

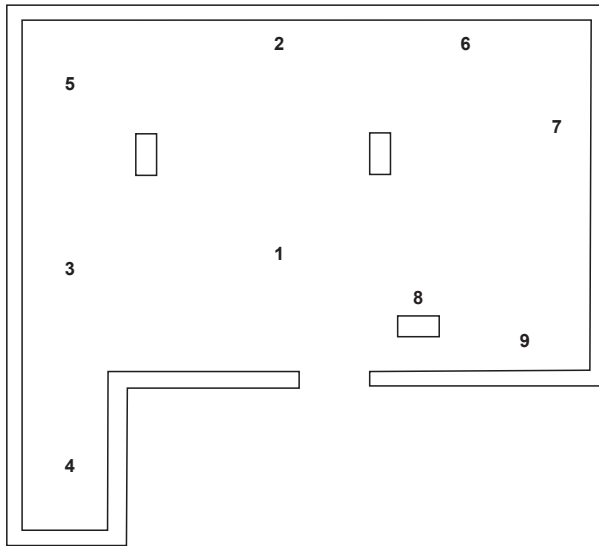
À R G O T

Luis Camnitzer
Jesse Chun
Furen Dai
Stine Marie Jacobsen
Taole Zhu

Curated by Xinyi Ren

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- 1 **Furen Dai**, *#Silverwords*, 2018, mylar reflective balloons, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.
- 2 **Luis Camnitzer**, *Insults*, 2009/2019, vinyl, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York.
- 3 **Furen Dai**, *Language Producing Factory*, 2016, two videos on loop, textiles, bamboo, cyanotype on fabric; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.
- 4 **Furen Dai**, *Language Product*, 2016, HD video, sound, color; 9:12 min. Courtesy of the artist.
- 5 **Taole Zhu**, *We decided to let them say, "we are capable", twice*, 2019, multimedia walk with site-specific texts, images, and sculptures. Courtesy of the artist.
- 6 **Jesse Chun**, *name against the same sound*, 2018, pigment print, 50 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist.
- 7 **Jesse Chun**, *enunciating silence and*, 2019, silicone, pigment, color pencil; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.
- 8 **Jesse Chun**, *WORKBOOK*, 2017, HD video, sound, color; 7:24 min; with text vinyl and wall paint. Courtesy of the artist.
- 9 **Stine Marie Jacobsen**, *Pidgin Tongue*, 2018, artist book and workshop project. Courtesy of the artist.

Have you ever felt the need to talk in a semi-encoded “insider” language, one that simultaneously guarantees understanding for your desired audience and confusion for eavesdroppers?

Perhaps we have all occasionally felt this need for encryption when sitting in a café or some other public space, and wished to communicate secretive or scandalous information with a confidante while carefully protecting this information from outsiders. It may have been something quite silly, like the latest gossip among a circle of friends, or something potentially incriminating, like plans for cheating our way out of a troublesome situation. Of course, we can opt for the easiest solution and simply lower our voices, but when you don’t know who might be listening, what other creative solutions have been devised?

This may be an occasional experience for most of us, but for certain groups it represents a much more urgent and daily need. “Insider language,” which can manifest as specialized jargon or simple made-up codes rooted in a shared vocabulary, is one of the most popular tools of selective communication deployed by precarious groups who have no full guarantee of the safety of speech. Lubunca, for instance, is a secret queer slang that has been used by the LGBTQ community in Turkey since the late Ottoman era in the early 1900s. It

was originally used among LGBTQ sex workers who needed to protect themselves from abusive crimes and police.¹ Similarly, the Polari slang language was used in Britain’s gay subculture at a time when homosexual activity was illegal, to disguise homosexuals from hostile outsiders and undercover policemen.² The language 女书 (Nüshu) is a derivative of Chinese used by the female community of Jiangyong County in South China. Nüshu was invented by the Jiangyong women to communicate among themselves because girls were not allowed to receive education or be literate. As a response, the women created their own language system that they forbade the men to learn.³

Despite their different levels of complexity and sophistication, these insider languages are not entirely independent, complete language systems such as English, Arabic, or Japanese. Most of them, rather, are slangs or variations based on the common language in their culture (Turkish for Lubunca, English for Polari, and Mandarin for Nüshu), with intentional deviations functioning like encryptions added in an attempt to shut out unwanted attention. Sometimes this is achieved through simpler solutions than inventing languages, such as associating a specific meaning to an already popular cultural token, so that it insinuates a hidden message when referred

