**JOEL SWANSON**
2010-2020

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...artist and writer who explores the relationship between language & technology

# foreword

## The (dys)functionality of language: the art of Joel Swanson

Joel Swanson (American, b. 1978) explores language and its literal, at times even physical or material forms. He stretches language to become an image, or multiple images. Swanson continually makes clear how language is a constantly shifting, dynamic system to be pushed, pulled, and kneaded into meaning. His is a highly disciplined approach to art making, at times drawing upon the rigor of 1960s Conceptual art as a foundation, finding ways of making it relevant to us today. He uses the structures of grammar and composition as sources for creative production. Importantly, such constraints become enormously productive and open up a range of possibilities for what he might do with them.

Swanson's work often renders the predictability of language unstable. In *Logic Only Works in 2-Dimensions*, 2014, a large-scale symbol is shown to be relative rather than definitive. The side-ways ">" is the greater-than symbol; which when reversed, is also the less-than symbol. The freestanding, kinetic sculpture registers how this symbol can function as both, simultaneously. With this work and in other examples, such as his ongoing series of lenticular drawings, Swanson plays with a duality within our linguistic system such that one thing can refer to or even be perceived as its very opposite. With *Logic Only Works in 2-Dimensions*, this type of dual reading is also entirely dependent upon the placement of the viewer. Pointing out the relative meaning of such a symbol is at the core of Swanson's practice, and in this effort he enables a fresh scrutiny of those subjects or ideas fundamental to and embedded in how we communicate and connect with others.

Swanson's continued exploration of the ambiguities or tricks inherent to the English language play with multiplicity of meanings. Studies of homonyms—words that sounds alike but are spelled differently and carry different meanings—form the basis of his lenticular image *Truly/Rural*, 2019. Here, he encourages the viewer to move around the work to discover the different words embedded within the holographic surface. The work's title hints at the fact that this work requires the viewer's movement and investigates language and place. It is a work as much about reading as about looking and, more generally, the multivalent experience of viewing a work of art today.

Swanson is also unafraid to invite humor into his practice. In *Lady Gaga's Twitter Feed Translated into Morse Code*, 2011, a small bulb flashes incessantly as it channels the language of the pop singer into the language of Morse code. While the premise might seem irreverent or flippant, it is in fact demonstrative of another key aspect of Swanson's effort: to find ways of enabling the abstract logic of linguistic systems to be relevant to contemporary life. This quiet work speaks capaciously to the ubiquity of codes that underpin contemporary communications from emails to blogs, posts, chats, tweets and numerous other methods for instant information-sharing. Transforming the ones and zeroes of contemporary technology into the dots and dashes of Morse brings the two languages together and indicates how similar the two are when broken down into their building blocks and component parts.

Swanson's works often act as prompts for viewer interaction, as they continually shift and move with our movements. Rather than passively observing his sculptures, photographs, and installations, viewers participate actively and, in doing so, discover new meanings in these all-too-familiar phrases, signs, and symbols. He finds dimensionality in language, bringing it out from the flatness of a screen or paper. His work helps us see, read, and experience this foundational system as the very opposite of its presumed rigor. When we see language as malleable, fluid, and active, we engage with it as relative rather than fixed. Swanson opens up the rigidity of our invented linguistic systems to reveal their porosity and, ultimately, their duplicity. The simplicity of Swanson's enterprise belies a sophisticated reassessment of language as a profoundly creative and flexible device that can be tweaked and played with, without end.
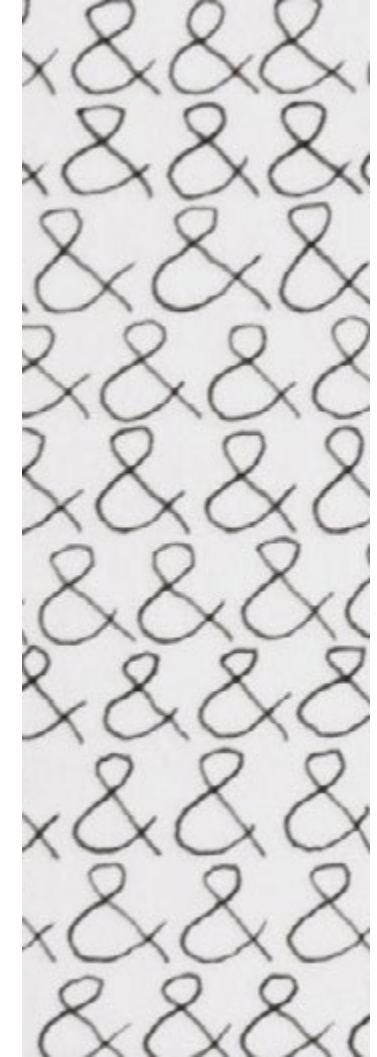
**Nora Burnett Abrams**
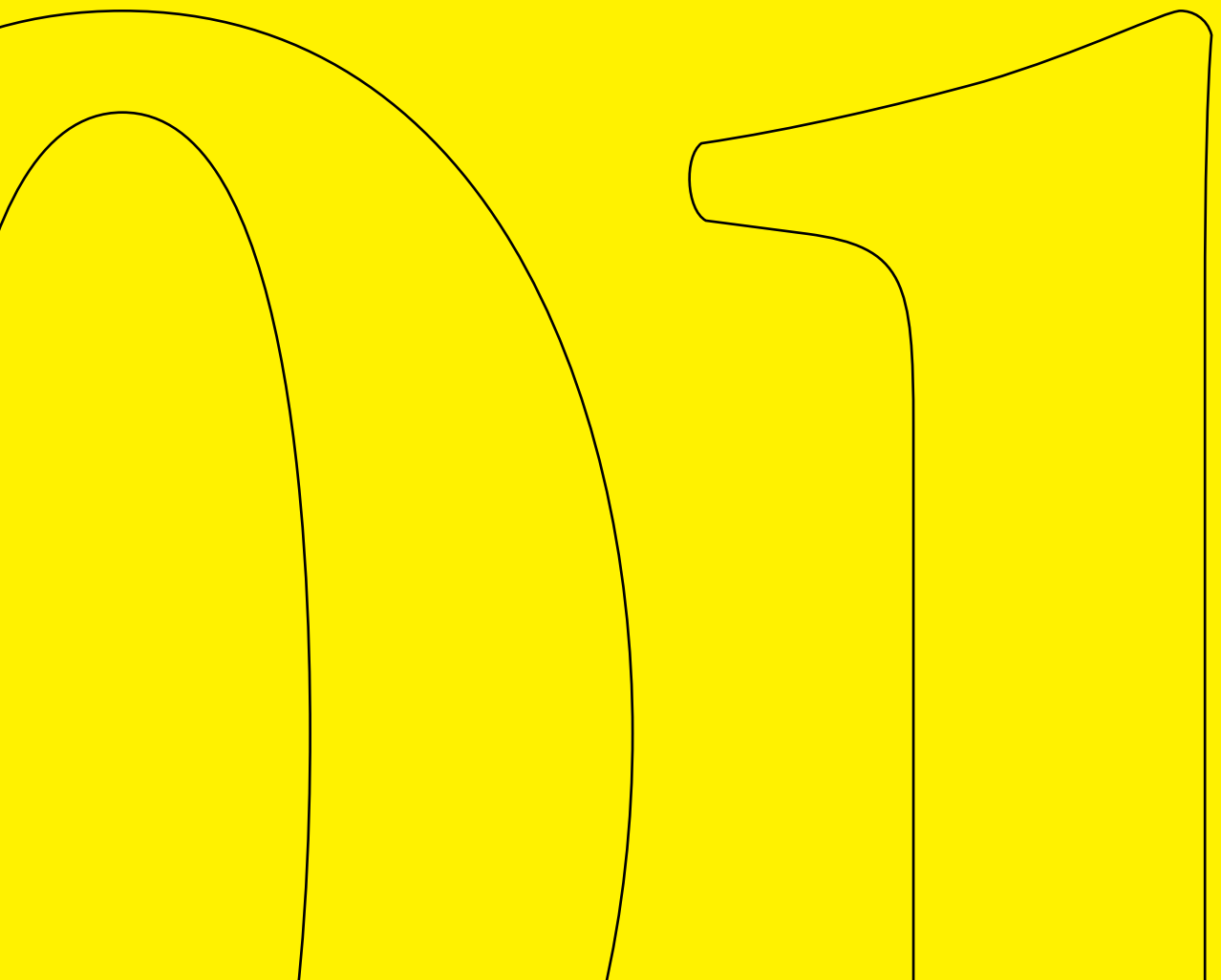*Mark G. Falcone Director*
*Museum of Contemporary Art Denver*

01

repetition

T/HERE, 2017, aluminum, steel, lighting.

