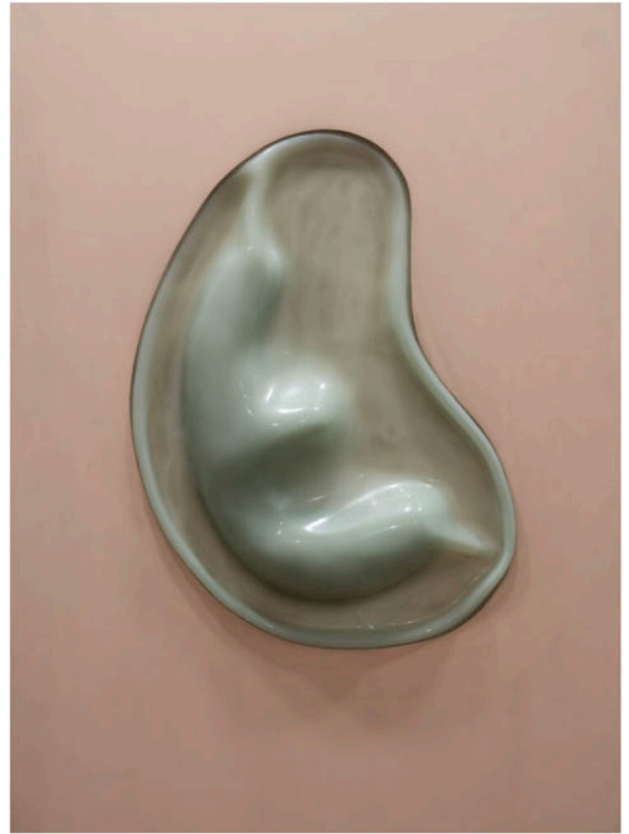


VISUAL ART

## Antoine Catala: Babble, Babble at art hall

A Decade of the New-York-Based French Artist's Work Bellows in a New Baltimore Art Venue

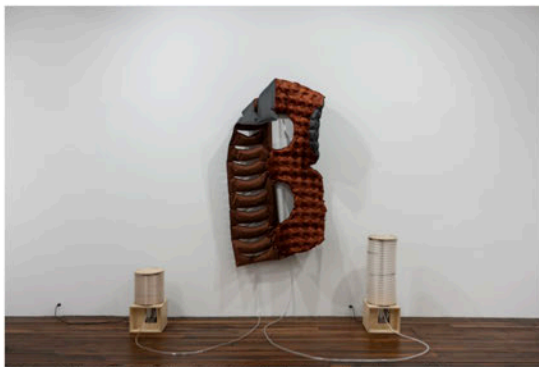
September 3, 2024  
Words: [Kristen Hileman](#)



With *Babble, Babble*, a provocative gathering of a decade's worth of his work, Antoine Catala (Toulouse, France, b. 1975) powerfully orchestrates a dystopic display of language as a failed tool for human understanding and community. The New York-based artist also establishes that rather than a technological gimmick, animating sculpture with sound and movement can be a poignant strategy for eliciting emotion, empathy, and serious thinking around visual forms and the content they carry. The not-to-miss show is on view at [art hall](#), a new, independent venue for contemporary art in Baltimore, during July and September.

When I walked into the first room of Catala's project, I was self-conscious and unnerved, feeling my breath slowly sync to the "breathing machines" supporting the sculptures

around me. A floppy letter “B” drooped on a wall like a deflated pool raft executed in tasteful shades of brown and grey plastic—a do-it-yourself, dollar store Richard Tuttle. Nearby, a flare of life-preserver orange outlined a plastic “X” marking a spot on the ground. Both inflatable forms were fed by clear tubing, which in turn connected to surprisingly delicate bellows. These pumps were distributed two per letter, flanking each, like lungs split apart and laboring to expand and expel enough to fill each alphabetic character.



