INTERNATIONAL ART ENGLISH

Alix Rule and David Levine

Of this English upper-middle class speech we may note (a) that it is not localised in any one place, (b) that though the people who use this speech are not all acquainted with one another, they can easily recognise each other's status by this index alone, (c) that this elite speech form tends to be imitated by those who are not of the elite, so that other dialect forms are gradually eliminated, (d) that the elite, recognising this imitation, is constantly creating new linguistic elaborations to mark itself off from the common herd.
—E. R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*, 1954

The internationalized art world relies on a unique language. Its purest articulation is found in the digital press release. This language has everything to do with English, but it is emphatically not English. It is largely an export of the Anglophone world and can thank the global dominance of English for its current reach. But what really matters for this language—what ultimately makes it a language—is the pointed distance from English that it has always cultivated.

In what follows, we examine some of the curious lexical, grammatical, and stylistic features of what we call International Art English. We consider IAE's origins and speculate about the future of this language through which contemporary art is created, promoted, sold, and understood. Some will read our argument as an overelaborate joke. But there's nothing funny about this language to its users. And the scale of its use testifies to the stakes involved. We are quite serious.

HYPOTHESIS

IAE, like all languages, has a community of users that it both sorts and unifies. That community is the art world, by which we mean the network of people who collaborate professionally to make the objects and non-objects that go public as contemporary art: not just artists and curators, but gallery owners and directors, bloggers, magazine editors and writers, publicists, collectors, advisers, interns, art history professors, and so on. *Art world* is of course a disputed term, but the common alternative—*art industry*—doesn't reflect the reality of IAE. If IAE were simply the set of expressions required to address a professional subject matter, we would hardly be justified in calling it a language. IAE would be at best a technical vocabulary, a sort of specialized English no different than the language a car mechanic uses when he discusses harmonic balancers or popper valves. But by referring to an obscure car part, a mechanic probably isn't interpellating you as a member of a common world—as a fellow citizen, or as the case may be, a fellow traveler. He isn't identifying you as someone who does or does not get it.

When the art world talks about its transformations over recent decades, it talks about the spread of biennials.[1] Those who have tried to account for contemporary art's peculiar nonlocal language tend to see it as the Esperanto of this fantastically mobile and glamorous world, as a rational consensus arrived at for the sake of better coordination. But that is not quite right. Of course, if you're curating an exhibition that brings art made in twenty countries to Dakar or Sharjah, it's helpful for the artists, interns, gallerists, and publicists to be communicating in a common language. But convenience can't account for IAE. Our guess is that people all over the world have adopted this language because the distributive capacities of the internet now allow them to believe—or to hope—that their writing will reach an international audience. We can reasonably assume that most communication about art today still involves people who share a first language: artists and fabricators, local journalists and readers. But when an art student in Skopje announces her thesis show, chances are she'll email out the invite in IAE. Because, hey—*you never know*.

To appreciate this impulse and understand its implications, we need only consider e-flux, the art world's flagship digital institution. When it comes to communication about contemporary art, e-flux is the most powerful instrument and its metonym. Anton Vidokle, one of its founders, characterizes the project as an artwork.[2] Essentially, e-flux is a listserv that sends out roughly three announcements per day about contemporary art events worldwide. Because of the volume of email, Vidokle has suggested that e-flux is really only for people who are "actively involved" in contemporary art.

There are other ways of exchanging this kind of information online. A service like Craigslist could separate events by locality and language. *Contemporary Art Daily* sends out illustrated mailings featuring exhibitions from around the world. But e-flux channels the art world's aspirations so perfectly: you must pay to send out an announcement, and not every submission is accepted. Like everything the art world values, e-flux is *curated*. For-profit galleries are not eligible for e-flux's core announcement service, so it is also plausibly not commercial. And one can presume—or at very least imagine—that everyone in the art world reads it. (The listserv has twice as many subscribers as the highest-circulation contemporary art publication, *Artforum*—never mind the forward!) Like so much of the writing about contemporary art that circulates online, e-flux press releases are implicitly addressed to the art world's most important figures—which is to say that they are written exclusively in IAE.

We've assembled all thirteen years of e-flux press announcements, a collection of texts large enough to represent patterns of linguistic usage. Many observations in this essay are based on an analysis of that corpus.

SKETCH ENGINE MODULE 1: CONCORDANCE

In order to examine the stylistic tendencies of International Art English, we entered every e-flux announcement published since the listserv's launch in 1999 into Sketch Engine, a concordance generator developed by Lexical Computing. Sketch Engine allows you to analyze usage in a variety of ways, including concordances, syntactical behavior, and word usage over time. We invite you to follow our analysis by using Sketch Engine[3] to do your own searches. Click on the blue dates to see original articles, and the red words to see sentences.

VOCABULARY

The language we use for writing about art is oddly pornographic: we know it when we see it. No one would deny its distinctiveness. Yet efforts to define it inevitably produce squeamishness, as if describing the object too precisely might reveal one's particular, perhaps peculiar, investments in it. Let us now break that unspoken rule and describe the linguistic features of IAE in some detail.

IAE has a distinctive lexicon: *aporia*, *radically*, *space*, *proposition*, *biopolitical*, *tension*, *transversal*, *autonomy*. An artist's work inevitably interrogates, questions, encodes, transforms, subverts, imbricates, displaces—though often it doesn't do these things so much as it serves to, functions to, or seems to (or might seem

to) do these things. IAE rebukes English for its lack of nouns: *Visual* becomes *visuality*, *global* becomes *globality*, *potential* becomes *potentiality*, *experience* becomes…experiencability.

Space is an especially important word in IAE and can refer to a raft of entities not traditionally thought of as spatial (*the space of humanity*) as well as ones that are in most circumstances quite obviously spatial (*the space of the gallery*). An announcement for the 2010 exhibition "Jimmie Durham and His Metonymic Banquet," at Proyecto de Arte Contemporáneo Murcia in Spain, had the artist "questioning the division between inside and outside in the Western sacred space"—the venue was a former church—"to highlight what is excluded in order to invest the sanctum with its spatial purity. Pieces of cement, wire, refrigerators, barrels, bits of glass and residues of 'the sacred,' speak of the space of the exhibition hall…transforming it into a kind of 'temple of confusion.'"

Spatial and nonspatial space are interchangeable in IAE. The critic John Kelsey, for instance, writes that artist Rachel Harrison "causes an immediate confusion between the space of retail and the space of subjective construction." The rules for *space* in this regard also apply to *field*, as in "the field of the real"—which is where, according to art historian Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "the parafictional has one foot." (Prefixes like *para-*, *proto-*, *post-*, and *hyper-* expand the lexicon exponentially and Germanly, which is to say without adding any new words.) It's not just that IAE is rife with spacey terms like *intersection*, *parallel*, *parallelism*, *void*, *enfold*, *involution*, and *platform*. IAE's literary conventions actually favor the hard-to-picture spatial metaphor: a practice "spans" from drawing all the way to artist's books; Matthew Ritchie's works, in the words of *Artforum*, "elegantly bridge a rift in the art-science continuum"; Saâdane Afif "will unfold his ideas beyond the specific and anecdotal limits of his Paris experience to encompass a more general scope, a new and broader dimension of meaning."

And so many ordinary words take on nonspecific alien functions. "Reality," writes artist Tania Bruguera, in a recent issue of *Artforum*, "functions as my field of action." Indeed: *Reality* occurs four times more frequently in the e-flux corpus than in the British National Corpus (BNC), which represents British English usage in the second half of the twentieth century.[4] *The real* appears 2,148 times per million units in the e-flux corpus versus a mere twelve times per million in the BNC—about 179 times more often. One exhibit invites "the public to experience the perception of colour, spatial orientation and other forms of engagement with reality"; another "collects models of contemporary realities and sites of conflict"; a show called "Reality Survival Strategies" teaches us that the "*sub real* is…formed of the leftovers of reality."

SYNTAX

Let us turn to a press release for Kim Beom's "Animalia" (2011), exhibited at REDCAT last spring: "Through an expansive practice that spans drawing, sculpture, video, and artist books, Kim contemplates a world in which perception is radically questioned. His visual language is characterized by deadpan humor and absurdist propositions that playfully and subversively invert expectations. By suggesting that what you see may not be what you see, Kim reveals the tension between internal psychology and external reality, and relates observation and knowledge as states of mind."

Here we find some of IAE's essential grammatical characteristics: the frequency of adverbial phrases such as "radically questioned" and double adverbial terms such as "playfully and subversively invert." The pairing of like terms is also essential to IAE, whether in particular parts of speech ("internal psychology and external reality") or entire phrases. Note also the reliance on dependent clauses, one of the most distinctive features of art-related writing. IAE prescribes not only that you open with a dependent clause but that you follow it up with as many more as possible, embedding the action deep within the sentence, effecting an uncanny stillness. Better yet: *both* an uncanny stillness *and* a deadening balance.

IAE always recommends using more rather than fewer words. Hence a press release for a show called "Investigations" notes that one of the artists "reveals something else about the real, different information." And when Olafur Eliasson's *Yellow Fog* (1998/2008) "is shown at dusk—the transition period between day and night—it represents and comments on the subtle changes in the day's rhythm." If such redundancies follow from this rule, so too do groupings of ostensibly unrelated items. Catriona Jeffries Gallery writes of Jin-me Yoon: "Like an insect, or the wounded, or even a fugitive, Yoon moves forward with her signature combination of skill and awkwardness." The principle of anti-economy also accounts for the dependence on lists in IAE. This is illustrated at inevitable length in the 2010 press release announcing the conference "Cultures of the Curatorial," which identifies "the curatorial" as "forms of practice, techniques, formats and aesthetics…not dissimilar to the functions of the concepts of the filmic or the literary" that entail "activities such as organization, compilation, display, presentation, mediation or publication…a multitude of different, overlapping and heterogeneously coded tasks and roles."[5]

Reading the "Animalia" release may lead to a kind of metaphysical seasickness. It is hard to find a footing in this "space" where Kim "contemplates" and "reveals" an odd "tension," but where in the end nothing ever seems to *do* anything. And yet to those of us who write about art, these contortions seem to be

Corpus: **e-flux**
Hits: **1957** (313.7 per million)

Page 1 of 98 Go Next | Last

2001,07	Biennial is an attempt to allow the local	reality	become a space of flux and connection between
2001,07	generations through the workshops, while the	reality	is characterized not only by the continuity
2001,07	(Quantum Teleportation and the Nature of	Reality	) July 25 (Conference) Time - Uncertainity
2001,10	political, social, economic and personal	realities	is picked out as a central theme in the
2001,10	professionalism through the distance from western	reality	. This goes hand in hand with the excellent
2001,11	the efforts of making FAST FWD: MIAMI a	reality	. We saw a possibility for younger galleries
2001,12	are developing new models of contemporary	reality	. The reality they model through their work
2001,12	new models of contemporary reality. The	reality	they model through their work is as fictional
2001,12	architecture was generally based on a material	reality	. Architecture mirrored function and art
2001,12	from which it was made. As our model of	reality	has become more layered and less concrete
2001,12	audience into the gap between fiction and	reality	. Other artists create elaborate fictional
2001,12	fictional systems that fuse elements of	reality	and fantasy. Form Follows Fiction is conceived
2001,12	attempts to represent the new conception of	reality	being developed by the generation of artists
2002,01	addresses the interplay between external	reality	and internal states of mind. The installation
2002,02	dreams and nightmares can be measured against	reality	. In order to make this quite clear, Buetti
2002,03	is precisely such an oscillation between	reality	and fantasy that characterizes the world
2002,03	, Majorca and Segou, Mali. The reference	reality	of Barceló is complex and detailed, based
2002,03	represents a different view of the actual visual	reality	, it is not an anti-show. It completes instead
2002,03	The mix blurs the border between image and	reality	in an uncanny way. Lars Nilsson's investigation
2002,03	paradoxically investigated through its material	reality	. In the project space we show the work

Page 1 of 98 Go Next | Last

Lexical Computing Ltd.
Sketch Engine (version 2.59-2.91.9)

Occurrences of *reality* in the e-flux corpus

irresistible, even natural. When we sense ourselves to be in proximity to something serious and art related, we reflexively reach for subordinate clauses. The question is why. How did we end up writing in a way that sounds like inexpertly translated French?

GENEALOGY

If e-flux is the crucible of today's IAE, the journal *October* is a viable candidate for the language's point of origin. In the pages of *October*, founded in 1976, an American tradition of formalist art criticism associated with Clement Greenberg collided with continental philosophy. *October*'s editors, among them art historians Rosalind Krauss and Annette Michelson, saw contemporary criticism as essentially slovenly and *belle lettristic*; they sought more rigorous interpretive criteria, which led them to translate and introduce to an English-speaking audience many French poststructuralist texts.[6] The shift in criticism represented by *October* had an enormous impact on the interpretation and evaluation of art and also changed the way writing about art *sounded*.

Consider Krauss's "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," published in 1979: "Their failure is also encoded onto the very surface of these works: the doors having been gouged away and anti-structurally encrusted to the point where they bear their inoperative condition on their face, the *Balzac* having been executed with such a degree of subjectivity that not even Rodin believed (as letters by him attest) that the work would be accepted." Krauss translated Barthes, Baudrillard, and Deleuze for *October*, and she wrote in a style that seemed forged in those translations. So did many of her colleagues. A number of them were French and German, so presumably they translated themselves in real time.

Many of IAE's particular lexical tics come from French, most obviously the suffixes *-ion*, *-ity*, *-ality*, and *-ization*, so frequently employed over homelier alternatives like *-ness*. The mysterious proliferation of definite and indefinite articles—"the political," "the space of absence," "the recognizable and the repulsive"—are also French imports. *Le vide*, for instance, could mean "empty things" in general—evidently the poststructuralists' translators preferred the monumentality of "The Void."

Le vide occurs 20.9 times per million in the French Web Corpus; *the void* occurs only 1.3 times per million in the BNC but 9.8 times per million in the e-flux corpus. (Sketch Engine searches are not case sensitive.) The word *multitude*, the same in English and French, appears 141 times in e-flux press releases. *A lot* appears 102 times.

