

[Dominique Carella Questions Identity Constructs By Reclaiming Language](#)

THAT AWKWARD MOMENT WHEN YOU ARE STRIPPED OF YOUR HERITAGE AND ADMIRER FOR YOUR “UNIQUE” FEATURES AT THE SAME DAMN TIME.

That Awkward Moment When by Dominique Carella

Camile Messerley talks to Dominique Carella about pointing to the absurd social constructions of gender, race, and ethnicity by reclaiming language in her text-based installations.

Dominique Carella is a recent graduate of the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she received her Bachelor's degree in Sociology and Visual Arts. For the exhibition *¿Qué Pasa, USA?*, Carella, created a large scale vinyl text piece entitled *That Awkward Moment When...* (2016), which is accompanied by a postcard sized take-away, *I am Only Boricua When* (2016). She analyzes the societal structures of race, gender, and ethnicity primarily through the use of language and text as medium. In this she is also calling awareness and attention to the microaggressions and oppressive language Women of Color experience everyday. The exploration of these ideas comes first from personal experience growing up in San Francisco, and uses this environment which she has lived in since childhood in her practice. Carella's practice has been impacted by graffiti, urban slang, and pop culture as a whole. Due to these influences, her work ranges from the sharing of very personal accounts, to looking at institutionalized forms of oppression through visually stimulating large scale installations.

As Carella continues to work with text in a variance of mediums, the progression and extrapolation of her subject matter and the issues she faces and works with will be key in the political state of the country post-election. To quote Carella "my work is very much a reflection of my daily interaction with the world around me, and I know I'm going to have a lot to say in the next four years." Being that as it may, I look forward to the calls from Carella that hold the capacity to further community engagement and interaction of not only in her home base that is the bay area, Being that language can be shared at the speed of Google Fiber, this work has the ability to travel as is it did to *¿Qué Pasa, USA?* in Kansas City, Missouri.

I HAVE NEVER CONSIDERED MYSELF A WOMAN OF COLOR. I HAVE SPENT MY LIFE LIVING IN WHITENESS, LIVING A PRIVILEGE I DID NOT ASK FOR AND THAT I DO NOT APPLAUD. I AM PUT IN THE CATEGORY OF MY ANCESTORS' OPPRESSORS. THE COLOR OF MY SKIN MAKES ME PASS IN THE EYES OF A SOCIETY THAT BASES STANDARDS OF BEAUTY ON SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED AND INSTITUTIONALIZED FORMS OF OPPRESSION. I AM DEEMED MORE INTELLIGENT, MORE ELOQUENT, AND MORE CAPABLE BECAUSE OF THE TONE OF MY SKIN. I AM CONSISTENTLY STRIPPED OF MY HERITAGE, OF THE SACRIFICES OF MY ANCESTORS, AND OF THE STRUGGLE TO UNDERSTAND MY OWN EXISTENCE THROUGH THE GAZE OF A SOCIETY THAT LUMPS ME INTO A CATEGORY OF MY OPPRESSORS. MY SUCCESSES ARE NEVER QUESTIONED BECAUSE OF MY WHITENESS. I AM ONLY PUERTO RICAN WHEN THE SIZE OF MY BREASTS BECOMES THE BASIS OF CONVERSATION. I AM ONLY BORICUA WHEN IT IS EASIER FOR THE MASSES TO UNDERSTAND MY HERITAGE BASED ON MY BODY, THAN TO TRY AND UNDERSTAND THE COMPLEXITY OF MY BIOGRAPHY.

I Am Only Boricua When by Dominique Carella

CAMILE MESSERLEY: Your work in *¿Qué Pasa, USA?* is all text driven, pulled from a personal response, feeling, or reaction to oppressive language directed at people of color, more specifically women of color. These works follow ridiculous and hyperbolized social constructions for race, gender, and ethnicity. Can you expand on your use of language as a medium, and further your use of language as a critique of these oppressions?

DOMINIQUE CARELLA: Often, I will produce dozens of ideas or phrases and only end up using one. The phrases that I choose come to me very naturally, I believe the more I over think, and edit and rearrange a single phrase, the less organic it seems, so I usually stick with the first wording that comes to mind.

My process begins with my inspiration, with an encounter, a conversation, a music video, a magazine headline, really anything that pisses me off. I then take my experience and put them into words that the public can understand, often through humor, or pop culture references. Like I said,

my process is very organic, the more I over think my work the less effective it is. I take my anger and turn it into something that will start a conversation, I add a little humor so that people can digest it, but I also make sure that it has that raw and honest element masked beneath the humor that starts the conversation.