- 1 See Peshma Magid, “The Changing Nature of Lubunca, Turkey’s LGBTQ Slang,” *Atlas Obscura*, September 15, 2017. Available online at <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/lubunca-lgbtq-language-slang-turkey>.
- 2 See “The Secret Language of Polari,” National Museums Liverpool. Available online at <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/visit/floor-plan/life-at-sea/gaylife/polari.aspx>.
- 3 See Zhao Liming, “The Women’s Script of Jiangyong: An Invention of Chinese.” In Mow, Shirley, Tao Jie, and Zheng Bijun, eds. *Holding up half the sky: Chinese women past, present, and future*. The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2004. pp. 39–52.

4 See Broadside Ballad Entitled 'Nell Flaherty's Drake'. Available online at <https://digital.nls.uk/broadsides/view/?id=15144>

to. An example that comes to mind is the nineteenth-century Irish ballad “Nell Flaherty’s Drake,” famous for cramming as many Irish curses as possible into the lyrics. The “drake” of the title, whose original meaning is a male duck, is believed to be a coded reference to Robert Emmet (1778 – 1803), who helped to plan and led an uprising in 1803 against the British rule in Dublin. The uprising failed after an explosion in an arms depot, and Emmet was captured and hung for his participation in the uprising and the assassination of the Lord Chief Justice. As Irish Home Rule was a volatile subject in the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century, the song has since been used as a vessel of encrypted insults to incite its listeners to keep up the fight.⁴

If we further expand our analysis, we may find even in our own quotidian lives an abundance of mutant vocabulary that stems from our desire to speak or express ourselves in secrecy. This phenomenon is quite widely manifested in the Chinese cultural sphere. The word “argot,” for example, is obscure in English; the Chinese equivalent, 黑话 (hei hua), is much more accessible and colloquial. Directly translating into “black talk” or “obscure talk,” hei hua refers to the words and phrases used by subcultures, cliques, minority groups, and professionals that are recognizable only to insiders of those groups. In recent years we have seen a dramatic expansion in the usage of such “dark talk” outside of subcultures, a phenomenon directly related to an intensifying micromanaging and censorship of speech, especially online where erasure and castration of speech that contains “sensitive words” happens on a near-daily basis.

Among these, one fairly recent incident comes to mind. The celebrated human-rights activist and Nobel Prize laureate Liu Xiaobo passed away in July 2017. His death was a sensitive issue because of his outspokenness against

the authorities, which had led to his imprisonment in 2008. At the time of his death, nearly ten years later, it was feared that the commemoration of Liu would cause a stir in the masses. As a result, a set of words and phrases became temporarily “illegal” on Chinese Internet search engines and social media sites. Some of these terms are hardly surprising—his full name (Liu Xiaobo), for example, his initials (LXB), and the things he was known for (the 08 Charter and the Nobel Peace Prize). Other censored terms raised eyebrows: the popular cyber commemorative symbol “RIP”, which stands for “Rest In Peace,” became unavailable on some of the most popular sites. For a brief period, even the candle emoji was marked as “illegal content.”

When even the candle emoji became inaccessible, netizens came up with yet another strategy to show their silent mourning and protest against the blatant efforts to erase all trace of Liu’s existence: people began reposting with birthday cake emojis, an image containing even more candles than the original emoji, and a symbol celebrating life, not death. Both macabre and ironic, the gesture showed, somehow, the impossibility of wiping out disobedient thought through censorship. Wordplay, in this and many other cases, became a way out of the dilemma of self-censorship.

The *Argot* exhibition presents a collection of artworks that examine different aspects of secretive communication. Probing the reasons behind a need for secrecy, the joy in identification through style and code words, the mechanisms at work in the play of camouflage, and the implied outcomes of decoding, it attempts to expand our understanding of insider languages beyond a merely anthropological or linguistic interpretation. *Argot* understands insider and private languages as uncommon languages used by minority groups to

express themselves when they have no full guarantee of free speech. They are practical solutions devised by their users to bypass or combat specific problems, ranging from homophobia and racism to censorship and algorithmic control. It is crucial to state that the goal of this project is not to invent a new utopian language system, or to delve deep into the art of cryptography. It is not interested in the static, or the orderly, but the fluid, the ephemeral, and the cunningly deceptive.