French is probably also responsible for the prepositional and adverbial phrases that are so common in IAE: *simultaneously*, *while also*, and, of course, *always already*. Many tendencies that IAE has inherited are not just specific to French but to the highbrow written French that the poststructuralists appropriated, or in some cases parodied (the distinction was mostly lost in translation). This kind of French features sentences that go on and on and make ample use of adjectival verb forms and past and present participles. These have become art writing's stylistic signatures.[7]

French is not IAE's sole non-English source. Germany's Frankfurt School was also a great influence on the *October* generation; its legacy can be located in the liberal use of production, negation, and totality. Dialectics abound. (*Production* is used four times more often in the e-flux corpus than in the BNC, *negation* three times more often, *totality* twice as often. *Dialectics* occurs six times more often in the e-flux corpus than in the BNC; at 9.9 instances per million, *dialectics* is nearly as common to IAE as *sunlight* to the BNC.) One press release notes that "humanity has aspired to elevation and desired to be free from alienation of and subjugation to gravity…. This physical and existential dialectic, which is in a permanent state of oscillation between height and willful falling, drives us to explore the limits of balance." Yes, the assertion here is that standing up is a dialectical practice.

October's emulators mimicked both the deliberate and unintentional features of the journal's writing, without discriminating between the two. Krauss and her colleagues aspired to a kind of analytic precision in their use of words, but at several degrees' remove those same words are used like everyday language: anarchically, expressively. (The word *dialectic* has a precise, some would say scientific, meaning, but in IAE it is normally used for its affective connotation: it means "good.") At the same time, the progeny of *October* elevated accidents of translation to the level of linguistic norms.

IAE channels theoretical influences more or less *aesthetically*, sedimented in a style that combines their inflections and formulations freely and continually incorporates new ones.[8] (Later art writing would *trouble*, for instance, and *queer*.) Today the most authoritative writers cheerfully assert that criticism lacks a sense of what it is or does: unlike in the years following *October*'s launch, there are no clearly dominant methodologies for interpreting art. And yet, the past methodologies are still with us—not in our substantive interpretations, but in the spirit and letter of the art world's universally foreign language.[9]

SKETCH ENGINE MODULE 2: WORD SKETCH

Sketch Engine permits you to get a global picture of a word's behavior by doing a "Word Sketch." Here you can see the various ways in which a word is deployed and the frequency with which it is paired with other words all at once. Select "Word Sketch" in the sidebar, enter the word you're looking for in the "Lemma" field, and then select the grammatical form of the word for which you're searching. [10]

AUTHORITY

We hardly need to point out what was exclusionary about the kind of writing that Anglo art criticism cultivated. Such language asked more than to be understood, it demanded to be *recognized*. Based on so many idiosyncrasies of translation, the language that art writing developed during the *October* era was alienating in large part because it was legitimately alien. It alienated the English reader as such, but it distanced you less the more of it you could find familiar. Those who could recognize the standard feints were literate. Those comfortable with the more esoteric contortions likely had prolonged contact with French in translation or, at least, theory that could pass for having been translated. So art writing distinguished readers. And it allowed some writers to sound more authoritative than others.

Authority is relevant here because the art world does not deal in widgets. What it values is fundamentally symbolic, interpretable. Hence the ability to evaluate—the power to deem certain things and ideas significant and critical—is precious. Starting in the 1960s, the university became the privileged route into the rapidly growing American art world. And in *October*'s wake, that world systematically rewarded a particular kind of linguistic weirdness. One could use this special language to signal the assimilation of a powerful kind of critical sensibility, one that was rigorous, politically conscious, and probably university trained. In a much expanded art world this language had a job to do: consecrate certain artworks as significant, critical, and, indeed, contemporary. IAE developed to describe work that transcended the syntax and terminology used to interpret the art of earlier times.

It did not take long for the mannerisms associated with a rather lofty critical discourse to permeate all kinds of writing about art. *October* sounded seriously translated from its first issue onward. A decade later, much of the middlebrow *Artforum* sounded similar. Soon after, so did artists' statements, exhibition guides, grant proposals, and wall texts. The reasons for this rapid adoption are not so

different from those which have lately caused people all over the world to opt for a global language in their writing about art. Whatever the content, the aim is to sound to the art world like someone worth listening to, by adopting an approximation of its elite language.

But not everyone has the same capacity to approximate. It's often a mistake to read art writing for its literal content; IAE can communicate beautifully without it. Good readers are quite sensitive to the language's impoverished variants. An exhibition guide for a recent New York City MFA show, written by the school's art history master's students, reads: "According to [the artist] the act of making objects enables her to control the past and present." IAE of insufficient complexity sounds both better and worse: it can be more lucid, so its assertions risk appearing more obviously ludicrous. On the other hand, we're apt to be intimidated by virtuosic usage, no matter what we think it means. An e-flux release from a leading German art magazine refers to "elucidating the specificity of artistic research practice and the conditions of its possibility, rather than again and again spelling out the dialectics (or synthesis) of 'art' and 'science.'" Here the magazine distinguishes itself by reversing the normal, affirmative valence of *dialectic* in IAE. It accuses the dialectic of being boring. By doing so the magazine implicitly lays claim to a better understanding of dialectics than the common reader, a claim that is reinforced by the suggestion that this particular dialectic is so tedious as to be interchangeable with an equally tedious synthesis. What *dialectic* actually denotes is negligible. What matters is the authority it establishes.

SKETCH ENGINE MODULE 3: HISTOGRAM

To generate your own histogram, do a concordance search for the word of your choice. Then, in the sidebar, select "Frequency." In the new window, select the type of analysis you want to do (e.g., by year or by institution) in the "Text Type Frequency Distribution" panel, and then click "Frequency List."[11]

IMPLOSION

Say what you will about biennials. Nothing has changed contemporary art more in the past decade than the panoptic effects of the internet. Before e-flux, what had the Oklahoma City Museum of Art to do with the Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich? And yet once their announcements were sent out on the same day, they became relevant—legible—to one another. The same goes for the artists

Using Sketch Engine, you can track usage over time and generate histograms—graphs of frequency distributions—that show how certain terms "trend" in the e-flux corpus. Liam Gillick, perhaps the quintessential artist of the IAE era, had his best year in 2009, judging by the number of instances. But in terms of relative frequency—instances in a given year relative to the total number of words used in that year, swell as the frequency of the word within the overall corpus—his best year was 2003

whose work was featured in them, and for the works themselves. Language in the art world is more powerful than ever. Despite all the biennials, most of the art world's attention, most of the time, is online. For the modal reader of e-flux, the artwork always arrives already swaddled in IAE.

Because members of today's art world elite have no monopolies on the interpretation of art, they recognize each other mostly through their mobility. Nevertheless, the written language they've inherited continues to attract more and more users, who are increasingly diverse in their origins. With the same goals in mind as their Anglophone predecessors, new users can produce this language copiously and anonymously. The press release, appearing as it does mysteriously in God knows whose inboxes, is where attention is concentrated. It's where IAE is making its most impressive strides.

The collective project of IAE has become actively global. Acts of linguistic mimicry and one-upmanship now ricochet across the web. (Usage of the word *speculative* spiked unaccountably in 2009; 2011 saw a sudden rage for *rupture*; *transversal* now seems poised to have its best year ever.)[12] Their perpetrators have fewer means of recognizing one another's intentions than ever. We hypothesize that the speed at which analytic terms are transformed into expressive, promotional tokens has increased.

As a language spreads, dialects inevitably emerge. The IAE of the French press release is almost too perfect: it is written, we can only imagine, by French interns imitating American interns imitating American academics imitating French academics.[13] Scandinavian IAE, on the other hand, tends to be lousy.[14] Presumably its writers are hampered by false confidence—with their complacent nonnative fluency in English, they have no ear for IAE.

An e-flux release for the 2006 Guangzhou Triennial, aptly titled "Beyond," reads: "An extraordinary space of experimentation for modernization takes the Pearl River Delta"—the site of a planned forty-million-person megacity—"as one of the typical developing regions to study the contemporary art within the extraordinary modernization framework that is full of possibilities and confusion. Pearl River Delta (PRD) stands for new space strategies, economic patterns and life styles. Regard this extraordinary space as a platform for artistic experimentation and practice. At the same time, this also evokes a unique and inventive experimental sample." This is fairly symptomatic of a state of affairs in which the unwitting emulators of Bataille in translation might well be interns in the Chinese Ministry of Culture—but then again might not. The essential point is that learning English may now hardly be a prerequisite for writing proficiently in the language of the art world.

At first blush this seems to be just another victory over English, promising an increasingly ecstatic semantic unmooring of the art writing we've grown

accustomed to. But absent the conditions that motored IAE's rapid development, the language may now be in existential peril. IAE has never had a *codified* grammar; instead, it has evolved by continually incorporating new sources and tactics of sounding foreign, pushing the margins of intelligibility from the standpoint of the English speaker. But one cannot rely on a global readership to feel properly alienated by deviations from the norm.[15]

We are not the first to sense the gravity of the situation. The crisis of criticism, ever ongoing, seemed to reach a fever pitch at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Art historian and critic Sven Lütticken lamented that criticism has become nothing more than "highbrow copywriting." The idea that serious criticism has somehow been rendered inoperative by the commercial condition of contemporary art has been expressed often enough in recent years, yet no one has convincingly explained how the market squashed criticism's authority. Lütticken's formulation is revealing: Is it that highbrow criticism can no longer claim to sound different than copy? Critics, traditionally the elite innovators of IAE, no longer appear in control. Indeed, they seem likely to be beaten at their own game by anonymous antagonists who may or may not even know they're playing.

Guangzhou again: "The City has been regarded as a newly-formed huge collective body that goes beyond the established concept of city. It is an extraordinary space and experiment field that covers all the issues and is free of time and space limit." This might strike a confident reader of IAE as a decent piece of work: we have a redundantly and yet vaguely defined phenomenon transcending "the established concept" of its basic definition; we have time and space; we have a superfluous definite article. But the article is in the wrong place; it should be "covers all issues and is free from the time and space limit." Right? Who wrote this? But wait. Maybe it's avant-garde.

Can we imagine an art world without IAE? If press releases could not telegraph the seriousness of their subjects, what would they simply *say*? Without its special language, would art need to submit to the scrutiny of broader audiences and local ones? Would it hold up?

If IAE implodes, we probably shouldn't expect that the globalized art world's language will become neutral and inclusive. More likely, the elite of that world will opt for something like conventional highbrow English and the reliable distinctions it imposes.

Maybe in the meantime we should enjoy this decadent period of IAE. We should read e-flux press releases not for their content, not for their technical proficiency in IAE, but for their lyricism, as we believe many people have already begun to do.[16] Take this release, reformatted as meter:

Peter Rogiers is toiling through the matter
with synthetic resin and cast aluminum
attempting to generate an oblique and "different" imagery
out of sink with what we recognize
in "our" world.
Therein lies the core
and essence of real artistic production—the desire
to mould into plastic shape
undermining visual recognition
and shunt man onto the track
of imagination.
Peter Rogiers is and remains
one of those sculptors who averse from all
personal interests is stuck
with his art in brave stubbornness
to (certainly) not give into creating
any form of
languid art whatsoever.
His new drawing can further be considered
catching thought-moulds
where worlds tilt
and imagination
chases off grimy reality.

We have no idea who Peter Rogiers is, what he's up to, or where he's from, but we feel as though we would love to meet him.

"International Art English," coauthored by sociologist Alix Rule and artist David Levine, was first published in online magazine *Triple Canopy* in 2013. Widely cited, discussed, and debated, the essay prompted rebuttals from artists Hito Steyerl and Martha Rosler, both regular contributors to the site e-flux, whose press release archive was used to generate data for Rule and Levine's essay. For *Mass Effect*, *Triple Canopy* editor Alexander Provan has written a short follow-up on the essay's afterlife, which appears next in this volume, titled "Chronicle of a Traveling Theory."

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this reprint, words that have been underlined originally appeared in red in the online *Triple Canopy* article and were linked to content featured on e-flux. This first hyperlink, "the spread of biennials," takes users to an e-flux-distributed press release for the 9th Gwangju Biennial in South Korea.

2. "In its totality, e-flux is a work of art that uses circulation both as form and content," Vidokle told *Dossier* in 2009, after an interviewer asked whether e-flux—by that time quite profitable—was art or a business.

3. Visit the original article to use Sketch Engine: <http://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english> (accessed Aug. 13, 2014).

4. Using Sketch Engine's parts-per-million calculator, we can measure the frequency of words in IAE relative to their usage in other corpora. For instance, the website of the BNC, which is searchable on Sketch Engine, describes the corpus as "a 100 million word collection of samples of written and spoken language from a wide range of sources." Searching for "reality" in the e-flux corpus returns 1,957 hits, which represents 313.7 hits per million; searching for "reality" in the significantly larger BNC returns 7,196 hits, which represents only 64.1 hits per million. In other words, *reality* plays a much more prominent role in International Art English than in British English.

5. Similarly, White Flag Projects describes Daniel Lefcourt's 2012 exhibition, Mockup, as "a storage room, a stage set, a mausoleum, a trade show, a diagram, a game board, a studio, a retail store, a pictograph, a classroom, a museum display, an architectural model, and a sign-maker's workshop."

6. IAE is rarely referred to as *writing*, much less *prose*, though on occasion art people want to write, or claim to have written, an "essay," which at least has its etymological roots in the right place. The choice of *text*—fungible, indifferent, forbidding—says much about how writing has come to be understood in the art world. Texts, of course, are symptomatic on the part of their authors, and readers may glean from them multiple meanings. The richness of a text has everything to do with its shiftiness.

7. The press release for Aaron Young's 2012 show at the Company, "No Fucking Way," reads: "This blurring of real and constructed, only existing in the realm of performance, speculation and judgment, implicates the viewer in its consumption, since our observation of these celebrities will always be mediated."

8. It's hard to pinpoint the source of some of IAE's favorite tics. Who is to blame for the idle inversion? Chiasmus is at least as much Marxist as poststructuralist. We could look to Adorno, for whom "myth is already Enlightenment; and Enlightenment reverts to mythology." Benjamin, in his famous last line of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," writes about fascism's aestheticization of politics as opposed to communism's politicization of art. David Lewis, reviewing a George Condo exhibition in *Artforum*, writes that the artist's "subject matter, ranging from whores to orgies and clowns, is banal but never *about* banality, and Condo does not seem to really 'play' with bad taste—it appears instead that bad taste plays with him."

9. IAE conveys the sense of political tragedy: everything is straining as hard as it can to be radical in a context where agency is perennially fucked, forever, for everyone. Art must, by

lexical design, "interrogate" and "problematize" and "blur boundaries" and even "highlight blurred boundaries." But the grammatical structures make failure a foregone conclusion. (Thinking of these structures as social structures conjures up a world—borrowed vaguely, and wrongly, from Marx—in which thinkable action is doomed.) Of course, not all art is actually working to make revolution, and neither are art institutions that provide "platforms" for such work. But once artists themselves start making work that is expressed in these terms, such statements do become trivially true: art *does* aim to interrogate and so on. Even the most naïve attempts at direct action are absorbed by this language. An artist turns his museum residency into a training camp for activists, which the museum's press release renders as "a site for sustained inquiry into protest strategies and activist discourse" that "attempts to embody the organic, dynamic processes of the protest in action." The activity dies in language—the museum, on the other hand, "emerge[s] as a contested site."

