

# Mapping, Coding, Translating: Concrete Legacies in the Work of Detanico Lain

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**Abstract:** The text explores the work of the Brazilian artists Angela Detanico and Rafael Lain in their multifarious relationship with the legacies of translation theory, poetic concretism, and the visual poetry of Kitasono Katue. In conversation with Detanico Lain and the Paris-based art critic and theorist Federico Nicolao, we wonder through their recent body of work and through the constellation of artists, literary authors, and scientists whose poetic paths approached and intersected with their own.

**Keywords:** Translation, poetry, art, Federico Nicolao, Kitasono Katue

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“A sign are we, senseless (*Ein Zeichen sind wir, deutungslos*),” wrote Friedrich Hölderlin in 1803, in the poem “Mnemosyne.”<sup>1</sup> The Swabian poet’s persistent experience of the limits of language and signification heralds, in more than one way, the ethos of modern poetics. The unrelenting struggle for sense as an operation that must always recommence, repeatedly revealing the fundamental senselessness of human existence, returns in a preemptory fashion in this much-discussed passage of Hölderlin’s “In Lovely Blue” (1808): “Is there a measure on earth? There is none (*Gibt es auf Erden ein Maß? Es gibt keines*).”

Much could be said about the resonance of these verses throughout the history of modern poetry, in its multiple attempts at a thorough renewal of language. The same radical motivation illuminates the trajectories of Charles

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<sup>1</sup> Hölderlin 198 (my translation).

Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, Ezra Pound and E. E. Cummings, all the way through to the “verbivocovisual” poetics of the Noigandres group and the myriad ramifications of their work.<sup>2</sup>

This same impetus informs and shapes the artistic trajectory of Angela Detanico and Rafael Lain, in their continuous search for the origin of signification, their incessant creation of coding systems that map, decipher, and re-cipher our encounters with nature, and their theoretical and material exploration of the manifold relationships between the earth and its all-too-human measures, norms, and patterns.

Drawing from their respective backgrounds in design and semiotics, Detanico and Lain work across multiple media and techniques combining digital and video art with sculpture, drawing, and even traditional techniques such as Japanese gold leaf painting. The poetic experience materialized in their work constitutes itself as an effort of translation—translation from the language of nature into the language of humans, translation of existing human languages into an expanding variety of invented codes—as if each of their works strove to confer material shape on the translating impetus that animates the modern poetic experience, thus adding to it yet another layer of translation; namely, the translation from the realm of poetry to that of contemporary art.

The pages that follow endeavor to render this fundamentally visual experience back into the verbal and conceptual realm.<sup>3</sup> They originate in a conversation, a public dialogue on the occasion of Detanico Lain’s 2017 exhibition at the Brazilian Embassy in Tokyo.<sup>4</sup> But it might be more accurate to situate their actual starting point in another conversation, which took place half a century earlier, between Haroldo de Campos, the Japanese poet Kitasono Katue, and the poet and musician L. C. Vinholes.<sup>5</sup> Kitasono’s visual poetics was

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<sup>2</sup> See the “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry” in de Campos 217-19.

<sup>3</sup> Parts of this article have been previously published in earlier versions in the catalogue of *Archipel*, Musée de l’Abbaye Sainte-Croix, Les Sables-d’Olonne, 2018 and the catalogue of *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, The Club, Tokyo, 2019. We thank the galleries for their permission to use the texts.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Pedro Brancante, cultural attaché at the Brazilian Embassy in Tokyo, for organizing the event and orchestrating this encounter.

<sup>5</sup> We discuss the exchange between Kitasono, Haroldo de Campos, and Vinholes in the dialogue below; I discuss it in further length in *Breaching the Frame. The Rise of Contemporary Art in Brazil and Japan* (Erber 21-144).

a constant source of inspiration during Detanico and Lain's residence at Villa Kujoyama in Kyoto and resonated throughout the 2017 exhibition in Tokyo. Then and now, the question of poetic translation and the relationship between the visual and verbal realms are at the center of the conversation.

True translation, in contrast to its common representation<sup>6</sup>, does not take place between two previously existing, ready-made linguistic realms. On the contrary, each time, translation must establish the boundaries of a new linguistic territory, demarcating the limits between languages, so that a relationship of correspondence can first be created. As such, translation's relationship to language is, at its very core, like a mapping practice that traces form, limits, and order onto nature. Only on the basis of this essential mapping function of translation, this drawing of boundaries between linguistic territories, can one speak of its fidelity; only on this basis can a translation be said to be exact, literal, or free in relation to an "original," which is in turn repeatedly remapped, recreated or, as Haroldo de Campos would put it, "transcreated."<sup>7</sup>

Detanico Lain bring this mapping endeavor to center stage. In their 2019 exhibition at Tokyo's The Club, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow* (Figure 1; Plates 1, 2, and 3), the viewer lands on an imaginary island, crossed by the International Date Line, divided between the bright of day and a starry night, between East and West—a space that holds the secret to our human measurement of earthly time, and thus to the arbitrary origin of the mapping of time onto space. The environment brings to mind the "postutopianism" of Liam Gillick's *Discussion Island*, while simultaneously echoing Italo Calvino's quasi-algorithmic compositions in *Invisible Cities*. An artificial island, architecturally planned and constructed: as such, a site for contemplation. Can we ever learn to inhabit it?