Visitors to the exhibition are greeted by Furen Dai's installation *#Silverwords* (2017), an ongoing interactive project that takes interest in key-word-based online censorship and users' reactions to it. Dai writes "sensitive words" banned on the Internet in bold black letters onto reflective mylar balloons, creating a physical floating dictionary of sensitive vocabulary. Since both the online sensitivity and the offline realities it is rooted in are ever-changing, it is natural that each time the work is installed, the vocabulary of sensitive words also changes accordingly. At the end of each reenactment, as a rather tongue-in-cheek gesture, Dai invites participants to leave these balloons floating in an outdoor space. These balloons carrying "taboo" words are then seen gliding through physical public spaces, like fugitive ghosts banished from the virtual world where they belonged, their reflective surfaces shimmering in the sunlight. In a sense, this is a perfect metaphor for the fate of a cunning code language. As these languages represent not secrets but, rather, public secrets, these signifiers whose signified are brazenly obvious to anyone sharing the same cultural sphere then function as specters haunting our society, much like balloons gliding down the streets.

#Silverwords is followed by conceptual artist Luis Camnitzer's *Insults* (2009), a wall of texts in six different languages,

each insulting those who cannot read it (e.g., "All those who don't know how to read English are stupid/Tous ceux qui ne savent pas comment lire le Français sont stupide"). At once antagonistic and comic, *Insults* plays with the subtle tension between having a sense of cultural superiority and the anxiety and or shame in the superiority per each of its viewers. Language in this case functions simultaneously as a space and the walls around it: on the one hand, the sentence's simple wording guarantees understanding for anyone who knows the basics of any of the six languages; on the other, the idea that anyone who doesn't share a language would not know they were being insulted gives viewers that suppressed chuckle. The real punchline, however, comes after we figure out that each language insults different peoples, when we realize the language-safe space we have been hiding and chuckling in the whole time was a lie, a magic mirror that praises the beauty of anyone who asks "who is the fairest of them all." Camnitzer was able to poke at many issues with this piece, some of them quite sensitive and taboo in our time of multi-culturalism. But specifically in the context of this project, *Insults* gives us a vague idea of what the division that language causes can provoke in our group psychology: identification, superiority, even a sense of exclusivity bordering on xenophobia.

Furen Dai's other work in the exhibition, a multimedia installation titled *Language Factory* (2017), presents an alternative, dystopian ending to what has until now been a rather optimistic interpretation of insider language as a tool of social critique. *Language Factory* was the result of the artist's expedition to Jiangyong County, in Hunan, China, where the language Nüshu was invented and is still used by local women. What she found there, however, was that the language had become subject to cultural



Furen Dai, *Silverwords*, 2018, mylar reflective balloons, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist.

tourism and consumerism. Shortly after scholars discovered Nüshu and knowledge of its existence spread out to the world, the local authorities of Jiangyong realized the potential of the language in terms of tourism and publicity and subsequently sought to maximize its value. In their endeavor to preserve an “authentic” image, the local government forbade the women both to do restoration work on their existing houses and give them land to build new ones on. Dai also learned that women who knew the language had been pressured to stay in the village and perform their cultural activities for menial wages as entertainment for tourists, instead of being allowed to find work in the larger cities nearby for better salaries. As a result, some women intentionally refused to learn this language, while others chose not to pass it on to their female descendants, so as to free the younger women to leave and remove the pressure on them to maintain this connection with the past. This realization led to Dai’s parody video *Language Factory*, where she invited local women to perform in a fictional factory that echoed reality in every way, the exception being that Dai invented her own made-up language instead of using Nüshu directly. This brief, seven-minute video is rich with contradictions and ironies. On the most obvious level, we see the hypocrisy of the local government, which, in preparing to apply for World Cultural Heritage Site status on the basis of Nüshu, had in fact accelerated the extinction of the language. But as we go deeper, we begin to question the scholars and tourists whose benevolent intentions to study, promote, or simply marvel at this anthropological wonder is somehow contributing to its demise.

