

# Outside the (White) Box: 言靈

Ann Tong Li

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## Abstract

To begin this research is to begin an inquiry into the power of language, the power of critical thinking, and the power of individual agency. While examining influential precedents and contemporary examples of linguistic development within social and artistic realms, I seek to highlight the use of language in art and life as a pathway to call for critical thinking, reshape the established reality, and open up new possibilities. Through a series of case studies, I attempt to answer the following questions in my research: How did we end up in a panopticon made of language, and how did language become the weapon for social discipline? Is breaking free from the panopticon possible, and if not, what can we do? Weaving the analogy between the gallery and the bigger societal picture as a thread, I try to propose new venues for mind and social transformation through curation and art-making. In other words, how can we transform the self and reality, or promote new ways of being through the use of language in art?

## Acknowledgements

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Thank you to my amazing artists, Agnes Wong and Camille Kiku Belair. Thank you for being the stars of my curatorial debut, the facilitators of *kotodama*, and dear friends of mine. Thank you for all the stunning works, refreshing ideas, and captivating conversations. I'm so lucky to have you as my artists.

Thank *you*, to whoever is reading this thesis or has visited the exhibition (in-person or virtually!). Thank *you* for believing in the power of language. Thank *you* for being a part of our *kotodama*.

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## Part I

### Curatorial Essay

Showcasing two sets of different yet unanimous approaches to conceptual and language art by Agnes Wong and Camille Kiku Belair, the MFA thesis exhibition *Outside the (White) Box: 言靈* highlights the interplay between language and mind, idea and enactment, intentionality and improvisation as pathways to (artistic) liberation. Focusing on instruction-based works, this exhibition aims to shed light on the potential of language art in shaping, questioning, or challenging reality, warping it up or opening up new possibilities both ideologically and practically. Forms of language from text and beyond are investigated, as well as the abstract nature and performativity of language.

The exhibition title refers to the Japanese word 言靈(*kotodama*). Combining two words “言(koto)” meaning language or words, and “靈(tama)” meaning soul or spirit, *kotodama* is interpreted as “the spirit of language” or “the power of language”<sup>1</sup>, pointing to the mystical powers that words and names have in altering reality: Saying good words makes things go well, and vice versa. Though the word bears religious meanings to a large extent, the etymological side of it echoing Wittgenstein’s *language-game* is highlighted: The world is defined by the language we use, and the defined reality in turn influences language, creating an ever-evolving network.

Art, at the forefront of thinking, marks the place where *kotodama* happens the most. On one hand, incidents like pointing at a urinal and referring to it as a great work of art (yes, the

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting fact here is that “こと(koto)” can also be written as “事” meaning “thing” or “matter”, which coincides with the mutual-influence between language and reality.

infamous *Fountain* (1917)) are of no surprise anymore in contemporary art. One may argue that the gestural meaning of this act or the idea of “readymade” is far greater than the urinal itself. But in that social setting, the urinal was defined by Duchamp, a Dadaist artist, and the debate and impact of his work have endured and still affect contemporary art practices. All of this adds to the work's artistic quality, even though, paradoxically, Dadaism as a whole or the piece itself is fundamentally anti-art<sup>2</sup>. From Dadaism to Fluxus to the contemporary art scene, what can be seen is a thread of artistic approaches redirecting us outside the rules of the white cube(box), which forms the other half of the exhibition title. These artistic practices, through language’s power of definition, mark the affirmative forces within *kotodama*.

On the other hand, the interpretation of a work of art is increasingly defined (or even framed) by the language around art – didactics, labels, wall texts, essays – and more broadly, defined by the written (or unwritten) rules of the art world and the academia, by the white cube, by the flow of capital, by the confrontation of ideologies, struggles for recognition and essentially, by “the rules of art” (Bourdieu, *Rules* 47-166). Similarly in social practice, human society is constrained by the written (or unwritten) rules named the “norm”, and (seemingly) operates accordingly as a matter of course. These practices, rendering language as invisible frames, mark the oppositional force within *kotodama*.

How can we utilize the power of *kotodama* to explore the outsides of the (white) box? In this exhibition, the two artists, Wong and Belair, attempt to offer answers to that question with their self-evident works.

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<sup>2</sup> See Bourdieu, *Rules* 171, quoting Duchamp on the intention of the piece: “*That machine has no intention, except to get rid of the appearance of a work of art. It was a whim. I didn't call it a 'work of art'. I wanted to throw off the desire to create works of art...*”

The first iteration of *Outside the (White) Box: 言靈* takes place in Ignite Gallery (West Half), OCAD University, 100 McCaul from March 20 to 28, 2024. The previous year, I was hired as a student monitor at Ignite soon after being assigned the west half of the gallery for my thesis show. Based on my observations while working there, I began to feel very lucky because Ignite is a truly unique space that stands out among all the amazing gallery spaces on the OCAD campus. First, it is along the main artery of the second floor of the main building, where students pass by on a daily basis. This gives the exhibition a steady audience flow without forcing people to come on a schedule. Second, the fact that the gallery doesn't have a door, and has a hallway through it naturally gives it an open/transient/liminal quality that fits the idea of the exhibition. It is this quality that gave me and the two artists the chance to come up with site-specific iterations and fresh ideas for their work. We didn't want everything to happen and wrap up in the gallery, instead, we wanted the gallery to be a starting point for something even bigger. In our dialogues, we discussed the boundlessness of language, the endless possibilities that come with the execution, and the idea of distribution, which later served as a major inspiration for the form of Wong's installation, and Belair's sound walk programming.

Back in spring 2023, I first encountered Wong's thesis work *Things I cannot find a place for (Forever, is a feeling)* (2023) at OCAD's GradEx, where she filled a whole room with found objects/images/footage, printed matter, music and text. Everything was placed in a scattered fashion, yet everything talked in unison – a handheld footage of a store aisle accompanied by Chopin's Nocturne Op. 9 No. 2, an image of a mirror left on the street, intentionally fragmented (musical) scores, and more documentation of fragmentation and open-ended language.

Almost all of Wong's work surrounds the idea of *forever*. Coming from a complicated background: Hong Kong, The Netherlands, and now living in Toronto, Wong inevitably has fragmented memories and feelings of displacement, hence the "*desire to grasp the intangible. The fleeting. The transient,*" as she concludes poetically. As an intermittent international student for the past six years, I resonated with Wong's pieces on a personal level, in moments of uncertainty about whether to call myself "diasporic", of an idea or a feeling that couldn't be explained even with all the languages I know, or, of an in-between, ever-evolving but never certain state of who I am.

Being surrounded by Wong's work is being inside her mind. For Wong, language (whether visual, musical or textual) is the vehicle of memories, memories of displacement "*extracted from its original context*" and re-placed here, so it could become everyone's memory. This process echoes Wittgenstein's *language-game* with one more layer (Wong's layer) of reality from the beginning, creating what Wong describes as a "*new (dreamlike) reality*" on the audience's end. In each of the pieces, Wong tries to provide only the slightest details, and we automatically fill in the rest with our own experiences, feelings and memories. This way, as much as the fragments are intentionally not specific, they are rendered the most specific in every audience. The process subtly evokes Stan Denniston's *Reminders* (1980), where he took a photo of a place that triggered his memory of another place as the "cue", and then travelled back to the place in his memory to take another photo as the "response". In Wong's work, "cues" to herself become "cues" to each of us, montaged with other memories, hijacking those uniquely common moments

(“responses”) in us. Wong’s pieces therefore create an interactive process where she welcomes you to join this collective memory, to belong to this memory of unbelonging, of rootlessness.

One aspect that I cherish about Wong’s work is her ability to occupy *everywhere*, both physically and mentally. One of the works included this time, *Pain makes people change, but it also makes them stronger* (2023), is a found rock with black lettering on it, reading “Pain makes *people* change, but it also makes them stronger,” a universally-used motivational quote. This rock is carefully placed on one of the corners of the space with pastel-pink bubble wrap padded underneath, evoking the term “cornerstone” quite literally. Considering the relative placement of this piece to all the other pieces around the room, it’s almost a statement of pain being the cornerstone of this artistic creation, or this fragmented life. But note that *people* is printed in italic letters – we’re being reminded again that this is not *only* Wong’s story. Oftentimes, Wong’s work is reminiscent of the first-person point of view found in film and TV. Wong’s artist book *My Diary* (2023) offers the audience a notebook with a printed index which mimics the format of a diary. The chapters in the index roughly describe the themes investigated in her body of work: “*I Want Every Object to be Meaningful, to be Beautiful*”, “*On Transience*”, and “*On Being Lyrical and Distant*”... Upon reading this, one might think there is a lengthy textual content inside, but in reality, it’s all fragments of mirrors except for the index page. The mirrors here could be representing Wong herself, or her past *visual self* (Steyerl), but mostly, everyone who is reflected in these mirrors. These loosely text-based pieces evoke Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images* (1929), and John Baldessari’s *The Goya Series* (1997) that “used language to expose the inadequacy of language” (Jones). Here, what’s exposed is the absurdity within the dialogue

between text (or the absence of text) and the object – a motivational quote with a stone, an index with a mirror-filled diary – Wong lets the uncanniness speak for itself.

