

ART REVIEW

Kerry Tribe uses language as a medium in 'Onomatopoeia'

The artist's new show at Emerson Contemporary Media Art Gallery examines how we connect, communicate.

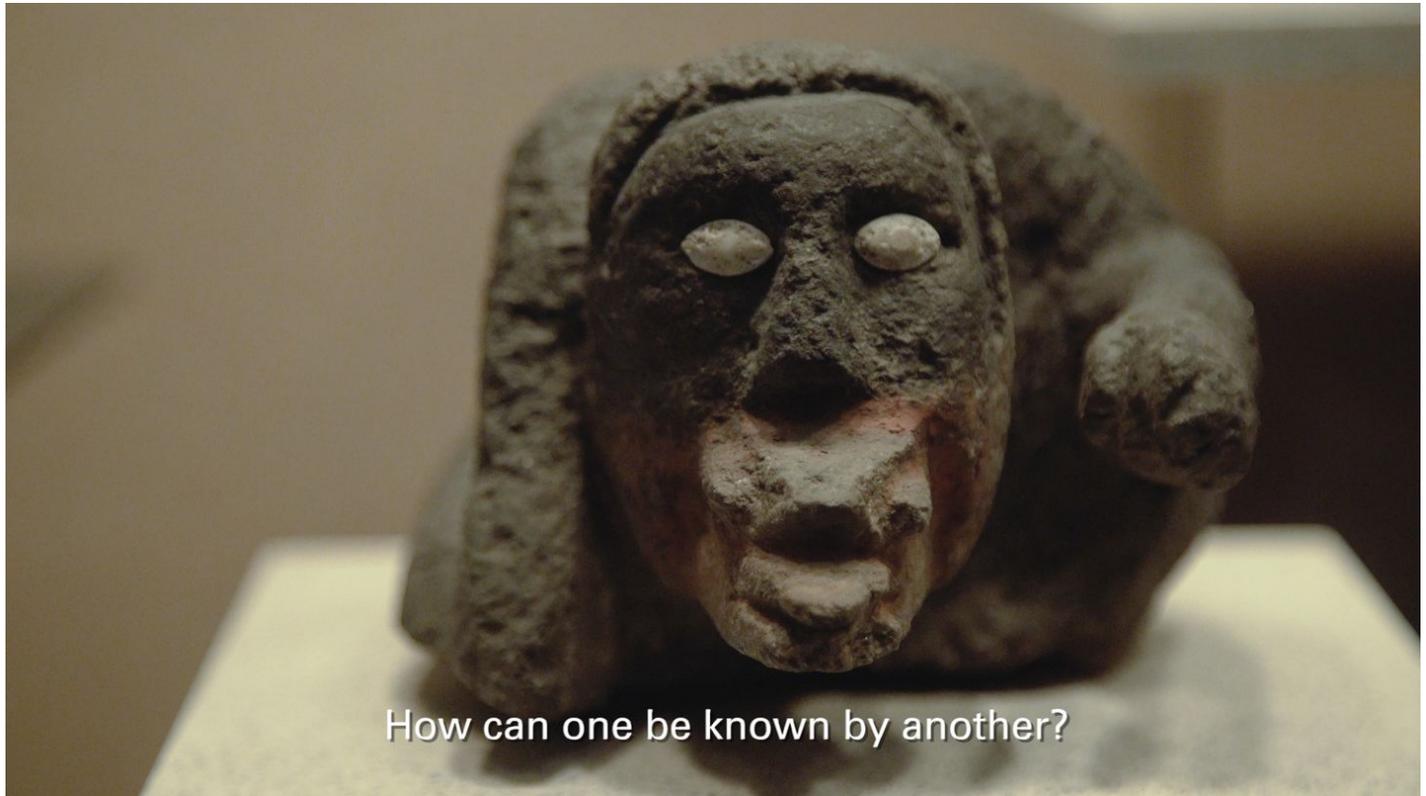
By **Cate McQuaid** Globe Correspondent, Updated February 17, 2022, 12:00 p.m.



A video still from Kerry Tribe's "Afasia," 2017. Installation view by Emerson Contemporary. KERRY TRIBE AND EMERSON CONTEMPORARY

“How can one be known by another?” Kerry Tribe asks in Spanish in her video “Afasia.”

The subtitle, in English, appears over an image of a pre-Hispanic stone head at the [National Museum of Anthropology](#) in Mexico City. The Boston-born, Los Angeles-based artist's exhibition "Onomatopoeia," at Emerson Contemporary Media Art Gallery, steps into gaps of understanding within ourselves and between people.



A video still from Kerry Tribe's "Afasia," 2017. KERRY TRIBE

Onomatopoeia — a word that mimics a sound (thud, whoosh) — crosses a gap between experience and cognition. We constantly vault over such cracks as we navigate the world. Our brains process imagery differently than language, for instance.

Spanish words for colors are listed in a rainbow of hues in "Prueba de colores y palabras," a grid of silkscreen prints, but "verde" is never green, "azul" is never blue, and so on. Tribe borrows the format from a neuropsychological exam, the [Stroop Color and Word Test](#). Naming the color, not the word, tests your ability to focus when there's more than one stimulus coming at you. Presenting it in Spanish adds another level of difficulty for people who primarily speak English.



Kerry Tribe, "Prueba de colores y palabras," 2017. Silkscreen on paper; installation view by Emerson Contemporary. KERRY TRIBE AND EMERSON CONTEMPORARY

Many circuits need to connect for understanding. Tribe's art makes a corollary between the gaps in our own circuitry and the gulfs we cross to comprehend someone else's experience.

"Afasia" — the Spanish word for [aphasia](#), a language disorder due to brain damage — alternates between Tribe's voice-over in a hesitant Spanish, which she says she is trying to learn, and photographer Christopher Riley's in English. Riley, a friend of Tribe's, has aphasia. His speech is halting as he searches for words. "I collect rocks. I collect meteorites. I collect rocks, meteorites, and crystals," he says, as gems and minerals from [Natural History Museum of Los Angeles](#) appear on screen.

Fluency is a kind of privilege — an ease of being in the world that we take for granted. In that context, "Afasia" raises questions about other notions of privilege. For instance, should a white artist be using Indigenous cultural artifacts in her work? (It was made in 2017.) But there's a respectful tone throughout "Onomatopoeia" — the humility of trying to

understand



A video still from Kerry Tribe's "Afasia," 2017. KERRY TRIBE

Watching the weaving of imagery with two languages, written and spoken, in “Afasia,” this viewer struggled to keep track. Perhaps that’s Tribe’s point. We are so quick to make meaning. It keeps us safe, and the struggle in the gaps is mighty uncomfortable. Yet maybe there — and not in the meaning itself — is where we can meet each other, just as Tribe attempts to grasp Riley’s experience by speaking in a language unfamiliar to her.

Our internal meaning-making systems are unique, so we may not ever truly know another. But “Onomatopoeia” offers hope we can connect in the *not* knowing, and persevere alongside each other.

KERRY TRIBE: ONOMATOPOEIA

At Emerson Contemporary Media Art Gallery, 25 Avery St., through March 27.

<https://emersoncontemporary.org/exhibition/kerry-tribe/?back=ago>

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