual content and the art's conceptual structure.

## **A. Language**

### **I. English and Spanish: Perception through Language**

In my artwork, I utilize specific languages – English and Spanish – to illustrate the ways in which verbal communication influences personal perception. English is solely accessible through its written form on constantly changing video screens, while Spanish is exclusively spoken, never written, and heard through headphones connected to the artwork itself. It was important to include both formats – written and spoken – to exhibit the effects of translation on a specific message or idea, and since I am fluent in both languages, I knew that I could draw from my own proficiency while working with their spoken and written forms. Additionally, I decided to implement information from studies indicating that the human brain responds much differently to a known language as opposed to unintelligible dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Specific areas of the human brain have been proven to respond to a language the individual understands, while those same areas fail to perform in the same manner when the subject listens to undiscernible speech.<sup>2</sup> I incorporate the differences between listening to a language one speaks and hearing the sounds of a language one doesn't speak by encouraging English speakers to meditate on what they think and feel when encountering the sounds of a language they cannot fully understand.

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<sup>1</sup> Broderick, Michael P., Andrew J. Anderson, Giovanni M. Di Liberto, Michael J. Crosse, and Edmund C. Lalor. "Electrophysiological Correlates of Semantic Dissimilarity Reflect the Comprehension of Natural, Narrative Speech." *Current Biology* 28, no. 5 (February 22, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Broderick, Michael P., "Electrophysiological Correlates of Semantic Dissimilarity Reflect the Comprehension of Natural, Narrative Speech." *Current Biology* 28, no. 5.

Another fundamental reason for the use of these specific languages depended on the context of the artwork's exhibition. Knowing that the final artworks would ultimately be exhibited at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum in Orlando, Florida, I knew it would be logical to utilize both English and Spanish in this project. The certainty of having English speakers, Spanish speakers, and bilinguals interacting with my work motivated me to incorporate language in a way that would produce varied responses: English speakers may solely understand the textual component, yet they remain auditorily engaged through the spoken Spanish, while Spanish speakers encounter the mystery of an undecipherable text, and bilinguals face a choice of either listening or reading at certain points throughout their experience. By including both English and Spanish in my artwork, I provide sufficient material for viewers with varying levels of proficiency in the languages to engage with the work in distinct yet worthwhile ways. The deliberate presentation of the two languages in different formats thus functions to showcase the consequences of translation between languages and to ensure the distinctive participation of the piece's viewers.

## II. The Role of Written English alongside the Spanish Voice

I incorporate text within my piece to highlight the variations that transpire when a particular message is translated from one language to another. Throughout certain videos within my pieces, I include four English phrases: "if given the chance," "to reach beyond my sight," "I listen to what you say," and "but I can't hear you." These succinct expressions operate as English translations of the spoken Spanish. The lengthy descriptions communicated through the audio contrast against the few English phrases, hence suggesting a degree of loss or deficiency when the messages are translated from one language to another. Additionally, the inclusion of English text allows viewers to gain a sense of what the spoken Spanish means, essentially functioning to

uphold the idea of distance and separation while also permitting them to interact with the art through the familiar language. Thus, the use of English phrases in my work contrasts against the spoken Spanish audio in order to illustrate how a particular message or idea undergoes significant changes when delivered through different languages.

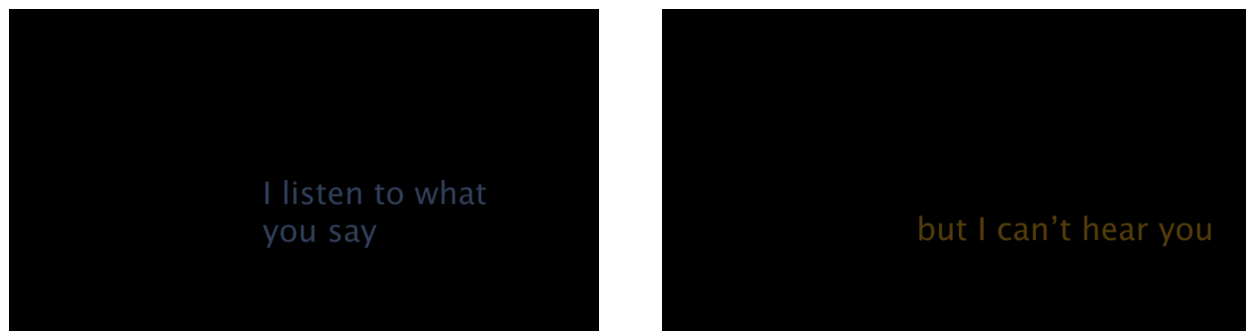


Figure 1: Video Stills (1) from *Untitled (Sin Titulo) Series*, (2020)

## B. Audio

The use of spoken Spanish as an audio component within my work reflects the meditative state of mind I wish to encourage in my viewers. The auditory portion of my work features a slow, peaceful pace of a softly spoken Spanish poem that conveys the desperation of misunderstanding and the frustrations of being unable to recognize the perspectives offered by foreign languages. Since the auditory component of the work can be accessed only by wearing headphones, the viewer is better able to integrate themselves into a contemplative experience.

Below is a transcription of the piece's Spanish audio:

Apunte, a punto de una feliz inquietud,  
 Una voz que me resulta conocida  
 Que indica, comenta, inquieta,  
 Lamenta las tartamudas que nos interesan  
 Por sus lindas bocas que forman el sentimiento  
 Y forman incomprensible,



Inconcebible,  
 Los significados  
 Que sin sus formas, sus casas son  
 Desnudos e inútiles

Que sea tan difícil  
 lo que me dices  
 Si tu belleza pudiera extender mas allá que mis oídos.  
 Entre ciertas lágrimas,  
 aspiraría  
 tus intenciones  
 Oigo a veces pero aún así  
 no te escucho.<sup>3</sup>

I deliberately create poetic verses to impose additional challenges for the viewer to grapple with during their interaction with my pieces. This compositional decision intentionally implements and accentuates the abstract, challenging nature of poetic language, essentially adding further need for interpretation and analysis from the viewer to better understand how the elements of the artwork function together. The poetic format of the language in the audio and text requires work from the viewer to decipher the verses' intended meaning. Through poetic language I incorporate another layer that challenges viewers along with the difficulties of deciphering the connections between the Spanish voice and the English text.

I focused on maintaining a smooth delivery in order to showcase the intriguing mystery one may encounter when they come into contact with poetic language, whether the individual understands it or not. My emphasis on meditation stems from this notion of philosophical enigma. Not only is the audio meant to lull the viewer into a relaxed state of contemplation, but

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<sup>3</sup> Cue, on the verge of a happy restlessness/a voice that seems familiar to me/that indicates, comments, restless/laments the stutters that interest us/by their pretty mouths that form the sentiment/and form incomprehensible/inconceivable/the meanings/which without their forms, their houses are/naked and useless/for it to be so difficult/what you say to me/if your beauty could reach beyond my ears/within certain tears/I would aspire/your intentions/I listen sometimes but even then/I can't hear you

