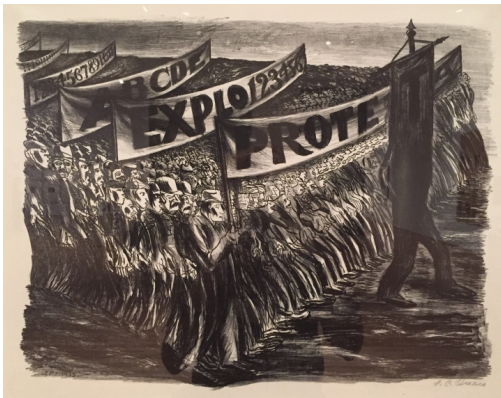


ART

## How Latin American Artists Have Used Language to Political and Poetic Effects

The artworks in *Words/Matter* suggest that language is not simply ethereal and cerebral, but infinitely malleable, corporeal, and tactile.

Annelise Gelman May 21, 2019



José Clemente Orozco,  
"Manifestación" ("Demonstration," 1935)  
(all photos by the author for  
Hyperallergic)

AUSTIN, Texas — One of the first institutions in the United States to focus on Latin American art, the Blanton Museum of Art in Austin, Texas, has been amassing its collection in this area since the 1960s. [Words/Matter: Latin American Art and Language at the Blanton](#) represents the museum's longstanding dedication. It is a fascinating tour through the Blanton's archive of works on paper (which, in total, numbers over 15,000), bringing together artworks at the intersection of image and text from Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Chile, Paraguay, and elsewhere.

*Words/Matter* is divided into six rooms, each approaching this intersection from a different angle — and a few troubling ingrained distinctions along the way. The "Alphabets" section includes gorgeous silkscreens and artists' books focusing on the unique nature of letters and typography, with prints stretching the "poem" into something that looks more like a musical score. Two further sections, "Prose and Poetry" and "Concrete Poetry," celebrate the influence of the Noigandres group and poet Augusto de Campos on concrete poetry — a movement in which

words and letters straddle the visual and verbal, often forming figurative images with their layout and typography. This section displays a huge variety of artists' books and other forms of embodied poetics. "Fighting Words," "Shapes of Language," and "Between the Lines" feature newspapers, mail art, protest banners, cardboard signs, and even Coke bottles that served as political protests (often coded to evade censorship), or sharp — sometimes comical, sometimes cynical — social critique.



Installation view of *Words/Matter: Latin American Art and Language* at the Blanton, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas



Octavio Paz and Vicente Rojo, "Discos visuales" ("Visual Disks," 1968)

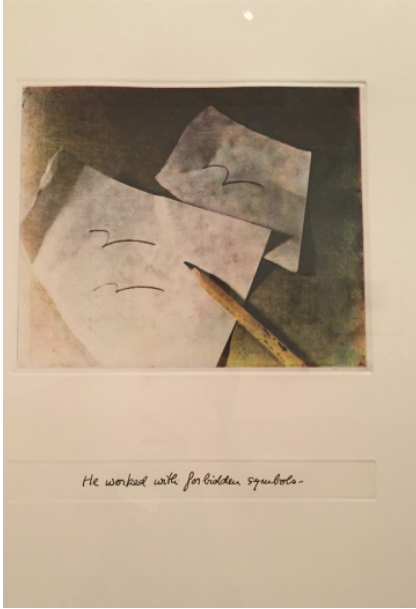
In a section on activist art, Antonio Caro's "*Aqui no cabe el arte*"



Augusto de Campos and Julio Plaza, *Poemobiles*, (1974)

("Art Does Not Fit Here," 1972-2014) — a sprawling set of glossy acrylic banners commemorating the university students and indigenous Guahibo people murdered in Colombia in the 1970s — abuts a lithograph of dogged Mexican protestors made four decades earlier by José Clemente Orozco. Luis Camnitzer's 1983 *Uruguayan Torture Series* — painstaking photo etchings that obliquely depict the Uruguayan military dictatorship's brutal use of torture — are installed near San Antonio-born artist Alejandro Diaz's playful neon sign "Make Tacos not War" (2007). Diaz's work has a light touch, but feels oddly out of place — cheeky, Instagrammable — next to

Colombian artist Johanna Calle's "*Perímetros (Urapán)*" (Perimeters (Urapán), 2012), an ambitious and painstakingly detailed typographic tree.



