

An Artist Adopts Avant-Garde Poetry to Express the Limits of Language

As a black, Muslim woman, subject to any number of externally imposed strictures, Kameelah Janan Rasheed does not adopt these avant-garde techniques for merely aesthetic purposes.



Louis Bury November 16, 2017



Installation view of Kameelah Janan Rasheed's *in the proper direction: forward/ also the ache of (perceived) velocity* at Printed Matter, New York (all images courtesy the artist and Printed Matter)

Recently, Kameelah Janan Rasheed's evocatively cryptic text-based installations have appeared in many of her solo and group shows, from [A.I.R. Gallery](#), to the [Queens Museum](#), to the [8th Floor](#). The all black-and-white installations contain imbricated rectangles of text and image, many of them found and then altered, that sprawl haphazardly across gallery walls like

wheatpaste posters on a city construction site. The works, which look like vivisectioned scrapbooks, are equal parts installation art and visual poetry.

Given the textual nature of this work, the back exhibition room at Printed Matter, the Chelsea neighborhood artists' book store, is an apposite space for Rasheed's latest installation, *in the proper direction: forward/ also the ache of (perceived) velocity*. For the show, Rasheed arranged variously sized black-and-white paper rectangles along the room's narrow parallel walls, as well as in adjacent vitrines, in a manner that recalls a timeline. Sporadic snippets of wavy and distorted poetic text appear throughout — such as the punning directive to “use your/ inside/ vote” — but most of the rectangles are wordless. In particular, the preponderance of all-black rectangles creates the impression that much of the work has been redacted.



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The exhibit's explanatory wall text, which has itself been partially obscured by a black rectangle, cites the French literary group Oulipo as Rasheed's primary methodological influence for the show. This citation offers a helpful angle for understanding the at times hermetic difficulty of Rasheed's text-based aesthetic. Founded in 1960 by a group of mathematicians and writers, and still active and influential to this day, Oulipo invents constraints to generate literary texts. In works such as Georges Perec's infamous La Disparition, a novel written without using the letter

‘e,’ the group conducts playfully serious investigations of how freedom and restraint manifest themselves in art.

Rasheed extends such investigations in her own unique direction. While most Oulipian theory emphasizes the paradoxically liberating effect, for artist and audience alike, of artistic constraint, Rasheed’s installations appear agonizingly straitjacketed — “ferment-/ ed black power/ fuss in// a ma/ son jar,” reads one twisting and self-interrupting language scrap. As a black, Muslim woman, subject to any number of externally imposed strictures, Rasheed seems dissatisfied with the idea of adopting this freeing technique for merely aesthetic purposes. Instead, she captures a sense of what the poet Fred Moten calls the “fugitive” nature — elusive out of necessity — of black sociopolitical resistance in the United States. Like the work of Glenn Ligon and Christopher Wool, artistic predecessors who have worked with black-and-white textual accretion and erasure, Rasheed’s installations probe the limitations and fissures of linguistic self-expression.



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Elsewhere in her practice, Rasheed has worked with language in more direct and acerbic ways. Her ironic 2015 poster series, *How to Suffer Politely (and Other Etiquette)*, uses black sans serif type against a bright yellow background to deliver public messages — “TAKE IT LIKE A MAN BUT DON’T TAKE IT UP WITH ‘THE MAN’” — like bee stings. Her black-and-white installations, by contrast, are more guarded and intimate, even when they convey related ideas.

This mood of embattled reluctance accounts in part for Rasheed's use of difficult poetic avant-garde techniques. Audiences often assume that artistic difficulty derives from pretentious obscurantism, but Rasheed's installations demonstrate how, at its best, such difficulty derives from nothing more than simple necessity.



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Kameelah Janan Rasheed, in the proper direction: forward/ also the ache of (perceived) velocity continues at Printed Matter (231 11th Ave, Chelsea, Manhattan) November 25.