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Diploma Thesis

Lettermania

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Abstract

The work explores the physical staging of typography as a direct counter-measure to the dematerialization of language in the era of Large Language Models (LLMs). While algorithms effortlessly process human words as invisible, frictionless tokens, this project originates from a contrasting sense of personal and semantic exhaustion to forge legible, "meaningful" artistic statements. Drawing conceptual grounding from the meta-linguistic poetry of Cia Rinne¹ and the philosophy of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO)², the installation transforms the artist's creative block into a monumental physical obstruction. By mass-producing typographic forms in plaster and Styrofoam, and tangling them in heavy industrial chains, the work deliberately severs the bond between signifier and signified. What results is a "landfill" of exhausted vocabulary: an unreadable, spatial intervention where letters abandon their communicative duty to exist simply as raw, stubborn matter.

Introduction

We are currently experiencing the ultimate dematerialization of language. In the era of Large Language Models (LLMs), human words are consumed by billions, severed from their physical and emotional origins, and converted into invisible statistical tokens stored on remote servers. This work does not propose a new way of reading, but rather a physical mechanism of friction against this digital overload.

The unofficial title and conceptual anchor of this work, "I am very miserable about sentences," is borrowed from a sound-poetry piece of Cia Rinne³ (and by extension, Gertrude Stein). However, it also serves as a personal confession. Recently, I have found myself exhausted by the mechanics of semiotics, struggling to forge clear, "meaningful" artistic statements. This installation takes that shared frustration literally. Rather than forcing language to make sense, I am forcing a collision between semiosis and tactility, turning my own semantic block into a physical object. Similarly, Rinne playfully treats sentences as autonomous entities that can be exhausted, arbitrary, or complete failures.

¹ Domokos, J. (2021, December 17). Verbal and technical media in the multilingual poetry of Cia Rinne. *Fabula*. <https://doi.org/10.58282/colloques.7418>

² Harman, G. (2018). *Object-Oriented Ontology: A New Theory of Everything*. Pelican Books.

³ ERRATUM MUSICAL. (2024, March 10). Cia Rinne - I am very miserable about sentences [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aq9jefkar2A>

1. Theme: Dematerialization of Language

The central theme of this work is the physical staging of language in direct opposition to its contemporary digital state. In our current era, language is undergoing a profound "dematerialization." This refers to a broader discourse in the digital era where language is increasingly treated as algorithmic data rather than a physical or spoken utterance.⁴ Large Language Models (LLMs) represent the peak of this shift; they divorce text from bodily experience by turning human words into statistical weights and vectors stored on servers. To the machine, a word has no weight or shadow, it is frictionless bits stored on servers. In direct opposition to this, my work acts as a mechanism of physical friction. By extracting typography from its traditional functions and casting it in plaster or Styrofoam, I am re-materializing the "token"⁵ into a "thing." The work attempt to force a collision between semiosis (the meaning) and tactility (the touch). However there is a stark irony here: while the machine effortlessly generates endless text, I have found myself increasingly paralyzed by the weight of a single sentence.

2. Evolution of the work

The development of this project occurred in several stages. It began with my 2024 Klausury project, which explored the intersections of miniature worlds, voyeurism, and observation through diorama-like settings. I initially planned to incorporate miniature figurines interacting with the text to create a sense of scale and narrative. However, upon reflecting on the relationship between the human body and the architecture of language, I abandoned the figurines to some extent. Using small figures created a metaphor where language was a structure they navigated, but it kept the viewer at a safe, voyeuristic distance. By removing the miniatures and scaling up the physical pile of letters, the viewer's own body replaces the figurine. The enormous letters no longer act as a miniature diorama, but as a direct, architectural intervention in the human-scale world.

3. Process and Means

The project employs a hybrid approach to sculpture, using traditional casting methods or Styrofoam model making integrated with ready-made elements.

⁴ Hayles, N. K. (1999). *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. University of Chicago Press.

⁵ A "token" refers to the basic unit of text processed by algorithmic models.

Casting & Finishing: The primary technique involves creating plaster molds to mass-produce the typographic forms and cutting Styrofoam to create giant letters.

Assemblage & Binding: These handcrafted elements are piled into a central mound, interwoven with heavy, rusted industrial chains. The chains physically bind the letters, visualizing the restrictive "syntax" and the command to "order a sentence" that Rinne speaks of. Giant Styrofoam letters also are attached to the window glasses to partially block the lights and create shadows.

