

THESIS

LANGUAGE GAMES

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

LANGUAGE GAMES

The complex nature of language has interested me as long as I can remember: how we experience it and how it affects our lives in both personal and public ways. This fascination was the spark for a thesis body of work that considers Ludwig Wittgenstein's "language game" in the context of contemporary discourse. In his publication *Philosophical Investigations*, he first coins the term, noting that it is "meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life."¹ This idea that we activate language as we speak it, is the cornerstone of my personal exploration of the written and spoken word as a medium and the foundation of this thesis body.

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The complex nature of language has interested me as long as I can remember: how we experience it and how it affects our lives in both personal and public ways. This fascination was the spark for a thesis body of work that considers Ludwig Wittgenstein's "language game" in the context of contemporary discourse. In his publication *Philosophical Investigations*, he first coins the term, noting that it is "meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life."² This idea that we activate language as we speak it, is the cornerstone of my personal exploration of the written and spoken word as a medium and the foundation of this thesis body.

According to Wittgenstein, language games exist amidst every set or group of individuals; every culture; every area of study; even within the individual's conscious and unconscious self.³ What he doesn't acknowledge, though, is the role of the individual outside of a language game: the person less privy to the rules defining the conversation. In this series of puzzles and games, I have adopted the title *Language Games*, acknowledging Wittgenstein's premise but interrogating the assumption that all language systems can exist without an entry point for those outside of the system.

Through and investigation of both public and private language systems, some of the works within this body require audience interaction, while others simply offer it as an opportunity to examine language through play: specifically, through the active engagement between the political language stamped, engraved and painted on the puzzles and the participant. Aimed at stimulating more questions than answers, these sculptures probe ideas of semiotics, post-structuralism, logic and the hyper-real by deconstructing the language games we experience both in public forums and in our minds.

The first of my investigations, titled *Silver Secrets* (Fig. 1-2), explores the nature and structure of the secret as a language game. These tiny, silver sculptures are sentence diagrams of individual secrets: secrets that people have confided in me, secrets that I have confided in people, and secrets that I have confided in no one. I used traditional Modern English Grammar diagramming techniques to map out each secret and erased the words so that I was left only with the frame of the diagram. In transforming them into three-dimensional objects, I torqued the diagrams anywhere there were intersecting lines, and finally cast them in sterling silver.

When I exhibited the *Silver Secrets* I offered audience members an opportunity to enter their names in a drawing for each “secret.” Conceptually each sculpture was formed to embrace the idea of secret as precious whisper, but far more interesting to me than the formal elements used to express such an idea are the implications involved in giving the secrets away. Even though the sculptures are diagrams of very specific secrets, when the sculpture changes ownership does the secret change? Does it become a representation of all secrets? Does it become a structure upon which the new owner projects the secrets that exist in his or her life? How does the owner interact with the piece; does he or she carry it around in a wallet or purse? Or does it sit on a shelf and collect dust...is it ignored? And finally does the interaction between the owner and the object say something about the way these individuals engage with this system of private language?

I don't presume to have an answer to these questions, nor do I think that my work will necessarily lead to answers: that's not the purpose of the objects. Rather, they simply expose these questions, offering my audience an opportunity to delve into the complex and nuanced way in which we interact with this closed language system.

Where the sentence diagram offers a particular opportunity to deconstruct language—sentences—in a specific way, the rest of the works in this body were created in the form of the puzzle. Still relying on a structural system that echoes the structure inherent in language, the sliding-tile puzzle exists as a game that invites the viewer to physically manipulate the language that I’ve etched, painted and stamped onto the surfaces. As handmade wooden objects, they recall games as they existed before the accelerated age of technology. They require participants to slow down and experience the language, offering an opportunity to engage critically with the letters, words and implications of the language system at play. Formally, one of the most compelling ideas integral to the structure of the sliding-tile puzzle is the requirement of its incompleteness. Its functionality demands a missing tile, leaving a moving window through which something might be revealed or a hole through which part of the language or sentence is lost.