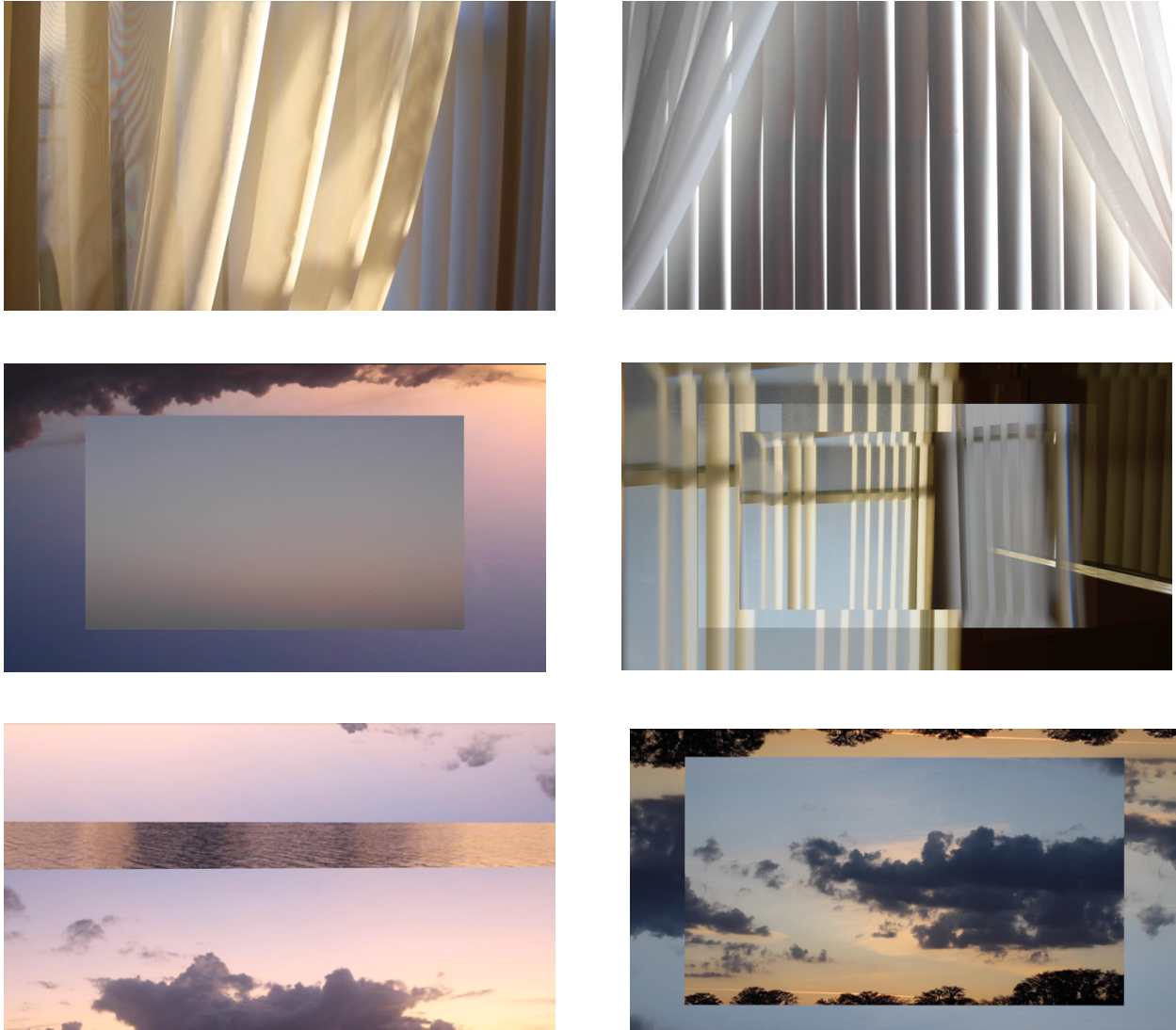
the privacy of hearing the Spanish through headphones offers an intimate opportunity to reflect on the possibilities of understanding the world through another language. It is through this auditory component that I also reference the distinctive experience of focusing on the vocals of a language as opposed to its verbal meaning. An inability to comprehend the spoken Spanish encourages the viewer to instead focus on the sound of the language itself, essentially achieving an undeterred experience of the vocals unique to that particular language. It is through the auditory component of my project that I urge viewers to encounter and appreciate the vocal uniqueness of human language.

### **C. Imagery**

#### **I. Blinds, Clouds, Sky: The Implications of Distance**

The incorporation of blinds, clouds, and skyscapes functions as a visual reference to the mystery and isolation one may experience when encountering a language one might not understand. Such imagery functions to elicit feelings of distance and separation. Blinds literally impede the view beyond the window while clouds and skyscapes are always in sight but forever out of reach, much like any foreign language that contains its own elements inaccessible to those who lack complete proficiency. By showing images of blinds and the sky together, I emphasize a separation between inside and outside, between where one presently stands and where one could potentially migrate to. Furthermore, the incorporation of soft yet vibrant colors accentuates the wondrous mystery of the unknown; it is through the meditative beauty of the visuals and their inaccessibility that their secrets become all the more fascinating. The depiction of various blinds and skyscapes within split and distorted shapes represent obstructions that impede the viewer from immersing themselves completely in the experience that lies beyond them. This visual emphasis on the barrier evokes a sense of detachment inevitably implemented by the inability to

understand a language. Not only is one deprived of communicating with others by means of a language one lacks proficiency in, but by failing to speak in and understand that language, one is also cut off from the distinct ways in which that particular language categorizes the world.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 2: Video Stills (2) from *Untitled (Sin Titulo)* Series, (2020)**

<sup>4</sup> To say that languages categorize the world refers to the way in which their structural characteristics impact how speakers may perceive what they speak about in the language. For instance, English speakers are inclined to perceive objects as neutral as a result of the “it” pronoun, while Spanish speakers classify all objects as either masculine or feminine, thus encouraging Spanish speakers to inherently impose genders, as well as gendered characteristics and associations, onto objects.

The decision to utilize these particular images also brings their universal standing into consideration. In order to provide as much as an inclusive experience as possible for my viewers, I made the decision to use blinds, clouds, and skyscapes as visual representations for my conceptual framework. That these objects can be recognized universally also integrates the idea of language as a tool to describe the objects that exist in the world around us and that are experienced by all humans, regardless of the language they speak. While these visuals did allow me to illustrate abstract concepts like language and language comprehension, I was still obligated to consider the role that these forms have had in classical artistic traditions, and what those roles entail in the contemporary era of artistic production. For this reason, I describe these implications and their roles within my art in the following section.

## II. Romanticism and the Sublime

The visuals of my work draw extensively from Romanticism and classical traditions of the picturesque, both which serve to visualize the connection between personal perception and language. After the controlled order brought about by the Enlightenment, proponents of Romantic art sought to focus instead on unpredictability and “the potential for cataclysmic extremes,” with an emphasis on emotion and the subjective.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, German Expressionism upholds “the artist’s inner feelings or ideas over replicating reality,” which operates much like the Romantic portrayals of the natural world.<sup>6</sup> Both artistic movements encourage emotional expression over realism, evidently promoting personal depictions of the world as seen in the work of Romantic painters like Joseph Mallord William Turner. The powerful expression within

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<sup>5</sup> Galitz, Kathryn Calley. “Romanticism.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. (October 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Tate. “German Expressionism.” Tate. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/g/german-expressionism>.

Turner's paintings exhibits his belief that "landscapes can convey a full range of emotional meanings."<sup>7</sup> Works like *Venice, From the Porch of Madonna della Salute* further display Turner's engagement with Romanticism and German Expressionism (see *figure 4*). In *Venice*, Turner "combines multiple viewpoints to present an impossible view of several Venetian landmarks," effectively implementing distortions onto reality in order to realize a personalized artistic vision.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 3: Joseph Mallord William Turner,**  
*Dort or Dordrecht: The Dort Packet-boat From Rotterdam BeCALMED, (1818)*

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<sup>7</sup> Barker, Elizabeth E. "Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851)." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. (October 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Barker, Elizabeth E. "Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851)." In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–. (October 2004).



**Figure 4: Joseph Mallord William Turner,  
*Venice, From the Porch of Madonna della Salute*, (1835)**

I draw from these art historical sources to demonstrate the role that language plays on an individuals' interpretation of the world around them. I incorporate imagery that evokes mystery and separation, yet I portray these images in romanticized forms to showcase how language allows its speakers to perceive them in unique ways. Through my paintings I reference the distinctiveness of every human language, implementing classical traditions of the picturesque to visualize linguistic individualities.<sup>9</sup> This stylized approach also alludes to the Expressionist concept of distorting reality in order to make it “expressive of the artist’s inner feelings or ideas.”<sup>10</sup> The artwork’s references to Romanticism and German Expressionism thus illustrate the plentitude of distinct worldviews offered by human languages.

By depicting stylized versions of the video-based imagery, I echo the principles of Romantic art that examined nature through the lens of the sublime. Though the sublime entails

<sup>9</sup> Galitz, Kathryn Calley. “Romanticism.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. (October 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Tate. “Expressionism.” Tate. Accessed April 20, 2020. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/e/expressionism>.



feelings that “stun the soul, imprinting feelings of terror,” my own use of visuals implements this emotional intensity in a way that accentuates wonder as opposed to fear.<sup>11</sup> I present paintings that showcase incorporeal elements of the natural world in a way that highlights their awe-inspiring essence through romanticized color choices and distortion, paralleling the association of nature with the sublime. In this way, I portray clouds – objects with an extensive connection to classical traditions of the picturesque – as vessels for unique expression rooted in sentiments of admiration, essentially reminiscent of elements from Romanticism and the sublime. The color design and use of precise visuals within my work thus function to reflect the infinite potentials for communication and expression made possible through spoken language.



