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Thank you. I’d like to thank Maryhelen Hendricks and the Humanities and Sciences Department of the School of Visual Arts for inviting me to speak today. I’ll read some notes that I have prepared and then show a few images from the works I mentioned at the end. Once upon a time, images and text seemed at odds with each other, distant cousins at most. As an artist, why should I use words when pictures say it all? Same thing in reverse for novels. Why put in a picture in *War and Peace* when Tolstoy gave it all words, those funny little squiggly things all black and white. This is a story about the coupling of words and images, which I believe came out of necessity to regain content in the art world at the end of modernism story. I’m not going to get into advertising, film making and other forms of media where image and text have been traditionally linked, although these forms have certainly influenced artists and vice-versa. That would be way too much territory. I will speak of conceptual art in the late 60’s and early 70’s for that is when I began as an artist. And coincidentally, that is when narratives as art surfaced as we sense the narrative of modernism had come to an end. I will also speak about where we might be today more than 4 years later. When I speak of texts, I refer to formal languages such as: French, English, German, Korean, Russian. When I speak of image, I am speaking of those images we have come to consider art. With conceptual art, formal language and often combines with images to form a metatext. And this is where the [boink] comes in, the eroticism of their combination of possibilities. Certainly we can think of text in a broader scope, not only as formal language. For instance, the light is yellow, the Audi Spider and the Prius are 250 and 100 yards away, respectively. I am pregnant and healthy. So what if it says don’t walk, I can still run. I read the individual signs, the yellow light, the speed of the cars, my physical condition all combine to give me the text, yes I can make it. A text generated from the disparate signs. If there is any division in American culture right now, it is between those of us who are text-oriented making decisions gleaned by acknowledging the ever-changing circumstances of our lives and those of us who are grammar-oriented going by rules already formulated in our minds and in our culture. Most often we operate on both levels, switching between text and grammar. Liberals generally speaking are probably more text-oriented, conservatives more grammar-oriented, living their lives guided by pre-existing rules. But I digress[sic]. There are differences in the mental processing of verbal and iconic signs. We know that traditional Chinese characters had obvious visual connections to their meanings. I first understood this as a student reading Ezra Pound’s *ABC of Reading*. Mankind, the word mankind is represented with a stem and 2 appendages, kind of like the walking man. The Orient, by a half circle and a setting sun caught in a symbol of [tree]. Western letters refer to verbal sounds. Any visual similarities they have in their meaning are coincidental. In Western languages, spoken and written signs are randomly related to their meaning, you simply learn it. Even in onomatopoeia, various languages have different words with similar meanings. It would be surprising to hear a rooster pronounced exactly cock-a-
doodle-do or a bee fly up to you and utter the word buzz, complete with a finely
enunciated b. To manage this, the bee would have to have a pair of lips. F-I-S-H does
not look, feel, smell, taste or sounds like a fish. We simply know that fish has the
meaning fish by attending pre-school, by eating in restaurants, by fishing and listening
to summertime from Porgy and Bess. Iconic or visual signs relate to the meaning in
various way, sometimes several ways in a single sign. For example, I have a gun here.
Actually it is simply a hand with 5 fingers. A child can transform this hand into a gun
by first pointing it. I will not point it at you because it is loaded with meaning. And the
longitude of the index finger is similar to the longitude of the barrel. The verticality of
the thumb is similar to the verticality of the hammer of a pistol. But upon firing the so-
called gun, the index finger changes position. Instead of representing by similarity the
barrel of the gun, it actually moves in the same way a trigger finger does as it pulls a
trigger. And, of course, it is a finger, not simply a representation of one. The movement
is not similar to the movement of a trigger finger, it is the same movement of a trigger
finger. A metaphor for a barrel no longer. That gesture is both iconic and kinetic since
it involves movement as well. Iconic signs relate to their meaning in various ways. They
relate through similarity, longitude, fatness, thinness, etc. Sometimes their qualities are
the same qualities as the reference. I will explain the difference between referent and
meaning are signification shortly. Sometimes iconic signs are analogous to their
meaning. The bloody footprints of O.J. Simpson share a pattern of points analogous to
the pattern of the side of his shoes. The lights and darks of an analog photograph are
analogous to the light patterns responsible for burning the silver grains in film’s
emulsion. This is why the Amish folk living around Hamburg, Pennsylvania where I
grew up do not want themselves photographed. They believe somehow that their
essence is captured. They are correct in their paranoia. An object can motivate, can
motivate the production of a sign through the artist’s focused gaze. This can be a good
ting, certainly in the case of David, the sculpture by Michelangelo, or in Olympia as
well. And elements of an iconic sign might be culturally coded like their linguistic
counterparts. A line of a particular width represents the edge of an arm. No black line
exists on the edge of an arm with any particular width. But we understand through
iconic conventions that the black line represents an edge when, in fact, the black line
already has 2 edges of its own. Iconic signs may be composed of various combinations
of the above. With both iconic and linguistic signs, there is a dilemma of the referent
and a possible referential fallacy. Just because there is a word or an image does not
mean there is a corresponding state of the world. The device used to convey that
meaning, a word, a drawing, a photograph is called a signifier. The meaning are
signification of an iconic sign is the signify. The signified is the idea that you get in
your head. The referent is what is referred to. This presupposes a state of the world
where the referent exists. Most often a referent doesn’t exist in any kind of physical
state but words and pictures do exist in a physical state, otherwise we couldn’t perceive
them. Take the word mermaid, for example [UI] symbolic [UI] unicorn. An idea comes
to mind when we hear mermaid but it is impossible to come up with a mermaid in
reality. With difficulty, we can come up with a narwhale, a whale that has a spindly
horn that may be a temperature gauge protruding from its head. But, alas, we cannot
come up with a unicorn. We can come up with Zach Galifianiakis dressed in a fish
costume in a possible update of Disney’s Mermaid. But the image is simply another manifestation of an iconic sign for mermaid, not a referent. Take any preposition – in, and, or or – these don’t have things you can come up with like you can with a fish. Like conjunctions–and, but, because, although–prepositions have a function within a given language but not tangible object. I would imagine in paintings prior to modernism that you assumed that there did exist some kind of referent because there was an illusion to reality through the paradigm of realism. So the meaning or, in other words, the signified is what takes place in your head, whereas the referent is what we assume exists in the world. The expectation of a clear referent disappeared in the very early part of the 20th century with the cubists, more so with Kasimir Malevich. As painting turned to abstraction, photography took painting’s place and with photographic images, we again believe that once there was a there, there. The flag paintings of Jasper Johns first shown at the Leo Costelli Gallery circa 1958 are a lush medium of heated wax and pigment that depending on the proportions of wax to pigment vary in transparency. Actually Johns’ first used newspaper print for the support and then painted over it with wax. Red, whites and blues flickers of language can be seen through the lush layers of paint. Now Johns could have saved himself some trouble and just bought an American flag and hung it on the wall in a gallery like Duchamp did with his snow shovel in 1917. But Johns obviously liked to paint. Are the red of the stripes a representation of a flag’s red or are they red? Same for the white and the blue. Actually he did several variations of the colors of the flag, my favorite being the white flag now hanging at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By the way, many of these things that I’m mentioning are right here in New York City and they have to be New York City. It’s much better to see them in real life than to see something on a slide projection. Johns painted these flags in the mid 50’s when it is not cool to paint illusionistic space. Johns got away with representation by painting subjects already flat. Abstract expressionism and the story of modernism had killed pictorial space. Johns did not paint the flag waving in the wind. That would have been an obvious representation. He painted it flat on. So is the rectangular format a representation of the perimeter of the flag or is it the perimeter of the flag? Of course, the flickers of language and the sumptuous paint surface keep informing us this is not an actual flag, but a representation. An iconic sign combining both iconic and linguistic signs. I should note that by the very nature, his flags can never flutter in the wind or all the wax will fall off. This entire conversation could have been based on the work of Jasper Johns, who meshed language and art, not only in the flags but in the paintings of the names of colors, red, yellow and blue, where the color of the paint does not coincide with the word for the color or on which it is painted. And everything that he chose the subject, the alphabet, the numbers 0 to 9, the targets and the maps. Then Johns came up with a painting called “The,” a small-sized encaustic painting with a beautifully mottled surface and at the bottom he stenciled in the word “the”, a definite article. Through Johns’ transformation, his The, normally an article that stands before a noun, not anything that you can put your finger on, becomes an object in its own right. The object of the painting. By the way, I don’t have a photograph of the painting to show you later. Try Googling T-H-E. Even when you put Jasper Johns in front of it, it’s just too much. Another favorite of mine is a sculpture done by Bruce Nauman he’s one of my favorite artists. I first met him in 1969