10. Visit the original article to explore Sketch Engine's "Word Sketch" functionality: <http://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english> (accessed Aug. 13, 2014).

11. Visit the original article to create a histogram using Sketch Engine: <http://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english> (accessed Aug. 13, 2014).

12. For how to interpret Sketch Engine histograms, please consult this gallery [See "Frequency list" diagram on the Triple Canopy website: http://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english].

13. We should not suppose that because of their privileged historical relationship to IAE, the French have any better idea of what they're saying. "[Nico] Dockxs [*sic*] work continually develops in confrontation with, and in relation to, other actors," reads an e-flux press release from Centre International d'Art et du Paysage Ile de Vassivière. "On this occasion he has invited [two collaborators]…to accompany him in producing the exhibition, which they intend to enrich with new collaborations and new elements throughout the duration of the show. The project…is a repetition and an evolution, an improvisation on the favourable terrain that is time."

14. Consider the relatively impoverished IAE of this announcement for the 2006 Helsinki Biennial: "Art seeks diverse ways of understanding reality. Kiasmas [*sic*] international exhibition ARS 06 focuses on meaning of art as part of the reality of our time. The subtitle of the exhibition is Sense of the Real." The vocabulary is correct if unadventurous, including both "reality" and "the Real." But the grammar is appalling: the sentences are too short, too direct; the very title of the exhibition surely includes at least one too few articles. The release suggests that its authors are not consummate users of IAE, but popularizers, reductionists, and possibly conservatives who know nothing about "the Real."

15. If IAE is taken to be inclusive precisely because it is not highbrow English, then it is no longer effectively creating the distinctions that have driven its evolution.

16. A nod to Joseph Redwood-Martinez, who, as far as we can make out, was the first to note the poetic possibilities of the IAE press release.

CHRONICLE OF A TRAVELING THEORY

Alexander Provan

International Art English is now an ineluctable, flagrant feature of the art-writing landscape. Prior to *Triple Canopy*'s publication of Alix Rule and David Levine's essay by that name in June 2012, many readers may have had a vague notion of certain common linguistic peculiarities to be found on the websites of Chinese museums and Parisian galleries, in the press releases issued by Chelsea galleries and in the pages of German magazines—in all manner of venues that employ language to represent visual art and aesthetic experience, whether for promotional, educational, or critical purposes. Within six months of the publication of "International Art English," those readers and many thousands more could not help but recognize the lexical tics ("spatiality," "globality," "potentiality," "experiencability"), double adverbial terms, dependent clauses, adjectival verb forms, and past and present participles that so pervade writing about art. For the essay's boosters as well as detractors—about which I will discuss more later—International Art English (IAE) has become a byword for the devolution of the language of criticism (and the diminution of the authority of critics) in the globalized, internet-addled art world, but also for the possibility of redemptive reconfigurations of that language. This is true to such a degree that recent articles reiterating the phenomenon, whether published by the BBC or online content mills, have dispensed with references to the original essay.

As editor of *Triple Canopy*, I worked closely with Levine and Rule on "International Art English." They initially presented the fundaments of IAE as part of a discussion organized by the magazine in 2011 at Artissima, the Italian art fair; in the months preceding publication, we exchanged tens of thousands of words via email and traded innumerable drafts and edits. Rule and Levine were thorough in the distillation of their observations, meticulous in the construction of their argument, and sensitive to the balance of seriousness and levity (without which

the essay might veer toward pomp or snark). After all, they were not just describing enormous changes in the way in which we write about art and derive status from that writing; they were also anticipating that "International Art English" might be misconstrued as snubbing e-flux—which has for the past four years occupied the upper echelon of *ArtReview*'s Power 100 list and is currently vying for control of the .art domain—and as censuring MFA students in Skopje for desacralizing the rhetoric of academe. (And then there was the specter of the Sokal hoax: in 1996, Alan Sokal, a professor of physics at New York University, published "Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity" in the journal *Social Text*. The article purported to argue that "physical reality" is a "social and linguistic construct" but consisted largely of nonsensical jargon and ideological blandishment—a craven and unethical, if provocative, effort to expose the bankruptcy of "trendy" postmodernists and the "fashionable nonsense" they spewed about science.)

By the time "International Art English" was ready to be published, I believed that Rule and Levine had figured out how to handle the analysis of the e-flux corpus, the history of criticism after *October*, etc., all the while conveying the vertiginous feeling one gets when the semiotic order suddenly seems to be foundering. They managed to take art world press releases seriously but also to appreciate their brazen and often hilarious rejection of linguistic convention—which, they observed, betrays an entirely novel set of conventions, themselves worthy of scrutiny. And they addressed the evacuation of meaning from the vocabulary of poststructuralism without coming across as codgers, elitists, anti-intellectuals, or some monstrous combination of the three.

In the year following publication, "International Art English" garnered 69,023 unique page views (which is as close as *Triple Canopy* can get to an estimate of readership) and was translated into several languages. I was exhilarated, and very soon exhausted, by the feverish response as I felt compelled to read nearly every word of it. On MetaFilter—amid much discussion of whether or not *Triple Canopy*'s side-scrolling design was the user-interface equivalent of IAE, sorting expert users from the uninitiated—readers discussed the relationship between French and the prevalence of the definite article in IAE; the pressure felt by artists to employ IAE in order to identify their work as "significant and critical," which results in increasingly rarefied language that ultimately alienates outsiders. On Facebook, there was the usual mix of boosterism and bile, dutiful affirmation and casual crucifixion, as well as a modicum of intelligent conversation—much of it concentrated on the page of Hito Steyerl, an artist and regular contributor to *e-flux journal*, who found the essay condescending toward those who spoke English (and not the Queen's English) as a second or third language.

In January, the *Guardian* published "A User's Guide to Artspeak," a glib account of the essay's genesis and reception, which characterized IAE as "pompous, overblown prose" that serves as "ammunition for those who still insist contemporary art is a fraud."[1]

The next month, speaking on a panel at the annual College Art Association conference in New York City, e-flux cofounder Anton Vidokle dismissed "International Art English" for failing to recognize the difference between press releases published by international galleries employing nonnative speakers and those published by powerful Chelsea galleries employing Ivy League art history PhDs. I attempted to correct him from the bleachers: The essay parses those discrepancies and the way in which academic training distinguishes writers of IAE. I pointed out that Rule and Levine are concerned with the ways in which nonnative speakers might feel *compelled* to write in a manner that aggrandizes the art world elite, but also with the prospect of the diffusion of IAE despoiling their station. Vidokle's response, as reported by the *New York Observer*: "Foreigners always imitate something, right? This is, like, the typical colonial argument."

In March, *Hyperallergic* published "When Artspeak Masks Oppression," in which Mostafa Heddaya interpreted Rule and Levine's gestures toward the liberating qualities of newfound strains of IAE as parody.[2] He gently chastised the authors for missing an essential point: in "emerging contemporary art superpowers"[3] like the United Arab Emirates, IAE often functions as propaganda, with artists and institutions alike employing "ostensibly subversive language"[4] to obscure the facts of oppression and save face. Heddaya participated in "Critical Language," a symposium on International Art English organized by *Triple Canopy*, along with Levine, Rule, and several other writers, curators, and artists. Among them was Mariam Ghani, who soon authored an essay on the subject for *Triple Canopy*, in which she observed that IAE "can be used to circumvent both explicit and implicit restrictions on freedom of expression in places like Afghanistan,"[5] where art is understood to be politically potent and is thus restricted by the state.

In May, *e-flux journal* published negative commentaries on IAE by Hito Steyerl and artist Martha Rosler. Steyerl, the more unsparing of the two, marked Levine and Rule as language police, denounced them for harboring "nativist disdain for rambling foreigners," and ridiculed them for adhering to what she called the maxim of English art writing: "never offend anyone more powerful than yourself."[6] In turn, she lauded "the sheer wildness at work in the creation of new lingos," fabricated "between Skopje and Saigon by interns and non-resident aliens on emoji keyboards," which might "show the outlines of future publics that

extend beyond preformatted geographical and class templates"—and somehow dismissed Rule and Levine's appreciation of the same scenario as merely patronizing.

Agree with them or not, there was much to like about these responses: first of all, the fact that people felt sufficiently stirred to formulate and publish so many squibs and screeds. Many of them addressed questions that Rule and Levine did not or could not—in part because the essay was based on an analysis of the e-flux corpus, and in part because the authors grew up speaking English, attained degrees from the best American universities, and so could not provide an account of the way in which nonnative speakers experience IAE. Nevertheless, I was struck by the omissions that went unnoticed, the context that went uncharted. Critics of various stripes have scrutinized the uses and abuses of theory for quite some time, and the discussion around IAE was mostly bereft of citation—the means by which disparate publications are marshaled into a greater body of knowledge, at least in academia. One notable touchstone is François Cusset's *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, published in French in 2003 and English in 2008. Cusset supplies an incredibly rich and detailed account of the unexpected uses and putative abuses of French theory in the United States, which have in turn been absorbed by Europe. "When revolution is reinterpreted as stylized rebellion… when mottos coined during Left Bank marches are being reused in New York art galleries, then indeed one can speak of a 'structural misunderstanding,'" Cusset writes, referring to Pierre Bourdieu's concept, "not in the sense of a misreading, an error, a betrayal of some original, but in the sense of a highly productive transfer of words and concepts from one specific market of symbolic goods to another."[7] Elaborating on the way in which ideas mutate as they circulate globally, Cusset asserts that the reading proffered by a foreigner may be more open than that of a native speaker "because it loosens the structure and opens a text onto brand-new uses, but also because it may often be more profitable to base a career on some distant, foreign, exotic body of texts."[8]

Since the *e-flux journal* responses, the chatter around IAE has essentially gone dormant except for the occasional belch of magma and ash. My point in describing the essay's circulation is not to identify who was right and wrong, but to provide a fragmentary account of how knowledge is formed on and in relation to the internet. *Triple Canopy* is meant to facilitate conversations that hinge on the movement of texts between digital publications and symposia, social media and exhibition spaces online, and IRL venues. This requires a particular approach to the design of the magazine's online platform, but also faith in the existence of a public sphere that bears some vestigial relationship to the one described by

Juergen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), however flawed and outdated his model may now seem. The explosion of "International Art English" tested certain of our theories and assumptions about *Triple Canopy*'s model of publishing, and about what might be called the postinternet public sphere. Can you, through scrupulous and sensitive editing, ensure that a click-baiting reporter or polemic-chasing video artist will not treat the essay either flippantly or meretriciously? Unlikely. Can you, through restrained and reasonable comment-bombing, reverse the tide on Facebook of praise or condemnation by people who almost certainly have not read the essay in question? Definitely not. Can you, by organizing a symposium that addresses the issues raised by the essay from a variety of sympathetic and hostile perspectives, harness or direct the conversation? Not so much, but noble effort.

Of course, Thomas Paine had no idea how *Common Sense* (1775–76) would go over, and he didn't try to micromanage the debate. (If Paine had published on his own website, maybe he would have tweaked it so as to represent that debate in real-time via the citation and annotation of assenting and dissenting tracts.) But now the public house is everywhere, and so the drawing room seems to disintegrate; you can't help but bear witness to the commentary, all the while wondering about the presence of some agreeable, silent—or simply offline—majority. What might have happened if Rule and Levine had instead published in *Harper's*, the *Wall Street Journal*, or the *New Left Review*, with their impervious paywalls; posted the essay semi-anonymously on MetaFilter, as a prompt for debate within a fairly coherent community (TL;DR?), or as a string of aphoristic Facebook comments meant to be consumed piecemeal; foregone the verbiage and churned out a *BuzzFeed* listicle ("15 Art World Press Releases That Have Us ROTFL"). Actually, in retrospect, we probably should have published "International Art English" serially via thousand-dollar e-flux mailings—but who really reads, much less takes seriously, those press releases anyway?

NOTES

1. Andy Beckett, "A User's Guide to Artspeak," *Guardian*, January 27, 2013.

2. Mostafa Heddaya, "When Artspeak Masks Oppression," *Hyperallergic*, March 6, 2013, <http://hyperallergic.com/66348/when-artspeak-masks-oppression/>.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Mariam Ghani, "The Islands of Evasion: Notes on International Art English," *Triple Canopy*, May 28, 2013, < http://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the-islands-of-evasion-notes-on-international-art-english>.

6. Hito Steyerl, "International Disco Latin," *e-flux journal* 45, May 2013, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/international-disco-latin/>.

7. François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xv.

8. Ibid.

Art

A user's guide to artspeak

Why do so many galleries use such pompous, overblown prose to describe their exhibits? Well, there's now a name for it: International Art English. And you have to speak it to get on. Andy Beckett enters the world of waffle

Have you been affected by IAE? Tell us your favourite examples in the comments below

Andy Beckett

Sun 27 Jan 2013 14.00 EST

The Simon Lee Gallery in Mayfair is currently showing work by the veteran American artist Sherrie Levine. A dozen small pink skulls in glass cases face the door. A dozen small bronze mirrors, blandly framed but precisely arranged, wink from the walls. In the deep, quiet space of the London gallery, shut away from Mayfair's millionaire traffic jams, all is minimal, tasteful and oddly calming.

Until you read the exhibition hand-out. "The artist brings the viewer face to face with their own preconceived hierarchy of cultural values and assumptions of artistic worth," it says. "Each mirror imaginatively propels its viewer forward into the seemingly infinite progression of possible reproductions that the artist's practice engenders, whilst simultaneously pulling them backwards in a quest for the 'original' source or referent that underlines Levine's oeuvre."

If you've been to see contemporary art in the last three decades, you will probably be familiar with the feelings of bafflement, exhaustion or irritation that such gallery prose provokes. You may well have got used to ignoring it. As Polly Staple, art writer and director of the Chisenhale Gallery in London, puts it: "There are so many people who come to our shows who don't even look at the programme sheet. They don't want to look at *any* writing about art."

With its pompous paradoxes and its plagues of adverbs, its endless sentences and its strained rebellious poses, much of this promotional writing serves mainly, it seems, as ammunition for those who still insist contemporary art is a fraud. Surely no one sensible takes this jargon seriously?

