COGNITION-STROLL
Annette Cords and **Becky Brown**
June 14 - July 28, 2017

Project: ARTspace
156 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010

A two-person exhibition featuring
tapestries, weavings, drawings and
paintings in an installation of printed
wallpaper designed by the artists.

COGNITION-STROLL
by Tatiana Istomina

Erkenntnisspaziergang, a German compound neologism, which literally translates as "Cognition-Stroll", describes a walk taken with the specific intention of contemplation. Its meaning partially overlaps with "flaneur"—the 19th-century French word turned into a famous cultural trope by Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin. But the two terms differ slightly in character: while "flaneur" denotes the figure of an urban spectator, an idle observer of a city crowd that she is both part of and apart from, *Erkenntnisspaziergang* seems to suggest a more introspective stroller, whose gaze is directed inward as much as outward.

The latter attitude, in which the walker's attention is divided between what happens around her and her private thoughts and preoccupations, marks the works of the two artists in "Cognition-Stroll." The paintings and drawings by Becky Brown and the tapestries, weavings and collages by Annette Cords are inspired by contemporary urban culture; they draw on street markings and graffiti, city maps and newspaper clippings, advertisements and subway poetry—embellishing, abstracting and obfuscating these signs and messages; turning them into semi-abstract compositions. They comment on the pains and pleasures of city life: the over-abundance of information and our inability to han-dle it; the exciting and troubling impacts of digitalization; the perils of navigating multivalent discourses of urbanism, architecture, politics and the public sphere.

At the same time, Brown and Cords are deeply concerned with formal and conceptual problems internal to their practices. In their individual mediums and with their personal lexicons of forms and ideas, the two artists grapple with boundaries between text and image, abstraction and figuration, utility and transcendence, information and poetry. A "Cognition-Stroll" into the history of these issues could lead in a dozen different directions, from Russian trans-sense poetry and early 20th-century textile designs, to Friedrich Schiller's concept of play drive and Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas on private language. But some of the most prominent themes in these artists' works—the power and limitations of abstraction, the nature of language, and the communicative potential of a visual sign—are curiously entwined in a search for a universal language, which for a few centuries captivated the scientific and philosophical community in Europe.

The idea of an artificial language created specifically for expressing and facilitating abstract human thought arose for many European philosophers and natural scientists during the 17th and 18th centuries. René Descartes believed it was possible to define a lexicon of characters akin to numbers that, alongside a specially designed "mathematics of thought," might generate every complex idea the human mind could imagine. However, there were two major challenges in this pursuit: (1) identifying a lexicon of basic concepts; and (2) organizing the concepts into a grammatical system with clearly-defined rules. The first problem appeared particularly daunting: one had to reduce the contents of the Universe and the human mind— a potentially infinite number of objects, life forms, abstract ideas,

actions and relations—to a relatively small set of simple characters. "An Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language" by Anglican clergyman and natural philosopher John Wilkins, published in London in 1668, was one of the most ambitious attempts: an all-inclusive classification of the totality of objects and ideas with a finite set of basic concepts and a system of grammar to organize them into complex configurations.

Wilkins subdivides the Universe into 40 major genera, which are further split into 251 characteristic differences; from these he derives 2,030 species, which appear in pairs. He begins by separating all things into Transcendental and Special. The Special Things are God and World: while "God" contains the idea of the Trinity, "World" includes all spiritual and material elements organized hierarchically: from Spirits (Angels, Demons, Souls, Minds…) and Heaven (Sun, Stars, Planets…) to Stones, Metals, Herbs, Animals, etc.

The Transcendental Things include Kinds, Causes and Modes, which are further split into categories such as Species, Substances, Quantities, and Actions—each serving as a knot in a network of more and more narrowly defined concepts. The properties of space, time, movement and relations between objects are conveyed through extensive lists and pairings:

Seeking / Finding,
Showing / Concealing...

Adhering / Abandoning,
Applying / Abstracting...

Repeating / Changing,
Representing / Imitating....

A set of graphic symbols (horizontal dashes, small bars, hooks and accents) form a visual vocabulary, and a phonetic system in the Latin alphabet determines each word's pronunciation. The basic vocabulary of 2030 characters is supplemented by Natural Grammar—a set of tenses, modalities, pronouns, articles, prepositions, etc.—that combine with characters to expand the lexicon for greater complexity.

For example, the particles Metaphorical / Like may be used to elaborate the meaning of a character. Wilkins suggests the following constructions:

Ornate + Metaphorical ⟶ Elegant, Quaint,
Foot + Like ⟶ Pedestal…

Another particle, Artist, "is not of so much necessity as the rest."
His suggested uses are as follows:
Quantity + Artist ⟶ Mathematician,
World + Artist ⟶ Cosmographer.