when I was a student in the (UI) Park home of my teacher Italo Scanga. Bruce was Italo’s former student in Wisconsin and Italo kept close ties with his students, particularly in a sauna downstairs in the basement where he had his students flagellate him in the custom of Calabria. Bruce arrived in an old 1957 Citroen that looked much like a flying saucer. With the aid of its standard hydraulic suspension system, it actually rose several inches from the ground when starting off and lowered gently after coming to a stop. He brought a long a small curved bronze plaque a few inches high and nailed it to a tree of a similar circumference. It wrapped halfway around the trunk and read, “a rose has no teeth.” Later he fashioned a solid block of steel roughly 2 feet by 1 foot by 6 inches thick as I remember it. When exhibited, it lays flat on the floor. The title of the work is “Dark”. An art world rumor suggests that Bruce engraved the word dark on the underside of the steel block. Now this piece of steel is way too heavy for a person to lift. You can’t touch things in a museum anyway so a person would never know for sure if the word dark is engraved on the underside. But let’s say you get permission and some assistance from an Olympian weight lifter like Zoe Smith of Great Britain. She might be able to tip it over. But, of course, when she lifts the block, the state of the world signified by the word dark, itself a physical entity, would no longer exist as a state of the world because the underside, including the word dark, would become light. Linguistic signs like so-called reality have to have some sort of physical presence, otherwise we can’t perceive them. The erotic play here is between the physical presence of the word and the physical state of the meaning. What it becomes when you set eyes upon the word. Sometimes language exists on the top of the image, such as the illuminated manuscripts in the Book of Kells circa 800 A.D. containing the 4 Gospels or the illuminated manuscripts of William Blake as in his Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Language is prominent in Russian Revolutionary film posters in the early half of the 20th century and in Picasso’s Still Life With Chair-Caning, 1912 and in the works of Rene Magritte, most notably This is Not a Pipe, more recently in the works of Neil Jenny and Ed Ruscha. Art has been coupled with already existent narratives and literature like David’s Death of Socrates, in his Oath of the Horatii, in his Death of Marat, 1793, in Jericho’s Wrath of the Medusa, 1819, where the narrative exists through an already famous story. And how can we forget the Last Suppers of Leonardo Da Vinci and Andy Warhol? Here the accompanying texts are not seen but conveyed through literary and religious tradition. Titles add linguistic content to works, even as non-objective as Frank Stella’s “Marriage of Reason and Squalor”. Stella’s famous statement, what you see is what you see, is the mantra of minimalism but the titles of his early black paintings circa 1965 recently showed at L&M Arts takes us to a place as dark as the black stripes which are the only thing that you see when you look at the paintings. The titles include “Bethlehem’s Hospital,” which gets its name from the London mental institution sometimes known as Bedlam. By the way, these titles are in German so I’m not going to attempt saying them in German, I’m going to say the titles in English. The Flag on High echoes a phrase from a Nazi marching song and may have been a reference to Johns’ flags that he saw on a visit to New York with his teacher and later mine, Steven Green. The most famous title, “Work Makes You Free” the words that were displayed cynically above the gates of Auschwitz. These are Frank Stella’s
black paintings, around 22 or 23 years old. These paintings were extremely influential to me as an undergraduate student in Pennsylvania. What baffled and intrigued me is that they seem to have no content. But, of course, the titles allude to a content that is as dark as the paintings are black. Jackson Pollock often left his paintings untitled or simply gave them numbers. His fellow painter and partner, Lee Krasner, noted, perhaps naively, that simple numbers as titles are neutral, allowing the viewer to see the paintings as pure paintings without outside reference. Language also influences the meanings of art through the myths of an artist. We know little about Stella’s personal life but there is a great deal of myth, i.e., language surrounding Pollock’s life and death from his famous urination in Peggy Guggenheim’s fireplace to his untimely death drinking and driving from a party in the Springs with Ruth Klingman and her friend, not making a corner and smashing into a tree. The account of Pollock’s death, Love Story, was ghost written for Ruth by my now deceased friend, Mel Juffe. So in the case of Pollock, there is a little language in the work, even in the titles, for the sake of pure painting. But the language is in the myth of the artist and with Pollock in particular, the Er language of the script like drifts. So art employs language through already existent tales, through titles, through Er alphabets, through mythologies via gossip and art history. The first stories of Van Gogh’s auditory circumcision were gossip. Sometime later they became art history. In the late 60’s and early 70’s artists put language directly on the wall. This brings me to conceptual art and narrative art where a photograph was considered naked without an accompanying text. Often the text was the image. Photography space is less self-conscious, you don’t have to paint it, all you have to do is click. Because of the times, the Vietnam War and the obvious need for equality in race, as well as equality of the sexes, political motivations earned, urged a change in medium or possibly the other way around. Artists documented seemingly non-collectible works in remote places in an effort to eliminate objects and, therefore, to undermine the art world establishment. After all, the establishment was drafting us. Ironically, the photographs and language that documented these works were not originally thought of as being collectible objects either. I refer to the so-called earth works and documentation circa 1968, 1969 of Michael Heiser, Robert Smithson, Dennis Oppenheim and Peter Hutchinson. These artists often employed minimalist forms and applied them to outdoor environments. Already you have landscape and space and recording them through photography and documentation, you also have language and image. Artists at the time called this documentation graphics. Now 40 plus years later people experience these works through their documentation consisting of text and image. Conceptual art soon evolved from documentation to fictional text and other forms of language that was language and image for its own sake, not as documentation of art that existed in some other place. These conceptual artists include Robert Barry, Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth, who taught at this school, Vito Acconci, who also taught here, Hannah Darboven, Peter Hutchinson, who made the transition from documentation to story or narrative art, William Wegman, John Baldessari, David Askevold and myself, the latter 3 artists included in the 1973 exhibition at the John Gibson Gallery called “Story Art.”
My epiphany came with a drive up the Delaware River on March 20th, 1969, a cold day. I attended undergraduate college around the time that the great narrative modernism was over, all the signs of its demise were present. There were exceptions but the ones who most often made it into art history had stripped away the very notions of what art was, in particular, illusionistic pictorial space. Duchamp understood this. That is one message of his “Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even.” The bride was art, the bachelors, of course, the artists of the 20th century, stripping her naked of her givens. By 1965 when I was an undergrad at school, the painters I admired, Stella, Martin and Ryman, as well as Johns with his flags, had arrived at total pictorial flatness. Paint was paint, canvas was canvas. What you saw was what you saw. It was also the beginning of what later was called post-modernism. We didn’t realize it really but we started writing narratives with photographs perhaps to keep the story going. Something like the little boy sticking his finger in the dyke to stop an oncoming deluge. It was in the context circa 1969 that I emerged as an artist and the first emergent show of conceptual of art titled Art in, in the Mind. Marsha Tucker, then a young curator at the Whitney, recommended me to Athena Spear from Oberlin College. Marsha was one of the people attending Italo’s backyard barbecues. Actually, the evolution or revolution for me went something like this. Influenced by Frank Stella, I was cutting square holes out of a large monograph chromatic canvases. At first, this seemed sacrilegious. Gradually the whole got bigger and bigger. Soon I had cut the whole canvas, cut out the whole canvas and placed it aside or on top of the stretcher frame. So in 1968 at graduate school in Elkins Park I painted a 5 foot square directly on the wall and then on the floor and then on the ground. I asked myself, why a square. So I started painting 3 foot wide lines and fields first one hour long, then from sunrise to sunset using a paint brush and gallons of house paint. This line went through a little stream so I thought why not paint a line totally in water. I bought several gallons of white paint and drove up a scenic 2-lane road along the Delaware River. I hadn’t planned what happened next, I just wanted to find a body of water wide enough to walk across in an hour and drip the paint while I photographed it. I stumbled upon Washington’s Crossing, perfect spot. Midway through my crossing on foot I hadn’t organized the boat, the river deepened. I lost my balance and the rapids pulled me under. I thought to myself long before Michael Jackson did, this is it. I let go of the camera, undid my belt and jettisoned the 4 gallons of paint strung around it, got my head above water and continued to the other side. It was at this point, March 22nd, 1969, left with only a story, I realized that that was enough. I went back to school drenched and chilled and told Italo what had happened. He just laughed and with his heavy Calabrian accent, he said, “Bill, Bill. What have you done?” I bought another camera and a month or so later I photographed myself disguised as George Washington and needing to make a series complete, chopped down a cherry tree and notarized the so-called documentation. Throughout the 70’s I wrote fictional stories, not necessarily validated by fictional photographs. Then at some point in 1979, I felt I had done enough with literal text and eliminated them from my work. My work has since evolved into photographs of stems and now blowing ribbons, kind of like er alphabets, closer to Chinese ideograms than to western language. In the early 80’s artists to be later designated the picture generation, such as Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger and Sherry Levine, began appropriating
images and text from advertising as well as from other artists. This might have been more difficult had image and text not evolved first from documentation of earth and body works. In the late 60’s through narrative art, in the early 70’s where text and a photo were considered objects, not a means to another end like the documentation of earth works. Since then, cultural environment has, the cultural environment has changed in part due to technological developments. And I’m skipping way ahead here. We have the early Macintosh computer in 1987, except for the $2,900, two thousand nine hundred 1987 dollars, this gave us easy image and text. It was more versatile than a typewriter or a camera and, in fact, it was both. Now the 80’s seem a long time ago. They not only seem old but they are certainly old in a, to a student born in 1992. Soon we may see a Macintosh SE30’s in the Antique Road Show. More recently we have the iPad and the new solid state retinal Mac Book Pro. Image and text are now wholly compatible. They are not merely hooking up as they did in the early 70’s. They are an old married couple. That said, still the whole world, from the sidewalks of New York City to the underground shopping malls of Seoul, are overflowing with offspring of language and text. Actually it is called texting. Funny how texting soon morphed into sexting. Maybe the medium really is the massage. Will these combinational possibilities survive as art or will it even matter if we think of them as such? My Delaware crossing 43 years ago was an existential journey. I brought no witnesses. The car was too small, too small for both witnesses and gallons of paint. Anyway, the camera was gone. I only had the story. In the present political atmosphere, controlling one’s narrative does seem more important to some than the nature of truth. Note the last debate. This attitude is the essence of post-modernism of this election and the reason why I am not really comfortable with the premise that it is only the story that matters. It may be deeper than that like a certain spot midway across the Delaware River where George Washington crossed so many years ago. I save the last one and very important coupling of art and language, of image and text, perhaps the most important to me is not texts that are aide of photographs, titles or even the texts of art history, texts that are after the fact of art. These particular texts are texts before the fact. Philosophies that have influenced artists, writers and film makers over the decades, texts that accompany errors of art and literature inspire.

Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy in his metaphors of Apollo and Dionysus influenced almost all the important artists, writers and film makers of the 20th century. Many quote him as an influence. And his metaphors of Apollo and Dionysus, this opposition is evident in films like Harold and Maude and in the novels of Nabokov, Lolita certainly in Clockwork Orange by Anthony Burgess and the film of the same name by Stanley Kubrick. The main character having one eye made up of as a woman, Dionysus, and the other of a man, Apollo. This metaphoric play could be the subject of an entire symposium. The writing of Karl Marx influenced artists and writers throughout the 20th century. Critics like Benjamin Buchloh are his avatars. The only problem I have with Marx is that he couldn’t write any poetry worth a damn. Here are a couple of lines from his poem To Jenny. This is by the way a book, it’s a little book by Karl Marx really suppressed by Marxists.
Jenny, teasingly you may inquire why my songs to Jenny I address when for you alone my pulse beats higher, when my songs for you alone despair, when you alone can them inspire.

Why get artistic clues from him? Einstein’s “Theory of Relativity” both special and general, published in 1905 and 1916, respectively, influenced cubists in the 1910’s and 20’s. They painted various perspectives and angles of things seen simultaneously in time and space. Freud’s analysis of dreams and the unconscious certainly influenced the surreалиsts, both on the [UI] side like Salvador Dali and the automatistic side like Juan Miro. Carl Jung had something to do with this as well. Jean Paul Sartre’s existentialism Being In Nothingness accompanies abstract expressionism in 1940’s and the 50’s. Its resident poet in America was Frank O’Hara.

My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent and he carries me quietly like a gondola through the streets. He has several likenesses that like stars and years like numerals. My quietness has a number of naked selves so many pistols I have borrowed to protect myselves from creatures who too readily recognize my weapons and have murder in their heart though in winter they are warm as roses in the desert taste of chill anisette. Jasper Johns title of painting in memory of my feelings.

Wallace Stevens was an existentialist. My favorite quotes are the lines of “Sunday Morning”.

We live in an old chaos of the sun. Our old dependency of day and night. [UI] free of that white water inescapable. Deer walk upon a mountain and the quail whistle about us their spontaneous cries sweet berries ripen in the wilderness and in the isolation of the sky and evening casual flocks of pigeons make ambiguous undulations as they sink downward to darkness on extended wings.

Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, completed when he was a prisoner of war at Lake Como, was first published in German in 1921. It identified the relationship of language and reality and defined the limits of science. Wittgenstein greatly influenced Joseph Kosuth. Sol LeWit told me so and Wittgenstein certainly influenced me. The structure of behavior and phenomenology of perception by Merleau Ponty influenced Bruce Nauman and other artists of the 70’s, along with The Raw and the Cooked by Claude Levi Strauss and then all of Roland Barthes writings from Elements of Semiology to A Lover’s Discourse. Barthes brought the fledgling study of semiotics to the fore and considered both linguistic science first taught by Ferdinand De Saucier in his course in general linguistics circa 1905 and other signs including iconic olfactory kinetic signs, to name just a few. Barthes A Lover’s Discourse written later in life when he had broken away from the strict Marxist ideology that many French intellectuals adhered to. He
influenced young artists like Keith Herring. I know this first hand because Keith read it in my class and responded to it in his notebooks. Keith made those radiant cartoon lines and emanating from his figures assigned for himself. Susan Sonntag influenced artists and photographers and wrote extensively on photography and in 1966 published *Against Interpretation*, influencing the art and writing of the late 60’s. Her writings and photography are in part responsible for the maturation of photography as art in the 1980’s. See Shirley Levine, Cindy Sherman and Louise Lawler. John Cage wrote a book called *Silences* which emphasized the space between things as well as the randomness of the ending of experience and art. Baudrillard’s simulations and his idea of the similar [UI] influenced Jeff Koons, Ham Steinback, who also taught at School of Visual Arts, Richard Prince and Sherry Levine in the 80’s by questioning what is real.

Michelle Foucault replaced the empire of signs with the constructs of power and was influential in art as well as the women’s movement at the beginning of the post-modern era. Nicholas Beauregard defined the relational esthetics of the 1990’s. We can’t forget the world of stand-up, even though some of the artists, the influences were dead serious. At least they kept us laughing usually before we went to sleep. Jerry Seinfeld, Lenny Bruce, Robin Williams, Steve Martin, Andy Kaufman, Larry David. I have 2 sons, one 17 and one 11. On any given evening, after homework and before bed, they are sitting on a low-slung couch watching the flat screen TV with a minimum of 2 other flat screens on their laps, a PSP, possibly an iPhone 5 and an iPad. For them the combination of text and image is a given in the way that in 1905 or even in 1969 we still may have assumed that paint and canvas were the given criteria for art. The multiple screens are also proof that Columbus and Magellan were ultimately mistaken. For my sons, the world is totally flat. My older son has argued that some video games are art. He has noted the games “Journey,” “Heavy Rain” and “Flower,” the latter you simply follow a bunch of flower petals blowing in the wind across a meadow. He is sincere about this. Digital mediums have played a large part in the making of recent art. There is a Canon 35 millimeter camera, specifically the Canon 5D Mark 3, that is capable of shooting a major motion picture and is in the hands of many photo artists. Epson, a forerunner in digital printing, has a huge ink jet printer that is making life easier for many artists who use photographic images and text. Ironically, it is actually painting because in any ink jet printer you have liquid ink sprayed onto a paper surface. It is almost affordable to have one in your studio. I used one at Greiger Labs in Düsseldorf a few weeks ago to produce one of my ribbon photographs 10 feet by 5 feet wide.

There is much interest in Wade Guyton’s work at the moment. He currently is having a mid-career retrospective at the Whitney. You can see it there now. There has been much ado about his digital prints. Text often a single letter like an X or his series of U works that have images of fire surrounding a large capital U. His current works certainly qualify for image and text. I do not know what the U means for him. But it does fit easily into the digital communications of text messages and Twitter. In fact, it is a vowel often substituted for a second person pronoun and it saves 2 characters, as in I lv u. Our vernacular is evolving from language as conversation to text and tweets. I am ready for my first tweet. So many words, so little space. Of all the possible tweets, what
should be my first? How about – she scrunched up her lips into an iconic pout, pausing adjusted her grannies and looked back to her papers. She resumed reading. Without lips, it would be quite impossible to speak. Therefore, any theory of modernity or maternity for that matter would have to be silent. Historians should consider the soft fleshy parts resting on the nether side of one’s teeth and puckering sensually into space. Lips are as essential to modernity as space the lack of it. Speaking of space, did you know that they have discovered a planet orbiting 2 stars? It does figure 8’s around the sun. Consequently, the inhabitants don’t need light bulbs. And they discovered another planet that might be made entirely of diamonds. Not sure if it’s just one big fat diamond or tons of little ones. Proposing marriage in this planet is quite ridiculous. By the way, I was looking for hickory nuts the other day and discovered a bird lying in the grass. It was so perfect that at first I thought it might be sleeping. But it wasn’t breathing, no inhales, no exhales. I think it was a wax wing a beautiful grey bird, except it had yellow tips on its tail. The tail stuck up in the air with a yellow tip on the end of each feather like a [UI] flag proclaiming here I am, I’m just a little grey bird but I have these yellow tips on my tail, see. I didn’t know what to do. I was afraid the cat would get it and rip it apart. So I went into the shed and looked for a shovel. I couldn’t find the common garden variety so I grabbed the shovel we use for snow. The ground was still soft from the rains and I dug a hole where the lawn meets the forest. I scooped up the little bird and carried it over the hole and dropped it in. And it fell belly down with its neck twisted to the left but the feathers on its tail stuck up, just like I had found him saying here I am, I’m just a grey bird but I do have these beautiful yellow tail feathers. The next step was to throw dirt on him, covering, of course, the yellow tips of his tail. And I knew the worms would soon get everything, including the yellow tail feathers that would be bent over from the weight of it all. I held the shovel over him. I didn’t know what to do. I felt like Hamlet or Ophelia or something floating in a stream. One often encounters streams and meadows as well as whispering children, laughing boys and girls and girls and boys and boys and girls. That’s too long for a tweet. So how about this one? If we take eternity to mean not infinite temporal duration but timelessness, the [internal -sic] life belongs to those who live in the present. Our life has no end in the way in which our visual field has no limits. [applause] So we’re gonna flip through a couple of [UI] and then [UI] [Voice too far in background to hear] Neil Jenny came out during conceptual period of time in the early 70’s when most of [UI] photographs. He was very intelligently still using painting, but with words. He came out [UI] emerged at the same time as, as conceptual artists. And he’s still working, fantastic artist. [UI] [voice too far in background to hear] No mention of no talk on word and image would be complete without [UI] [voice too far in background to hear]. And the next one is more famous. It says Hollywood. These things, we’re going back now and obviously, these things don’t have any text on top of them, but they’re related to text that people at the time understood, that were mythologies in the culture. That’s a favorite, that’s a [UI]. When Andy Warhol died, we thought that God had died and then I, everyone, a lot of people were dying of different things and he died of a [UI] the nurse just wasn’t taking care, he was sleeping and the signs kind of went off and he had a gall bladder operation. It just was a fluke, he died. Anyway, before he died he wasn’t really ill or anything. Before he died he did a whole series of “Last Suppers.” In
fact, my dealer at the time, gave me the head of Christ to take back to New York, he didn’t want to pay the customs and I put it in my suitcase and I had the head of Christ, just to study, in my bag. But this is a complete Last Supper kind of thing by Andy Warhol. And this is obviously taken from Da Vinci. And [UI], but that’s by Worhol. This is “The Marriage of Reason” [UI] by Frank Stella. And [UI] by Frank Stella [UI]. This is also by Frank Stella. These are prints but they were [UI], that’s what was available in this size. But[UI] they were huge black paintings done in 1965. This is not such a great example of Michael Heiser, but it’s called “Compression Line”. I mean the reason why I’m [UI] we use these, basically we don’t have this anymore. Actually that was a fairly physical piece of metal, but most of his works we don’t have any more.

