

Antoine Catala

alphabet

October 15–November 21, 2020

“In the 16 years I have lived in the US, I have met very few happy Americans. Yet this is the place that generates most of the tools behind our modern modes of communication.”—Antoine Catala

alphabet, Antoine Catala’s fourth solo exhibition at 47 Canal, features inflatable sculptures representing the 26 letters of the Roman alphabet. In the front room, letters are arranged in conventional alphabetical order around the gallery walls. Each letter is approximately 30 inches wide and fabricated out of fabric conventionally used for inflatable neck pillows and camping sleeping pads. Each is attached to a bellows that acts as a ventilator. This inflates and deflates each letter intermittently, animating them as if they are breathing. Temporary walls have been built to produce the enclosed space in which the sculptures are installed.

The exhibition explores Catala’s ongoing concern with miscommunication. Following a series of artworks addressing language, incorporating rebuses and emojis, this new body of work returns to the written word. Nothing, however, is written. Catala’s longstanding interest is in the tools that facilitate communication, rather than the messages these tools create. As each letter contracts, it crumples an abstract, indeterminate shape, evoking fragility and pathos. Meaning and affect are generated kinetically. The installation ruminates on language’s inherent failures and playful rebirths.

Writing tools are never neutral. Lately, in 2015, the U.S. conglomerate Alphabet Inc. was formed, becoming the parent company of Google and the tech giant’s former subsidiaries. Alphabet Inc. epitomizes the current climate, driven by digital technology, in which communication is financialized—a networked condition that some commentators have termed “semicapitalism.” With a sense of rhythmic, trancelike drama, *Alphabet* explores language beyond its linguistic functions, investigating, through metaphors of expansion and contraction, a more sentient economy of communication. The letters in *Alphabet* are dynamic three-dimensional renderings of the typeface Noto Sans, a web font designed by Google and available through the Google Fonts repository.

In an adjacent room is a parallel group of letter sculptures. These artworks are larger, and are presented as single, autonomous letters in different colors. They are installed directly on the gallery’s floor. The wheezing ventilators attached to each sculpture appear to sing together, asynchronously, through the walls of the two rooms. The unlikely chorus reminds us of the material reality of immaterial technologies, and their symbiotic relationship with body and mind.

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Antoine Catala (b. 1975) lives and works in New York City. Solo shows include *Jardin Synthétique à l’isolement* at Musée D’Art Contemporain, Lyon; and *Distant Feel* at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh. In 2019 his work was included in *May You Live in Interesting Times*, the 58th Venice Biennial. Catala’s works have also been exhibited at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.; MOCA Cleveland; Whitechapel Gallery, London; the High Line, New York; the Fridericianum, Kassel; and at MoMA PS1, New York, among other galleries and institutions. His works are included in several public collections including the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Centre Pompidou, Paris; FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims France; Musée d’Art Contemporain de Lyon, France; and the Whitney Museum of Art, New York.