Luis Camnitzer, *Serie de la tortura uruguaya* (Uruguayan Torture Series, 1983)

Contrasting gestures like these sacrifice historic, geographic, and emotional continuity, so that *Words/Matter* doesn't generate a coherent narrative about the relationship between politics, art, and text in Latin American countries. What the exhibition lacks in coherence, it makes up for in breadth, but its scope and nonlinear chronology might lead some viewers to draw equivalences between governments and cultures without attending to the works' contexts and nuances. If *Words/Matter* aims in part to show how visual artists use language to communicate political messages, it provides little sense of any particular locality's artist-activist movement or its effects (or lack thereof) on policy or culture. Instead, the show can feel surprisingly apolitical, despite its numerous politically charged offerings, the individual works more effectively addressing language itself.

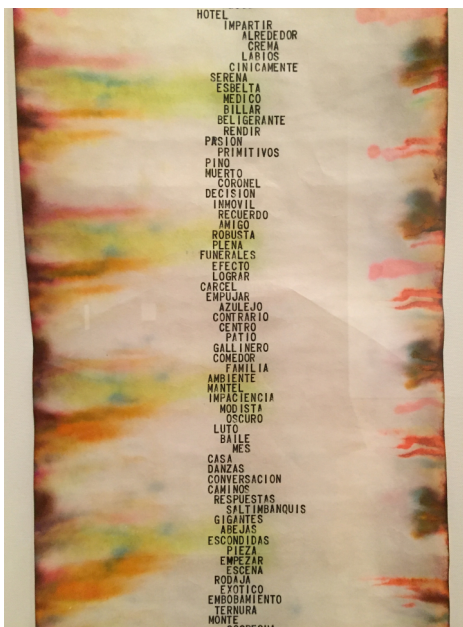


Alejandro Diaz, "Make Tacos not War" (2007)

To that end, the works suggest that language is not simply ethereal and cerebral, but infinitely malleable, corporeal, and tactile — a living thing, even. I've never seen so much loving attention paid to words as *material* or *materials*. Nury González's striking cashmere piece, "Recado a Gabriela Mistral" ("Message to Gabriela Mistral," 1995), uses embroidery thread and the natural striations of pinstripe

suits to “write” an homage to Mistral, the “great singer of mercy and motherhood” and the first Spanish American writer to win the Nobel Prize in literature. Leandro Katz’s rice paper scroll — the commanding yet delicate “*Columna XI*” — is seductively unrolled only in part. Other striking works are a series of hand-stitched pillows (Feliciano Centurión’s 1996 “*Reposa*,” “*Sueña*,” and “*Soledad*”) and a set of slogan-engraved wooden boxes repurposed from a bankrupt candy maker (Bernardo Salcedo’s 1975 “*Frases en cajón*” [“Box phrases”]), reading “*Prohiben paso*” (“No passing allowed”) and “*Azucar para cien años*” (“Sugar for one hundred years”).

In his 2005 essay “There Are No Visual Media,” W.J.T. Mitchell writes: “All media are, from the standpoint of sensory modality, ‘mixed media.’” Even encased in glass, Mexican poet Octavio Paz’s “*Discos visuales*” — colorful paper disks with overlapping geometrical segments and malleable text on layers that can be rotated by hand — are undeniably tactile. Similarly, Augusto de Campos’s *Poemobiles*, pamphlets halfway between poems and pop-up books, can only be read when opened and transformed into sculptures. *Words/Matter* proves repeatedly that words are important and that they command physical space. But it’s also a beautiful demonstration of the multisensory nature of poetry, its inherently more-than-visual and more-than-verbal quality. Rather than expanding the notion of “visual art,” *Words/Matter* suggests that there is no such thing as a purely “visual art” at all. Artworks are not meant merely to be looked at any more than poems are merely meant to be read. There are so many other verbs out there — to wear, to rest on, to hold aloft, to open, to drink — that poetry can enact.



Leandro Katz, “*Columna XI*” (“Column XI,” 1971)

Words/Matter: Latin American Art and Language at the Blanton continues at the Blanton Museum of Art (200 East MLK Jr. Blvd., Austin, Texas) through May 26.