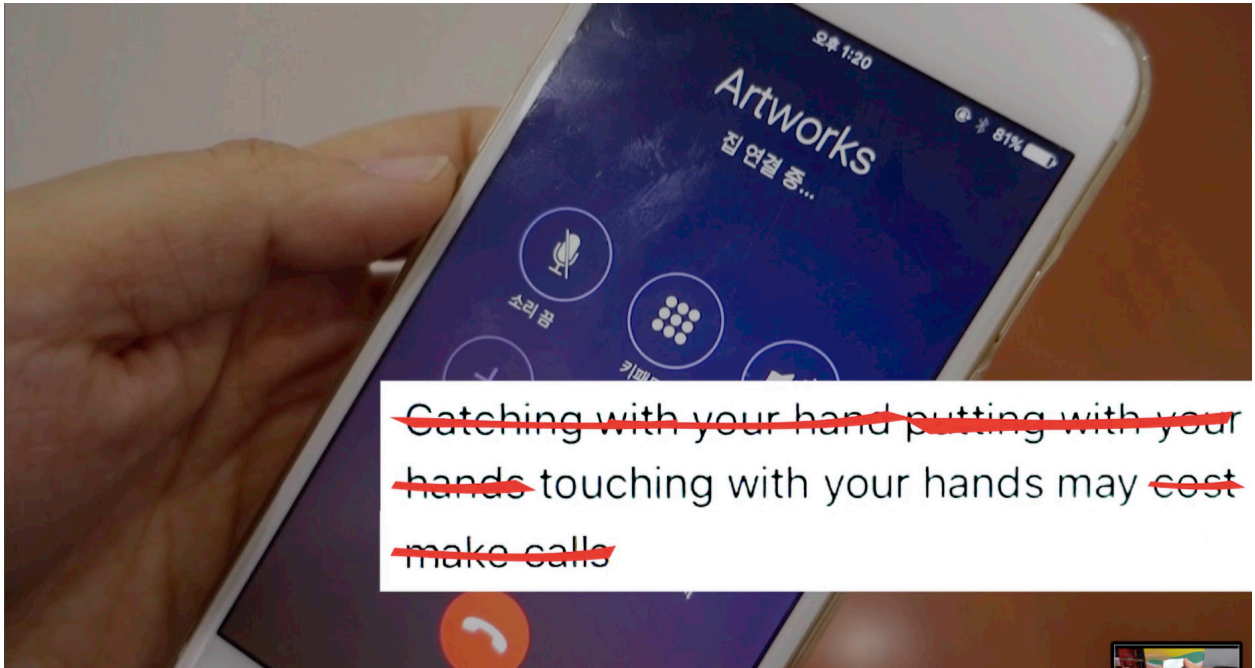


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Top: Suzanne Lacy with Meg Parnell, *Cleaning Conditions* (2013). Image courtesy of the artists and Manchester Art Gallery. Photo: Alan Seabright.

Bottom: Jisoo Chung, *Museum Manners for Siri* (video still) (2016). Single-channel video, 2 minutes and 42 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist and Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery.

constructed inside the ante-room, where interviews with 100 women had taken place. Interviews with the members of the advisory group were played over the speakers, with subtitles projected onto one of the studio walls and full transcripts available on nearby clipboards. Without relying on archival information, the display felt more accessible and direct. Here, the intention and instructions—on what to do and how to engage with the work—were clearer.

Socially engaged projects are notoriously difficult to document and translate for the context of an art exhibition. In these two attempts in Manchester, the Whitworth prioritized information and materials, and the result made the show's purpose feel opaque, while Manchester Art Gallery considered their audience and how *they* might interact with the materials. But while it may have been the more successful of the two, the Manchester Art Gallery installation still felt numb to the urgent themes presented therein. A static exhibition can never fully do justice to these kinds of projects. In socially engaged practices, people are both the subject and the medium, and there is no aesthetic way to represent them in all their beautiful, messy glory. The stories told in works like Lacy's often feel incomplete, and rightly so—they're not finished, but still evolving. Even after the work is ostensibly over, the participants, the artist, and our world remain in a state of constant change. All we'll ever get when this kind of practice is distilled into an exhibition is documentation

of a moment—a time capsule that immediately starts to age. If we must continue presenting this kind of work in institutions, we need to figure out a way for the exhibition to act as a locus for discussion and activity that goes beyond an affiliated public program. Without participation, Lacy's projects don't function, and in an exhibition format, it's needed to move the dialogue forward.