A pair of sculptures subtitled *Contemporary Campaigning* (Fig. 3-4), were the first two puzzles in this series aimed at deconstructing political rhetoric: a language game that defines so much of our societal scaffolding, but lacks the entry point previous discussed.⁴ All of the puzzles included prompt the question: should contemporary citizens demand that the language delineating their day-to-day lives be accessible and concise? Should the stewards of our country, namely politicians, be required to change the rules of his or her language game to accommodate those affected by the words he or she speaks and writes?

These two particular sculptures are double-sided, with one side of each puzzle displaying a campaign Tweet from the 2012 presidential election (one from Mitt Romney and one from Barack Obama), and the other a formal logic truth-table that breaks down an argument that the candidate makes in the web link attached to the Tweet. The binary code covering the surface of

the puzzles become like pixels through which the letters and words of the Tweet emerge. This binary code exemplifies one of the many binaries that characterize these games (including truth and fallacy; validity and invalidity; Democrats and Republicans; right and wrong; digital and analog; and black and white) while serving as another underlying structure.

Eight-bit binary code serves as the architecture that delineates our digital world. In these two puzzles, the eight-bit strings of code are a direct translation of the text attached to the web link in the Tweet and examine the way a several-hundred word argument by each candidate is paired down to a Tweet of 140 character or less. As it is undoubtedly impossible to make a complex argument in such a short space, these puzzles explore the possibilities of language that the candidates are left with in this online forum, and examine the way that these candidates become hyper-real characters defined by their filtration through such social media.⁵

Another area of political rhetoric where we see a consolidation of language meant to stir the populace is in presidential slogans. A transitional piece, *Truths* (Fig. 5) is a seven sculpture series focused on deconstructing these slogans. The seven slogans cited span 150 years and offer a glimpse at how generic and empty words have been used for so long to convey something out of nothing. The sculptures maintain the sliding-tile puzzle format, but have only two rows of puzzle pieces, creating a banner-like form. Referencing Scrabble as another very literal language game, I hand-stamped each puzzle piece with a single letter and its corresponding subscript Scrabble number. As these puzzles are single-sided, the audience is left with a moving window revealing one small square of information that exists on the back-board. These back-boards are engraved with delineated squares, most of which are empty, but a few of which are marked “double word score.”

The language games in *Truths* are about assigning value to signs. When all of the puzzle pieces are in order and reveal the original slogan, the most “valuable” words, or signifiers, begin on these “double word score” squares. As soon as the puzzle is scrambled, however, the signified is disarmed and an opportunity to arrange new signifiers is created.⁶ A transitional piece, *Truths* is ultimately rooted in the letter—a structural system that constitutes everything we say and write. The letter is what we’re left with after the language is deconstructed, and it’s what every signifier has in common regardless of whether or not it signifies anything at all. It was this idea that propelled me to the final series in this body titled *Learning to Read* (Fig. 6-8). This series layers structural systems such as the alphabet and education against yet another political language game: legislative texts.

In his writings on post-structuralism, Jaques Derrida deconstructs the assumption that language is built upon a logical semiotic structure. He argues that in the end all we really have are signifiers that simply point to more signifiers, making it impossible to derive a definitive, whole meaning for any given word.⁷ This endless relationship between words is quite flawlessly reflected in legislative writing, and is one of the foundational frameworks I utilize for this series.

Composed of twenty one wooden tablets and six wooden sliding tile puzzles—one tablet or puzzle for each letter of the alphabet plus a second iteration for the letter “Y”—the series depicts the number of different bills necessary to grant meaning to one page of legislative text. The first element in the series, a puzzle revealing the letter “Aa” upon its backboard (Fig. 6), is engraved with the first page of H.R. 209, a bill to authorize funds to hire and train classroom paraprofessionals. This individual page of legislative text relies upon another bill, section 306(a)(2) of H.R. 5656, highlighted on the puzzle in gold. This section of H.R. 5656 was then engraved onto the second sculpture in the series (Fig. 7), a wooden tablet with the painted letter

“Bb” emerging from the tiny letters and words engraved into its surface. Echoing the structure—or non-structure—that Derrida defined, each subsequent sculpture is engraved with the excerpt pointed to by the bill that preceded it, and is then painted with the letter that corresponds chronologically.