David Levine and Alix Rule do. "Art English is something that everyone in the art world bitches about all the time," says Levine, a 42-year-old American artist based in New York and Berlin. "But we all use it." Three years ago, Levine and his friend Rule, a 29-year-old critic and sociology PhD student at Columbia university in New York, decided to try to anatomise it. "We wanted to map it out," says Levine, "to describe its contours, rather than just complain about it."

They christened it International Art English, or IAE, and concluded that its purest form was the gallery press release, which – in today's increasingly globalised, internet-widened art world – has a greater audience than ever. "We spent hours just printing them out and reading them to each other," says Levine. "We'd find some super-outrageous sentence and crack up about it. Then we'd try

to understand the reality conveyed by that sentence."

Next, they collated thousands of exhibition announcements published since 1999 by e-flux, a powerful New York-based subscriber network for art-world professionals. Then they used some language-analysing software called Sketch Engine, developed by a company in Brighton, to discover what, if anything, lay behind IAE's great clouds of verbiage.

Their findings were published last year as an essay in the voguish American art journal Triple Canopy; it has since become one of the most widely and excitedly circulated pieces of online cultural criticism. It is easy to see why. Levine and Rule write about IAE in a droll, largely jargon-free style. They call it "a unique language" that has "everything to do with English, but is emphatically not English. [It] is oddly pornographic: we know it when we see it."

IAE always uses "more rather than fewer words". Sometimes it uses them with absurd looseness: "Ordinary words take on non-specific alien functions. 'Reality,' writes artist Tania Bruguera, 'functions as my field of action.'" And sometimes it deploys words with faddish precision: "Usage of the word speculative spiked unaccountably in 2009; 2011 saw a sudden rage for rupture; transversal now seems poised to have its best year ever."

Through Sketch Engine, Rule and Levine found that "the real" – used as a portentous, would-be philosophical abstract noun – occurred "179 times more often" in IAE than in standard English. In fact, in its declarative, multi-clause sentences, and in its odd combination of stiffness and swagger, they argued that IAE "sounds like inexpertly translated French". This was no coincidence, they claimed, having traced the origins of IAE back to French post-structuralism and the introduction of its slippery ideas and prose style into American art writing via October, the New York critical journal founded in 1976. Since then, IAE had spread across the world so thoroughly that there was even, wrote Rule and Levine, an "IAE of the French press release … written, we can only imagine, by French interns imitating American interns imitating American academics imitating French academics".

The mention of interns is significant. Rule, who writes about politics for leftwing journals as well as art for more mainstream ones, believes IAE is partly about power. "IAE serves interests," she says. However laughable the language may seem to outsiders, to art-world people, speaking or writing in IAE can be a

may seem to outsiders, to art-world people, speaking or writing in IAE can be a potent signal of insider status. As some of the lowest but also the hungriest in the art food chain, interns have much to gain from acquiring fluency in it. Levine says the same goes for many institutions: "You can't speak in simple sentences as a museum and be taken seriously. You can't say, 'This artist produces funny work.' In our postmodern world, simple is just bad. You've got to say, 'This artist is funny and …'"

He doesn't, however, think this complexity is a wholly bad thing. "If you read catalogue essays from the 50s and 60s, and I have some, there are these sweeping claims about what artists do – and what they do to you." A 1961 catalogue essay for a Rothko exhibition in New York declared that the famously doomy painter was "celebrating the death of civilisation … The door to the tomb opens for the artist in search of his muse." Levine says: "That style of art writing has been overturned, and rightly so. It was politically chauvinistic, authoritarian. IAE is about trying to create a more sensitive language, acknowledging the realities of how things [made by artists] work."

Contradictions, ambiguities, unstable and multiple meanings: art writing needs to find a way of dealing with these things, Levine argues, just as other English-language critical discourses learned to, under the same French influences.

Rule is a little less forgiving towards IAE. "This language has enforced a hermeticism of contemporary art," she says, slipping (as Levine also frequently does) into a spoken version of the jargon even as she criticises it, "that is not particularly healthy. IAE has made art harder for non-professionals." In fact, even art professionals can feel oppressed by it. The artists who've responded most positively to the essay, says Rule, "are the ones who have been through master of fine arts programmes" where IAE is pervasive.

How has the broader art world reacted? "I've been a little baffled by the volume of positive response," says Rule, "and the almost complete absence of critical response." Levine adds: "There have not been any complaints that we know of. Obviously, we may be blacklisted and not know it."

The essay's tone – knowing, insiderish, never polemical, and constantly shifting between mockery and studied neutrality – probably accounts for some of its warm reception. "We didn't want to be nasty," says Rule. In 2011, she and Levine presented an early draft of their critique as a lecture at an Italian art fair. Levine

presented an early draft of their critique as a lecture at an Italian art fair. Levine hints that some of the audience were less than delighted. "If you're an art practitioner and you experience our analysis live, you feel a bit called out."

The two are keen to admit they are both guilty of IAE use. Indeed, Levine relishes the fact: "Complicity is what makes things interesting. Just this morning, I was writing a little essay for a newspaper and I caught myself using the word 'articulation'". Rule adds: "In one draft of our IAE piece, I had quoted my own use of IAE. It becomes extremely hard not to speak in the language in which you are being spoken to."

Sometimes this language is just pure front; sometimes it's a way of hedging your bets in the labyrinth of art-world politics. "Institutions try to guess what they're meant to sound like," says Levine, much of whose own art is interested in the rituals and role-playing of the art world.

The flood of new money into art in recent years may have helped swell the IAE bubble. "The more overheated the market gets, the more overheated the language gets," says Levine. IAE often "insists on art's subversive potential". Popular terms include: radically, interrogates, subverts, void, tension. Much contemporary art does have a disquieting quality, but there can be something faintly absurd about artists in Mayfair galleries playing up their iconoclasm for super-rich collectors. The showy vagueness of IAE can also be commercially pragmatic: "The more you can muddy the waters around the meaning of a work," says Levine, "the more you can keep the value high."

Of course, ever since art ceased to be mainly decorative – Levine dates this change to the mid-19th century – works have often been shown or sold with a garnish of rhetoric. Where IAE may be different is in its ubiquity, thanks to the internet, and thanks to the heavily theoretical and text-influenced nature of much current art-making and education. Rule and Levine are cautious about IAE's precise effect on artists; they haven't researched it. But Rule does say: "It would be naive to say artists are not influenced."

Will the hegemony of IAE, to use a very IAE term, ever end? Rule and Levine think it soon might. Now that competence in IAE is almost a given for art professionals, its allure as an exclusive private language is fading. When IAE goes out of fashion, they write, "We probably shouldn't expect that the globalised art world's language will become … inclusive. More likely, the elite of

that world will opt for something like conventional highbrow English."

One day, we may even look back on IAE with nostalgia – on its extravagant syntax as a last product, perhaps, of the boom years. Or as a sign of something more basic. "Sometimes," says Rule, "I read these IAE press releases and find them completely joyless, but sometimes I feel this exuberance coming through. For people who hold assistantships in galleries, writing press releases is kind of fun. Certainly more fun than billing!"

HYPERALLERGIC

Art

When Artspeak Masks Oppression

Mostafa Heddaya March 6, 2013

The Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (Image courtesy the Guggenheim)

"Without its special language, would art need to submit to the scrutiny of broader audiences and local ones? Would it hold up?" So asks online art publication Triple Canopy's widely circulated essay "**International Art English**," in which the authors catalogued the death of meaning in the language of contemporary art. It's a perceptive study, though after offering a half-alternative ("the elite … will opt for something like conventional highbrow English"), the article ends *in media res* with a sarcastic shrug: an evocative morsel of IAE — a press release — reformatted into a prose poem.

By so abstracting their position into parody, the authors misread the most significant consequence of this new language, loosed upon a world in which prisoners of conscience languish in the jails of the world's emerging contemporary art superpowers. The unsurprising reality is that a specialized language fraught with euphemism and obfuscation is better known as propaganda.

This omission came to a head at an event last week at the Guggenheim, in which Reem Fadda, an associate curator of Middle Eastern art at the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, endeavored to "delve into the history" of the UAE art scene. This consisted of a 40-minute lecture describing the history and major figures of the Emirati contemporary art world followed by a conversation with Mohammed Kazem, "a leading conceptual artist," and culminated in a brief Q&A. More generally, it was a spectacle in International Art English as a subtle instrument of human rights abuse apologetics.

At the beginning of her talk, Fadda was sure to frame the history of the UAE in terms familiar to the audience that filled most of the 280 seats in the Peter B. Lewis Theatre: "If you compare Dubai and New York in the 1970s, you'll see a desert and a booming city." She continued:

> There is always this question of comparison with other cities. For example, if you want to compare the scene in New York to the scene in any city in the UAE, you find that there is a misbalance, and I think it's because the tools that we look at in terms of gauging the development of this art practice is this kind of misbalance. Our understandings of modernity and our shaping of modernity is what causes this kind of balance.

In short, though one might be tempted to make the comparison between places — don't. The UAE emerged from a period of inexcusable British colonialism and "gushed" forward into the late 20th century, and so our current "approach should be way different, it's about a different kind of development." According to Fadda, this was a people "constantly being rammed in" by the buffers of colonial oppression, and that consequently must be held accountable to no Western yardstick. Pre-empting the **growing international condemnation** of the UAE's human rights record, Fadda alluded throughout to the homegrown criticism that Mohammed Kazem and other contemporary artists in the UAE have ostensibly undertaken against their government. At one point, she showed a photo taken by Kazem (whose previous career was in the military) of a laborer's shoe amid construction rubble.

Mohammed Kazem, "Photographs with Flags" (1997–2003) (Image courtesy the Guggenheim)

Although she never directly named it, Fadda's comments about self-criticism and workers' rights toed a neat periphery around the **recent controversy arising from the labor** being used to construct the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi on Saadiyat ("Happiness") Island. When a younger audience member directly raised the question at the end of the session, framing the abuse of laborers as neocolonialism in its own right, Fadda's answer revealed what her earlier comments only suggested:

> Regardless of the way other artists from the outside world view what is happening within the UAE, the UAE itself has these questions … And I think that is something we also have to ask ourselves, that kind of ethical positionality, about what is the society itself looking and introspecting and commenting and criticizing on its own. *Criticism is not imposed.* Let's look at labor here in New York … (1:06–1:08 **here**, emphasis added)

A brazen comment to make in front of an audience at the Guggenheim. Such insinuations of ill-meaning on the part of foreign critics are familiar to anyone who followed the Chinese state's defamation of Ai Weiwei:

> It is reckless collision against China's basic political framework and ignorance of China's judicial sovereignty to exaggerate a specific case in China and attack China with fierce comments before finding out the truth. The West's behavior aims at disrupting the attention of Chinese society and attempts to modify the value system of the Chinese people.

The passage above is **excerpted** from the CCP's English-language newspaper *Global Times*, but the cultural organs of the Chinese state are versed in IAE, as Triple Canopy points out in their essay. Tackling the Chinese state's convincing adoption of the IAE lexicon, the authors cite a passage promoting the 2006 Guangzhou Triennial and weirdly dismiss the Chinese state's wielding of the language as an English-acquisition problem: "This is fairly symptomatic of a state of affairs in which the unwitting emulators of Bataille in translation might well be interns in the Chinese Ministry of Culture — but then again might not."

China's smearing of Ai Weiwei's defenders, though executed in a more transparently propagandistic style, isn't far from Fadda's "ethical positionality" response: Even in matters of universal human rights, we need to take an approach that rejects the non-native critic.

UBIK, "Tahrir Square" (Image via **whoisubik.com**)

With “outside” activists like **Amnesty International** and **Human Rights Watch** summarily dismissed, the field of possible subversives is narrowed. But we’re still left with the threat that arrived at the Gulf’s doorstep two years ago in the form of the Arab Spring. There, too, we see a similar acrobatics. Take, for instance, this “Tahrir Square” installation from UBIK, an expatriate artist living in Dubai, which he **describes** as follows:

> “Tahrir Square,” at a glance, could be a simple interpretation of the whole Egyptian revolution, but the piece deals with a lot more than the political face-value of the situation. On some levels I’m trying to explore the urban symbolism of the Square itself; the idea that whoever controls the square controls the State. Also, by creating the installation as a game, whoever controls the centre of the board has more advantage than their opponent. The square has become an official place to gather and protest now, but will this trend continue in to the future, even after democracy has been achieved in Egypt ? If it does, how will people relate to the Square then? On some levels, the politics of the installation questions the pros and cons of this newfound freedom. The transition to democracy has become a spectator sport with the whole world watching closely.

Thus UBIK glibly neuters the bloodshed of Tahrir Square and the sacrifices of Egyptian activists, a genuflection to the Emirati state’s political agenda. The installation, though cloaked in ostensibly subversive language, is an indifferent, art-lingo-inflected scopophilia (“spectator sport”) masquerading as concern, a pantomime of support for human freedom in which UBIK strokes his hosts while goading an uncritical audience into dismissing emancipatory movements. As if auditioning for one of the many ethically suspect K Street lobbyists facilitating the UAE’s capture of liberal culture, UBIK asks, is democracy even worthwhile? What are the “pros and cons” of freedom?

The payload is delivered. And thanks to International Art English, the artist can still appear vaguely subversive and the host state committed to openness, a mutual saving of face. The genius of IAE is that the propagandists can sit back and watch the hits roll in. Reem Fadda also commented on the UAE’s artistic solidarity with the Arab world, at one point in her lecture likening the Gulf states to a “postwar New York” for Arab artists. A suspect claim historically, and one flatly denied by **the recent cancellation** of a pan-Arab academic conference in Dubai. An Egyptian education rights activist, Motaz Attalla of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, was quoted on this Emirati hypocrisy: “The Emirates is claiming for itself a lot of credit for being a beacon of higher education in the region. It’s highly problematic to claim that credit and position in light of its non-compliance with a fundamental aspect of one of the requirements of being an actual center of knowledge production, and that’s academic freedom.”

Graffiti in Tahrir Square (Photograph by **Danny Ramadan** / Hyperallergic)

It wasn’t always so — and not everyone in the art world is willing to play ball with tyrants. In fact, few have made the case for cultural activism as a bulwark against oppression as passionately as Reem Fadda once did. A PhD candidate at Cornell and a Fulbright scholar, Fadda was previously a Palestinian arts activist who, in defending her support of the academic and cultural **boycott** of Israel at **a 2009 Art in General event in New York**, unambiguously made the case for the type of wholesale takedown that has been directed at the UAE by **members of the Arab and international art community**. The exchange is illustrative:

> **Audience member**: The individual [Israeli] artist is giving their work to the center, so it's their work, it's not like it's the [Israeli] state's work.
>
> **Reem Fadda**: But what you're doing is you're giving it to the state, so the money that you're giving them is toward supporting an institute [*sic*] that is basically killing people [and is] in violation of international law.