Wilkins' language drew much attention and some harsh criticism in the years following its publication. While it included a classification of plants that was advanced for its time (assembled with the help of botanist John Ray), its overall incompleteness, numerous ambiguities and contradictions supplied rich material for censure and witticisms by Wilkins' contemporaries and later authors—most famously, Jorge Luis Borges, whose Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge, later cited by Michel Foucault, was inspired by Wilkins' project.

Characteristic ambiguity can be found in the category of "Common Mixed Materials" which he acknowledges to be "a very Heterogeneous heap," including:

1. Food for cattle,
2. Fuel,
3. Materials for giving light,
4. Cures for Wounds and Sores,
5. Materials for cleansing and stiffening of clothes,
6. Communication by writing: Paper (Parchment, Vellum, Schedule, Ticket) / Book (Volume, Tome, Treatise, Library, Manuscript).
7. Ornament: Picture (Portraiture, Effigies, Map, Chart, Landscape, Emblem, Image, Projection, Scheme, Diagram) / Image (Statue, Puppet, Idol, Colossus, Crucifix).

For every character, Wilkins specifies a list of synonyms, which often read as bizarre or amusing word sequences:

> Conditioning: preserving, candying, seasoning, embalming, Mummy.
> Box: Chest, Trunk, Ark, Coffer, Cabinet, Bin, Cupboard, Locker, Safe, Drawer, Coffin.

