

Antoine Catala: *alphabet*
By Nina Wolpow

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Antoine Catala, *alphabet* (detail), 2020. TPU-Polyester, vinyl tubing and ventilator pumps, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Photo: Joerg Lohse.

The French artist Antoine Catala has made breath and language the tether points of *alphabet*, his latest show, on view now at 47 Canal. The show consists of 26 sculptural renderings (all made in 2020) of each letter in the Roman alphabet according to the internet font Noto Sans. Constructed from coarse black polyester of the sort used for inflatable camping pillows, the letters are attached, respectively, to 26 lung-like apparatuses, which ventilate according to a server running a program Catala wrote. At a given moment, this program leaves a handful of letters silent and unmoving, while others swell and emit the groan of mechanical inhalation, and still others wheeze asthmatically, deflating and going limp. The result is an unnerving, paradoxically disjointed symphony: a soundtrack of failed meaning.

Google, and its parent company, Alphabet Inc., own Noto Sans. The Noto font families are named for their imperative to remove the square boxes, called “tofu,” that appear when one computer or another cannot read a character—“no tofu” became “noto.” Figuratively and literally, Catala’s forms blow up, and thus comment on, this mission of

intense legibility—by constructing convalescent letters, Catala challenges Google’s conflation of a glitch-less existence with freedom or prosperity as the enfeebled font makes a mockery of itself. *alphabet* evinces the conundrum that perfected semiotic systems overlook the human, psycho-significatory process that is uniquely able to activate language—more able, in fact, than a machine—and further, to enable speech.

Regarding the 26 elements of *alphabet* is simultaneously a restrictive and panoptic experience. The letters are hung in order, on three adjacent temporary walls; consequently, one can either stand back to apprehend—both visually and acoustically—the full suite, or, approaching and thus aligning oneself with a single element, try to conceive of its relationship to the others. Turning to take in an inflating “d,” for example, one might catch out of the corner of one’s eye the flagging tail of “r” and wonder if the two are in significatory cahoots, as might be the case with a three-dimensional Ouija board. Then “a” might respire, and so on, producing a dizzying, somewhat paranoia-inducing schematic. The human brain wants to isolate meaning and sense, but these are signs in vegetative states. Any hint of vigor is a trick, a trompe l’oeil of mechanical intervention.

It is impossible to discuss *alphabet* without stating the obvious fact that artificial respiration, and respiration in general, is troublingly of-our-time, and it may be pointless to underscore the fact that Catala conceived of his ventilator-like machines (importantly, these are artworks, not effective medical instruments) before the onset of the pandemic. Art is, as we know, perennially affected by the circumstances into which it is introduced.



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Furthermore, the politics of breathing, as well as the larger, intersectional discourse of who owns language, both prefaced and presaged the punishing effects of COVID-19. But where the affect of *alphabet* is somewhat animate, its aesthetics are patently inhuman. Catala’s letters are not beings—they are technology, and there is a compelling fatuousness to their intensive care environment, a doubling down on invention that verges on absurd.

This is manifest in *s* (2020), a standalone and particularly convincing component of the show. Slumped on the floor of a smaller secondary gallery, *s*, whose fabric resembles a discarded tangerine rind, is rigged up to two breathing devices rather than one, and writhes pathetically as each starts and stops in turn. Why Catala chose to isolate this particular letter is not abundantly clear, though one can proffer ideas: “s” enables plurality, and looks like a snake or a curled human body. But the preposterousness of its isolation and its luxurious convalescence is a beautiful exemplification of technological and corporate overindulgence. Lying there alone, enabled doubly by artificial breath, *s* conveys the Frankensteinian irony that there is danger in tinkering obsessively with that which is necessarily flawed. The prospect of uncompromising semiotic transparency is ghastly for a reason: in such a state, even language that appears to be living is dead.