What happens when the incomprehensibility of a language speaks louder than the language itself, and what happens when the form and the contents speak otherwise? In the following pieces, Wong attempts to create a new language where music, text, and images intersect, where the musical and performative duality of the word “score” becomes blurry as it occupies the in-between. In *Q&A* (2022), this language is reduced to only punctuation marks left on a plain music sheet: Commas, periods, and question marks on repeat, in reprise; and similarly in *Untitled Composition (Arpeggio)* (2022), but this time with images and gradient colour blocks. Later in *Untitled Composition (Reprise)* (2023), this language evolves once again. Wong decorates a music sheet printed on a clear acrylic box with randomly placed black dots, numbers from 41 back to 1, and metallic pastel-coloured beads, the title of the score reading “The Only Thing”. The piece seems to be telling the story of life: In this score of ages we go through, a new bit of lived experience is generated from the first clef like a film reel. But based on the idea of reprise, the interpretation above becomes merely one possible reprise of this overly unspecified score. The interpretation of these works brings to mind the process of mosaicking: Arranging little pieces into bigger patterns, except each of our unique life experiences are the pieces missing in the works. They could be songs, conversations, or arrays of mysteries that rely on the audience to solve. Or, it could just be a feeling – *Everything is a feeling*, to quote the artist. The works also question why we tend to understand the language of them, to interpret them in the first place – even when they’re written on sheet music.

For this thesis exhibition, I commissioned Wong to create a new site-specific installation for her odes to Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit*. As another important element in Wong's work, boxes symbolize the transience and impermanence that the other pieces try to grasp. We use large boxes to carry, move, and categorize, and smaller boxes to put in (frame) the precious and important, for instance, rings. This time, Wong fills them with instructions, found images, and found objects instead. The form of the installation speaks to the Fluxboxes, where Fluxist artist George Maciunas "lovingly collected, preserved, and catalogued" useless or obsolete objects left out by the 1960s late capitalist society. (Harren 144) "Instead of bringing satisfaction, the object fuels desire for more, different, newer things," Harren describes the empowerment of these boxes which echoes Wong's (non)intention with her boxes (159). Similarly in this new assemblage of open boxes, Wong puts together objects, words, emotions, and memories, to create a site-specific and audience-specific new meaning and cues for contemplation and/or action. Some of the instructions here include:

#### WALKING PIECE

Go on a walk. Never return home.

#### VOICE PIECE

Say everything you didn't say.

#### CLOCK PIECE

Erase all of the numbers from a clock.

Do everything in your own time.

### SELFISH PIECE

Do everything for your own enjoyment.

### MIRROR PIECE

Look at your reflection from the puddle of  
your own tears.

### COLLECTING PIECE

Think about all that you have and don't have.

Hold them in your hand forever.

### FOREVER PIECE

Think about forever, *forever*.

Within these short instructions, recurring themes and keywords like *forever* and *everything* can be found. Although bearing an instructional quality in their form and tone, therefore motivating enactment, the instructions also sound like they're quietly recounting from memory. Once again, the conflict between form and content is highlighted, as well as ideas of materiality and the definition of preciousness. Each one of the items in the boxes is a wish, a whisper, a soft sigh, lighter than a feather, but heavier than *forever*.



The installation, later named *How many times until it becomes meaningful? How many times until it becomes meaningless? Iteration one* (2024) is accompanied by Wong's *Music Box (Image Recalibration Lullaby)* (2023), a large acetate sheet presented with a mix of found images, instructions, and their realizations. This sheet sets the tone of the installation, and conjures background music playing from a music box. While the checkered background indicating transparency<sup>3</sup> echoes *Untitled Composition (Reprise)*, it also gives a sense of *choreography* that is chronological and event-based, making this installation *a staged experience*, as Wong states.

Taking the openness of Ignite Gallery and the idea of “the gallery being a starting point of a bigger picture” into consideration, the instructions in the installation are also printed and scattered around the OCAD campus, making the analogy among contents spilling out of the boxes and thinking outside the box, and further, the enactment out of the white cube(box) of the gallery. Instructions and found images printed as temporary tattoo stickers are provided to promote the further distribution of language as the vehicle for ideas. “*You*, are welcome to bring the art, bring the language with you, think about it, do (or don't!) something about it, tell a friend, or just simply look at it, *forever*.”

While Wong's work uses language and its form to lure the audience into an alter-reality, Belair's work employs language to guide the audience to often-ignored facets of it. As a part of the graduating MFA Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design cohort at OCAD U, Belair has always created work with a unique, speechless charm. I particularly love their way of interpreting the interchangeability between forms of language – from sonic, textual to visual, activating what's called *sonic imagination*, an ambiguous position between sound culture and a space of

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<sup>3</sup> In Adobe Photoshop and other design software, transparency is often displayed as a checkerboard background.

contemplation outside it (Sterne 5). This concept echoes the idea of the *elsewhere* that is central to Fluxus, as well as this thesis exhibition that highlights language as a pathway to creative freedom. In the contemporary gallery space that is overwhelmed with visual-centered practices or a small portion of non-visual approach, Belair's work attempts to bridge the gap.

I have to admit that I'm no good with music, especially compared to a professionally trained composer and guitarist like Belair. But what's captivating about their work is the (seemingly) silent power of abstract (visual) language. When musical information is processed and converted to images, a mystery emerges, to which the processing method is the key. Belair's ongoing exploration of diptychs since 2023 precisely embodies this process. The creation of the diptychs can be summarized as using twelve-tone composition to generate grid-based patterns from melodies.<sup>4</sup> Each shaded square represents a musical pitch (all of which are devotedly hand-drawn by the artist), the top horizontal line of which is the original melody's sequence. In this exhibition, three of the diptychs: *Diptych I, II, and III* are displayed in pairs of greyscale and coloured renderings, corresponding with three melodies presented as a QR code accompanying the pieces.

Intentionally not playing the audio in the gallery, Belair designs the first impression of the diptychs to be fully visual-centered and curiosity-inducing. Although presented with nearly no text, the diptychs vaguely bear a naturally instructional quality in their visual language.

Reminiscent of the use of grids by artists Agnes Martin and Ellsworth Kelly, Belair's notational grid drawings, however, come with a twist in their musical nature instead of the exploration of

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<sup>4</sup> The twelve-tone technique is a method of musical composition first devised by Austrian composer Josef Matthias Hauer.

serenity or form. This divides the audience's experience into "before the music" and "after the music", which creates a watershed moment where the way of looking(listening) cannot be reversed. Alternatively, one may choose not to listen to the sound samples at all and keep the viewing of the diptychs as a purely visual experience, or some may choose to listen to the sound samples first and "unlock" the grids with "keys" in their hands.

British composer H. C. Banister regards music as a language that is "not of intercommunication, not of narration, nor of description, but of *expression*." (107) In this way, the diptychs pose a challenge to the definition of language – similar to using written characters to embody verbal speech, this language that Belair creates uses the grid (or every single one of the squares) as characters to embody melodies, which also make sounds and *express* ideas. The language, while mystical in the first encounter, is ensured of intelligibility by the underlying melody and the interpretation by the audience. One may argue that this language is too vague to be a proper language understood by everyone, but to this doubt, Banister answers by quoting Mendelssohn on the intelligibility of music: "[T]hese [words], too, seem to me so ambiguous, so vague, so unintelligible when compared with genuine music ... [music], is not thought too indefinite to be put in words, but on the contrary, too definite." (4) Indeed, even the definition of "intelligibility" is defined by the language(s) we use, not to mention the understanding of language itself; and the fact that musical languages like Solresol and Moss<sup>5</sup> are created marks the non-artistic exploration of music's linguistic quality in practice. Belair's musical language, which emphasizes *expression* and individual interpretation, thus becomes a language that stands in juxtaposition to the language(s) we use every day.

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<sup>5</sup> Solresol is a constructed language devised by François Sudre; Moss is a musical language designed by composer Jackson Moore.

Interestingly, although having countless appeared in Fluxus event scores, the idea of “scores” was originally used in musical performances. In Belair’s work, the heritage of Fluxus’ inextricable connection with music is seen, especially regarding the question of what the nature of music is, and how text(language) can be interchanged with it. Belair creates text scores that guide audiences into the often-ignored sonic world, embodying the idea of *sonic imagination* once a highly detailed, formal instructional language. These scores explore the practice of listening(hearing) and the mutual impact between listening(hearing) and imagination.

Embracing Harren’s idea of “temporal readymades” reframing everyday experiences and gestures as art (9), which is central to Fluxist George Brecht’s work such as *Motor Vehicle Sundown (Event)* (1960) that conducts a concert/performance by motor vehicles at a sunset, Belair highlights the sounds in our visual-dominant world as what I would call “sonic readymades.” This is explored in Belair’s *Cloud Piece (cloud song)* (2023), where the audience is instructed to imagine what the clouds are hearing. As the only piece with an alternative title in Belair’s text scores, *Cloud Piece (cloud song)* indicates a sense of perspective switching. Unlike the other scores that ask the audience to act in certain ways or interact with certain objects, this piece asks the audience to imagine *being* the object, and start *feeling* in its position.

The piece starts by gradually guiding the audience’s imagination from palpable vision (“where treetops and/or buildings meet the sky”), to the existence a little bit higher (“the open air even further above them”), and then guiding them into the *sonic imagination, as* clouds. The second half of the piece asks the audience to imagine what the clouds are hearing (or heard), and then

redirects them to pay attention to reality (“sounds at ground level”). Eventually, the piece ends with a question, asking the audience’s preference between cloud-level sounds and ground-level sounds. Until here, everyone who has participated in this half-realistic half-imaginary experience should have “heard” the song of cloud-level sounds, the *cloud song*. Note that the first line of the instructions already asks the audience to carry the piece in mind whenever they are outside – other than the idea of repetition (reprise), this also equips the audience with a new way of sensing, feeling and thinking that disorients (reorients) attention to sounds of the palpable and impalpable surroundings. It is the kind of imagination that especially those who live in a concrete jungle (like Toronto) need.