What we have is what the artists call graphics. And so we have the word and image. I really believe that’s how photography was accepted as art through conceptual art and particularly land art and earth art using photography with text as documentation, which is word and image, of what these artists did.

This is maybe a more classic one [UI]. And this is “Number One” by Jasper Johns. This is by my former friend no longer alive, “Rings of Snow,” Dennis Oppenheim. But when he did this, this is just a photograph and a title, he shoveled the snow. Of course it was kind of dangerous because you get close to where the ice is melting. It was across the river, the river that divided the United States and Canada. But after he made this he took photographs, and placed text underneath the photographs. And what you actually see in the collection at the Met is a photograph and a text.

This was taken on the sly because there was all these guards standing around and you weren’t allowed ironically to take any photographs. This is Wade Guyton who you should see right now, it’s very good. It feels refreshing, at the Whitney it’s on the 3rd floor. I mean it really qualifies, there’s an image here and that’s the text. And ironically I really don’t know if he meant this but the letter U is the letter most used in texting. He also made sculptures of the letter U.

This is a love letter to a fictional person that I wrote in 1969.

That’s “George Washington in 1969”.

This is a hopscotch board that I did in 1971.10 sentences that I silk screened by hand on floor tiles to be used in the game of playing hopscotch. I actually wanted to make it functional.

This is “Short Story for a Popsicle” 1971. The popsicles existed in a freezer. The wrapper has the first part of the story on it, and then in order to finish the story you had to buy the popsicle and suck on it.

I had a show at 112 Green Street in October of 1970 and this is my piece called, “Rooster Bed Line.” If you fell asleep it was also possible the rooster would wake you up. 112 Green Street was a place where many artists would come and just put up their
works—it was fairly spontaneous. It was the first gallery in SoHo owned by Jeffrey Lew who basically got me my loft where I’m still at and a number of other artists
[End of recording]
WORD AND IMAGE: A NEW DISCOURSAL FRAMING

Frank Boyer,
State University of New York, New Paltz

There are no facts, only interpretations.
–Friedrich Nietzsche

Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.
–attributed to Daniel Patrick Moynihan

This paper is a brief qualitative and philosophical exploration into some aspects of the relationship between word and image, as that relationship occurs in present-day American society, and particularly how it is articulated in the academic world. It is addressed primarily to art educators, but it will deal in terms general enough for it hopefully to be of interest to anyone interested in the topic, and in a socio-semiotic approach to culture. My thesis is that when viewed from a particular perspective, that of semiotics as most generally defined, word and image can be described as broadly commensurate and conceivable in the same terms in many ways, most significantly, in terms of epistemology. This paper is finally about what constitutes knowledge as that term is applied in the arts and humanities across the perceived gap that lies between the word and the image.

TERMS

Here are some terms that I will use throughout this paper. The first is “symbolic product.” By this I mean any result or product of human behavior that can be construed by the producer of that behavior or by an observer of that behavior as symbolic. An extension of the above concept is that of the “core symbolic product.” This is the symbolic product traditionally most strongly associated with a particular social role—i.e., if a person did not make that symbolic product or do the processes that lead to it, then that person usually not be perceived or labeled an incumbent in that role. Of course, not all roles focus on symbolic products, but in this discussion, we will focus on roles that do.

I also use the term “producer” of a symbolic product, rather than “creator,” in order to avoid the ideological baggage that comes with the later term. I designate those persons who are invited to experience the symbolic product to be the “recipients” of that product.

These terms are admittedly rough, “open,” as Wittgenstein would have it, and for the purpose of this discussion. Any guidance on refining this terminology would be much appreciated. Let’s see how far these terms and other concepts that I will introduce later in my argument take us.
MAJOR SOURCES

My argument/exposition/inquiry relies upon concepts derived from a somewhat idiosyncratic selection of thinkers and theorists. The inspiration for my ideas come from Ernst Cassirer and his followers, Suzanne K. Langer and Nelson Goodman, from Michel Foucault, Gregory Bateson, Erving Goffman, George Herbert Mead, Thomas Kuhn, Jan Mukarovsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, and, certainly less well-known, but quite important in the field of composition studies, a gentleman with whom I had the privilege of working at NYU in the late 1980’s, Geoffrey Summerfield.

In this paper, I seek to synthesize from these thinkers a new discursal framing that can be used to describe the relationship of word to image in a new way—hopefully useful to the purposes of those who are hearing these words, and above all those that are working in academic contexts devoted to the education of the future generation of artists and art educators.

DESCRIPTIVE STYLE: METAPHOR AND KNOWLEDGE

This paper relies upon a few metaphors and analogies, some of which lurk in the concepts gleaned from the writings by the list of the sources of and influences presented above. Metaphor is a suspect form of thought and semiosis that clashes with the methodology of those discourses of knowledge highly prized by the politically and economically dominant of the most affluent cultures of our time, paramount among them the scientific discourses, which emphasize and are to a great extent based upon the descriptive power of mathematics. The leaders in the “soft” disciplines are regularly placed in the position of justifying their claim on limited resources and making the more-or-less difficult case that the symbolic products of their fellow practitioners in those “soft” disciplines did indeed constitute not only a body of knowledge, but a body of useful knowledge.

I do not think that cross-discipline interrogation and criticism is not potentially valuable, but the degree of prestige that the “hard” sciences now enjoy gives the critics a great deal of power in asserting their critique—power that I believe can easily be misused. I think that in the arts and the humanities, much of the most revelatory and edifying (Rorty) ideas come in the form of metaphors and analogies, which have great descriptive power, and which can usefully describe aspects of human life that cannot be easily or usefully quantified.

THE ARGUMENT

I will now propose a conception of—a “framing” (Goffman (1986), Bateson) of the relationship between word and image that will, I hope, prove as useful to my auditors as it has to me in describing works of art, and in teaching my students to conceive of and function within both the academic context and the art world at large.
The first metaphor which we will use/examine appears in the title, that of the frame. I base my use of this metaphor on the work of two social scientists, Erving Goffman and Gregory Bateson. For both of these theorists, the frame is that part of a symbolic product or a specific time-bound sequence of behaviors that “programs” the experience for the recipient of the sequence of behaviors/symbolic product, directing in a number of ways how it is to be interpreted. The frame conditions the experience of the recipient of a symbolic product, and both communicates and “gives off” its own messages, in the sense of being capable of being “read”/interpreted/responded to in a way other than that which is intended. There are many ways of framing a symbolic product, and in fact, one could develop a rhetoric (speaking analogically) of the frame, in this metaphorical sense. I am seeking in this paper to establish a new, discoursal “frame” within which image and word can be “viewed” or in terms of which they can be described.

The next of my intellectual sources that I will invoke in order to create my framework is the somewhat unfashionable Ernst Cassirer. Cassirer was a semiotician avant-le-lettre, emerging from the neo-Kantian tradition and in his later work developing his own approach to the symbol, without reference to de Saussure or Peirce. For our purposes, what is interesting to us is his definition of knowledge, developed passim in The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms and An Essay on Man. In the common parlance, knowledge is often described as something that is apprehensible or which occurs “in” the consciousness of a person, it is something that is “inside” (note the metaphorical implication of person or mind as a container of some sort), but for Cassirer, knowledge is conceived of as out there. It resides in the symbolic products of human activity. This idea occurs everywhere in his work, after a certain point in his development. In his introductory essay that accompanies a collection of Cassirer’s lectures and essays (1979), Donald Varene writes a very significant phrase regarding Cassirer’s project: “In Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, p447, the job of philosophy is to grasp the whole system of symbolic forms, ‘the application of which produces for us the concept of an ordered reality . . . and it must refer each individual in this totality to its fixed place.’” (Emphasis added.) Essentially, Cassirer conceives of knowledge almost in a geographical sense—it’s spread out before us, is accessible to us at every point, though we must search through the archive of symbolic artifacts that embody the symbolic forms. It exists in what mankind has symbolized and communicated in a form that could be recorded. It is public. The way that he describes knowledge has an affinity with the formulations of Foucault, to which I will refer below, but there are differences between the central concepts of these two thinkers that are important for our purposes here, differences that will be discovered in due time. Cassirer’s thinking about culture, in fact, extends this geographical metaphor beyond its origins in epistemological reflections, and asserts that human nature itself is apprehensible and comprehendible in and through the symbolic products of human beings, if it can be known at all in any useful sense. However, for our purposes, I want us to retain the original idea of human knowledge as residing in that which is out there, symbolized. In this more limited form, it will serve our purposes later in this essay. I do not assert that Cassirer’s definition is complete, merely that it is useful for our purposes, and that by using it, and describing certain
phenomena in terms of that definition, some very interesting conclusions can be reached.

