

Set Theory

AMANDA DE LA GARZA



Verónica Gerber Bicecci, *Los hablantes—The Speakers*, 2014.
Borrador para ensayo visual—Visual essay sketch [Cat. 2]

A word is a soluble entity. A substance that undergoes multiple states. (...) Conversation, on the other hand, is liquid: dialogue is a spring fed by sound, flowing through time and space, there and back, from the speaker to the listener.

VERÓNICA GERBER BICECCI

In boxing, there is a practice called *shadowboxing*, which involves fighting with one's own shadow to improve skill and fitness. The shadow is always faster. The inner monologue resembles it; it is a mirror, a taller, stronger, swifter, faceless outline; we cannot defeat our own image. This is a silent dialogue of concise, sweaty movements. This is the position of the *I*, as a subject and as a pronoun. In a second moment, the other appears, He or She (singular or plural), before whom an exchange is established, a dialogue, a denial; there are two people listening and speaking to each other. There are various ways to create these exchange: some transpire through the written word, in emails; handwritten letters subjected to the chronological discrepancy between the initial composition and its answer; online chats that produce the idea of temporal simultaneity—but there are also *conversations with the dead* (as the poet Eliseo Diego¹ would say), with those we address in their absence and those we never met at all. Yet there is one circumstance, an occurrence through which conversation takes on other characteristics: face-to-face dialogue, the quintessential situation of speech-acts, described by the John Austin's pragmatic philosophy. Such encounters contain countless elements, tiny interpretive acts—but, above all, speech emerges as a sonority composed of noises and voids.

Verónica Gerber Bicecci's starting point is the gray, ambiguous area that appears in the holes of a conversation, and she goes on to create a graphic representation of different situations that occur within it. The inner dialogue appears in these drawings, the cacophony that results when

1 "Our friends are not the only ones we see almost every day, or every once in awhile, which is the always of an entire life. If friendship is company more than presence, so, too, must be those others we have never been able to speak with because we are separated by inexorable abysses of time." Eliseo Diego, *Conversación con los difuntos*, Mexico, Conaculta, 2013, p. 10.

we all speak at the same time, the *dialogue of the deaf*, the exchanges that don't need words at all, the ghosts that enter conversations and exit them.

One of the project's precedents is found in set theory and Venn diagrams—the visual formation that presents a cluster of logical relationships. The artist appropriates this visual device in order to develop, through a graphic essay, a system of linguistic relationships and operations that occur in conversation. However, Gerber's work does not seek to record clauses or conversational fragments within the mathematical and set theory-related language proposed by the theory itself. Instead, she employs some of its basic operations in translating them to the conversational context: union, intersection, and set difference; the possibility that part of set A is contained in part B under a principle of identity and inequality ($A \subseteq B$ or $A \not\subseteq B$). A conversation is thus understood as a universe in which the elements relating to each other are simultaneously subjects and words. In the artist's diagram, a pronoun, as the slightest expression of language, indicates the subject (individual or collective), which it both enunciates and silences.

In this project, language doesn't appear through words and their content, or through sentences extracted from a conversation, nor does it try to speak from a conceptualist aesthetic in which art is conceived as a linguistic proposition. *The Speakers* much more closely resembles a concrete poetry exercise, albeit a tangential one, as it seeks to somehow assimilate the material of language, a re-opening toward its gestural moment. As Augusto de Campos, Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos express in their manifesto, “concrete poetry begins through familiarizing oneself with graphic space as a structural agent. Qualified space: spatial-temporal structure, instead of mere temporal-lineal development.”². There are no blank pages in this piece, no ideographic versification of the sign: what it develops, rather, is a narrative situation, enclosed, minimal, infinitesimal. Any of us could inhabit it, precisely because it is centered on the principle of the dramatic character: the pronoun.

2—Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos, “Plano piloto para la poesía concreta,” in *Galaxia Concreta*, Mexico, UIA, 1999, p. 85.

The artist draws this set of relationships and hypothetical relationships, emphasizing the gestural act of drawing itself. She reminds us that speech is a body and, therefore, gesture. As stated by the anthropologist André Leroi-Gouhtran, there exists “(...) a reflection between the two mirrors of technical gesture and phonic symbolism.”³ It is through its bodily condition that language leaves a mark on spaces and objects. The drawings occupy the surfaces of the museum’s terraces and courtyards, transit areas within the museum building. These are spaces and moments of waiting and rest, spaces where people can strike up a conversation, smoke a cigarette, talk about what they’ve seen, what they’ve heard, what they haven’t understood. But a museum is already a public space, one in which negations, overlaps, and disputes come into operation, both on a discursive and ideological level—while a conversation is its emblematic image, associated with the idea of the Greek square (the public plaza where citizens would gather to discuss shared issues). Nonetheless, there is no dialogic transparency, as Jürgen Habermas defined it, in this context or in any other.

