

At Harlem's First Children's Museum, Artworks Strike Up Conversations

By Melissa Stern

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The artists here are using letters and words to communicate with you!

What letters and words do you see?

Type any letter on the keyboard, how many words do you hear that you know?

Which words will you use to talk about this show?

What questions do you have for the artists about their work?

Gallery text in 'Txt: art, language, media' at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

In October 2015 the first children's museum in Harlem opened its doors. The Sugar Hill Museum of Art & Storytelling occupies the first and lower floors of a stunning building, designed by David Adjaye. The building also houses 191,000 square feet of affordable housing and has been praised as a model for mixed income and mixed-use development in New York City.

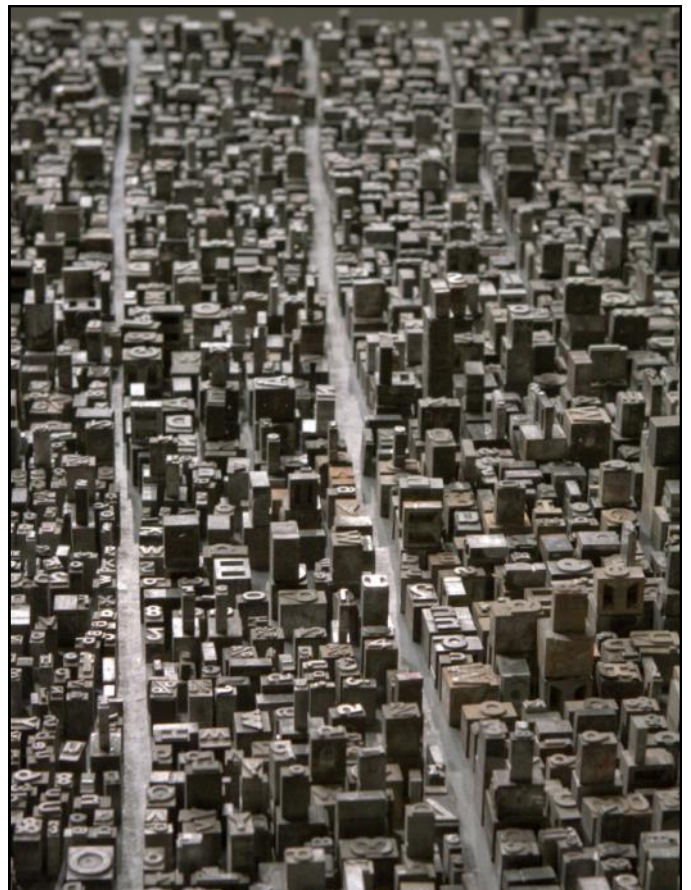
The museum inaugurated the opening with several exhibitions, each curated with children in mind, but by no means pandering or dumbing down the artistic mission. The most ambitious of the exhibitions is *Txt: art, language, media*, a mixed-media show exploring the inclusion of text in the work of 12 contemporary artists. The show has been co-curated by Rocio Aranda-Alvarado from El Museo del Barrio and Lauren Kelley, associate director and head of curatorial programs at the museum.

First, I must applaud the curatorial team for having the vision to paint one wall of the exhibition a stunning brilliant pink. I love it when curators forgo the neutral "box" of the traditional gallery model and incorporate the architecture of the room into the installation. Make no mistake, this is not a

"kiddie" pink; this is a shade of pink that has real balls. The pieces that are shown on the wall have a visual pop that delights the eye.

With an emphasis on local artists, the exhibition explores the nature of "conversation" — the kind a viewer can have with an artwork — and how its very definition can change across media. I found the most successful pieces in the show to be ones that used "old media" sculpture, like drawing and objects, rather than some of the "new media" works (two of which weren't working when I visited, an endemic problem of tech-reliant artwork).

Korean-born, New York-based Hong Seon Jang, for instance, has created a three-dimensional portrait of New York City out of pieces of letterpress type. The type is widely varying in height, font, and size. Entitled "Type City" (2015), it's clearly a riff on the famous "Panorama of the City of New York" that resides at the Queens Museum (a scale miniature model of the city that was commissioned for the 1964 World's Fair). The use of metal type is clever, as it renders buildings into abstract objects, identifiable



Installation view of Hong Seon Jang's "Type City" (2015)

Continue on reverse side

letters, and pure texture. A triad that is delightful to look at and an insightful representation of our city.

Brooklyn native Iviva Olenick is represented by 15 framed drawings, hung together like a puzzle in a single block. "Post-It/ Tweets; Selfies and Lettergrams" portrays the artist's life as seen through social media. Embroidered lines of text reveal tidbits of chat, gathered from her personal social media conversations. The embroideries are then incorporated into loose watercolor paintings that



Installation view of Iviva Olenick's "Post-It/ Tweets; Selfies and Lettergrams" (2014–2015) (detail)

compose a portrait of the person (or persons) whom the artist is having a conversation with. Containing poetic hints about the relationships between Olenick and her friends and family members, and strangers, the drawings memorialize her online interactions.

The boldest statement in the exhibition is a made by Antonia Perez. She has crocheted a large rug out of plastic bags. Embedded in the colorful and decorative patterns of the rug is the message, "Estas En Tu Casa" (which is also the title of the piece). Interestingly, when I looked this up for translation online I was offered an interesting variation of formal and colloquial meanings. From "Make Yourself at Home" to "You are at Home" to the literal "Are you at Home." They all work, in subtle ways, in the context of the artwork. A rug made of cast-off bags with this message leads to interesting questions (and remember this is a show pitched for children): Is this a comment on homelessness? The ways in which we make a home for ourselves? Is it a comment on the environment and the waste all around us? The wall title doesn't give any hints, but I see it as a jumping-off point for conversation. As an aside, the rug is beautiful, a geometric patchwork of strong colors and linear design.

The inclusion of Vuk Ćosić in this show is an interesting addition. Ćosić has been credited with the invention of



Installation view of 'Txt: art, language, media' at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling

"net.art," a digital platform that elevated the use of basic pixels and basic computer code (0's and 1's) to an art form. An early proponent of computer code as art, he mixes political, social, and aesthetic commentary into pixilated, mesmerizing videos. In the video included in this show, "Bruce Lee, King Kong, Mickey Mouse, Singing in the Rain" (2009), he has edited the films together into an amusing mash-up of cultural icons, all hierarchies erased by reducing all images to "0" or "1." The visual text is seamlessly united with the very essence of computer language.

It's a rich show, full of unexpected artworks that all circle around a common theme. But the show could have easily been larger. There are so many artists working with the theme of "text" that I would have loved to have seen this show expand into a fuller representation of that theme. However, this ambitious exhibit harbors the promise that future shows will continue to redefine "children's art" and challenge our notions of what children have the patience and interest to look at. This is an exhibition approachable by those of all ages, and marks a auspicious start for a new Harlem arts institution.

Txt: art, language, media continues at the Sugar Hill Children's Museum of Art & Storytelling (898 St Nicholas Ave, Harlem, Manhattan) through February 14.



Installation view of Antonia Perez's "Estas En Tu Casa" (2015)