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SPEECH ACTS: JONAS SEBURA AND ANTHONY WARNICK AT THE SCULPTURE CENTER

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From left to right: "In Search (finding place)" and "The Rise (for clarity and cleansing)" by Jonas Sebura.

Various media.

What powers do words have?

In a pair of exhibitions now ongoing at The Sculpture Center, Jonas Sebura and Anthony Warnick conduct two very different investigations of this question. Sebura looks at early efforts to manipulate reality directly through ritual and



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speech in the form of spells, incantations, curses, and prayers. Warnick uses the insights of philosophy of language to show us how speech is not just a vehicle for conveying information, but a mode of action. Specifically, he is fascinated by how language moves the levers of the American criminal justice system.

For *Confounded into Unitary Chaos*, Sebura turned the Sculpture Center's main gallery into a reliquary for a fake but sincere religion. It is sincere because its ritual objects represent real problems its hypothetical practitioners wish to alleviate. It is fake because no one believes in it.



Sculptures by Jonas Sebura. Various media.

Before attendees even enter the Sculpture Center, they are welcomed by a "Peace Flag" hung in the gallery's foyer. It is a white square marked with a multicolored triangle, and fringed with gold tassels. Like the flag of an unknown nation, is the first sign that viewers are entering a place and time—or at least a mindset—alien to disenchanted modernity.

A booklet written and illustrated by Sebura explains the (phony) liturgical significance of his props. The pamphlet begins with a quote from *The Demon-Haunted World*, the last complete book by astronomer and science popularizer Carl Sagan:

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"I worry that, especially as the Millennium edges nearer, pseudo-science and superstition will seem year by year more tempting, the siren song of unreason more sonorous and attractive."



The Millennium Sagan worried over in 1995 is now 17 years old. Scientific illiteracy, religious fanaticism, and toxic chauvinism are as dangerous as they have ever been. But it is not Sebura's aim to mock or lament magical thinking, but to understand it.

Like all of us scared primates, the imaginary practitioners of Sebura's cult suffer from forces outside human command. Their charms and fetishes represent grasping efforts to establish order. Waving crystals over a body is meant to heal an "ailment of the lower abdomen." A series of enchanted conch shells are to be sucked on to console an inconsolable child. A mask covered in corn kernels, the pamphlet tells us, figures in a rite for securing "a good spring crop."

The corn-studded artifact is one of four masks. The other three are made of seashells, hair, and teeth, respectively. Corn and shells are harmless, the hair was presumably harvested consensually, and the teeth are plastic. Nonetheless, the masks are pretty scary. The second time I went to see Sebura's show, I shared the gallery with another patron. He perused the masks, and when he realized one was made of teeth exclaimed aloud "Oh, shit!" (Most artists can only dream of inspiring such an authentic reaction!)



Jonas Sebura, "Hair Mask (for knowledge and power)" and "Teeth Mask (control ritual)." Various media.

The hairy and toothy masks are just two examples of the emphasis Sebura's spirituality places on the body. An assemblage lain on the gallery floor pairs a blackened log with a photographic printout of a bare, tattooed leg. An upright totem presents a grotesquely minimized human figure: a wooden eye on top, paint-stained gloves for hands, and a pink appendage near the base that could be either a penis or feet. A man-shaped wall hanging dyed with gold, teal, black and fuchsia brings to mind attempts to map chakras or acupuncture points. And the booklet tells us that when we wear the tooth mask to enact a spell countering "forces out of [our] control [that] are producing negative energy", we should wear nothing else:

STRIP NUDE AND RUN INTO THE DARKNESS. WEAR TEETH MASK. FIND STICK. BEAT STICK CONTINUALLY AGAINST EVERY TREE INSIGHT [sic]. STILL RUNNING. BEAT UNTIL STICK BREAKS. SPIT ON GROUND. SPIT OUT ALL THE SPIT. SPIT UNTIL NO MORE SPIT.

By centering his rituals around the body, Sebura holds a funhouse mirror up to real-world

religious practices. His fleshy props seem obscene, until we remember Jews and Muslims both practice circumcision, and one of the most common images in Western art is the stripped, bleeding body of the crucified Christ.



Anthony Warnick, "The Pen." Neon.

Confounded into Unitary Chaos is at once an expression of Sebura's sympathy with mystics, and a satire of those who would have us confront contemporary problems by turning to prescientific schemes. His explorations of the power of language are ironic and personal. Warnick's exhibition is pointedly social. In *Language Games*, he makes concrete and immediate facts of the criminal justice system that are, for many of the **artworld's** predominantly white and middle class denizens, abstract and remote.

But first, Warnick lays out his worldview. As in the make-believe world Sebura created, Warnick's universe is governed by speech and ritual. But the sort of power Warnick attributes to language is mundane, even familiar—but nonetheless profound.