Cassirer focuses in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and *An Essay on Man* on describing all the ways and forms by which human beings have symbolically described their world. He states, as is consistent with the Varene quote given above, that all of the forms are equally valid, because each of them describes a different aspect of the world, and, at the same time, of human life and consciousness. The forms include art, religion, myth, science, history, and language. Each one is valid, each a different lens for viewing, or tool for symbolizing the world.

Suzanne K. Langer, the most important follower of Cassirer, focused upon a symbolic form that Cassirer had not fully explored: art. In her books, she makes the distinction between discursive and non-discursive symbol systems or symbolic products. Langer emphasizes the difference between the two, stating that discursive symbol systems symbolize thought and that non-discursive symbol systems, primarily art, symbolize human emotions. This distinction, which I will use below, is Langer’s contribution, and does not appear in Cassirer. Rather than stressing the differences between the different forms, he stresses their similarity. Art is one of the symbolic forms, and in Cassirer’s thinking, it is not to be superseded or supplanted by any of the others. One locates it in its proper place in the map, and thus one understands it. Art, whatever its nature, according to Langer and Cassirer, has a firm and unassailable place in the cultural realm, as a symbolic form.

But here is an interesting implication of Cassirer’s thought that I don’t think anyone has pointed out. According to Cassirer, all of the symbolic forms are equally “valid” as articulations of human nature, yet, neither he nor Langer explicitly assert a knowledge claim for non-discursive symbol systems— for art.

It is at this point that some of the other thinkers to which I referred as my sources come into our exploration/exposition, in particular, Michel Foucault, who wrote as trenchantly in the history and epistemology of the social sciences and their associated institutions as did Cassirer in the history and epistemology of the physical sciences. Foucault pointed out, as did Thomas Kuhn, in his *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, that knowledge is created and preserved in human social systems and institutions—which people make knowledge, and that, according to Foucault, the means by which they do so is through discourse.

Discourse itself is usually thought of as the interchange of written texts, which are conceived of as being like the exchange of spoken language in a conversation. Yet, why limit discourse to spoken or written language? Can we not view it as an interchange of symbolic products, with some discourses, for instance, that of the visual arts, encompassing and being made up of many symbolic products which are not verbal, but function as “semantic gestures” within the discourse, that is, they are not verbal, but they can’t be excluded from our metaphorical conversation, any more than body
language can be banished from the cocktail party. The concept (metaphor) of the “semantic gesture” used above was invented by Jan Mukarovsky, a founding member of the Prague Circle of semioticians. He found it useful in describing the nature of literary production in terms of discourse. Frantisek Deak has recently applied the term to art and the function of the work of art in a discourse made up of works of art, or other non-verbal symbolic products (or non-discursive (Langer) action) that claimed or could be perceived to have a meaning, as well as texts. This formulation is very useful. Although we have already established the equality of general validity or value of verbal and non-verbal symbolic products, according to Cassirer/Langer, we were for the most part dealing with works of art that were extant, and had not dealt with them as emergent (Mead), so that there was no way of accounting for culture production in the non-discursive realm. The metaphor is one of objects arranged in space, while Mukarovsky and Foucault bring the dynamics of culture creation through discourse into play. Their metaphor is that of a conversation.

Culture and the symbolic products in which it is articulated, then, are socially emergent. This is a very important aspect of culture that is slighted in the Cassirer/Langer geometric model. In fact, the symbolic forms are not only a structured archive of symbolic artifacts, they are a set of semiotic practices that dynamically articulate themselves in social systems through discourse. They are not a tool, but are sets of ways of describing. The Cassirer formulation is more general, more philosophical, more structural—the Foucault/Mukarovsky descriptive model is more dynamic, more functional, more specific to social contexts in which culture, in the form of symbolic products, emerges.

So let us move forward one more step, and make an assertion that Cassirer did not make. Let us asset that the discourse of the arts and the discourse of any other branch of knowledge studied at universities all over the world are commensurate, in the sense that they all seek to generate knowledge. Let us, in accordance with the definition of knowledge outlined above, describe the knowledge of the artist in the same terms as the knowledge of any other of the knowledge workers, as his or her core symbolic product. In the case of artists, they produce works of art, that is, symbolic products or events that invite response and interpretation in relation to the archive and contemporary surround of works of art. Their core symbolic product is the work of art, and therefore, if we see knowledge as “out there,” as symbolized, their knowledge is the work of art itself. If knowledge is “out there” and resides in the symbolic products of the incumbents in the role of producer of a particular kind of product, that product is the knowledge of that role. In this framework of knowledge, there is no reason to define the core symbolic product of the artist as not being knowledge, simply because it is not verbal, or textual. Sadly, this kind of cross-discoursal contempt occurs often, but it is pervasive in regards to the arts in relation to other disciplines in the academy. Yet, according to Cassirer, a great philosopher of science as well as a great theorist of culture in general, this contempt makes no sense.
So where are we at this point? We can assert not only that the symbol system of art, functioning as it does through a discourse, just like any other of the discourses that generate symbolic products within the academy and our society, except that this discourse is made up of image and metaphor, of paint and pixels as well as words, symbolizes just as effectively as does science or mathematics, as history or sociology, and that it symbolizes something that science or history or sociology, or any other-ology cannot, and, furthermore, that it cannot be superseded by any other symbolic form, or any other discourse in fulfilling its social function of extending the archive of symbolic products in the field of art—that the later development of science does not mean that it can substitute for art—an important insight that Cassirer affirms. From Foucault, and the sociologists of science and other fields, for example, Thomas Kuhn, I have derived the idea that knowledge is the product of discourse, i.e., communication interchange, that occurs within a social situation. From Cassirer, I have taken the idea that all the symbolic forms are equally valid, and that none supersedes another. It has been but a short step to broaden the definition of discourse from that of the interchange of verbal symbolic products, as in Foucault, to the interchange of symbolic products created in any medium, in any of Cassirer’s symbolic forms, for Foucault’s definition is already an analogical application of a term that originally applied to spoken language, and that came to apply to written language. If all of the symbolic forms are equally valid, why not describe discourse in this broader way?

So let us then take the artist’s artworks as his or her knowledge, generated through their participation in the discourse that creates knowledge in the particular medium or field of the arts in which they are working. What can we do with this definition, this way of describing? We can shift the relationship of the arts to the humanities, and to the social sciences and sciences. Let me not only demonstrate how this shift might come about, but why it should, and in particular how and why it should come about in the field of art education.

If word and image are seen as commensurate means used in symbol-making activity, and they can be described together from this larger perspective, in the same way that apples and oranges, though clearly different, are both fruits. This formulation has profound implications for arts education, because if word and image are commensurate and equivalent as means in the discourse of the arts, there is no reason that they should not be commensurate in the educational discourses of the arts. What this means is that if one can define the knowledge of artists as “out there,” in their symbolic products, and especially in the core symbolic products that are associated in the tradition with their role as artists—that is, with their art. The knowledge of technique, and any other knowledge is attested to by the symbolic product, broadly described and not necessarily an object. This, of course, assumes that artists make, or perhaps, more accurately today, in our world of multiplying forms of documentation, “do” art. But in order for the utterance, or the gesture to be complete, to enter into the discourse, if you will, there must be recipients. There are a number of ways to play around with the boundaries of the socio-semiotic situation that I have described, but I don’t think that they cannot be accommodated usefully in this formulation.
CONCLUSION

From Bakhtin, social science, and linguistics comes the notion that there is a situational component to any utterance. The relevant branch of linguistics is called pragmatics, and has to do with the use of language in social situations. This complex of ideas provides us with the very important concept of social role in relation to the utterance. Let us broadly define and metaphorically extend the term “utterance” to all symbolic products—after all, the concept has already been extended in the literatures mentioned above from spoken discourse to written discourse, and, in relation to the dramatistic metaphor (Goffman) to a great many communication contexts and means.

Bakhtin writes about how literary genres arise out of what he calls “speech genres,” which are intimately associated with the social role of the persons generating them, thus looking to social context as the source of literature in a fundamental way, not merely as regards the immediate context of any individual producer of a text. It is this formulation, and its orientation to the role of the incumbent in the context that leads us to a convergence in the practice of artists, and especially for art students, for if their knowledge within the discourse is their art work, and this art work is deemed sufficient warrant for whatever “interior” knowledge the field of art education seeks to inculcate, should they have to write at all as part of their art training, and, if so, what kind of writing should they do? And what should be the role of art educators in relation to the writing that their art students do?

