

Correspondences, Equations, and ENDnotes on *SIH - Awnings*

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The END, Atlanta, GA

Dear Gonzalo y Estimado Todd:

Thank you for allowing me to contribute a little stack of ENDnotes for your correspondence –

- *SIH* or *Spanish is Hard* adopts the English word “awning” as a point of departure. That bright, bold yellow thing is called an awning in English. Say it 100 times. Ok, maybe just say it 20 times. Maybe just listen in The END as Hernandez and Schroeder say it for you, over and over on the soundtrack that accompanies this tiny but mighty exhibition. Awning, awning, awning, awning. This word (any word?) breaks down with repetition, becoming ragged at the edges of the mouth. It almost begins to strain the tongue and facial muscles. With attention and repetition, it fades in meaning and relevance, establishing itself as a question rather than a thing, in classic DaDa fashion, using nonsense to explore sentience.

- Awning is a word that can start with a concrete image and as we question its word-sound, its letters, its strangeness and familiarity, even its concreteness as a thing comes into question. Why does it exist? Who needs an awning? Are awnings decorative, protective, or for signage? Are they objects of the present or things of the past? The semiotic ground feels less solid, and things become more interesting with questions. The tediousness of the word awning (rhymes with yawning) signals a boring architectural rain protection, like an umbrella for a storefront or for a home when smaller in scale. Todd and Gonzalo started corresponding between Savannah and Kansas City and then Miami when Gonzalo moved there. They began via email, instant message, snail mail, and then with google docs, adding notes onto or adding visual responses to one another’s drawings, texts, or simple quips, often about or rooted in language. On a podium in the space sits a drawing unfolded like a letter, with marks made by one person and then, in response, by the next. A hard rock stabilizes its flimsiness, keeping it from blowing away, even though inside. It is a starting point.

- *Spanish is Hard*, the name of this show, started out as Todd’s response when Gonzalo said: “I wish you could speak Spanish because it would be so easy for me to communicate.” Todd answered with three words: “Spanish is hard.” The statements are equally deadpan, and even funny, flat in tone, and yet so true to the point of being obvious. One is a frustration with the communication of ideas that are complex. The other is an admittance that the acquisition of language as an adult is very challenging. “Spanish is hard” is at once an admittance and a complaint. I remember in 7th grade when I was contemplating which required language to study, other students told me: “take Spanish, it’s easy.” Somehow this seemed a little derogatory to me back then already. As if Spanish was somehow lesser than French because of a sense of ease or that it felt derogatory toward me that I should take an easier language than

French or German (Chinese, Portuguese, Arabic, etc. were not offered in school then). So Todd's reaction feels humble and thoughtful to me. Gonzalo's wish feels equally honest and meaningful. The desire to communicate complexity with ease is real. The desire to not have to confront the difficulty of labor, or to admit our shortcomings is also real. I like *SIH-Awnings* since it is about a process of connectivity. It is about how collaboration can happen at a distance or during Covid times or between artists from different parts of the world. Their collaboration is *correspondence*, how does one person correspond to another, one idea to another.

- Correspondence is quite rare today. We text constantly. Constantly! But do we really *correspond*? This suggests an element of reflection along the way, *a little space for all that is extra*. Correspondence seems to be communication plus added chance-filled reflection that is then sent back to the recipient to respond again. Maybe due to so much texting, it is our correspondence (with reflection) that has broken down? I like how this project revives that in an old-fashioned sense with new tools: google docs, pdfs, videos, travel, layered mark-making, texts, and Instagram.

- When I lived in Berlin, I loved reading *zweisprachige* novels: books translated in English on one page and German on the corresponding page. Such a direct way to translate. I submit that there should be more of these books available in all languages.

- One of my favorite books of all time is a triangle of letters. Letters are correspondences in that they express 1) close similarity, connections, and equivalences *and* in that they are 2) communications by exchange between people. In this sense, letters embody both definitions of the word *correspondence*. The book is *Letters Summer 1926*, a series of letters between three poets: Rainer Maria Rilke, Marina Svetayeva, and Boris Pasternak. It has nothing to do with awnings, but everything to do with language, sympathies, and the translation of feeling. All that is extra, but so essential, is in this book with a foreword by Susan Sontag. Consider this an embedded book recommendation, a postscript.

- Letter writing is hard. LWIH.