Although usually interested in non-prescriptive scores, in this series, Belair gives very specific instructions, creating a tension between the clarity of the text and the playfulness of the enactment. In *Space Piece* (2023) and *White Noise Piece* (2023), Belair turns the *sonic imagination* into a guided meditative process: *Space Piece* focuses on the sounds around (and through) the body, and *White Noise Piece* draws attention to the sounds from brushing fingers together. Though having taken inspiration from Fluxus, they differ from the scores by some Fluxists like Yoko Ono that conduct imagination with vague language, instead letting the imagination happen in specificity as the instructions are being enacted. Suppose we put the three pieces above side by side, *Cloud Piece*(*cloud song*) starts with an expectation for spontaneous reprises (“whenever you are outside, remember these instructions and think about them again”). In that case, *Space Piece* ends with a possibility of not being followed in order (“follow these instructions in the order listed, if you like”). *White Noise Piece* specifically indicates how long the piece goes on and at what point the piece ends (“Listen to the space around you for as long as

you like. When you break focus, the piece is over”). In this sense, the scores offer a *sonic mindset* for *sonic imagination* to be carried out spontaneously, improvisationally, but also immersively.

For the programming designed for the exhibition, Belair’s *Sound Walk Piece* (2024) was commissioned. As an extension of Belair’s sonic text scores, *Sound Walk Piece* is a zine-score with one sonic instruction on each page, including some blanks to be filled out by the audience. The enactment of this piece results in a guided sound walk that could be performed in any environment for any duration. Two things are notable in this zine-score: Each one of the instructions begins with “As you move through the world,” including the ones with the blank space; and every page(instruction) of the zine-score has the title *Sound Walk Piece* printed, and has no numbers that appear in the other text scores. These two features ensure that no particular order is assigned to the walk that highlights the sonic relationship between *you* and the world. Based on the sonic influence that the world has on *you*, or *you* have on the world, the two versions of *Sound Walk Piece* maximize audience autonomy without losing the theme of *sonic imagination*. Facilitated by Belair and me, the programming (reprise) of *Sound Walk Piece* happens on March 27, 2024, from 2:30 to 3:00 pm. We start within and from the gallery, but aim to carry this *sonic mindset* everywhere *you* go.

Belair’s scores overall resonate with John Cage’s work where he introduces silence into music. Cage’s controversial *4’33”* (1952), for instance, records performers *not* playing their instruments in absolute silence. Silence is an absence – the silence in Cage’s work, as Froneman states, means not the absence of sounds, but the absence of organized or institutionalized sounds

(Froneman 304); while in Belair's scores, the "silence" is not only the absence of sounds in the presentation of them (especially given the sonic nature of the pieces), but also the absence of traditionally defined forms of music. Just like the "having nothing to say" allowing the environment the opportunity to speak in Cage's work (Shultis 306), Belair's sonic scores seem to be *silently* telling us this: *There isn't an absolutely silent place. Open your ears.*

What first drew me to showing Wong and Belair together is a contrast between extreme vagueness and extreme clarity in their work, but lying under this facade is what's central to both Wong and Belair's work – the generation of site- and audience-specific new meanings. Having both drawn inspirations from Fluxus and Fluxists Yoko Ono, George Brecht, John Cage and the Fluxus heritage, the tension between the original authors' (non)intentionality and the audience's improvisational interpretation is presented in their work with the latter far more emphasized. There's also a shared musical quality to both Wong and Belair's work – Not to emphasize that Wong plays the piano and saxophone, while Belair is a classical guitarist and a composer, but I do see an inclination towards music in their works almost intuitively. Yet no music is playing intentionally in this exhibition as each audience has their music of mind.

So welcome. To an exhibition where anything could go wrong but that's exactly what's right, (Or wait, is there actually a right or wrong?) To an exhibition that speaks for itself but also lets *you* speak for it, that welcomes *your* definition, interpretation, imagination, and realization. To an exhibition that promotes the de-centring of the (overly prescriptive/traditionally expected/restrictively framed) gallery experience, and the centring of the diminished, the forgotten, the transient, the unseen/unheard of, the unsaid, the elsewhere, the outside..., the

*mind!* To an exhibition that *speaks* to the power of language, or doesn't. We welcome *you* to our *kotodama*.



## Part II

### Support Paper

#### Intro: Seeing from the Panopticon

Some furniture-like objects stand still on the floor, one of which roughly looks like an armchair. On the wall are diagrams with text instructions telling you how to interact with them, including sitting on the “armchair”. Now, would you sit on it?

That’s what I (almost) did to Gail Hastings’ *to make a work of timeless art* (1996), before a security guard dashed to me, yelling “Miss, please don’t touch the artwork.” Suddenly dragged back into reality, I realized I was in a gallery at the Museum of Contemporary Art(MCA) in Sydney, Australia, where, like most galleries, not touching art is part of the “gallery consensus” that I already knew of. But what happened, impactful enough that I ignored the consensus for a while at that moment?

To answer that, I believe I was lured into a micro-world created by the artwork where the enactment of the instructions was the only way toward the full experience. If I chose to follow those instructions, to enact the language in which they are written without any interruption, I would be bound to violate common sense, and vice versa. While this may not have been the original intent of the work, an unattained yet strong power is sensed, hiding within the language used in Hastings’ installation.

Nodding to Tony Bennett's theory of *the exhibitionary complex*, the museum, or in this case the gallery, exists in a system that is juxtaposed to the *carceral archipelago* that Foucault theorized, where "winning hearts and minds as well as the disciplining and training of bodies" happens. (Bennett 59-60) While creating a spectacle for the viewers to dwell in, the gallery also regulates the viewers with the presumed puritanism of knowledge and the behavioural restriction from the surveillance system. It is when the viewers automatically adhere to the consensus that the panoptic power of the institution – self-regulation that starts from within, really comes into play. This creates a panopticon made of language and other means of discipline, where the audience itself is the only guard in the central tower. Indeed, from then on, I never touched any artwork or exhibit in galleries and museums, just like I did before, only this time with clear consciousness. The episode in MCA reinforced the *absolute correctness* of "don't touch the art" to a whole other level. Think of the gallery as a miniature of the society that we live in – what happened in MCA happens to each one of us all the time with the panoptic power implemented in our heads. In the version of *language-game* in our current society, the power instilled in us in variations of rules (regulations, values, norms, or even laws) not only shapes who we are and what we "want" to be through its omnipresence and seemingly undoubted correctness, but also endows us a sense (sometimes an illusion) of control over other people as well as other people over ourselves.

In Bourdieu's theory, *the habitus* is a concept that includes the internalized norms, values, tastes, attitudes, and practices of a particular social group or class (*Practice* 52-65). In the context of the gallery experience, where the adherence to unspoken rules such as not touching the artwork can be seen as a part of *the habitus* that comes from a complex interplay of cultural norms, power dynamics, and disciplinary mechanisms. While language can be the medium for the shaping of

*the habitus*, Hastings' work, with the use of language, serves as a reminder of the counteractive power of language to disrupt *the habitus*, which can happen in the gallery, but also in social practices.

### **On Being “Good”: A Panopticon Made of Language**

One way a panoptic society makes us believe in all its rhetoric is through the indoctrination and reinforcement of language. For example, the Chinese word “乖”, which translates to being “good”, is a concept ingrained in most Chinese people’s minds, especially those of small children. If we break down the definition of the word “good”, it means to be obedient (especially to adults or superiors), to follow instructions without questioning them, in other words, to “know what's going on”. However, the definition of the word has nothing to do with the qualities of the person being defined, but rather is directly defined by other people. The final interpretation of what needs to be obeyed is firmly gripped in the hands of everyone but the self, so that "goodness", disguised as a compliment to the self, is in fact completely altruistic. The notion of self-monitoring is also included in this one short word, since the final realization of "goodness" to each individual depends on how the person being praised for goodness interprets and enacts the word. This way, anything can be an embodiment of goodness, and the definition of goodness gets to be gradually expanded through machines of discipline(e.g. family, school, workplace).

For most of my life, being “good” is a recurring theme. With the awakening of my gender awareness as a woman, “the good kid” quickly transformed into “the good girl(乖乖女)”, creating a gendered panopticon on top of the original one. After repeatedly accepting this

definition as a compliment, I voluntarily tried to live up to an illusory standard that never makes me feel “I’m enough”. It wasn’t until my realization did I find out that being “good” meant I was easily manipulated, that I didn’t know how to fight back, and that I fit in all the columns and grids that a patriarchal society wants me to be: a worry-free daughter, and a docile soon-to-be wife.

Filled with “good” citizens, society can become “good” too, turning into the equivalent of “a society watching over itself” that Bennett described (65). In early 2022, COVID-19 came into full swing in Shanghai, and with that came regulations at all levels that arose to control and alleviate the pandemic. During that time, everything from the Centre for Disease Control(CDC) strategy to everyone's code of conduct was dictated and reinforced, along with harder-than-ever censorship of any disapproving voices. Shanghai was transformed into a dystopian world dominated by rules horror<sup>6</sup>. Chinese society is the “good” society, and I saw the epitome of it in Shanghai in 2020, in the wake of which we still dream of not wearing a mask in public.

In Mandarin Chinese, “testing positive” is referred to as “阳(yáng)”, and some started to refer to those who tested positive as “羊(yáng)” which means “sheep”. First people used “羊” (or the sheep emoji) in their daily messages and social media posts, and it festered to the point where even official media directly used “sheep” to refer to people who had the virus. The classifier of the individuals also changed from “个/位” which is used to count humans to “只/头” which is only used to count animals like sheep. At the height of the pandemic quarantine, anyone who tested positive would be forcibly transferred to mobile cabin hospitals, so in the process of “sheep-hunting”, absurd words like “another sheep was dragged away from the neighbourhood

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<sup>6</sup> Rules horror is an emerging genre of horror which contains sets of rules to follow.

today” were said daily with sheer indifference. People referred to staff and medical personnel in protective clothing as “大白(Baymax)”, the inflatable healthcare robot in the superhero film *Big Hero 6* (2014), which not only cutified violence that lies beneath anonymity and collectivity, but also diminished the real struggle that the patients went through. Early 2022 in China was a time that has become an eternal scar in the hearts of a generation in language and in reality. It exists as a strong reminder that language could be harnessed to facilitate the perpetration of violence.