CM: Can you talk about your editing process? How are grammar and syntax part of your practice?

DC: Editing comes into my practice by a process of elimination, I may start with dozens of phrases, but it comes down to picking the phrase that is the most thought-provoking, the most eye-catching, the most likely to ruffle some feathers and to start a discussion. [it] is also dependent on the space I will be presenting the piece in and who the audience is. Text-based pieces can draw a lot of attention, so it is important that it works with the space—some pieces work better in some environments than others, that is just the nature of the work.

Grammar is incredibly important to me in my work. A lot of my work stems from my experiences as a woman of mixed heritage, I am pretty much 100% of the time perceived as a completely white woman. I am a first generation college student, and to me, my education is one of the most empowering things I possess. I believe that I am taken more seriously because I am perceived as a white woman—my successes are never questioned because of my whiteness. I believe it is crucial for my practice, that my knowledge, and my successes as a woman of mixed heritage become apparent through my use of grammar. I love pairing proper grammar with pop culture references for example that hint towards my age, my ethnicity, and my experiences as a woman of mixed heritage.



50 Simple Things Americans Can Do To Save The Planet by
Dominique Carella

CM: What is the relationship between *That Awkward Moment When...* (2016), the large text installed in vinyl letters, to *I am Only Boricua When* (2016), the postcard sized take-away texts that were below the wall piece. How did you conceptualize and decide in terms of the physical manifestation of the work? Furthermore, what do you think about the relationship between accessibility and scale in your work?

DC: To me, the bigger the better. Whenever I do a show I like to know what kind of space I am working with. My work is very adaptable, it can be large, it can be small, it can fit in many different kinds of spaces, but if it were up to me I would have my pieces take up entire walls. I like the size of my shorter text pieces to be dramatic and overwhelming. I often produce my shorter pieces with stencils and spray paint, but for this show the vinyl was crucial in creating a clean aesthetic that worked really well with the take home postcards.

The scale of my work is really crucial in understanding where my work stems from. My shorter text pieces, like the large vinyl piece on the wall, are often less vulnerable, they stem from moments of anger, and they are appreciated by the masses even if it does piss a lot of people off. The larger works really illustrate my anger or frustration, literally [through] the size of the work. In comparison to my take away piece, my longer in depth writing is much more vulnerable, it stems from very personal experiences and moments of sadness, grief, change, and strength. I feel like the personal element of the writing works very well with the take-home notion of the work; you can take the piece home, read it, love it, hate it, resonate with it, whatever it may be, but the second I put the text on a wall super large for the public to digest, it changes the piece.

CM: In terms of the next step, where do you see yourself in this work and where it might be going? How do you plan to further this concept? What are you working on in your studio currently?

DC: My work has changed pretty drastically in the last year, I went from producing pretty large-scale site-specific installations, to text-based works that come from my personal experiences, as opposed to addressing much larger societal issues. I believe my work will become more vulnerable the more I produce, and eventually I will have a collection of longer text pieces that address a variety of personal experiences. I definitely plan to continue with this concept, there is a lot to work with when your practice stems from your personal experiences and digs deep into your relationship with the world around you, especially in this moment in time.

Right now I am working on developing more text pieces, and producing them on different mediums, and experimenting with different sizes and how that changes the piece. In between larger projects, I love putting my work on stickers and other mediums that stem from street art and graffiti. I write a lot in black books as well, and am currently exploring new ways to include my black book work into my contemporary art practice.

CM: I saw that you're a recent graduate, do you have any thoughts or hopes and dreams for the near future? How has the election affected your practice and what you are currently working on?

DC: For many, many, days following the election I was definitely in shock and very depressed, that was the general consensus in the communities I occupy, alongside anger, and the desire to create change. The election will definitely affect my work—my work is very much a reflection of my daily interaction with the world around me, and I know I'm going to have a lot to say in the next four years.

This interview was edited and commissioned by the 2016-2017 Charlotte Street Curator in Residence, Lynnette Miranda, in collaboration with *Informality's* for *Issue 2: Digital Studio Visits* and the exhibition *¿Qué Pasa USA?* at la Esquina Gallery (1000 West 25 Street KCMO) open from November 18, 2016 through January 7, 2017. This interview was originally published on <http://collectivegap.info/>