

Hito Steyerl  
**International  
Disco Latin**

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*Last year, Triple Canopy published Alix Rule and David Levine's "International Art English."<sup>1</sup> As a broad critique of globalized artspeak semantics, the essay has since sparked many debates around the exaggerated claims and imprecise promotional language of contemporary art. In this issue of e-flux journal, Martha Rosler and Hito Steyerl each respond to Rule and Levine's essay.*

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Let's start with something else. Ever heard of the English Disco Lovers? A fantastic online project trying to outgun (or rather outlove) their acronym twin – the racist English Defence League, also abbreviated as "EDL" – on Facebook and Twitter. For this they use the bilingual slogan "Unus Mundas, Una Gens, Unus Disco (One World, One Race, One Disco)." The English Disco Lovers' name is, of course, a deliberate misreading of the original, a successfully failed copy coming into being via translation.

Likewise in the case of many exhibition press releases – or so Alix Rule and David Levine claim in their widely read essay "International Art English."<sup>2</sup> International Art English, or "IAE," is their name for the decisively amateurish English language used in contemporary art press releases. In order to investigate IAE, Rule and Levine undertake a statistical inquiry into a set of such texts distributed by e-flux.<sup>3</sup> They conclude that the texts are written in a skewed English full of grandiose and empty jargon often carelessly ripped from mistranslations of continental philosophy.

So far so good. But what are they actually looking at? In the unstated hierarchies of publishing, press releases barely even make it to the bottom. They have the lifespan of a fruit fly and the farsightedness of a grocery list. Armies of these hastily aggregated, briefly circulated, poorly phrased missives constantly vie for attention in our clogged inboxes. Typically written by overworked and underpaid assistants and interns across the world, the press release's pompous prose contrasts most acutely with the lowly status of its authors. Press releases are the art world's equivalent of digital spam, vehicles for serial name-dropping and para-deconstructive waxing, in close competition with penis enlargement advertisements. And while they may well constitute the bulk of art writing, they are also its most destitute strata, both in form and in content. It is thus an interesting choice to focus on this as a sampling of art-speak, because it is not exactly representative. Meanwhile, authoritative high-end art writing is respectfully left to keep pontificating behind MIT Press paywalls.<sup>4</sup>

So what is the language used in the sample examined by Rule and Levine? As the authors

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Mladen Stilinović, *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist*, 1992.

incontrovertibly prove, it is incorrect English. This is shown by statistically comparing press releases against the British National Corpus (BNC), a database of British English usage. Unsurprisingly, this exposes the deviant nature of IAE, which derives, the authors argue, from copious foreign – mainly Latin – elements, leftovers from decades of mistranslated continental art theory. This creates a bastardized language that Rule and Levine compare to pornography: “we know it when we see it.” So, on the one hand, there is the BNC usage, or normal English. On the other, there is IAE, deviant and pornographic. Oh, and alienating too.

But who is it that is willingly writing porn here? According to Rule and Levine, IAE is, or might be, spoken by an anonymous art student in Skopje, at the Proyecto de Arte Contemporáneo Murcia in Spain, by Tania Bruguera, and by interns at the Chinese Ministry of Culture.<sup>5</sup> At this point I cannot help but ask: Why should an art student in Skopje – or anyone else for that matter – conform to the British National Corpus? Why should anyone use English words with the same frequency and statistical distribution as the BNC? The only possible reason is that the authors assume that the BNC is the unspoken measure of what English is supposed to be: it is standard English, the norm. And this norm is to be staunchly defended around the world.

As Mladen Stilić told us a long time ago: an artist who cannot speak English is not an artist.<sup>6</sup> This is now extended to gallery interns, curatorial graduate students, and copywriters. And even within our beloved and seemingly global art world, there is a Standard English Defence League at work, and the BNC is its unspoken benchmark. Its norms are not only defined by grammar and spelling, but also by an extremely narrow view of “incorrect English.” As Aileen Derieg, one of the best translators of contemporary political theory, has beautifully argued: “incorrect English” is anything “not phrased in the simplest, shallowest terms, and the person reading it can’t be bothered to make an effort to understand anything they don’t already know.”<sup>7</sup>

In my experience, “correct” English writing is supposed to be as plain and commonsensical as possible – and, unbelievably, people regard this not as boring, but as a virtue. The climax of “correct” English art writing is the standard contemporary art review, which is much too afraid to say anything and often contents itself with rewriting press releases in compliance with BNC norms. However, the main official rule for standard English art writing is, in my own unsystematic statistical analysis: never offend anyone more powerful than yourself. This rule is followed perfectly in the IAE essay, which

ridicules the fictive Balkan art student who aggregates hapless bits of jargon in the hopes of attracting interest from curators. Indeed, this probably happens every day. But it’s such a cheap shot.