A full answer to these questions requires another paper. Here are some short answers.

Art educators can use the framing of word and image, of artwork and text that is laid out in this paper to defend the arts and art education as commensurate, autonomous, fields of endeavor with their own internally defined methods and kinds of truth, fact, and knowledge. The symbolic products generated in the discourse communities of the arts are not inferior to those generated in any other discourse, merely different.

Art students should not be asked to write in order to prove that they “really” know art—that is proven by their core symbolic product—their art work. The conceptions set forth here can be used to defend the arts and art departments and institutions of higher learning in the arts from the kind of attack that is so common in the logocentric context of the academy.

Art students should be asked to write—as Ivanic points out, an important aspect of participation in the academic context is the discoursal construction of identity. But it must be remembered that the core symbolic—and discoursal—products of the art students are and should remain their art works. Art students should be required, as Geoffrey Summerfield so often pointed out in meetings and in his theoretical writings, to “write in the role” of artists. What does this mean in their case? Their texts should be informed by the experience of their own art processes, and a deep knowledge of the traditions of artist writing in exactly that genre—a genre buried and disprized in relation
to that of criticism, because, as Rita Nolan’s article illustrates, the writing of artists, when framed as criticism, simply looks like bad criticism, because it stems from different ends-in-view (Mead) than criticism. Artists do not need to interpret their own art in the way that critics do. There is a tradition of writing in this way, and art students should be deeply experienced in exemplary texts from this tradition, which is far more important than any body of “theory” constructed from other subject positions and other discourses. Art students should be required to write texts that further and articulate the processes and projects in which they are actively engaged in their studios. That is where “the rubber meets the road.”

It is the duty of art educators to support and expedite the kind of writing described briefly above, and to defend the right of their students to do this kind of writing, and to receive appropriate recognition for it, given that the primary obligation of the art student is to make art, and that the art they make is their knowledge—they do not have to write in order to produce knowledge or, worse, proof of knowledge—In the art world and in the world of art education, image trumps text, the non-discursive is privileged over the discursive. It is the duty of art educators to articulate why this is so, and never to apologize for it. No one is entitled to his own facts, but each discourse community does create from the interpretations and symbolizations of its members, its own facts, its own truth. Art educators owe it to their students to defend those facts, that truth and kind of truth—knowledge as constituted in the discourse of art.

REFERENCES


To start, a story: the origin of writing as attributed to the Egyptian god Thoth (also the god of death). As the story goes, Thoth one day proudly visits Zeus [sic] to present writing as a newfound "elixir of memory and wisdom." And Zeus replies, Thoth! this is no elixir of memory, but of reminding:

This invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them ... you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without instruction and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant.  

1. Emphasis added.

2. Footnote appears at bottom of page.
I begin with this story (erroneously) to show how really very early critiques of new media are reiterated throughout history, and to connect these critiques to problems explored in my artwork. Overall, my work engages writing as a performative, or active medium. Similar to shifts from the modern, static, place-bound activity of scribes, to the industrial mass distribution patterns of print, my work describes a time broaching new relationships between isolated, duration-intensive experiences of writing, and more mobile, collaborative experiments in co-writing. I am most interested in writing installations. They do not have to be built. In fact my sculptures are entirely raw, using loose arrangements of found materials such as slab marble and stacks of printer copy paper grounded by accumulations of vellum and ink drawings, calligraphy.

Repetition and accumulation have long been principles of my projects. For example Formal Culture (2007) is first influenced by Automatist approaches of 1940s action painters like Paul-Émile Bourduas, Helen Frankenthaler (pictured here 1952), Jean-Paul Riopelle. While the constraints of duration and media can be very strict, focus in my practice centers often peripherally, on the context of writing, somehow other than its content.
Meaning persisting, much of the writing within the four four hour durations recorded for *Formal Culture* turn over topics in preparation for my thesis in Anthropology: *The Artist’s Ethnography*. Notions of reflexivity as promoted in recent and contemporary documentary cinema (seen here in a still from Vietnamese American cultural theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s 1982 *Reassemblage*), as well as the idea of the textual turn in what would become North American cultural studies and material culture, combined with questions of a performative social science; global international art fairs, and a roster of critical contemporary performance artists, were/are very important to my work. Some of the texts are autobiographical and confessional. Some spell out random numbers. Some are *koan*.3
Much of my process documentation is locus specific. *Formal* for instance describe the silence of Concordia University’s Ellen contemporary art gallery, where I recorded two of the four four hour writings, and also worked as a guide. Directed by Michèle Thériault and, at that time a staff of three, this is a university art gallery that respects and honors its students’ work; cares for an important art historical collection, and provides four internationally significant contemporary art exhibitions each year. One particularly good exhibit *9 Evenings Reconsidered: Art, Theatre, and Engineering*, curated by Catherine Morris re−presents the 1966 69th Armory Regiment event organized by Billy Klüver. Known for joining the efforts of engineers and artists for the first time, in Morris’ display the works of Yvonne Rainer (whose *Carriage Directness* is pictured above), Lucinda Childs, John Cage, David Tudor, Merce Cunningham, and so many others, again situate the everyday banality of electronic mediation—this time in a sea of pristine documentation: drawings, films, photographs, correspondence and interviews, sound recordings, and installation. I wrote in the spaces for this show dedicated to projection while the gallery was closed.

Process and automatism remain central to work installed recently at Regina Rex Art Gallery in Queens, New York in 2011. *Silence* (pictured at the start of this essay) is a tiny outtake of writings collected between 2009 and 2011. In its entirety *Letters from*
Nowhere, this work also sets out to present the durational presence of the writer and notions of writing across time and space. This extrapolates Heidegger's concept of the thrown presences of a telephone call. Writing fills the studio with other thinkers and bodies perhaps long dead or distant. As such I may be closer to my writing than to a neighbor. The works endeavor likewise to illuminate writing as medium.

My collaborative projects also begin with the banality of writing. Writing Other (2007), Anthology Art Space (2010 and ongoing), and Parsons Workshops (2012 pictured here), all seek to collapse, or concretize (but not to reify), the simultaneity and perceived ubiquity of internet conversations into real-time, in situ interactions. This type of reversal extends conceptual illustrations of what can and cannot be translated into language. It attempts to address shifts in how we understand the production and dissemination of knowledge, in this case artistic. So for example, Anthology uses handwritten dialogs and photography to document what cannot be documented in text and image, in the same way that do projects by Ed Ruscha, and Martha Rosler.

As artist Suzanne Anker notes, art making is a process of holding several contradictions simultaneously. Likewise, my cumulative practice circumnavigates the paradoxes intrinsic to writing itself:
embodiment of the writer writing

absence of the writer in the written

constitutive energy of context in writing

virtuality of any place, in the written

These recurrent valences are distilled as:

- embodied absence // and the constitutive fantasy
- constitutive embodiment // and the absence of ideology

In 1999 embodied knowledge was broached in a highly influential article on posthuman communications theory called “Becoming Beside Oneself.” Corporal learning may be most easily explained through example so, to stick with writing: while learning to write, the learner is naturally very aware of all of the minute actions necessary to create a particular shape. You may remember training workbooks designed to help you to hold a pencil; you might recall calluses on your fingers, or struggling to make a cursive form. Once this learning is embodied, you encounter a sort of cognitive tipping point—you no longer need to think about HOW to write, and you are free to think about what you are writing.

In short, once the knowledge needed to produce any task is embodied, the practitioner is no longer self-conscious of the multiplicity of motor mechanisms required to reproduce it, and can focus on the content, or context of the action. The difficulty with using writing as an example of course is that it is so changed. An important part of my project—in tandem with concerns like freedom and/or repression of cultural expression as repeated with the introduction of every new media—is the assumed evolution of writing and reading away from long-hand; the anticipated preciousness of handwriting in an age in which it is forgotten. Writing also points to an intensive and challenging process of learning to translate sounds (perhaps the primary level of abstraction) into visual symbols.⁶ So, it is not habitual to think of the writing body.
While print and digital texts are often perceived as less immediate to the writer, we can also look at typing to convey presences and durations. The distinction lies in the engineered disseminative properties of print and digital writing, but all are always already embodied. As you're learning to type on the QUERTY keyboard for example, you focus practice on seemingly meaningless movements: hjk; lgf; and so on. Then, when you KNOW how to type, when your knowledge of the keyboard is proprioceptive, your fingers fly over the keyboard and you think more about the idea to be conveyed; who you're writing to, etc., etc. Theoretically at least, there is no reason why not.

To interrogate this underlying embodied-ness of writing, it is entirely useless to endeavor to re-learn to write. See also the work of Hanne Darboven (1941-2009). First, in reading this, it is likely you already KNOW how to write. Second, you can never forget the words. You already have the alphabet and, more intimately, the concept that words are segments in chains of meaning, whether or not a direct print of voice, speech. For better or for worse, writing rarely emerges fully formed but is an excruciatingly slow, integrative process involving many stops and starts.
In an artistic exercise concerning this idea of re-learning to write, I determined to teach myself to write with my left hand backwards. I thought that by redistributing the effort I might also relieve the cramps in my right shoulder. This performative writing attends also to all of the peripheral actions ignored in conventional notions of writing (and theory), somehow separate from practice. It includes taking walks; making tea, looking at the sky, asking friend’s questions. So now I can write simultaneously with the right hand forward and the left hand backwards, the lines emanating out from a center margin.

