

## Emily Mast Explains How a Performance Art Piece Is Born

By [Catherine Wagley](#) Thursday, Mar 27 2014

"Recite poems with eyeglasses in your mouth," wrote Catalan poet Joan Brossa sometime around 1969. It's one line in a whole list of such instructions, and funny to picture. Maybe it's a blonde with a pageboy haircut, black-rimmed vintage glasses stuffed deep into her mouth, trying and failing to recite something eccentrically sappy. Or the glasses could be hanging by their frame, clenched between the reciter's teeth, and the poetry something serious, maybe by Yeats.

"There are so many different ways you could do it," says artist Emily Mast, who's about to stage a performance across LACMA's campus, based on Brossa's texts. But each one feels specific. That's the thing with Brossa, she explains. "The text is written in such a way that you always have this clear image."



Emily Mast's designs for flags used by performers in *The Least Important Things*, her performance this week at LACMA

PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILY MAST

Which images would really work in actual space, acted out by people? "Are they anywhere near as interesting when they're performed?" she's asked herself over the past year.

The list with the glasses-in-mouth instruction also includes the line, "Write a poem using toothpicks to form each letter." When the audience gathers outside LACMA's Bing Theater at the

start of her performance, taking place nightly March 27, 28 and 29, a character will be doing exactly that. The toothpicks are the usual size but metal, and Mast hand-sanded the ends to make them sharp enough to actually use before having them machine polished. "They're these stupid little disposable nothings," she says, but the text — and now the performance — make them crucial.

Cleveland-born, Cypress Park-based Mast, who will have new performance and video work in Hammer's second "Made in L.A." biennial this summer, has become known locally for work that often starts with an esoteric text or narrative. "There's a lot of recycling," she reflects, "taking the past and twisting it so it resonates."

Her performance of *Offending the Audience* restaged Austrian writer Peter Handke's offputting 1966 anti-play, in which performers heckle the audience, with unpretentious children as actors. *B!rdbra!n* — which debuted in early 2012 during the Pacific Standard Time Performance and Public Art Festival, then played out in slightly revised forms at REDCAT and alternative space Public Fiction — started with the story of Alex, a parrot on which researchers began experimenting in 1977. It was like an abstract poetry recitation with a *Gilligan's Island* color palette and house-music beat.

*B!rdbra!n* felt timely in the way it bridged two current, prominent impulses in contemporary art: the impulse to overstimulate, like too many browser windows open at once, and the impulse toward a sort of neo-minimalism, where objects are simple, structured and safe.

In *B!rdbra!n*, nothing made sense in a way you could put your finger on: a bird's trying to talk; a child's explaining semiotics; a woman with a basketball under her arm doing stand-up; a man in bright green pants breakdancing; two performers passing a colored block back and forth. But everything was organized and intentional.

"I'm someone who's always trying to squeeze things into their very essence," Mast says.

She titled her new LACMA project *The Least Important Things* after something Brossa said in 1956: "The least important things are always very important." He likely didn't mean this in a sentimental "stop and smell the roses" way, since what makes him compelling is his ability to make you feel the weight and weirdness of things without feeling confused or weighed down.

Mast first encountered Brossa 10 years ago, when she was a 20-something assistant to artist-filmmaker Philippe Parreno and living in Paris. She found Brossa's "Projects for Poems" in a book

of instructions by artists, which had just been published by ultra-prolific curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, a friend of Parreno's.

Brossa stayed in her mind in the intervening years, as she moved to Los Angeles, finished her MFA at USC and worked on other projects. In autumn 2012, José Luis Blondet, LACMA's curator of special initiatives, invited her to propose something, anything, for the museum. Blondet had seen *B!rdbra!n* at REDCAT and knew he wanted to work with Mast. She told him almost immediately that she wanted to stage a series of poems. "Of the 30 to 40 people I had talked to about Brossa, only José Luis knew who he was," she says.

Mast had even found a translator, Highland Park-based Debora Antscherl, which was necessary because hardly any of Brossa's work is available in English and Mast herself had been able to read only a sampling of it. She met Antscherl through another artist, Adrià Julià, who played soccer with Mast and once worked with Antscherl on a project called "Translation Attempt," translating a whole range of discordant verbal and nonverbal works, from film scripts to live dance.

Antscherl visited the Brossa foundation on a trip to Barcelona at the start of 2013. "They're particularly sensitive to the fact that Brossa has not crossed borders, especially European borders," Antscherl explains, so the foundation found the prospect of translating more Brossa appealing.

Still, the foundation wanted it done right: It required that everything Antscherl translated be approved by John London, the Brit who has done the most English translation of Brossa to date.

Then there was the challenge of reaching a specific, probably American audience at LACMA, who would be seeing, not reading or hearing, the poetry. (No one speaks in *The Least Important Things*, though performers hum at one point.)

Working through Brossa's archive proved an unwieldy task. Photos of him near the end of his life show him living amidst stacks and stacks of paper; he rented an extra apartment in 1987, nine years before his death, to hold more paper. While in Barcelona, Antscherl took photographs of documents and of Brossa's handwriting.

There was too much to translate all of it, so Mast would use Google and her knowledge of French to narrow down what interested her (Catalan is a fellow Romance language). Then Antscherl would translate loosely, and send it back to Mast.

If they decided to use a poem, Antscherl would work to make Brossa's words alive and witty, as they are in Catalan. "He almost gave them personality, words as characters," Antscherl says. She tried to be elegant. "And by elegant, I mean unobtrusive."

The problem, then, was how to structure the different vignettes. Mast had a card trick, a striptease where clothes fall from the ceiling, mini ballets and a chess game — but no throughline. "I thought I needed one," she says. "It's not my personal taste, but I wasn't sure viewers would be OK without one."

Eventually, Mast gave up. The texts weren't giving her a clear narrative, so she relied on intuition. She strung together 18 vignettes from 14 texts and found a path around LACMA's grounds along which the whole cast, crew and audience will travel for an hour, across gardens and up back stairs, the actors performing and changing costumes and personas en route. The procession ends almost, but not quite, under Tony Smith's imposing, spiderlike *Smoke* sculpture in the Ahmanson building. "It's actually very, very precise," Mast says.

She had the script entirely set before sending out a call for actors and holding group auditions: "It was so fun, seeing 20 women do approximate ballet moves."

Cast members, many of them affiliated with CalArts' theater program, began rehearsing in small groups in February, at a theater in Pasadena and in her living room, which sometimes is easier given that she has a 10-month-old: "Striptease at my house while the baby's sleeping," as she described a recent rehearsal.

But in the days before the performance, they've had to practice together, moving around the museum grounds during off hours, trying to anticipate what it will be like with 50-plus people trailing after them.

"Transitions are everything," Mast says. "It really is about these vignettes stacked upon one another, that when I juxtapose all these quirky moments, it becomes meaningful."