

ARTFORUM

Alejandro Cesarco

TANYA LEIGHTON

Alejandro Cesarco's exhibition "These Days" centered on two recent videos, *Learning the Language (Present Continuous I)* and *Learning the Language (Present Continuous II)* (all works cited, 2018), installed as rear projections in the two alcove-like side galleries in the larger of Tanya Leighton's two Berlin spaces. Each video was accompanied by a photograph, respectively *Margarita's Music Book (Spes Vitae)* and *Untitled (Double)*. Problems of language and translation, citation and repetition, have long been central to Cesarco's work. As suggested by their titles, both videos are concerned with language acquisition as a process of mirroring or repetition, in which existing forms (words, grammar, syntax) are practiced and repeated until they become naturalized. At the same time, the reference in their titles to Dan Graham's 1974 installation *Present Continuous Past(s)*, as well as the echo of Cesarco's own 2010 work *Present Memory*, hinted that questions of visual perception and temporal displacement or delay would also play a central role.



Alejandro Cesarco, *Learning the Language (Present Continuous I)*, 2018, 4K video, color, sound, 18 minutes 25 seconds. Margarita Fernández.

ArtForum, Summer 2019

Tanya Leighton

Learning the Language (Present Continuous I) is a fragmented portrait of the Argentinean pianist and musicologist Margarita Fernández. Originally shot on 16-mm film, the video captures the nonagenarian at the piano, where she plays a brief section of Franz Schubert's *Piano Sonata No. 20 in A Major* (1828) and parts of the piece whose score is depicted in the accompanying photograph: Manuel de Falla's *Pour le tombeau de Paul Dukas* (For the Tomb of Paul Dukas, 1935). Fernández is also shown sitting silently before the camera. Between these static shots, over intertitle translations in French and English, she muses in voiceover on such topics as Schubert's use of theme and variation or the relationship between sound and image in the films of Robert Bresson. In fact, this monologue combines the pianist's own words with writings by the American composer Morton Feldman and Cesarco's own texts. The collaging of multiple sources into a single voice is among the artist's hallmark tactics and reminds us, here as elsewhere, that our use of language of any kind is always already mediated, not only by the language and ideas of others but also by the linguistic structures and narrative conventions that render thought legible and make communication possible.

Learning the Language (Present Continuous II) restages a well-known scene from Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film *La Chinoise*, in which the young revolutionary Véronique, traveling by train, engages in an extended dialogue with her professor (played by the political philosopher Francis Jeanson, himself a former Communist radical) on the use of violence as a means of shutting down French universities—an especially prescient discussion given the events that would unfold in France the following year. The scene was previously re-created by Claire Denis in her short film *Vers Nancy* (Toward Nancy, 2002) as a conversation between a young immigrant woman and the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy on the notion of foreignness and related themes of intrusion, visibility, and cultural integration. In Cesarco's film, the professor is played by the Brazilian psychoanalyst, critic, and curator Suely Rolnik, while her real-life assistant plays the student. This time, the conversation focuses on the role and uses of repetition within psychoanalytic practice. Discussing, among other things, *La Chinoise* itself, Rolnik speaks of a desire to break free from the repetition of eternal sameness, while at the same time acknowledging that this "theater of ghosts" provides us with possible narratives, ways of organizing our experience of the world, without which moving forward in life would be impossible.

With the photograph *Untitled (Double)*, Cesarco turned this process of citation back on himself with an image of his studio. At first, the title appears to refer to two pictures of flowers (recalling some of his earlier projects) taped to the wall, or perhaps a couple of stacks of books neatly arranged on the edge of the desk. But compositionally, the work nearly restages his own 2014 photograph *Untitled (Remembered)*, which depicts a slightly wider view of the same work space, with a different arrangement of books and clippings. This subtle bit of auto-appropriation here served as a reminder of the studio as not only a site of inspiration, but also as a place for the practice and the pleasures of repetition.

— Jacob Proctor