These cases demonstrate the dual nature of language – a tool that constructs meaning and identity, yet, at the same time, holds the potential to facilitate harm and reinforce oppressive structures, the scariest scenario of which is when those harmful structures are built into our identities. Through these diverse scenarios, the profound and far-reaching impact of language becomes evident, both as a means of expression and as a force that shapes our understanding of self and society.

Unquestionably, being inside the walls of the panopticon gives us a sense of security and stability. However, out of years of results-oriented education, rigid familial and educational experience, and into a meritocratic society, I find myself at a loss, of drive and purpose, and also of the discipline that haunted and shaped me. For example, I constantly get frustrated in seminar courses because I lived my whole life listening to lectures without any reaction, so I often wish it was the same here. I don’t know what’s outside my path of dependence, beyond the walls of the panopticon, so I stand still, repeating my “good” self while watching possibilities pass me by like a programmed robot. This tendency of seeking safety in discipline almost traps me in lukewarm

laziness that pushes me away from reality, that's why breaking free from it is particularly important.

### **The Power of Language: in Social Practice**

从来如此, 便对吗?

(Is it right because it has always been like that?)

– 鲁迅 (Lu Xun), 狂人日记 (*Diary of a Madman*)

The contradiction of the two sets of rules in MCA demonstrates to me the possibility of rethinking the normative and challenging the discipline, and my reflection on the experience as a Chinese woman urges me to think of change. The two raised the following questions to me: Is it possible to recreate the same micro-world in art and other practices that lured me in and gave me the impulse to rethink? And is it possible to do it again and again so that the panopticon could be dismantled from the inside?

The world is defined by the language we use, and vice versa. Theorizing this relationship as *the language-game*, Wittgenstein explores the nature of language in his *Philosophical Investigations* arguing that meaning is intertwined with the use of language in specific social practices, in other words, a result of the execution of the rule of the game (Wittgenstein 5). Just like a pair of mirrors facing each other, language is not solely a symbol for description, but rather a reflection of human activities; and human activities also, in turn, embody the use of language. Language

(the rule of the game) exists as a part of the game with reality (the gameplay), which forms the ever-evolving entirety of the language-game.

One artwork that evokes a similar idea is Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1929), with a carefully-drawn pipe and a statement written beneath it reading: "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe)." In his book *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, Harry Torczyner quoted the famous surrealist painter:

The famous pipe. How people reproached me for it! And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it's just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture "This is a pipe", I'd have been lying! (71)

The absurdity we get from the artwork comes from a conflict of perceptions from the image and the text (language), and a tendency to believe the text that accompanies an image. Apparently the image, or the symbol of a pipe is not the pipe itself, but in this sense, no image in a book with a text of explanation could be the actual thing that it points to, yet this logic largely informs how we learn to recognize the reality of the world. While language determines our perception of the world which may not be accurate, the context in which the language exists also in turn influences the effectiveness of language. If we bring this artwork to someone who has never seen a pipe, or someone who doesn't understand French, the dilemma posed by the work is then smoothly discredited, which further proves the contextual nature of language.

Thus, the transformative power of language and how this power could be used reversely against itself is demonstrated. Language, and only language can mirror and shape reality at such a deep level, for both our minds and reality are shaped by it, and it is also the bridge between the two. This gives a language a special in-between position where it can operate both inwards and outwards. This point echoes what linguist Noam Chomsky refers to as the *Basic Property* of language: “Each language provides an unbounded array of hierarchically structured expressions that receive interpretations at two interfaces, sensorimotor for externalization and conceptual-intentional for mental processes.” (4) Here I want to add that language is a performative tool that can be thought of, written, spoken, and enacted. This creates four intertwined yet different systems that can be played with.

In Silvia Federici’s book *Witches, Witch-Hunting, and Women*, she talks about the emblematic shift in the meaning of the once-neutral word “gossip”. Originally meaning close female friendship, “gossip” now carries the derogatory connotation of “informal talk, often damaging to those that are its object” mostly among women, reinforcing stereotypes about women's alleged preoccupation with trivial matters (35-43). Meanwhile, in the Chinese language, words that compliment women like “乖乖女(good girl)” are always altruistic; swear words like “傻逼(stupid c\*\*t)” are mostly associated with femininity; while neutral words like “程序员(programmer)” gain negative, sometimes sexual meanings once they are reinvented of a female version “程序媛(female programmer)”. Some language also speaks to how women are regarded as the second sex in our society. For example, we commonly use words like “兄弟姐妹(brothers and sisters)”, “父母(parents: father and mother)”, and “夫妻(couple: husband and wife)” in daily life without questioning their order; and most cultures change the wife’s last name to the



husband's in marriage, while naming the children with the husband's last name, creating a situation where only male last names get remained in history.

Encouragingly on 小红书(RED), a Chinese social media platform, a proliferating opposite dynamic in the language-game is being played. Feminist communities urge that we change the female-indicating radicals in derogatory words, often through changing the “女(female)” radical to the “人(human/male)” radical in characters like “奸(evil/to rape)”; through refusing to use derogatory words like “嫉妒(to envy)” gender-neutral versions of them like “忮忌”; through reinventing the swear words like “他妈的(motherf\*\*cking)” to “他爹的(fatherf\*\*cking)”; or even simply through switching orders of words in phrases like “父母(father and mother)” to “母父(mother and father)”. Similarly in English, the words “queer”, “bitch”, “slut”, “dyke”, “prude”, “crip”, “mad” and so on are being semantically reclaimed, empowering both personal and sociopolitical liberation. Thanks to its rapid and wide-spreading nature, social media has become the main battlefield of this language-based social practice. These practices, although not necessarily the perfect way out of this patriarchal, heteronormative, and intersectional panopticon, did change the words and behaviour of some people, and have started meaningful discussions and actions towards fostering inclusivity and challenging oppressive (linguistic) norms.

Another successful manifestation of the power of language is the promotion of pronouns. As gender studies scholar Judith Butler states in their essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, gender is a public action and performative act that is compelled by social sanction and taboo. Different from sex, gender is a construction that people come to believe rather than

being born with. (520) The use of alternative pronouns becomes a form of resistance in a society with deeply ingrained gender norms, as it inherently challenges one of the biggest sources of taboo-making, language, and goes beyond the linguistic dimension. By refusing to conform to the traditional gender binary system, one takes back the agency that was once deprived by saying “I don’t play your game.” The act of voluntarily adopting and enacting another set of pronouns reclaims the initiative of the process of gender make-believe and performance, creating new gender(s), or subverting the concept of gender altogether. This linguistic revolution also calls those who strongly adhere to gender binary and norms, or have never thought about gender being a construct into action. It gives them a chance to confront their beliefs face-to-face, thus becoming a catalyst for broader societal introspection.

### **The Power of Language: Fluxus and its Echoes**

The form that Fluxus was trying to promote was first of all a form of openness: openness, you might say, practically to the point of dissolution.

– Joseph Beuys

Artistically, the power of language is practiced by the art and artists in Fluxus, and those who continue to follow the liberating and revolutionary Fluxus spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Among the various approaches utilizing language in Fluxus is the predominance of a thread of instructions. Instruction-based work embodying the Fluxus spirit was inherited, adapted, and has

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<sup>7</sup> I am aware that my focus is on Fluxus in this section and there are numerous other curatorial precedents and scholarly research that have not been fully explored in this thesis. For a list of these other sources, please see Appendix C: Additional Resources.

since developed widely. Within Fluxus, Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit* (1964) may be the most widely-known collection of instructional works. In the title *Grapefruit*, Ono analogizes herself, a Japanese diasporic artist working in the US, to grapefruit, a hybrid of orange and lemon. Self-published and distributed on the streets of New York City, *Grapefruit* defies institutional convention through poetic event scores, most of which are either too vague for us to grasp their meaning, or make absolutely no sense. The audience stumbles upon this fresh language, perplexed by its irrationality, its vagueness, and the immense possibilities of realizations (or lack thereof). Then it dawns on them, as Natilee Harren states in *Fluxus Forms*: "This manner of realizing a work beyond the bounds of reason, convention, or the original author's intention was central to the Fluxus project". (7) This way, the audience finds beauty in those seemingly absurd instructions as they enact them in their brain (or carry them out when possible), as they guide people to see what is not there, what is once ignored, what is never thought of/about. George Maciunas, Fluxus artist and founding member, describes this process with enthusiasm in his *Fluxus Manifesto* (1963): "Promote living art, anti-art, promote NON ART REALITY to be fully grasped by all peoples," so with possible outcomes varying from person to person, we, with Yoko Ono, complete the pieces together. Upon every person's encounter with the instructions, a new context-specific reality is created, where the original author's intention may not be the centre of the work at all.

The (uni)form of the instructions in *Grapefruit* roughly evokes Haiku(俳句), a Japanese traditional form of short poetry, where the idea of negative space is encouraged. As seen in one of the best-known Haikus, Matsuo Bashō's "古池や(Old Pond)":

古池や (old pond)

蛙飛び込む (frog leaps in)

水の音 (water's sound)

With just 11 words of pure description, a place, an action, and a sound, the readers automatically visualize unmentioned scenes and sights. As a non-native speaker of Japanese, I couldn't have fathomed the haiku tradition of frogs as the topos (imagery) for spring. Still, I could infer the weather, environment, and atmosphere of the event from my life experience, and then top those with my own state of mind at those moments, thus creating a leisurely and peaceful picture of a spring day together with the poet.

