

Raymond Boisjoly: The Explanatory Void

March 25–July 24, 2022, Reference Gallery



MIT List Visual
Arts Center

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Raymond Boisjoly works with text, photography, and image-based mediums to contemplate modes of transmission and consider how language, culture, and ideas are mediated, framed, or received.

As a Vancouver-based artist of Haida and Quebecois descent, Boisjoly expands on the Vancouver School's Post-Conceptual photographic practices while attending to both complex and subtle negotiations of Indigeneity in the context of colonialism. He draws on, and bends, vernacular conventions in language, photography, and fabrication, and his works often interrogate their own place in the realm of fine art through the artist's use of unconventional or rudimentary printing mediums (nylon tarp, commercial vinyl, office paper, or beer cans). While openly drawing from a range of sources, including popular culture and academic texts, as raw material, he also explores how images and language can break, distort, and falter.

Boisjoly deliberately avoids the conventional use of scanners, copiers, and inkjet printers in his practice—instead, he targets aspects of instability and contingency in the processes and media

he engages. For example, to make *Intervals* (2013), a series of large-scale digital C-prints, Boisjoly played YouTube versions of televised musical performances by sixties- and seventies-era performers, like Pat and Lolly Vegas and Buffy Sainte-Marie, on an iPad and then captured the screen on a flatbed scanner. One would be mistaken to read these works simply as a rumination on the layers of technological mediation, or lost fidelity to an original. Rather, Boisjoly lays bare the murky processes by which performance, personae, and media give shape to (and distort) personal and cultural identity, as well as ideas of "tradition." Irregular and improvised evolutions of digital translation—compression, lossiness, artifacting—also offer visual metaphors for cultural transmission and show us productive possibilities. As uncertainties are introduced and embedded, and an original (and its presumed authenticity)



Buffy Sainte-Marie (Illumination: 1969/2013)
Keeper of the Fire 01, 2013. Screen resolution
lightjet print mounted on dibond, 96 x 40 in.
(244 x 102 cm). Photo: SITE Photography

becomes increasingly distant, each duplication and iteration brings new, unforeseen potential.¹

In *Rez Gas* (2013), another earlier body of work, Boisjoly created a photographic inventory of all the gas stations on First Nations reserves (reservations) in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia using a rudimentary and deliberately unstable process. First, negatives were produced as photocopies on clear acetate, and then Boisjoly laid these negatives over black construction paper and exposed them to sunlight. Amplifying the indexicality of these fugitive photographic images, Boisjoly's method calls attention to the relationship between Indigeneity and place—a bond historically impacted by violence and dispossession—and the assertion and erasure of cultural identity. While subject matter and media vary in Boisjoly's work, there is a consistent tension between what is apparent and what is concealed. Messages are difficult to read, and communication is partial,

interrupted. For Boisjoly, language (both visual and written) is a potential force and a contested site, and by engaging it, he questions what we take to be given—whether it is legibility, clarity, or presumed neutrality.

In *As It Comes* (2013), as well as several other works, brightly colored sheets of office paper overlap in large-scale clusters, upon which text is printed and becomes legible from a distance. As artist Kevin Rodgers has observed, "The phrases never clarify [but] are always receding, as if in awareness of their own irredeemable incompleteness."² Similarly, in *Author's Preface* (2015), inkjet prints pasted to the wall read as syllabic bursts of thoughts that remain incomplete, and the final letter or two of words cut by the margins drop to the line below. These sentences have both a philosophical air while touching on the technical and forensic: "Not the beginning and still not the end," reads one; "Actions undertaken and documented," offers another.



Rez Gas (9001 Valley Dr, Squamish, BC, VoN 1To), 2013. Sunlight, construction paper, acrylic glass, 30 x 35 in. (75 x 89 cm).
Photo: SITE Photography



As It Comes (so also), 2013. Inkjet prints, staples, 90 x 70 in. (229 x 178 cm).
Photo: SITE Photography



Author's Preface, 2015. Twenty-five solvent-based inkjet prints, premixed wallpaper paste, 136 x 361 in. (346 x 917 cm) overall. Installation view: *Moucharabieh*, Triangle France, Marseilles, France, 2015. Photo: Aurélien Mole

Syncopated with abstracted images (again moving images subjected to a process of scanning and distortion), these partial phrases appear to emerge and recede across the wall, like the visualized speech of an overheard conversation.