This is not to say that one shouldn’t constantly make fun of contemporary art worlds and their preposterous taste, their pretentious jargons and portentous hipsterisms. The art world (if such a thing even exists) harbors a long tradition of terrific self-serving sarcasm. But satire as one of the traditional tools of enlightenment is not only defined by making fun. It gains its punch from *who* is being made fun of.

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But Voltairean satire is mostly too risky. We are indeed lacking authors attacking or even describing, in any language, the art world’s jargon-veiled money laundering and post-democratic Ponzi schemes. Not many people dare talk about post-mass-murder, gentrification-driven art booms in, for example, Turkey or Sri Lanka. I certainly wouldn’t mind a lot of statistical inquiry into these developments, whether in IAE or Kurdish, satirical or serious.

But this is not Rule and Levine’s concern. Instead, they manage to prove beyond a statistical doubt that IAE is deviant English. Fair enough, but so what? And furthermore, doesn’t this verdict underestimate the sheer wildness at work in the creation of new lingos? Alex Alberro has demonstrated that advertising and promotion crucially created a context for much early conceptual art in the 1960s.<sup>8</sup> And today, the aggregate status of digitally circulated data is wonderfully echoed in many so-called post-internet practices that congenially mash up online commerce tools and itinerant JPEGs using (or abusing) basic InDesign wrecking skills, creating fantastic crashes of accelerated data sets within wacky circulation orbits. The intricacies, undeniable fallacies, and joys of digital dispersion and circulation are not,

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however, Rule and Levine's focus. Nor are the politics of translation and language. Their aim is to identify non-standard English (or patronizingly praise it as involuntary poetry). But we should not underestimate their analysis as just a nativist disdain for rambling foreigners.

In an admirable essay, Mostafa Heddaya has pointed out the undeniable complicity of IAE art jargon with political oppression in a multipolar art world where contemporary art has become a must-have accessory for tyrants and oligarchs.<sup>9</sup> By highlighting the use of IAE to obfuscate and obscure massive exploitation – such as the contested construction by New York University and the Guggenheim of complexes on Saadiyat Island in Abu Dhabi – Heddaya makes an extremely important intervention in the debate.<sup>10</sup> Whatever comes into the world through the global production and dispersion of contemporary art is dripping from head to toe, from every pore, with blood and dirt, to quote Karl Marx, another forerunner of IAE. This certainly includes many instances of IAE, whose spread is fueled, though by no means monopolized, by neo-feudal, ultraconservative, and authoritarian contemporary art rackets. IAE is not only the language of interns and non-native English speakers. It is also a side effect of

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a renewed primitive accumulation operating worldwide by means of art. IAE is an accurate expression of social and class tensions around language and circulation within today's art worlds and markets: a site of conflict, struggle, contestation, and often invisible and gendered labor. As such, it supports oppression and exploitation. It legitimizes the use of contemporary art by the 1%. But much like capitalism as such, it also enables a class and geographical mobility whose restrictions are often blatantly defied by its users. It creates a digital lingua franca, and through its glitches, it starts to show the outlines of future publics that extend beyond preformatted geographical and class templates. IAE can also be used to temporarily expose some of the most glaring aspects of contemporary art's dubious financial involvements to a public beyond the confines of (often unsympathetic) national forums. After all, IAE is *also* a language of dissidents, migrants, and renegades.

Again, none of this is of interest to Rule and Levine. Fair enough. I doubt political economy matters much in the BNC. But their essay perfectly expresses the backside of Heddaya's argument. Because, as Rule and Levine correctly state, after IAE has become too global to



intimidate anyone, the future lies in a return to conventional highbrow English. And indeed, this is not a distant future, but the present, as evidenced by a massive and growing academic industry monetizing and monopolizing accepted uses of English. UK and US corporate academia has one major advantage over the international education market: the ability to offer (and police) proper English skills.

