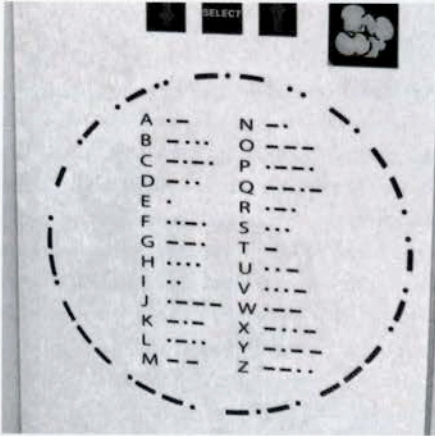




ARTISTS WORKING WITH PHENOMENA AND TECHNOLOGY.

of vacuum-formed capsules with popcorn inside, a printed journal of what the popcorn said, and a stamp with the date when popcorn "spoke." Additionally, the artist bronzed *Popcorn's* first words in *Talking Popcorn's First Words*, forever casting its speech, and placed them in a velvet-lined wooden box.



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Nina uses the phenomena of translation as an accidental occurrence of popcorn popping over time. Her translation machine purposefully has no bias towards English or any other particular language (except for the Western alphabet itself, which may phonetically translate into many non-Western languages); therefore it is just as likely that the popcorn will speak in Finnish or French, or a phonetic Korean, as it will speak in English. In fact, Nina prefers to call it "popcornese," a fortuitous language that accumulates meaning at an unperceivable scale. As Borges, too, understood, and creatively manipulated, translation expresses the idea that fundamental idealisms present in any culture were shaped by the grammatical rules and structures within their language. "The fact that no one [in Tlön] believes that nouns refer to an actual reality means, paradoxically enough, that there is no limit to the numbers of

them."¹⁵ Popcornese may similarly be a meta-language, or a moiré pattern, too broad in its etymological possibilities to fully translate into anything—although, occasionally, it does translate. The first English word popcorn spoke was "we," an ambivalent you and me phrase, a co-dependency of meaning with little context, a binary experience like the Morse Code itself, a mother and baby, on/off, 1/0, yin/yang. But in the end, it was the hot water inside the popcorn kernel that made it pop "we." When the water reaches about 450 degrees, it builds to steam, and the pressure causes the kernel to eventually express its poetic necessity the way a mother expresses milk for a newborn. Of course, popcorn has no intention; its prose is as blank as the longest English word that popcorn spoke, "silent." Only through our co-dependent hunger for knowledge does our psychological need to make associative links—where meaning needs to be larger than the random physics of steam—appear as an edible material, or both the subject and the object of our desires.

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Leçon de piano (Piano Lesson) by Jocelyn Robert and Émile Morin also creates a dynamic relationship between the material and the digital. The viewer encounters a grand piano of the iconic glistening black, concert hall type; as the sparkling white keys are visible and the curved lid is diagonally opened, its magic in brass, wood, and felt is revealed. However, standing in for the performer is a single light source, a projection illuminating the keys like 88 tiny screens. The performer stand-in plays colors and letters that appear to fall like rain on the keys, pressing each note with



a purposeful delay, as if their drops had a weight, and letters were resonating into rings. The letters play the broad assortment of pitches unpredictably, as when I wonder if I have just felt a drop of rain, and I then hold out my hand wondering when and where another one will fall.

Leçon de piano uses the Yamaha Disklavier, an acoustic grand piano with a digital interface. Therefore it combines the programming abilities of a synthesizer with the robust sound of the acoustic grand piano. The approximate 60 phrases originally taken from a child's piano lesson book play, for instance, the 20 notes corresponding to "in the dark corridor," or one as minimal as "rain," where the four raindrops slowly and randomly descend. The rain is not a downpour, but slow, patient droplets, where a cycle may take more than an hour to play all its phrases and colors. Eventually, the letters fade from the keys. In order to bring elements of simplicity into something larger and have a free-flowing collaboration, Morin and Robert come up with rules with which to collaborate. Like John Cage, or any software, the unique code driving *Leçon de piano* is a notation system based on rules that govern the behavior of the piano's performance, in this case the fixed linkage of sounds,

letters, and colors, but also the random order, and the duration of the phrasing. This synesthetic linkage of sounds, letters, and/or colors is often associated with early 20th-century art and religious movements. But it has a longer history, and synesthesia is also a real psychological disorder (or ability). The painter Wassily Kandinsky discovered his own synesthetic abilities while attending one of Wagner's operas in Moscow¹⁶ and later explored this ability, along with his Bauhaus colleagues and students. However, *Leçon de piano* is more of a deliberate, concrete poem, simple elements that interact in a complex way, letters emphasizing tones, and tones resonating letters. This intermedia approach of spelling tones slowly performs sublime-like phrases such as "the green valley" or "songs & riddles." Occasionally, a colored drop will illuminate a note, or a grayscale or chromatic scale.

