

# ART SPIEL

Contemporary Art and Culture

AUGUST 12, 2021 BY ART SPIEL

## Dream-Restart-Experience at PS122 Gallery

**Annette Cords and Becky Brown In Conversation**



*Dream-Restart-Experience Installation View, photo courtesy of Daniel AnTon Johnson*

The two-person show *Dream-Restart-Experience* at [PS122](#) features collaborative and individual works by Annette Cords and Becky Brown. The two artists' collaboration resulted in a wallpaper using three original alphabets, and vinyl lettering mounted on the gallery windows. Cords' tapestries interlace traditional weave structures with a twist—involving urban mark-making and found text. Brown's paintings embody artifacts of online culture while questioning their value. The show runs through August 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2021.

## Let's take a brief tour. What does the visitor see in *Dream-Restart-Experience*?

**BB:** Before entering the gallery space, viewers encounter our window installation, around the corner from 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue to 9<sup>th</sup> Street. Here, we produced vinyl lettering for individual windowpanes in three original fonts—one square and robotic, one curvy and voluptuous, and one adapting architectural motifs from the building and iron gate. One window bay displays a full alphabet, with upper- and lowercase letters, alternating between fonts, and harkening back to alphabet banners in classrooms, because PS122 was originally a public school.

**AC:** The fonts on the outside also set the stage for how our collaboration works. Becky had worked with squarish fonts previously, so I suggested she create another one for the show. As a contrast, I designed a rounded font with strong, curved negative spaces. This created a similarity in approach—we both used hand-lettering techniques—but a distinction in the outcome—in the look and feel of the fonts.



*Vinyl Lettering on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, photo courtesy of Daniel AnTon Johnson*



*East Gallery, Dream-Restart-Experience Installation View, photo courtesy of Daniel AnTon Johnson*

**BB:** Indeed, they appear to come from two different families or worlds, so they create a sharp juxtaposition side by side. When visitors enter the gallery, they discover paintings, tapestries, and works on paper in a wide range of sizes, punctuated and reframed by sections of wallpaper. We are interested in how wallpaper designs change with different degrees of repetition, so we often deploy it in a range of shapes and quantities. In the East Gallery, there is a 4-foot-wide strip behind a column, shadowing the architecture. Here, the pattern repeats only twice horizontally, while on the opposite wall, it continues around a corner in two larger sections. When one crosses into the adjacent gallery, the design covers an entire 20-foot foot wall, allowing the viewer to experience it at micro and macro levels—individual words and details, and an immersive pattern.

**AC:** The wallpaper is context- and site-specific in multiple ways. It allows us to emphasize architectural elements and move the viewer's eyes and body around the space. It also incorporates ideas we are currently working on individually, such as opposing word pairs. Placing our work next to and on top of it creates a connective tissue between our artworks and to the space. To me, it knits the show together.





West Gallery, Dream-Restart-Experience Installation View, photo courtesy of Daniel AnTon Johnson



West Gallery, Dream-Restart-Experience Installation View, photo courtesy of Daniel AnTon Johnson

**Tell me about your collaboration—the origin, idea, process.**



**BB:** Annette and I met as part of the inaugural Open Sessions program at The Drawing Center in 2014. Among a large group of artists, smaller groups were created based on shared interests—in our case, language. We were given a lot of freedom in how to organize an exhibition, which lead to discussions on bringing together diverse practices with some sense of logic and cohesion. We designed a shelving system to organize, reframe and connect our work. During those conversations, Annette threw out the idea of wallpaper, and it stuck with me and became a starting point for us when we collaborated on our own a few years later.

**AC:** Yes, I was curious what wallpaper would do to our work and to the space. Interestingly, it also became a vehicle for discussing ideas and decision-making: why include this and not that? What system will help us organize everything? What rules are we playing by?

