

Two Coats of Paint

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[Gallery shows ▾](#)

[Museum Exhibitions](#)

[Ideas & Influences ▾](#)

[Interviews ▾](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Fiction](#)

[Screens](#)

[Gallery Guides ▾](#)

GALLERY SHOWS

Les Gommages: Becky Brown and Annette Cords at PS122

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Annette Cords and Becky Brown. *Installation view of Traumneustartversuch, Various materials and dimensions. 2021.*

Contributed by Axel Bishop / “*Traumneustartversuch*,” or Dream-Restart-Experience,” is a literal translation of a German compound word, describing the effort to continue a dream one had just before waking.* It is the title of the current, collaboratively constructed two-person exhibit now on view at PS122 by **Annette Cords** and **Becky Brown**.

Cords glyphic geometries are studies of formal possibility in the development of the new letter sets that the two artists have built their installation around. Altogether in series appearing in different parts of the exhibition, Cords glyph studies appear as something like a film leader common to early cinema, where a visual countdown leads to the start of a screening. The countdown also calls attention to the cyclical motion of the projector itself, used by projectionists for calibrating the timing of the film. Calibrations recur in “*Traumneustartversuch*” in a range of inventive ways that are influential to our looking and slowly coming to understandings, as if waking and beginning to assign language to itemize the liquid narrative of dream space. Resisting these assignments can be a way to stave off the evaporation of a dream, but image dynamics inevitably fall into the linear and symbolic generalities of identification. This show seems to experiment with the interplay of image-experience vs. knowing through written language.



Becky Brown, Social, 2021, collage and paint on paper

The vinyl letters in an array of typefaces invented by the artists (working separately but in close conversation), are affixed directly on windows around the gallery space. When your eyes adjust to the change in depth of field — of the plane of the floating letter to the space immediately outside — you recognize the “restart experience.” Details of the ironwork designs on the gate out front pull

forward here and there to emerge as a “W,” or an “O;” an endwall detail becomes an “E” and so-forth. We find the anatomy of language in the materials and shapes of our everyday environs.



Annette Cords and Becky Brown. Installation view of Traumneustartversuch, Various materials and dimensions. 2021

In contrast to this conjuring effect, the opposite is explored on the inner walls of the space. The artists have turned the typefaces that they have developed into wallpaper. It is legible as repeated tiles, but definition generally falls away into pattern, and the tendency is to let it be an ambient texture more than a text. Hanging paintings directly on, or overlapping, the wallpaper intensifies this language slippage, especially when the painting is an observational study of erasers like the one seen here by Brown. Depictions of erasers blocking the text, a sign of erasure. The underpainting of the study is made with a color wash over painterly gesso, a technique that makes the ground appear like wet photographic paper. What is initially a wonderfully rendered, lighthearted-looking image becomes complex and layered with interpretation and critique of image itself as it is in service of language and vice-versa. Again, the trauma of the “*Traumneustartversuch*.”



Annette Cords and Becky Brown. Installation view of *Traumneustartversuch*, Various materials and dimensions. 2021

Con-man Verbal Kint (better remembered as the mythical crime lord Keyser Sze) in the film *The Usual Suspects* threads together elaborate apopheniac fictions by drawing on the labels, signs and materials of his immediate surroundings to seize on the susceptibility of his interrogator to follow his thread. The story becomes rich and spatialized. The words used for triggering storytelling begin (and end) as language mined from fragments, exploded into imagined narrative, and then re-formed as concrete evidence of the telling. The detective (and the audience) all-at-once experiences the deconstruction of the yarn that has been spun once it unfurls, collapsing back into the super-localized artifacts that paper his bulletin board and pile on his desk. In an instant, as we hold on to the fantastical places that we have been and characters that populate those places, all that we have come to know dematerializes in our wakefulness.

To spend time in the gallery with the sunlight raking across the floor presents another cinema of elusive type. Those vinyl letters assert themselves again, this time in a manner which connects the model of ideas in the gallery to its wider context. The source of the projection is the sun: light throws silhouettes of the letters onto the floor and wall. When the shadows slowly change their position, they engage with the work on the wall in opportune, seemingly intentional connections and exchanges with the typefaces applied to list paintings and word weavings. The movement is not based on a mechanistic projector, but rather the rotation of the planet: Shadows are cast, letter forms align to words, words infer meaning. This is a movable type unbound, threading together whatever words that it can find, like Verbal Kint who wouldn't stop talking, grabbing on to words to save his life.

So more might be said about Brown's lists. Passwords as we find them here are comical in their accumulated variation. We need a second, mnemonic list to remember the words established to access documents and programs that are coded and separated from the surface phenomena of the world. (Further, even if we keep our passwords straight, it is now commonplace to verify that we are in fact human, raising philosophical questions that one imagines will incite a future painting by Brown). Maybe this is what the invented fonts of this work derive from; visual cues to begin "understanding" *before* reading: visual cognition. And the list that gets overlayed by the projected letters in the gallery? All words that accompany social in one way or another, like "media," "distancing,"

“justice,” “practice,” “network.” It is a code-switching puzzle best understood by being in the moment. The word “social” rides alongside the list on what appears to be a servomechanism or a conveyor belt, deploying the word to accompany a selected compound option. Preference not on the list? Brown examines language that reveals relationships that form or suppress knowledge in a world guided by machine intelligence. The technology of this painting does have its phantoms. Imagine that this list will cultivate additional words by interpolation, based on a combination of user selections and the floating bank of collage and hand-painted imagery that cascade in a streaming, imperfect grid. Neo asks, “Do you always look at it in the coding? Well you have to. The image translators work *for* the construct program. But there’s way too much information to decode the Matrix. You get used to it.