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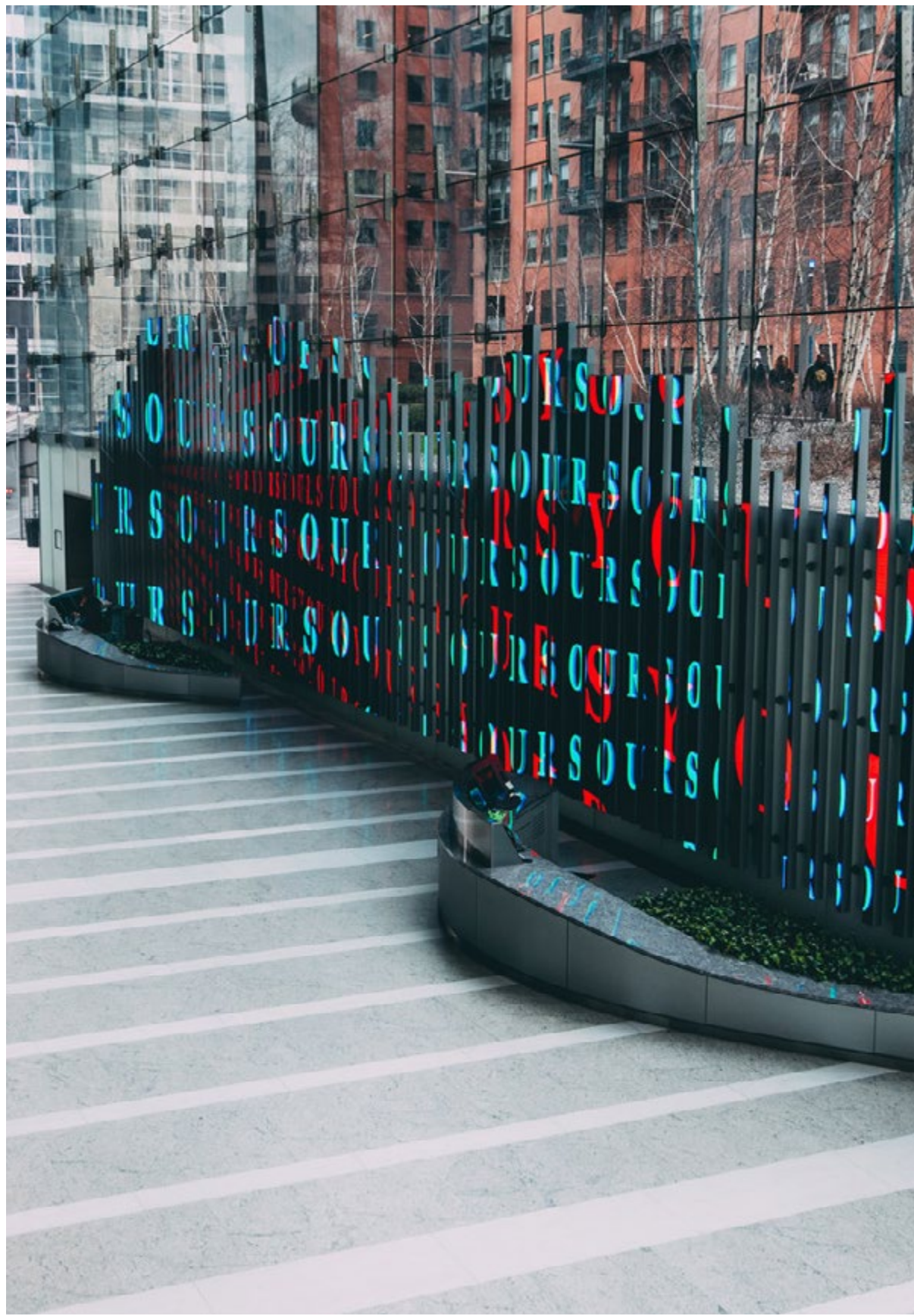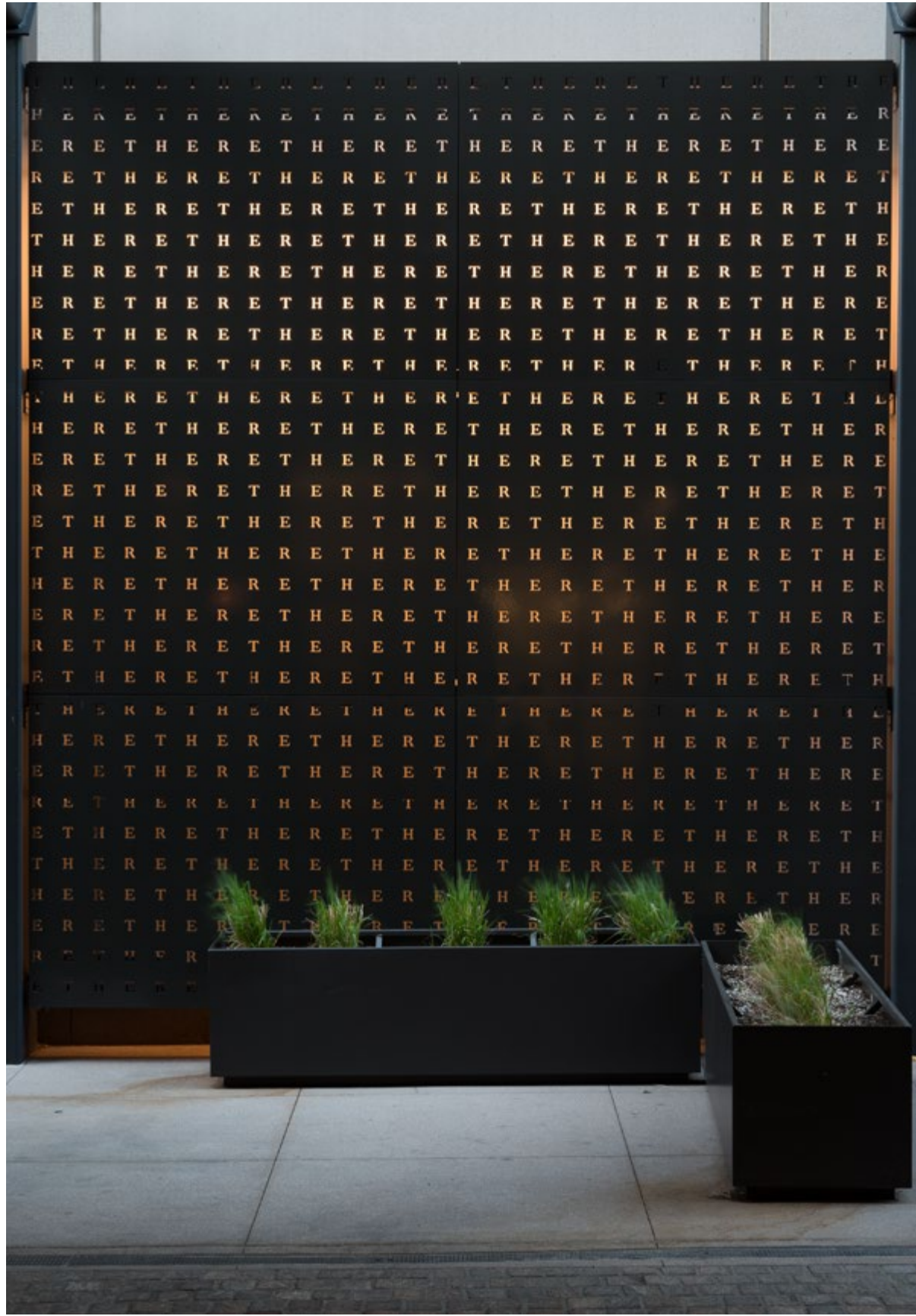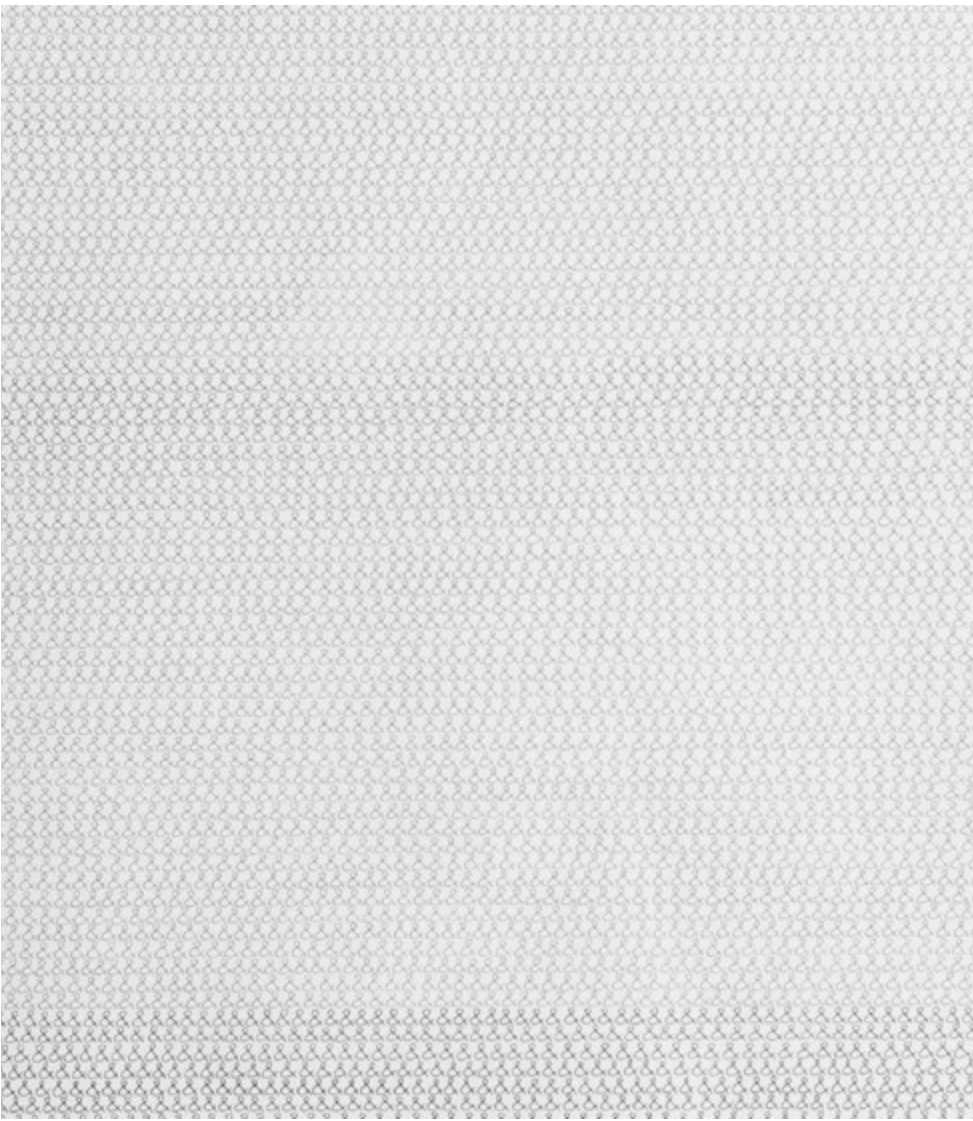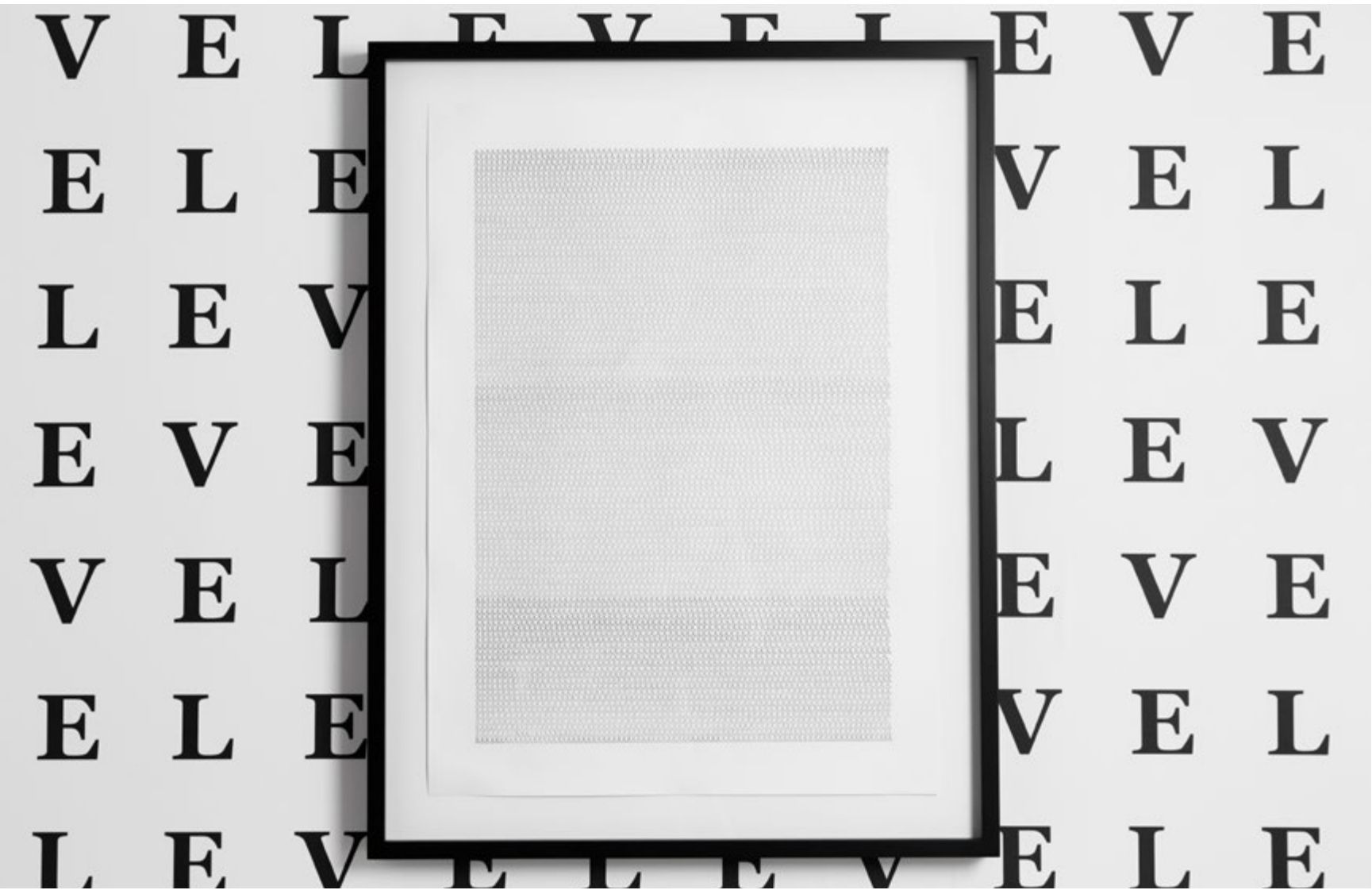