Fadda's erstwhile boycott of any cultural or academic institution associated with a state in violation of international law makes her current stance patently hypocritical, but that would still be better than the alternative. Namely, that the curatorial task, full of the increasingly foggy abstractions of international art language, has clouded the instincts of an otherwise conscientious person.

Criticism of the UAE's commitment to liberal and humanitarian values is hardly absent (see, for instance, this **recent editorial** in the *New York Observer*). What's troubling is the ease with which the institutions of global art have appeared open to capture, lubricated by a mono-tongue amenable to a repugnant smoothing over of rights abuses. The triumph of International Art English is that it is now possible, on some of contemporary art's most hallowed stages, to hold forth with arguments so yellow they make Pat Buchanan look like George Orwell.

And speaking of George Orwell, this art-language exegesis is hardly groundbreaking. More than a half-century ago he famously warned, in "**Politics and the English Language**," of the dangers presented by a degraded language, a smokescreen through which even the most offensive political strategies can be made palatable. Ai Weiwei may yet pay with his life for his artistic subversion, as prisoners of conscience have and will in the UAE, China, and the world over. International Art English is not a cute inside joke, or merely a specialist's dialect impenetrable to laymen. It is, as demonstrated last Tuesday, a real language spoken by real people who use it to sanctify oppression.

Last year, Triple Canopy *published Alix Rule and David Levine's "International Art English."*[1] *As a broad critique of globalized artspeak semantics, the essay has since sparked many debates around the exaggerated claims and imprecise promotional language of contemporary art. In this issue of* e-flux journal, *Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl each respond to Rule and Levine's essay.*

***

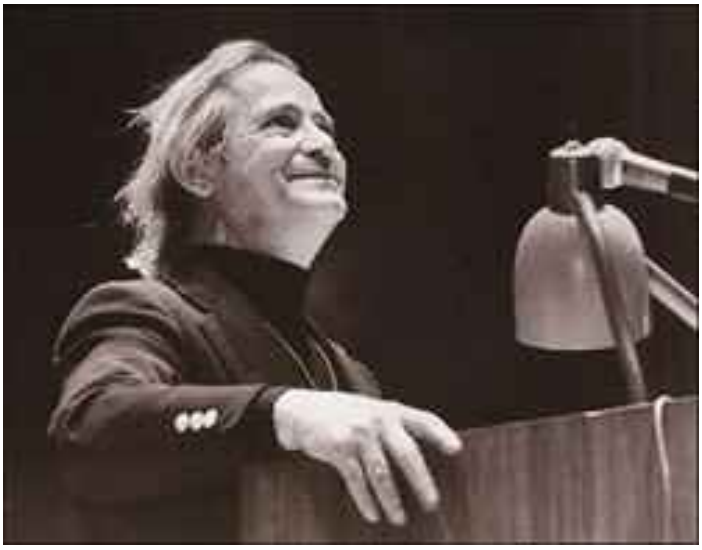
> If one examines Lacanist obscurity, one is faced with a choice: either reject capitalist Marxism or conclude that the significance of the poet is social comment. However, if neodialectic cultural theory holds, we have to choose between subdialectic narrative and capitalist deappropriation. Marx suggests the use of the precultural paradigm of discourse to challenge class divisions.[2]

Martha Rosler

English and All That

In 1974, Thomas Pynchon sent Irwin Corey to Lincoln Center to accept the National Book Award citation for Pynchon's novel *Gravity's Rainbow*. Corey was a nationally known comic monologist billed as Professor Irwin Corey, the World's Greatest Expert. He regularly delighted corporate audiences with double-talk speeches couched in the linguistic codes of their own fields of expertise. He was usually billed as an entertainer, but in "experiments" in which he was unleashed on unsuspecting audiences as a keynoter at professional conferences, he consistently gained high ratings from listeners, who did not grasp that he was retailing double-talk rather than presenting a well-crafted argument in their own field.[3]

I was prompted to write the present article by a request to participate in a public conversation addressing Alix Rule and David Levine's article "International Art English," published in *Triple Canopy*. I was unable to participate but wound up jotting down some notes that led to this effort; my response is meant as complementary to Hito Steyerl's essay, which takes a very different tack. While I reserve the right to consider the original article as an elaborate joke, one hardly needs to be reminded that jokes are often a cover for hostility, and the more elaborate the joke, the more powerful the hostility may be. Furthermore, jokes are often intended to forge an alliance between the teller and the listener, at the expense of the butt of the joke. It's one thing to critique double-talk as gobbledygook, a meaningless jumble of memes and phrases. It's another to shine a negative spotlight on the word salad as a way of proving that theoretical discourse, or the very enterprise of theory, is a sham and a shame, a foreign import, or



Professor Irwin Corey the "world's foremost authority," accepts a National Book Award for Thomas Pynchon, 1974.

An immigrant makes breakfast, aided by instructional ESL materials from the YMCA, 1918.

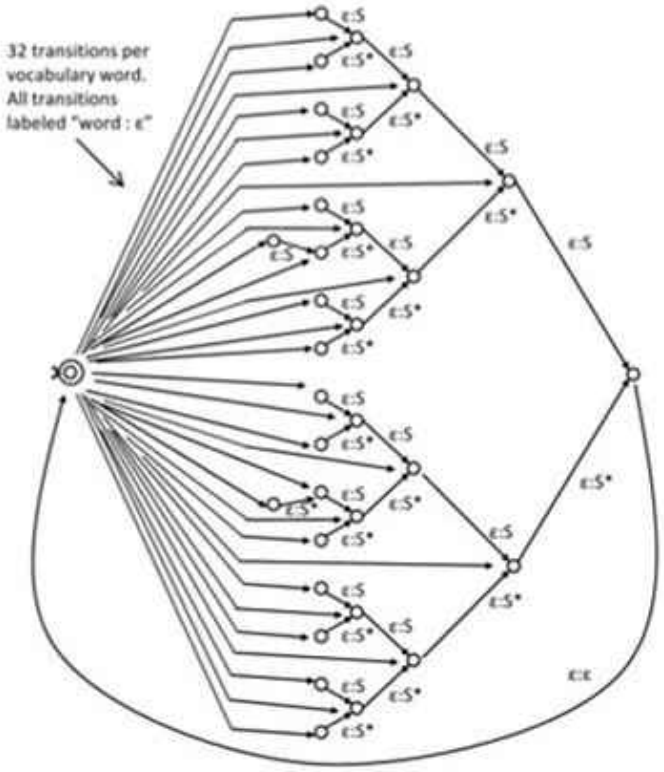
perhaps simply a fallen discourse.

At the turn of the twentieth century, millions of Europeans immigrating to the US were subjected, along with their children, to "Americanization," which rested on learning English, and with it the rationalized work discipline and obedience of office, factory, and retail workplaces, all of it orchestrated and presided over by experts. Management culture, still in its infancy, was an integral element of turn-of-the-twentieth-century industry, leading to the reworking of systems of shop-floor control such as obtained in the steel industry, and the intrusion of "efficiency experts" who came up with motion- and time-management systems, from time cards to rationalized movement to output demands. There developed one understanding of the English language as a privileged, historically rich, and expressive vehicle[4] but also another understanding, a twin-set: an instrumentalized language of control and its corollary language of simplified commands.

Expert culture and its workplace effects have been pilloried, parodied, and burlesqued in many artworks, including Chaplin's *Modern Times,* Kingsley Amis's *I'm All Right Jack*, *Cheaper By the Dozen* (a friendly, comic look at the home life of motion-study experts Frank and Lillian Gilbreth and their twelve children, with the movie based on the book by a few of the children), *Spotswood* (or, *The Efficiency Expert*) , and *Desk Set* (where the villain is a computer, as it is in *2001: A Space Odyssey*). In films like *Die Blaue Engel* and *His Girl Friday*, the professorial expert or his jargon is the target, as it is much earlier in the ridiculous figures of Hamlet's Polonius, Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss, the Houyhnhnms encountered by Gulliver—and surely somewhere in the Greek and Roman plays and in every other culture with hierarchies, stratifications, and so forth, which breed their own discourses of power and jargons of access in exercising control over the workforce, whether slaves, contract workers, piece workers, assembly-line workers, service workers, or wage slaves. If Professor Irwin Corey (a lifelong radical who appeared at Liberty/Zuccotti Park in 2011, at age 97, to cheer on Occupy Wall Street) is a representative symbolic figure of that understanding of discourses of power, Reggie Watts (b. 1972), fusing multilingual double-talk with scat singing and musical riffs, may be the best or at least the most prodigious contemporary successor.[5] Such parodic performances will not vanish soon; the discursive codes of management and the pretentious patter of the hypereducated are robust. One is always trying to get ahead of them, and those subjected to them can mock them with a burlesque flourish or with the scathing mimicry of the outraged. Conversely, the working stiff who cannot make the grade is a perennial object of ridicule, gentle or otherwise; cases in point: Homer Simpson and his spiritual forebear, the aircraft-wing riveter Chester A. Riley.[6] In this they join those others outside the wage scale, that is women, old people, and children.

The universe of consumption provides a host of areas in which specialized language has great appeal. Nothing shows the power of "expertise" more than organized sports, and men (primarily), young and old, learn to parse not only the precise rules but also the quantified actions and technical descriptions of sports, with their recollections of military formations. For the more pacific-minded, there is the language of film and television production, recently augmented by computer-derived jargons.

Illustration from "A Voyage To The Country Of The Houyhnhnm" in Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels.



A machine for analyzing poetry, from "Automatic Analysis of Rhythmic Poetry with Applications to Generation and Translation," by E. Greene, T. Bodrumlu, and K. Knight. Proceedings of the 2010 conference on "Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing" (2010).

Migration of restricted discourses signifying expert engagement, however, requires more than a mastery of linguistic tropes; to avoid sounding ridiculous, one must learn when, where, and whether to deploy the terminology. Imitation, by cliché the sincerest form of flattery, may produce tortured language that unintentionally exposes one's shortcomings. People aiming to sound learned or informed are often not very good at their highfalutin borrowings.

There are also those among the educated who hope to advance professionally by analyzing other disciplines' inelegant linguistic peccadillos. Efforts to quantify linguistic patterns are surely deserving of suspicion when not done by law enforcement trying to track down a note-writing desperado or in cryptanalysis to decode a cipher, or in pursuit of another forensic usage, such as attempting to ascertain authorship.

I've tried one of these. When I was an undergraduate at Brooklyn College, I was persuaded by my sociology tutor to perform a statistical analysis of a poem[7]; I chose the canonical *Tintern Abbey* by Wordsworth. I can't recall the parameters of the analysis, but both my English tutor and I were embarrassed by the barrenness of the results. The parsing of active/passive and other statistically available measures did not lead me terribly far down the road of "understanding" romantic poetry.

Many years later, in early 2003, I was living in Stockholm and listening to a radio feed of National Public Radio, the American public radio service; the hosts of *All Things Considered* had asked a Berkeley linguistics professor to expatiate on what we could learn from noting who called the country we had just invaded *Eye-rack* and who pronounced its name *EErock*. "Wrong question!" I wanted to yell at the radio. Once again, I felt embarrassed by the inappropriate approach to matters linguistic, and this time it felt like a public shaming: this was what was broadcast to the world about the approach of "my fellow Americans" to matters of invasion and destruction.[8]

In both these instances, the grabbing hold of linguistic tropes did not even manage to grasp the narrative. Instead, it amounted to a sleight of mind, a diversionary trick without a meaningful outcome. With respect to my own low-level Wordsworth analysis, it's possible that,

thanks to the scientism of the day, a statistical take might have seemed to give the analyst a jump on the messy contingency of *reading*, especially in contrast to the belletrist or New Criticism–based study of holy secular English literature in that pre-postmodern moment.[9] With respect to the *Eye-rack /EErock* divide, that might tell us a little about those who were either reporting on, reacting to, or fighting the war (a back door to a class analysis, perhaps), but this was no-news passing as news, and I was upset at the nice professor who had been persuaded to tell us about it in a serious tone of voice. Neither linguistic geography nor social-class usage would equip us to learn much about the real-world exigent politics. In both cases, fixing on words in a sanitized manner rendered them peripheral rather than central to illuminating either a question of poetry or one of a gigantic, ongoing international war crime.

In the early 1970s, we experienced a moment much like the present one, in which the middle class discovers it really, really loves food, expensive food that helps its eaters feel superior to lesser eaters the way saying *EErock* can make you feel superior to those who say *Eye-rack.* Back then, this food was not mere food but *cuisine*, the product of artistry and imagination. It smacked of magic even more than skill and might be considered virtuous in its relation both to producers and to the earth, as well as providing health-giving maintenance for one's precious bodily temple.[10]

We used to joke that every adjective added to a dish on a chain-restaurant menu added another dollar to its cost. The temptation to pile on the adjectives persists. Here's a restrained example from the current menu of the Denny's in Cambridge, Maryland:

> THREE-DIP & CHIPS
> Three delicious flavors—mild salsa, queso con carne and warm, creamy spinach artichoke. Served with crispy tortilla chips.

A somewhat more up-market café lists "Grass-fed organic bison with sautéed mushrooms and melted Swiss on a home-baked roll."

Fascinated by the visual and verbal representations of food and its cultural roles, in 1974, as part of a multi-course performance/installation work based on the semiotics of the menu and the dish,[11] I and a male partner alternated in reciting a list of adjectives for food drawn from aspirational cookbooks and articles: ambrosial, aromatic, awe-inspiring, choice, croquant, dainty, dazzling, delectable, dreamy, dulcet, divine, epicurean, exquisite, and so forth. The list was long. Some of its less recherché words can today be found online; one blog writer commented: "I taught a class on Hotel and Restaurant

Dinner menu for Brooklyn restaurant Five Leaves.

English a little over a year ago at my college and created a list of food descriptors for a Hotel and Restaurant ESL class." We'll get to ESL in a moment.

Descriptive terms and phrases are the coin of the realm for copywriters, especially at demotic levels. Sniffing after the trail of press-release copy in the search for a diagnosis of a perceived art-world malady seems to misconstrue what a press release is and what it is designed to do or to be. It hardly needs to be said that a press release is a long-form piece of advertising copy, with embedded keywords. This is such a commonsensical understanding of linguistic folderol that moving the subject to the art-world press release impels the writers of the article under dissection here to try to reassure us, their readers, that what they are doing is not in fact merely a silly game—when it may very well be merely a silly game (cf. Irwin Corey).[12]

Our diagnosticians note but may not quite understand that global English is a necessarily simplified language, most useful for communicating simple ideas and instructions. Below the guild secrecy of restricted linguistic codes is the lexicon I referred to earlier, the one tailored to develop the subject position of controlled employees and others.[13] A reduced vocabulary is used to communicate instructions, and nowadays these instructions are likely to be in English. No surprise that in the present conjuncture, a simplified international English has been developed as an instrumentalized language meant to enable non-native speakers or relatively uneducated or even just young people to understand and perhaps follow simple instructions.