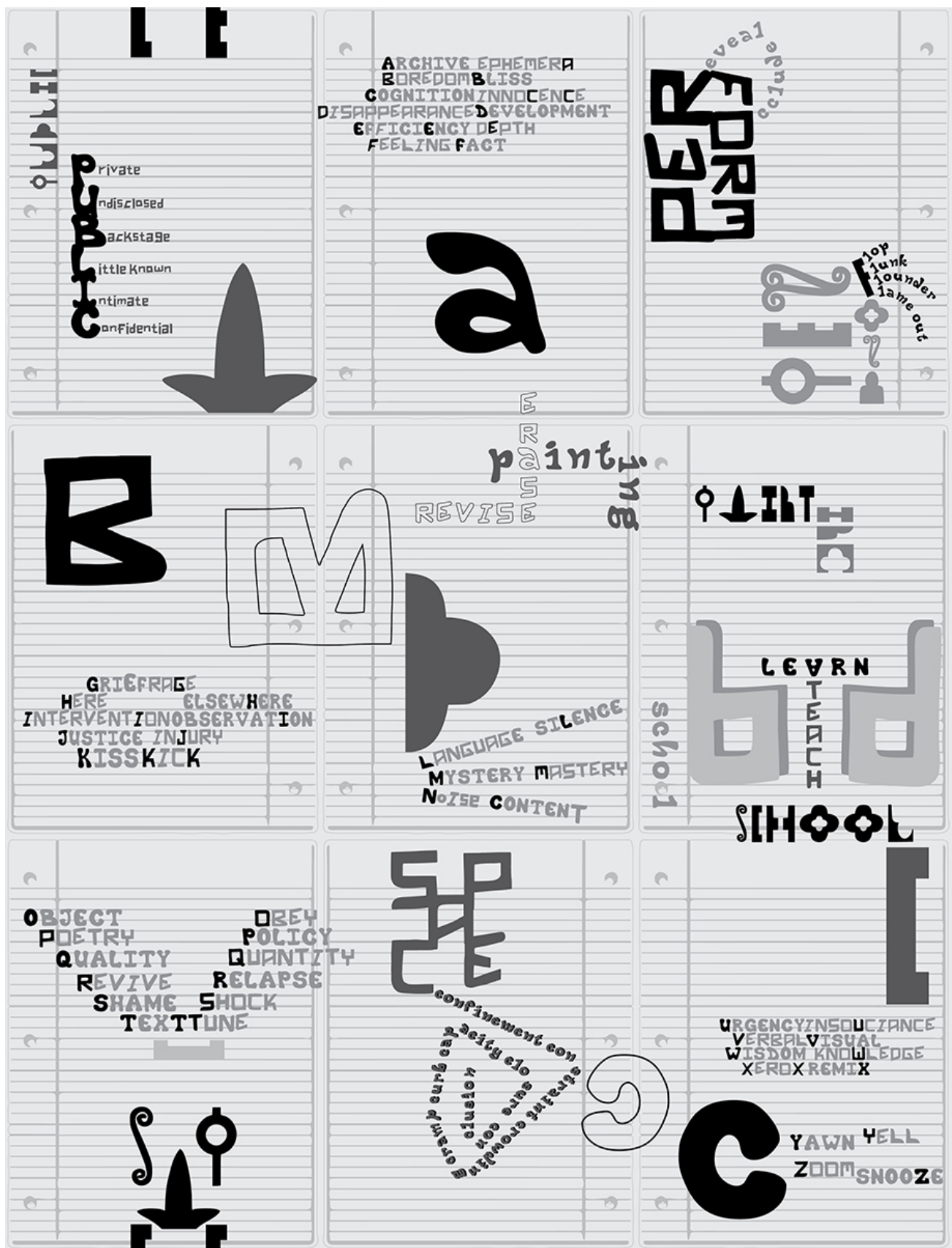
**BB:** We are interested in ways our collaboration exists alongside our individual work and presents opportunities to explore and elaborate. Working with Annette forces me to question some of my instincts as I explain (and sometimes defend) them to her, which deepens my own thinking.



**AC:** Our first collaboration was an exhibition including a wallpaper design, a panel discussion, and a publication, all grouped under the title *Cognition-Stroll*. This compound phrase is a literal English translation of the German word *Erkenntnis Spaziergang*, a practice of going out to gain deeper insight while walking. I had shared a list of German compound nouns, along with their awkward and evocative translations, which Becky loved. Our current exhibition title is drawn from this same collection.

**BB:** The first wallpaper design drew on a shared pool of images we'd exchanged over three years—including the interior of a Brooklyn pizza parlor and a Le Corbusier building facade in Berlin—emphasizing geometric pattern through repetition and creating pathways for visual “walks” through the picture plane. This led to a second wallpaper design for a group show on the theme of walking, at Queens Museum and Flux Factory. *Dream-Restart-Experience* is our third collaboration, and our first time working with invented fonts.





*Dream-Restart-Experience, 2021, Wallpaper, dimensions variable, photo courtesy of Annette Cords*

**AC:** We created letterforms individually and brought them together into alphabets, words, and phrases. Letters spell out poetic opposites we generated together, as well as PS122's rotation of identifying P- and S-words: public, school, painting, performance, and space. There is an intense back and forth during the wallpaper design—exchanging

compositions, long Zoom sessions, sharing screens, and evaluating ideas. It's about coming up with something that is more than the sum of its parts, where  $1+1=3$ . I enjoy having Becky be the first viewer and responder to ideas I put out there. The collaboration becomes a game, like moving a ball down a playing field by tossing it back and forth.