Antoine Catala, B, 2024TPU-backed fabric, vinyl tubing and custom ventilator pumps. Image courtesy of Vivian Doering and art hall



Antoine Catala, X, 2023 (detail)TPU-backed fabric, vinyl tubing and custom ventilator pumps. Image courtesy of Vivian Doering and art hall

Mechanical and emphatically loud, the pumps appeared to work against each other. As soon as one pushed air into a shape, the other sucked the life out such that the “B” lifted and lowered its corner in ongoing meager salute. And the “X,” in a kind of cute but vapid way, scrunched its legs, endlessly skittering in one direction and then the other. Sized and deployed so closely to human scale and posture, the letters evoke the simultaneously stuffed and hollow men of T.S. Eliot’s famous poem—conceived at

another moment in history when things had gone profoundly off the rails—promising a world ending not with a bang but a whimper.

Art historically, Catala's pieces recall Hans Haacke's work of the late 1960s. Before moving into full-fledged institutional critique, Haacke explored effects of natural forces and interactions within biological systems by creating sculptural microcosms. His most well-known is "Condensation Cube," a clear acrylic box containing a small amount of water that formed drops and rivulets as the number of human bodies, light sources, and other factors in the gallery around it caused fluctuations in temperature and humidity. Catala's sculptures more closely resemble Haacke's 1969 piece "Circulation," a network of transparent tubes snaking across a gallery floor through which a pump injects air and water.

But where Haacke's early works encouraged a sensitivity to interdependencies among natural elements, the potential for collective human impact, and the possibility of unexpected and infinite variation (could a condensation pattern ever repeat?), Catala's sculptures are relentless, closed systems, unaffected by the presence of gallery visitors and regulated by digital programs buried invisibly within their apparatus. Haacke's pared-down aesthetic was one that admitted aspirational thinking about reparative interactions between people and their environment. Although volumetrically depleted, Catala's

plastic surfaces and unseen code are resistant to breaking down and unable to reform into a more constructive set of actions.



Installation view of Antoine Catala's "Babble, Babble" at art hall, Image courtesy Vivian Doering and art hall

Catala's field of inquiry is also language, a complex topic that, whether seen as a natural, technological, or hybrid phenomenon, shifts us from Haacke's broadly ecological inquiries into the realm of human relations...and with the advent of large language models, the relationships between people and the artificial intelligences they seek to build. Of course, the art of the 1960s and 1970s provides instructive references in the arena of language too. Catala's visually arresting color choices tuned to consumer palettes are akin to those in the textual works of Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, and Bruce Nauman. But they also

appear as lonely balloons that have floated away from their context when compared to the imagistic phrases, philosophical propositions, and aggressive cadences of those precedents.



Antoine Catala, A (++), 2018 (detail)aluminium stand, silicone rubber, electronics, pump, solenoid valves, Image courtesy of Vivian Doering and art hall

Not at all to diminish the visual quality of Catala's work, but rather to emphasize the gloomy and provocative purposefulness behind his choice of materials, the cold, uniform plastic skins that he "sculpts" hold none of the flickering artistry of Kosuth's or Nauman's neon fabrications, suggesting an evolving visual and tactile impoverishment of the consumer landscape. The glowing neon of conceptual art gave way to the hard and shiny