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<sup>6</sup> For a lengthier discussion of the relationship between translation and the "representation of translation" see Sakai 1-17.

<sup>7</sup> See de Campos 312-26.



**Figure 1. Exhibition view: *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, 2019**

Imposing itself at the center of the island, the Date Line appears as a paradigmatic site of translation, an imaginary border that constitutes the very condition of its possibility. And as a site of the encounter and fusion of separate temporalities in a single poetic instant, the secret it holds is also that of radical contemporaneity. Taking cues from semiotics and the natural sciences, Detanico Lain's approach to mapping and coding is nonetheless never simply scientific. Their rigor is of an entirely different order than that of Jorge Luis Borges's cartographers, who managed to draw the map of an entire empire on a 1-to-1 scale, so that each sign coincided exactly with the actual geographic place it represented, as if in an utopic communion between the real and the imaginary. What we find in Detanico Lain is, instead, a problematization of the arbitrary nature of our very representations of the universe, works that promote a conscious liberation of the creative signifying impulse from the conventional borders of time and space. Between the rocky waves of a Zen garden, what their works present to us is not a peaceful image of nature but the always-evasive object of both our science and our poetry: sense (Figure 2; Plate 4).



**Figure 2. *Sense* (2019)**

This search for sense spills over from the material and the poetic to the conceptual and critical. Here, material and concept, art and criticism, science and art, are not opposed, but find themselves instead in a constant, open dialogue spanning the whole globe, regardless of conventional east-west, north-south cartographic divisions. The Earth itself appears (and at times conceals itself) from myriad perspectives that reflect its relative position in cosmic space.

Our initial conversation was joined by the Paris-based writer, critic, and translator Federico Nicolao, one of the most original voices in European art criticism today and a long-time admirer of Brazilian poetry and art. In a kind of e-mail-based-*renga*-in-prose, Detanico Lain's works lead our conversation from the concrete movement and visual poetry to mathematics and the Oulipo, Paul Valéry, James Joyce, Copernicus and Galileo, all the way to the Moon and back. This transcontinental, originally multilingual exchange is what follows below, in English translation.

***Dialogue: Pedro Erber, Federico Nicolao, Angela Detanico, Rafael Lain***

**Pedro Erber:** I want to return to the conversation that we started at the occasion of your 2017 exhibition at the Brazilian Embassy in Tokyo. If I were to describe in few words what impressed me the most in your work at that point, I would say it was the subtlety and simplicity in the way those pieces materialize concepts, translating them into a visual language that expresses something comparable to mathematical beauty.

I recall an old quarrel between the Brazilian poets Ferreira Gullar and the brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos about the idea of mathematical poetry.<sup>8</sup> Until the end of his life Gullar came back to it from time to time in his column in the daily “Folha de São Paulo.” He claimed that his initial break with the group of concrete poets of São Paulo came from his disagreement with their project of applying mathematical rules to poetry. And Gullar added that, in fact, the *paulistas* ended up never composing such mathematical poems, which led him to decide that he would no longer agree to publish a manifesto spelling out rules for a poetry still to be written.

Each time I thought of this controversy I wondered what those mathematical poems could have looked like, and what Décio Pignatari and the brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos were seeking in this rapprochement between poetry and mathematics that, if Gullar is to be believed, they never carried out.

In your recent works, in which an intimate dialogue with concrete poetry seems to set the tone, I feel as if, for the first time, I could get a glimpse of what this mathematical poetry may look like. I am thinking of *Vague* (2010), for instance, and of *White Square* (2017; Figure 3; Plate 5) in particular. The mathematical element emerges here not so much as calculation or the mere application of rules—although those aspects are also present in many of those works—but mainly as a creative method. Each of those works proposes new rules, new principles, and, in a way, a new experimental poetic language, which drives forward the project of a *verbivocovisual* poetry, while simultaneously recalling a crucial aspect of mathematics itself, which is expressed in the ancient Greek word μάθημα, meaning “subject of instruction,” or perhaps more to the point: that which can be learned.

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<sup>8</sup> See Gullar 151.



**Figure 3. *White Square* (2017)**

This apprenticeship, this action of learning is, in my view, where the driving force for each of these works can be found: learning a code, a new formula and a new form of poetic writing: writing that, beyond *verbivocovisual* expression, also exists as a tridimensional object, pursuing the path opened by the neo-concrete proposals of Gullar, Lygia Pape, and others.

**Detanico Lain:** Art is the invention of new languages to express reality and to elaborate new concepts to deal with reality, to contain it. It is a creative movement that paves the way to sublimate the understanding of the world and, ultimately, to enable its construction. Every one of our works creates its own language to a certain extent—as if, in order to express each new sentence, one would need an entirely new language. Each work is an expression of this process, and simultaneously its culmination.