This also, incidentally, is where we run into a little trouble, because the actions and behaviors we’d have liked to address are the actions and behaviors that are by definition inexpressible…things intrinsic to process, but always excluded from any final, static, or formal result. It’s also a little bit like describing the performative attributes of, for example, a video game which, according to many recent theorists is somehow disembodied.

*Project Statement* (2011 pictured above), and *cloud test* (2011-12) are the first results of my learning to write with the intent to demonstrate the choreographic and/or physical potentialities of writing. The completed works may represent something of writing and reading beyond their habitually passive renderings, to express thought and thinking as really very powerful, even dangerous ways of being.
Embodied knowledge eventually led me to embodied cognition, a new cognitive science approach. Here, in contrast to previously described traditional sciences understanding of mental capacity in abstraction from sensory perception and movement—situated or embodied cognition is in the social and natural environment; it extends beyond individual systems, it is collective, and constitutive.

I discovered The Embodied Mind only after I'd completed a temporary gallery installation The Constitutive Fantasy. This project is all about failed citizenship as it is and in photographs.

It was two dusty sheets of plastic written over with texts about imagination legible only in the adjacent mirror, hung from the jam above the window of Botanic Gallery in Bushwick, Brooklyn, what used to be a Botanica (but lost the a), and at the time functioned also as the Vinos en Wyckoff storeroom (whose proprietor quite generously sponsored openings).

The Commons opened as part of Beat Nite, an event hosted by Jason Andrew’s Norte Maar, a neighborhood art walk I have nothing with which to compare.
I mention this now to make a point about the really plainly intuitive nature of my process. A series of drawings curated by Jacqueline Mabey (Jackson Pollock, 2012 pictured here), are likewise intuitive. Handwriting, perhaps the quintessential skill-based, ubiquitous, time-based medium, kind of serendipitously tends to reflect the intimate truths of our new technologies and devices. It is already a work about itself.

As Lawrence Weiner writes:

*The painting stopped at the edge. When you are dealing with language there is no edge that the picture drops over or drops off. You are dealing with something completely infinite. Language, because it is the most non-objective thing we ever developed in this world, never stops.*

My work takes experience, thought, and ideology as action, as behavior, and as context, situated in the world. As a result, my works are rarely legible at a glance. And while there is a tension between performance and ethnography, try to consider how “performance retains a quality of impermanence [...] marked temporally” giving us at least the now-ness of the real that ethnography sacrifices, for preservation. As we are seeing in many contemporary renderings of early conceptual, cybernetic, and performative installations and exhibitions, a cover is often a new song, reproductions of events—in time—are new events. So like any and all political revolution or change in the weather (which go on whether or not televised), our everyday reality is never written, but still, is always writing.

In closing, a brief transcript from my 2011 *Project Statement*:

*opportunities for being as thought comes through listening—in ways, both before and after having heard. In ways both inside and outside of context—in ways a tangible, unavoidably concrete object, and in ways as immovable, as elusive to holding as sound so properly must be. The whole of it then, because you, we, one is incapable of listening only with the ears, or heart or mind, but that doing enters/exits—exists.*

“If I don’t [write] I’ll be lost, and in losing myself lose you.” My intent is to replace focus on any formal, finished piece of writing, to the being and doing of thinking. I hope I’ve been able to hint at the ethics underlying my practice. The presence of the writer persists in writing for print; digital type, and other new forms of word processing and communication like texting, chatting. We “write” with our minds and our spines, our devices and our environments, our histories and interactions. Maybe these works render something about the social, intersubjective implications of telematics as they are currently reconfiguring conventional notions of space, and time.
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3. As reappropriated by many New York artists in the 1960s and 70s from Eastern zen philosophy, a *koan* is an unanswerable puzzle, an exercise in absurdity. This recalls also Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “experiment” in understanding thought through physiological observation of the brain. Wittgenstein’s assertion that words can be learned only through *use*, can be extrapolated also to art and design education, so that we understand creativity via what creativity can *do*, rather than what it is. Per design studies specifically, this highlights two interconnected aspects for research, both elements of context: 1) media, knowledge, history, and 2) body, performance, locus, or *interaction*. The source exemplifies itself whereby refuting then-traditional cognitive sciences approaches Wittgenstein unfortunately also overlooks the body—due his period and Modern rationalist perceptions. See especially *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary studies for the ‘Philosophical Investigations’,* c1933-35 (Borgo Press, San Bernardino California, 1960).

4. See *PostScript; Information*, and *Six Years* among early important exhibitions on conceptual and cybernetic art. See also especially *Art by Telephone... Recalled* a recent project curated by Paris-based historian and professor Sébastien Pluot, who says of the curator of the 1969 exhibition *Art by Telephone*: Jan van der Marck, who was referring to both Marcel Duchamp and Laszlo Moholy Nagy in the invitation lettres to the artists: “If we analyze precisely some works, it is clear that the artists are responding to these references and take positions (LeWitt is referring to the grid Nagy used but introduce variation and interpretation space/ Bochner is playing on words in a way that is close to Duchamp’s way of delegating...)”

5. This duality inherent in artistic pursuits is outlined for our period most eloquently by Carl Jung in 1950, in *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966) where Jung writes “Every creative person is a duality or synthesis of contradictory qualities. On the one side they are human beings with a personal life, while on the other they are impersonal creative processes...[Thus] a specifically artistic psychology is more collective than personal in character.”

6. For the most comprehensive history of writing, through the history of neurological development in reading, see Wolf’s *Proust and the Squid: The story and science of the reading brain* (Harper: New York, 2007).

7. See Adriaan Van Der Weel’s, *Changing our Textual Minds: Towards a digital order of knowledge* for an examination of not only different modes of production and dissemination of writing and print, but how these cognitive motor shifts may be related to ideological change (Manchester University Press, 2011).

8. ...as perhaps *Don Juan* may have had it in his psycho-ethnography critique of the Western tendency to “walk on y/our heads”. And as maybe Urs Fischer means when he recommends "*think with your feet, walk with your head,*” in *The New Decor*, edited by Ralph Rugoff (London: Hayward Publications, 2010). Constraints for cloud test were established in an effort to isolate and re-visit the physical processes of learning to write, yet they also and perhaps only incidentally reflect new issues attributed to the actual cloud. Some of these and other related theoretical issues are described in the 2012 Metahaven essay “*Captives of the Cloud.*” Described as a “planetary-scale infrastructure... first made possible by an incremental rise in computing power, server space, and trans-continental fiber-optic connectivity,” some attributes of the cloud are weirdly resonant also with the efforts of medieval monks in isolation. ...Despite the now apparent and popular imagination of medial immateriality, ubiquity, post-nationalism, and transparency, both projects
demonstrate an actuality much more intensively opaque, centralized, and geographic than they may seem.

9. See Lawrence Shapiro’s *Embodied Cognition* (Routledge: New York, 2011). Part One introduces and critiques traditional cognitive science, Part Three provides my introduction to embedded cognition. This new cognitive science, together with posthuman media theories; emerging and traditional medicines suggest that a primary attribute of humanity (and cognition), is a cumulative effect of social and ecological situatedness. While I would scream bloody terror against measuring human character according to physical features you might also try Ken Dychtwald’s *Body Mind* (Putnam: New York, 1977) and maybe do some yoga, another practice that gets outward presentation redundant to sense, meaning.


OTHERS/OTHERING/(M)OTHERS

Patricia Denys
Platt College

We have put Nature and all of its inherent value into the category of Other, and we are certainly disconnected from it. Most of us do not know or even question where our food comes from, nor do we always, if at all, practice being Green. Most of us do not see the torture, hear the screaming or smell the blood during the slaughtering process that occurs before the meat is on the plate. As someone else has done that for us, we are easily able to categorize animals for food as Others as we have no moral obligation to them. How can we presume one species is more important or of lesser value than the other? Non-humans do not historically take more than they need. We humans cannot seem to control ourselves at the salad bar. As a species, our concept of our “rights” and an overbearing sense of entitlement have overshadowed our ability to listen to our primal instincts. Being in the category of “Others,” means being less valued. All things are “other” in our anthropocentric culture.

As a culture, we use words and images in the media and amongst ourselves in order to influence behavior. The media reflects and influences our cultural beliefs about ourselves and about other beings. Not only do advertisements, books, television, and film encourage expected behavior, they often contain underlying themes that reflect and enforce how we are structured as a society. We often use misperception, objectification and denial in order to propagate myths and to alienate. The repetition of certain texts encourages acceptance and often denies accountability.

What does the subject of consumption mean and how is it masked? Is it only in relation to buyers and merchandise, to the visual consumption of images, to the consumption of another by eating or the consumption of a woman’s sexuality, for example?

Our love affair with meat is consummated by meat eating. The mythology of meat eating is inherent to our culture. It is supported by our government, and generally believed that it is the best way to stay strong.

The “Beef: It’s What’s for Dinner” campaign demonstrates a myth foisted on the consumer regarding health. Every hour, over one hundred people die in the United States due to heart disease. Vegetarians are about 50% less likely to die from heart disease. On the Cattlemen’s Beef Board web site, the “Beef: It’s What’s for Dinner” campaign is explained. “When introduced to the new creative, consumers agreed beef was the only protein that could make such a majestic and powerful statement and so ‘Powerful Beefscapes’ was born.” The “need for meat” becomes the rationale for suppression and violence in factory farming.

