

Blue Line in Space: Jill Downen's *Speak Truth*
Jenny Wu

A twenty-second audio file:

“I always searched for the truth. I found half-truths, fake truths, hidden truths, provisional truths, invented truths, material truths, formal truths, analytical truths, synthetic truths...”¹

I lose the last three seconds of the sentence. The speaker's winded speech gets garbled. The recording cuts off.

What I have before me that I want to call a transcript is a blue sound wave, a watercolor line rendered in the hand of Kansas City-based artist Jill Downen (b. 1967). Their exhibition *Speak Truth* at Bruno David Gallery (19 November 2021 – 5 March 2022) is the occasion for my encounter with a stranger's voice. I can only guess what the speaker, Downen's friend and fellow artist Flávio Cerqueira, says next. This triggers a vexation that is, I would argue, a perfect encapsulation of the way language functions in everyday conversation: as a process of grasping, guessing, retracing, anticipating, and assembling meaning out of sounds, silences, and breath. But the soft blue line before me represents a hypothetical language, a provisional panacea, a utopian proposition. It represents the language of truth/s.

Much of Downen's past work has centered on the relationship between architecture and the human body. For instance, as part of their 2010 Guggenheim Fellowship, they constructed a site-specific installation at the Luminary in St. Louis that served as a sanctuary for solitude and quiet. The space was compared to works by Fra Angelico and James Turrell for the way it evoked human spirituality and invited self-reflection.² In another instance, Downen manipulated the architectural components of the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis to make the building's floors and walls swell like folds of flesh. In the past two years, it appears that Downen has turned their attention outward, toward language, intersubjectivity, and social trust. While remaining concerned with phenomenology, space, and light, Downen has devoted a significant portion of their recent practice to imagined space and realities conjured by voice.

For Downen, their recent *Speak Truth* project (2020–) on display at Bruno David is an act of translation in a broad sense. They first invite participants to provide audio recordings of themselves “speaking truth,” whatever that might mean to the individual participant. They then paint the sound wave patterns each participant generates as a sinuous line on a long piece of paper. These painted lines are called “truth lines.” Downen mails the truth lines back to the participants, and through this process the artworks enter into a gift economy, and the participants—who now number over forty and represent nine countries and eight languages—are able to see their truths represented in a silent visual language. The tension of *Speak Truth* lies its

¹ Jill Downen, *Speak Truth: Flávio Cerqueira*, <http://jilldownen.com/speak-truth-nov-21/>.

² Ivy Cooper, “Jill Downen,” *Art in America*, 23 November 2010, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/jill-downen/>.

unsettled relationship with several aspects of language and communication: questions of universality and specificity, preservation and distortion, accessibility and fugitivity all come to a head in this compendium of experimental intimacies.

Such questions race through my mind, and yet I am still here, affixed in time and space, with a stranger's voice in my ear. Between breaths, I pick up fragments of background noise, what I interpret as birdsong and cars passing by, and I am convinced that the strangers who have participated in Downen's project are gifting more than just their personal testimonies but also parcels of their geographies, their cities. The snippets of everyday goings-on in Brazil, Iran, Canada, France, Germany, Ghana, Lithuania, and elsewhere, together with the blue of Downen's watercolor line, call to mind an image from poet and critic Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*. From the window of her room in the Chelsea Hotel where she lies with her lover, the speaker describes a blue tarp flapping on another building's roof.

“It was a smear of the quotidian,” Nelson writes, “a bright blue flake amidst all the dank providence. [...] It was essentially our lives. It was shaking.”³

Likewise, Downen's blue artworks—whether they are books, scrolls, sculptures, or immersive installations—are rendered not in the blue of the sky but in that of polyethylene tarps and PVC pipes. In other words, Downen presents to us a human-made blue, a blue that symbolizes the world we have constructed, that is the consequence of our human actions, which are themselves consequences of our anxieties and ambitions. The color's manifold cultural associations aside, blue is, for Downen, the color most closely associated with truth, the subject of the exhibition.

Beyond the *Speak Truth* artifacts, the viewer encounters an immersive sculptural installation that lifts the “truth line” from the page and gives it a material body. Some of these three-dimensional forms hang from the ceiling in the center of the room. One such hanging tentacle, owing to its excess length, winds across the floor, tapering like the tail of a snake. Other more rigid forms lean against corners and walls. These sculptures are blue, though segments have been wrapped in white gauze, and I occasionally come upon a stripe of white paint or a spot of gold. Inside the stark white cube of the gallery, the sculptures seem to breathe. Their slack postures—the way they hang and lean—seem to be the very indicators of their organicity.

The word that comes to mind is *preparation*. The shades of blue in the bright white cube certainly suggest newness, finish. Yet the rough textures, the uneven coats of latex and plaster, suggest a process cut short, entropy settling in on that which never achieved its final form. The blue wires look as if they have been hung up to dry, the long poles leaning against the wall resemble implements waiting to be picked up and used. Each tangled cord insinuates the process and labor of its future unraveling and yet remains suspended, oscillating between states of growth and decay.

The unsettledness of the installation is, I believe, of a piece with that of the *Speak Truth* project. Like those first-person testimonies, the sculptures in the installation were once a collection of disparate objects that Downen has chosen to bathe in blue. Yet through the gaps in the latex coating of a work like (*Anti*) *Plumb Line* (2021), a blue knot that hangs by the entrance, one can

³ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (Seattle and New York: Wave Books, 2009), 7.

see the specific identity of the blue PVC pipe asserting itself. This deconstructed quality contributes to the formal argument of this exhibition, which was conceptually organized around the patterns and ruptures present in the symbolically potent colors blue, gold, and white. The shattering of conventional binaries such as uniformity and difference emerges as another of the show's guiding principles, just as the open-ended imperative to "speak truth" makes room for both abstract concepts shared across cultures—identity, family, and the importance of voice—and the nuances of each individual's cadences and contexts.

Any examination of "truth" and what it means to "speak truth" is necessarily an excavation of truth's limitations: the helplessness of testimony in the face of systemic oppression, the instability of a single subjectivity within the affective soup of others' competing worldviews. The vast expanses of white space on the pages of the *Speak Truth* books—and the white walls of the gallery space—render the quivering blue lines of truth ever thinner and stranger. At the same time, it is the overwhelming encroachment of falsity's abyss that makes a blue mark in the void as necessary as breath itself.

Jenny Wu is a writer and arts worker based in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She holds an MFA in fiction and an MA in art history both from Washington University in St. Louis. Her writing, which explores East Asian history and identity through an experimental feminist lens, has received generous support from the Rona Jaffe Foundation, the George Kaiser Family Foundation, the Louis B. Sudler Prize in the Arts, and the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry. Her literary and art criticism has been featured in publications such as *Asymptote*, *BOMB*, and *Harp & Altar*. In her free time, Jenny is an avid reader, coffee enthusiast, and burgeoning art curator. Most recently, her independently curated show *Texts and Soundings: The Image Talks Back*, featuring seven artists and collectives from three continents, won the NARS Foundation Exhibition Open Call and was on view from April to May 2022 at the NARS Foundation in Brooklyn.