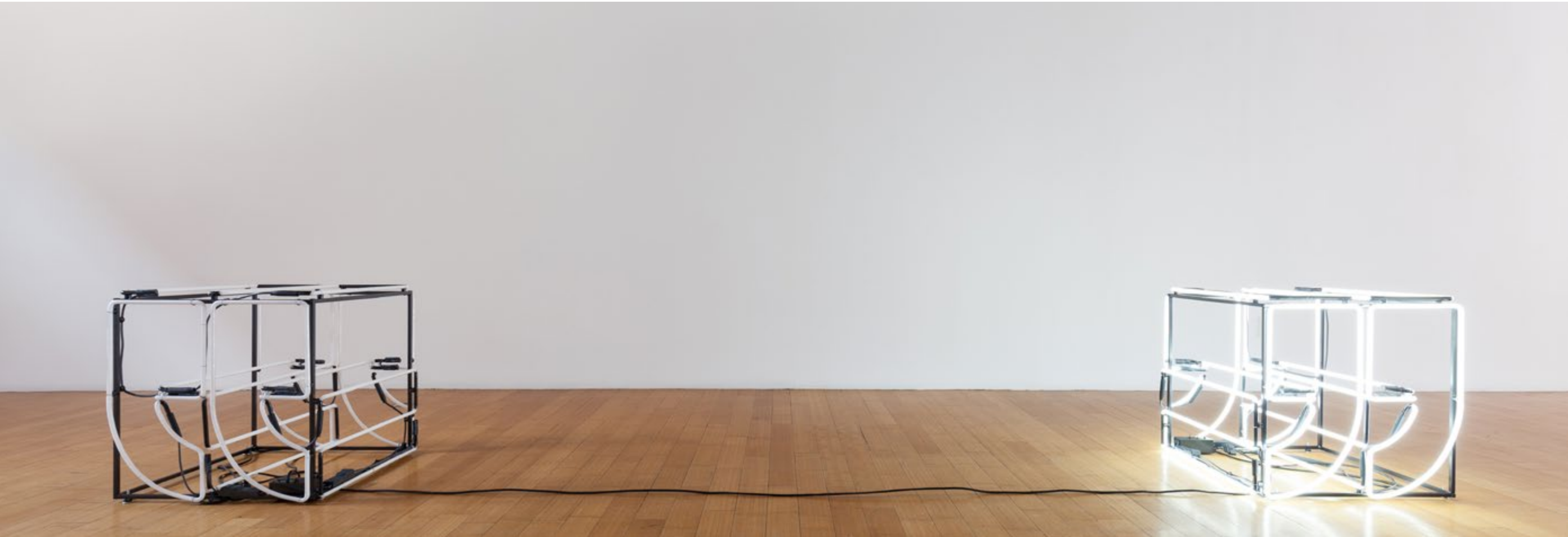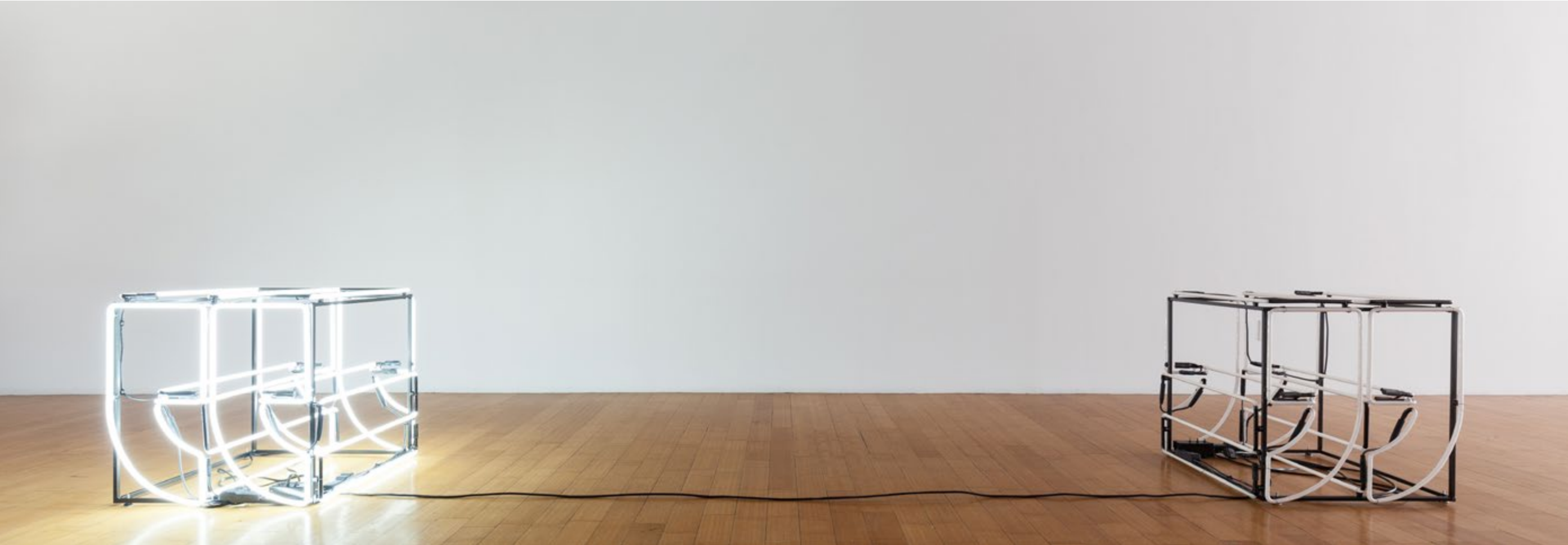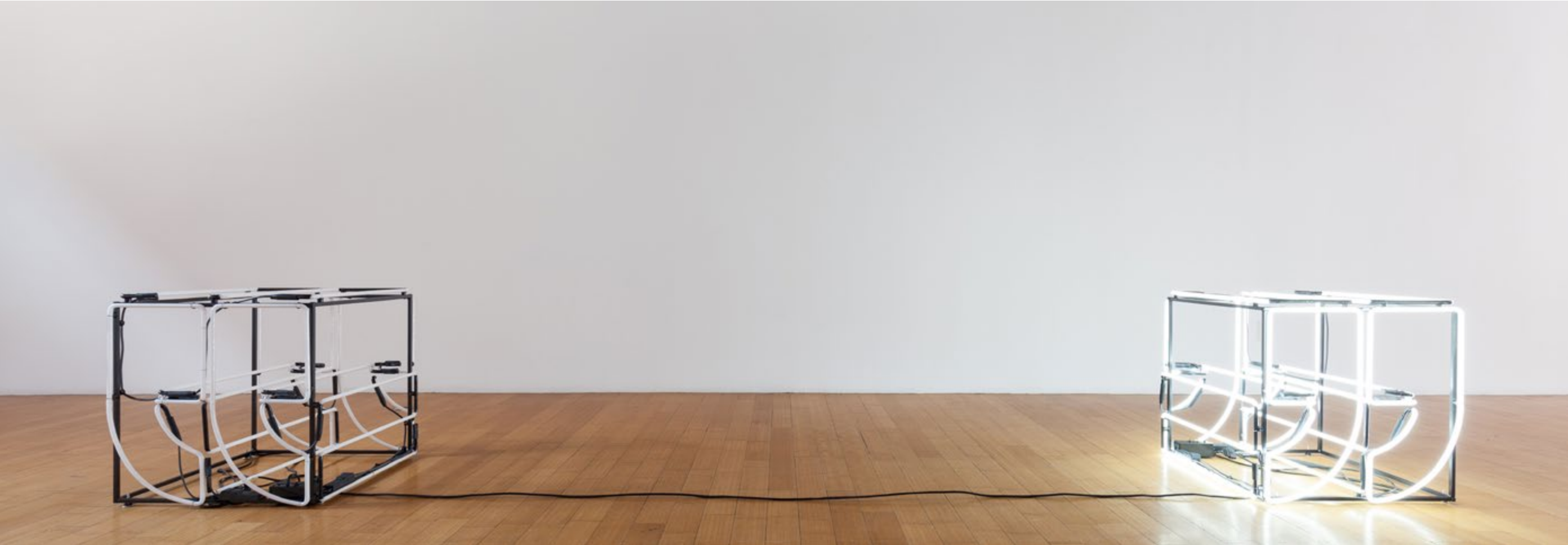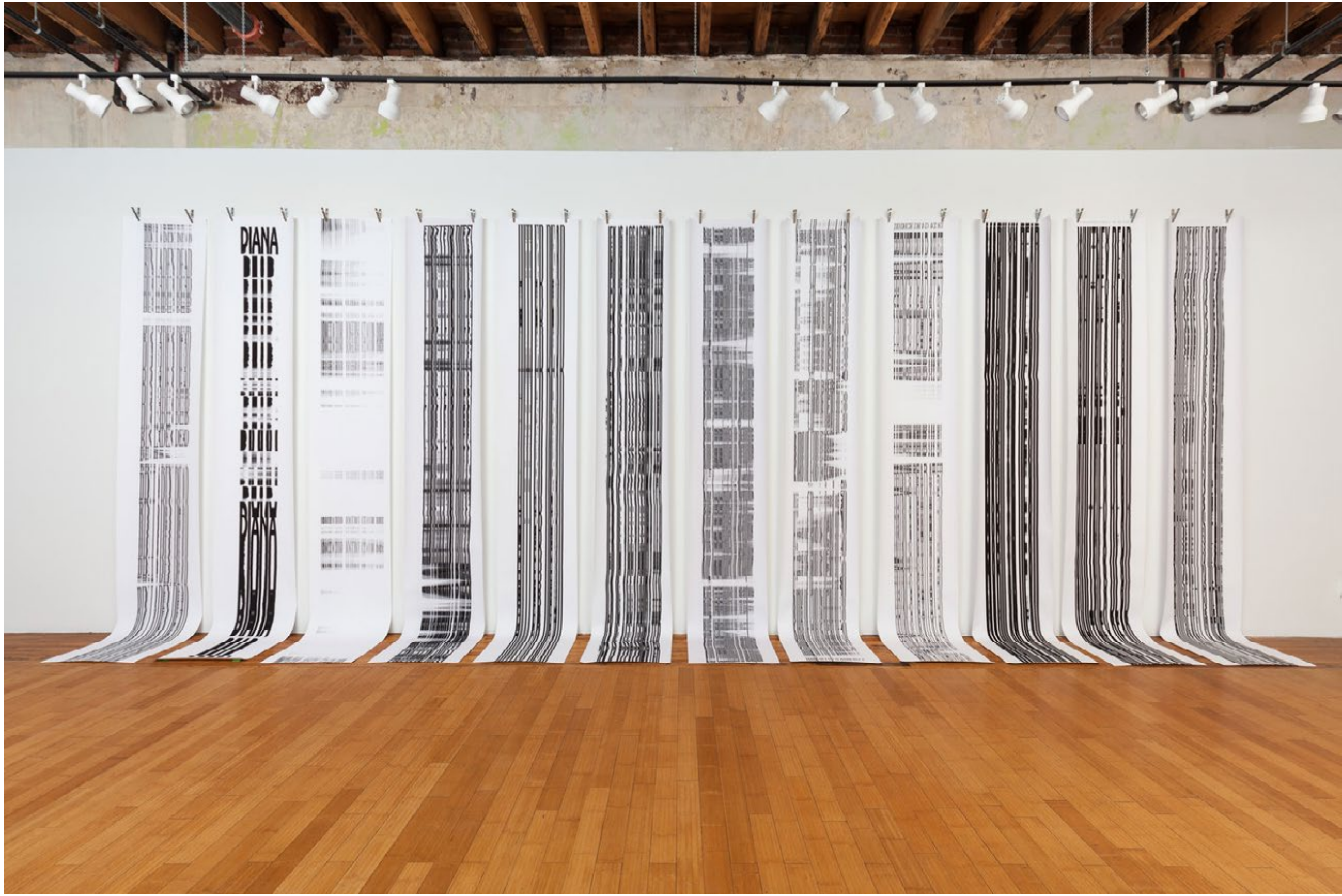
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