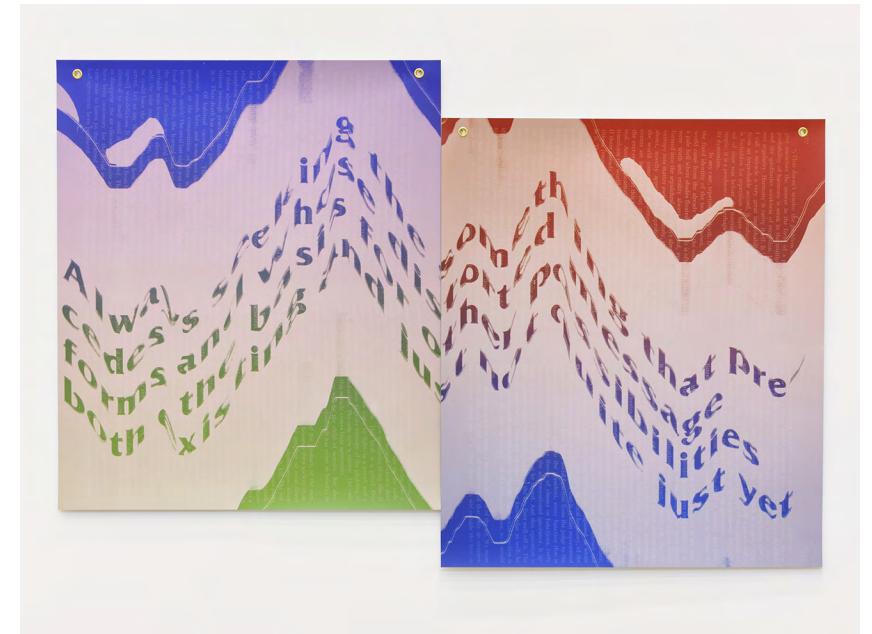
At the core of Boisjoly's language investigations is an interest in the character of knowledge production—an epistemological undertaking grounded in querying the technologies of images and language and their role in creating repositories or documents. And yet, just as Boisjoly fosters a tension between what is revealed and withheld, he also runs interference with vision and what we might consider understanding. "If we disorient our vision," he asserts, and "if we seek to misunderstand that which is being viewed or recorded, then another type of understanding can emerge, one that only comes through detour or obstacle."³ What is this other type of understanding,

and what can we learn from it? How can we find ourselves meaningfully out of place?