For the version on display in this exhibit, the artists have built upon this original collection of sublime-like phrases with more complex interactions between phrases, sound, time, and perception. Phrases such as "walk" literally and repetitively walk up the keys, or "now here" slowly becomes "nowhere." All the textual phrases are simple and performed in the simple key of C major, the colors are simple, but the interaction between color, light, text, and sound is complex, similar to a landscape engaging the viewers in a semicircle around the keyboard. This display may recall the light, sounds, and colors of neighborhood children, not noticing the drizzle because they're engaged in their play while wearing bright orange jerseys and moving through a green field at dusk, which is reminiscent of a band or orchestra warming up until a song slowly

emerges. So, too, the lesson in *Leçon de piano* appears as a nonsense play warming up to become puzzle-like word games, or the precise geographic coordinates where the piano and viewer are located in the gallery space. *Leçon de piano* doesn't engage with the sublime in the conventional sense of an encounter with nature that astonishes us with intense pleasure. It is closer to David Nye's technological sublime, where modern electronics dissolves "the distinction between natural and artificial...[and in] blurring this line it created a synthetic environment infused with mystery."⁷

The original software code written for *Leçon de piano* has no agenda in the practical or economic sense, but this installation may have a social use if we believe that the presentation of an almost Buddhist sense of discovery is potentially a significant contribution toward a culture deeply engaged in software and code. As modernism is said to free us from ignorance, Morin and Robert free us from the models of typical technological progress that is economically or socially linked. These artists are aware of the burden of exclusive software entities, with top-down messages regarding the path to technological core values, and how these entities are primary inspirers of human behavior qua technology, and our interactions with software. Like everyone of their generation, Morin and Robert have seen a system of cultural desires presented through high-end inventions, gadgets, and screen resolution, or heard the arguments for practical societal needs based on years of problem-solving research. One of the outcomes is that our behaviors begin to form around these technological ideologies as much as they form around our behavioral needs. This system of technological progress is often synonymous

with the concept of freedom that modernity offers, but for these artists, while the technology is imbued with all its historical compromises, the artists look at the technological form as a fresh template, as blank as the white keys awaiting letters and phrases. The top-down message may not be reaching Morin and Robert—or they don't care about it, perhaps laugh at it—but they somehow skirt around the messages that are supposed to inspire society, including propelling them into a better future. *Leçon de piano* doesn't purposefully seek a better future or communication tool; rather, it offers a "a new sensory experience" with the objective to inspire the here and now, arguably creating a new technological sublime form with what is ordinary, everyday, and diminished in scale.

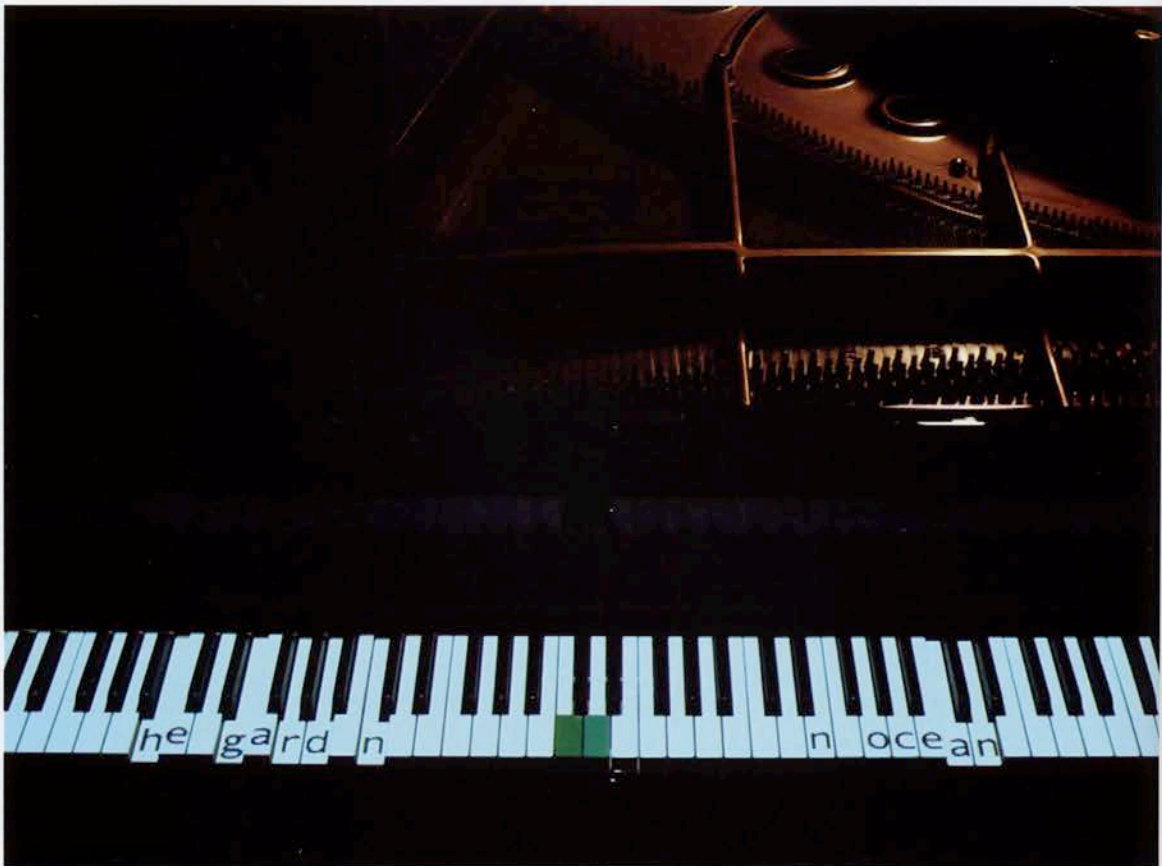
Leçon de piano is not a child's lesson in the conventional sense of learning by heart through attentive repetition and discipline, but it reflects an accidental encounter with color, light, and sound. The installation before us is not nature, but a lesson in the childlike acceptance of an acoustic sculpture, playing the way nature performs, the sky accompanied by the earth.



For the installation *One Bird* by Paul DeMarinis, the viewer encounters a yellow birdcage on a floor stand with a near eye-level flame trapped inside. The flame is from a Bunsen burner with a fire large and soft enough to flicker with a slight draft. A small metal rod intersects the flame and is connected to an audio player. In front of the birdcage is a musical box with a hand crank, and when the viewer turns the crank, a flame in the cage



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