Unlike Dai, **Jesse Chun** directs her attention not toward peripheral languages but toward the lingua franca of our world, modern English. Chun attempts to defamiliarize our linguistic norms through “othering” or queering the English language, much as artists who work with identity have sought to defamiliarize whiteness or masculinity: by offering a counter-gaze from the periphery toward the center. In *name against the same sound* (2018), Chun takes materials from ESL (English as a Second Language) workbooks, redacts them into isolated paragraphs, then reorganizes the fragments into collages. The displaced passages, in their newly found solitude alongside their strange bedfellows, take on a poetic quality, inviting a startlingly wide range of possible interpretations. Other queering techniques Chun employs include repeating or overlapping sentences until they become unintelligible, highlighting regional differences in pronunciation and spelling, and juxtaposing images of nature with images of words and letters. In *WORKBOOK* (2017), Chun manages to break down the English language into audio and visual particles so isolated and displaced that we forget the meanings they carried as a compound. A chain of “o’s” begins to resemble bubbles, an upside down “L” seems to fit into a Korean character, and a perfectly comprehensible command repeated over ten times sounds almost alien. Similarly, *sound natural* (2018) is a sound sculpture composed from audio tracks found online that train language learners to properly (or “naturally”) pronounce English vowels, sounds that Chun also managed to make uncanny through montage.

Chun pokes at English with a naive curiosity, like a rather destructive child sitting among its toys. We watch as the language is massaged, bent, broken, twisted by the arm, disassembled into a



Jesse Chun, *name against the same sound*, 2018, pigment print, 50 x 30 inches. Image courtesy of the artist.

*You go to
class, you start
shouting about
a topic and
that's it! That's
how it normally
happens here.*

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Stine Marie Jacobsen, *Pidgin Tongue*, 2018, artist book and workshop project. Page from artist book. Image courtesy of the artist.

million pieces and roughed back together. What makes this disfiguration even more interesting is the fact that her source materials are never randomly selected. Instead, they are almost exclusively extracted from the pedagogical or authoritative texts used to educate, examine, and discipline language learners, making the disfiguration a power-related process bordering on defacement. In fact, Chun is interested less in the functional aspects of language than in its institutionalization into a dominant role. Whether it be English, Latin, or Putonghua (standard spoken Mandarin—the word literally means “common tongue”), the unifying of spoken and written language has always accompanied political and cultural domination.

Chun’s work questions what our discussion language privacy has so far has taken for granted, namely, the existence of a “public” language. Does there really exist a language that is open to anyone, or has this openness always been assumed, a mere legend? If so, how was this legend constructed, and more importantly, what was it that laid hidden beneath a facade of openness and transparency? In short, Chun’s interest in language lies not so much in its functional aspects as in its institutionalization process. Her source materials—ESL textbooks, phonetics tutorials, even certificates from standardized tests such as TOEFL or IELTS—are exactly the instruments by which English has maintained its dominant status. Chun asks whether there is a possibility of someday decentering English and replacing it with a visual language, or a language yet to come.

But why stop with English? Does the structural critique of the institutionalization of a “primary language” really end with one language? A revisiting of Camnitzer’s *Insults* might be useful at this point. Perhaps the roots of the problem lie not in any *one* language but rather in the insular nature of lan-

guage itself. The six monumental lines of insults loom before us with twofold desperation. On the one hand, they are the six official languages of the United Nations, a linguistic reflection of the current global order. On the other hand, each language remains shut away by an insular barrier that makes it oblivious to the meaning of others. What would be the point of creating yet another language, if a language always creates misunderstanding before it can facilitate meaning? In other words, could it be that the future language that Chun’s artwork beckons would bear little structural resemblance to our existing ones?

This query is picked up by **Stine Marie Jacobsen’s** *Pidgin Tongue* (2018, artist book and workshop project), an educational project designed to encourage children to devise their own, fluid languages that escape the regulations from existing ones.

A pidgin language is defined as a simplified means of communication that develops between two or more groups that do not have a language in common. It draws its grammar and vocabulary from several languages, and is commonly employed in trade between groups who come from different cultural backgrounds. The word “pidgin” originates from a Chinese pronunciation of the English word “business.” A pidgin is by definition a language that arose out of necessity. It is naturally spontaneous, impromptu, and economic. A pidgin is not the native language of any speech community, but is instead always learned as a second language. Jacobsen’s project, *Pidgin Tongue*, draws on this idea of a fluid “middle ground” language, and experiments with intentionally creating an atmosphere for others (specifically children) to invent their own forms of pidgin language. Perhaps there is no better explanation for this work than its own introduction, which reads as follows:

Your mother tongue just flew far away like a pidgeon!