Blank space constructs *The Speakers*. The visual plane has a binary composition: white and black, indicating the difference between speech and silence. Although the piece’s driving force is conversation, the omnipresent element is the idea of erasure, crossing-out, occlusion. This is a recurring subject in Verónica Gerber’s work, not only as a topic but also as a procedure. The piece *Poema invertido [Inverted Poem]* (2013) proposes an operation that revolves around the enigma of *Poema plástico [Plastic Poem]* (1953) by Mathias Goeritz. In this work, Gerber seeks to puzzle out a mystery, decipher the poem-sculpture. She tackles it through a system of indices and relationships proposed by other writers, producing a map to untangle the message—an impossible task from the very beginning.

Further, in *Biblioteca ciega [Blind Library]* (2012), Gerber translates names, places, and reasons for the destruction of different libraries throughout history into Braille: the Library of the Caliphate of Córdoba, the Library of

3— André Leroi-Gouhtran, *El gesto y la palabra*, Caracas, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1971, p. 211.

Numa, the Library of Alexandria, the Library of Jerusalem, the Library of Nalanda, the Library of Antioquia, and the Nasrid Library. All destroyed by fire, catastrophe, or war. Triply inaccessible: for being written in Braille, for being hidden along the walls of Mexico City's historic downtown area, and for their disappearance in time and space.

In *Poema invertido*, and in earlier works, the idea of negative space articulates a path. It regains its meaning in technical composition, as well as its thematic recurrence in other disciplines like physics, mathematics, and philosophy. In the case of *The Speakers*, it appears in the form of its simile, the idea of an empty set, defined as a space containing no elements at all and represented by the symbol \emptyset . It speaks to what we cannot know —which, when applied to conversation, is something about the other that entirely escapes us. However, this silence is not sterile, but rather productive; after all, it generates a tension among the elements, which appear in the margins or in the center. In reference to Mallarmé, Octavio Paz remarks, “By the path of the magical language the French poet arrives at silence. But every human silence contains an utterance. We remain silent, Sor Juana said, not because we have nothing to say, but because we do not know how to say all that we should like to say. Human silence is a being still and, therefore, it is implicit communication, latent meaning.”⁴

For the artist, what emerges from this negative space is literature, the construction of a scene, of a narrative. The *Blind Conversation*, included in this catalogue, is nourished by different people’s thoughts and observations about conversation, resulting in a tautological plot. Meanwhile, the visual essay presented in the previous pages effectively extends the project of spatial intervention. The book is the visual piece, too, and at the museum is the spatialization of language.

Many of the artist’s projects follow this same path. They are accompanied by stories, accounts, anecdotes, conversations, explorations of the relationship between literature and the visual arts. In her book *Mudanza [Moving Out]*, Gerber follows the routes of artists who made the transition from writing to visual art: Vito Aconci, Ulises Carrión,

4— Octavio Paz, *El arco y la lira*, Mexico, FCE, 1972, p. 65

Sophie Calle, Marcel Broodthaers, and Övind Fahlström, as well as the artist herself in the opposite direction. She describes, for example, the way in which Vito Acconci shifted from fiction to poetry and then to performance. “It wasn’t the blank page that terrified him, but rather the words themselves, their interstices emptied of objects, their blurred time, the way they ache in thought, those transparent scabs.”⁵ In this trajectory, this mutation of one discipline into another, one must cross a gulf where holes will always remain, a kind of untranslatability between word and image—the same that transpires between mathematical language and visual arts. In this way, Verónica Gerber’s practice works like a pendulum, with the visual realm filling literature’s lacks and vice-versa. This is why her pieces are found in the crossfire: holes and voids are a form of suspense, a mutual engulfment, a round of shadowboxing.

John Cage says “There is no such thing as an empty space or an empty time. There is always something to see, something to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot.”⁶ This passage is widely known, as it refers to the anecdote in which Cage visited a soundproof room and heard the internal noise of his own organs. Conversation, then, is not a binary moment in which speech is the opposite of silence; rather, one contains the other, in the spirit of succession, supplanting, amalgamation. It appears as a territory both circumscribed and indefinite, full of all the things we don’t say (in the present and in the past), of what we will never say; of the silence that follows a sentence, or precedes a burst of laughter; the quiet speech of rumor, murmur, the moment before a fright, the complicit silence in the face of your own shadow.

5—Verónica Gerber Bicecci, *Mudanza*, Mexico, Aueio, 2010, p. 19.

6—John Cage, *Silencio: conferencias y escritos*, Madrid, Árdora, 2005, p. 8