**Figure 5: Angela-Maria Martinez, *Untitled 2 (Sin Titulo 2)*, (2020)**

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<sup>11</sup> Galitz, Kathryn Calley. “Romanticism.” In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. (October 2004).



Figure 6: Angela-Maria Martinez, *Untitled 1 (Sin Titulo 1)*, (2020)

#### D. Media Use

##### I. Video: The Complexities of Linguistic Change

The use of video in my artwork serves to reference the fluctuating nature of language. Within each piece, small ten-inch monitors are embedded into the housing structures, with each housing measuring 20" x 37", 25" x 57", and 72" x 42", respectively. The smaller scale of the monitors in comparison to the paintings and the housings themselves is meant to encourage an intimate viewing experience; by utilizing such a precise scale for the moving images within the piece, I invite the viewer to closely examine the details of the videos and their constantly changing relationship to the tangible paintings beside them. The videos' constant alternation provides a visual demonstration of contextual shifts, and how these shifts affect meaning. As the footage alternates, the static paintings beside them also undergo changes based on the different images presented. For instance, when the footage shows blinds, the viewer is inclined to think about the relationship of the blinds' vertical lines and the linear disruptions through the paintings, or about the connection between the blinds themselves and the stationary clouds. It is



through this use of video that I showcase language's constant fluctuation according to the context in which it is utilized.

The pacing within my work's video portions promotes a thoughtful consideration of the philosophical implications of this integral component of our lives. In accordance with the soft-spoken nature of the Spanish audio, the duration of each footage segment also lingers for an ample amount of time (about eight seconds or more). The videos' lethargic pacing gives the viewer enough time to investigate the details of the visuals while also remaining invested in the auditory component. Through this slow tempo, viewers are able to examine the relationship between the moving and static images of the piece in a thoughtful manner. Such a tranquil experience allows for a meditative encounter with the piece, inspiring the viewer to consider the relevance of inspecting language as a philosophical concept. By engaging with variation and pacing through the medium of video, I highlight the importance of recognizing the complexity of language and of considering its thoughtful potentialities.

## II. Painting as Translation

In my work, the use of acrylic painting functions as a visual translation of the imagery in the video. Although the acrylic paintings correspond to the video's images, they function as representations of such images, as opposed to perfect replications. The emphasis on representation as opposed to replication reiterates the fact that translations often do not capture the complete essence of a deciphered message. The visible differences between the recorded skylines and the painted skylines allude to the changes in meaning that often occur when translating a specific message from one language to another.

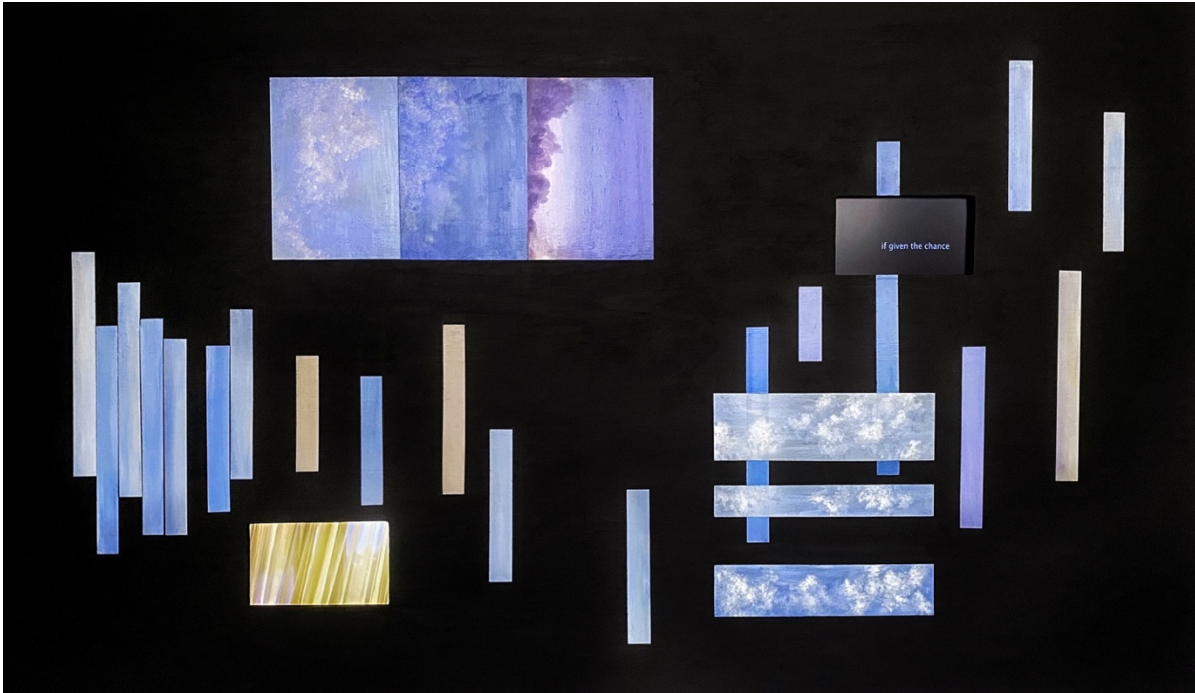


Figure 7: Angela-Maria Martinez, *Untitled 3 (Sin Titulo 3)*, (2020)

I also acknowledge the barrier that impedes one from understanding the intricacies of a language one doesn't speak through the precise masking of the paint. The clearly defined edges of the paintings parallel the blinds that obstruct the view beyond the window. These obstructions allow the viewer to only see distorted and fragmented portions of the "translations," which visually represents the barrier that impedes individuals from accessing the unique perspectives offered by any language they don't understand. Additionally, the black voids of negative space between each painting and screen alludes to the unknown and mystery that surrounds language. By echoing the imagery in the video pieces with paintings that correspond to the precise color, tone, and form of specific visuals within, the artwork visually represents the way languages impose unique perspectives onto the objects and ideas they describe. Through the incorporation of painted imagery in my piece, I seek to portray the importance of acknowledging the unique perspectives that result from the ways that different languages describe the world.

## Research, Concept(s), and Influences

### A. Linguistic Theory and Philosophy

#### I. Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Language

According to philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, in order for a system of communication to work, the members of that system must agree on their attitudes towards the things around them.<sup>12</sup> Regular use and application of those concepts thus form part of language and its successful implementation.<sup>13</sup> Wittgenstein's work reflects the common assertion that speakers of a language "share a brain."<sup>14</sup> This idea embodies the changes I feel myself go through when I transition between English and Spanish (for instance, when I suddenly have to change my speaking from English to Spanish, I hear my voice get higher, I feel lighter, more open and extroverted). Furthermore, Wittgenstein stresses that the meaning of words lies in the diversity of their functions.<sup>15</sup> As such, it is the responsibility of the speaker utilizing the words to implement their correct function according to the situation at hand, and for this to take place, the listener must be able to share an understanding of the word's function in context. In this sense, the idea of shared attitudes becomes linked with the influence of language in our lives; it shows the extent to which language can affect our behavior and our perceptions of ourselves.

Yet, this understanding between speakers has the potential to hinder us just as much as it helps us. The agreements that speakers of one language have act as the basis for the unifier that is language. However, even though it is undeniable that language forms part of a culture, it is also worthwhile to question whether people are willing to believe that part of this truth lies in the

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<sup>12</sup> "Ludwig Wittgenstein." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed September 21, 2019. <https://www.iep.utm.edu/wittgens/>.

<sup>13</sup> "Ludwig Wittgenstein." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed September 21, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> "Ludwig Wittgenstein." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed September 21, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Kenny, Anthony. *Wittgenstein*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981: 155.

fact that almost everyone unquestioningly agrees on logical truths based simply on the structure of the language they communicate in. By unquestioned agreement, I refer to the fact that individuals must abide by the structure of any particular language in order to communicate with other speakers of that language. This is not to say that all speakers accept the possible implications of that language's organization, but even if an individual disagrees with the implications of certain linguistic configurations, they are still obligated to utilize those structures in order to successfully converse. As such, all human languages force their speakers to abide by their conditioned rules, thus imposing specific perceptions onto their speakers.<sup>16</sup>

“Without sharing certain attitudes towards the things around us, without sharing a sense of relevance and responding in similar ways, communication would be impossible. Regularity of the use of such concepts and agreement in their application is part of language, not a logically necessary precondition of it. Imagine a different form or way of life and you imagine a different language with different concepts, different rules and a different logic.”<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between the words that I include in my piece and the imagery that I present alongside it demonstrates a movement beyond the principle of language agreement. Instead of showcasing imagery that reflects the word's literal meaning, I utilize visuals to embody the emotion of the words, thus guiding the viewer into a space of contemplative peace. For instance, by pairing phrases like “to reach beyond my sight” with various images of blinds, I

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, some speakers of English have proposed adding the pronouns ze/zer to the English vernacular in order to promote inclusivity for gender neutral/genderfluid individuals. However, even if one agrees with the decision to do so, implementing this change cannot be immediately nor easily done, since all speakers of English would need to reconfigure their lifelong understanding of personal pronouns to accommodate such a change.