You might not be able to communicate clearly after using this book ...

Pidgin Tongue will teach you how to create your own words and expand your understanding of language.

“Pidgin” is a simplified grammatical form of a language that can emerge between groups with different languages that need to communicate with one another. Pidgin languages can be built up of words, sounds and body language. A pidgin has no native speakers and is not “owned” by any one group.

The book contains a collection of exercises for children and their grown-ups, tailored to break down language barriers and borders, so that your tongues can taste languages as freely as they taste food. Imagine you could eat your way into a new language, to stir and mix it as you like. Language shapes us, like food. :)

It is said that “the pen is mightier than the sword” and that language can directly influence politics. In the words of one of our young co-authors, “sharing your pen is honest.”

Throughout the book, you’ll find statements from a group of children who used the exercises to explore human-rights topics in the Latvian constitution⁵ and made a new “Pidgin Tongued” constitution.

Pidgin Tongue brings a new language to life, shaped by the thoughts and imaginations of children. If you want to learn their language, play the exercises together! This book is not for teaching children about language, but for allowing children to teach grown-ups how to build better wor(l)ds!⁶

The idea of “pidgin” is a powerful one, and a perfect metaphor for a decentralized, “rogue” language. *Pidgin Tongue* was first conceived and co-created in Latvia, where nearly forty-percent of the population speaks Russian, and where the language divide has been an

issue causing both domestic and international tension. Latvia has the largest Russian-speaking population in the European Union, with many Latvians being members of families who moved there from Russia during the Soviet era. Some Russian immigrants came from elsewhere in the Soviet Union simply looking for a better life, in the same way Europeans today move around the EU. But the mass migration, say Latvian historians, was also part of an attempt by Joseph Stalin to dilute and eventually destroy Latvia’s own language and culture. Resentment is not usually manifest between the two language groups, but some Russian speakers have said that they have suffered discrimination since Latvian independence in 1991.⁷

Pidgin Tongue tackles this potential divide by actively inviting children from both language groups to imagine an alternative way of communicating, one that has its roots in its parent languages but does not conform to the rules (and identity politics) of either. The book is a collection of easy tasks and workshops that Jacobsen created in collaboration with educators and Latvian schools, and a selection of children’s responses from their first workshops. These tasks draw on a variety of sources. For example, “Fantam words,” a game in which children are invited to sit between two loudspeakers playing a recorded word on a loop and are asked to write down what they hear, is inspired by perceptual and cognitive psychologist Diana Deutsch’s experiment “Phantom words,” which explores how participants hear the same word differently. Another game, “Draw & Fold & Draw & ...,” is inspired by the Surrealist game “Exquisite Corpse,” a method by which words and images can be collectively assembled in sequence. *Pidgin Tongue* encourages children to express themselves not just through words they have learned from family and society but through sounds, body gestures, and imagery. More important,

5 Latvia is a country in Europe and as in other countries they have a constitution, which is a “rule book” that provides guidelines for people living in a country [original footnote from *Pidgin Tongue*].

6 Stine Marie Jacobsen, *Pidgin Tongue*, ed. Ida Bencke (Berlin: Broken Dimanche Press, 2018). pp.7-8.

7 See Damien McGuinness, “Ukraine Crisis: Latvia’s Russian Speakers Find Their Voice,” BBC News, June 12, 2014. Available online at <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-27800878>.

Stine Marie Jacobsen, *Pidgin Tongue*, 2018, artist book and workshop project. Workshop documentation. Image courtesy of the artist.



it simultaneously trains them to be receptive to these unorthodox expressions from others—to meet a stammering person halfway.

