



James Drake

Tongue-Cut Sparrows

DiverseWorks Artspace

Houston, Texas



Installation of *Tongue-Cut Sparrows*

Each day women and men congregate on the streets below the El Paso County Jail in an effort to communicate with their friends and loved ones incarcerated there. They do not speak with words but have invented a simple and effective sign language using their arms and hands. *Tongue-Cut Sparrows* explores that phenomenon and the desperate need to communicate, regardless of circumstances or obstacles. Composed of three elements—projected video images, large-scale drawings, and a hand-bound book—the work's unsettling beauty reminds us that real boundaries are not just geographic, but are also epochal and psychological.

In *Tongue-Cut Sparrows*, the contradictions of public and private, love and passion, lyricism and fierceness, betrayal and violence coexist.

Viewers share space with the video images and are drawn into a more physical sense of the experience of the event. In an era of quick media takes that trivialize even the most egregious circumstances, Drake's images investigate the very core of language.

Shown simultaneously, the three life-size video images convey the reality of the situation: the women are standing in front of the jail, looking up toward the prisoners, signing simple phrases as well as passages from novels and poems by a variety of authors, including William Shakespeare, William Blake, Benjamin Sáenz, and Cormac McCarthy. The huge drawings provide the formal element of the project, transforming details of the hand signals into breathtaking studies of positive/negative composition. The book serves a more

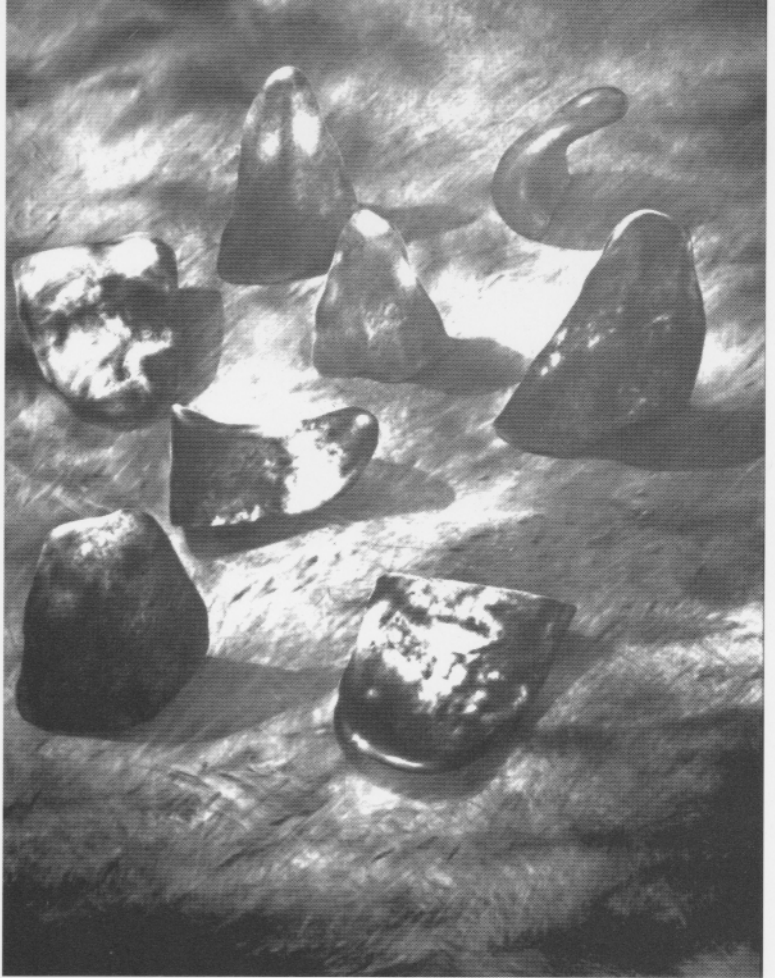
intimate purpose. Displayed on a table, viewers are invited to read the poems and meditate on the images of the women in isolation.

Taken together, the components of *Tongue-Cut Sparrows* leave viewers with open-ended scenarios, supplying a myriad of emotionally charged messages, from which any single conclusion is not available. Gestures seem to be continuously poised on the edges of possibility. Occurrences take place in our imaginations, in the lives and activities of those we don't know and have never met; they exist in words, sounds, pictures, places, and movements all at once. Amid the rising tide of rhetoric, Drake reminds us that the sign, the gesture, is not just weapon, but may be our true wealth.

Susie Kalil, 1996

In there
I remembered
how often I'd sat
and watched
the dark people
standing outside
the gray jail
on San Antonio Street,
women and boys
looking up
every day
at the building
prayers on their lips
as if they were standing
at the graves
of their dead
waiting for them
to rise.

Benjamin Alire Sáenz
excerpt from "El Paso County
Jail", *Dark and Perfect Angels*,
Cinco Puntos Press, 1995



A Thousand Tongues Burn and Sing, 1996

Tongue-Cut Sparrows, 1996



the flames sawed in the wind and the
embers paled and deepened and paled
and deepened like the bloodbeat of
some living thing eviscerate upon
the ground before them and they
watched the fire which does not
contain within it something of men
themselves inasmuch as they are less
without it and are divided from
their origins and are exiles.
For each fire is all fires, the
first fire and the last ever to be.