**BB:** Yes, and the outcome is never predetermined from the start. When we get into the gallery, we install the wallpaper first—a physical two-person job that puts us in touch with the space. We then spend time with our individual works, anchoring large pieces and filling in/editing as we go, as though we are constructing a poem. It's important that our works are interspersed, so the viewer jumps from one “language” to the other, and back, in a kind of syncopated rhythm. We very much appreciate the relationships that form between individual pieces, the way single letters form words and words create sentences.



*East Gallery, Dream-Restart-Experience Installation View, photo courtesy of Annette Cords*





*East Gallery looking West, Dream-Restart-Experience Installation View, photo courtesy of Annette Cords*

**You are dealing with text. What was your approach to legibility and the notion of the narrative in this project?**

**BB:** Annette and I both work with text, in related but distinct ways. I often work with large collections of words, such as the apologies and away messages (inside the greeting card) in this show. Annette often focuses on a single word, phrase or pair that is more deeply embedded into a visual composition. We are both interested in the play between reading and seeing—how language is also seen, and images are also read.





Annette Cords: *Big Revival*, 2019, Jacquard tapestry, wool, cotton, metallic & synthetic threads, 66" x 68",  
photo courtesy of Annette Cords

**AC:** I am curious how we decipher information. Because words and text are considered clear and direct forms of communication, I often make them less legible and more obscure. This calls for closer and slower looking. On the other hand, elements such as weave structures appear to be purely visual. For a weaver, though, they are readable and carry meaning. Bringing these elements together in a tapestry creates a narrative. In *Big Revival*, I play with different degrees of readability. The words *Big* and *Revival* are legible; nested within them are weave structures readable to a weaver, but someone else will see them as abstract patterns. At the bottom right, I wrote a purposefully illegible phrase, liberating the words from their meaning. This back and forth between different modes of seeing and deciphering extends to symbols and images. The square with the X symbolizes an empty, unsecured building and contrasts the meaning of the legible words.



**BB:** Discussing the show with someone the other day, the square with the X took on another meaning for me—a box to check while filling out forms, usually online. In my work, specific text has become increasingly important in recent years. I find patterns in speech and writing, in a range of contexts—the news, the classroom, the kitchen table, the dinner party. The giveaway poster *Lost in the Digital Swamp* assembles New York Times headlines addressing current technological conditions and online life. I started the collection because I kept reading articles that articulated the dangers of technology so clearly, yet nothing seemed to change. I observed a frightening disconnect between language and action, as though the sheer volume of words on the subject renders them ineffectual and meaningless. The composition includes two original hand-painted alphabets, transformed by software into fonts. There are many fonts that resemble handwriting—another way “the system” impersonates human authenticity. I was interested in reversing that trend by injecting my painted letters—with all their irregularities—into my computer.