As Min Sook Lee notes<sup>8</sup>, The absence [of things] speaks of something else. This echoes the Fluxus spirit that manifests through decentering the mainstream, focusing on the margins, the unseen, the unsaid, the “elsewhere” – the empty space outside the frames of the designated norms. The blank (absence) in Ono's instructions is huge enough to be filled in by everybody with their own interpretations, which mirrors the thought process of reading a haiku. Take *Collecting Piece II* (1963) from the book as an example:

## COLLECTING PIECE II

Break a contemporary museum into pieces  
with the means you have chosen. Collect  
the pieces and put them together again

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<sup>8</sup> The instructor of one of the most impactful courses I had at OCAD, “Autoethnography & Voice”.

with glue.

1963 autumn

Without a doubt, the only legitimate way of realizing *Collecting Piece II* is through imagination. However, it prompts us with the unsaid questions: What and where is this “museum” Ono is referring to? Why do we need to break it, and glue it back again? With what means chosen and why? Ultimately, is the museum still the same museum then? The key to these questions may lie in Maciunas’s *Fluxus Manifesto* (1963): “Purge the world of bourgeois sickness, ‘intellectual’, professional & commercialized culture, ... PURGE THE WORLD OF ‘EUROPANISM’!” To break the “museum” could mean to rid it of institutional structures, the culture of “sickness” that Fluxus was working against in the 1960s. While the “into pieces” part may indicate a sense of disruption and dispersion of the power structure, the act of gluing the “museum” back together, on the other hand, may hint at the Fluxus spirit that bonds together those once dismissed by history. Ultimately, the “museum” would never be the same again, as the institution would be utterly transformed. Alternatively, one may actually tear down a museum and put it back together with glue; define a paper model as the museum, shred it into tiny bits, and put them in a bowl of glue; or even see this event score as the one true verbal realization of the score itself. Through the unlimited trials of (un)realization, *Collecting Piece II* evokes an institutional critique that is almost nonchalant, but strong enough as you make of it.

Among the artists who follow along the Fluxus spirit and respond to Ono, Toronto-based artist Lan "Florence" Yee situates this spirit within a queer and racialized/diasporic discourse. Yee’s

body of work *Tangerine, After Grapefruit* (2020-2021) comes with a direct reference to *Grapefruit*. Embroidered on large five-by-five linens, Yee's instructional texts seem more achievable compared to Ono's, but inherently different due to a distinctive cultural background. This difference is seen in the title, and also in *Exchange Piece* (2022), where the audience is prompted with a series of actions surrounding a tangerine:

#### EXCHANGE PIECE

Peel a tangerine.

Eat the fruit while thinking of

a loved one.

Send them the leftover peels.

Summer 2020

As a part of a former collaboration project *Please Help Yourself* (2021), Yee and artist Arezu Salamzadeh sent clay to people around them who couldn't be visited during the pandemic, had them form the clay and return it to the artists, who transformed the retired clay into the ceramic tangerine peels that accompany every iteration of this body of work. The tangerine, another fruit in the citrus family along with grapefruit, exists on people's tables as an offering to guests in Yee's Cantonese culture. Tangerines represent a non-verbal sense of gathering and homecoming in Asian households. To Yee who was born and raised in Canada, this sense of homecoming becomes even more non-verbal that it's distant and unachievable (Kelly). The tangerine in the

instruction points to an elsewhere that cannot be reached in a physical sense, but also in a mental and emotional sense. Melancholy resides in these simple actions as well as warmth and nostalgia, as we share a virtual tangerine – when the sour-sweet juice hits your tongue, who would you think of? And when queerness and identity are the centre of the instruction, such as in *Name Piece II* (2022):

## NAME PIECE II

Change your name based on:

- how many dinners you've had together
- whether or not you like their clothes
- how hard they cry around you
- whether or not they misgender you

Fall 2021

The “name” here isn’t just what we call ourselves. It’s also what people refer to (and think of) us as, in other words, who people think we are and who we really are. As an aspect of Kotodama, naming plays an important role in defining one’s identity, and within queerness, this often heavily relies on the definition from the heteronormative, “non-queer” world. The audience is asked to change their own and other people’s perception of themselves, to change their identity,

based on the time with, opinions from, and trust from the other party of this relationship, whether it being friendship, kinship, or intimate relationship. Ending at misgendering or not, this piece softly declares that for a queer person, even if the counterpart fulfills the normative requirement, without the queer identity being accepted, they would never be fully themselves in this relationship.

More instruction-based works that carry the Fluxus spirit in *Tangerine*, *After Grapefruit* include *Resistance Piece* (2021) which gently asks the audience to “*Rest, for longer than permitted.*” making rest a radical form of resistance; as well as *Falling Piece* (2022) that asks viewers to “*Fall out of line. Fall out of love. Fall out of place.*” which suggests (the unsettlement of) life out of normative designations. Through these intentionally blurry yet playful instructions, Yee’s work demonstrates an action of heartfelt counter-archiving that is neither objective, holistic or canonical.

In Ono's famous performance *Cut Piece* (1964), which is also derived from a set of instructions, Ono distributes her autonomy by giving the audience the right to potentially expose her body. In the original instruction, the audience is asked to come on the stage, one at a time, to cut off a piece of her best suit of clothing from her, using a pair of scissors placed in front of her.

Although bearing conflicting interpretations (even denied by the artist herself in earlier times), this work is (later framed) as a feminist work against the patriarchal and Orientalizing gaze on the racialized female body (Concannon 83). Sitting still in *Seiza*<sup>9</sup>, Ono seems to have given up fighting, but she in fact acts as the conductor of the audience by creating her own rules and having people follow them. The implication of the elsewhere in *Cut Piece* is subtle but strong –

In a conversation between Ono and Christophe Cherix, the curator of *Yoko Ono: One Woman*

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<sup>9</sup>正座, a Japanese polite sitting position.



*Show: 1960-1971*, Ono mentioned the conflict between the cutting being a line and our body being a curve. “And that’s what they do in life,” she concludes, which brings to mind the rigid frames and grids that society imposes on us, and the will in Ono to let us reflect on the fact collectively. In the 1971 version of *Grapefruit*, Ono adds a statement noting that the performer “does not have to be a woman,” which contradicts the “him” that Ono used to refer to the performer in the *Cut Piece* event score. This change, and essentially every change in the development of *Cut Piece* endows it with a fluid nature, which further adds layers of meanings regarding identity, sexuality, and intersectionality without controlling the interpretation. Ono’s work demonstrates how language can be used as a counterproductive weapon to its original purpose.

Roughly 6 decades later, Chinese-born artist Xie Rong stands on a similar stage. In this reenactment of Ono’s *Cut Piece*, Xie starts by saying “My body is the scar of my mind,” which pays tribute to Ono’s 1971 song *O’Wind (Body is the Scar of Your Mind)*, and proceeds to have her clothing cut out by the audience till her body is fully exposed just like Ono. In the 2-channel video displayed in The Image Centre in Toronto, an overview of the performance, as well as a close-up of the artist are shown side by side. Surprisingly, different from Ono’s performances, some people tried to cover Xie up during the performance. While a sudden change in human nature is highly unlikely, the change of behaviour may come from the audience knowing that they are being recorded/supervised, especially considering that some of their faces appeared in the video in such a viral time. Alternatively, the change may come from modern social rules deeply embedded in people’s minds (because of law enforcement), a sense of protection, a second-hand embarrassment/modesty, or a feminist practice. Either way (or all of them), Xie

Rong's *Cut Piece* (2023) offers a brand-new chance for us to (re)view *Cut Piece* in a contemporary discourse.

Fluxus evokes an intentionally given-up intentionality, which exists at the centre of all Fluxus work and those who continue to hold its heritage. I would like to highlight Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings as an epitome of this spirit. Although not essentially a member of Fluxus, in an interview with Saul Ostrow, LeWitt admits that his thinking is a reaction to Fluxus (24). LeWitt's instruction-based wall drawings are essentially the results of his instructions executed by others (construction workers, staff) during the installation, so every outcome of the same instruction can vary significantly with each iteration. Ultimately, LeWitt's rule-based works almost become anti-rule for they are meant to be improvised from. LeWitt's work challenges the vagueness of the idea and execution of rules: At what point do the rules become internal and self-enacted in the rule followers? Are they considered still following the rules or creating on their own terms? And finally, does the artist still have control over the interpreted interpretations? These questions evoke the idea of the original author's intention as "seeds," which are, as interpreted by Concannon, activated "individually and collectively in the minds and actions of those who receive them." (83) In the case of LeWitt, this is reflected in the dynamic and varied interpretations of his instruction-based wall drawings; and in the case of Ono and many other Fluxists' works, this is demonstrated with the reenactments and re-performances of them and those who respond to them.

On a personal note, Fluxus reminded me why I wanted to practice art in the first place – It's play, and it's fun! Fluxist works evoke child's play and word-play, which might be deemed as

“unserious” in the art world. However, that is exactly why Fluxus is for those who are tired of grand narratives and statements, or the unspoken rule that “everyday events and improvised thoughts don't deserve to compete with the dominant narrative, thus they don't deserve to be art.”

As Harren quotes historian Roger Shattuck's accidental statement<sup>10</sup> on the basis of Fluxus:

“We're concerned with an enormous *seepage* of art into life.” (15) In this interplay between language and mind, idea and enactment, (non)intention and improvisation, Fluxus and its echoes offer a pathway to reclaiming creative freedom and more.

