

ARTFORUM



View of "Antoine Catala: alphabet," 2020.

NEW YORK

Antoine Catala

47 CANAL I GRAND STREET

291 Grand Street 2nd Floor

October 15–November 21, 2020

Twenty-six inflatable Roman letters—made from jet-black polyester and connected to ventilator pumps—form *alphabet*, 2020, a sculptural installation by Antoine Catala.

The letters, hung in an unsettlingly festive manner along three of the gallery's walls, are modeled after a typeface cribbed from Google's proprietary font book.

The letters expand and contract with each concerted swell of the pumps. At one point, we see the e shrivel up like a neglected jack-o'-lantern, while the l bloats up into a chubby digit. Sliding between language and modernist shapes, *alphabet* sustains a play of text and image in every arc of forced air. The pumps' sibilant gasps invoke a pandemic-era fear: death by lung failure. Ventilators can mechanically support a Covid-19 patient's breath, but intubation can render them unable to speak, or cause severe damage to their vocal cords. Catala's subtly tragic and darkly funny work highlights the fine line that frequently exists between horror and humor.

Alphabet also nods to Alphabet Inc., the parent company of the continuously embattled Google. Where individual letters invite children's expressive combinations, this airtight sequence channels the logic of a complete set. Enter monopoly: of the English language over big tech, and of American corporations over information. It's dryly ironic when the Trump administration—notorious for underhanded profiteering—attempts to regulate a corporate giant in the name of the common good. Chalk it up as a worthy entry in 2020's almanac of bewildering events. Catala's wheezing alphabet confronts the reality that the systems we depend on—including our democracy, health care, and environment—are struggling on life support. What remains to be seen is how permanent the damage will be.

— *Lucy Hunter*