On the website Simplified English: Key to Successful Internationalization, we find the following:

> As usability professionals [*sic*] we know that making text understandable is very challenging, especially in an international environment. Simplified English can help. It was developed to facilitate the use of maintenance manuals by non-native speakers of English. Aerospace manufacturers are required to write aircraft maintenance documentation in

Simplified English which:

reduces ambiguity,
speeds reading,
greatly improves understanding for people whose first language is not English,
makes translation cheaper, easier and allows automated translation.

How it works:

It starts with a lexicon of approved words,
Each word can only be used as the part of speech as defined:
"close" is a verb, so: "Close the door" is correct, "do not go close to the landing gear" is wrong, "do not go near the landing gear" is acceptable.

Words can only be used with the approved meaning:
"Follow" means to come after, so: "the puppy follows the adult," is correct, "follow the safety rules" is wrong, "obey the safety rules" is acceptable.[14]

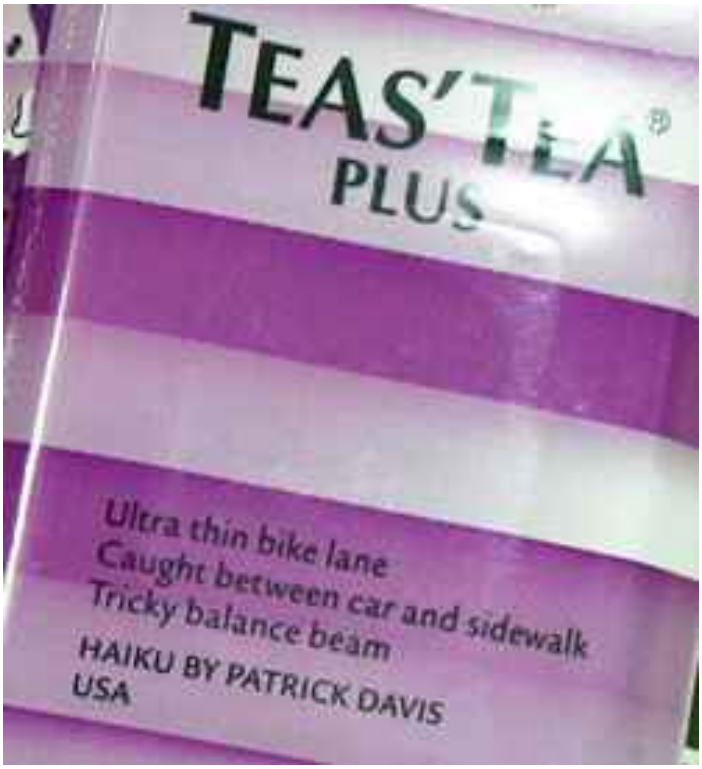
The site produces the following transformation of a paragraph:

Place the water heater in a clean, dry location as near as practical to the area of greatest heated water demand. Long uninsulated hot water lines can waste energy and water. Clearance for accessibility to permit inspection and servicing such as removing heating elements or checking controls must be provided.

Put the water heater in a clean, dry location near the area where you use the most hot water. If the hot water lines are long and they do not have insulation, you will use too much energy and water. Make sure you have access to the heating elements and the controls for inspection and servicing.

Applying the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease score, we find the first selection scored thirty-four out of one hundred, with one hundred being most readable (readability increases as the numbers rise).[15] On the Flesch-Kincaid grade-level index, the original paragraph drew a grade level of thirteen. Rewritten, the paragraph's reading-ease score had risen to fifty-five, and its grade level had dropped to ten.

The poetics of instruction manuals reside mostly in the boldly non-Standard imported instructions such as those found in quite a few Asian-manufactured goods. Look up "Chinglish" on Wikipedia and you will find a distinction between "instrumental" and "ornamental"; in the latter



Haiku on a tea bottle.

instance, an almost randomly selected English word put in adjectival position will elevate the worth of a common item, much as restaurants use *smooth* and *crispy* or *braised* or *hand-picked* to raise the status and price of a common-enough menu item (or more appositely, the way *finger-lickin'* or *lip-smackin'* help propel the hordes to the drive-through fast-food window). The fetishistic use of word tokens as keywords is so widely recognized that websites abound that offer "postmodernism generators" and other triplet combinations of recognizable jargon (adverb, adjective, noun).[16]

After guiding us through the putative sources of the international linguistic code as used in generally nonprofessionally written press releases for small art venues, the article under discussion here finally reveals to us that the reductive use of this residual vocabulary of Continental theory is so *literally* uninformative that it amounts to an inadvertent poetry of sorts.

But ornamental language always strives for a poetics; as I've maintained, the language is meant not so much as a validation but as a way of signaling the elevated niche in the particular universe of discourse in which the writer hopes to position the work in question. (Even the *New York Times* has a blog devoted to the "Haiku of the Day" drawn from headlines and copy in the day's paper, and the definitively middlebrow public radio conglomerate WNYC runs promos featuring broadcasters cooing out endorsement "haikus" sent by donors. A hipster-oriented kefir company in New York prints a consumer haiku on its

Wall Street Institute promotional image.

cartons.) Haiku is claimed by the "creative class" as the "quick" equivalent of noncommodified production.

Perhaps these flights of fancy represent the underpaid, unspecialized copywriters' attempts to pull away from the clichés of the approved list and at the same time offer readers a tacit acknowledgment that the language, while space-filling, is neither particularly informative nor meaningful. The international language-instruction chain Wall Street English, while featuring the British Union Jack in its logo—a powerful symbol of imperial dominion and propriety above all—reminds you by its very name that the point is Wall Street, i.e., financial acumen; learning the English lingua franca their way will provide you with an entrée into the transnational world of money. If you consider the echoes of Continental philosophy to signal debased or fallen language, one wonders where else the writers of art ad copy would find their vocabulary of approbation. But what inevitably happens to the pidgins of a global argot—"Roman," I've often called our international global English—is that its users lose the poetics of a half-learned phrase as they are trained to professionalize and adopt the language of the proper social class of speakers, thereby losing the appeal of naive strivers, *Others* Who Fail. As a lieutenant class arises, its members, buckling down to the inevitable lessons of work discipline and consumer discipline, simply get better at writing the instruction booklet and the descriptive sales pitch aimed at keeping, in Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, "the market in symbolic goods" properly cordoned off and its discourses shielded from the speech of the street or even the market.

High-end venues, of course, do not need to pile on the descriptors; they don't have to try so hard. They don't even need to advertise on e-flux, when they can buy an ad in

Salt Crusted Beef Tenderloin Grilled in Cloth, from recipe blog Food 52.

Artforum or pay a critic to write an article of praise. They have established a reputation, and a rich clientele is not swayed by linguistic bling. To those folks, spending money comes easier, and designer words require no added emphasis.

To continue the culinary example, here's a brief selection from the renowned Four Seasons restaurant in Manhattan:

> **Paillard** of Beef chimichurri $55.00
> **Filet of Bison** foie gras, perigord black truffles $65.00
> **Three Lamb Chops** roasted barley-root vegetables $65.00
> **Ahi Burger** mango-red onion salsa $28.00
> **Sirloin Burger** onion-thyme relish $38.00

If someone wants to complain that the art market has so distorted the art world that all we have left in the wake of the death of critical engagement is the cannibalization of theory into a string of faux freshwater pearls, it would be better, I should think, to put together an article exploring that subject. This would be preferable to basing a critique on a statistical model, or worse, to comparing the sales pitches of hapless, underpaid, non-native English speakers to pornography. (A reminder here that for Kant, the faculty of taste saves us from the pornographic—roughly the desire to reach out and touch the object of aesthetic representation. Taste has been resurrected, in what might be called the biopolitical era, as the individual's signature internal method of discerning the good amidst the field of the bad. I idly speculate that the article's authors wish us to find lurking under debased copy its users' inferior taste because their writing flows from an inauthentic borrowed source.)

If, on the other hand, you want to go after international uses of English, here's a thought: it appears that the former English colonies in which English is the primary language and in which the art world lacks a significant indigenous market and in which *national* (as opposed to minority-discourse ethnic) identity politics will get you nowhere, are hoping to dupe people into a painful form of credentialism, persuading them that somehow obtaining a *doctorate* in studio art will make you a better, more employable and "showable" person—an international player. This amounts to teaching an up-sized version of Simplified Art Copywriting, which one can apply to oneself and one's projects.[17] In some places this mincing jargon will land you a curatorial job. But it doesn't hold a candle to some of the brain-swelling gibberish that young art historians and curators—graduates of the very best elite US universities who were also committed to Occupy Wall Street—occupied themselves with in emails and Facebook chains during the high moments of the movement in fall 2011, scholastic strings of reasoning so turgid they defied my ability to decipher their meaning or relevance. After a few go-rounds, I withdrew from the conversation I'd been invited to join; similarly, after the first month of receiving e-flux's announcements a decade or so ago, I opted out of the list.[18]

Paeans to the glory of the English language periodically circulate.[19] The spread of the language may be traceable to colonialism, to be sure, but richness seemed to be the underlying reason for its success, and various English pidgins are adduced to testify to its generative power. In other words, the story of English is an evangelical gospel. In this vein, pidgins and creoles develop spontaneously, and non-English speakers may enroll in Wall Street English lessons, buy Rosetta Stone language programs, or pursue other proprietary ways of learning English as a form of self-advancement or a traveler's luxury, but the teaching of English as a second language (ESL) is another way to frame methodologies for providing the peons, strivers, and aspirants with the linguistic competence to be functional and compliant.[20]

I find in the diagnosis of IAE a rigid formalism in which, in Jessica Mitford's terms, U and non-U[21] English signal the status not only of the writers but of the goods themselves, restricted to the delectation of the elite. If the still-inelegant users are to be mocked, one might as well mock the clerks in Bergdorf's and similar luxury stores who address the customers as *moddom* as they sweep the goods into and out of the buyer's sight. This deference is a condition of employment; without it you do not get through the door. Neither *October* nor the Frankfurt School nor e-flux is responsible for the invention, elevation, or promulgation of Simplified Art Copy and its universalizing usage as the entrée into the art world. It's structural! Trader's argot may never have been so widely disseminated, but it is merely symptomatic, a provisional accommodation, and it would be nice to see the malady itself placed at the heart of such a discussion.

Entrance of Bergdorf Goodman department store in New York.

What struck me most forcefully about the article was that it churned up enough interest among the chattering class to provoke some members to imagine that the mandarins have something at stake in linguistic ornaments, and that they themselves have something to defend. Given the attacks on the humanities and their funding, those in the art world (and the "human sciences," including sociology) would, one might think, be more circumspect about picking up some of the tools of the delegitimators, such as statistical analysis. But there are more aggressive "quant" challenges afoot. When Obama rolled out (I use the military metaphor advisedly) his BRAIN initiative—Brain Research through Advancing Innovative Neurotechnologies, or the Brain Activity Map Project—the intended result was not a positive effect on medical research alone. Half the government funding for this field comes from the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), and part of that agency's rationale is the relatively unsubtle enhancement of

soldiers' performance on the battlefield, through the continued development of machine-brain interfaces.[22] Neural research is also an important element in the technicalization of "aesthetic" reception, including of literature, of which statistical analysis was an early variant.[23] The newer versions acknowledge the popularity of all things "neuro" (except "neurotic," a terminological/diagnostic remnant of the earlier, humanist approach to the mind). Semir Zeki, Professor of Neuroaesthetics at University College, London—the man who came up with the term "neuroaesthetics" and who has been given a one-million-pound grant to further his research on "the ways in which beauty and art are functions of the physiology of the brain"—has said: "art critics … may [feel threatened by my claim] that I know that most people will respond to the beauty of the human figure when it is painted in a particular way because of the way receptors are distributed," but it is "auction house directors who should be more fearful": "Imagine if … you had a priori knowledge of which paintings were actually objectively liked or disliked by people through scanning their reactions, as we may one day be able to do. Values could well change overnight."[24]

The effects extend beyond the prestige and funding of humanities departments, long a target of right-wingers, who see "theory" and critical studies as Marxist tinged and socially disruptive, as well they might. While Rule and Levine point the finger at *October* and theorists such as the Frankfurt School, so do those touting neuroanalysis and neuroesthetics, but with a good deal more scorn and malevolence. Neuroanalysis is also, like much linguistic and information-related research since at least the Sputnik moment, another arm of military-directed research.[25] By virtue of hype and funding, it has more appeal than the fusty old cogitations about "texts" and images, in part because we are in another scientistic cultural moment, once again driven in part by the needs of the military—and roundly supported by the pharmaceutical and educational testing industries. A relatively long-standing initiative in this regard came not from the Left-bashers and humanities-haters, but from the Marxist scholar Franco Moretti. Moretti, based at Stanford University, established the Center for the Study of the Novel in 2000 and, as a logical outgrowth, in 2010 cofounded the Stanford Literary Lab, which "discusses, designs, and pursues literary research of a digital and quantitative nature."[26] The Lab uses statistical analyses, but Moretti's aim is broader: to establish a sort of natural history of literary forms, using quantitative measures of large data sets, scientific hypotheses, and so on. The genealogy of efforts to bring scientific method to studies of literature is far too complex to explore here. Critics of Moretti's research have included others on the Left; Christopher Prendergast, for example, in 2005, while noting the importance of scientific methods of investigation to previous generations of Marxist scholars, suggested that Moretti's project amounted to a social Darwinism of the evolution of literary form, an impossible attempt at naturalization.[27]

In light of the movement toward other forms of quantification, the relatively simple statistical methods employed by Rule and Levine look somewhat benign, though no less antihumanist. Pillorying the qualitative methods, theoretical programs, and descriptive efforts pursued in nonscientific fields is often both necessary and useful. I will end, however, by offering a reminder that critiques and lofty-sounding parodies can be highly damaging when stealthily advanced to blow up a discourse. Samuel Beckett (in 1930) and many others in various fields, including art, have published bogus papers, mostly as malicious acts.[28]Often these are aimed at what is perceived as a threatening language promulgated by "the Left." But my final example, like that of Moretti's research, stems from the Left. It is a quotation from the fake analysis of the social construction of science submitted by physicist (and anti-deconstructionist) Alan Sokal to the journal *Social Text,* where it was duly published, while elsewhere it was simultaneously exposed as gibberish by Sokal himself.[29] Causing a huge international splash at the time, Sokal's article had at least a temporarily deleterious effect on the nascent field of cultural studies, especially when it hit the mainstream press, distracting attention from its areas of investigation and painting it as frivolous with the broadest of brushes.[30] Here we see a weak link, admittedly a noxious pastiche of what might be called "vocabularyism," confected to sink the entire enterprise by the postmodern moment's Irwin Corey. While junior Simplified Art Copy writers may be guilty of unwittingly assembling pretentious lofty verbal concatenations, that sad symptom hardly serves to discredit the entire field.