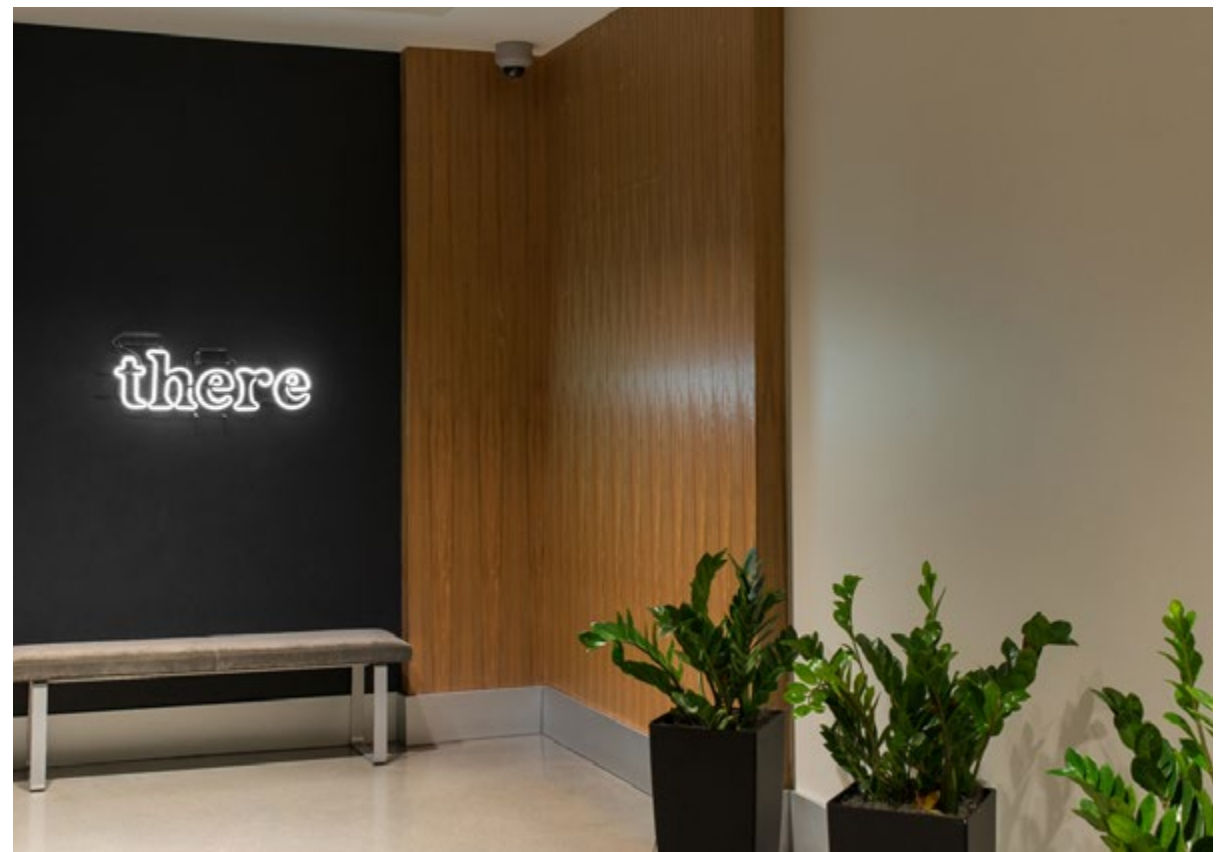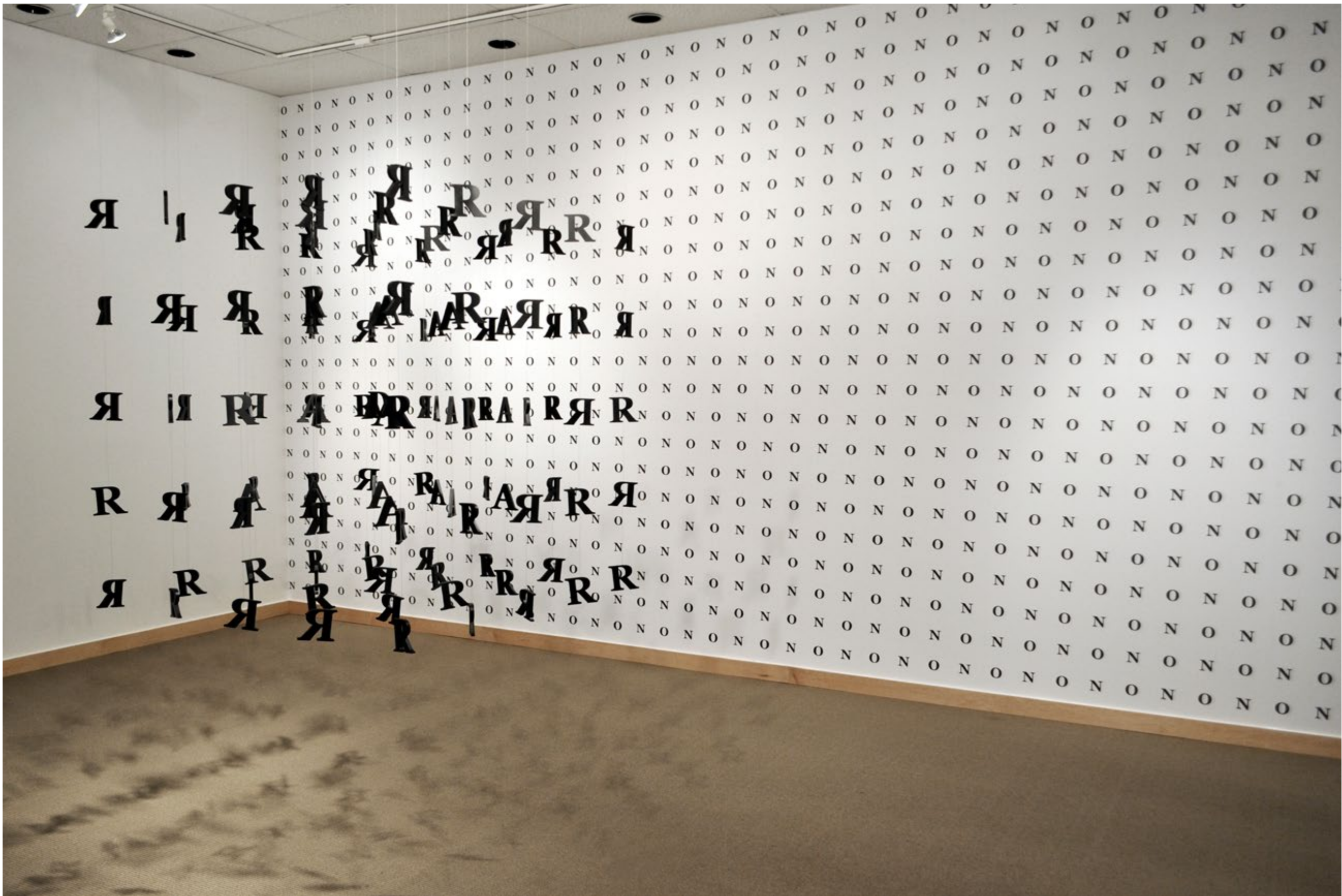
STICKS AND STONES, 2017, Audio recording of artist's mother and father, 3D printed plastic, 4 x 4 x 9 inches each.