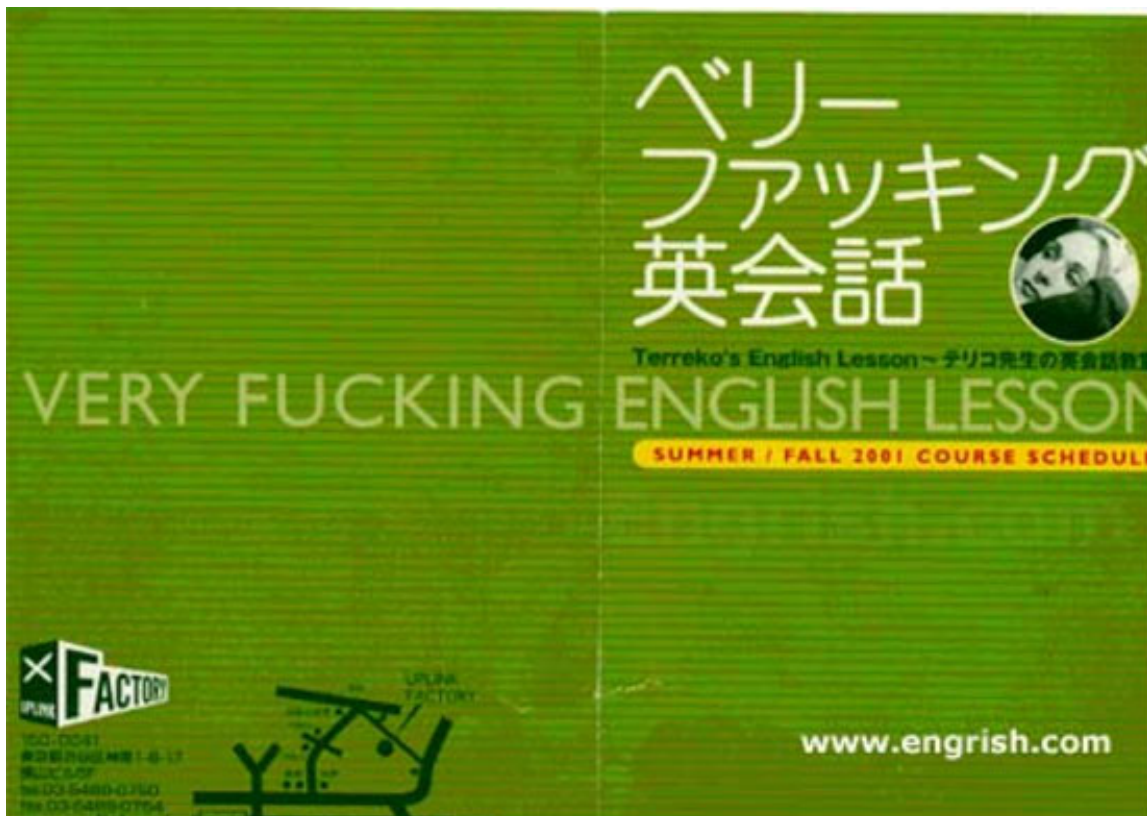
No gallery in Salvador da Bahia, no project space in Cairo, no institution in Zagreb can opt out of the English language. And language is and has always been a tool of Empire. For a native speaker, English is a resource, a guarantee of universal access to employment in countless places around the globe. Art institutions, universities, colleges, festivals, biennales, publications, and galleries will usually have American and British native speakers on their staff. Clearly, as with any other resource, access needs to be restricted in order to protect and perpetuate privilege. Interns and assistants the world over must be told that their domestic – and most likely public – education simply won't do. The only way to shake off the shackles of your insufferable foreign origins is to attend Columbia or Cornell, where you might learn to speak impeccable English – untainted by any foreign

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accent or non-native syntax. And after a couple of graduate programs where you pay \$34,740 annually for tuition, you just might be able to find yet another internship.<sup>11</sup>

But here is my point: chances are you will be getting this education on Saadiyat Island, where NYU is setting up a campus, whose allure for paying customers resides in its ability to teach certified English to non-native speakers. In relation to Heddaya's argument, Frank Gehry's fortress will be paid for not only by exploiting Asian workers, but also by selling "correct" English writing skills.

Or you might pay for this kind of education in Berlin, where UK and US educational franchises, charging students seventeen thousand dollars a year to learn proper English, have slowly started competing with the city's own admittedly lousy, inadequate, and provincial free art schools.<sup>12</sup> Or you might pay for such an education in countless already existing franchises in China, where oppressive art speech will soon be delivered in pristine BNC English. Old imperial privilege nestles quite comfortably behind deconstructive oligarchic facades, and the policing of "correct" English is the backside of IAE-facilitated neo-feudalism. Such education will leave you indebted, because if you don't



pawn or gamble your future on acquiring this skill, you will be shamed out of the market for unpaid internships just because you aggregated some critical theory that monolingual US-professors translated wrongly decades ago. For the art student from Skopje, it's no longer "publish or perish." It's "pay or perish!"

That's why I couldn't care less when someone "unfolds his ideas," or engages in "questioning," or in "collecting models of contemporary realities." Not everyone is lucky enough, or wealthy enough, to spend years in private higher education. Convoluted as their wordsmithing may be, press releases convey the sincere and often agonizing attempt by wannabe predators to tackle a T. rex. And as Ana Teixeira Pinto has said: nothing truly important can be said without wreaking havoc on the rules of grammar.