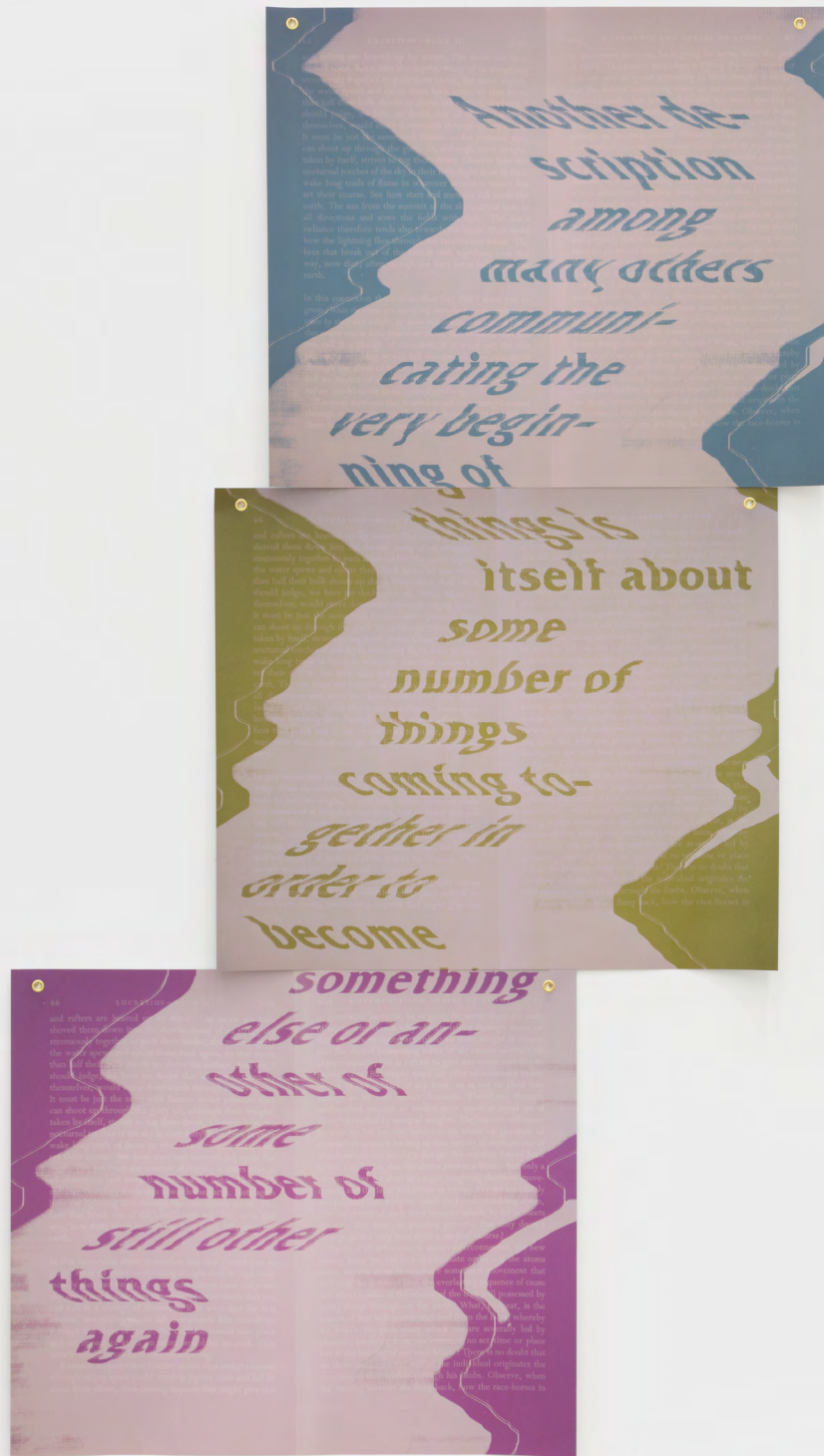
In the new works created for his List Center exhibition, Boisjoly continues to explore language and mediation and plays with a specific visual binary—image versus text—to stretch our understanding of perception. When does a linguistic object become a picture? Can we see an image and read a text at the same time, or does the primacy of one override the other? In UV-printed vinyl sheets hung with grommets (a medium typical of commercial printing), Boisjoly offers us a double exposure of text on text, image on image. With various modes of stretching and distorting text, he opens up questions around experiential capacity. How can language be used to explore the limits of knowledge? How can we think about language and writing in relation to tension and friction?

Parasite (After Michel Serres) (2021), two photographic prints, references the French philosopher's theory of communication, in which noise is an inevitable obstacle—a parasite in all verbal and written exchanges.⁴ Playing with a figure-ground relationship and a stark contrast of legibility, Boisjoly cast a warped band of his own enlarged words (drafted in image-editing software) across two adjacent vinyl panels, whose colored grounds are dense with scanned texts from book pages. Both the larger phrase and scanned pages were shot on computer screens through an analog process of multiple exposures. Together with *Clinamen (After Lucretius)* (2021), *Parasite* is openly citational—it embeds and registers a certain kind of inheritance or influence, referencing thinking that has informed Boisjoly's own. And yet, ontologically, there is not just a relationship or juxtaposition between

