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Circling a Square

*Post-capitalists' general strategy right now is
to render language (all that which signifies) abstract
therefore easily manipulable.¹
– Kathy Acker*

In her cyclical, cross-media practice, Nora Turato examines language – spoken and written – to draw attention to societal conditions, developments, and phenomena. Across solo performances, artist books, enamel works, large-scale wall pieces, and spatial installations, as well as video, sound, drawing, and painting, her work offers precise observations of a society obsessed with surfaces and heavily shaped by images and AI-generated content, while tracing how shifts in language use alter meaning. Since the beginning of her career, Turato has worked with found material from diverse sources – the internet, social media, the press, books, films, music, and conversations – and, increasingly in recent years, with her own writing. The artist treats all of this language as equivalent material, whether she has written it herself or appropriated it.

Since 2017, Turato has been creating her iconic *pool* cycles – works whose origins date back to the last years before generative AI, when online content was still largely written by humans. That changed rapidly in the years that followed. In retrospect, the *pool* cycles vividly chart the swift, systemic shift that language has undergone over the past decade. Turato could not have foreseen this, yet the cycles have become a record of it – one that only grows more relevant. In an age of large language models (LLMs)² and “AI slop,”³ the artist continues to explore language and how it is used, but her recent works increasingly center on her own body as a source of the “language of the flesh.”⁴ Kathy Acker explored the failure of verbal language to grasp the corporeal in her essay “Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body,” describing the body as “that which cannot be finally controlled and known.”⁵ Acker rejects “ordinary language,” which seeks to organize, name, and control, yet finds that the body itself constitutes a language, that operates beyond the world of meaning. This strongly echoes Turato’s approach and her interest in the gap between the body and the emergence of language – in the unknown and the uncertain within a culture built on predictability.

¹ Kathy Acker, quoted in: McKenzie Wark, *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?*, London: Verso, 2019, p. 1.

² Large Language Models (LLMs) are artificial intelligence (AI) models trained on massive amounts of text data to process and generate human-like language.

³ Usually mass-produced AI-generated content lacking in quality and meaning that inundates the internet while also serving propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Kate Crawford expands this definition, arguing that AI slop is also the cultural and material byproduct of an extractive, resource-heavy system in which minerals, water, electricity, exploited human labor, and human knowledge are converted into endless volumes of synthetic content. See Kate Crawford, “Eating the Future: The Metabolic Logic of AI Slop,” in: *e-flux Architecture, Intensification*, September 2025, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/intensification/6782975/eating-the-future-the-metabolic-logic-of-ai-slop> [accessed October 13, 2026].

⁴ Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*, Ithaca/NY: Cornell University Press, 2004, p. 141.

⁵ Kathy Acker, “Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body,” in: *The Last Sex: Feminism and Outlaw Bodies*, ed. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993, pp. 20–28, here p. 26.

Home is where the kitten is, the title of one of Turato's new works, adapts the saying "Home is where the cat is," which is widely found on mass-produced products such as posters, mugs, and pillows and is itself a variation on the old proverb "Home is where the heart is." Does the word "heart" equal "cat" in this context? In her new works, Turato is interested in simple word combinations, single words, and symbols that mean everything and nothing at once. The heart symbol, as the artist sees it, has become both empty and emotionally charged in today's culture. Cats, meanwhile, have dominated internet culture – in memes, images, and videos – almost since the early days of the web in the 1990s. When Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, was asked in 2014 which popular use of the internet he would never have predicted, he answered: "Kittens."⁶ But it is not only their cuteness factor that makes cats so popular. Their "unselfconsciousness," as the media scholar Radha O'Meara argues, has become a rarity in an age of hyper-surveillance: "Unselfconsciousness is associated with privacy, intimacy, and, increasingly, with impossibility. By allowing us to project onto the experience of their protagonists, cat videos invite us to imagine a world where we are not constantly aware of being watched, of being under surveillance by both human beings and technology. Through cat videos, we celebrate the untameable."⁷

In Turato's new paintings, text meets texture. Handwritten catchphrases and affirmations, altered by the artist, merge with playful color fields and "muddy terrains." A closer look reveals a recurring spiral movement – a core dynamic of each work on canvas – that partly inscribes itself into the shapes of the letters themselves. One of the oldest symbols in human culture, the spiral stands, among other things, for nonlinear progression. Unlike the circle, which returns to its starting point, or the grid that dominates modern culture with its fixed coordinates, the spiral never leads back to the same place; it is open-ended. Each element in the paintings – word, symbol, texture, gesture – carries equal weight as vocabulary. Here, Turato continues to explore how conditioned human behavior and learned patterns manifest physically. The feminist philosopher Teresa Brennan argues that modern conscious life largely suppresses what she calls "finer feelings."⁸ Because we rely so heavily on sight and on rigid subject/object categories, we tend to block out the subtle, physical information our senses register from our surroundings. Life itself, which speaks directly through what Brennan calls the "intelligence of the flesh" or "fleshly languages," is endlessly varied in its expressions and states. In her view, the biological, sensory, and emotional processes of the body are highly precise forms of communication operating through a complex system of signs. Verbal language, she argues, differs from these "fleshly languages" mainly in speed: it is "slower" because it is conscious of its own expressive capacities.⁹ Each work incorporates immediacy and emergency, becoming the carrier of very specific *frequency* that operates beyond a retinal experience. The series is closely connected to Turato's ongoing exploration of her own voice and of "physical sound" – the bodily, "nonrational" sounds historically coded as female, as opposed to the controlled, "institutionalized language" coded as male.¹⁰

In exploring the tension of "becoming" – an image, a language, a sound – this new series is very close to Turato's performance practice. In a world obsessed with certainty, overoptimization, and longevity, where the body is defined by metrics – sleep scores, heart rate variability, caloric intake, productivity outputs – Turato turns back to the mortal, messy body, which is inseparable from life.

Text by Lidiya Anastasova

⁶ Emily Thomas, "Inventor of Web Astounded by All the Cats Online," in: *HuffPost*, March 13, 2014, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/tim-berners-lee-cats-www-internet-safety_n_4959160 [accessed October 13, 2026].

⁷ Radha O'Meara, "Do Cats Know They Rule YouTube? Surveillance and the Pleasures of Cat Videos," in: *M/C Journal*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.794> [accessed October 13, 2026].

⁸ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (see note 4), pp. 122–123.

⁹ Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (see note 4), p. 141.

¹⁰ Anne Carson, "The Gender of Sound," in: Carson, *Glass, Irony and God*, New York: New Directions, 1995, pp. 119–142. Carson traces how patriarchal culture has restricted women to "nonrational" bodily sounds while treating controlled, articulated speech as a masculine domain.