<sup>17</sup> “Ludwig Wittgenstein.” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed September 21, 2019.

emulate the desire to extend past the barriers disallowing movement from the recognizable known to the fascinating unknown (see *figure 8*). Through this juxtaposition of written language, spoken language, and imagery, I reflect Wittgenstein’s idea of a “different logic” that reaches beyond the abilities of language to connect with the sentiments that escape linguistic description.

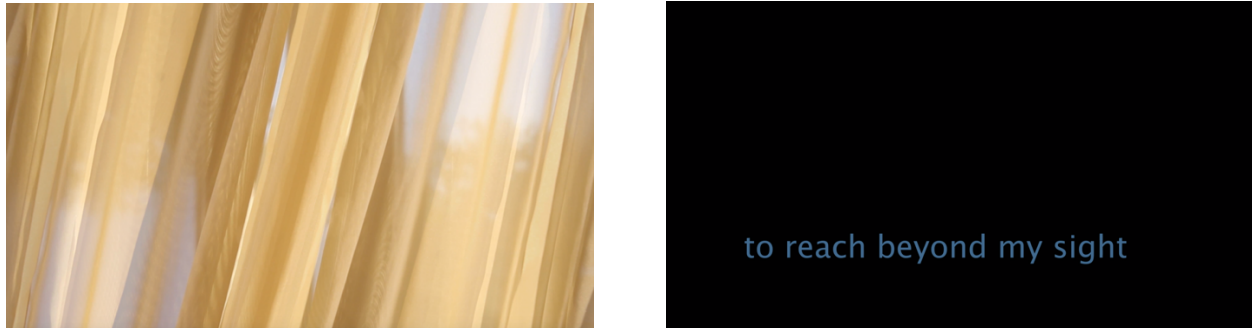


Figure 8: Video Stills (3) from *Untitled (Sin Titulo) Series*, (2020)

## II. Ferdinand de Saussure and Semiotic Systems

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, originator of the concept of the linguistic sign, it is our conceptions of things, as opposed to the things themselves, that form part of our language.<sup>18</sup> Saussure’s philosophies reflect Wittgenstein’s ideas of shared attitudes, for according to Saussure, “any means of expression accepted in a society rests in principle upon a collective habit, or on convention, which comes to the same thing.” Both philosophers acknowledge the necessity for shared attitudes in order for language to function, yet it is Saussure who analyzes the relationship between words and their meanings as linked concepts and sound patterns.<sup>19</sup> This

<sup>18</sup> Joseph, John E. “Ferdinand De Saussure.” Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics, March 21, 2018. <https://oxfordre.com/linguistics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.001.0001/acrefore-9780199384655-e-385#acrefore-9780199384655-e-385-div2-3>.

<sup>19</sup> Saussure, Ferdinand de. “Course in General Linguistics.” Translated by Roy Harris. *Journal of Linguistics*, 1983: 66.

approach to language differs from those propagated by Wittgenstein, since Saussure concentrates on the meaning imposed onto abstract sounds, while Wittgenstein's work focuses on speakers' absolute use of linguistic structures. Saussure's studies demonstrate the relationship between 'signifier' and 'signified,' the term 'signifier' functioning as a representative of the "acoustic image" and the 'signified' as indicative of the concept.<sup>20</sup> These terms demonstrate that although words in a language can seem straightforward and simple, they do not solely indicate what they themselves are; instead, a single word can entail further connotations beyond those that speakers may associate with that word. Saussure's theories thus reflect the complex nature of language that is very easily overlooked or unrecognized.

"A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern."<sup>21</sup>

Much like Saussure's ideas, my pieces challenge the viewer to read the components of the work in a specific way and to question whether or not their interpretation is 'correct.' Even though the distinct languages function as barriers that deter total linguistic comprehension, this hindrance of understanding forces viewers to draw their own conclusions based on the sound of the voice itself, the scarce English text, and the imagery that accompanies it. Again, I acknowledge different levels of proficiency through the different registers through which I present my main idea. Even if a viewer lacks proficiency in Spanish, the paintings, video footage, and poetic structure of the English text all provide additional layers of meaning, and from these a viewer engages in a distinctive experience based on the available registers and their

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<sup>20</sup> Joseph, John E. "Ferdinand De Saussure." Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics, March 21, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Saussure, Ferdinand de. "Course in General Linguistics." Translated by Roy Harris. *Journal of Linguistics*, 1983: 66.

personal experiences. Similarly, a Spanish speaker lacking complete proficiency in English would also be able to meaningfully engage with the art's auditory poetics, painted imagery, and video footage. In light of Saussure's concept of the linguistic sign, I encourage my viewers to draw from their personal experiences and capabilities to consider the relationship between the language and visuals presented to them. Implementing linguistic incongruencies into the work – avoiding the use of Spanish and English as direct translations or subtitles for one another – parallels Saussure's theories of 'signified' and 'signifier,' not only through the implications of the poetic structure of the language, but also through the lack of literal comprehension. However, the inability for some to understand the words' literal meanings allows the viewer to infer meaning from what *is* available. The deliberate use of a distinct languages and lack of exact translations thus reflects Saussure's philosophies of semantics.

Many of Saussure's ideas are manifest in the work of contemporary artist Joseph Kosuth, such as in his piece *One and Three Chairs*. This particular composition of Kosuth's has informed my own art practice because of its relationship to language. In the work, a chair, a photograph of the chair, and the English definition of a chair coexist together as a single piece. The implications in the title are important to consider because they acknowledge the presence of one chair (the idea of the chair itself) and three chairs (the manifestations of multiple representations). As such, this work questions the effect of different representations on how individuals view a single object, essentially echoing Saussure's idea of shifting the 'signified' for a set 'signifier;' In Kosuth's piece, the word "chair" functions as a signifier that encompasses three distinct possibilities for what its 'signified' could be.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> "Joseph Kosuth: One and Three Chairs." MoMA Learning. MoMA . Accessed September 19, 2019.

These particulars of the composition also prompt the viewer to question whether or not any one of the representations is more accurate than the others.<sup>23</sup> In his piece, Kosuth demonstrates “how art can move beyond objects into a more purely conceptual realm by including a physical object, a visual representation of that object, and a mental representation of the object.”<sup>24</sup> In doing so, Kosuth also references Wittgenstein’s emphasis on speakers’ shared attitudes as the basis for communication, specifically through the piece’s examination of the different meanings that stem from a single word. If not for the agreement between all English speakers about the meaning of the word “chair,” Kosuth would be unable to address the variations of this single English term. By neglecting to engage in representational forms of art and instead upholding the concept of his piece as the art, Kosuth seeks to assert that true art begins where physicality ends. It is for this reason that the essence of Kosuth’s work is not contingent upon classical aesthetics but instead upon the context that frames the work. *One and Three Chairs* thus conveys Kosuth’s quintessential basis for artmaking, that the actual works of art are the *ideas* that comprise the art, not the physical objects that materialize it.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> “Joseph Kosuth: One and Three Chairs.” MoMA Learning. MoMA . Accessed September 19, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Galenson, David W. *The Reappearing Masterpiece: Ranking American Artists and Art Works of the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: National Bureau of Economic Research, Inc, 2003: 12.

<sup>25</sup> Galenson, David W. *The Reappearing Masterpiece: Ranking American Artists and Art Works of the Late Twentieth Century*. 2003: 12.