Meanwhile, taking the opposite path—thus going from work to language—presupposes, as you said, a commitment, an experience beyond contemplation. This is the path that interests us, from work towards code, from hypothesis towards problem, from answer to question. It is a return to the time of invention and discovery that spans learning and understanding. We tap into a poetic force in this movement and, in it, we glimpse the fusion of form and concept to which we aspire in our works. This reminds us that, in order to speak of things, names and definitions were created, that the phenomena of nature have been synthesized in physical formulas, that forms, rhythms and harmonies have tended toward complete abstraction in mathematics.

This movement makes us remember that the sun and the moon are celestial bodies we contemplate in the sky but also symbolic, mathematical and mythical objects intertwined with the many facets of the system of knowledge constructed to accommodate the pace of a finite existence at the perpetual rhythm of days and nights, to reconcile experience on the human scale with the consciousness of the infinite.

Turning the concrete reality of the world into language is a process of invention, in which desires, poetry and ideologies are articulated. Looking at it in this way, we can have a glimpse of the rationality, curiosity and fantasy of human nature. Today, languages and codes overlap, organizing and complexifying reality through different levels of abstraction. Language is spoken, then written, then codified, transmitted, and translated.

We can explore this complexity by using different “materials” such as sounds, words and intervals, or by being inspired by other research fields such as mathematics, thanks to the legacy of all those who dared to mix, combine, and transgress different genres and disciplines. Like the latin palindrome SATOR AREPO TENET OPERA ROTAS that inspired Anton Webern for the 12-tone series. This is indeed a very curious and exciting moment in the history of art.

**Federico Nicolao:** Here we should also not forget our dearest European visual poet, Jean-Luc Godard, who, having dreamt in his youth of pursuing the route of mathematics, later chose as the title for a much misunderstood exhibition “Voyage(s) in Utopia, 1946-2006, Searching for a Lost Theorem.” Following in the footsteps of Évariste Galois and Niels Abel, two mathematicians, his dream



was clearly to reach, through the art of cinema, the theorem that would have enabled him to rethink the word/image relationship. But this is another story.

**D/L:** Eisenstein, too, spoke of the word/image relation in his essay “The cinematographic principle and the ideogram,” when discussing the art of editing as a form of writing akin to the ideogram, in which a sign, he argued, is composed of different “scenes.” In the same essay, he also spoke of Japanese poetry as a form of composed images, just like in cinema.

**Nicolao:** In this same direction, which grazes the impalpable but is nonetheless very concrete, you worked with Takeshi Yasaki, the choreographer, in Kyoto to render a poem by Kitasono Katue in gestures and images—*Monotonous Space* (performed at Villa Kujoyama, 2017)—where performance functioned as a cinema of ideas that enabled ideograms to become once again a kind of plastic form.

**D/L:** Our goal was to approach plastic forms as transforming bodies that evolve in space and time. *Weightless Days*, a performance we did in 2006 with Takeshi Yasaki and Megumi Matsumoto, was our first experience in this direction. We designed a space in transformation for dancers, a kind of playing field, with animations projected in black and white on the stage, constructing the space with zones of shade and light. These abstract forms in movement, inhabited by two dancers, bring up dualities like night and day, presence and absence, masculine and feminine.

**D/L:** In *Monotonous Space*, Kitasono’s text adds a new vector; the poem provides the subject of the piece and the rhythm of the images. It also led us to deal with language as both writing and speaking: that is, as a graphic element in the animations and as voice in the sound composition.

These performances are moments of convergence, where visual forms, sound, poetry, and gesture are mixed; they contaminate each other, overflow into each other. An intersection of disciplines where delimitations no longer make sense, a machine in which multiple pieces come together as a complex whole, where the image can provide rhythm, gesture can be graphic, sound is embodied and the word duplicates itself in sound and image.

After *Monotonous Space*, we created a suite with two other poems by Kitasono, presented at Kyoto's Nuit Blanche by Megumi Matsumoto. And we are working on a third part with the duo Takeshi and Megumi (Plate 6).

**Erber:** Your interest in the Japanese poet Kitasono Katue (1902-1978) can be said to recuperate a central thematic of concrete poetry and resume a long-standing dialogue between Brazilian and Japanese avant-garde poetry. Towards the end of the 1950s, Haroldo de Campos got in contact with Kitasono through Ezra Pound. Pound knew of the Brazilian poet's interest in ideographic writing and sensed a mutual affinity. Campos and Kitasono started a sporadic correspondence, exchanging poems and translations. Albeit courteous and fed by mutual interest in each other's work, their relationship cannot be said to have deeply impacted the trajectory of either of them. In part, perhaps, because Kitasono's poetry was not particularly ideographic; but also because he was never completely convinced by the principles of concretism, even though he went as far as translating the Noigandres' *Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry*, which he published in 1964 in his avant-garde poetry journal *VOU*.

Many of the pieces in *Archipel* (2018; Plates 7 and 8) were conceived during your residence at the Villa Kujoyama, in Kyoto, where you delved more deeply into your research on Kitasono and into a dialogue with Japanese art and aesthetics—both traditional and contemporary. One crucial aspect in your work on this dialogue, which differentiates it from the earlier concretist moment, is that your interest in Kitasono does not stem from a general curiosity and fascination about ideographic writing, but rather from a specific interest in his experimental project of constructing a plastic-poetic language. I think the *Archipel (Setting Stones)* (Plate 7) installation nicely embodies this bifurcated dialogue: on the one hand, with the zen tradition, through its reference to the stone garden of the Daitokuji temple, and, on the other hand, with Kitasono's avant-garde project—not to mention its striking visual resonances with the work of Suga Kishio.