the text "cited" by the photographed scanned image and the words Boisjoly composed; they are fused together, embedded in the same analog, filmic material. Each exposure modifies the previous, and together, they become one image. But in this interplay, or interfacing, Boisjoly also deliberately obscures what is cited by generating a kind of noise, which, for him, holds a certain value and potential. "When you don't have direct and immediate access," he has said, "it ultimately changes your knowledge of the content and how you might proceed to speak to others about it. There is a productive character to misrecognition or misunderstanding."⁵ With these, as in prior works, photography is a tool not for indexing the world with fidelity or identity but for thinking through displacement, mediation, and distancing, and fostering a deliberate ambiguity between production and consumption.



Parasite (After Michel Serres), 2021. Solvent-based inkjet print on vinyl, grommets, two parts: 42 x 36 in. (107 x 91 cm) each; 52 x 72 in. (132 x 183 cm) overall. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.



Left: *Clinamen (After Lucretius)*, 2021. Solvent-based inkjet print on vinyl, grommets, three parts: 36 x 42 in. (91 x 107 cm) each; 108 x 61 in. (274 x 155 cm) overall. Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

A new suite of eight works printed on vinyl uses a similar process of analog-photography double exposure to capture text Boisjoly again composed in image-editing software to further reflect on these themes. "We are somehow what we know.../...and we are what we do not yet know," reads two of the panels. Each a palimpsest of wavy, distorted words, these pieces also challenge us to see, and to read, two texts simultaneously. Their spacey, untethered shadows and color inversions evince the look of 3-D anaglyph images (stereoscopic images seen using 3-D red-cyan glasses) but implicate language as a way to allude to stereo sound and binaural hearing. Consequently, the work tugs at an implied relationship between speaking and listening, just as *Clinamen* and *Parasite* target a tension between language and writing. These pieces also reflect on knowledge, language, and experience in a way that offers a link to the exhibition's title, *The Explanatory Void*. While the spectral presences of words hang like shadows and echoes in these artworks, the gulf they make visible represent a chasm between language and experience, or language

and understanding. For Boisjoly, these sentences address language through its capacity to bring us closer to the unknown or to give shape to encounters that come to us first as experiences before we can develop an understanding of them through words.

In all of these pieces, Boisjoly renders language elastic, codependent, and vulnerable, exposing the peculiar limits of writing in relation to a dominant culture or from a particular subject position—and how those dynamics map physical and nonphysical limitations, born of the culture from which that writing emerges. In what is perhaps the most challenging pair of artworks to decipher, the overlaid texts read: "Language is bound by experience, and yet it is never quite fully our own to use." Knowledge production is undeniably political, Boisjoly's work reminds us, and it, too, is continually subject to dynamics of power and the assumption of language as shared property—or, at the very least, a shared infrastructure. In Boisjoly's pieces, however, language does not have a guaranteed legibility. Rather, it creates and emerges from noise.



Above, and cover detail: *Always Some Number of Things*, 2021. Beer can on wall, 118 x 148 in. (300 x 376 cm) Photo: Rachel Topham Photography.

This tension is also given form, by way of literal friction, in a large-scale drawing executed on-site, in which Boisjoly has rubbed an unopened beer can on the wall's surface to render rippled, undulating text. Boisjoly's choice of beer can as a medium refers to a range of cultural associations ("Always some number of things," read a recent beer-can work). The beer can's graphite-like quality calls to mind silverpoint drawing, with its own art-historical references concerning image production, while the object itself, wielded by the artist, openly brandishes a harmful stereotype—one that negatively associates alcohol with people of Indigenous heritage. The artist's recent exhibition text put it plainly: "Using a container for alcohol as a drawing implement for a barely legible English text is not a neutral gesture."⁶