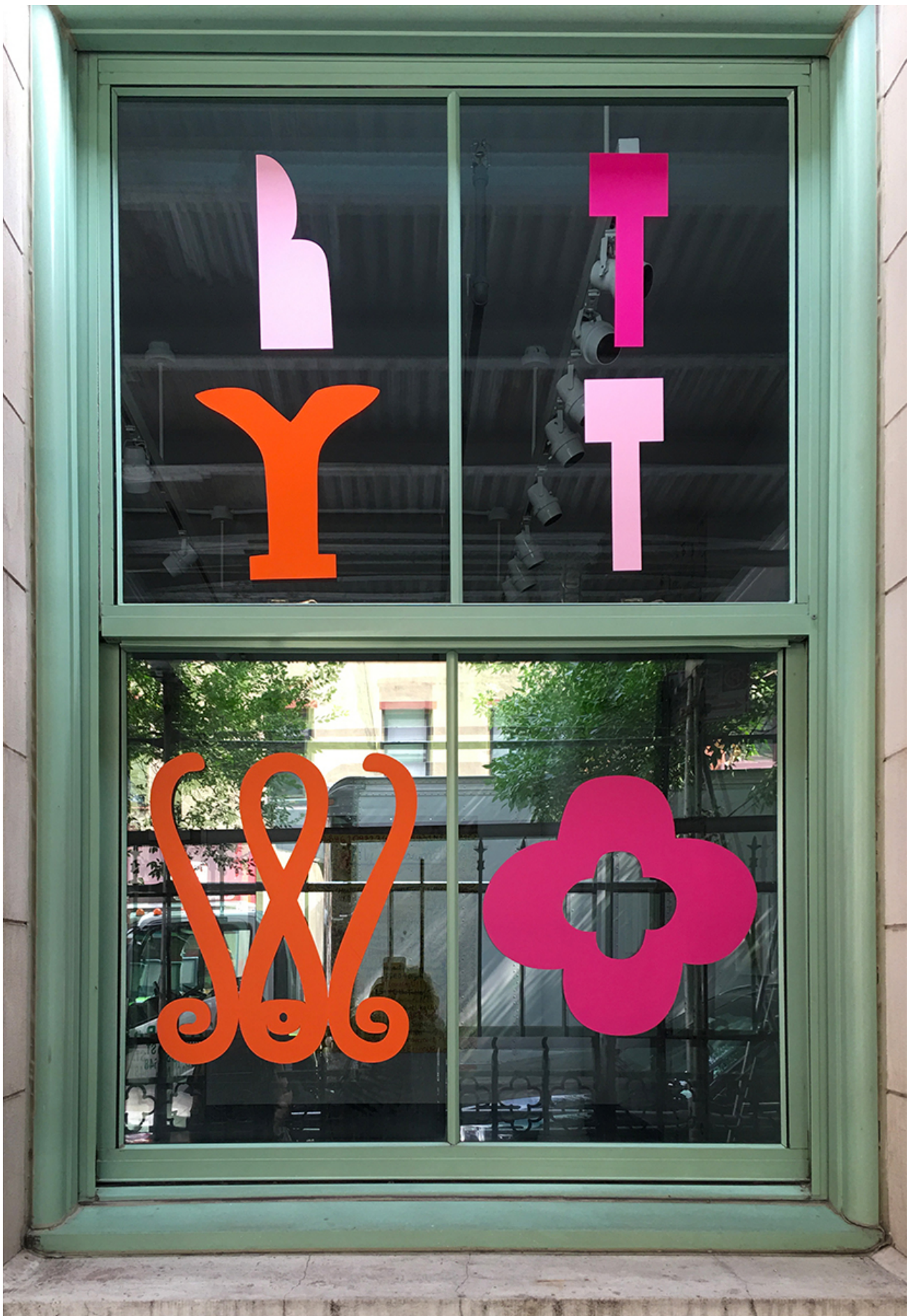
This Friendship Has Been Digitized. Human Contact as a Luxury Good. Luddites Shall Inherit the Earth. So the Internet Didn't Turn Out the Way We'd Hoped. Where Do We Go From Here? From Muzak to Netflix. The Roots of Big Tech Run Disturbingly Deep. Nothing Lasts Forever: My Quest to Imagine a Better Social Media Universe. The Great Streaming Space-Time Warp. Boy, Disconnected. Is Instagram Ruining Architecture? Meet Zora, the Robot Caregiver. Social Media and the Populist Moment. The Life and Death of the Local Hardware Store. We Hate Data Collection, but That Doesn't Mean We Can Stop It. The Real Cost of Tweeting About My Kids. If you're online (and, well, you are), chances are someone is using your information. How an Online Mob Created a Playbook for a Culture War. Your car Knows When You Gain Weight. Addicted to Screens? That's Really a YOU Problem. The Trauma of Revenge Porn. I'd Love a Dining car: The Sterile, Efficient Life of a Millennial/. There is No Tech Backlash. How to Be REAL on Instagram. Stop Surveillance Humanitarianism. Let's Wage a War on Loneliness. Can Democrats Compete with Trump's Twitter Feed? Live-Streaming Your Broke Self for Rent Money! Why Aren't We Curious About the Things We Want to Be Curious About? You've Been Clickbaited by Your Own Brain. Lost in the Digital Swamp. Free Speech is Killing Us. Are We Living in a Post-Happiness World? When the Internet Chases You From Your Home. The Age of American Despair. The Internet is Broken.



**Both the architecture and history of the PS122 space appear to play a role in your work. Can you elaborate in what ways?**

**AC:** Initially, we were not sure when the gallery would reopen following the pandemic. The director, Ian Cofre, suggested we consider a window installation. We thought alphabets would make a connection to the building's past as a public school, and that invented fonts could encourage a search for a new language, a reflection on how we might articulate a post-Covid future. As the visual components of language, letterforms are stepping-stones towards cognition, which felt important in this transitional moment for our city, and the world.