**D/L:** Kitasono understood how important it was to take the text as image, as forms on paper. Writing is not only a vector of concepts or mental images; it is also, literally, an image. That explains the interest of Brazilian concrete poets in his work. And naturally ours. Our very first project, *Font Delta* (2002), was an

attempt to show the natural evolution of languages through the visual transformation of letters.

Kitasono was a master of rhythm and patterns. In certain poems he created impressive visual, sound and conceptual patterns, arranging repetitions and voids. We see the strong visual rhythm he creates with the arrangement of the letters as musical scores. These are the aspects of his poetry, and particularly his poem *Tanchō-na Kūkan* (1949-1978), which inspired us to make *White Square* (2017), an installation created upon our return from our artists' residence in Kyoto. The first lines of the poem—that are repeated at the end—are transcoded in *Pilha-Kana* (2006; Figure 4), a writing/sculpture that links hiragana characters to ordered groups of objects, a version for Japanese of our piled-up writing system. In the installation, the piled-up words are formed by rejoinders of blocks of white plaster on which Malevich painted his black square, and they themselves delimit, by their positioning, the angles of a square: a play of oppositions, presence/absence.



S A T O R  
A R E P O  
T E N E T  
O P E R A  
R O T A S  
(PILHA)



**Figure 4.** *Pilha-Kana* (2006)

With great visual talent, Kitasono transcended verbal language in his *Plastic Poems* (1960s-1970s). His avant-garde poetry shifts away from traditional poetic forms, which is why his work has remained relatively unknown, even in Japan. We are deeply involved with his economic use of words, the use of repetitions, a certain theatricality, as ritual, not in the evocative or mystical sense but as the systematization of a gesture, of certain ways of doing. We think of the periodic reconstruction of the temples of Ise: from the same plans, with the same tools and the same gestures, in 20-year cycles repeated for centuries. We think of dry garden patterns, the complexity of their mineral arrangements, which aim at perfection through repetition; and of the relationship to nature that informs the conception of these gardens, imagined like miniature landscapes that refer to wide open spaces.

The work *Archipel (Setting Stones)* integrates this ritual aspect because it implies a gesture, a codified gesture. It draws inspiration from the *Sakuteiki*, an eleventh-century Japanese garden book. It defines the creation of a garden as the art of placing stones (*Ishi wo taten koto*). In *Setting Stones*, the stones/letters are distributed in space by the pace of human steps in a sequence of twenty-six positions based on the letters of the alphabet. Each word made of stones is a word-landscape, or more accurately, a word-garden, a micro-landscape composed of few elements in which the void or the silence—the alphabetical organization of the letters is implicit in the spatial distribution of the stones—signifies as much as the presence of the objects. It is a kind of contemplative writing.

**Erber:** But beyond concrete poetry, literature is omnipresent in your work and of course in this exhibition. For example, *Ulysses* by James Joyce who, of course was another inventor of language.

**D/L:** We scanned the 732 pages of Joyce's novel and literally animated them. A man walks, endlessly, borrowing his steps and contours from Étienne-Jules Marey's deconstruction of movement (Plate 8).

**Nicolao:** There is also that large work, very slight and almost invisible. I am referring to *Horizon*.

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**D/L:** Upon our return from Japan, we left for the Sables d’Olonne to think about the exhibition’s content. We wanted to attain a sense of immersion in that landscape, in that expanse of tide-measured sea, that fluid landscape that plays hide and seek with the sky. It was under this contemplative state that the idea of *Horizon* (Figure 5) came to us. We searched for the word horizon in several books and retained from them only each line containing this word. We aligned these pages to form a word horizon line on the wall. We began with Georges Perec’s novel *A Void*, assuming we would find it there, since the word horizon does not contain the letter “e”! Then followed horizons found in novels, poems, but also in philosophy and aesthetics, so as to let our horizon emerge at the edge of concepts and consciousness. It’s an exquisite corpse joining Roubaud, Mallarmé, Foucault, Blanchot, Lautréamont, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Huysmans, and a few others. The final piece is a collection of 360 pages coming from twenty-six books, a long line of horizon coming from our personal library.