"The conversation around alcohol is complicated," Boisjoly has said, and just as his works query the often convoluted conditions of image-making, this piece also challenges the way certain harmful or spurious images become typecast through varied modes of distortion. And yet, as Boisjoly points out, this work (along with much of the artist's practice) is arguably not about Indigeneity in any

outward way. Therefore, seeing the beer can and reducing the piece to a stereotype (or some sort of commentary on one) is itself characteristic of the power of that stereotype. The potency of using a beer can for Boisjoly, if "not a neutral gesture," is about neutralizing that stereotype: "I'm trying to find ways to articulate that it doesn't have to hold that power." He continues, "It's about getting close enough to talk about it but not being totally determined by it."⁷ By warping his words to the point of indecipherability, the work addresses what it might mean to engage in a "drunken form," or the controlled looseness of a slightly off-kilter, off-balance experience in which clarity is intentionally repressed. As viewers, we are tasked with contorting our eyes to read, focusing and unfocusing; our vision and grasp of language are made unstable. In engaging this form and this medium, Boisjoly distorts linguistic objects just as he distorts expectations and tenders the possibility that a beer can may be a means to something else. In the context of his practice, this particular work speaks to layered misperception and the wide-open possibilities—of language, expression, and understanding—that exist at the margins of legibility.

- 1 One work in this series plays with linguistic misunderstanding, transcribing mistaken lyrics that pertain to identity: Sly and the Family Stone's "Thank you for letting me be myself" is re-rendered in the latter part of the title of Boisjoly's *Sly & the Family Stone (Interval: 1971/2013) Thank You (Falletinme Be Mice Elf Agin)* (2013).
- 2 Kevin Rodgers, "Raymond Boisjoly: The Work That Work Leaves Undone," *C Magazine*, no. 116 (Winter 2012), 53.
- 3 Sarah Robayo Sheridan and Raymond Boisjoly, "Raymond Boisjoly: Over a Distance Between One and Many," Koffler Centre of the Arts, April 2016, <https://kofflerarts.org/Exhibitions/Gallery/Online-Publications/Raymond-Boisjoly-Over-a-Distance-Between-One-and-M>.
- 4 Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Scher (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); see, specifically, "Rat's Dinner: Diode, Triode," pp. 51–55, where noise and the parasite are identified.
- 5 Sheridan and Boisjoly, "Raymond Boisjoly."
- 6 Raymond Boisjoly, "Some Number of Things," Catriona Jeffries, <https://catrionajeffries.com/exhibitions/raymond-boisjoly-some-number-of-things-nov-6-dec-18>.
- 7 Raymond Boisjoly, Conversation with the author, October 25, 2021.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Raymond Boisjoly (b. 1981, Langley, British Columbia) lives and works in Vancouver. He has had solo exhibitions at the Polygon Gallery, North Vancouver (2020); VOX, Montreal, Koffler Centre of the Arts, Toronto (2016); Carleton University Art Gallery, Ottawa, PLATFORM Centre for Photographic and Digital Arts, Urban Shaman, Winnipeg (2014); Simon Fraser University Galleries, Burnaby (2013); and Forest City Gallery, London, ON (2012), among others. He has been featured in international biennials, including: Honolulu Biennial (2019); Les Ateliers de Rennes—biennale d'art contemporain (2018); Montreal Biennial and SITElines Santa Fe (2014). His work has also been included in exhibitions at Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University (2021); Remai Modern, Saskatoon (2020, 2018); Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle (2017); Oakville Galleries (2016); Vancouver Art Gallery (2016, 2012); Logan Center, University of Chicago (2015); Triangle France, Marseille, Camera Austria, Vienna (2014); and the Power Plant, Toronto (2012). Boisjoly received a BFA from Emily Carr University of Art and Design (2006) and an MFA from the University of British Columbia (2008). He is Assistant Professor in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University.

Raymond Boisjoly: The Explanatory Void is organized by Natalie Bell, Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

Left: *Clinamen (After Lucretius)*, 2021 (detail).

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Artist Talk: Raymond Boisjoly
Saturday, March 26, 2022, 2:00 PM,
Bartos Theater
CART captioning (real-time captioning)

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October 21, 2022–February 26, 2023

Front cover:

Always Some Number of Things, 2021 (detail).

All images courtesy Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver

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