Figure 9: Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, (1965)

Kosuth's piece significantly inspires my own practice through its examination of language. The word "chair" itself implicates meanings that are unique to English. Chair can reference a position of leadership or authority (the chair of a committee), and the only way for a listener to infer the correct meaning of the word is by referencing the situation in which the word is uttered and the words that surround "chair" to finish the complete thought. It is from these considerations that I drew inspiration for some preliminary versions of my artwork. In one of my early studies, I deliberately positioned multiple images of skyscapes around a piece of paper with repetitions of the Spanish phrase "la mañana le da la bienvenida a el mañana" (the morning welcomes the tomorrow). Through my attempts to incorporate visuals alongside this expression, I integrated Kosuth's exploration of linguistics and the multiple representations that exist for a

single phrase or object. Within this study, I acknowledge the influence of gendered nouns in the Spanish language and how this feature is not present in English, which draws from Kosuth's insistence on concentrating the art in its conceptualization as opposed to its visualization.



**Figure 10: Initial Study (1),**  
*(la mañana le da la bienvenida a el mañana), (2019)*

Although I heavily reference Kosuth in my earlier work, I also seek to consider the additional meanings that stem from conventional language in my final art piece. The text I incorporate in the work's videos functions to remind the viewer about the need for additional words and contextual information to fully understand the intended message. Much like Kosuth, I burden the viewer with the responsibility of deliberating on what they deem to be an accurate meaning of the text shown, as the words themselves do not offer enough to assign a precise thought to the imagery. While Kosuth questions the different interpretations attached to a single object, I point out the confusion that results when an idea is not presented with its necessary

linguistic accompaniments. For instance, a portion of a video clip may include the phrase “to reach beyond my sight” in English while carefully selected imagery poetically alluding to what might be conjured by those words fills the screen. At the same time, the audio track includes related but not identical phrases articulated in Spanish. Through the aural and visual language-based component of my work, I demonstrate the instances of misinterpretation that occur when the systematic facets of any language are not implemented according to its specialized rules and regulations. Both Saussure and Kosuth focus on the influence of the linguistic sign, and both inform my own practice through their emphasis on the fluctuating nature of language.

### III. Friedrich Nietzsche’s Concepts of Language and Truth

While Saussure studies the relationship between a concept and the sound pattern attributed to it, accentuating the complexity of language through its shifting roles and functions according to context, Friedrich Nietzsche addresses the confines of this linguistic complexity. In his writings, Nietzsche often describes language as a limitation. He asserts that language can be used to manipulate people’s perception of truth, and that, consequently, language hinders interaction because of its influence on communication.<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche maintains that by “using language to talk about reality, we already presuppose reality; we take our language to express truths.”<sup>27</sup> This demonstrates a need to seriously consider the effectiveness of language’s accuracy during instances of spoken and written communication. Nonetheless, Nietzsche also argues that the human aptitude to respond to multiple perspectives is a positive thing, and that a person’s practical, evaluative, and cognitive abilities depend on an availability of different perspectives.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Anderson, R. Lanier. “Friedrich Nietzsche.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, March 17, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/#Plur>.

<sup>27</sup> Pham, Le Quyen, "Nietzsche on Language and Our Pursuit of Truth." *The Expositor: A Journal of Undergraduate Research in the Humanities*. 6. (2016): 59.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, R. Lanier. “Friedrich Nietzsche.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

Therefore, it is relevant to consider that “language is useful to us but ultimately detached from reality.”<sup>29</sup>

In spite of the limitations that language imposes on its speakers, such restrictions encourage the use of separate contextual clues to apply meaning to specific objects or situations. While it is important to acknowledge the way in which language hinders interaction, it is just as relevant to address the interpretive prospects that humans engage in as a result of these restrictions. Nietzsche’s ideas primarily inform my art through the Spanish audio’s effects on my viewer’s perception of the imagery. By deliberately problematizing the interaction with the artwork, I make perception and the interaction challenging, forcing the viewer to utilize their evaluative and cognitive abilities in order to conjure their own meaning from what they are presented with. In my pieces, I urge viewers to utilize means other than language to understand and attribute meaning to the work. The use of imagery, video, and audio functions as separate registers from the written and spoken language, and as such, provide the viewer with separate material that facilitates a meaningful interaction with the work apart from linguistic comprehension. This emulates the idea of language as limitation; my viewers are encouraged to move past a translation of the language and to instead focus on the implications of coupling such precise imagery with the moving elements of the video and the lyrical sound of the Spanish audio.

#### IV. “The Role of Meaning in Human Thinking”

Sky Marsen’s article “The Role of Meaning in Human Thinking” elaborates on language as negotiation, drawing upon Saussure’s established relationship between the signifier and

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<sup>29</sup> Anderson, R. Lanier. “Friedrich Nietzsche.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

signified. Marsen explains that a word such as "tree" can be used to signify things other than the object it denotes; speakers create a code that can only be decoded by those who can decipher the patterns without referring to the natural world.<sup>30</sup> According to Marsen, this demonstrates the "negotiative part of language" and "underlies artistic expression."<sup>31</sup> This negotiability of language is integral to artistic expression because it forms the mechanisms by which artists justify the formal and conceptual structures of their work. If not for such negotiability, artists would be barred from elaborating on their decisions to use one color over another, their preference for one type of formal approach over another, and so on. As such, the human ability to attribute meaning allows the very idea of art and the conceptual frameworks that compose art to exist. Furthermore, language's negotiability allows for the interpretation of objects like art, which also demonstrates the possibility for different opinions and perspectives through the use of conventional language. Though this is not to say that all interpretations are equally valid, it does facilitate the means by which individuals are able to argue and validate their perceptions, within reason.

Marsen distinguishes between formal and natural/conventional language, the former denoting the use of "numbers, equations, and algorithms to communicate, based on precise measurement and unambiguous reference," while the latter encompasses "verbal signs we use to communicate in our everyday interactions."<sup>32</sup> Formal languages are universal and exact, while conventional language is varied and abstract.<sup>33</sup> I explicitly work with natural language in my art

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<sup>30</sup> Marsen, Sky. "The Role of Meaning in Human Thinking." *Journal of Evolution and Technology*. Vol. 17 Issue 1 – March 2008 - pgs 45-58, Accessed September 13, 2019. <https://jetpress.org/v17/marsen.htm>.

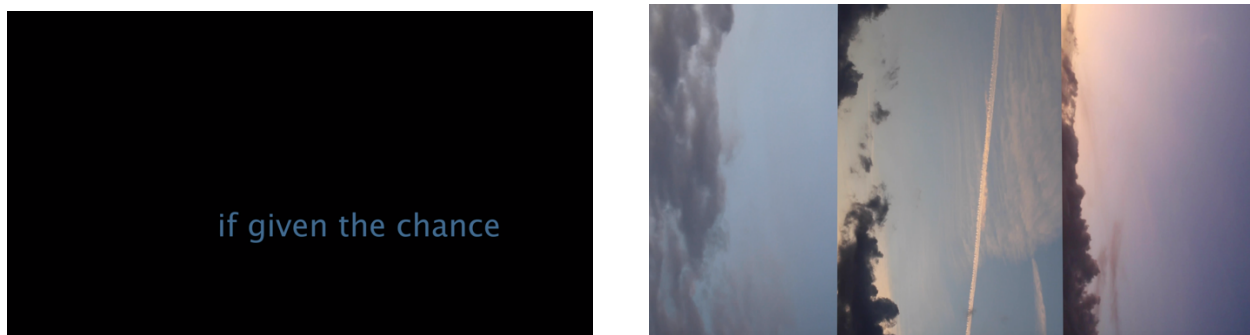
<sup>31</sup> Marsen, Sky. "The Role of Meaning in Human Thinking." *Journal of Evolution and Technology*. Vol. 17 Issue 1 – March 2008 - pgs 45-58, Accessed September 13, 2019. <https://jetpress.org/v17/marsen.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> Marsen, Sky. "The Role of Meaning in Human Thinking." *Journal of Evolution and Technology*. Vol. 17 Issue 1 – March 2008 - pgs 45-58, Accessed September 13, 2019. <https://jetpress.org/v17/marsen.htm>.

<sup>33</sup> Marsen, Sky. "The Role of Meaning in Human Thinking." *Journal of Evolution and Technology*. Vol. 17 Issue 1 – March 2008 - pgs 45-58, Accessed September 13, 2019. <https://jetpress.org/v17/marsen.htm>.

to convey language's ability to facilitate communication of everyday life, and how this flexibility also carries implications that give language its expressive command. Specifically, my use of spoken Spanish phrases and written English phrases demonstrate how language can allow us to discuss abstract concepts (such as the feelings provoked by a beautiful skyscape) or give meaning to otherwise impartial objects (as in the attribution of peaceful mindsets to clouds).