**Figure 5. *Horizon* (2018)**

**Nicolao:** This reminds me of an observation by another expert mathematician, Paul Valéry, who wrote in his *Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci*:

“He who has never completed—be it but in dream—the sketch for some project that he is free to abandon; who has never felt the sense of adventure in working on some composition which he knows finished when others only see it commencing; who has not known the enthusiasm that burns away a minute of his very self; or the poison of conception, the scruple, the cold breath of objection coming from within; and the struggle with alternative ideas when the strongest and most universal should naturally triumph over both what is normal and what is novel; he who has not seen the image on the whiteness of his paper distorted by other possible images, by his regret for all the images that will not be chosen; or seen in limpid air a building that is not there; he who is not haunted by fear of the giddiness caused by the receding of the goal before him; by anxiety as to means; by foreknowledge of delays and despairs, calculation of progressive phases, reasoning about the future—even about things that should not, when the time comes, be reasoned about—that man does not know either—and it does not matter how much he knows besides—the riches and resources, the domains of the spirit, that are illuminated by the conscious act of *construction*. The gods have received from the human mind the gift of the power to create because that mind, being cyclical and abstract, may aggrandize what it has imagined to such a point that it is no longer capable of imagining it” (101). The calculation of progressive phases: this necessarily approximative science, which questions the future, comes close to the future, but lets it go. Maybe this is the place to search for one of the few non-exotic bridges between different traditions in poetry. Perhaps this is also what Pound sought in his own hermetic manner: the capacity of poetry to think in images.

**D/L:** We took great pleasure in exploring one of Valéry’s manuscripts in the *Conscience* (2016) animation. But as you say, that is another story. Valéry was well aware of this human being formed by the cogito, by abstraction, by the flow of ideas more or less anchored in the possible and the experience of reality: an idealization with its contradictions, its ups and downs. Our walking man, *Ulysses*, is this being, this more-or-less fluid syntax at the intersection of experience, research, memory and folly. It is a being-language. A body made of text, a referenced interior monologue, a sort of echo of the novel where Joyce has one body organ corresponding to each chapter.

**Erber:** Cosmic space is another recurrent element in the works gathered for the 2017 exhibition at the Brazilian Embassy, as well as in the monographic project in Sables d'Olonne, and again more recently in the 2019 exhibition at The Club. I am thinking here of your observation of space from Earth—the horizon, the phases of the moon, the International Date Line—and your interpretation of nature through language, as in the establishment of geographic maps—of both the Earth and the sky. The references to Copernicus, with *365 Suns* (Plate 9), to Galileo with *28 Moons* (Plate 10), and to the astronomer and mathematician Nathaniel Bowditch with *Timezonotype*, speak to your affinities between scientific activity and poetic, artistic practice.

**D/L:** I would rather say that it is the relation between cosmic time and human time, between the world and the experience of the world that is mediated by science. Like subjectivity meeting its extreme in the idea of infinity. In works such as *Star Names*, *365 Suns*, *28 Moons*, etc. science is brought back to daily experience, posed as the erudite explanation of daily phenomena. The sun is a star, an apparent movement, the succession of days and the cycle that defines the year. But the sun is also an image that wakes us up each day, that calls us. In explaining the world, science also explains the human condition. We see extreme beauty—and why not a beautiful illusion—in all these science-created systems, explanations, and codes. An enormous energy... It makes me think of the quote by Valéry you mentioned...

**Nicolao:** Somewhat, perhaps, like Willys de Castro's poems from 1953, the dimensions of cosmic space and that of earthly time speak to each other. Let me end by just quoting two of his poems:

geometria viva  
fixa no extremo do traço  
eclode vagarosa do centro

a vaga explode rosa  
onde amo a côr  
e a forma que expressa  
o perfume no tempo

and this one:

tento  
ide  
ponto  
no céu  
a adaga

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*Plates*



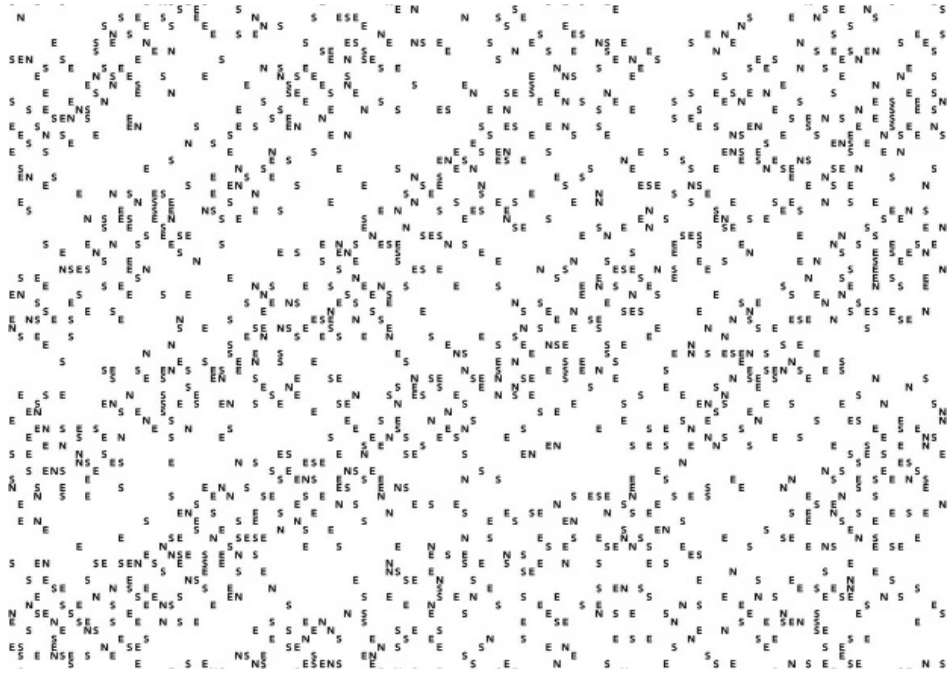
**Plate 1. Exhibition view: *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, 2019**