Language Games is displayed in the Sculpture Center's Euclid Avenue gallery. The first item visible upon entering that space is white neon lettering which reads "The Pen." The two words

automatically prompt viewers to fill in "...is mightier than the sword." By mentally reciting the cliché, we are primed to think about the power of speech. Behind the neon sign, a flat screen TV flashes eleven Anglo-American phrases people say in order to take on obligations, or to maneuver someone else into honoring an obligation: "I Approve," "I Order," "We Confess," "You Guarantee."



Anthony Warnick, panel (one of 24) from "Gideon's Trumpet." Toner print on wood.

These phrases illustrate the concept of a "performative utterance," first described by the midcentury Oxford philosopher J.L. Austin. In Austin's account, an utterance is performative when it affects changes in the social world that can only be brought about by its being said. A pastor's declaration "I now pronounce you man and wife!" is the final step in a procedure which brings about a marriage. The marriage itself is not a collective figment, but a concrete institutional reality affording privileges granted by churches, governments, employers, and banks. In successfully making a performative utterance, we do not report already-existing facts, but rather *make new facts*.

That's Warnick's theory. Here is how he puts it into practice: Stretching across most of the left

wall of the Euclid Avenue gallery is “Gideon’s Trumpet,” a series of 24 toner prints on wood. In severe black-and-red pixels, the prints depict subtitled screenshots from the 1980 legal drama *Gideon’s Trumpet*. In this scene, a hard-faced judge declares:

“Clarence Earl Gideon, I sentence you to be confined in the state penitentiary at Rayford for the maximum period prescribed by law for this offense, five years.”

The handing down of a prison sentence is one of the most obvious ways an utterance can reshape the entire course of a life. This is especially true in the historic example Warnick points us towards. The “Gideon” receiving sentence is the eventual plaintiff in the 1963 U.S. Supreme Court case *Gideon v. Wainwright*, in which the nine justices unanimously decreed that states must provide attorneys for defendants who cannot afford their own lawyer. Warnick’s invocation of the *Gideon* case forces us to consider the gap between the lofty ideal of justice and flat-footed realities. Gideon, a hobo with an eighth grade education, was convicted after being forced to defend himself in a larceny case. He was eventually freed after a retrial, and his case enshrined every American citizen’s right to a public defender. But he still lost two years of his life incarcerated. Even before the *Gideon* decision, all defendants were supposed to have the right to counsel, per the *Sixth Amendment*. The U.S. Constitution is supposed to be the word to which all American law conforms—the utterance that trumps all other utterances. But even the most revered utterances really are “mere” words if no one carries out their directives.



A gallery viewer with “\$162,510,000” by Anthony Warnick et.al. Prisoner-produced offset prints.

Justice, Warnick shows us, can only be talked into existence with great effort and time. Sometimes it takes two centuries and a Supreme Court decision. But the prison-industrial complex can make other things much faster. For his two most provocative pieces, Warnick created sculptures from items ordered from **OPI Correctional Industries**, a company which employs incarcerated inmates as laborers.

“\$165,510,000” is a waist-high, neatly-stacked pile of fake \$100 bills. Along with the denomination number, the green slips of paper are stamped with a “THE TRANSMUTATION OF—TO GOLD.” (We do not learn what, exactly, is being transmuted to gold; white bands cover up that part of the currency.) “Infinite Sleep” is a pillar of some 30 pillows. They are thin, and covered in

textured vinyl. They are intended for use by inmates.

The imposing height of “Infinite Sleep” makes for an arresting visual experience. However, the takeaway of Warnick’s prisoner-manufactured pieces is conceptual, not sensory. They invite us to consider the chain of linguistic activities which brought these items into being. Presumably, Warnick filled out order forms and signed checks to facilitate his commercial transaction with OPI. Verdicts and sentencings uttered by juries and judges created the population of prisoner-workers. And in 1864 Congress approved the 13th Amendment, which explicitly permits the use of slavery or involuntary servitude as punishment for a crime. Especially since the 1970s, public and private companies have used this law to pay imprisoned laborers subminimum wages, or nothing at all.



Anthony Warnick et.al. “Infinite Sleep.” Prisoner-produced pillows.

Warnick’s work is clearly social criticism, but it may not be activism. His exhibition underlines the fact that law is made by people, but is outside any one individual’s control. Law is a body of practices, traditions, and policies bigger than any one person. An individual can no more change the law on her own than she can change

the meaning of a word, the value of a currency, or the borders of a nation by herself. Change must be done together, or not at all.

But art has no obligation to comfort, or to offer bullet-pointed action plans. Neither Sabura nor Warnick do these things, but instead offer us a view of familiar existences from unfamiliar vantages. Their shows are perfect compliments to each other, and strong exhibitions even if each is seen one at a time.

Confounded into Unitary Chaos and Language Games both run through April 13 at the Sculpture Center. The galleries are located at 1834 East 123rd St. For more information, please call 216-229-6527 or go to sculpturecenter.org.

Special thanks to Ann Albano.

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