I reflect Marsen's ideas in my work by coupling language with imagery that merely reflects the emotions and implications behind the words as opposed to explicitly displaying their literal meaning. When I include window blinds and clouds in my work, for instance, these images evoke the 'signified' of the lyrical audio. Even though the dialogue portion of the work describes a longing to comprehend what cannot be readily understood, it is the accompanying imagery that functions as an extension of the dialogue by alluding to the meditative state of mind provoked by the language that accompanies the piece. As previously stated, images of blinds and clouds reflect the emotional depth of the language's words through their undulating visualization of inside and outside, of remoteness and estrangement. In this fashion, I also evoke Marsen's idea of conventional language through my intentional use of poetic phrasing. Instead of implementing impartial or unambiguous text, I utilize the fluidity of poetry to emphasize the role of language that extends beyond what it literally signifies.



**Figure 11: Video Stills (4) from *Untitled (Sin Titulo)* Series, (2020)**

## B. Neuroscience Studies and Linguistic Anthropology

### I. “The Neuroscience of Language”

Neuroscientists have conducted many studies associated with the brain’s response to language. In terms of bilingualism, research has shown that bilingual speakers retain a “remarkable level of plasticity across the languages with evidence that the two languages engage directly within a single language system, stretched in different directions by the conflicts and convergences present across each level of language use.”<sup>34</sup> The constant activation of the two languages “creates demands on cognitive systems and the neural mechanisms that control them” in ways that allow the bilingual to “function fluently in each language.”<sup>35</sup> Such findings indicate the adaptive nature of language processing, and showcase how language acquisition imposes physical adaptations onto the speaker.<sup>36</sup> It is this level of change caused by language use that I wish to highlight in my work; not only is it relevant to address the impact of language on the brain, but the acknowledgement of bilingualism as a means to increase plasticity and cognitive performance demonstrates the extent to which language infiltrates even our physical beings.

Friedemann Pulvermüller’s account of specific investigations in “The Neuroscience of Language” showcases a difference in the way the brain reacts to hearing words and pseudowords (a unit of speech or text that appears to have meaning but does not). According to a study that focused on the brain’s response to word stimuli, neuroscientists confirmed that “words evoke stronger high-frequency brain activity than comparable wordlike material,” and that the brain “distinguishes between words and similar but novel and meaningless items.”<sup>37</sup> This showcases

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<sup>34</sup> Kroll, Judith F., Kinsey Bice, and Lauren Perrotti. “Bilingualism, Mind, and Brain.” Essay. In *Annual Review of Linguistics*, edited by Paola E. Dussias, 1:377–94, 2015: 389.

<sup>35</sup> Kroll, Judith F., Kinsey Bice, and Lauren Perrotti. “Bilingualism, Mind, and Brain.” 2015: 389.

<sup>36</sup> Kroll, Judith F., Kinsey Bice, and Lauren Perrotti. “Bilingualism, Mind, and Brain.” 2015: 389.

<sup>37</sup> Pulvermüller Friedemann. *The Neuroscience of Language: On Brain Circuits of Words and Serial Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007: 53.

that words themselves do not provoke reaction, rather, it is the meanings, memories, and associations attributed to specific words that provoke a response to them. As such, Pulvermüller's findings demonstrate how we remain connected to our past experiences and to the world around us through language.

In addition, neuroscientific studies focusing on category-specific words affirm language's function as a 'signifier' (in other words, language as a vessel of meaning, a representation for something else). Lexically ambiguous and unambiguous words were found to provoke neurophysiological differences; in other words, "the meaning of ambiguous words is somewhat richer than that of words with only one meaning."<sup>38</sup> These findings clearly exemplify any word's ability to function as a representative for objects or concepts apart from its literal definition(s).

The process of developing my work – involving the production of various studies, prototypes and mock-ups – resulted in a very particular finalized form that reflects this aspect of language processing. In terms of the work's formal elements, I initially drew inspiration from neuroscientific research that concentrates on the brain's processing of language (see *figure 12*). I experimented with paint and its fluidity to reference meticulous neuroscientific examinations of the brain; by creating abstract paintings, I sought to formally emulate brain activity, effectively visualizing the concept of language processing through a painterly approach to scientific research.

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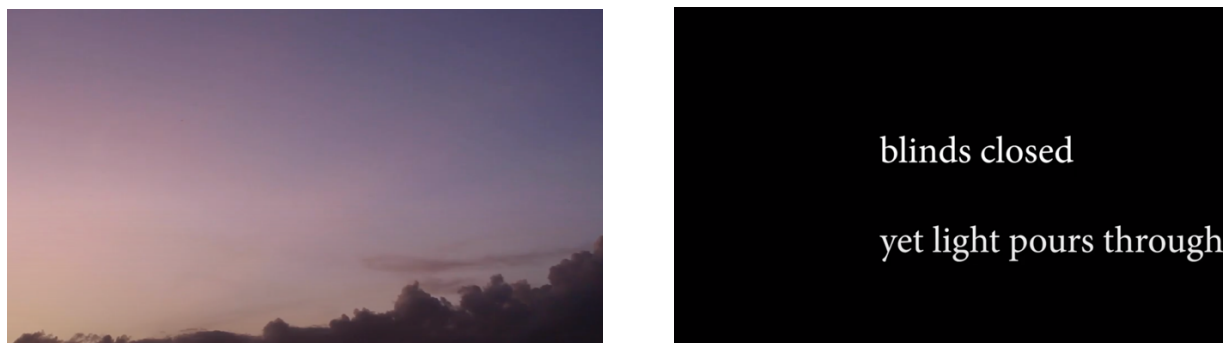
<sup>38</sup> Pulvermüller Friedemann. *The Neuroscience of Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007: 61.





**Figure 12: Initial Studies (2), (focus on formal elements/brain scans), (2019)**

By contrast, in the initial stages of my project’s video component, I focused mainly on incorporating imagery in a way that interacted with language in a more active and purposeful manner. I worked with the Spanish phrase, “la mañana le da la bienvenida a el mañana” – “the morning welcomes the tomorrow” – to reflect the importance of signified meanings: in Spanish, the articles “la” and “el” shift the meaning of the word “mañana” to mean either “morning” or “tomorrow.” I then implemented footage of blinds and the sky alongside the spoken language and English text to showcase the concept of language processing (see *figure 13*). Although the language in this study does not literally match the imagery, the connections between the video footage and the Spanish language referencing change and cycles served to acknowledge the role of ‘signified’ meanings in linguistic comprehension. In doing so, the development of my work emulated the neuroscientific studies that demonstrate language’s ability to provoke strong emotional responses that draw from memory or ‘signified’ meanings.



**Figure 13: Initial Study (3), (video stills from experiments with language through text), (2019)**

In my final art piece, I incorporate language in a way that draws upon a viewer’s knowledge of words’ meanings to add further implications to the sentences I compose. For instance, I utilize the context of my project to influence my viewer’s understanding of the phrases “if given the chance,” “to reach beyond my sight,” “I listen to what you say,” and “but I can’t hear you.” In accordance with Pulvermüller’s findings, the words I use are likely to serve as reminders of poignant past experiences, and thus inevitably compel the viewer to engage in an emotionally invested experience. These phrases thus serve to demonstrate the role of language as signifier through their implicated meaning within my work.

## II. Examining the Relationship between Language, Thought, and Perception

An in-depth analysis of the structural units that comprise Spanish and English highlights the importance of text and the voice in my own work. Phonemes, the “smallest meaningful units of sound in a language,” function differently in Spanish and English.<sup>39</sup> English contains more than fourteen vowel sounds while Spanish only has five.<sup>40</sup> This vast dissimilarity explains why

<sup>39</sup> Stanlaw, James M., Nobuko Adachi, and Zdenek Salzmman. *Language, Culture, and Society: An Introduction to Linguistic Anthropology*. New York: Routledge Taylor et Francis Group, 2019: (377).

<sup>40</sup> Colorado, Colorín. “Capitalizing on Similarities and Differences between Spanish and English.” Colorín Colorado. Colorín Colorado, December 5, 2018.