The existence of a pidgin language signifies the lack of an existing lingua franca between different cultures, and therefore represents a gap of expression and understanding. Pidgin is the elusive inhabitant of the border itself, the overpopulated no-man’s-land between “correct” and “official” languages. Traditionally, speakers of the mother languages of a “pidgin tongue” do not consider it proper; this hybrid of two or more established languages is recognized by neither. In cases where a pidgin becomes somewhat standardized and is learned by some as a first language, it is then considered linguistically a creole. It is especially interesting to consider how people who grew up speaking creole would normally find themselves needing to correct their speaking and writing habits upon conversing with those coming from the background of more dominant languages, in order to be recognized as a cultured person. This could be an instance when they could find themselves using the institutionalization tools roasted in Chun’s artworks.

In the edition of the *Pidgin Tongue* book that is on exhibit in *Argot*, the result of workshops held in Latvia, the same content is written in English, Latvian, and Russian, but the project is ongoing and can be activated by people from other backgrounds with the artist’s instructions. For art viewers who do not come from the specific bilingual environment of Latvian or Russian, or for that matter from any bilingual environment, *Pidgin Tongue* provides a conceptual vacancy for adults to dabble in and marvel at the “incorrect.” It may well be that we have lost the capacity to express through more ways than the verbal languages we have mastered, but we can still make an effort to be more accepting when we hear a “pidgin” being spoken, or when someone is trying, through painful stammers and wild hand gestures, to illustrate something that does not yet have a name. *Pidgin Tongue* is an attempt to meet others halfway by forcing its participants to step into the uncomfortable zone of being a non-native speaker.

And here we are. We have observed how language, which developed as a tool to facilitate understanding and communication between subjects, can also function as a tool for opacity and exclusion. We have seen how this mobile safe space can be used as an umbrella to shelter controversial discourse, non-compliant behavior, resistant force, but also incendiary speech and criminal activity. We have observed how a tool originally designed to provide safety and emancipation for a minority can be turned on its head and capitalized on, mined as a cultural commodity, and can instead enslave its users. We then moved from questioning minority languages to questioning the nature of language itself through the disfiguration of the most dominant language in our world today, eventually landing on a fantastically imagined utopian pidgin language, native to none but home to all. It is quite paradoxical how a line of thinking that began with an intrigue of secrecy somehow landed on complete transparency, from argot to Esperanto. But this may well be the message of the exhibition, if it must have one: that secrecy in language will always be a paradoxical issue. There are so many questions that are left unanswered by diving into the reasons why these secretive languages exist, and by observing how they are used and misused. On the one hand, inventing an exclusive slang to protect the privacy of a minority group may more often than not further alienate this group from the rest of the population. On the other, what may start out as a friendly and scholarly attempt to decode this secretive wall and bring its users to light may also be destroying their refuge and

bringing a community to its demise.

I am afraid that personally I have no answers to any of the questions that I or the artists have raised, and I do not believe any of these artworks—even *Pidgin Tongue*, a work intended to be used as an instruction manual—should be used as solutions to the aforementioned dilemma or instrumentalized for other ends. I must apologize to anyone who has lingered with me this long that I must leave you without a clearly phrased closure. I imagine we have all, at some point in our lives, enjoyed the sweetness of complicity with others with whom we speak code in, understood only by those within the circle. I can also imagine that we have all found ourselves on the other side of this wall of exclusion, being irritated and offended that we are excluded from a conversation, that we are not let in on the joke. Maybe there is only this: in an ideal society, one that I hope we all long for, no group would feel the need to shelter itself from others out of fear that eavesdroppers might mean it harm; and we can all empathize with someone who stammers, lost for words, and struggles with a meaning so new that no language has yet assigned a word to describe it. Perhaps we can try standing in this middle ground, a no-man's-land where no language has yet been claimed as its territory, where the only way to express is to first be willing to listen, to meet others halfway and to wait patiently as an infant idea stammers into existence.

But not so fast.



Stine Marie Jacobsen, *Pidgin Tongue*, 2018, artist book and workshop project. Image courtesy of the artist.

This discussion has so far implicitly assumed that opacity was an abnormality, a symptom which suggests deeper chasms in communication that had best been fixed. But does there exist another angle, one that transports us slightly away from the here and now, allowing for a broader, more radical perspective? What happens if we accept the opacity that argot has created instead of questioning, and subsequently trying to “fix” it?

The following is an afterthought, an alternative ending to the discussion on insider language. This is an attempt to open up our understanding of argot to a more unfamiliar dimension, namely, the idea of an argot so alien that it appears to its outsiders not as a language, but as a magical conjuring, an incantation. The final piece featured in the exhibition acts rather as a specter itself, probing the relationship between secrecy in language, prophecy, and social change.