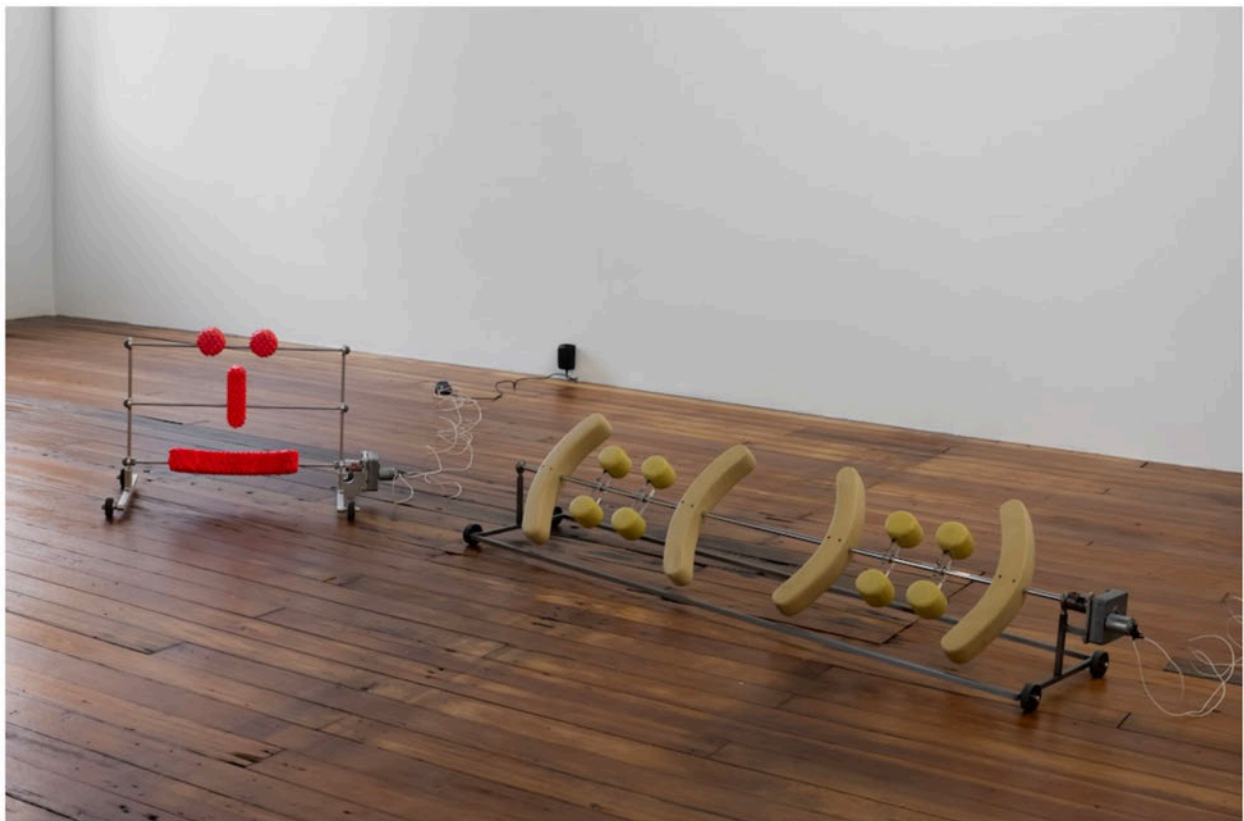
play of reflections in Jeff Koons's art starting in the 1980s, and now Catala produces copious sheathes of non-biodegradable matte surface that require all too much effort to gain buoyancy. Is it that Catala's sagging single letters want to signify but can't commit fully to the form required to attract companions and make meaning? Or, are they mindlessly content to claim space and consume resources as they babble away in isolation?



Installation view of Antoine Catala's "Babble, Babble" at art hall, image courtesy of Vivian Doering and art hall

Other works in the exhibition broaden the artist's bleak outlook on the state of language and communication in the first decades of the twenty-first century. As I ascended a staircase to the second floor of the exhibition, I was immersed in the gurgles and cries of an infant, trying to

express its desires prior to participating in the standardized system of language that its parents (or other figures of authority and care) employ. This soundscape announced Catala's engagement with a certain lineage of French linguistic and psychoanalytic theory, which, with the hope of being helpful and brief, I will summarize as being important in making more evident the power structures that shape social norms and institutions. Not just expression, but the formation of (and limitations on) our identities and behavior occurs through language according to this school of thought. So when Catala meditates on the emptiness of language today, he is also calling into question contemporary personhood, including the abilities to realize the fullness of our own nature and to understand the true nature of others.



Similar to bodily organs or sex toys, one pink and one black silicone phallus mounted on pedestals throb to the same monotonous pumping as Catala's letters. The color here was adeptly selected to advance a critique of the sexualized and racialized conventions of language which rigidly differentiate and classify people, embedding oppressive hierarchies in the words and phrases we use on a daily basis. With the artist so explicitly bringing sex into his considerations, a close-by "Y" inflatable invited chromosomal interpretation as a mate to the "X" downstairs, raising the polarizing question of whether we should trust scientific categorization or suspect that it too is infected with a language problem. There is an existential phonetic leap to be made with this piece as well, once the visual "Y" is intoned as the verbal "why."