**(L.A. in Long Island)
Mis/
Communication:
Language
and Power in
Contemporary Art
at Paul W.
Zuccaire Gallery
November 11, 2021–
March 12, 2022**

“How many words does he say?” I was completely taken aback when my son's pediatrician asked me this during his two-year checkup. The previous year had been spent obsessing over Covid precautions—so the fact that he spoke a total of seven words hadn't occurred to me as an issue. Soon after this appointment, however, we began the long-drawn-out process of undergoing evaluations for him to qualify to receive New York State-sponsored speech therapy. After looking at my family, evaluators would question if any other languages were spoken at home. To this, I always retorted with a defensive and definitive “no.” While

some of my sharp reaction was mucked up with guilt for not speaking Korean to my son, it was more due to my suspicion that what was being projected onto us was the same “defect” that was ascribed to me growing up as a bilingual, ESL kid. In the wake of rampant anti-Asian violence in the United States, and with the knowledge that my skin determines my safety, I did not want language to become yet another reason our family was treated as if we do not deserve the right to exist and take up space in this country.

Mis/Communication: Language and Power in Contemporary Art, curated by Amy Kahng for the Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery at Stony Brook University, featured works by 15 contemporary artists that expose language as much more than a tool for communication. Language is a locus of power that impacts one's physical body, creating boundaries in space and access to capital. It possesses the capacity to create or erase collective memory. The exhibition offered a welcome reprieve, as I am still grappling with my son's speech-related needs. The artworks allowed my thoughts regarding language to rest upon something more concrete, rather than anxiously percolate inside of me.

Installed prominently near the center of the gallery was *Ashley* (2018), a leather-upholstered muffler by the Los Angeles-based, Korean-American artist Dahn Gim that emits a recorded voice of the artist and other women repeating “vroom, vroom.” The work is part of Gim's series

Names I Had You Call Me (2018) and the sculpture is titled for a name Gim once went by (other names the artist has gone by, such as *Erin* and *Catherine* [both 2018], are also represented in the show). While self-naming can be an act of empowerment, Gim's experience suggests a constant readjustment of her identity, whether fueled by the need to have a name that can be pronounced by Americans or an attempt to rewrite her narrative. Like the absurdity of hearing the onomatopoeic sound of a car rather than its actual sound, Gim's piece reveals the dissonance that forms within oneself through the language of naming.

Clarissa Tossin's *Vogais Portuguesas/Portuguese Vowels* (2016) further explores the gap between one's identity and language. A series of sugar sculptures made from molds that were cast inside of Tossin's mouth as she pronounced each of the Portuguese vowels, the work refers to the history of Indigenous people in Brazil who were forced to abandon their native tongues and adopt Portuguese in their daily lives. Tossin's sculptures show how language shapes our bodies, and her use of a mutable material suggests how with repetition, we may begin to lose the ability to speak our mother tongue, as we lose the muscle memory of how that language was spoken.

In *Museum Manners for Siri* (2016), a video work by Los Angeles- and Seoul-based Jisoo Chung, the artist reads the English-language rules posted at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Seoul, to Siri. The video shows Siri repeatedly misunderstanding Chung's

English pronunciation, resulting in a succession of errors as the AI technology attempts to transcribe her dictation—Siri confuses “artwork” with “Arbor,” and “step back” becomes “stab back.” Chung performs these mistranslated rules in her video, looking at a wooden column instead of an artwork, and stabbing the back of another viewer at the museum with a plastic fork, rather than stepping back from the artwork. In Kim Schoen's *The Horseshoe Effect* (2013), a young, professionally dressed white woman orates inside a strange room filled with the kinds of stone columns and mantels often seen in classical interiors. Speaking in sentences garbled with academic jargon, her monologue is nonsensical. Though these works have divergent origins, they both deal with language as a hegemonic barrier rather than a tool of communication and a source of access. In Chung's work, we see that the pervasive preference of “standard” English pronunciation is even coded into our technology. In Schoen's, though no content is being delivered, the speaker carries on with unwavering authority, insisting on her power even as there is no one there to listen.

Despite the exhibition's complex themes of power, Western hegemony, and colonization, an air of lightness and humor persisted. This makes sense, as humor stretches time—making space to linger and observe, especially in instances of failure, such as a breakdown in communication. As I walked out of the gallery, I detected a newfound liveliness to my gait. I thought to myself

that perhaps the antonym of miscommunication is not communication; perhaps the opposite of my son's imperfect speech is not perfect speech. I move on to a wider, open space—I knew this place before, but I am prone to forget—where a chorus of stories exists in our broken, intimate, sometimes secret tongues.