

Alejandro Cesarco

Artpace San Antonio, USA

Alejandro Cesarco's visually spare but text-rich exhibition privileged reading over looking and was at its most interesting where that distinction breaks down. The show featured only four works: three 'indexes' (or grids of digital images depicting stark columns of serif text) and, in a separate room, a subtitled, black and white video projection. In total, the works offer 29 pages plus seven filmic minutes of verbiage. However, much of this text – single lines if not single word annotations – is spare as well. Subsequently, Cesarco explored the broader cognitive acts of reading – imagining, associating, forgetting and remembering/reconstructing – to varying degrees of frustration and seduction.

Index (2000), *Index (a novel)* (2003) and *Index (a reading)* (2007–8), each present an enlarged A-Z inventory for a book Cesarco has not yet written, nor likely ever will. *Index*, two rows of six double-column paginated sheets, purportedly conveys Cesarco's own story: pages 254–65 tally theoretical and artistic influences ('Orozco, Gabriel, 89, 91–94, 215'; 'Barthes, Roland, 115–117'), readings and viewings ('*Hiroshima mon Amour*, 68'), and mental notations ('simulation, 98; and death of referential, 35, 99, 145'). A potential cipher to Cesarco's practice, *Index* regretfully points to little within the exhibition itself. Instead, for effect, the work depends on the viewer's own ability to relate Jacques Lacan to Belle and Sebastian and multiculturalism. *Index (a reading)* and *Index (a novel)* prove more engaging: the former is an index about indices and its largest entries are concepts self-reflexive to experiencing the work ('reading', 'memory', 'time'); the latter, an abridged love story, offers sentiments that are evocative, if clichéd ('Jealousy', 'spooning', 'Waiting...; at airports...; at home').

Index (a novel) also comes closest to providing pleasurable reading. All three indexes are cleverly conceived, but reading each, especially alphabetically, is laborious. Partially to blame is the content, which is often dryly denotative; some is physical – Cesarco's indices, enlarged and framed behind glass, deny the intimacy and tactility of the book form they quote. Part is the practiced experience of an index, in which one searches rather than looks. The compulsion is to encounter each list non-linearly. This is, to an extent, Cesarco's intent, to present reading as process, production and authorship. Yet as one picks and chooses, constructing and interpreting his or her own narratives, the implied complete text only becomes increasingly elusive. Despite his interests in 'absence' and 'translation' (both terms appear as entries on all three indices), his indexes formally suggest ideal wholes, an expectation never quite reconciled with the invariably partial experience of their reading.



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Index

(detail)

2000

Digital c-type print

51×41 cm

Titled *The Two Stories* (2009), the exceptional video begins (by contrast) with this fallibility, and uses it toward more decisive ends. The work appropriates a text by Uruguayan author Felisberto Hernández. A first-person narrator, speaking in Spanish with English subtitles, relates an entertaining tale about giving a reading of his writing in a well-appointed home. At turns listless and nervous, he lets his mind – and his narration – wander, frequently to the faces of his audience, and in particular to that of a desirable female listener. The video's images, slow pans and zooms of a vacant parlour, loosely approximate the narrator's gaze: when he speaks of avoiding the glance of this female, the video cuts to a statue beyond a parlour window. *The Two Stories* presents a series of gaps or leaps: between the story read in the parlor and the tale presented at Artpace; between languages; between experiences of hearing, reading and looking; and between speaker and audience subjects. The video articulates these absences as palpable, lived spaces, as relations motivated by desire, distraction, confusion, awkwardness and boredom. The viewer is subsequently invited to validate similar feelings in her own narrative experience – her reading – of the work.

Cesarco is frequently cited as continuing the tradition of language-based Conceptualism of the 1960s and '70s, though with added heart and soul. While he does regularly present textual forms, often sentimental and frequently readymade, in sites of visual reception, his work is most articulate when he inverts this strategy: rather than employing linguistic forms to reconfigure visual experience, Cesarco uses visual forms to reconsider our understanding of the literary.

Kurt Mueller