60

LOGIC ONLY WORKS IN TWO DIMENSIONS, 2014, aluminum, steel cable, motor, 72 x 72 inches.

context
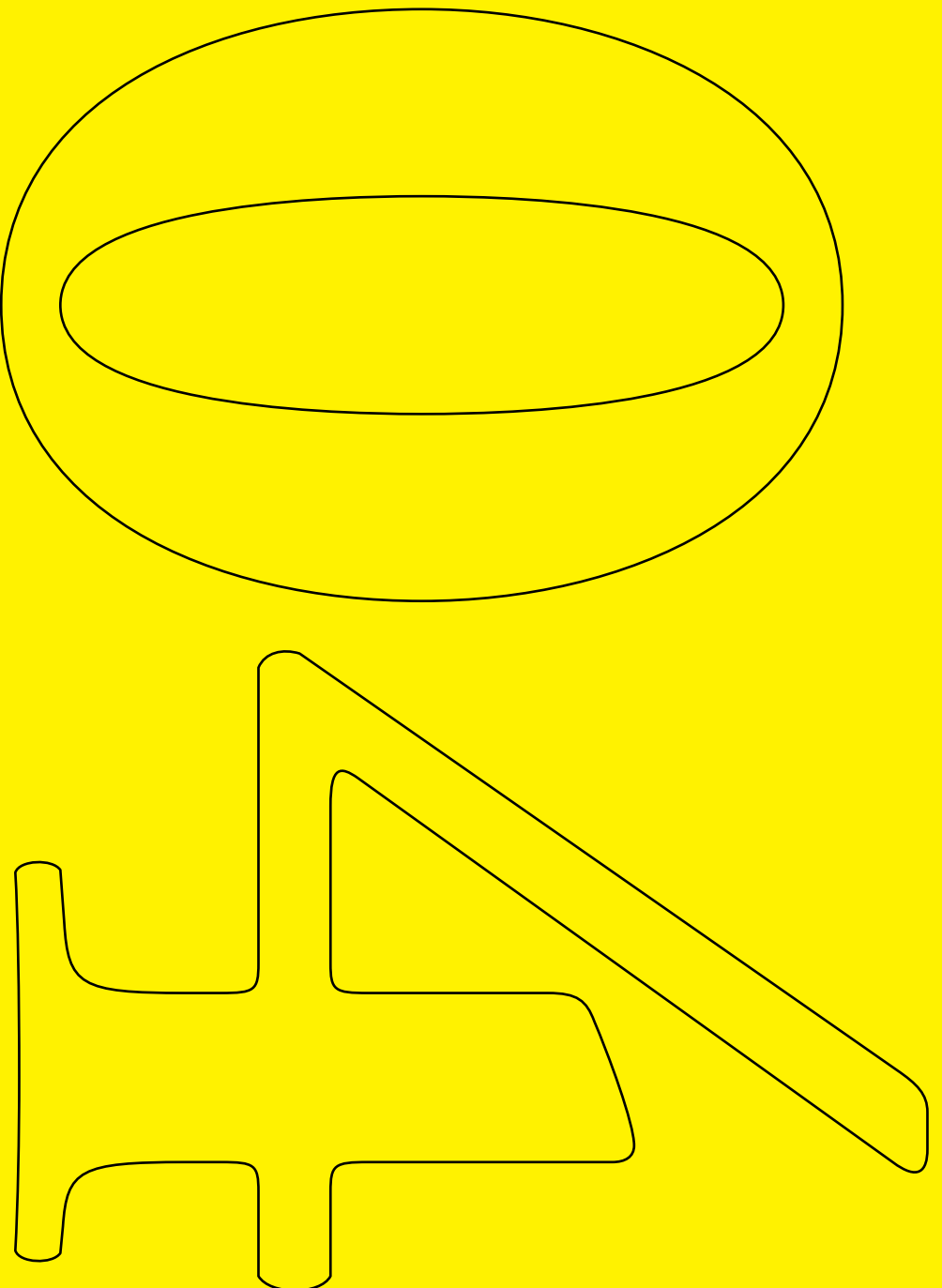
CONJUGATION OF BEING, 2018, traffic sign, custom programming, public art commission for RedLine and Black Cube Nomadic Museum.

Strawberry
Piña Colada
Wild Cherry
New Car
French Vanilla
Lemon

▼

72 SOL LEWITT'S "SENTENCES ON CONCEPTUAL ART," DIAGRAMMED, 2011, painted MDF, dimensions variable.

OTHER, 2017, LightJet Print, 48 x 96 inches.

Ambivalent Typographic Mark, 2017, digital animation, 5 minute loop, dimensions variable.

composition

05

**RAINBOW PASSAGE, 2019, DYMO label tape on paper, 20 x 16 inches.**

# Hyperliterate Swollen Speech

In primary oral cultures, there is no reason for the concept word to be consistent with our literate-culture idea of the word. Walter Ong explains: "If you cannot write, is 'textbased' one word or two? The sense of individual words as significantly discrete items is fostered by writing, which, here as elsewhere, is diaeretic, separative."

The issue of what exactly makes a word pervades Joel Swanson's work, and this, along with other aspects of speech and letter, are dealt with in particularly compelling ways in his four pieces executed on label tape, *Rainbow Passage* and the three *Marginalized Ways of Speaking* artworks.