> [T]he content of any science is profoundly constrained by the language within which its discourses are formulated; and mainstream Western physical science has, since Galileo, been formulated in the language of mathematics. But *whose* mathematics? The question is a fundamental one, for, as Aronowitz has observed, "neither logic nor mathematics escapes the 'contamination' of the social." And as feminist thinkers have repeatedly pointed out, in the present culture this contamination is overwhelmingly capitalist, patriarchal and militaristic: "mathematics is portrayed as a woman whose nature desires to be the conquered Other." Thus, a liberatory science cannot be complete without a profound revision of the canon of mathematics. As yet no such emancipatory mathematics exists, and we can only speculate upon its eventual content. We can see hints of it in the multidimensional and nonlinear logic of fuzzy systems theory; but this approach is still heavily marked by its origins in the crisis of late-capitalist production relations. Catastrophe theory with its dialectical emphases on smoothness/discontinuity and metamorphosis/unfolding, will indubitably play a major role in the future mathematics; but much theoretical work remains to be done before this

approach can become a concrete tool of progressive political praxis.[31]

X

Martha Rosler is an artist who works with multiple media, including photography, sculpture, video, and installation. Her interests are centered on the public sphere and landscapes of everyday life—actual and virtual—especially as they affect women. Related projects focus on housing, on the one hand, and systems of transportation, on the other. She has long produced works on war and the "national security climate," connecting everyday experiences at home with the conduct of war abroad. Other works, from bus tours to sculptural recreations of architectural details, are excavations of history.

1
Triple Canopy 16 (July 2012). See http://canopycanopycanopy.com/16/international_art_english .

2
Generated by http://www.elsewhere.org/pomo/ .

3
To see a transcript of Corey's speech, visit https://midlandauthors.com/routines/ . I have no idea how the talk was received. In fact, there are many such examples of successful discursive hoaxes, in different forms; I return to this below.

4
On the study of this English, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Minneapolis, MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1983).

5
Among other forms of linguistic improvisation, scat talking and scat singing are ages old. Scat singing was practiced in the modern era in the US by Jelly-Roll Morton and Al Jolson (see Wikipedia) and robustly during the Jazz Age by Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, the fabulous Ella Fitzgerald, Anita O'Day, Mel Tormé, Carmen MacRae, Betty Carter, and later by the "vocalese" trio Lambert, Hendricks & Ross, the Swingle Singers, and hosts of others; the rock 'n' roller Dion; and of course Bobby McFerrin, and some hip-hop artists. Between double-talk and scatting is poetry, from Gertrude Stein to the Language (or L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E) poets, and Edith Sitwell, Lord Buckley, and Captain Beefheart, but perhaps not including non-bardic monologuists from Jean Shepherd to David Antin to Spaulding Gray or the mellifluous nonsense poets such as Edward Lear or even Lewis Carroll.

6
And related old-timey television characters such as Ralph Kramden and more so his pal Ed Norton, Fred Flintstone, and the rube puppet Mortimer Snerd; by virtue of "allowing" us to mock them, they become fetishized.

7
I was in an experimental program at Brooklyn College, modeled on the British system, that incorporated a tutorial approach to higher education.

8
Clearly, I am ignoring the difference between grammatical and phonetic analyses here.

9
That is, in contrast to a personalized humanistic reading on the one hand, and to a formalist myopia on the other. A statistical study of Wordsworth's corpus rather than a single poem might have led to some insights about his work, but I am not persuaded. Sketch Engine, the online tool used by Rule and Levine, which they characterize as a "concordance generator," claims to work "at the intersection of corpus and computational linguistics"; in the case of IAE, the "corpus" was e-flux's online press releases. Even back in the 1960s, when I was performing my sophomoric analysis, statistical linguistic analysis was meant not as a literary tool exactly, but as a precursor to computerized machine translation and, like almost all government-funded linguistic research, including that of Noam Chomsky, was aiming for an eventual military/AI application. Since then, a whole universe of linguistic modeling has opened up.

10
Something like the ads in Whole Foods, a supermarket chain whose very name ripples out from the *Whole Earth Catalog* of hippie days .

11
A Gourmet Experience, 1974.

12
Rule and Levine, joking or not, are hardly sophisticated linguistic commentators. They attack the generative process of nominalization, but contemporary English is rife with strange nominalizations, so much so that the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* , in a recent article on the process, ridicules, among other coinage, the neologistic *fail* (for fa ilure) and *sequester* (for sequestr ation). (See Henry Hitchings, "Those Irritating Verbs-as-Nouns," March 30, 2013, and his subsequent "The Dark Side of Verbs-as-Nouns," April 5, 2013; the *Times* has addre ssed this issue repeatedly over recent years, but we should remember that journalism amuses itself by pillorying academe.) Our writers also inexplicably fail to recognize the increasing prominence of the word *space* in many disciplines, including psychology and its pop versions, since the 1960s. In that vein, one might consider the importance to many contemporary theories of the *privileging of space over time* (cf. Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and others) in contemporary capitalism. Thus we may expect philosophically inflected corpora to have more terms relating to *spatiality* than to *temporality.* Rule and Levine also note the prevalence of dependent clauses, particularly as sentence openers, but what academicized writing fails to employ these? Why else is Microsoft Word always beseeching us to abandon their use, along with high-flown padding, which is also attacked by Rule and Levine? Finally, their comments on the word *text* are close to unintelligible.

13
The military is well-known for its idiosyncratic language of euphemistic substitutions ("collateral damage , enhanced in terrogation, targeted killing"), the most outrageous of which is the renaming of the War Department as the Defense Department; see also Godard's *Alphaville* for the poetics of philosophical and emotional impoverishment abetted by selective lexical reduction, which no doubt is derived from the "Newspeak" of George Orwell's novel *1984* and his postwar ur-texts on politics and language.

14
The slight barbarisms of language are as quoted; the original formatting is worse. See https://web.archive.org/web/20110907003509/http://www.userlab.com/SE.html .

15
J. Peter Kincaid is one of the authors of the document, written in 1992, from which the Simplified English example was drawn. I believe the Microsoft Word dictionary, in trying to get readers to reword their paragraphs to produce less passive constructions, grades the results using the Flesch-Kincaid Reading Ease score.

16
See the opening epigraph and the closing quotation of the present article.

17
The US has few art-making programs that offer a doctorate, except in supposedly non-market-oriented fields such as "social practice." Some are floating the idea that this added credential is necessary to catapult its holders above the MFA crowd when it comes to academic jobs. Caution makes me refrain from adducing examples of self-descriptions by such hyper-educated people that look even worse than the bad examples offered by Rule and Levine.

18
In my effort to stem email overload, I also routinely request to be removed from gallery and artist announcements. I don't appreciate bloat. But I digress.

19
In the mid-1980s, as globalization became a topic, the public television "miniseries" *The Story of English* developed from a book by the same name written by a former US public television news co-host, the Canadian-born Robert (Robin) Breckenridge Ware McNeil. The message was the richness of the language, whose productivity and immense vocabulary (dually sourced from Norse/Germanic and Greco-Roman roots) is the story behind the story of English dominance. This is little more than the imperialist imaginary at work.

20
This is not the place to consider the ways in which the terminology, or designation, of English as a second language (ESL) has been sliced and diced, and in some cases replaced by ESOL (English for speakers of other languages), EAL (English as an additional language), ESD (English as a second dialect), EIL (English as an international language), ELF (English as a lingua franca), ESP (English for specific purposes), or even EAP (English for academic purposes). See the Wikipedia entry for English as a second or foreign language, which is chock-full of variants and their acronyms: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ESL .

21
"Upper class" and "not upper class."

22
President Obama, in his speech of April 2, 2013 on the BRAIN initiative, announced an initial expenditure of $100 million for 2014 and a projected total of $3 billion over the decade. (See "Remarks by the President on the BRAIN initiative and American Innovation," https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/04/02/remarks-president-brain-initiative-and-american-inn

ovation .) The European Union got there slightly earlier, announcing in January 2013 the Human Brain Project, on which it expects to spend $1 billion over the coming decade. (See John Horgan, "Why You Should Care about Pentagon Funding of Obama's BRAIN Initiative," Scientific American Cross-Check blog, May 22, 2013, https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/why-you-should-care-about-pentagon-funding-of-obamas-brain-initiative/ , and his earlier posts linked therein.) Some sources suggest that the National Institutes of Health already spends about $5.5 billion yearly on neuroscientific research. (See Jason Koebler, "Obama's $100 Million BRAIN Initiative Barely Makes a Dent in Neuroresearch Budget," *US News & World Report* , April 3, 2013, https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/04/02/obamas-100-million-brain-initiative-barely-makes-a-dent-in-neuroresearch-budget .)

23
See Alyssa Quart's summary "Adventures in Neurohumanities," The Nation, May 27, 2013, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/adventures-neurohumanities/ ; Patricia Cohen, "Next Big Thing in English: Knowing They Know That You Know," New York Times, Mar. 31, 2010, https://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/01/books/01lit.html ; "Can 'Neuro Lit Crit' Save the Humanities?" by the editors of the New York Times Opinionator blog, Apr. 5, 2010, https://archive.nytimes.com/roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/04/05/can-neuro-lit-crit-save-the-humanities/ ; and Tim Adams, "Neuroaesthetics," published on the blog Blouin Artinfo, April 23, 2009.

24
Tim Adams, ibid. For a look at a recent neuroaesthetic reading of literature, see Kay Young, *Imaging Minds: The Neuro-Aesthetics of Austen, Eliot, and Hardy* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), available at https://kb.osu.edu/bitstream/handle/1811/46926/Young_final4print_text_file.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y . On this bandwagon one finds Marina Abramović; after people sat staring into her eyes for extended periods, often bursting into tears, during *The Artist is Present* (2010), her performance at MoMA, Abramović became interested in somehow making visible the brain function involved in "the transfer of energy between performer and public." Supported by the Mortimer D. Sackler Family Foundation, Abramović worked with US and Russian scientists on "an experimental performance installation" at Moscow's Garage. The installation was called *Measuring the Magic of Mutual Gaze* (2011). See Marina Abramović, "Neuroscience Experiment I: Measuring The Magic of Mutual Gaze," on the Abramović-Garage website http://archive.garageccc.com/eng/events/lectures/18526.phtml . She and New York public radio talk-show host Brian Lehrer sat, wired up and gazing across at one another during a radio broadcast; the resulting discussion can be hear at https://www.wnyc.org/story/275310-neuroscience-and-art/ .

25
Hats off to Greg Sholette for his reinsertion of the Sputnik effect into art discourse. Much of the funding in linguistics and related fields stemmed from the legislation passed to respond to this Cold War space race.

26
See https://litlab.stanford.edu/. For a sample of a pamphlet put out by the lab, see https://litlab.stanford.edu/LiteraryLabPamphlet1.pdf .

27
Christopher Prendergast, "Evolution and Literary History: A Response to Franco Moretti," New Left Review 34 (July/August 2005); much of Moretti's work had been also published in the New Left Review. For a later, non-theoretical critique, see Kathryn Schulz, "Distant Reading," New York Times Sunday Book Review, June 26, 2011, p. 14; published online as "What is Distant Reading?" June 24, 2011, https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/books/review/the-mechanic-muse-what-is-distant-reading.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 . See also Elif Batuman, "Adventures of a Man of Science: Moretti in California," n+1 issue 3 (Fall 2006) and published online (Apr 23, 2010) at https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-3/reviews/adventures-of-a-man-of-science/ . Batuman distinguishes formal literary development from Darwinian natural selection, as does Prendergast's essay, and notes that Moretti does not mind the loss of a "human" element in such studies.

28
Judith Rodenbeck has directed my attention to the magazine *November,* parodying *October* —a target of Rule and Levine—which put out a single issue in 2006. It featured articles by "Lukács G.C. Hechnoh," "Rosamund Kauffmann," and "Chip Chapman" (respectively, Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, and Hal Foster).

29
"Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," *Social Text* (Spring/Summer 1996). Sokal published his self-exposé in *Lingua Franca* in the May 1996 issue.

30
The article under discussion here, "International Art English," gained a second life when the authors were interviewed in the *Guardian* newspaper.

31
In case it is not abundantly clear, let me reiterate that the book-end quotations gracing the present essay are, in the first instance, the machinic product of a generative computer program, and in the second, Alan Sokal's devilish foray into gobbledygook/double-talk. See http://www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal/transgress_v2/transgress_v2_singlefile.html .

Hito Steyerl

International Disco Latin

Last year, Triple Canopy *published Alix Rule and David Levine's "International Art English."*[1] *As a broad critique of globalized artspeak semantics, the essay has since sparked many debates around the exaggerated claims and imprecise promotional language of contemporary art. In this issue of* e-flux journal *, Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl each respond to Rule and Levine's essay.*

***

Let's start with something else. Ever heard of the English Disco Lovers? A fantastic online project trying to outgun (or rather outlove) their acronym twin—the racist English Defence League, also abbreviated as "EDL"—on Facebook and Twitter. For this they use the bilingual slogan "Unus Mundas, Una Gens, Unus Disco (One World, One Race, One Disco)." The English Disco Lovers' name is, of course, a deliberate misreading of the original, a successfully failed copy coming into being via translation.

Likewise in the case of many exhibition press releases—or so Alix Rule and David Levine claim in their widely read essay "International Art English."[2] International Art English, or "IAE," is their name for the decisively amateurish English language used in contemporary art press releases. In order to investigate IAE, Rule and Levine undertake a statistical inquiry into a set of such texts distributed by e-flux.[3] They conclude that the texts are written in a skewed English full of grandiose and empty jargon often carelessly ripped from mistranslations of continental philosophy.

