

Living Fragments: On Berlin's Winter of Broken Pieces

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I, for one, want to be broken into pieces. The way sappy music breaks its lovers. We bright-lit gallery people are more reserved. But we find our venues.

Visual art fans often experience their blissed out breakdowns by way of the fragmentary aesthetic. In keening for this energy – the drama of skillfully executed amputations – we are kin of the romantics, who got high on the mythological potency of ruin; also of twentieth-century collagists, bricolagists, and post-Duchampian found-object sculptors. In the galleries of our neoliberal non-future, disembodied pieces of image, text, and object persist as envoys from a limbo between whole and part. They tease with the terrible delight of falling apart. Carried off, this technique distills uncanniness. Think of organs twitching disembodied, a roving light through masking dark.

Fragmentary art satisfies a craving for decontextualization: from body, sense, meaning. Now that our world seems made up of information fragments – headlines, tweets, posts – this aesthetic has become more potent than ever. Lapping up morsels, we lose sight of the whole. Perception is broken to pieces. A shattered, non-whole art becomes a poetic equivalent for our contemporary relationship with volumes of dubious information, none of which ever seems complete, or true. In Berlin, a city made of breakages, two recent exhibitions evinced the fragment's renewed power.

In Natalie Czech's photographs – recently on view at Berlin's [Kindl Zentrum](#) with Friederike Feldmann's drawings and wall paintings – poetic turns of phrase feel like the subconscious of language. Isolating words within blocks of writing, drawing attention to textual gaps, and juxtaposing phrases from capitalist refuse, Czech mines the dormant possibilities of words, image, design. To make *A Poem By Repetition By Charles Bernstein* (2018), Czech reprinted, at enlarged scale, two copies of a page from the National Geographic's August 2017 "Space" issue. In white type on the inky space scene, she selected the words of Bernstein's 1994 poem "Dark City." Highlighting these words, she then painted over the magazine's text in grey. In this way Bernstein's poem took form as a twinkling constellation within the pop-scientific text – a story, in its own way enchanting,

of the etymology and mythology of star names. At first Czech's structural game felt almost programmatically clever – a constellation amidst constellations. But her strange contrasts stir everything up. Transposed, Bernstein's lyricism and the science journalism open a door between the rational and the absurd. Light creeps through, improbably, in both directions.

Czech's work is hallmarked by an odd humor. In the projected montage *Cigarette Ends* (2019), photographs of cigarette butts fade in and out of one another. They lay together like cauterized appendages – spent prostheses for troubled souls. Their quiet romance might seem commonplace, but Czech introduces comic sizzle. The logo “Free,” stamped on one butt combines with its neighbor “Holiday,” to form a quip on deadly pleasure. “Visa Vision” and “Peace Goodluck” jibe with similar acidity at the deadly habit. Here, cast-off material fragments – the cigarette butts – synthesize another kind of fragmentation. Meanings we thought we knew disintegrate into hidden messages and glancing emotions. We are taunted from a place just beyond rational sense.

Friederike Feldmann also relishes in a sub-dimension of language. Her drawings, presented at Kindl in two series titled *Oneliner* (2014-19) and *Lyrics* (2012), look like a species of handwriting wherein ligatures, loops, and tangles have mutinied against comprehensible meaning. The drawings unspool cursive that has nothing to say but plenty to feel: giddy, gurgling. This wordless automatic writing takes a page from the great Hanne Darboven, and splices it with a cartoonish and painterly impulse. On the museum's angled ceiling, broad strokes loop and break. There is not a single legible syllable, only a sustained urge, crashing like waves, acting out the experience of speech and writing.



Natalie Czech / Friederike Feldmann, installation view, 2019. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

In backdated calligraphic style, Feldmann's work rings a note of solidarity with Marshall McLuhan's most famous thesis. We'd better keep our attention on the materiality of communication, McLuhan thought, if we want to understand the actual power of information over minds and souls.

Feldmann's work draws its own power from exhaustively rendering how meaning-making feels. These drawings and paintings bring us into contact with language's libidinal force. Their worthwhile mission begins and ends there.

To know that that a pre-linguistic dimension exists within oneself, to be aware of the constant, awkward relationship between a perceived world and the languages that encode and shape it, is to be suspended in a state of dizzy anxiety. This affect squirms in Charlotte Duale's ceramics. At [Galerie Noah Klink](#), the pieces were hung in broken lines, looping and folding like glyphic sound waves. Flirting with logic, they became the letters and phrases of a world where the impossibility of linguistic meaning had been finally accepted. This is not art as linguistic study, so much as resonant interpretation. Duale's hand-formed ceramics analogize how words and sounds ring in and through the body. Turning color – pink into blue, into yellow, into bone white – they seem synesthetic. The lines cluster, bunch, and stack, tangling consonants: thought and voice like mist.

In *Empire of Signs*, Roland Barthes described just such a situation – the pleasure of being immersed in the rhythms and textures of a foreign language. The text is both liberating and problematic in its liberty. Implicit in Barthes's account is a certain privilege; for tourists, lostness in language is exhilarating, but for other travelers, especially migrants, it can be terrifying. And yet to invite fragmented encounters with information and language, independent of easily digestible meaning, is also to make legible an experience that spans power imbalances: the searching of all speaking and thinking creatures.



Natalie Czech / Friederike Feldmann, installation view, 2019. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

These shows implicitly argue for the right to raw experience. Language and information, in becoming tools for explaining and encoding the world, have also become less available to raw contact – formatted into piecemeal delivery systems, chillingly non-sensual, non-mysterious. Working against this effect, these works chased language's fleeting ghosts. Despite being absolutely certain that a pre-linguistic dimension exists, we can never quite get there, can never quite touch it. And still, the art *works* as abstraction. Language is not here stripped down to some essential reality. Instead its interior and alternate dimensions are performed through tricky games and embodied recitations. The humor of their delivery prevents each artist from slipping into nonsense or romance. Instead, it gets as close as possible to transparent contact with the reality of language. In so doing, it announces itself as an ideal, something worth grasping for, even as it eludes us forever.

These shows tapped into an eerie pleasure, one that spans technological and corporeal communication, and runs through wire and circuit, esophagus and diaphragm, pen and paper. All this vibrates with something beneath the tidy surface of information; in the undercarriage, the cracks, the fragments of communication, covert meaning lurks. Handwriting's loops are as meaningful as its letters, words, and sentences. Broken apart, meaning matters.