Two obvious planes of existence for a poem, whatever that is, or a word, whatever that is, are those of speech/audition and grapheme/vision. In addition to pronouncing a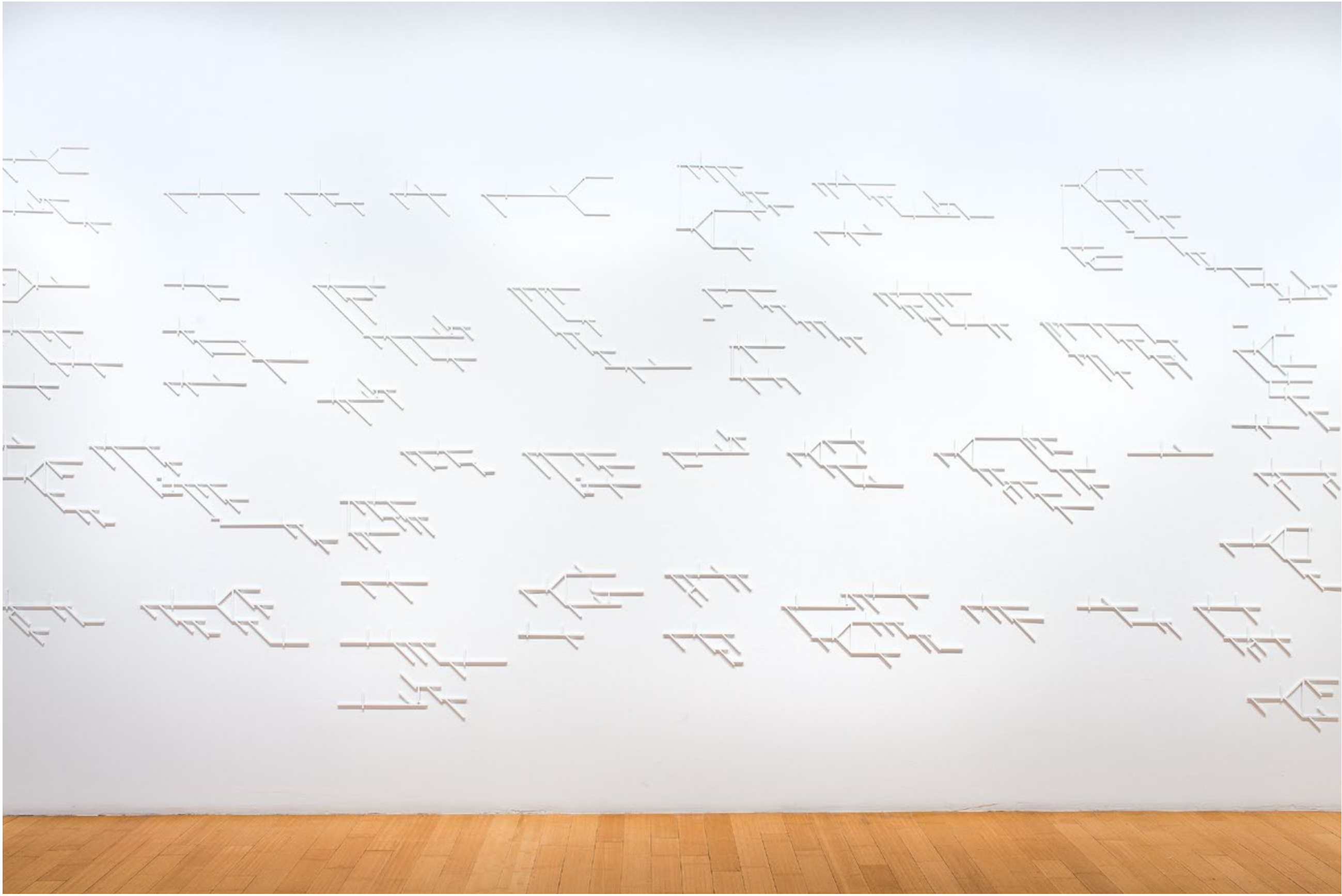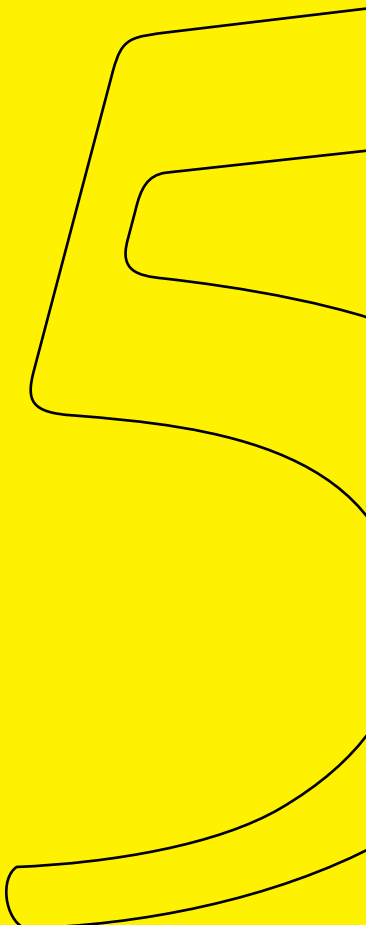nd listening to a text, or visually inscribing it and reading it with the eye, it is also possible to remember language (or devise it in the mind in the first place) and to then contemplate it. In his work with a standard labelmaker (one word or two?) Swanson exploits the strange and familiar materiality of this inscription machine, provoking us to think further about all three of these ways of producing and encountering language.

What type of inscription has produced these works? Not writing of the sort done with a stylus; not typing in the conventional sense, with a keyboard; not even printing in the usual sense, which makes its inked impression into a surface that we view face on. The label produced in this act of inscription is made without ink, and is embossed.

Dymo Corporation was founded in 1958, with a patent for its first "hand operated embossing tool" being filed the next year and issued to David W. Souza in 1961. Several labelmaker designs have been produced under the Dymo name over the decades, and some are widely considered to be design classics. These days, a Dymo labelmaker is much more likely to be battery-operated and to print on thin, adhesive plastic, although embossing labelmakers are still made and used.

The embossing action of the labelmaker shares its name with the sort of embossing that artists, artisans, and craftspeople have done

for centuries, but its action is regularized and industrialized. In the Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, definitions 2a and 2b of "emboss" seem as if they would be the most relevant ones, but also seem too elevated to apply to the action of this everyday product: "To carve or mould in relief; to cause (figures, part of a wrought surface) to stand out, project, or protrude." "To adorn with figures or other ornamentation in relief; to represent (a subject) in relief." The primary definition is not inapplicable, but is one used to describe parts of the body, initially, and only later things such as landscapes: "To cause to bulge or swell out, make convex or protuberant; to cover with protuberances."

In the three *Marginalized Ways of Speaking* works and in *Rainbow Passage*, it seems odd to claim anything has been adorned, ornamented, carved, or molded. But letters have been caused to bulge or swell out. The label tape is covered with protuberances, the black of the tape stretched into white glyphs. The embossing action is a bodily one, itself a signature, providing specific traces of the hand that worked the wheel and handle, most apparent in the *Marginalized Ways of Speaking*

works. Even when a few letters are produced in a way that seems visually perfect (and anyone who has used an embossing labelmaker, however carefully, knows this is the exception to the rule) they have been formed by this inexact process of bulging, swelling, and distortion.

One perspective on Swanson's tape works views them as texts. Some viewers may approach them (particularly the challenging *Rainbow Passage*) without really reading, considering them as one of those "walls of text" that so many online readers refuse to climb. I find it more provocative to see these texts as lineated language, as verse. But the three *Marginalized Ways of Speaking* pieces are not only divided into many lines; they are also quite evidently one-word artworks, the sort of one-word writings that Paul Stephens has recently examined in depth in his book *absence of clutter: minimal writing as art and literature*. What Stephens writes regarding the one-word poems of Aarom Saroyan applies to Swanson's one-word artworks as well: They have the effect of "jolting us from a passivity in which we suppress the mysteriousness of language."

The label tape works, being made of letters, can be transcribed, and it is interesting to consider what gets lost in transcription. Here, for instance, is a transcription of the first two lines of *Marginalized Ways of Speaking* (Mumbling):

M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M
M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M
M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M
M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M.....

Transcribing this artwork may be a meditative exercise, but perhaps it does not need to be undertaken exhaustively. Even beginning the process reveals that the work, seen as a text, is compelling because it is a material text, because of its materiality, because of the imperfections in embossing and the way that letters overlap one another and are not evenly spaced. A transcript will not help us figure out this work's particular grip on language.

Attending to this work letter by letter is productive, however. The letters used, each of which are repeated many times, are MUMBLING. This is

of course a conventional, dictionary spelling. But spelling out the word letter by letter, even in this oddly extended way, is the opposite of mumbling. How can one mumble and pronounce the sound corresponding to each letter in MUMBLING? Wouldn't a person who is actually mumbling have to say, at the very least, something more closely corresponding to MUMBLIN or perhaps even MUMLIN? Similarly, since the speech impediment colloquially called a lisp involves difficulty in pronouncing /s/, if the pronunciation of the word by someone lisping were to be imitated orthographically, we would expect the letters LITHPING to be used. We could also expect stuttering, characterized by repeating and lengthening speech sounds, to operate by repeating consonant clusters such as ST rather than repeating each letter or phoneme. So Swanson's marginalized way of producing visual language is not a direct record of speech sounds via text; its relationship is more complex. It is a literate representation of a category of marginalized speech. And rather than being a degraded or diminished representation of that word, it is extended and insistent. It is not an illiterate scribble or semi-literate attempt a

producing a text, but a hyperliterate and effortful inscription.

While *Marginalized Ways of Speaking* extends the traditional way that words are spelled out, *Rainbow Passage* presents a different sort of text. There, the letters are providing one sort of close record of speech — a phonetic transcription, using the ARPABET codes developed in the 1970s. The text represented here is the earliest one used to gather recordings in the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA). Because the pronunciation of this text is shown phoneme by phoneme, without any other division, if we take the perspective of an oral culture, this entire text is also, like "textbased," actually one word.

Spaces do separate the phoneme codes, but the sequence of them is otherwise uninterrupted. That makes this text similar to those early manuscripts written in the scripto continua style, entirely without spaces. The obvious way to figure out where one word ends and another begins — here, I mean "word" in our literate-culture sense, the divided word that we cannot help but seize upon as a concept — is by giving voice to such a text. So, why not read it aloud? For this step a partial transcription is of help:

W EH N DH AH S AH N L AY T S ...

The text begins with "when," straightforwardly enough, but the Carnegie Mellon Pronouncing Dictionary lists four ways of pronouncing the word, not only W EH N but also HH W EH N, W IH N, and HH W IH N. Swenson has chosen one, the first listed. Leaving aside the question of lexical stress, there are two ways to pronounce the next word, "the," and while DH AH is listed first, someone striving to enunciate clearly might well choose to say DH IY — using the same phonemes as in "thee," but without the lexical stress. Since this text was taken from Grant Fairbanks's

*Voice and Articulation Drillbook*, it would not be unusual for someone to read it in this way. So this phonetic transcript is not the way (however one wishes to pronounce "the") of giving voice to this passage of text; it is one particular way. It makes for a striking black-and-white representation of a discussion of the rainbow.