So far so good. But what are they actually looking at? In the unstated hierarchies of publishing, press releases barely even make it to the bottom. They have the lifespan of a fruit fly and the farsightedness of a grocery list. Armies of these hastily aggregated, briefly circulated, poorly phrased missives constantly vie for attention in our clogged inboxes. Typically written by overworked and underpaid assistants and interns across the world, the press release's pompous prose contrasts most acutely with the lowly status of its authors. Press releases are the art world's equivalent of digital spam, vehicles for serial name-dropping and para-deconstructive waxing, in close competition with penis enlargement advertisements. And while they may well constitute the bulk of art writing, they are also its most destitute strata, both in form and in content. It is thus an interesting choice to focus on this as a sampling of art-speak, because it is not exactly representative. Meanwhile, authoritative high-end art writing is respectfully left to keep pontificating behind MIT Press paywalls.[4]

So what is the language used in the sample examined by

Mladen Stilinović, An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist, 1992.

Rule and Levine? As the authors incontrovertibly prove, it is incorrect English. This is shown by statistically comparing press releases against the British National Corpus (BNC), a database of British English usage. Unsurprisingly, this exposes the deviant nature of IAE, which derives, the authors argue, from copious foreign—mainly Latin—elements, leftovers from decades of mistranslated continental art theory. This creates a bastardized language that Rule and Levine compare to pornography: "we know it when we see it." So, on the one hand, there is the BNC usage, or normal English. On the other, there is IAE, deviant and pornographic. Oh, and alienating too.

But who is it that is willingly writing porn here? According to Rule and Levine, IAE is, or might be, spoken by an anonymous art student in Skopje, at the Proyecto de Arte Contemporáneo Murcia in Spain, by Tania Bruguera, and by interns at the Chinese Ministry of Culture.[5] At this point I cannot help but ask: Why should an art student in Skopje—or anyone else for that matter—conform to the British National Corpus? Why should anyone use English words with the same frequency and statistical distribution as the BNC? The only possible reason is that the authors assume that the BNC is the unspoken measure of what English is supposed to be: it is standard English, the norm. And this norm is to be staunchly defended around the world.

As Mladen Stilinović told us a long time ago: an artist who cannot speak English is not an artist.[6] This is now extended to gallery interns, curatorial graduate students, and copywriters. And even within our beloved and seemingly global art world, there is a Standard English Defence League at work, and the BNC is its unspoken benchmark. Its norms are not only defined by grammar and spelling, but also by an extremely narrow view of "incorrect English." As Aileen Derieg, one of the best

translators of contemporary political theory, has beautifully argued: "incorrect English" is anything "not phrased in the simplest, shallowest terms, and the person reading it can't be bothered to make an effort to understand anything they don't already know."[7]

In my experience, "correct" English writing is supposed to be as plain and commonsensical as possible—and, unbelievably, people regard this not as boring, but as a virtue. The climax of "correct" English art writing is the standard contemporary art review, which is much too afraid to say anything and often contents itself with rewriting press releases in compliance with BNC norms. However, the main official rule for standard English art writing is, in my own unsystematic statistical analysis: never offend anyone more powerful than yourself. This rule is followed perfectly in the IAE essay, which ridicules the fictive Balkan art student who aggregates hapless bits of jargon in the hopes of attracting interest from curators. Indeed, this probably happens every day. But it's such a cheap shot.

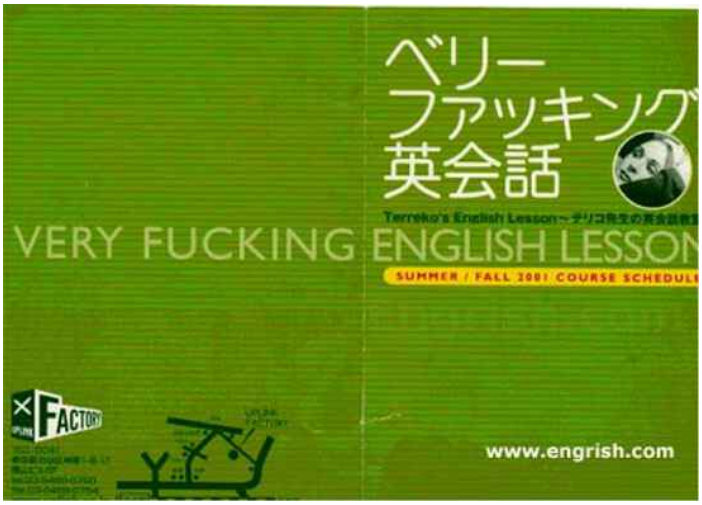
This is not to say that one shouldn't constantly make fun of contemporary art worlds and their preposterous taste, their pretentious jargons and portentous hipsterisms. The art world (if such a thing even exists) harbors a long tradition of terrific self-serving sarcasm. But satire as one of the traditional tools of enlightenment is not only defined by making fun. It gains its punch from *who* is being made fun of.

But Voltairean satire is mostly too risky. We are indeed lacking authors attacking or even describing, in any language, the art world's jargon-veiled money laundering and post-democratic Ponzi schemes. Not many people dare talk about post-mass-murder, gentrification-driven art booms in, for example, Turkey or Sri Lanka. I certainly wouldn't mind a lot of statistical inquiry into these developments, whether in IAE or Kurdish, satirical or serious.

But this is not Rule and Levine's concern. Instead, they manage to prove beyond a statistical doubt that IAE is deviant English. Fair enough, but so what? And furthermore, doesn't this verdict underestimate the sheer wildness at work in the creation of new lingos? Alex Alberro has demonstrated that advertising and promotion crucially created a context for much early conceptual art in the 1960s.[8] And today, the aggregate status of digitally circulated data is wonderfully echoed in many so-called post-internet practices that congenially mash up online commerce tools and itinerant JPEGs using (or abusing) basic InDesign wrecking skills, creating fantastic crashes of accelerated data sets within wacky circulation orbits. The intricacies, undeniable fallacies, and joys of digital dispersion and circulation are not, however, Rule and Levine's focus. Nor are the politics of translation and language. Their aim is to identify non-standard English (or patronizingly praise it as involuntary poetry). But we should not underestimate their analysis as just a nativist disdain for rambling foreigners.

Jakup Ferri, *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English is No Artist*, 2003. Single channel video.

In an admirable essay, Mostafa Heddaya has pointed out the undeniable complicity of IAE art jargon with political oppression in a multipolar art world where contemporary art has become a must-have accessory for tyrants and oligarchs.[9] By highlighting the use of IAE to obfuscate and obscure massive exploitation—such as the contested construction by New York University and the Guggenheim of complexes on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi—Heddaya makes an extremely important intervention in the debate.[10] Whatever comes into the world through the global production and dispersion of contemporary art is dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt, to quote Karl Marx, another forerunner of IAE. This certainly includes many instances of IAE, whose spread is fueled, though by no means monopolized, by neo-feudal, ultraconservative, and authoritarian contemporary art rackets. IAE is not only the language of interns and non-native English speakers. It is also a side effect of a renewed primitive accumulation operating worldwide by means of art. IAE is an accurate expression of social and class tensions around language and circulation within today's art worlds and markets: a site of conflict, struggle, contestation, and often invisible and gendered labor. As such, it supports oppression and exploitation. It legitimizes the use of contemporary art by the 1%. But much like capitalism as such, it also enables a class and geographical mobility whose restrictions are often blatantly defied by its users. It creates a digital lingua franca, and through its glitches, it starts to show the outlines of future publics that extend beyond preformatted geographical and class templates. IAE can also be used to temporarily expose some of the most glaring aspects of contemporary art's dubious financial involvements to a public beyond the confines of (often unsympathetic) national forums. After all, IAE is *also* a language of dissidents, migrants, and renegades.



Again, none of this is of interest to Rule and Levine. Fair enough. I doubt political economy matters much in the BNC. But their essay perfectly expresses the backside of Heddaya's argument. Because, as Rule and Levine correctly state, after IAE has become too global to intimidate anyone, the future lies in a return to conventional highbrow English. And indeed, this is not a distant future, but the present, as evidenced by a massive and growing academic industry monetizing and monopolizing accepted uses of English. UK and US corporate academia has one major advantage over the international education market: the ability to offer (and police) proper English skills.

No gallery in Salvador da Bahia, no project space in Cairo, no institution in Zagreb can opt out of the English language. And language is and has always been a tool of Empire. For a native speaker, English is a resource, a guarantee of universal access to employment in countless places around the globe. Art institutions, universities, colleges, festivals, biennales, publications, and galleries will usually have American and British native speakers on their staff. Clearly, as with any other resource, access needs to be restricted in order to protect and perpetuate privilege. Interns and assistants the world over must be told that their domestic—and most likely public—education simply won't do. The only way to shake off the shackles of your insufferable foreign origins is to attend Columbia or Cornell, where you might learn to speak impeccable English—untainted by any foreign accent or non-native syntax. And after a couple of graduate programs where you pay $34,740 annually for tuition, you just might be able to find yet another internship.[11]

But here is my point: chances are you will be getting this education on Saadiyat Island, where NYU is setting up a campus, whose allure for paying customers resides in its ability to teach certified English to non-native speakers. In relation to Heddaya's argument, Frank Gehry's fortress will be paid for not only by exploiting Asian workers, but also by selling "correct" English writing skills.

Or you might pay for this kind of education in Berlin, where UK and US educational franchises, charging students seventeen thousand dollars a year to learn proper English, have slowly started competing with the city's own admittedly lousy, inadequate, and provincial free art schools.[12] Or you might pay for such an education in countless already existing franchises in China, where oppressive art speech will soon be delivered in pristine BNC English. Old imperial privilege nestles quite comfortably behind deconstructive oligarchic facades, and the policing of "correct" English is the backside of IAE-facilitated neo-feudalism. Such education will leave you indebted, because if you don't pawn or gamble your future on acquiring this skill, you will be shamed out of the market for unpaid internships just because you aggregated some critical theory that monolingual US-professors translated wrongly decades ago. For the art student from Skopje, it's no longer "publish or perish." It's "pay or perish"!

That's why I couldn't care less when someone "unfolds his ideas," or engages in "questioning," or in "collecting models of contemporary realities." Not everyone is lucky enough, or wealthy enough, to spend years in private higher education. Convoluted as their wordsmithing may be, press releases convey the sincere and often agonizing attempt by wannabe predators to tackle a T. rex. And as Ana Teixeira Pinto has said: nothing truly important can be said without wreaking havoc on the rules of grammar.

Granted, IAE in its present state is rarely bold enough to do this. It hasn't gone far enough on any level. One reason is perhaps that it took its ripping off of Latin (and other languages) too seriously. IAE has clung to preposterous claims of erudition and has awed generations of art students into dozing through Critical Studies seminars—even though its status as aggregate spam is much more interesting.[13] So we—the anonymous crowd of people (which includes myself) sustaining and actually living this language—might want to alienate that language even further, make it more foreign, and decisively cut its

ties to any imaginary original.

If IAE is to go further, its pretenses to Latin origins need to be seriously glitched. And for a suggestion on how to do this, we need look no further than the EDL's ripped off slogan: Unus Mundas, Una Gens, Unus Disco (One World, One Race, One Disco). Let's ignore for a moment that the word "disco" could sound so foreign that Rule and Levine might sensibly suggest renaming it "platter playback shack." Because actually EDL's slogan is hardly composed of Latin at all. Rather, it's written in IDL: International Disco Latin. It is a queer Latin made by splashing mutant versions of gender across assumed nouns. It's a language that takes into account its digital dispersion, its composition and artifice.

This is the template for the language I would like to communicate in, a language that is not policed by formerly imperial, newly global corporations, nor by national statistics—a language that takes on and confronts issues of circulation, labor, and privilege (or at least manages to say something at all), a language that is not a luxury commodity nor a national birthright, but a gift, a theft, an excess or waste, made between Skopje and Saigon by interns and non-resident aliens on Emoji keyboards. To opt for International Disco Latin also means committing to a different form of learning, since disco also means "I learn," "I learn to know," "I become acquainted with"—preferably with music that includes heaps of accents. And for free. And in this language, I will always prefer anus over bonus, oral over moral, Satin over Latin, shag over shack. You're welcome to call this pornographic, discographic, alienating, or simply weird and foreign. But I suggest: Let's take a very fucking English lesson!

X

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1
Triple Canopy 16 (July 2012). See http://canopycanopycanopy.com/16/international_art_english .

2
Alix Rule and David Levine, "International Art English," *Triple Canopy* 16 (2012). See http://canopycanopycanopy.com/16/international_art_english .

3
I have contributed extensively to *e-flux journal* in the past, thus losing any pretense to occupy any neutral and objective stance within the debate, and squarely positioning myself as a fully conscious coproducer of IAE spam.

4
See Taylor & Francis and other semi-monopolist pimps of publicly funded scholarly writing.

5
Tania Bruguera's transgression against statistically correct English is, according to Rule and Levine, the excessive use of the word "reality." Now, I am not surprised that "reality" doesn't show up very often in the BNC, since over the past few decades the UK has been more obsessed with "realty." However, to make the word "reality" a key term of a supposedly pornographic language is taking its denial a bit far.

6
Mladen Stilinovic, *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist* , 1994–6. Embroidery on banner.

7
In private conversation.

8
In Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity,* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). I am fast-forwarding here over an intriguing branch of scholarship that investigates translation within globalization. Some of the findings of this scholarship are available at http://translate.eipcp.net/ . The website's researchers and the practitioners of this scholarship include writers like Gayatri Spivak, Jon Solomon, Boris Buden, Rosi Braidotti, Antonella Corsani, and Stefan Nowotny, among many other equally notable thinkers. Their research deals with power, language, and neoliberal globalization, often using case studies, such as refugee struggles, or specific angles on historical decolonization. This scholarship highlights the role of minor, emerging, and submerged languages in contemporary political realities. Ah! There goes the r-word again. X-rate this footnote!

9
Mostafa Heddaya, "When Artspeak Masks Oppression," hyperallergic.com, March 6, 2013. See http://hyperallergic.com/66348/when-artspeak-masks-oppression/ .

10
See the GulfLabor public statement at http://gulflabor.wordpress.com/2013/01/07/update/ , and the Guggenheim's response at http://web.archive.org/web/20130119044226/https://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Guggenheim-responds-to-proposed-artist-boycott/23392 .

11
See, for instance https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/108849/art-criticism-amp-writing-mfa-now-accepting-applications-for-fall-2013/ .

12
This is my fault, sorry! Working in this system also enables me to partially disregard the rules of "correct" English writing, which full freelancers might admittedly have to put up with to stay in the market.

13
Thanks to Joshua Decter, Richard Frater, Janus Hom, Martyn Reynolds, Christoph Schäfer, Zoran Terzic, and others for extensively debating this issue in private conversation with me. Nina Power helpfully suggested to rename artspeak as "bollocks," with which I entirely agree, as in "International Disco Bollocks."