“Spanish speakers have difficulty differentiating between vowel phonemes in words like *seat* and *sit*.”<sup>41</sup> Both phonemes are “pronounced differently from the Spanish *si* (yes),” which imposes complications for a Spanish speaker’s pronunciation of the English word(s). Issues like these are further complicated by the impulse to implement one’s native language system onto a new language. For instance, since English speakers are inclined to transfer their habits of the English system to Spanish, a problem is certain to arise “when the sound systems of English and Spanish differ.”<sup>42</sup> Building off of these differences in phonemes between English and Spanish, I incorporate Spanish audio to emphasize English speakers’ struggle to confine their pronunciation to the limited number of Spanish phonemes. By contrast, the English text challenges Spanish speakers through the uncertainty of pronunciation. Through this acknowledgement of vocal pronunciation and its challenges for speakers who may not fully comprehend the language, I also accentuate the way that the Spanish audio incites wonder and contemplation through the sound of a language spoken by a native speaker, enunciated in ways that would be more difficult to execute by those lacking proficiency in Spanish.

Similarly to my own incorporation of spoken Spanish, contemporary artist Kader Attia utilizes the voice as a meaningful register. Attia’s work closely relates to my own through its detailed examination of language and its lack of index (an index requires an existential or physical connection between it and its object).<sup>43</sup> Attia mainly works with sound and the “agency of nature before and beyond human being”<sup>44</sup> This directly relates to my work considering that it is through language that we categorize nature in order to better understand it. One of Attia’s

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<sup>41</sup> Colorado, Colorín. “Capitalizing on Similarities and Differences between Spanish and English.”

<sup>42</sup> Lado, Robert. "A Comparison of the Sound Systems of English and Spanish." *Hispania* 39, no. 1 (1956): 26.

<sup>43</sup> Atkin, Albert. “Peirce's Theory of Signs.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Stanford University, November 15, 2010.

<sup>44</sup> “Narrative Vibrations, 2017.” Kader Attia. Accessed November 13, 2019.

video works titled *Prosody* “references the way in which written text arouses emotions” and examines how “the way we speak to each other communicates more than what we actually say.”<sup>45</sup> This connects deeply with my own incorporation of sound and language, namely in the inclusion of an acoustic experience that coincides with the visuals of the piece. Much like Attia’s use of the voice as a vessel of communication, I utilize Spanish audio to create an experience suspended in and dependent on time. Through the communicative properties of spoken language, I create an experience that utilizes the voice to convey a message through its sound just as much as it does through the words it uses, essentially allowing speakers of both Spanish and English to infer meaning from the spoken portion of my project.



**Figure 14: Kader Attia, *Prosody* (still), (2017). Digital 1-channel HD video projection. Courtesy of the artist, Galleria Continua, Galerie Krinzinger, Lehmann Maupin, and Galerie Nagel Draxler**

In addition to my research of vocal linguistics, I have also incorporated findings from anthropological studies concerning the relationship between language and thought. Investigations of language and its influence on human perception have provoked various theories that explore the intricacies of verbal communication. One of these theories, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, was

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<sup>45</sup> Giovanna Zapperi, "Kader Attia: Voices of Resistance," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 46 (Autumn/Winter 2018): 116-125.

conceptualized after Benjamin Lee Whorf introduced the principles of linguistic determinism and linguistic relativity. Linguistic determinism hypothesizes that "the way one thinks is determined by the language one speaks" and linguistic relativity asserts that "the differences among languages would thus be reflected in the different world-views of their speakers."<sup>46</sup> As such, this theory claims that each language provides a completely unique experience of the world for its speakers, unparalleled and unmatched by any other.

Evidence for these principles was demonstrated through studies on the Hopi language. The Hopi language does not refer to time in terms of past, present, and future or as a distinct space from the present, emphasizing the Hopi's concentration on objective experience.<sup>47</sup> Unlike English, the Hopi language encourages its speakers to think of time as a continuum; since Hopi does not have tenses like English, it interprets events as continuations of what has already happened; "it is as if the return of the day were felt as the return of the same person, a little older but with all the impresses of yesterday, not as 'another day,' i.e. like an entirely different person."<sup>48</sup> This differs from the notion that every day is a new day or a fresh start, which is common in English expressions and ideas. The Hopi language emphasizes the idea of preparation, because it is customary in Hopi culture to work with the expectations of current events carrying implications into the future.<sup>49</sup> To the Hopi, anything that occurs accumulates into the 'getting later' of everything else, and thus differs from English speakers' conceptualizations of 'restarting' with every day.<sup>50</sup> Language, according to these suggestions and studies, was thus shown to "produce an organization of experience."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Stanlaw, Adachi, and Salzmann. *Language, Culture, and Society*, 2019: 232.

<sup>47</sup> Stanlaw, Adachi, and Salzmann. *Language, Culture, and Society*, 2019: 234.

<sup>48</sup> Whorf, Benjamin Lee. "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language." *Sociolinguistics*, 1997: 209.

<sup>49</sup> Whorf, Benjamin Lee. "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language.": 207.

<sup>50</sup> Whorf, Benjamin Lee. "The Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language.": 209.

<sup>51</sup> Stanlaw, Adachi, and Salzmann. *Language, Culture, and Society*, 2019: 233.

However, reconsiderations of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis argue that "humans do not live in incomparable linguistic worlds" because it is possible to translate from one language to another, at the very least by means of a descriptive phrase.<sup>52</sup> Theoretical and philosophical counterarguments such as translatability, mutual linguistic comprehension, and language universals further discredit linguistic relativity and determinism. Translatability refers to the possibility of providing adequate translations by description alone when a language may not have a one-word equivalent for a word from another language.<sup>53</sup> For instance, American English contains many words for different car models that other languages do not possess, yet it is possible to describe each model in another language that lacks extensive terms for vehicles.<sup>54</sup> This ties into the possibility for mutual linguistic comprehension, which holds that even if translations cannot completely capture the original meaning, it is usually still possible to communicate the general idea.<sup>55</sup> The existence of language universals – the aspects all languages have in common, like sentences – “seems to suggest that languages, and the construction of linguistic categories, may not be as totally arbitrary as Sapir and Whorf imply” in their hypothesis.<sup>56</sup>

Berlin and Kay's article "Basic Color Terms" disproves the idea that each language creates an entirely different experience of the same world for its speakers. When conducting research to test whether speakers of different languages could somehow identify different colors, it was concluded that every language recognizes the existence of multiple colors, despite their lack of clear, distinct labels for each.<sup>57</sup> For instance, there are several specific words for colors in

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<sup>52</sup> Stanlaw, Adachi, and Salzmann. *Language, Culture, and Society*, 2019: (234-235).

<sup>53</sup> Stanlaw, Adachi, and Salzmann. *Language, Culture, and Society*, 2019: (235).

<sup>54</sup> Stanlaw, Adachi, and Salzmann. *Language, Culture, and Society*, 2019: (235).

<sup>55</sup> Stanlaw, Adachi, and Salzmann. *Language, Culture, and Society*, 2019: (245).

<sup>56</sup> Stanlaw, Adachi, and Salzmann. *Language, Culture, and Society*, 2019: (246).

<sup>57</sup> Berlin, Brent, and Paul Kay. *Basic Color Terms*, 1969.

English - olive, navy, crimson - that other languages lack. In fact, some languages order all colors under just two categories: white and black (in these languages, the colors are split according to how bright or dark they are).<sup>58</sup> Thus, although there are some instances where languages can affect a speaker's worldview, there are still universal continuums that disprove the existence of completely different realities depending on the language one speaks. These findings subsequently encouraged the development of new hypotheses regarding the relationship between language and thought.

Noam Chomsky's universalist proposal maintains that thought shapes language and culture, effectively relying on the philosophical concepts from both Wittgenstein and Saussure. Chomsky's ideas specifically tie into Wittgenstein's philosophies related to the influence of language on communal attitudes, and Saussure's emphasis on the importance of identifying meaning beyond what is literally said. Both philosophers comment on the relationship between language and thought, and their theories inform the observations and studies of linguistic anthropologists like Chomsky.

Chomsky considered language to be an innate, instinctual, and genetic human property and thus argued that instead of descriptively analyzing spoken sentences, it was necessary to "find the mental rules that generated these sentences."<sup>59</sup> Conversely, the idea of cultural determinism claims that culture directly influences "grammatical patterns and modes of thinking."<sup>60</sup> These different anthropological investigations of language showcase the mysteries that remain and the complexities of its relationship with our cultural organizations and thoughts,

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<sup>58</sup> Berlin, Brent, and Paul Kay. *Basic Color Terms*, 1969.

<sup>59</sup> Stanlaw, Adachi, and Salzmann. *Language, Culture, and Society*, 2019: (247).

<sup>60</sup> Stanlaw, Adachi, and Salzmann. *Language, Culture, and Society*, 2019: (247).

and it is through these theories that I chose to examine the philosophical intricacies of spoken language.