Every sculpture that depicts a consonant is a simple oak tablet with the legislative text engraved into its surface while each sculpture that reveals a vowel is a sliding puzzle with eleven squares. Lined upon the wall they manifest an institutional authority, appearing like diplomas or plaques upon a distinguished wall. The legislative text specific to the puzzles (determined by the previously discussed lineage of bills pointing to subsequent bills) is engraved into the surface of the eleven puzzle pieces, deconstructing and reconstructing the language of the text as the pieces are shifted around. As single-sided puzzles, the viewer is once again presented with a small moving window that reveals the text engraved upon the backboard behind the puzzle pieces. The tiny words engraved upon these six backboards once again act as pixels, revealing the image of each vowel, but because of the puzzle pieces can only be viewed in fragmented parts as the viewer moves the puzzle pieces around.

In these six puzzles, the formal structure of the objects creates the opportunity to deconstruct the language game that is the political legislation engraved into the puzzle pieces, while juxtaposing it against six different language games on the backboard: language games that audience members might be able to more actively understand or participate in. Each of these six language games is epitomized in a single page of text from six academic studies of secondary education: Math, Science, English, History, Foreign Language, and Economics. For example, first puzzle (Fig. 6) has the first page of legislative text engraved upon the puzzle pieces, and an

excerpt from George Orwell's *Animal Farm* engraved into the backboard. It is in the *Animal Farm* text that the vowel "Aa" is brought forth by wiping paint into the engraved words.

All of the tablets and puzzles are presented in a giant rectangular grid: three rows by nine columns measuring 15.2x5.2 feet. Viewed from a distance (Fig. 8), this organization offers the viewer a sense of rigid structure and a new presentation of the alphabet they learned to understand as children. As the viewer approaches the pieces, however, they lose the boundaries of the grid and the didactic nature of the legislative texts engraved into the boards and puzzle pieces becomes overwhelming.

Each series in this body of work reinforces the idea of structure through organization and logical systems, but then deconstructs the language presented within each structure. Though they all source different language games, each series prompts a consideration of whether the language present is there to illuminate or disguise. As is true with the *Silver Secrets*, the puzzles and tablets composing the bulk of this thesis weren't designed to reveal a concrete conclusion; rather, they were created to prompt critical thought. Throughout their genesis, these sculptures have continued to answer my questions with more questions, and have only piqued my intrigue in language, a vast tool that defines so much of how we communicate with each other.



Fig. 1, *Silver Secrets* (detail), 2012, sterling silver on wooden block, .75" x .75" x .75"



Fig. 2, *Silver Secrets*, 2012, sterling silver on wooden blocks, .75" x .75" x .75"



Fig. 3, *Contemporary Campaigning*, 2012, wood, acrylic paint, polyurethane, 20" x 20" x 36"



Fig. 4, *Contemporary Campaigning*, 2012, wood, acrylic paint, polyurethane, 20" x 20" x 36"