Granted, IAE in its present state is rarely bold enough to do this. It hasn't gone far enough on any level. One reason is perhaps that it took its ripping off of Latin (and other languages) too seriously. IAE has clung to preposterous claims of erudition and has awed generations of art students into dozing through Critical Studies seminars – even though its status as aggregate spam is much more interesting.<sup>13</sup> So we – the anonymous crowd of people (which includes myself) sustaining and actually living this language – might want to alienate that language even further, make it more foreign, and decisively cut its ties to any imaginary original.

If IAE is to go further, its pretenses to Latin origins need to be seriously glitched. And for a suggestion on how to do this, we need look no further than the EDL's ripped off slogan: Unus Mundas, Una Gens, Unus Disco (One World, One Race, One Disco). Let's ignore for a moment that the word "disco" could sound so foreign that Rule and Levine might sensibly suggest renaming it "platter playback shack." Because actually EDL's slogan is hardly composed of Latin at all. Rather, it's written in IDL: International Disco Latin. It is a queer Latin made by splashing mutant versions of gender across assumed nouns. It's a language that takes into account its digital dispersion, its composition and artifice.

This is the template for the language I would like to communicate in, a language that is not policed by formerly imperial, newly global corporations, nor by national statistics – a language that takes on and confronts issues of circulation, labor, and privilege (or at least manages to say something at all), a language that is not a luxury commodity nor a national birthright, but a gift, a theft, an excess or waste, made between Skopje and Saigon by interns and non-resident aliens on Emoji keyboards. To opt for International Disco Latin also means

committing to a different form of learning, since disco also means "I learn," "I learn to know," "I become acquainted with" – preferably with music that includes heaps of accents. And for free. And in this language, I will always prefer anus over bonus, oral over moral, Satin over Latin, shag over shack. You're welcome to call this pornographic, discographic, alienating, or simply weird and foreign. But I suggest: Let's take a very fucking English lesson!

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Hito Steyerl is a filmmaker and writer. She teaches New Media Art at University of Arts Berlin and has recently participated in Documenta 12, Shanghai Biennial, and Rotterdam Film Festival.

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1  
*Triple Canopy* 16 (July 2012). See [http://canopycanopycanopy.com/16/international\\_art\\_english](http://canopycanopycanopy.com/16/international_art_english).

2  
Alix Rule and David Levine, "International Art English," *Triple Canopy* 16 (2012). See [http://canopycanopycanopy.com/16/international\\_art\\_english](http://canopycanopycanopy.com/16/international_art_english).

3  
I have contributed extensively to *e-flux journal* in the past, thus losing any pretense to occupy any neutral and objective stance within the debate, and squarely positioning myself as a fully conscious coproducer of IAE spam.

4  
See Taylor & Francis and other semi-monopolist pimps of publicly funded scholarly writing.

5  
Tania Bruguera's transgression against statistically correct English is, according to Rule and Levine, the excessive use of the word "reality." Now, I am not surprised that "reality" doesn't show up very often in the BNC, since over the past few decades the UK has been more obsessed with "reality." However, to make the word "reality" a key term of a supposedly pornographic language is taking its denial a bit far.

6  
Mladen Stilinovic, *An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist*, 1994–6. Embroidery on banner.

7  
In private conversation.

8  
In Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual Art and the Politics of Publicity*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003). I am fast-forwarding here over an intriguing branch of scholarship that investigates translation within globalization. Some of the findings of this scholarship are available at <http://translate.eipcp.net/>. The website's researchers and the practitioners of this scholarship include writers like Gayatri Spivak, Jon Solomon, Boris Buden, Rosi Braidotti, Antonella Corsani, and Stefan Nowotny, among many other equally notable thinkers. Their research deals with power, language, and neoliberal globalization, often using case studies, such as refugee struggles, or specific angles on historical decolonization. This scholarship highlights the role of minor, emerging, and submerged languages in contemporary political realities. Ah! There goes the r-word again. X-rate this footnote!

9  
Mostafa Heddaya, "When Artspeak Masks Oppression," [hyperallergic.com](http://hyperallergic.com), March 6, 2013.

See <http://hyperallergic.com/66348/when-artspeak-masks-oppression/>.

10  
See the GulfLabor public statement at <http://gulflabor.wordpress.com/2013/01/07/update/>, and the Guggenheim's response at <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/Guggenheim-responds-to-proposed-artist-boycott/23392>.

11  
See, for instance <http://www.artandeducation.net/announcement/sva-art-criticism-writing-mfa-now-accepting-applications-for-fall-2013/>.

12  
This is my fault, sorry! Working in this system also enables me to partially disregard the rules of "correct" English writing, which full freelancers might admittedly have to put up with to stay in the market.

13  
Thanks to Joshua Decter, Richard Frater, Janus Hom, Martyn Reynolds, Christoph Schäfer, Zoran Terzic, and others for extensively debating this issue in private conversation with me. Nina Power helpfully suggested to rename artspeak as "bollocks," with which I entirely agree, as in "International Disco Bollocks."