Following Chomsky's approach of analyzing the rules that govern sentence generation, I decided to focus on the systematic nature of language and how this very precise system generates different perspectives through the way in which the meaning is produced. Meaning in language is not achieved by *what* is said necessarily, but by *how* it is said. This holds true if one examines the rules of grammar in English and how they help organize thoughts into coherent sentences that are then communicated and understood by the listener.

The text within my piece draws from these assertions through its specified role: although it is meant to convey meaning to the viewer, there is an intentional disconnect between what is conveyed through text and what is meant to be perceived by the Spanish audio. The phrases "if given the chance," "to reach beyond my sight," "I listen to what you say," and "but I can't hear you" offer an idea of what is being said in Spanish, but it is hinted at both through the amount of English text compared to the amount of Spanish audio and through the straightforward summation of the content in English that the two languages convey a similar message in different ways, one through quicker and more upfront text, the other with lyrical and reflective audio. It is through this variation in delivery between the two languages that I address the experience of both bilingual speakers and speakers of either English or Spanish; anyone who encounters this work will have the opportunity to understand the distinct experiences offered by each language. As such, the work of linguistic anthropologists informs my own art practice through the field's investigation of language structure and its effect on perception.

Contemporary artist Louise Lawler also examines the influence of grammatical structure on meaning as propagated by Chomsky through the different ways in which she organizes



language to provoke different responses to a single visual. Lawler's piece *Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?* informs my own artistic practice due to her use of language as a way to alter the meaning of specific imagery. The title of the original piece, *Does Marilyn Monroe Make You Cry?*, is meant to draw the viewer's focus primarily to the actual painting of the movie star. However, the title *Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?* shifts the focus from the woman depicted in the piece to the artist that created the depiction. Each title provokes different interpretations and questions that concern the same image. Lawler's piece is comprised of two identical photographs of Andy Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe with an auction price next to the painting. Lawler purposefully places two photographs of the same artwork directly across from one another with different titles in order to challenge conventional notions of authorship and to explore the influence of language on art.<sup>61</sup>

This piece has informed my own art through its experimentation with language and its repetitive imagery. Lawler's use of her photographs' titles to activate her piece informed my own usage of language; the English phrases that appear in the videos within my artwork function as loose translations or ideas that stem from the Spanish audio. In this way, I draw from Lawler's approach to recontextualization and implement it in my own work by providing the viewer with information that allows them to retain an idea of the meaning behind the Spanish dialogue without entirely capturing the language's intended connotation. In terms of imagery, the artist's analogous photographs inspired my decision to replicate the images from the audiovisual components of my piece onto the paintings on the panels. Much like Lawler's intentional display of identical images, I strive to point out the differences in the depictions that I provide in my art,

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<sup>61</sup> Lawler, Louise. "Louise Lawler. Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?. 1988: MoMA." The Museum of Modern Art. Accessed September 16, 2019. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/46258>.

not as evidence for a claim I wish to propose, but instead as references for ideas that I want others to experience and consider.



Figure 15: Louise Lawler, *Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?* (1988)

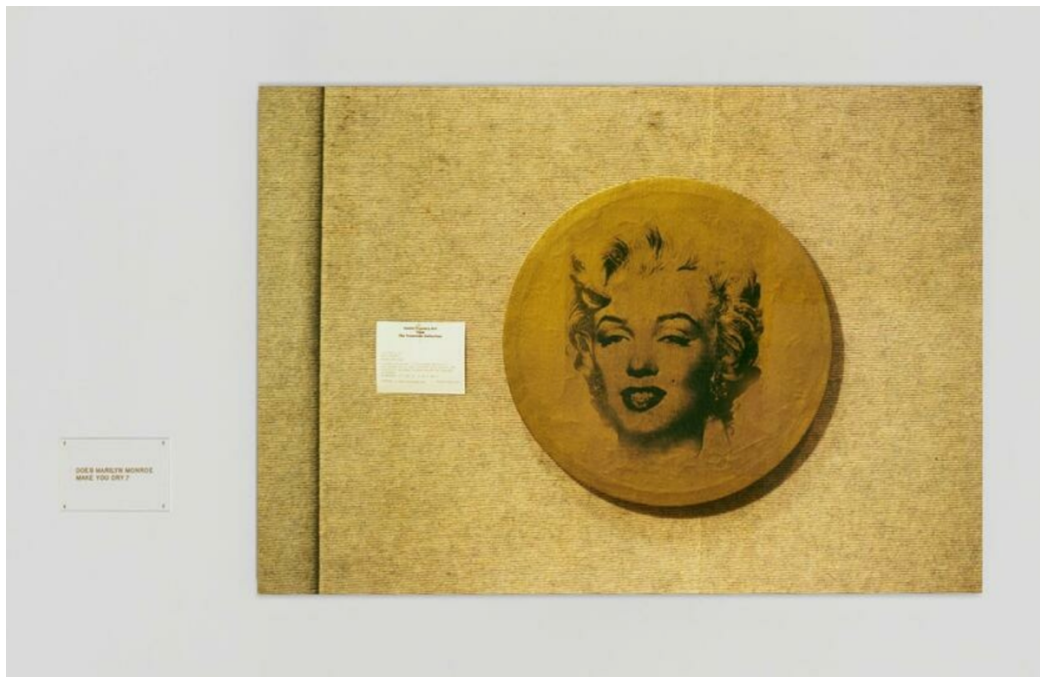


Figure 16: Louise Lawler, *Does Marilyn Monroe Make You Cry?* (1988)

Lawler’s overall practice - which focuses on “pointing things out, not necessarily answering anything” – also reflects the ideologies I wish to emulate in my art; similarly to Lawler, I intend not to offer concrete answers but instead to draw attention to the possibilities of each language’s influence on thought and action.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, my focus on the artistic medium’s effect on the perception of the object parallels Lawler’s concentration on the external factors that inevitably influence and contribute to art. Her work re-contextualizes images and provokes the viewer to consider how ownership and display impacts artwork.<sup>63</sup> It explores how the reception of art is shifted and framed by each person who looks at it.<sup>64</sup> Lawler’s approach is a useful resource in the context of my own work because I also wish to encourage my viewers to consider how language influences what they think. The extent to which the titles of Lawler’s works implicate different meanings exemplifies how I hope to showcase the influence of language on our engagement with the world.

### **Encounter (Conclusion)**

The surroundings that influence viewer interaction with my work inform its central concepts. Due to circumstances beyond my control, the work has yet to be installed in a physical museum space. In light of this, I have included installation mock-ups that demonstrate the intended positioning of the work within the Cornell Fine Arts Museum at Rollins College (*figure 16, figure 17*). The mock-ups show my works situated within two alcoves in the museum, hence providing visual references for the justifications of this installation; I include these anticipated

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<sup>62</sup> “Louise Lawler.” artnet. Accessed March 28, 2020. <http://www.artnet.com/artists/louise-lawler/>.

<sup>63</sup> Lawler, Louise. “Louise Lawler. Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?” The Museum of Modern Art.

<sup>64</sup> Lawler, Louise. “Louise Lawler. Does Andy Warhol Make You Cry?” The Museum of Modern Art.

views because it is important to visualize how these works exist in relation to the museum space and the ways in which this space enforces the conceptual framework.



**Figure 17: Installation Mock-Up (1)**



**Figure 18: Installation Mock-Up (2)**

Situating the artworks along a hallway at eye level allows the viewer to engage intimately with each piece. This emphasis on proximity encourages a detailed examination of the different formal elements, from the painted and filmed visuals to the reoccurrences of the poetic English text. This closeness also factors into the importance of wearing headphones; only by experiencing the auditory element of the works in addition to the visual components can viewers participate in a well-rounded experience of my art and its concepts. The presentation of my artwork within the museum space also utilizes the physical layout to reference the structure of written language. The rectangular shapes of the housings glide formally along the physical space of the hallway, which echoes a horizontal orientation of written text, and alludes to the act of reading. Since I know that most, if not all, of my viewers are familiar with a horizontal form of written language – as opposed to languages that are transcribed vertically – the drawn-out layout of the hallway guides their movement in a manner reminiscent of written English and Spanish.

These physical maneuvers imposed by the art's surroundings causes viewers to apply the motion they would engage in when reading text written in either language. Approaching the housings from one end to the other as opposed to initially encountering them straight on enforces the themes of fluidity and written language within my work.

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