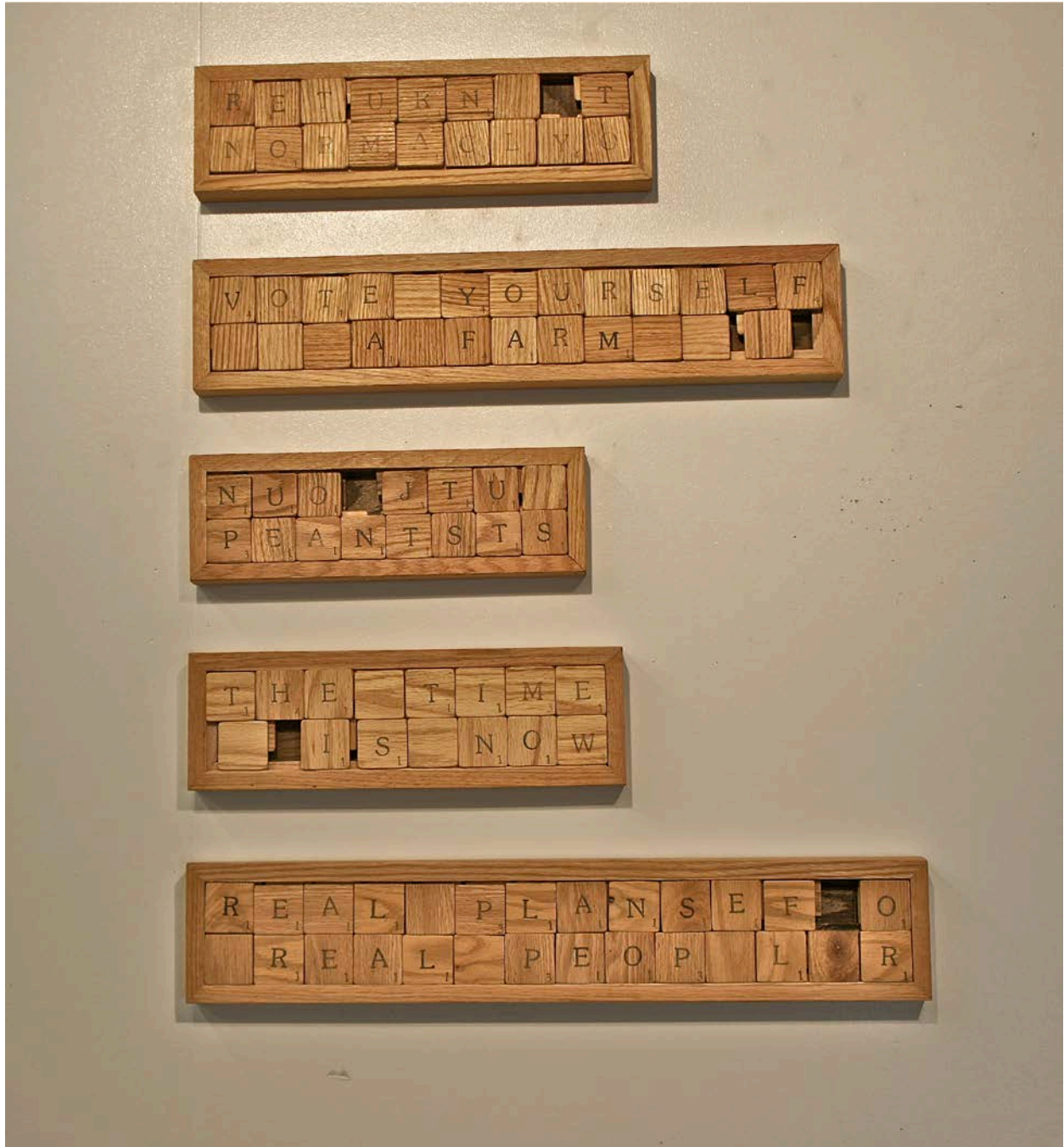


Fig. 5, *Truths*, 2012, red oak, black ink, stain, danish oil, 45" x 30" x 2"



Fig. 6, *Learning to Read* (Detail “Aa”), 2013, red oak, acrylic paint, polyurethane, danish oil, 58.5” x 173.25” x 3.5”

section 306(a)(2) Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education and Related Agencies Appropriations Act.

