

There is an intended literalness in the title *Concrete Language*. As a descriptive term it gives language a material form; as a referent it deliberately points to concrete poetry, a literary genre that uses text as visual material. For the concrete poet language is material to be explored through its formal elements. Typeface, size and position create a visual impact that is to be read and seen as a whole, giving the visual configuration of words as much importance as conventional linguistic usage. The work brought together under the title *Concrete Language*, generally speaking, takes up the conceits of concrete poetry but situates itself in the expanded field of visual art. With a nod to that literary history, *Concrete Language* is a current look at the relationship between language and visual art, where linguistic signs form the structure of an object to be perceived rather than a text to be read. The visual presentation is not used to emphasize meaning, but to create layers of meaning that unfold spatially over time. — The syntactical use of language assumes that it implicitly leads to understanding, reveals meaning and clarifies intent. The rigidity of the structure is a form of denial, obscuring its own limitations and one-dimensionality. In an early essay, "Literature – Transparent and Opaque," Ian Wallace defines conventional use of language as transparent as opposed to a material use of language which is opaque. For Wallace, "the reader does not see the iconography of transparent language, there is no delay between the recognition of the word and the chain of meanings which are taken for granted. Opacity, involving delay, brings both instability and openness to the meaning."¹ The primary difference between the two uses of language is that the former is used as a function of understanding while the latter is more concerned with perception, setting the stage for understanding by placing emphasis on the act of reading. — In much of the discourse surrounding contemporary art secure meanings are fugitive. Privilege is granted to art's potential to open discussion and uncover multiple viewpoints. Apprehension, comprehension and understanding are scrambled; meaning is understood to be tenuous at best. Beneath the blatancy of the exhibition's title rests an ambiguity, its literalness conceals an underlying concept that runs through the works in the exhibition. Many of the works reveal an absence or loss of the word or syntactical structure even though the structures of language are the basic formalizing principles of the work. — The spatial translation of language opens a void where the viewer can insert their own preconceptions, creating a balance between intent and interpretation. Since the late 1960s Lawrence Weiner has used language as a medium, spatially adjoining phrases and other lexical signs to specific sites.

He defines himself as a sculptor who uses language to represent the physicality of a concept and the mobility of meaning in relation to the work's lack of formal structure. For Weiner this unstable material presence is a viable means to directly address the unknowable way in which the work is received. Establishing meaning and obtaining understanding is less about the artist's intention, and more about the viewer/reader. Authorship is linked to a work's material presence, and in order to acknowledge the viewer's essential role in defining meaning Weiner redefines his relationship to form. He states in his much quoted 1969 declaration of intent: 1. The artist may construct the work; 2. The work may be fabricated; 3. The work need not be built. —

This declaration equates absence with meaning, acknowledging a work's potential to contain a specific meaning while also forgoing the necessity for these specifics. Through the endless possibilities of the text's formal relation to space, language becomes truly abstracted, reflective of the object or situation it describes. This absence is posited using the formal properties of language while simultaneously obscuring, abstracting and reducing conventional linguistic form. Wallace's and Weiner's divergent, but interdependent relationship with language is our starting point. For *Concrete Language*, we bring together works by 15 artists that we see building a dialogue which begins with a formal consideration of language. In these works this formal relationship creates a lull where visual perception is essential to establishing meaning or setting the stage for how meaning might be derived. In this small sampling of works, we attempt to frame a larger picture, drawing a loose and wide trajectory of contemporary works that materialize this absence using language as their basis. Sometimes it is represented literally, emptying a word or linguistic sign of its original meaning, or referencing an object that will never exist. Other works in the exhibition empty meaning using more subtle formalities, applying an aesthetic sensibility that implicates the viewer and disrupts conventional modes of reception. Whether this erasure happens through an excessive repetition, explicit appropriation, total abstraction or site-specificity, the manner in which we read is flipped over, scrutinized, manipulated and reflected back. —

co-curated by Jenifer Pappararo and Christina Ritchie

¹ Ian Wallace, "Literature – Transparent and Opaque," *Concrete Poetry*, Fine Arts Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. 1969 Reprinted in *The Avant-garde Tradition in Literature*, Edited by Richard Kostelanetz, Prometheus Books, 1982.