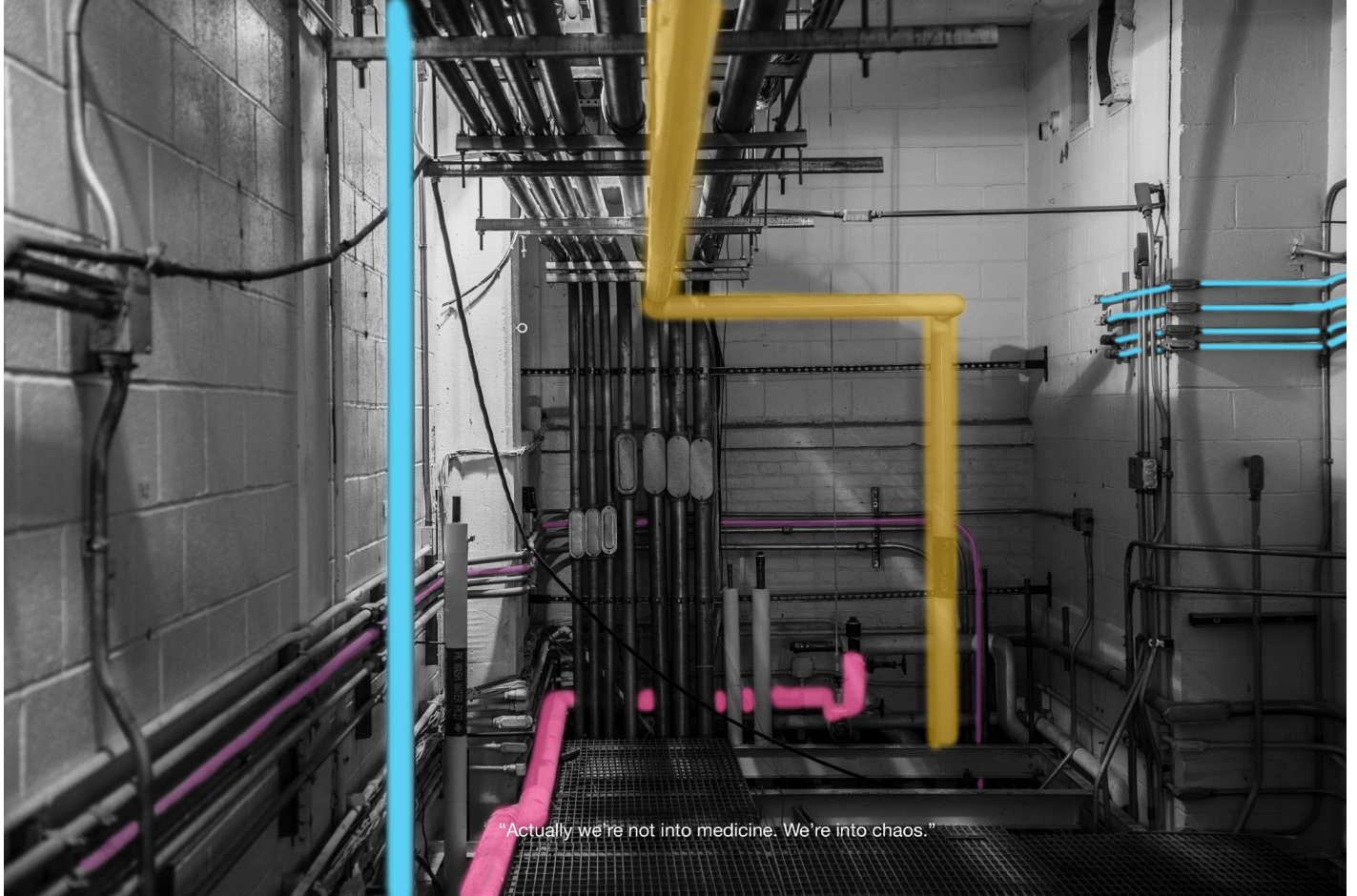
We decided to let them say, “we are capable”, twice (2019) by **Taole Zhu** is a time- and site-specific journey that weaves together institutional histories of place with fictions and personal narratives. The reference point for this journey are the dysfunctional machines that produced Viagra inside the pharmaceutical giant Pfizer’s old headquarter in Brooklyn. Over the course of the exhibition, small groups of people will walk the tour in the building. Each participant will receive a portable media player and headphones along with a bag holding various small objects and instructions necessary to complete the journey.