TITLE I—DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
Employment and Training Administration
TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

For necessary expenses of the Workforce Investment Act, including the purchase and hire of passenger motor vehicles, the construction, alteration, and repair of buildings and other facilities, and the purchase of real property, for training centers as authorized by the Workforce Investment Act, the Women in Apprenticeship and Nontraditional Occupations Act, and the National Skill Standards Act of 1994, \$3,207,805,000 plus reimbursements, of which \$1,808,465,000 is available for obligation for the period July 1, 2001 through June 30, 2002, of which \$1,377,965,000 is available for obligation for the period April 1, 2001 through June 30, 2002, including \$1,102,955,000 to carry out chapter 4 of the Workforce Investment Act and \$275,000,000 to carry out section 169 of such Act; and of which \$20,375,000 is available for the period July 1, 2001 through June 30, 2004 for necessary expenses of construction, rehabilitation, and acquisition of Job Corps centers: Provided, That \$3,098,000 shall be for carrying out section 172 of the Workforce Investment Act, and \$9,600,000 shall be for carrying out the National Skills Standards Act of 1994: Provided further, That no funds from any other appropriation shall be used to provide meal services at or for Job Corps centers: Provided further, That funds provided to carry out section 171(d) of such Act may be used for demonstration projects that provide assistance to new entrants in the workforce and incumbent workers: Provided further, That funding provided to carry out projects under section 171 of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 that are identified in the Conference Agreement, shall not be subject to the requirements of section 171(b)(2)(B) of such Act, the requirements of section 171(c)(4)(D) of such Act, or the joint funding requirements of sections 171(b)(2)(A) and 171(c)(4)(A) of such Act: Provided further, That funding appropriated herein for Dislocated Worker Employment and Training Activities under section 132(a)(2)(A) of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 may be distributed for Dislocated Worker Projects under section 171(d) of the Act without regard to the 10 percent limitation contained in section 171(d) of the Act: Provided further, That of the funds made available for Job Corps operating expenses in the Department of Labor Appropriations Act, 2000, as enacted by section 1000(a)(4) of Public Law 106-113, \$586,487 shall be paid to the city of Vergennes, Vermont in settlement of the city's claim: Provided further, That \$4,800,000 provided herein for dislocated worker employment and training activities shall be made available to the New Mexico Telecommunications Call Center Training Consortium for training in telecommunications-related occupations.

Fig. 7, (Detail "Bb"), 2013, red oak, acrylic paint, polyurethane, danish oil, 58.5" x 173.25" x 3.5"



Fig. 8, 2013, red oak, acrylic paint, polyurethane, danish oil, 58.5" x 173.25" x 3.5"

¹Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, as quoted in Eike von Savigny. “Common Behavior of Many a Kind: *Philosophical Investigations* section 206,” in *Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 108.

²Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, as quoted in Eike von Savigny. “Common Behavior of Many a Kind: *Philosophical Investigations* section 206,” in *Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 108.

³ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. Anscombe. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1958), 9.

⁴ Malcome Richards, *Derrida Reframed*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2008), 12. Richards notes that, “For Derrida, Heidegger’s notion of *Destruktion* suggested not simply a negative act of destruction, but also a positive act, such as a clearing away of something no longer useful. Derrida’s decision to use the disused French word *deconstruire* allowed for layered associations on only to Heidegger’s term, but also to his own contentious relation with structuralism. The term ‘to deconstruct’ conjures an image of a structure or object in mid-air, suspended, all its parts visible. ‘Deconstruction’ can also conjure an image of something in the midst of collapse, not destroyed, but falling apart—a ruin, even. ‘To deconstruct’ something suggests that the act of taking something apart can be the first step toward understanding something anew.”

⁵ Baudrillard, Jean, *Why Hasn’t Everything Disappeared?*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Seagull Books, 2009), 40. “...term for term: with programmes based on the 0/1 binary construct, which is a kind of integral calculus, the entire symbolic articulation of language and thought disappears. So there will no longer be any thought-sensitive surface of confrontation, any suspension of thought between illusion and reality.”

⁶ Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin. New York, 1966.

⁷ Malcome Richards, *Derrida Reframed*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2008), 15.

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