*Marginalized Ways of Speaking* and *Rainbow Passage* invite the viewer to be a reader, and not only a silent reader. They invite a transformed viewing and reading experience, as well as sustained thought about language. In their material nature, they give the lie to the regular, uninteresting, digitally-produced facsimiles of embossed labels, meant to point backwards in time but produced without any human touch. They show that even within the framework of industrial and regularity, even within an everyday activity such as labeling, there is expression and many signs of the body that was at work. By choosing extremely constrained means of inscribing a text and stretching that text production process to extremes, Swanson has produced material texts that shine on the visual word, resonate with the spoken word, and leave us with new ways of thinking about language when we pause from viewing.

**Nick Montfort**

*Professor of Digital Media*
*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*
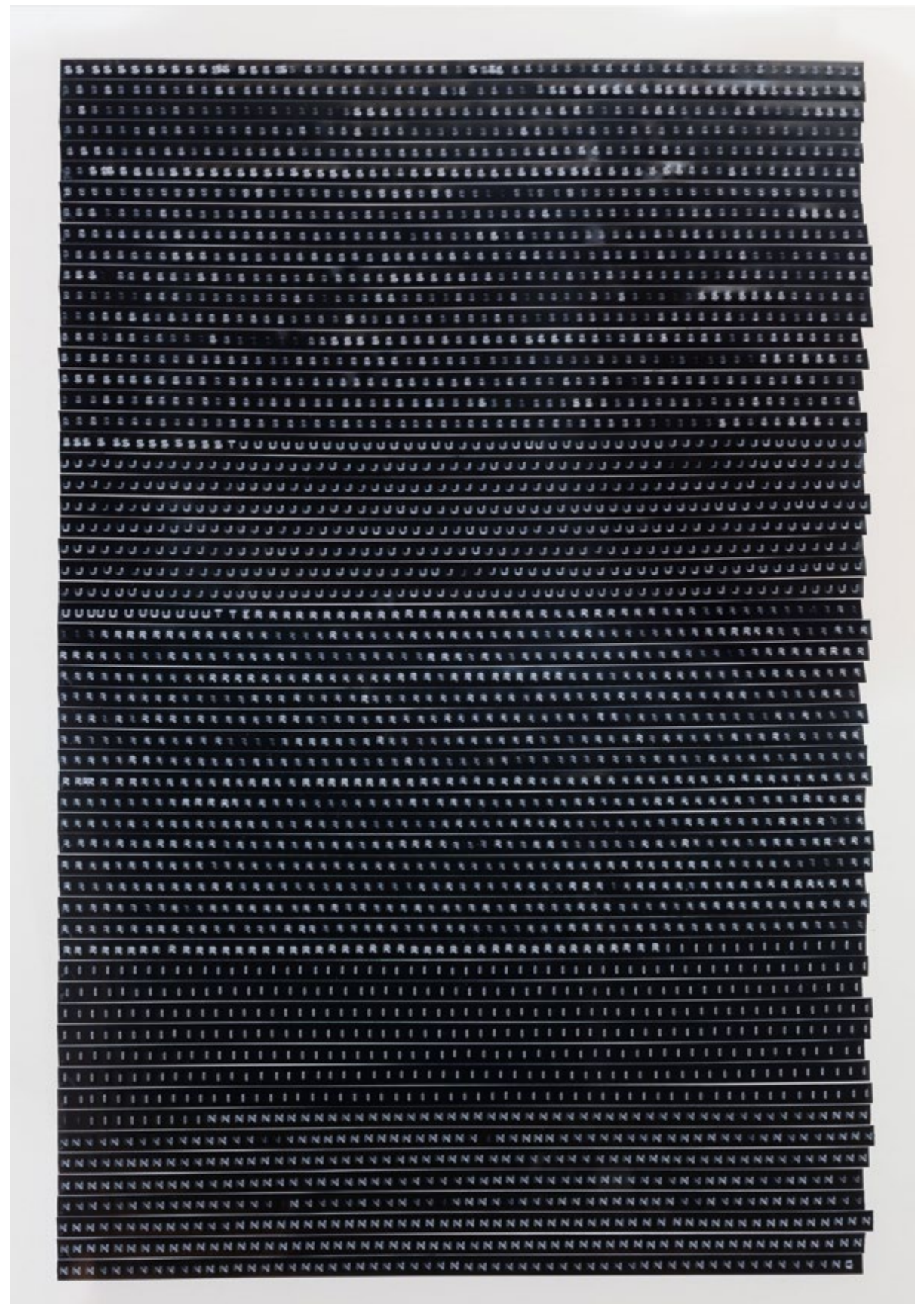
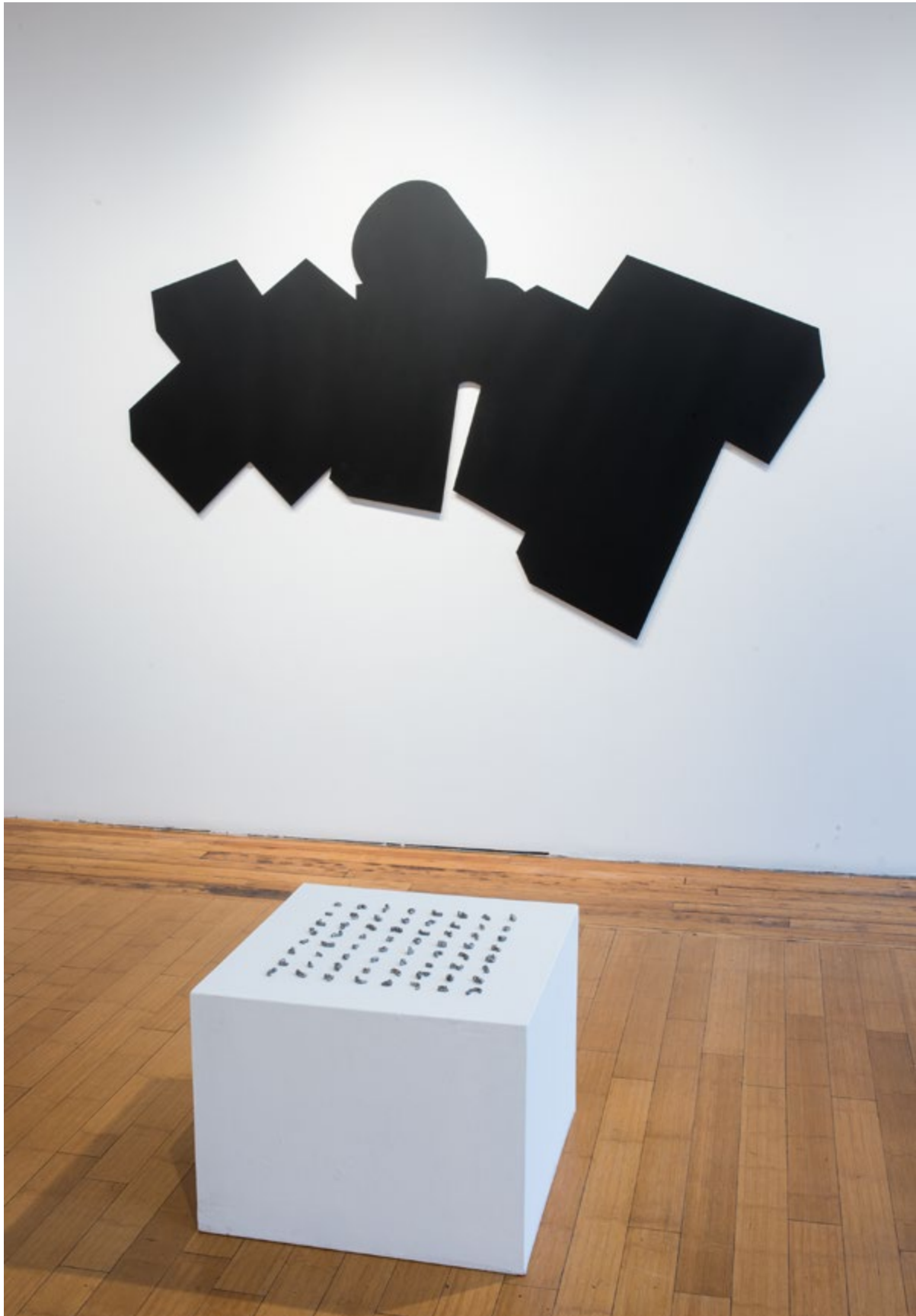# EIGHT-AND-A-HALF-BY-ELEVEN

2019 INSTALLATION

# interview

**Sean J. Patrick Carney and Joel Swanson**

The works in Joel Swanson's "Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven" are all about the English language. But where another artist might rely on wordplay—the potentially startling implications of a misplaced homonym, for example—Swanson meditates upon more commonplace operations: how English gets taught, aestheticized, gendered, and propagated. So clearly related to the English language are Swanson's latest objects that it's easy to miss the collection's central paradox: there is essentially no text in the show.

Six months ago, I was in Swanson's studio in Denver, looking at several in-progress pieces that would later show up in "Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven". Our discussion turned to the nature of communication itself, and how he and I had individually learned to navigate reading and writing. It turned out that we'd both attended

religious primary schools, where the language arts are taught with a mildly fascist flare. In several of Swanson's new works, there were signs and signifiers—lined paper, cheap pink erasers, correction fluid—that might get overlooked as innocuous, everyday even. But they had a strange energy to them, one that pulled me instantly back into those classroom spaces. I felt a peculiar combination of nostalgic excitement and academic anxiety. The panicky stress of properly forming an upper case S or Q in cursive. Trying to recall, under pressure, the correct order of the e and the i in ceiling. The exhilaration of totally winging it on a spelling test—but somehow coming out okay in the end. Years had gone by since I'd even thought about the actual process of learning to read and write—and I call myself a writer.