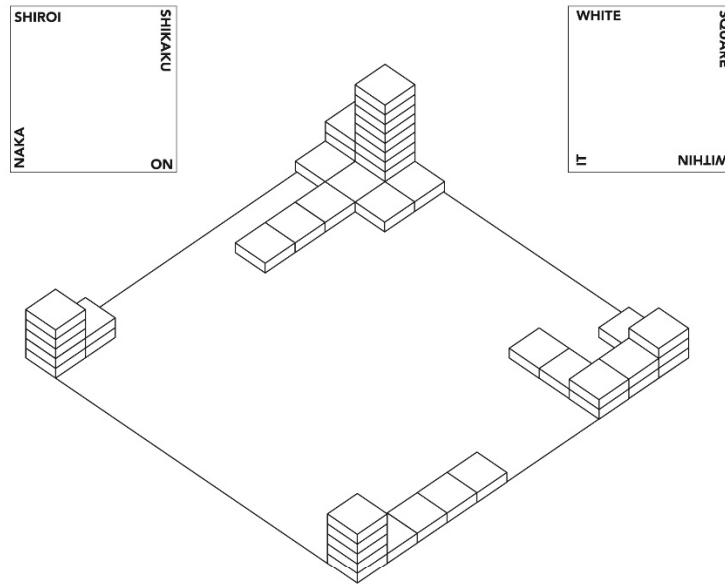
**Plate 2. Exhibition view: *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, 2019**



**Plate 3. Exhibition view: *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow*, 2019**

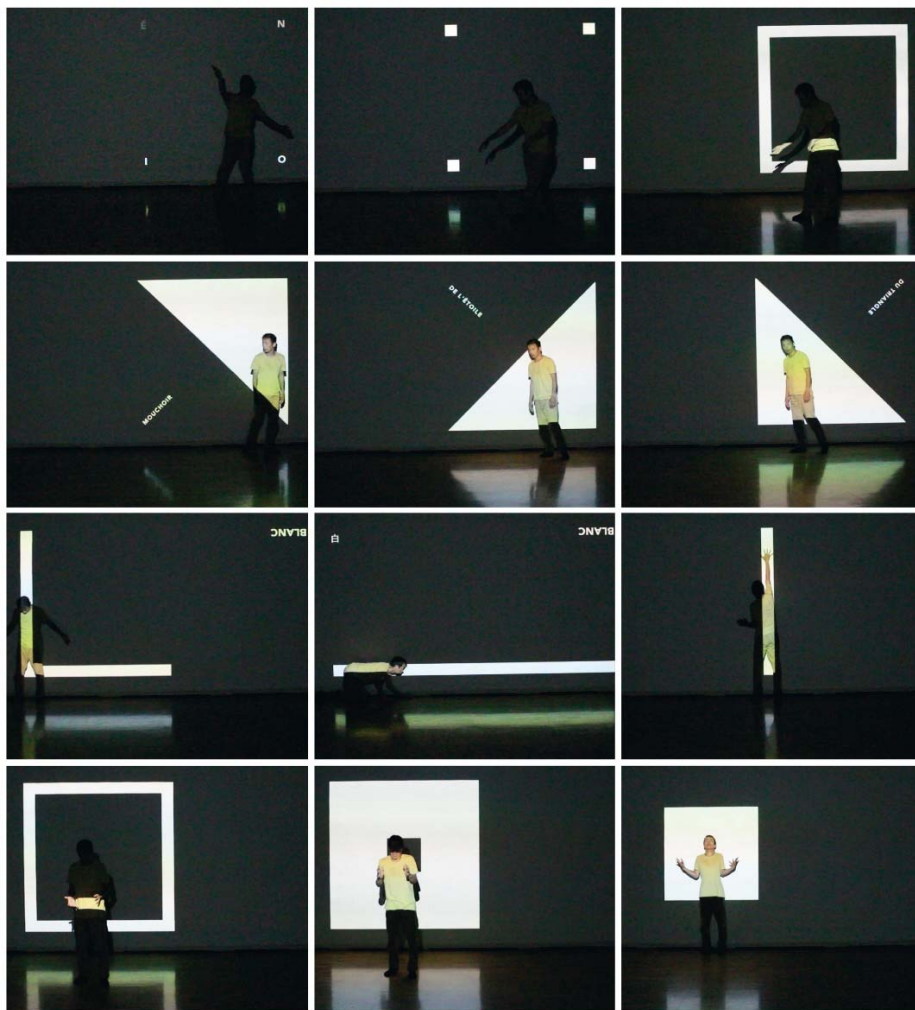


**Plate 4. *Sense* (2019)**



ん N	わ WA	ら RA	や YA	ま MA	は HA	な NA	た TA	さ SA	か KA	あ A
		り RI		み MI	ひ HI	に NI	ち CHI	し SHI	き KI	い I
		る RU	ゆ YU	む MU	ふ FU	ぬ NU	つ TSU	す SU	く KU	う U
		れ RE		め ME	へ HE	ね NE	て TE	せ SE	け KE	え E
	を WO	ろ RO	よ YO	も MO	ほ HO	の NO	と TO	そ SO	こ KO	お O