### **Outro: An Elsewhere, or Lack Thereof**

One may argue that these kinds of practices are simply refuting and working against existing language, which in reality, further fortifies the binary in language, that there is no true escape from language-games – I admit that this is one of my main struggles with this research too. Often I wonder, when the mainstream is decentered, and the margin becomes the new mainstream, what do we do then? Would the work that we do be rendered meaningless if the situation that Bourdieu describes below goes on forever:

It follows that they are at any one time the site of a struggle between two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, which favours those who dominate the field economically and politically (for example, 'bourgeois art'), and the autonomous principle (for example, 'art for art's sake'). (216)

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<sup>10</sup> See Harren 15, Shattuck was critiquing object-based neo-dada works as a response to Maciunas, but “unexpectedly allied himself” with Fluxus works.

And for the most resolute defenders of autonomy, the opposition between works made for the public and works which must make their own public is elevated into a fundamental criterion of evaluation. (218)

This remains unanswered in me. But at least for now, knowing that we live in this huge construction made from language and so on, if the rules of the language-games are fully used to achieve a better future, the liberation we get would be a real construction, a real alternative reality that we would be living within (or at least ideally). Instead of adapting the idea of escaping, I want to embrace the idea of creating and amplifying. In the ever-evolving universe of social construction, humanity did, and will continue to make ideological and practical progress. I see this kind of language practice as the start of an awakening, and the prelude of a bigger change. At the very least, it informs us of the possibility of a reimagined future.

The above chapters are written from the viewpoint of a pure audience in the gallery. However last year, I started working as a gallery monitor at Ignite Gallery. This made me think again about the incident that happened in the MCA, especially when an extremely fragile floor-based work was placed in the gallery without any protection, but only a simple line: “Do Not Touch.” Automatically, I told the audience the same thing as the MCA security guard did: “Please don’t touch the artwork,” possibly out of responsibility and a fear of punishment, but also because *I was told to do so*. In *the habitus* as a staff keeping the institution running, one often becomes a facilitator of the panoptic power without realization, hence the inhumane events in Shanghai in early 2022. In the end, each of us lives in different panopticons of our own, which interweave into a big web that makes up our society. So is there really an *elsewhere* after all?

Not nodding to this behaviour, but as the end to the story of the artwork at Ignite: It was partially stepped on and ruined outside of supervision (probably by a child). Many students passed by and showed anger towards this incident, probably out of compassion for the hard work of the artist (which is part of their *habitus*). After a while, the artwork was restored with new protective measures around it which ensured that nobody ever touched it again. Still, for a little while, the power relations in this gallery setup were disrupted. To *not* speak, *not* understand, *not* act might be the optimal solution to the disruption of this linguistic panopticon. After all, the weakness of language is that it cannot actually confine the mind, but gives structure or direction (and makes you believe that you're confined), which doesn't necessarily result in action. Even the most serious set of rules is turned meaningless if it is not understood and acted upon, as is the case with other weapons of discipline.

I often think about what my mom said: "Language is just a tool, (so don't pursue it as your life path)" which I understand to some extent, because she said it to me when I was trying to choose my undergrad program. There's also a little bit of selfishness that comes with being a language lover: I don't want what I love to lose its lustre being polished by long hours of research and work. But for this thesis project, it became inevitable that I went down the path of language. I am fortunate because I have been able to use curation as a vehicle for the combination of language and art. Though the barrenness of language is sometimes rendered powerless in front of the vastness of thoughts and feelings, in art, I prefer to see language as a *platform* for looking into the possibilities rather than as a *frame* that limits expression.

In Ted Chiang's sci-fi novel *Story of Your Life* (1998), the alien "heptapods" provide the protagonist with a whole new set of ways to perceive the world by teaching her their language. Although far from mature, it is my vision to do the same thing in my research (and future curatorial practice) through the use of language in art.

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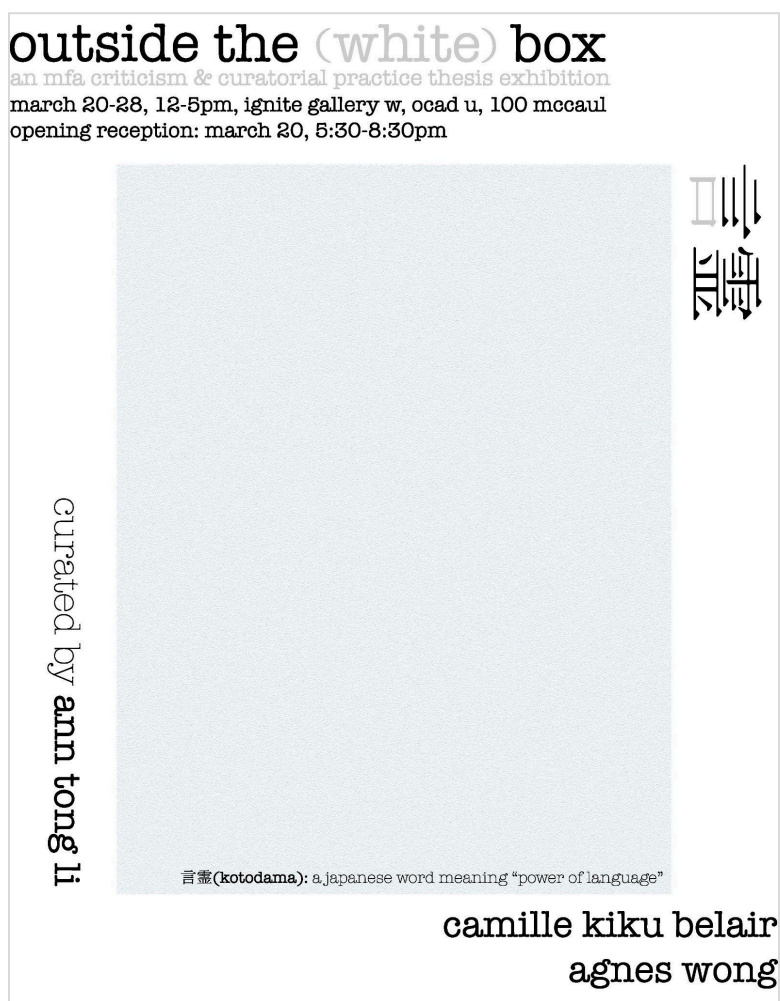
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## Appendix A

### Thesis Documentation

#### Promotional Materials



Main poster of *Outside the (White) Box*: 言靈



Instagram image for *Outside the (White) Box*: 言靈



Instagram image for Sound Walk with Camille Kiku Belair

## Handout

## outside the (white) box : 言靈

**Camille Kiku Belair**

1. **Cloud Piece (cloud song)**, 2023  
Inkjet print  
8.5"x11"
2. **Space Piece**, 2023  
Inkjet print  
8.5"x11"
3. **White Noise Piece**, 2022  
Inkjet print  
8.5"x11"
4. **Sound Walk Piece**, 2024  
Inkjet print  
8.5"x11"
5. **Diplych I**, 2023  
Graphite and coloured pencil on paper  
Two 38"x25" sheets
6. **Diplych II**, 2023  
Graphite and coloured pencil on paper  
Two 38"x25" sheets
7. **Diplych III**, 2023  
Graphite and coloured pencil on paper  
Two 38"x25" sheets

**Agnes Wong**

8. **Pain makes people change, but it also makes them stronger**, 2023  
Inkjet adhesive on found rock, acrylic, polyethylene  
Dimensions variable
9. **My Diary**, 2023  
Spiralbound book, mirror fragments  
8.5" x 11"
10. **Q&A**, 2022  
Inkjet print  
8" x 9.4"
11. **Untitled Composition (Arpeggio)**, 2023  
Inkjet print  
8" x 9.4"
12. **Untitled Composition (Reprise)**, 2023  
Inkjet adhesive on acrylic  
8.5" x 11" x 1.3"
13. **Music Box (Image Recalibration Lullaby)**, 2023  
Inkjet on acetate, acrylic  
65" x 24"
14. **How many times until it becomes meaningful? How many times until it becomes meaningless? Iteration one**, 2024  
Paper, acrylic, paper boxes, tissue paper, found objects  
Dimensions variable

Handout side A: Floor map of Ignite Gallery (West)

**Agnes Wong** (she/her) is a multidisciplinary designer and artist based in Tkaronto/Toronto and Hong Kong. Through an experimental approach, Agnes' creative practice seeks to integrate themes of displacement, fragmentation, and temporality together in an interdisciplinary blend of digital and moving image, photography, graphic design, text, and print matter. She holds a BFA (Honours with Distinction) in Publications from OCAD University (2023) and has completed her propaedeutic studies at Design Academy Eindhoven, Netherlands. She is also the founder of *FOREVER GIFT SHOP*. Agnes is currently the Communications Assistant at Xpace Cultural Centre.

**@agnesdoubleu**

**Camille Kiku Belair** (they/them) is a gosei (fifth-generation) Japanese Canadian with French Canadian ancestry. They are a composer, classical guitarist and interdisciplinary artist interested in working with field recordings and experimenting with mixed media. They previously completed a BMus specialising in composition at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music, and studied at California Institute of the Arts in both the Performer-Composer and Experimental Sound Practices MFA programs. Currently pursuing an MFA in the Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design program at OCAD University, their work involves developing hand-made book objects that function as compositional tools, including the exploration of different forms of music notation.

**@camillekiku**

**Outside the (White) Box : 言靈** is an exhibition that embraces *your* interpretations.

Focusing on conceptual and instruction-based works, the exhibition highlights the interplay between language and mind, idea and enactment, intentionality and interpretation as pathways to creative freedom and more.

Forms of language from text and beyond are investigated, as well as the abstract nature and performativity of language.

Curated by

**Ann Tong Li** (she/they) curates, writes, illustrates and designs in Toronto. Ann holds a BDes in Visual Communication Design from Shanghai Jiao Tong University, an MA in Illustration from Maryland Institute College of Art, and is currently a candidate in the MFA Criticism and Curatorial Practice program at OCAD University. Ann worked as a graphic designer, illustrator, curatorial assistant and gallery monitor for Ignite Gallery.