We'd been talking for nearly an hour when I got stuck staring at an abstracted, black cutout wall piece, trying to figure out from where exactly I recognized its familiar shape. Eventually, it clicked: it depicted the letter forms of the Trix cereal logo, albeit reversed, in silhouette. This gave me pause, prompting me to look around the studio again. And that was when I realized that this entire suite of language-based artwork was otherwise devoid of actual text.

Quiet, unfolding rhythms are central to Swanson's latest work. Instead of designed-out typography tables, cheeky word lists, or blinking neons, "Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven" endeavors to articulate the unremarkable, anti-spectacular taxonomies quietly governing our communications. Here, Swanson subtly makes the invisible visible. What's really quite extraordinary is just how prominent these discreet systems are once someone shows us where to look.

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**Q** Contemporary American artists associated with text-based work— I'm thinking Kruger, Ligon, Holzer, Ruscha—typically employ culture jamming, double entendres, or poetics. Your most recent exhibition concerns itself similarly with language, but points to something less esoteric: the formal, institutionalized method by which English is taught. What prompted you to start mining institutional English language pedagogies for artistic content?

**A** Several years ago someone asked me about the roots of my interest in language and I was surprised that I couldn't offer a satisfying response. This prompted me to start thinking about my formative experiences learning the systems—the

rules, really—of English. I visited school supply stores and pored over grammar textbooks. Aesthetically, these educational materials seem juvenile and overly simplified, but they are filled with deep ideological norms and biases. These materials, and my early experiences with them, became the foundation for this body of work.

**Were you finding yourself less interested in what a given text-based work, singularly, might be able to communicate?**

In a sense, yes. During a studio visit, a friend identified a conundrum with text-based art. "As soon as you've finished reading the text," they said, "it feels like you're finished with the piece."

I think there is a lot of truth in that, and that's why you see contemporary text-based artists deploying various strategies to extend the viewer's experience beyond the purely semantic meaning of words. Ligon, for example, frequently uses illegibility. Kruger juxtaposes disjunctive images and texts. Holzer plays with timing, actively manipulating the very duration of reading. And they're not just extending experience, they're complicating our very expectations of reading.

**"Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven" also complicated expectations. You produced an exhibition of language-based sculptures and wall works that was essentially devoid of language.**

I've always wanted to create a body of work that is about language but doesn't rely upon words. Some might call this an interest in the paratextual aspect of language. This exhibition explored the materials, structures, and methods that form the support or background of language. And through the process, I realized just how tricky text was. How can you be critical of language without using it?

Many of the exhibition's works borrow formal aesthetics from conceptual art and American modernism. Your sculpture *How Many Pink Pearl Erasers would it Take to Create a Perfect Cube?* can hardly escape comparisons to Judd. *College Ruled* and *Wide Ruled*, your intersecting wall drawing pieces, clearly owe a debt to LeWitt. Are you influenced by these artists?

This body of work is deeply influenced by artists like Judd, LeWitt, even Agnes Martin. But at the same time I hope that my work comes across as playfully critical of modernist and conceptual art. Since graduate school I have struggled with the aesthetics of both conceptual art and modernism. What irks me about conceptual art, in particular, is that it presents itself as some intentionally-reductive non-aesthetic. And it is anything but that!

**It can definitely be cold and clinical, I'll give it that.**

Exactly, which is, in actuality, a very calculated aesthetic. Thereby, the claims of objectivity or a "non-aesthetic" in conceptual art are inherently problematic. Further, it's synonymous with a specifically straight white male history of conceptual art. I've always been critical of that lineage, and of that posturing. That's why I'm playful with those standards. In my work, you'll often find aspects that are absurd—stupid even—that I hope upend the stranglehold that the canon has on artists working today.

**Which parts of your process feel the most absurd to you?**

I think my work is conceptually absurd. For example: figuring out how many erasers it would take to create a perfect cube, and then actually making it; or, creating lead casts out of unrecognizable, aberrated pieces of Alpha-Bits cereal. And other works were, practically speaking, inordinate wastes of time. Consider *Composition Notebook Pattern*—it is practically absurd to spend dozens of hours enlarging and retracing a pattern that was originally produced digitally and industrially. I'd call it stupid, even. Sometimes it doesn't even take artistic skill!

**Ha! Don't be so hard on yourself, Joel!**

Of course, I'm half-joking.

**What are your working definitions of "absurd" or "stupid"?**

I've settled on this framework: absurdity and stupidity are just labels for things that don't fit within the dominant ideological paradigm. Some of the most brilliant and challenging cultural works share this investment in absurdity. For me stupidity is the street version of absurdism.

**Beyond the absurd, and perhaps in spite of the clinical, "Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven" felt subversively intimate, emotional even. What are your personal memories of learning how to properly use the English language?**

I went to a small conservative Christian elementary school. Unsurprisingly, grammar and language arts were a focus. Formative early experiences included diagramming sentences, memorizing Bible verses, or hand-copying vocabulary words in detention—language as a form of punishment. This bred in me a real ambivalence towards language. While I love language, I grew up hating it. And in some ways, I still do. Language always seems to embody two incongruous things at once; it is powerful but incredibly fragile, expansive but also reductive. Mining those memories, and feeling them in the present moment, coalesced into

what is absolutely the most autobiographical body of work I've ever made.

**Tell me a little more about *Composition Notebook Pattern*. What is your relationship to those ubiquitous classroom objects?**

Growing up, all my writing assignments were done in those Mead brand journals with the distinctive marbled, almost monochromatic camouflage pattern on the cover. Conceptually, I connect this distinctive visual pattern with the structural patterns of writing. Repeating vocabulary words, copying perfect letterforms, and crafting the perfect sentence are all a mimicry of given semantic and grammatical patterns.

**The wall piece *Untitled* (*Trix™*) and the miniature sculptural collection *Unrecognizable Letter Forms* (*Alphabits™*) activated cereal-based memories from my own childhood: preparing for school, binging Saturday morning cartoons. But I'm also remembering pining for certain brands I either wasn't allowed to have because of the sugar content or that my family wouldn't buy because of the price tag. I hadn't previously considered how significantly those associations are imprinted in my mind.**

Growing up my mom was very health conscious so getting to eat sugar cereal was rare. Every year for my birthday my parents would take me to the store and I could pick out any sugar cereal I wanted. They would then wrap up the cereal as a birthday present. To this day, eating sugar cereal feels like some taboo thing. I've likely fetishized it in some way which is why it seems to keep coming up in my work.

Trix was always one of my favorite cereals. For that piece, I was drawn to the dramatic dimensionality of the branded letterforms. Sugar cereals have amazingly strong brand identities, with characters complete with their own mythologies and catch phrases. "Silly rabbit, Trix are for kids". For me, it all comes back to the role of language on these boxes. I would sit there eating cereal while reading and re-reading every square inch of those boxes. Cereal boxes were a significant part of my linguistic education.

**Is it important for viewers to understand just how personal in scope this body of work is?**

Curiously, no; I don't actually consider these autobiographical back stories terribly integral to fully experiencing the work. Of course, the stories are my personal context for the pieces, the motivation driving their production. But I suppose that I am paradoxically modernist in a sense; I want the pieces to exist in their own time and space, to elicit discreet connections from individual viewers. If too much autobiographical information enters the exhibition space, I worry that it risks truncating potential interpretations embedded within the work. So, by using ubiquitous, familiar materials like pencils, erasers, and paper, it becomes more likely that a viewer will be able to connect personally with the works by considering their own histories using these pedagogical materials.

**The English language derives heavily from Latin, the precursor to romance languages. But unlike romance languages, English is traditionally said to have few instances of grammatical gendering—save, obviously, for pronouns. Do you think of English as gender-neutral?**

While it's true that English doesn't grammatically gender its nouns, every language always carries traces of the physical body. This includes our constructions and biases around our bodies, just like gender. Take, for example, fundamental binaries like *man* and *woman*. These belie a "default" or "normalized" term, which is often the unmarked word of the pair—in this case *man.* Unfolding from that is the vast number of English words—mankind, man-made, manpower— where man is the default for humans at-large.

**You're saying that the gendering is hidden in plain sight.**

Yes, exactly. Now, in a way, I'd actually prefer dealing with systems whose problematic elements are clearer, more apparent. Of the romance languages, I'm most familiar with French. And the French are extremely proud of their language; they protect it fiercely through institutions like the Académie Française, a formal council concerned specifically with matters pertaining to their language. As you might expect though, there are certainly movements to de-gender the French language. The systems of power—the gendering—are much more apparent in French and therefore easier to critique. In English, the structural inequities of the language are much more difficult to expose because they are so normalized, so hidden and buried.

One of the primary goals in my work is to unearth and expose the default systems of power in the English language. Those systems are so insidious that they've become omnipresent, and thereby normalized. Power disguises itself as normative, default. But there is always a history to uncover, one revealing that systems of power are anything but neutral.

**If the power systems in the English language are already hidden through normalization, why not make work that's more direct, more explicitly critical?**

The ideological power of language itself is potent and pervasive, but also rather quiet. I feel like my work needs to aesthetically consort with, and within, these more subtle forms of power. The objects I'm producing intentionally opt for the slow burn. Don't get me wrong, I do appreciate loud work, and at times I even wish my own work had a sharper edge. But what's always truly resonated with me is art that is quieter, that buries itself in your mind. I aspire to make work that a viewer could chew on for a couple of years, finding new meanings over and over again.

**Do you think that text will eventually find its way back into the work?**

Text will always be a primary aspect in my work, but at the moment I am still excited by these paratextual phenomena that are absent of literal text. I've been a bit obsessed with the edges of books, both as these formal indexes of a text and because of their physical construction. I've continued to play with rules, as in lines on paper. "Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven" absolutely opened up several new directions for my studio practice. It is curious how the absence of words can make the power of language more palpable and present.

# DAVID B. SMITH
## GALLERY

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