

CRISTIN TIERNEY

ARTFORUM



François Bucher, *A celestial event, no words, they should have sent a poet*, 2017, cyanotype, 8 1/4 × 11 3/4".

François Bucher

JOSÉ GARCÍA, MX

The Greek word *logos*—reason, discourse—stands at the core of the Western conception of the world, denoting the rationality through which reality is shaped or perceived. François Bucher’s exhibition “Contact—(cosmic background noise explorer)” welcomed visitors with *Logos*, 2017—the word spelled out in white neon letters, hanging upside down. One could read the text right side up only through its reflection in a puddle of water: The unlit room where it was displayed had been carefully flooded. The space between

the word and its mirrored image, like a gap between dimensions, was the perfect prelude for a jumbled narration in which the artist, relying on disparate science-fiction sources, explored the possibility of making contact with an abstract cosmic intelligence.

For about a decade now, Bucher has been interested in shamanism, esoteric rituals, and other techniques for opening portals to different dimensions. Here, instead of addressing the matter thematically, he conjured a small and coded universe in which sculptures and images held an uncertain or even duplicitous status: They performed their role as artworks but also served as devices of transcendent communication. For instance, *Contacto plausible. El universo según José Simón* (Plausible Contact: The Universe According to José Simón), 2019, is a sculpture made of two concentric iron rings that replicate the apparatus through which the Colombian TV repairman named in the title claims to have undergone a molecular disintegration and subsequent recomposition. In an accompanying video, Bucher interviews Simón, who provides a detailed account of his voyage. Conversely, one of several works titled *Cosmic Background Noise Explorer*, 2017, is a set of headphones with seashells in place of speakers and pads—a sculpture hinting at the possibility of training oneself to detect intelligent patterns within cosmic noise through unexpected portals.

The works acquired a distinct strength thanks to the recurrent appearance of Eleanor “Ellie” Arroway, the protagonist of Carl Sagan’s 1985 novel *Contact*, who, much like the artist and the aforementioned TV repairman, is in search of any weak signals of cosmic noise that may turn into patterns leading to otherworldly gates. One of several cyanotypes titled *A celestial event, no words, they should have sent a poet*, 2017, shows Ellie (Jodie Foster, incarnating the character in the titular 1997 film) in open-mouthed awe facing something we cannot see. If whatever Ellie witnessed stayed elusive, other images (created mostly through solarization) offered the viewer background patterns, in muted colors, that accentuated the idea of undeciphered coded messages lurking on the surface: the airbrushed sequence of the number pi (*PI [8888]*, 2019); a series of circles in different colors of vinyl and acrylic paint (*L. P. ROSEN. Cosmic Background Noise Explorer*, 2016); and a geometric design that for Zoroastrians represents infinity and evolved into a Buddhist symbol, the swastika, before it was employed by the Nazi party (*Patrón Sayagata* [Sayagata Pattern], 2019).

In Sagan’s novel, contact with other intelligences is confirmed by the echo of Adolf Hitler’s speech at the 1936 Olympic Games—according to the book, the first TV transmission strong enough to be heard beyond the earth. The writer’s

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cautionary tale of portals that can lead us to either a different reality or straight to the past resonates in *Was Heisst Denken? (a qué se le llama pensar? qué nos llama a pensar?)*, 2018, whose second parenthetical subtitle adds the question “What calls us to think?” to German and Spanish renderings of Heidegger’s *What Is Called Thinking?* (1952). Bucher’s black-and-white ink-jet print reproduces a newspaper image depicting a gigantic swastika found during excavation work in Hamburg in 2017. The trauma of the repressed—or buried—past comes back to haunt the present.

— *Fabiola Iza*