Two flaws in Wilkins' classification were the difficulty of memorizing and using the characters, and the doubtful advantage of the system in comparison with natural languages such as English or Latin. Despite numerous other attempts, by the mid-18th century the search for a philosophical language has effectively come to an end. It becomes clear that no finite classification of the universe is possible, and that philosophical thinking relies on conceptual apparatus and grammar of natural languages, which are unavoidably ambiguous and unstable.
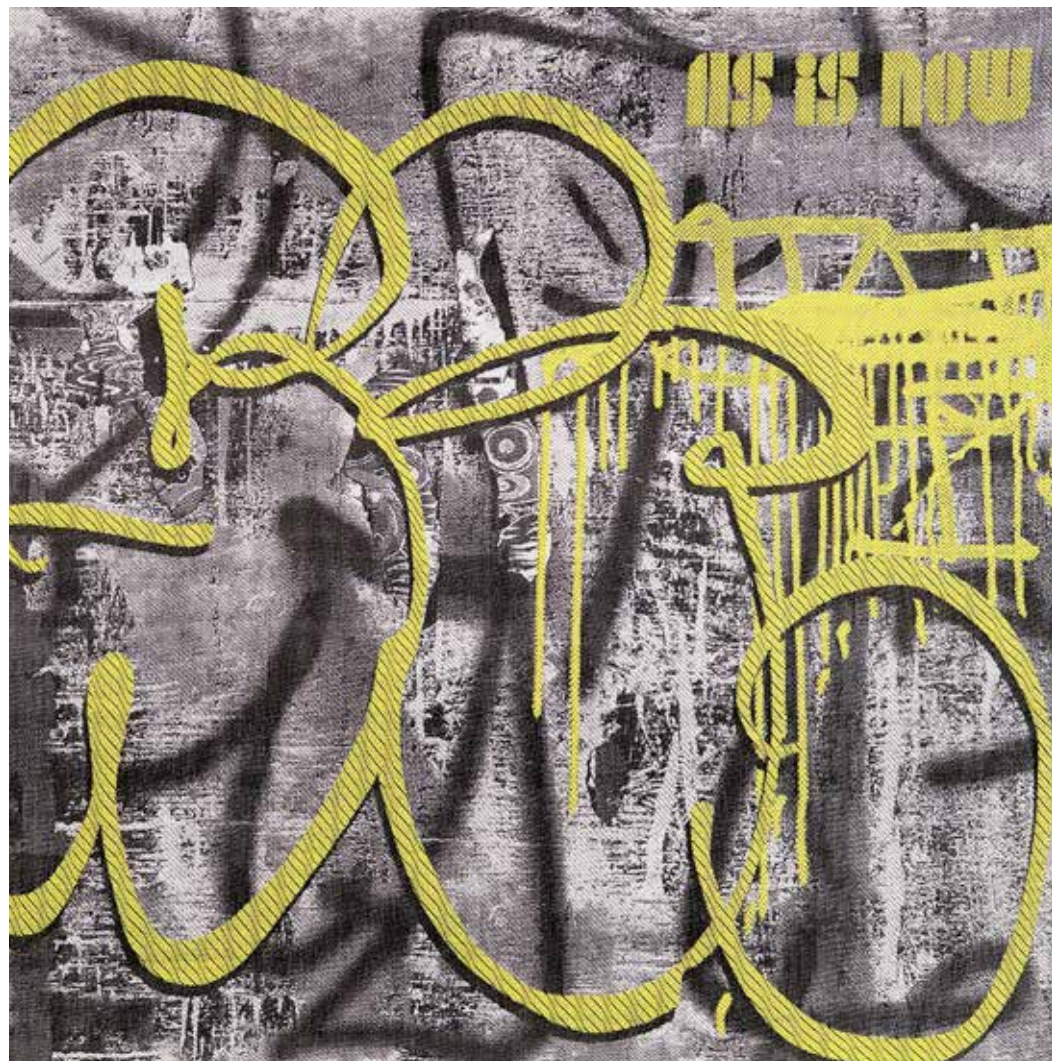
Although the Real Character helped to illuminate some crucial relationships between language, communication, abstract concepts and visual signs, it remained a philosophical and scientific failure. Clearly, the imaginative and aesthetic qualities of Wilkins' thought prevailed over the pragmatic concerns of science. If we view the project as not just a treatise on taxonomy and linguistics, but an all-encompassing attempt at extracting perfect clarity of thought from the
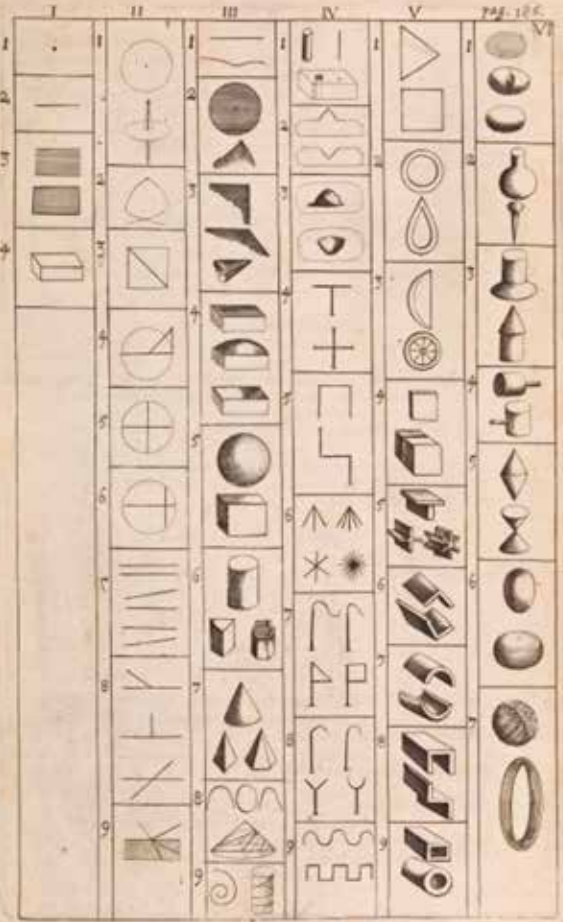
muddle of natural language, it resonates with some of the most radical artistic endeavors of the 20th century: from Russian Futurist poetry and Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism, to the "zip" paintings of Barnett Newman and Joseph Kosuth's conceptual installations.

Even today, despite our Postmodern distrust of universals, the search for transcendental forms and ideas lying beyond the mere appearances of things may still be a driving force in contemporary art. It likely propelled Becky Brown and Annette Cords on their "Cognition-Stroll" through the entanglements of visual and linguistic abstraction.