Ann is a language lover (as you can see). Ann wants (but doesn't force) this exhibition to be the music of your mind.

**@anniswatching**

Handout side B: Artists and curator bio, exhibition statement

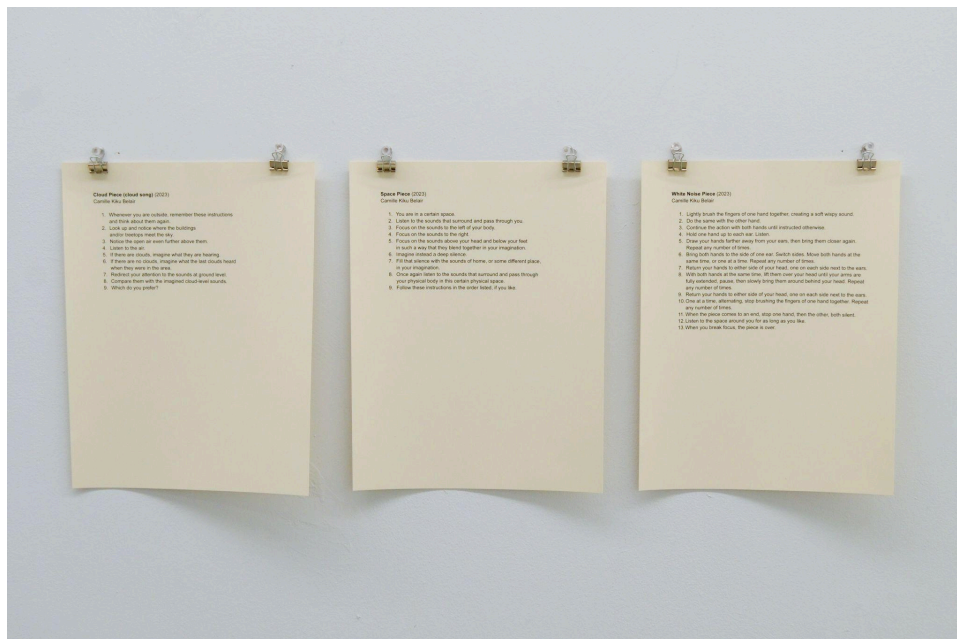
**Exhibition Photos**

Installation view of *Outside the (White) Box: 言靈* (with title vinyl)



Installation view of *Outside the (White) Box: 言靈* (overview)





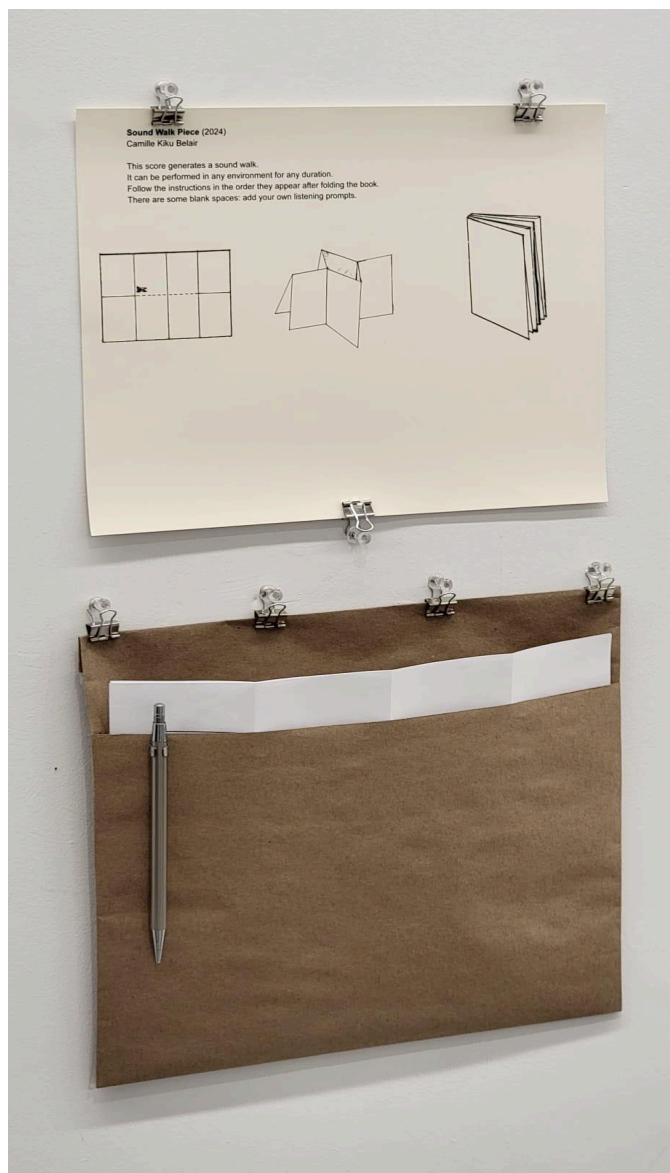
From left: Camille Kiku Belair, *Cloud Piece (cloud song)*, 2023