- Back to awnings. In this context, the awning could be any other object. The word could be any other word since the correspondence of images, ideas, and texts is more about the challenges of conceptual communication. And yet the word chosen was awning. It's an odd word to say. It is probably rarely spoken in the context of acquiring new vocabulary. It is not essential for language or for architecture. It is an extra. It is both concrete and meek or kind of a nothingness. Unnoticed. Yet it is an actual sign. It signifies commerce in the way that it is expressed in object terms here, as a commercial-scale structure rather than a home awning. It's yellowness also expresses a commercial function rather than a home. The architectural feature that is an awning in English and *el toldo* in Spanish suggests small businesses rather than BIG BOX stores. To me, coming to Savannah from Brooklyn, it expresses the bodega, the corner store, thus returning the unfamiliar word back into the context of an Americanized Spanish culture of the quick and the fast. To me, it signifies fast-paced upbeat Spanish language canciones, the

pungent smell of meat being cooked in the way back of a store, the clicking sound of dominoes in the hot summer under the awning or in the store's backyard, and the friendly face of constancy creating a welcome, close-quartered, cozy smallness within the largeness of one's NYC neighborhood.

- The awning thus comes with endless associations, both linguistic and experiential. You can stand under it with a bunch of fellow New Yorkers when the downpour hits suddenly, a place of unexpected bonding and assembly. It's somehow old-timey, as my students often say, even though awnings are still in use, a throwback from an emergent late 19th century urban vernacular culture of familial commerce. In *SIH*, the awning is word and structure, color, and drawing, doubled in correspondence, its meaning emptied out, and re-embodied. It is a meeting point between two cultures, two artists, two words for the same thing. An aha moment of exchange. Facing one another, produced in tandem with a light set of agreed upon rules, the same but different, the awnings set off this exchange which ultimately too is about painting. We see the back of the awning from the outside, it's flatness and structure, at once painting, sculpture, and commercial object of exchange value. Like facsimiles, the large awnings are replicated in miniature form (four painted by Gonzalo and four painted by Todd). The END becomes an awning store (as if such a banality of word and form might exist), the bright yellow awnings of dual scales remind us of the gallery and warehouse space as commercial. In correspondence, words become ideas become objects become art become products become signifiers of experience again within the home. You choose.

- This little space, The END, matters here too. Inside of a warehouse, it is neither storefront nor studio, neither gallery nor museum. The space is like a little envelope. It contains a visual letter from an artist to anyone willing to open it or anyone who is inside enough to know about it. Craig Drennen as curator of the space matters here too. His work as an artist often touches upon a remembered phrase or a fleeting but sticky observation. The space allows a kind of non-committal exploration of a project. It's like a space for visual addendums and playful acts of collaboration. Artists collaborate with the space. When the idea of *Spanish is Hard* was presented to Craig, he responded with "you're welcome to, but it's like showing at a Jiffy Lube." The image stuck to Todd and Gonzalo. It became a part of the show. *Jiffy Lube* says fast and easy, drive-through car fluid replacement, cheap and painless, non-committal, anonymous, maintenance. Very American. It embodies the strip mall. It introduces another strange English word "jiffy" which means so fast you barely even notice it. *Instante*. The small but somehow everywhere franchise often has a little red awning on the front, as if to signal (falsely) small town guys or storefront ease of in-and-out access. The awning gathers signification as it mocks the hard work of language and meaning access. It reminds us of its object status as a marker between a structure's outside and inside, between word and meaning, between this language and that language, between objects and our often-thwarted desire for jiffylube comprehension.

- The END, The Jiffy Lube, the awning, *SIH*, all of them circulate in this space with influence – intended or otherwise - from Ed Ruscha's *Various New York Storefronts*; Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*; the concrete ambiguities and domestic Minimalism in the work of sculptor Robert Grosvenor; the understated doubling and relationality of Felix Gonzalez-Torres's clocks

and stacks and pillows and spills; Elmgreen and Dragset's Prada Marfa; *I Send You This Cadmium Red: A Correspondence Between John Berger and John Christie*; the "mail art correspondence" of the late Ray Johnson, and other "mail art" progenitors; and perhaps even the very recent work of L.A. artist Lauren Halsey, to name a disparate few.

- Small exhibition spaces like The END are essential. They punctuate a world in which real estate is out of control. Cars, interstates, and online shopping have drastically altered our experience of the storefront. Artists are relegated to strip malls and warehouses, shipping containers, mini-galleries, and tiny houses. We may wonder about the incredible shrinking artist, or we can choose instead to see the artist as an atom, ever-present, increasingly accessible, and with a fresh micro-permeability within daily life.

- I guess it's a matter of language.

For the sake of reflection,

Lisa

P.S. In The END, "... every expression of human mental life can be understood as language." And every expression about language and human mental life must/should/could/even "might could" ☺ reference Walter Benjamin.... LOL. Seems passé, but somehow the words of a man who studied the minutiae of culture to fully reflect upon his own humanity, remain ever-useful, always ready to help us translate and establish correspondences in the world. In "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" he continues (and I excerpt here): "It is the linguistic being of man to *name* things. Why name them? To whom does man communicate himself?... Does man communicate his mental being *by* the names that he gives things? Or *in* them?... [and finally] ... "within all linguistic formation a conflict is waged between what is expressed and expressible and what is inexpressible and unexpressed." (Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott, pp. 314-320).