Tatiana Istomina is a Russian-born, New York City-based artist and writer working with painting, drawing and video. She plays the role of researcher, archivist, chronicler and occasional detective, reconstructing missing connections, probable causes and hidden consequences of historical events. She holds a PhD in geophysics from Yale University and an MFA from Parsons New School. Her work has been shown at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, The Drawing Center (New York), Gaîté Lyrique, (Paris) and others. Residencies include the Core Program at the Houston Museum of Fine Arts and the AIM program at the Bronx Museum. She has been a recipient of the Joan Mitchell Foundation Award, and the American Austrian Foundation Prize for Fine Arts. Her writing has been published in Art in America, the Brooklyn Rail, Hyperallergic and others.
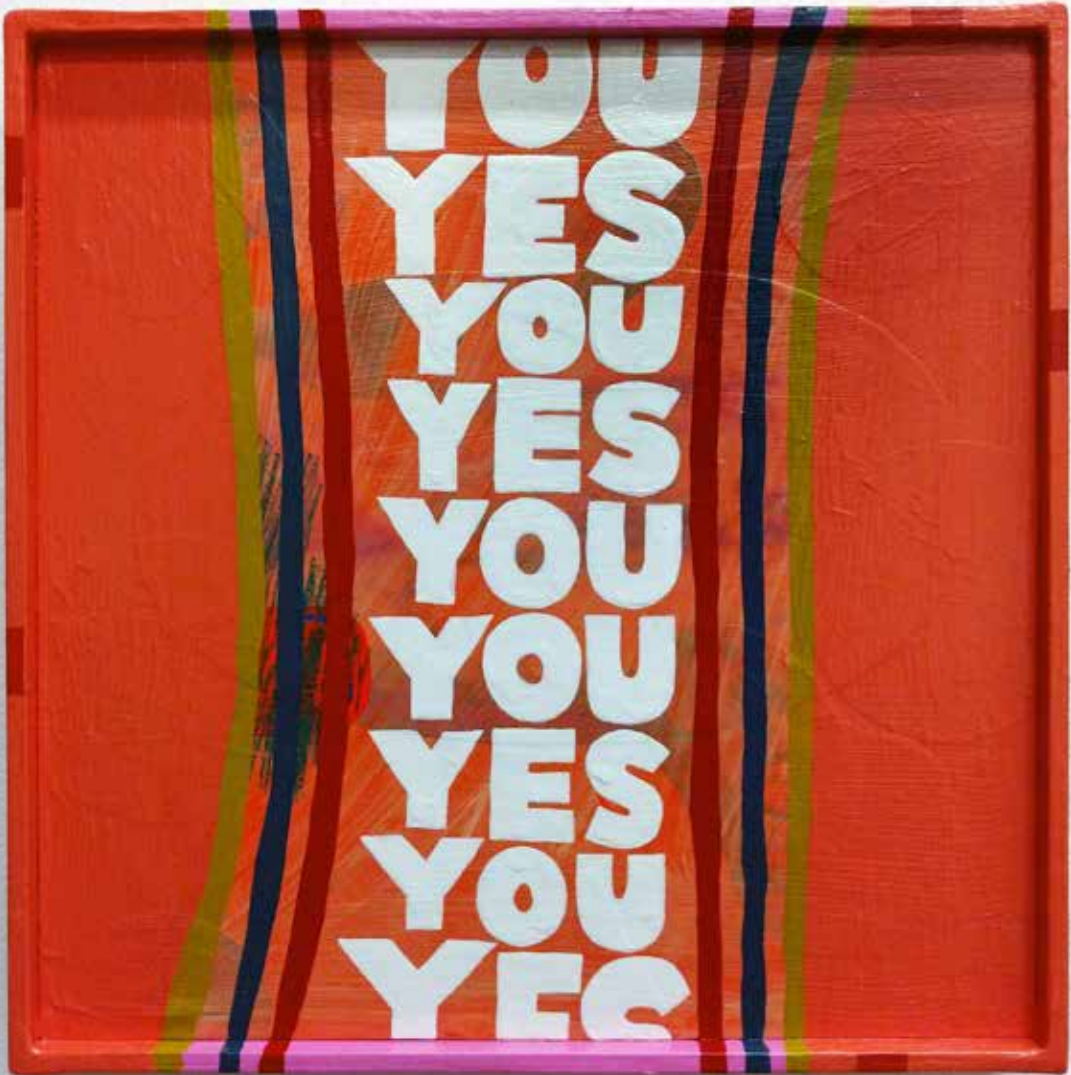
Cover:

Cognition-Stroll Wallpaper, designed by Becky Brown and Annette Cords

Images front to back:

1. Pizza Parlor, Brooklyn
2. Annette Cords, *Your Eye Is My Mirror* (detail), 2017, Jacquard Tapestry, 98 x 66 inches
3. Becky Brown, *Pleasant View* (folded), 2016, Mixed media on paper, 42 x 64 inches
4. Becky Brown, *Pleasant View* (detail), 2016, Mixed media on paper, 42 x 64 inches
5. Annette Cords, *Let Them Paint* (detail), 2016, Hand-woven Jacquard Tapestry, 50 x 41 inches
6. Annette Cords, *Let Them Paint* (detail), 2016, Jacquard Tapestry Simulation, 50 x 41 inches
7. Becky Brown, *Writing Holding* (detail), 2016, Acrylic on paper, 11 x 15 inches
8. John Wilkins, *Phonetics*
9. John Wilkins, *Relations of Space*
10. Annette Cords, *As Is Now* (detail), 2016, Hand-woven Jacquard Tapestry, 48 x 41.5 inches
11. Becky Brown, *Yes You*, 2016, Mixed media on wood with frame, 12.5 x 12.5 inches
12. Le Corbusier Facade, Berlin