The walk is an investigation into the psychological, technological and aesthetic aspects of drugs as a form of contemporary incantation. The main component features a few manipulated metal parts cut from demolished machines which were part of the production line for drugs during the Pfizer era. Now dysfunctional, they are what Zhu

describes as graffitied monument-machines that catapult and deliver its public towards an idealized future. Some writings – a sarcastic mixture of phrases from Viagra commercials and political slogans – are only shown in Augmented Reality on to the machines that scatter around the perimeter of the space.

The narrative is loosely based on a fictional character Francesca Gundan who worked as a lab researcher at Pfizer during the fiscal crisis of the 70’s in New York. The story claims that Gundan wanted to develop a drug that embodied promise and faith for a utopian vision, disappointed by politicians who failed to do so. Gundan left behind diaries and sketches about his invention to his offsprings in hopes that it could be realized in the future.

The idea of accepting opacity (or rather, not being able to do anything about it) brings us face to face with a disturbing thought, which is that what happens inside the haze of obscurity is neither accessible nor comprehensible to those of us who still stand on the outside. The inconceivability of this unsettles us. Five centuries after the Age of Exploration, when all information is thought to be accessible through one channel or another, when the increase in accessibility of human knowledge appears to be an irresistible tide, it is understandable to find the idea that there are new realms of darkness in the world atlas both ludicrous and alarming. In James C. Scott’s 2009 book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, he uses the concept of Zomia to argue that the continuity of the ethnic cultures living there provide a counter-narrative to the traditional story about modernity, specifically, the narrative of state-making. Scott describes Zomia as “the largest remaining region of the world whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states.” Instead of viewing the hill



Taole Zhu, *We decided to let them say, "we are capable", twice*, 2019, multimedia walk with site-specific texts, images, and sculptures.
Video still. Image courtesy of the artist.

people as barbaric or pre-civilized, he argues that they “are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys—slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare.”⁸

In terms of opacity and transparency, it is not difficult to draw the connection between the Zomia/valley relationship to the argot/public language binary. The temporary safe space that present day argot-speakers have created for themselves is not unlike mobile islands of Zomia amidst the vast transparent spaces of public language. What does trouble the valley-states the most about the existence of Zomia is the inequality of information. If Zomia had been populated with barbarians who had yet to be assimilated into civilization (if we could temporarily excuse the problematic terminology), we would find them much less threatening since we as “explorers” are in possession of the information about both the Self and the Other. But a Zomia populated with “dropouts of civilization” flips this relationship around—it is now the “civilized,” the nation-state, the users of the public language who are in the dark, who have no knowledge of what happens inside the haze.

The languages, or rather, the snippets of speech that we are able to intercept from Zomia, therefore become more significant and more powerful than normal argot. The language of Zomia is not only unknown but unlearnable. It is intentionally created to protect a runaway community from outside administration and policing. Again, we have no way to make sure whether to be hopeful or hostile toward the unknown, since it could well be both a rogue civilization seeking alternate futures for our present society and or criminal networks scheming for malevolence and destruction. Protected by opacity, it is perfectly possible for each mobile Zomia to give birth to both social and economic models unimaginable for us. This is what makes the language of Zomia an incantation—it is an argot spoken to the future.

8 James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011). p.ix.

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Argot examines insider languages used for secretive expression when freedom to speak openly is not guaranteed.

The original nineteenth-century French term “argot” denoted the jargon or slang of criminals. Today, the same mechanisms of secretive communication is being used by people around the world to creatively combat injustice. The issues addressed range from homophobia and racism to censorship and algorithmic control. *Argot* attempts to expand our understanding of insider languages beyond a merely anthropological or linguistic interpretation by probing the reasons behind a need for secrecy, the joy in identification through style and coded words, the mechanisms at work in the play of camouflage, and the implied outcomes of decoding.

Argot

Opening reception: April 18, 2019, 6:30 - 9:30 pm

April 18 - May 8, 2019

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ARGOT

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April 18, 2019

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