

Reversible Taxonomies: Meaning and Its Undoing in Dianne Pearce's Aesthetic Propositions

Elena Shtromberg

The taxonomic impulse is one of the more prominent features in Dianne Pearce's oeuvre, conceptually uniting her multifarious artistic projects. Pearce's work demonstrates an ever-present urge to classify the words, symbols and behaviours surrounding us, at the same time that it attempts to deconstruct accepted classification systems. Pearce's artistic practice is intimately tied to a study of language, and text is a central raw material of her objects. But while one is encouraged to "read" her way through the work, one is also faced with the instability and the polyvalence of semantic, and for that matter quotidian, codes. What interests Pearce is the indeterminate space between the precise dictionary definition of words and their multivalent, unexpected and at times undesired lived realities. This tension is often explored through the juxtaposition of different languages and the impossibility of translation to capture the residual and emotional weight of words as they circulate different social and cultural contexts.

In *Better Left Unsaid* (2005), 48 cut-out plastic signs are strung and hung along the ceiling, conjuring the tradition of *papel picado* or punched paper, a popular Mexican craft typically used as decoration during celebrations. The celebratory tone is hinted at by the abundance of bright colors filling the installation; however, this festive tone belies the loaded and offensive text imprinted on the banners. The insulting words are printed in three languages, English, Spanish and French, often in that order, perhaps referring to Pearce's own familiarity with the languages, having lived in Canada and Mexico. Encountering these textual invectives, one is forced to confront the incongruity between the form and content of the work. The narrative value—that is, the text embedded in the signs—disrupts their symbolic value, alluded to by the invocation of the decorative, popular tradition of *papel picado*. Does the cheerful tone of the banners soften the blow of the language they display? Could this be a metaphor for the many negative messages proliferating in the public sphere through media and advertising, seducing the viewer with their visual appeal? The work is further layered through the incorporation of translation. Not only is the craft of *papel picado*—commonly cut from tissue paper—translated to a sturdier plastic material, but the insults are

translated as well. Language and its contingency on cultural context is thus brought into sharper focus. In the sign displaying Dog Perra Chienne, one must recognize the popular use of dog to refer not only to the domestic mammal but also to someone who is unattractive. The meaning shifts in the different linguistic contexts. Without the anchor of cultural context, the offensive words are drained of affective value, and they symbolically act and literally hang as floating signifiers.

Another semantic operation is at play in *Stammer and Rustle* (2006-07), a spiral made out of white porcelain letters placed on the floor to reenact a quote from French semiotician, Roland Barthes's book *The Rustle of Language* (1986), or more specifically the opening lines of the eponymous essay. The meaning of Barthes's text, translated into Spanish and recontextualized through the exhibition space, eventually dissolves into a jumble of letters in the centre of the spiral, another bundle of signifiers. The viewer of the piece is meant to circumambulate the text, a movement typically reserved for experiencing sacred objects. Entering the work in this way strengthens the bond between the viewer and the work. The act of reading is dependent on the act of walking, activating the body of the spectator into motion. One is propelled to experience the work by performing the same pauses and repetitions in walking that Barthes describes in the act of stammering. Meaning thus becomes contingent on the reader/spectator's performative relationship to the text, encouraging the possibility of multiple interpretations.

This interpretive multiplicity is more explicitly on display in Pearce's work *Polyphonic Novel* (2006-07). The title of the work cites Russian literary critic and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin's term for a text characterized by a multiplicity of voices. Pearce's work actualizes such a model in artistic practice by opening up the act of creation to the public. The work itself comprises 516 rubber stamps of images from the Webster's Dictionary that are placed in bins on a table, where participants are then encouraged to create a visual text through the free interplay of images. These texts are then tacked onto a corkboard hanging on the wall, where they accrue meaning through their placement next to other texts. The ensuing visual display is a cacophony of symbols, images and text that is impossible to navigate in any coherent, linear way. Instead, the resulting landscape

is a fragmented collage of ideas and meanings that reflects on the complexity of language in today's society.

Tusovka: Indisciplined Meetings (2010) is closely related to *Polyphonic Novel*. It comprises a series of ten small blocks of paper—the kind one uses to jot down notes, to-do lists, etc. Each block is devoted to a series of letters and each page includes an illustration, as well as its dictionary correlate in both English and Spanish. The series in its entirety contains an inventory of 516 illustrations drawn from the Ninth New Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. The cover page of each paper block contains an image of a group of students being preached to by a man in a suit, whose arms are raised, underlined by the title, *Tusovchiks*, and the name of the artist. The students in question invoke the Soviet era through a number of visual codes. The homogenous student body is purposefully groomed and their tidy uniforms speak to physical discipline, or at the very least the rooting out of difference. The children stand eagerly poised to listen, and one girl holds up a sign that reads *Indisciplined Meetings*, pointing to a tension between the visual codes of discipline and the textual code referred to by 'indiscipline'. Are these students capable of contesting discipline? Pearce has declared that she is invested in the idea of indiscipline, which she translates as "unruly encounters between the public and the work." *Tusovchik*, as Pearce explains on the last sheet of each paper block of paper, is a Russian slang word and implies a participant in *tusovka*, a "post-productive community of a purely simulative kind," or "an artistic and intellectual community or association." In this community, she claims, meetings are vital, and so it is through presence, "individual flexibility and acceptance of the other," rather than through subversion that indiscipline is activated. The space of the meeting depicted on the cover of the blocks of paper is recast in the meeting of the participants of the work, who are invited to create as they please, using stamps and crayons in a schoolroom-like workshop area. Here, the illustrations, accompanied by their dictionary definition in Spanish and English, are reconfigured in spontaneous directions, once again affirming a polyphonic existence of signs, but also crafting different and perhaps more interesting taxonomies and semantic possibilities.

It is this moment of rupture or intervention into accepted systems of classification that is a driving force in Pearce's artistic propositions, and one she encourages her audience/participants to enact, not only in the space of the gallery where they experience the work, but also as a strategy for lifelong learning.