Cormac McCarthy

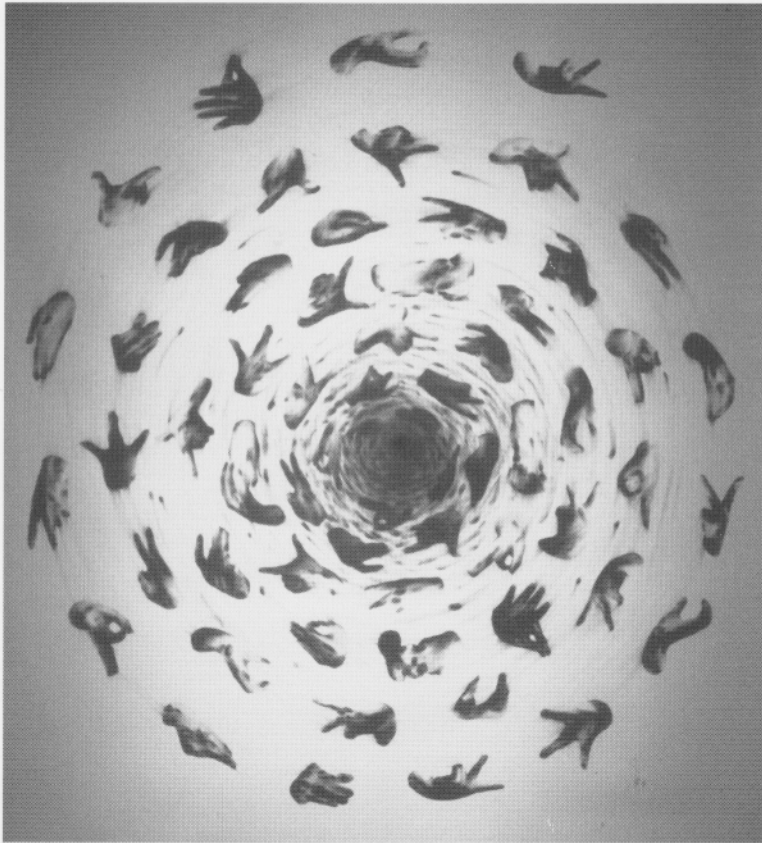


Video Installation, *Tongue-Cut Sparrows*

Born in Lubbock, Texas in 1946, Drake attended the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles (BFA, 1969, MFA, 1970). Drake has been based in El Paso for over 25 years and currently maintains studios in El Paso and Santa Fe. Drake has over the years employed numerous materials—steel, bronze, gold leaf, even an automobile engine—to convey his message. Other than his work as a sculptor, Drake is known for his strong graphic sensibility as evidenced in a steady stream of prints and drawings. In the *Tongue-Cut Sparrows* installation, Drake incorporates video for the first time. A concurrent installation of his work is included in *conceal reveal* at Site Santa Fe. James thanks Angie, Gabriella and Liz, his collaborators in this work.

Drake received an AVA (Award in the Visual Arts) from the Southeast Center for Contemporary Art, 1989, a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), 1989, a NEA travel fellowship for a residency at La Napoule in France, 1989, and a NEA regional grant through the Mid-America Arts Alliance, 1988. He has received commissions for the Pascagula County Library, Pascagula, Mississippi; the El Paso County Courthouse; and for Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, Alabama to commemorate the Civil Rights Marches of 1963. Drake's work is in numerous public collections including the Art Institute of Chicago; Corcoran Museum of Art, Washington, D.C.; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; New Orleans Museum of Art; New York Public Library; and San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art.

James Drake
Tongue-Cut Sparrows
September 12 - October 26, 1996



"Here power failed the lofty phantasy; but already my desire and my will were resolved, like a wheel that is evenly moved, by the love which moves the sun and other stars." 1996

Checklist of the Installation

Tongue-Cut Sparrows, 1995, charcoal on paper, 72 x 52"

"Here power failed the lofty phantasy; but already my desire and my will were resolved, like a wheel that is evenly moved, by the love which moves the sun and other stars."

Paradiso, Dante Alighieri, 1996, charcoal on paper, 114 x 80"

A Thousand Tongues Burn and Sing, 1996 charcoal and paint on paper, 114 x 80"

Tongue-Cut Sparrows, 1996, charcoal on paper, 52 x 72"

Tongue-Cut Sparrows, 1996, charcoal on paper, 52 x 72"

Tongue-Cut Sparrows, 1996, charcoal on paper, 52 x 72"

Tongue-Cut Sparrows, 1996, video installation

World Above World Below A Thousand Tongues Burn And Sing A World To Come, 1996, charcoal on paper, 114 x 80"

Unbound book pages, **Tongue-Cut Sparrows**, 1996, Published by 21-Steps, Beaverton, Oregon

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Statement of Purpose

DiverseWorks is a non-profit contemporary arts center where artists play a key role in programming and policy decisions. DiverseWorks, dedicated to presenting new visual, performing and literary art, functions like a laboratory—a place where the process of creating art is respected and where artists can test new ideas in the public arena. By encouraging investigation of the social, cultural and artistic issues of our time, DiverseWorks builds, educates and sustains audiences for new and contemporary art.

Cover: *Tongue-Cut Sparrows*, 1996

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