Plate 5. White Square (2017)



**Plate 6. *Monotonous Space* (2017)**



**Plate 7. *Archipel (Setting Stones)* (2018)**

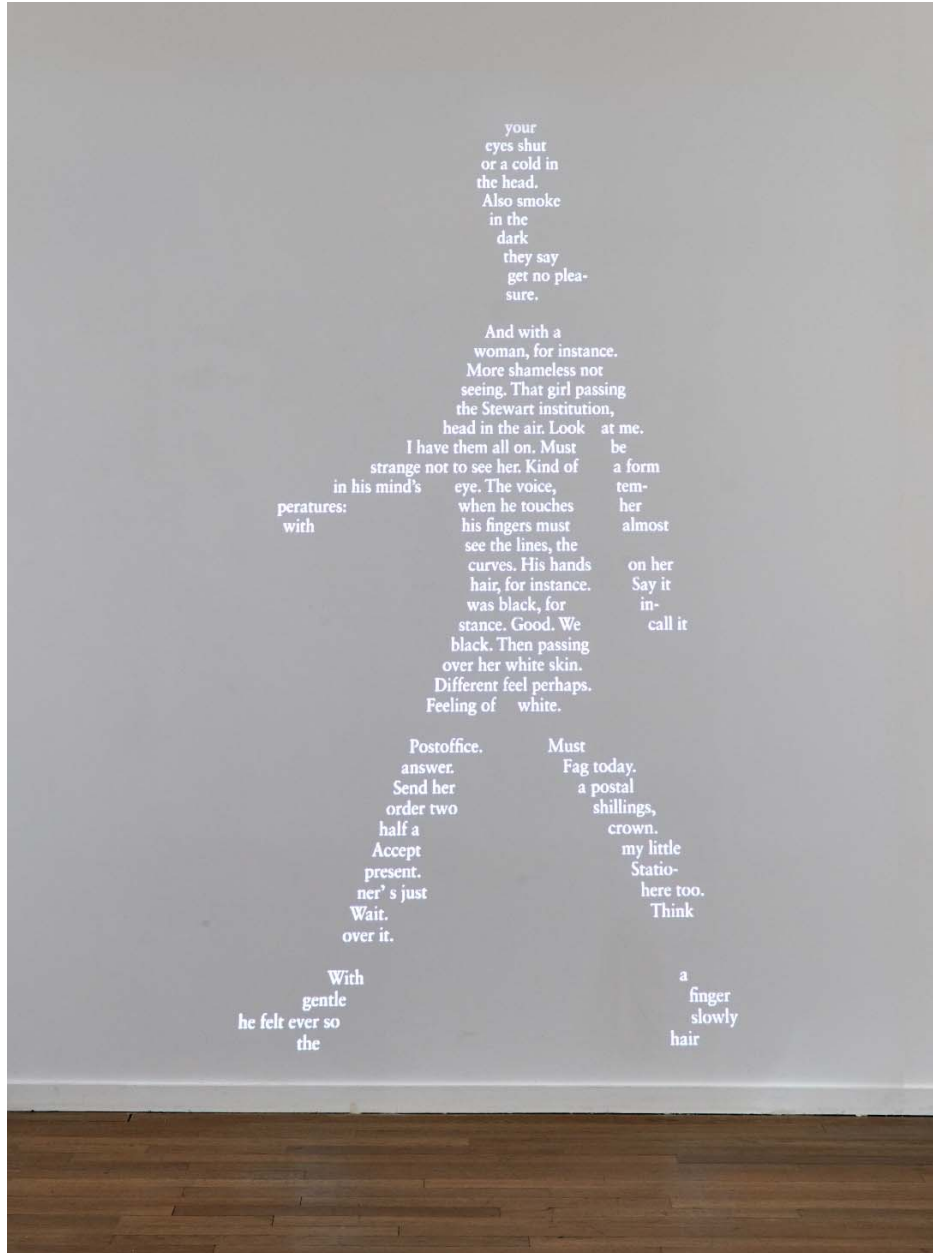