Media Integration: A focal point of the pile is a functioning, obsolete CRT television monitor, buried within the letters displaying a textual video work created for this exhibition.

4. Context

This work situates itself at the intersection of contemporary sculpture, visual poetry, and semiotics. Meanwhile Cia Rinne's poetry serves as the conceptual bridge between the digital and the physical object. In her work "Sentences", she treats the structure of a statement as a site of potential failure, where logic often collapses under its own weight. My installation, *Lettermania*, takes Rinne's "disobedient" sentences and gives them a literal, physical gravity. If Rinne shows us that a sentence can be exhausted or arbitrary, this work demonstrates what that exhaustion looks like when it is cast in plaster and piled into a landfill of vocabulary.

Historical & Contemporary References: Historically, it draws on the Dadaist and Cubist incorporation of text into visual art. In the Czech and Eastern European context, the fringe tradition of visual poetry as outlined in the anthology *Třídít slova* (Sorting Out Words: Literature and Conceptual Tendencies 1949–2015) serves as a vital foundation for understanding text as an autonomous visual object.⁶ While conceptual artists like Joseph Kosuth used language to dematerialize the art object, my practice aligns closer to contemporary artists like Fiona Banner (who creates dense, physical, sculptural representations of text)⁷ or Xu Bing, specifically his monumental installations like *Book from the Sky*.⁸

⁶ Buddeus, O., & Magidová, M. (2016). *Třídít slova: Literatura a konceptuální tendence 1949-2015*.

⁷ Tate. (n.d.). 'Don't Look Back', Fiona Banner, 1999 | Tate. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/banner-dont-look-back-p78533>

⁸ Xu Bing 徐冰. (n.d.). INKstudio. <https://www.inkstudio.com.cn/artists/97-xu-bing/>

Structural Semiotics: This work is a physical deconstruction of the Saussurean model, where words are usually tied to specific meanings.⁹ By tangling these plaster letters into a chaotic, chained mass, I've broken that bond. What remains is the "signifier" without the "signified". Letters that can no longer be read as words, but only experienced as heavy, raw material.

Beyond semiotics, the work engages with Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO) which argues that objects have a reality that is entirely independent of human perception or use. In the digital realm, language is "human-centric"; it exists only to be processed, calculated, or read by us. But in my work, the letters are not necessarily a tool for human communication, but "beings" in their own right. The letters do not care if they are legible; they simply are, existing in a state of exhaustion and physical persistence that survives long after their meaning has failed. Thus, this connection to OOO allows the installation to be viewed not as a message to be decoded, but as an encounter with the "withdrawn" life of things.

5. The Installation

The final installation is situated in Sculpture 2 Studio. The core of the installation is a monumental, conical pile of white plaster letters dominating the center of the studio floor, resembling a landfill of exhausted vocabulary. Nestled at the peak of the pile, tangled in chains, is an old CRT monitor playing a looped video. Meanwhile, applied directly to the large glass studio windows, filtering the natural light, are large Styrofoam letters reading: I AM VERY MISERABLE ABOUT SENTENCES. Dozens of rusted steel chains radiate outward from the central pile, stretching across the room and anchoring onto the studio's radiators and the letters on the window. This creates a physical web that the viewer must carefully navigate, making the space itself feel trapped by the text.

6. Reflection

Through Lettermania, my intention was to shift language from something we effortlessly consume into something we must physically feel and navigate. However, the physical reality of this space and the phrase "I am very miserable about sentences" dominating the windows, is not just a theoretical nod to Cia Rinne. It deeply encapsulates my own current frustrations as an artist. Recently, I have found myself struggling with the immense pressure to construct "meaning," feeling bogged down by the mechanics of semiotics

⁹ Saussure, F. d. (1959). *Course in General Linguistics* (W. Baskin, Trans.). Philosophical Library. (Original work published 1916).

without being able to articulate a clear, meaningful message. In many ways, this project became a meta-artwork about that very personal journey. My inability to forge a legible artistic statement resulted in the creation of a literal roadblock of broken language. A physical monument to my own semantic exhaustion.

Because of this personal surrender to unreadability, I feel the work begins to touch upon the ideas of Object-Oriented Ontology in a highly practical, almost therapeutic way. Piled into a chaotic mass, the plaster and Styrofoam letters seem to assert a quiet autonomy from my own expectations as an artist. They are no longer efficient vehicles for human communication, but rather raw, stubborn materials that simply take up space, relieving me of the burden of "making sense."

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