Other lists are included: Settings, Greetings, Apologies, Auto-replies, Passwords, and even the working list of passwords noted on an iconic yellow legal pad, but the pad is blown up in scale with wiggly trompe-handwriting. Silly, cursive, colorful, messy, handmade writing theatrically widens the gap between what we think of as nostalgically human and cyber-aesthetics. If you see the pad on Instagram, it is known as a simulation, but understood in the scale of the room it is a model. The works by both artists are cousins of concrete poetry, a form-follows-function-follows-form method of presenting text shaped by its content.



Becky Brown, Greetings, 2021, various materials and dimensions

Cords approaches the ocean of visual language quite differently, more subtly. Working on a loom to produce vector-based imagery yields a terrain elusive to define. An experienced farmer will tell you at a glance if a field is growing GMO or organic crops. One can deconstruct what has transpired in the process of these weavings to some degree, but the result is a fully hybridized product. Calculated, serenely tactile; ordered yet expressive, the haunted alphanumeric glitches and graphics animate the surface and entice the eye to be unsettled, as words hide in plain sight. The lexicon of these weavings grows from a deep and historic design compendium that seamlessly blends Navajo textiles, op-art, zines, Bauhaus design, graffiti, cryptograms, corporate logos, on and on, more a prism than a mirror. Like Browns paintings, the weavings hang on top of the wallpapered alphabets, but also in

architectonic frames that float them off the wall and into the room. Formally the frames are both an open book and an open door. They ask to be examined from the back (if there is such a thing in sculpture or architecture). The back of a weaving appears surprisingly as adhoc fray, the subconscious of coolly resolved surfaces. The perpendicular frame is coded by the same geometry of the sweeping circles encountered in what was previously described as “countdown headers.”

Visual codes abound in Cords weavings. Perhaps they demonstrate an alternative to the list theorem. Each of the scrambled particles of text and cypher connect us with different cultural enclaves through varying mark types woven together. Unreadable as script, we see a graffiti tag peeking up from the arranged turmoil produced in the field of threads. Tags mark territories with a paradoxical branding of an anonymous author. And a tag is redolent of the hasty, full-bodied script sprayed over the ground floor sill visible on the other side of the Avenue visible through a nearby window. Vernacular utterances overheard among other voices; a corporate tongue, technical jargon. Overall a noisy crowd can be organized into a schematic or a score. At one point in *32 Short Films About Glenn Gould*, the actor Colm Feore as Glenn sits in the diner of a truck stop that he frequents. We watch him listening. A long-haul trucker tells a story about a girl. A Quebecois logger orders breakfast, two men banter around a pool table, a radio plays a popular song. The camera returns to Glenns ear, and to his finger that undulates to the rhythms of speech as it moves from background noise to a melodious signal. His ear at work separating and integrating, building a composition from the hidden soundscape.

Words like dance or revival appear in Cords picture plane. Detached from context they are understood more through their visuality and the covert transmission from the source that has manufactured such graphics, its motives rooted. The combination of various lingual images, and the method of production involving underlying mathematics of warp and weft are more memory palace or scored indeterminacy than written navigational direction.

Dance and revival also bring to mind a spiritual gathering. In radical religious practices, glossolalia is a submission to greater powers, a channeling of communications vocalized as if from speakers of a radio. In the past century poets have periodically come up with approaches to appropriating the performance of inspired incantation as a generative mode of finding and articulating language. The works of both artists here, in varying strategies, have come up with their own approaches to building meaning from experimental language expressions that have an effect on a viewer willing to give in to looking, to have their own experience of speaking in tongues both structural and improvisational. You can look away (or wake) from the work to understand it.



Annette Cords and Becky Brown. Installation view of *Traumneustartversuch*, Various materials and dimensions. 2021

A large edition of prints, available for the taking, is stacked on a pedestal. Phrases written in Browns idiosyncratic font are drawn from her archive of New York Times headlines, many heading stories on the impact of technology on humanity. *Instagram Ruining Architecture*, “When The Internet Chases You From Your Home,” *Luddites Shall Inherit The Earth*. The print has the same specs as the newspaper it refers to. Look out the window that you are standing in front of, and like the detective at the end of the film that has finally realized Verbal’s deception, or Robbe-Grillet’s Inspector Wallas turning up erasers in a stationary store, you are staring at a row of newspaper vending machines lined up on the sidewalk distributing phrases much like what you have been reading in the gallery. This aspect of the project brings to mind the physicist/avant-garde artist Bern Porter, whose “found” poetry was harvested from the language of advertising, cookbooks, newspapers and other everyday sources. Porter treated copy as found objects to be re-framed and considered in an elevated context of poetics. Yet, the lists that Brown tends to archive are more constructed — curated to reinforce the message that she has uncovered by sorting words emerging from what is around us, her hand more involved in helping us see pattern language. As the detective says of the messy pile of papers on his desk, “it all makes sense when you look at it right, you gotta stand back from it.

“Dream-Restart-Experience: Annette Cords and Becky Brown,” PS122 Gallery, 150 First Avenue, New York, NY. Through August 22, 2021.

**Traumneustartversuch* translation by Annette Cords

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