Emoticons are another category of study for Catala. A small phalanx of low-to-the-ground, wheeled sculptures contain punctuation marks turning on metal spits. In ":-) (smiley)," 2021, a muted, rubbery red curving bracket rotates from smiley to frowny position. As the bottom of the curve hits the floor, it propels the whole of its "face" forward, and then after an interval, reverses and pulls itself back into the corner of the room. Similarly, "(::():::) (band-aid)," 2014, is a wandering bandage comprised of a quadruplet of textual faces that seek an unspecified wound.





Antoine Catala, :-) (smiley), 2021Foam coated in plastic, motor, steel, plastic, electronics, power supply, Image courtesy Vivian Doering and art hall

Some have celebrated emoticons and emojis as delivering an Esperanto of pictures that transcend language barriers and convey an array of feelings that words cannot completely capture. But that is far from Catala's conclusion. His desultory affect machines suggest a lazy interchangeability to texted and posted emotions—our investment in happiness and sadness, approval and rejection, is superficial and fleeting. And in contemplating the abrasions caused as the emoticon elements repeatedly drag themselves along the floor, I imagined that the constant activity of liking and un-liking could grind to dust the universe of feelings ostensibly at the origins of these signifiers. Catala's contribution to the critical discourse he invokes is to prompt us to ponder language in a digital age, compelling an examination of social media and other online communication, as well as a future where

search functions, text generation, and concepts of creativity stem from technology that has been trained on a vast pre-existing corpus of language thoroughly seeded with biases and ideologies.

Catala pushes on both intellectual and emotional levers throughout the exhibition, but I was most affected by two works that strongly conjured the vulnerability and strangeness of the human body. One, made in 2018, presented the letter “A” as a quivering rubber pancake attached to electrical wires. Diminutive in comparison to Catala’s inflatables, the “A” lay askew on a clinical stand. The small form’s trembling placed it at risk for sliding to the floor...the start of our alphabet and the first step of preschool reading lessons was on the verge of tumbling to its end.

The final work, a bruised pink monolith installed on the ground floor, struck me even more viscerally. As a refrigeration unit violently hummed, a torso-sized beige bean implanted in the column rumbled; its shell collapsing inward for several seconds to reveal the exaggerated contours of a human embryo. While not fully successful in compressing the awesome and abject qualities of pregnancy and gestation into a single visual statement, this piece did chillingly suggest the way that even such a private, deeply pre-linguistic state is already politicized, not only because of conflict over reproductive rights (which has become only more dire since the piece was made in 2014) but because the embryonic body it represents will

inevitably be born into a socio-political landscape that constrains what it can become.



Antoine Catala, B, 2024TPU-backed fabric, vinyl tubing and custom ventilator pumps, image courtesy Vivian Doering and art hall



Antoine Catala, Logo to Me and the Others Breathing, 2014, powder coated aluminum, silicone rubber, pump, pressure sensor, electronics75 x 26 x 8 in., image courtesy Vivian Doering and art hall

**Postscript:** When I visited Catala's show in early July, I felt that the noisy, monotonous respirations of his exhibition perfectly suited the summer of 2024, with its stalemated presidential rematch, tech bro bravado, and oppressive, record-breaking heat. Sitting down to write about the exhibition a couple of weeks later, I am moved by how that context has been disrupted. While the inertia of big systems entwined with language—technology, economics, politics, etc.—remains formidable, something historic happened with the withdrawal of President Biden from the upcoming election and the candidacy of Vice President Harris.

Catala's work provides a fascinating lens through which to consider this change. President Biden's withdrawal followed a debate in which he stumbled in delivering the chirpy rehearsed language expected of today's politicians. This failure of language is of a different type than that which concerns Catala. Biden's inarticulateness exposed the complex humanity normally masked behind political rhetoric. It also triggered a generational (and hopefully generative) transfer, giving a prominent platform to a younger voice to which many are turning for new formulations of language and policy. Isn't it quite sinister then, that the Vice President's critics have set about attacking her laugh, undermining the very tone in which she will be speaking, delegitimizing her voice in advance of it proclaiming words, and trying to hollow out the possibility of new speech so that the cycles that Catala so perceptively critiques can continue.

***Babble, Babble* opened on June 29 at art hall, 101 East 21st Street. The venue is closed during August, but reopens on September 1, with Catala's show continuing until September 28. art hall is open by appointment only; contact [info@arthall.art](mailto:info@arthall.art) to schedule.**