**BB:** The building's original iron fence creates a barrier between passers-by and the windows, so we decided to utilize its decorative motifs, along with architectural details on the building itself. One alphabet is composed entirely of these elements, and we hope this visual connection will call viewers' attention to details of the built environment that we tend to overlook in our daily routines. After a time of isolation during Covid, we also hoped to celebrate a return to street life and public space by creating a reason for passers-by to linger on this East Village corner.



Vinyl Lettering on 9<sup>th</sup> Street, Architecture Font, photo courtesy of Annette Cords



## How do you see this collaborative project in context of your overall collaborative work?

**BB:** This collaboration was an exciting new step for us, as our previous two wallpaper designs did not include text. At first, I worried that a wallpaper covered in text would be too much with our dense visual/textual works on top of it. But we kept open space in the composition, with the background of lined paper inviting viewers to imagine writing/drawing their own letterforms in relation to ours.

**AC:** I really wanted to create a text-based wallpaper, and in our initial discussions, we took different approaches. Becky was more concerned with specific words and their meaning, whereas I saw words more as visual elements. The wallpaper merges both approaches. For me, our collaboration is a way of posing questions and comparing notes. Language is an essential part of both of our practices, so why not look at it together? Articulating meaning in this particular time and place is reflected in the wallpaper and extends to our individual works.



Annette Cords: *All Letters in One Place 1 & 15*, Becky Brown: *Unfortunately & Human in the Loop*, photo courtesy of Annette Cords

**BB:** And we felt that despite its words, the wallpaper still functions as visual pattern and connective tissue, creating new meanings for existing works. Annette's series of

gouache drawings, *All Letters in One Place* are abstract compositions using the building blocks of language—circles, diagonals, straight lines and curves. They use a similar grayscale to our wallpaper, so it feels like pieces of the wallpaper have sprung out and reconfigured themselves into something new. My small painting *Unfortunately* is positioned partially on top of the wallpaper and appears to explode out of it—as if our alphabets again reconstituted themselves, this time gaining color and assembling into one repeating mantra.

**AC:** I am very happy with the way all the elements came together in the final installation. It is always a leap of faith because we never know how our work will converse specifically—you can only think it through so much in advance. Who would have thought that the back of my tapestry matches in color the inside of Becky's greeting card? Or that the vinyl letters on the windows cast shadows on the gallery floor? The fun part of putting it all together is realizing unforeseen connections, which in turn can lead to future collaborations.



West Gallery, *Dream-Restart-Experience*, photo courtesy of Annette Cords

**Annette Cords** was born in Northern Germany and raised in Hamburg. She received her MFA in Painting from the University of Pennsylvania. Since then, her practice has evolved to span installation, sculpture, and textiles. Her work explores the possibilities



of mark-making, examines language systems and vernacular styles, and asks how we process and interpret visual information. Recent solo exhibitions include Shape/Shifters, Project:ARTspace, New York; Breaking the Grid, Kang Contemporary, Berlin; Sideways, New York Public Library; and Diamond Days, Villa Rosenthal, Jena, Germany. Her work has appeared in group shows at venues including the Queens Museum, Flux Factory, The Drawing Center, Kentler International Drawing Space, and Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles. She has been the recipient of grants and residencies, including a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship, an Open Sessions Residency at The Drawing Center, and a grant from the ArsVersa Kunst-Stiftung.

**Becky Brown** was born in Manhattan and lives in Buffalo, NY. She received her MFA from Hunter College and teaches at SUNY University at Buffalo. Between painting, sculpture, and installation, she reinvents news headlines, discarded appliances and other found materials, questioning whether unlimited access to information and communication actually brings us deeper knowledge or human connection. Solo exhibitions include Arts+Leisure Gallery (NYC) and Fort Gondo Complex for the Arts (St. Louis). Group exhibitions include The Drawing Center, Queens Museum, Freight+Volume Gallery, A.I.R. Gallery, the Buffalo Institute of Contemporary Art, and Religare Arts Initiative (Delhi, India). Her installation *No, said the Fruit Bowl*, in the kitchen of an abandoned home on Governors Island, was described in the New York Times as “machines vomiting as if in a bulimic’s nightmare.” She has been an artist-in-residence at MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, Jentel, and the Edward Albee and Saltonstall Foundations, among others. Her writing has been published in Art in America and The Brooklyn Rail.

Annette Cords and Becky Brown met in the inaugural Open Sessions program at The Drawing Center in 2014 and have been collaborating ever since.

**Dream-Restart-Experience at PS122 Gallery runs through August 22, 2021 150 First Ave, New York, NY 10009**

 **IN CONVERSATION**

**#ARTSPIEL, #TODDBARTEL**