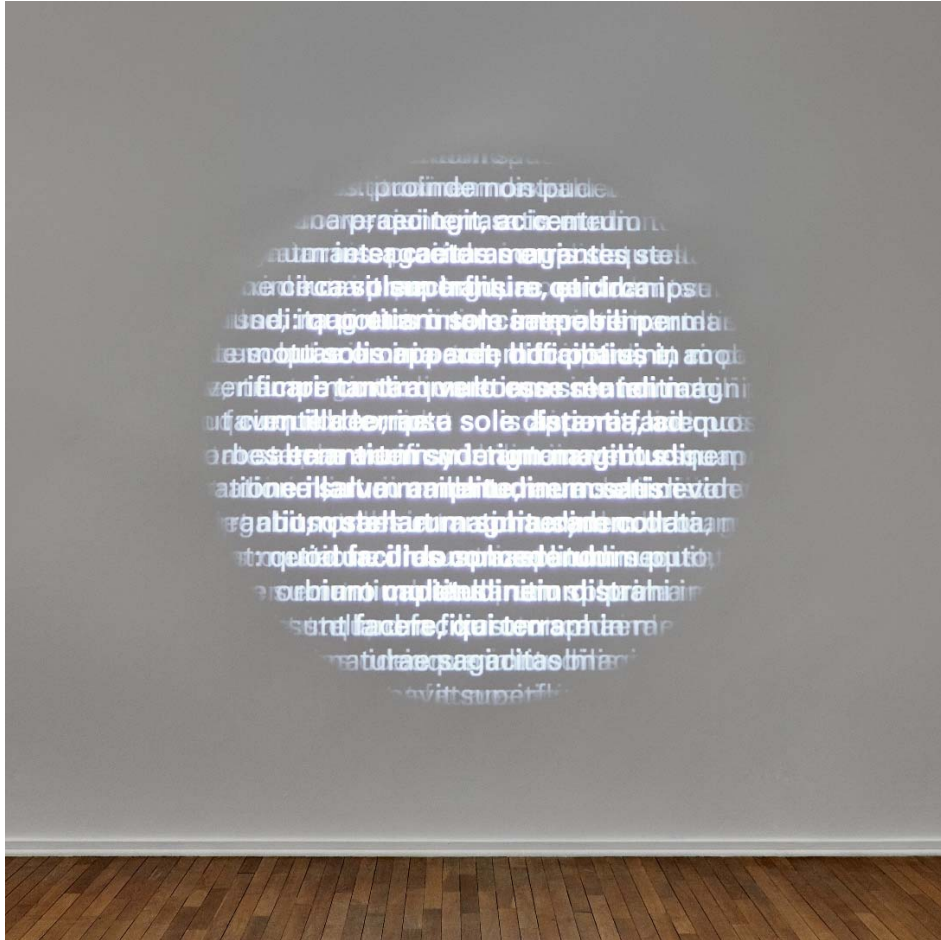
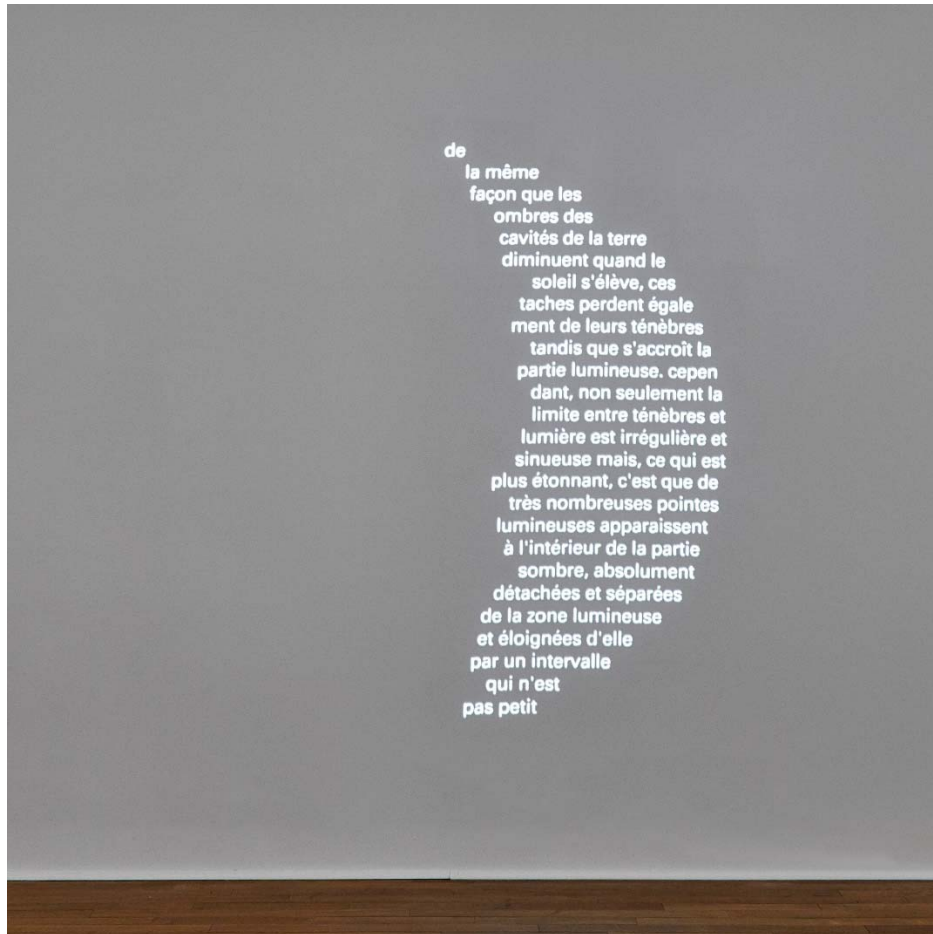


Plate 8. *Ulysses* (2017)





**Plate 9. 365 Soles (2016)**



**Plate 10. 28 *Moons* (2014)**