Camille Kiku Belair, *Space Piece*, 2023

Camille Kiku Belair, *White Noise Piece*, 2023

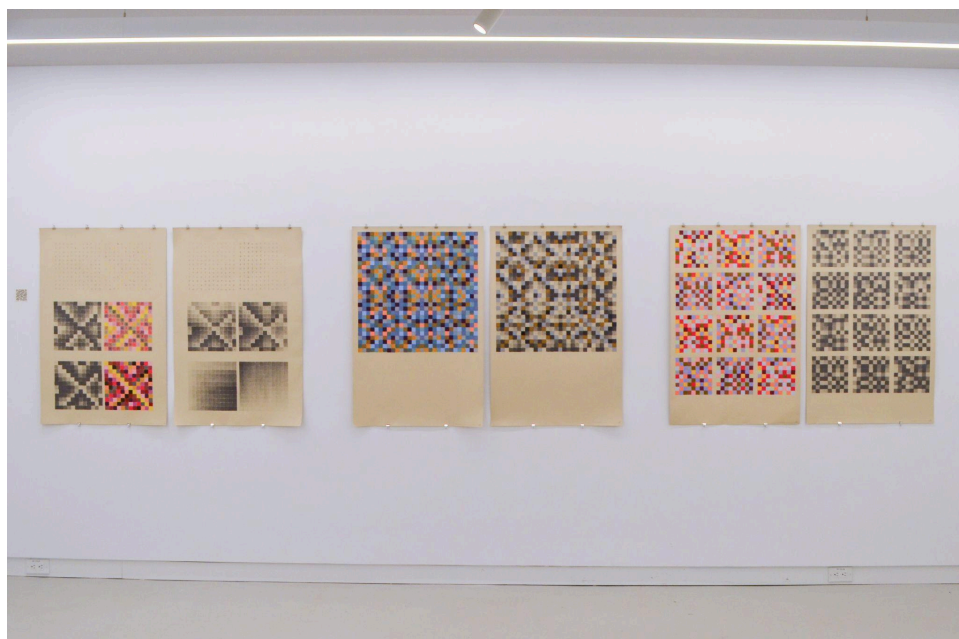


Audience enacting *White Noise Piece* in the gallery



Camille Kiku Belair, *Sound Walk Piece*, 2024

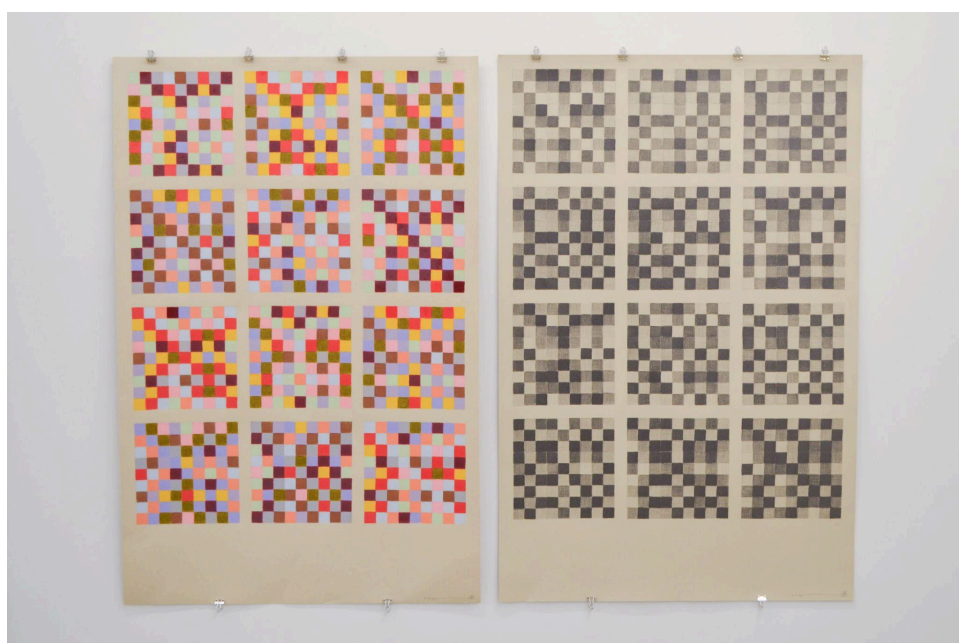




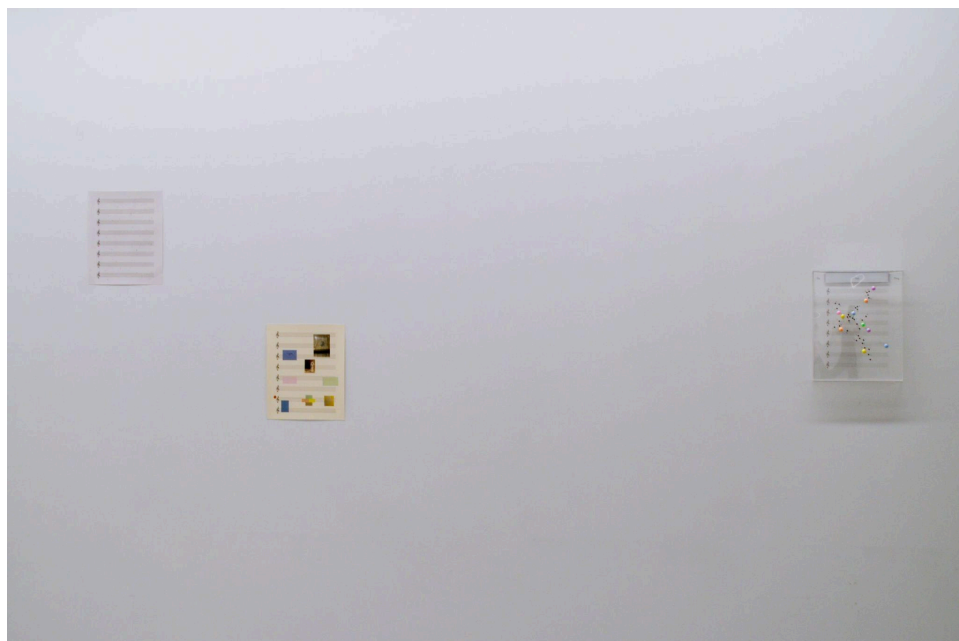
From left: Camille Kiku Belair, *Diptych I*, 2023

Camille Kiku Belair, *Diptych II*, 2023

Camille Kiku Belair, *Diptych III*, 2023



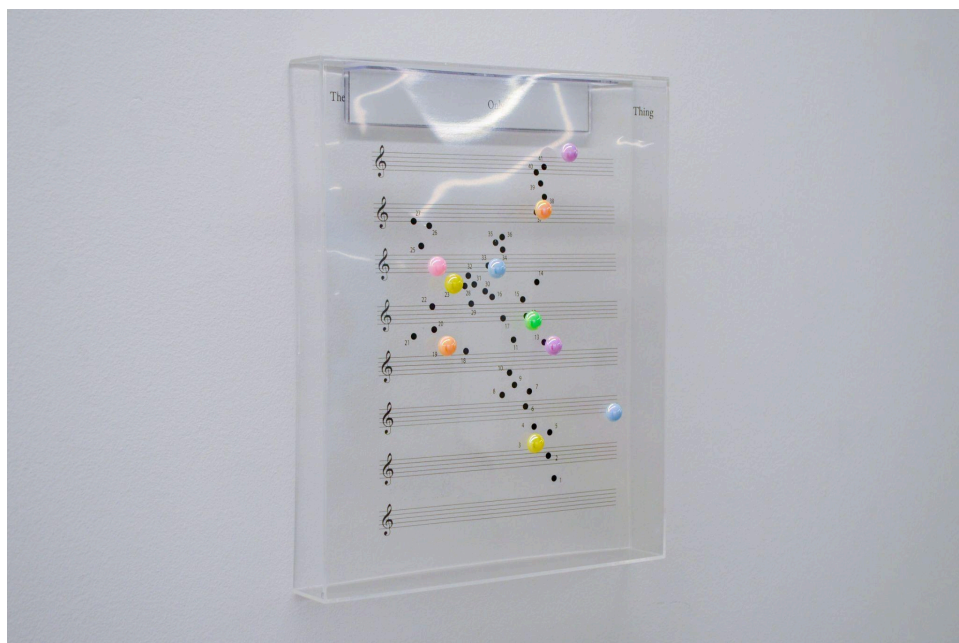
Camille Kiku Belair, *Diptych III*, 2023



From left: Agnes Wong, *Q&A*, 2022

Agnes Wong, *Untitled Composition (Arpeggio)*, 2023

Agnes Wong, *Untitled Composition (Reprise)*, 2023



Agnes Wong, *Untitled Composition (Reprise)*, 2023

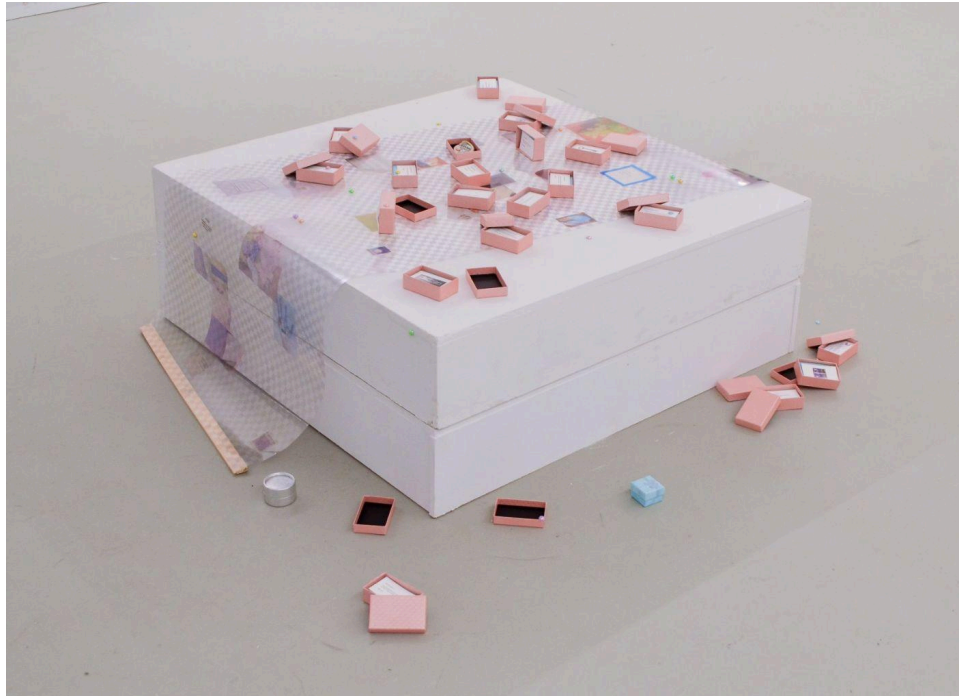


Agnes Wong, *Pain makes people change, but it also makes them stronger*, 2023



Agnes Wong, *My Diary*, 2023 (with *Diptych III* reflected in the cat mirror)





From top: Agnes Wong, *How many times until it becomes meaningful?*

*How many times until it becomes meaningless? Iteration one, 2024*

Agnes Wong, *Music Box (Image Recalibration Lullaby)*, 2023



Scattered instructions and images from Agnes Wong, *How many ... Iteration one, 2024*



Installation view of the temporary tattoo stickers, an extension and form of further distribution of  
Agnes Wong, *How many ... Iteration one*, 2024

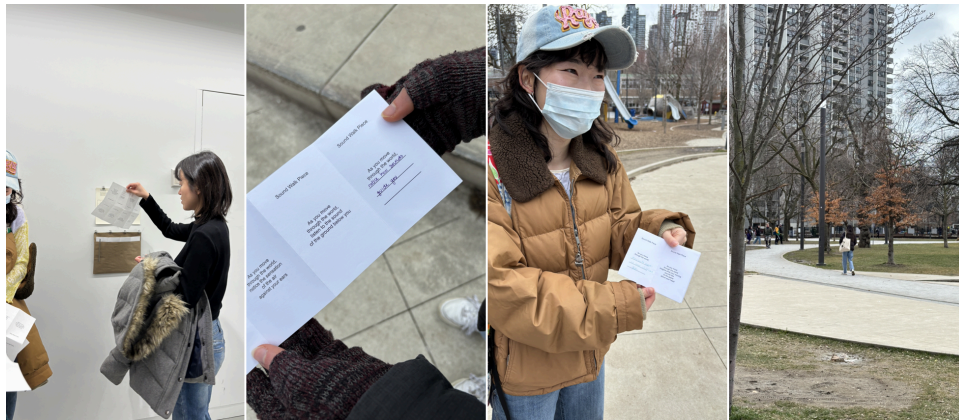


Audience interacting with the temporary tattoo stickers

## Programming: Sound Walk with Camille Kiku Belair



Artist talk by Camille Kiku Belair



Participants interacting with and enacting *Sound Walk Piece*

## Appendix B

### Artist Biographies

#### **Agnes Wong**

[@agnesdoubleu](#)

Agnes Wong (she/her) is a multidisciplinary designer and artist based in Tkaronto/Toronto and Hong Kong.

Through an experimental approach, Agnes' creative practice seeks to integrate themes of displacement, fragmentation, and temporality together in an interdisciplinary blend of digital and moving image, photography, graphic design, text, and print matter.

She holds a BFA (Honours with Distinction) in Publications from OCAD University (2023) and has completed her propaedeutic studies at Design Academy Eindhoven, Netherlands. She is also the founder of FOREVER GIFT SHOP. Agnes is currently the Communications Assistant at Xpace Cultural Centre.

**Camille Kiku Belair**

[@camillekiku](#)

Camille Kiku Belair (they/them) is a gosei (fifth-generation) Japanese Canadian with French Canadian ancestry.

They are a composer, classical guitarist and interdisciplinary artist interested in working with field recordings and experimenting with mixed media.

They previously completed a BMus specialising in composition at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music, and studied at California Institute of the Arts in both the Performer-Composer and Experimental Sound Practices MFA programs.

Currently pursuing an MFA in the Interdisciplinary Art, Media and Design program at OCAD University, their work involves developing hand-made book objects that function as compositional tools, including the exploration of different forms of music notation.



## Appendix C

### Additional Resources<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Thanks to my external reader, Dr. Toby Lawrence, for the support with these sources.

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