

Haimes, Helena. "Alina Tenser: A Particular Kind of Embrace." *The Brooklyn Rail*. Online. March 9, 2022.



Alina Tenser: *A Particular Kind of Embrace*

By [Helena Haimes](#)



Alina Tenser, *Container for Utterance*, что где когда, 2022. Vinyl, zipper, steel rods, concrete, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and HESSE FLATOW. Photo: Jenny Gorman.

Those who have learned a second language to a reasonable degree of fluency may be familiar with a disconcerting phenomenon known as “first language attrition.” Just as a learner starts to feel tantalizingly close to bilingualism, they might suddenly find themselves in what feels like a kind of communicative black hole; words and expressions you’ve used intuitively for decades suddenly disappear, and you’re left verbally stuck, without a way to express yourself in either your first or foreign tongue.

The first body of work presented in Ukrainian-born artist Alina Tenser’s current exhibition at Hesse Flatow brings this disarming experience immediately to mind. Her “Containers for Utterances” series is composed of stacked boxes made of flexible vinyl or

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PVC, many of them inhabited by cast concrete letterforms from the Cyrillic and Roman alphabets. These vessels are each stitched together with a single, long zipper; visual manifestations of Tenser's attempts to compartmentalize Russian and English words and phonemes after emigrating to the US from Ukraine as a child.

While some of these letterforms look as if they're making a run for it, scuttling in pairs along the edges of the gallery space or gathered in cliquy groups in the corner, others are arranged to play highly idiosyncratic word games that reflect her own confusions, memory glitches, and errors on the bumpy path to learning English. These are hard to grasp without explanation unless you're familiar with the difficulties specific to Russian-speaking English learners. For example, the letters R in English and the Russian Я bear no phonemic relation to each other and perplexed Tenser in their apparent similarity. Another "container" spells out the title of a popular Soviet-era TV trivia show *What? Where? When?* in which the audience supposedly wrote the questions, misremembered by the artist as *Who? Where? When?* Tenser found her discovery that the "who" was missing especially poignant as the audience's participation was supposedly central to the show, though it was likely not their contributed questions that were being posed. Such an example of Soviet manipulation of citizens' cultural experience resonates all too loudly given the current Russian government's aggressive disinformation that has recently given way to a full-blown invasion of Ukraine.

These references are layered, complex, and deeply personal, though Tenser manages to achieve a difficult balance between autobiographical reflection without being exclusionary. This work beckons all of us to engage with it, rather than alienating those of us with no grasp of the challenges peculiar to the relationship between these two particular languages. While Russian speakers can obviously connect with it on a profound level, it also successfully invites everyone else to ponder broader questions of the gaps between thought, speech, and the written word. Trapped in their almost entirely hermetic containers, these odd little concrete letters will resonate with anyone who's ever been lost for words, or fought to compartmentalize more than one language when trying to express themselves in another. Tenser revels in her own linguistic hiccups, as well as the idiosyncratic connections she formed between her first and second tongues. She manages to elevate



Alina Tenser, *Parentheses, Orange Path*, 2022. Satin ribbon, steel, expanded metal, casters, 56 1/2 x 33 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist and HESSE FLATOW. Photo: Jenny Gorman.

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language beyond its signifying register, and into the realm of the affective. Linguistic mistakes, stutters, and slippages are made, quite literally, concrete.

On a material level, there's an intentional lack of polish to Tenser's characters, dotted as they are with nicks and bumps. She doesn't fetishize concrete's potential to create an unbroken whole, à la Donald Judd, but instead relishes in its imperfections. The resulting objects offer a respectful nod to their Minimalist forebears while inhabiting thoroughly contemporary territory.



Installation view, *Alina Tenser: A Particular Kind of Embrace*, HESSE FLATOW, New York. Courtesy of the artist and HESSE FLATOW. Photo: Jenny Gorman.

Tenser has previously worked across video, sculpture, and performance, and the "Parentheses" (as well as the drawings accompanying them) in her second body of work exhibited here are especially fizzing with performative potential. The six freestanding metal frames interlaced with colored ribbon are mounted on casters, seemingly inviting us to activate them by wheeling them around the space. In fact, this is the first time Tenser has chosen not to include either her own performance or encouraged gallery visitors to physically interact with her artworks. Rather, we're left to imagine (with the help of her accompanying drawings) all the ways in which these moveable sculptures could be made to travel. Tenser wants us to remain hanging in that moment of possibility, a gutsy decision and ultimately a highly rewarding one for the viewer. Who hasn't visited an exhibition that shows the remnants of a performance and inevitably felt

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they've missed a crucial component? Just as with the stitched zippers and utilitarian plastic of her "Containers for Utterances," these armatures adroitly combine industrial and domestic processes; the ribbons seem as metallic and tough as the frames that accommodate them, until you notice the straggling ends that hang down, revealing their true identity.

Contributor

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Helena Haimes is a contributor to the
Brooklyn Rail.