Other cultural practices contribute to our separation from Nature. We have a clever way
of changing a living thing’s beingness by altering language. We say steak or hamburger instead of cow, pork or bacon rather than pig, leg of lamb rather than lamb’s leg, and chicken wings not chicken’s wings. Author and activist Carol Adams’ “absent referent” refers to the thought process that separates the meat eater from the end product. Adams’ “Absent Referent” is: “[ . . . ] to keep our “meat “ separated from any idea that he or she was once an animal who was butchered, to keep something (like hamburger) from being seen as having been someone (a cow, a lamb, a once-alive being, a subject.).”

The most omnipresent example of our disconnect with Nature involves factory food production in, as writer Carol Adams call it, the “flesh packing industry.” Animals are processed, disassembled, packed, and dressed. The majority of animals we eat are female and mothers. The females are impregnated forcefully while under physical restraint called a “rape rack” and held in “iron maidens” for the birthing process. Farrowing crates are metal prisons in which the mother sow is not allowed to move. Theoretically, the crate is to prevent her from rolling over on her young, but in reality it is about economy.

The truth is, the practice is based on space – less space means more animals, and that means higher production. In this ghastly prison, the sow is not allowed to turn over or walk, much less nurture. A broiler chicken has about a half of a square foot in which to live. In the microwave she has more room than she ever did when alive. Over one hundred thousand pigs die in transport each year and most are crippled by the time they get to the slaughterhouse having never touched the grass of a pasture, much less been on a family farm. Factory farming denies the beingness and the connectedness to Nature of over 9 1/2 billion animals annually in cloistered slaughterhouses and 21.7 billion sea animals in the United States each year. If you are an animal raised for food, everything natural is denied you. Your life is about confinement. This represents dismissal of a life as unimportant or nonexistent.

Raising animals in confinement for their lives until killed for food forces them into a life of loneliness, unspeakable suffering and a denial of individuality. The denial of harm done to animals has become culturally entrenched. As philosopher Theodore Adorno, a German Jew forced into exile by the Nazis wrote, “Auschwitz begins wherever someone looks at a slaughterhouse and thinks: they’re only animals” (qtd. in Patterson, Eternal Treblinka, 53).

Women and animals share an interconnectedness in how they are viewed, how they are marketed and, ultimately, how they are consumed. Even women being looked upon as closer to Nature and therefore, closer to animals, can lead to her denigration. Does “animal lover” mean “sentimentalist” which in turn means female? Meat eating weaves together the oppression of women and of animals. The majority of animals we eat are female and mothers. The marginalization of animals forces them into a category of Otherness, or those who are lesser than as they can be consumed. The “category” of
being controlled, due to man’s sense of entitlement, is one that is shared by females. One has to be seen as consumable, as useable, as something rather than someone.

This objectification has become so ingrained in our culture in the West that it denies accountability, and propagates the myth that how women and animals are marketed is acceptable. Being associated with animals represents disempowerment.

We reduce the animal to “dumb” to justify why our victim deserves such treatment when in fact it is our own misunderstanding of them. We delude ourselves that animals “beg” us to eat them, as the woman who wears a short skirt is “begging” for rape. Beasts of burden are labeled “lazy” or “stubborn” if they do not perform the task for which they have no choice. Emotional distancing through words or actions allows contempt without guilt.

The blurring of the distinction between animals and women can clearly be demonstrated in advertising spreads in which animals are dressed as women. Animals are often reduced to body parts, and sometimes marketed with sexual innuendos referring to women’s body parts. Colonel Sanders asks of his chicken consumers, “Are you a breast man or a leg man?” Animals such as birds, pigs and cows are often marketed using imagery usually associated with the objectification of a woman. A pig in a bikini, various animals with cleavage; hand, (or hoof, or wing) on hips or in high heels have all been used. The illustrations usually depict the animal smiling, positioned on all fours; rear view, standing on two legs, or an open laughing mouth in order to appear to encourage the consumer to eat them. The depiction of non-human animals as whores is anthropornography. These images are meant to be seen as something consumable or, more importantly, desirable. The Chicago Restaurant, “Uncommon Ground” has on its menu the “Double D Cup” breast of turkey. Harper’s Country Hams in Kentucky incorporated an illustration of a large, pink, heavily eye-lashed pig shown from the rear with head turned, mouth smiling, as part of their logo. This adds another connotation to the expression “Come and get it!” Stephanie Ross states, “oppression does not require the awareness or co-operation of its victims” (qtd. in Dunavey, “Sexist Words, Speciesist Roots,” 17). “Pork: The Other White Meat” was an advertising slogan developed in 1987 by advertising agency Bozell, Jacobs, Kenyon & Eckhardt for the National Pork Board.

Body chopping in ads shows parts of a female’s body or an animal’s in order to deny individuality by fragmenting body parts. Fragmented body parts become sexualized. In her book, The Pornography of Meat, Carol Adams says, “Pleasurable consumption of consumable beings is the dominant perspective of our culture. It is what subjects do to objects, what someone does with something.” “And so the question that comes to mind is just how does someone become something? How does someone come to be viewed as an object, a product, as consumable?” As Adams further states, the “sexual politics of meat” traps everyone, women, animals and men. More myths are propagated through the negative imagery of any species which in turn continue to
oppress that species. Writer Melinda Vadas said, “Meat is like pornography. Before it was someone’s fun, it was someone’s life.”

The objectification of women and animals in everyday language contributes to their oppression through the power of naming. Naming propagates the myth of how women and animals are marketed as being acceptable. Altering language changes a living thing’s beingness. Language is a powerful tool in linking women and animals. Women are called “chicks,” “birds,” “kittens,” “pussies,” “beavers,” “foxes,” “biddies,” bitches,” “cows,” “sows,” and “bunnies.” They are called names of other beings, beings who are not free to determine their own identities. We mock: “She’s a fat pig (or cow).” A woman is a “dog” or “sow” if she has not met the social obligation of being “pretty.” We oppress in a patriarchal way by comparing animals and women to “prey” in hunting and seduction and by doing so, continue to give both a lesser status. Most of the connotations refer to a life of servitude such as hen, cow, and bitch. Animal pejoratives denigrate all non-human animals as well.

Today’s female cows live a life of servitude that begins with being artificially inseminated shortly after one year of age. They lactate for ten months after giving birth and are then inseminated again, continuing the cycle in order to produce milk for the only mammal who drinks milk after weaning; humans. Cows are either confined to massive, crowded lots full of their own waste, or spend their lives standing on concrete. The natural lifespan of a cow is twenty years. They can produce milk for eight or nine years. By the time cows are four or five years old, as a result of conditions on factory farms from stress causing disease, lameness, and reproductive problems, they are rendered worthless to the dairy industry. At this time, they are slaughtered.

The female chicken’s plight exemplifies our disconnectedness to Nature in regards to how her real life is in contrast to how the media represents her, and, as a consequence, how she is perceived. She is the perfect example of perception vs. reality in how her life is lived in contrast to how her life is presented, as her life from birth is one of servitude.

The female chicken’s two-year existence is a life lived against her will and against every natural grain in her being. Her body is not her own. Her natural desires to dust bathe, roost above predators and nurture her young are denied her. Instead, her two years in a factory farm are a living hell, an insane asylum. She lives with 4-8 other debeaked hens in a single wire battery cage measuring 18” x 18” x 14.” These cages are stacked in dimly lit buildings holding up to 125,000 hens. She cannot stretch, spread her wings, or nest. She stands on wire, stretches her neck through wire to eat swill from a tray, lays her eggs on wire with no place to prepare or nest, defecates through wire and often dies on wire, before her slaughter after two years as an egg layer. Those who do survive two years as a battery hen, do so only to face a horrific slaughter. She will ultimately have more room in the household microwave.
She is lastly reduced to garbage on a plate, automatically thrown away with the paper cups, cigarettes and gum; without a thought for what she once was, or rather never had a chance to be. Yet, she remains a pastoral symbol in the kitchen; decorating hand towels, painted on the morning coffee cups, dyed at Easter, and referenced as a nurturing mother figure in children’s books. The genocide of over 25 million chickens a day ends the lives of these gentle, earthy souls. This self-serving affair with meat that was once a being operates between desire and denial.

Animals are consumable because they are controllable. We elevate the word, “man,” through capitalization. This one linguistic treatment distinguishes man from other species. We do not capitalize “oyster” or “chicken.”

Goldfish, mice, bugs, and snakes, for example, are often denied dignity and worth, therefore taking on a “lesser than” status even within their own species by humans who decide who is “worthy” of even the name “animal;” of who is a “good “ animal or a “smart” animal such as a dog. We have continued to exploit and victimize animals throughout time, even using that as a foundation to victimize each other. Ironically, who is it that we turn to when there is no one else—often an animal companion; other animals are “others.” Despite this bond, HSUS estimates that 8-10 million dogs/cats enter the shelters each year and 4-5 million are euthanized.

Both human genders often mirror the oppressors and promote speciesism by denigration of animal species in proclaiming that they “do not want to be treated like an animal.” Removing humans from animalkind promotes the speciesist belief that humans not only differ from non-human animals but also are inherently superior. We signify that opposite genders are Others to each other and non-human animals are Others to both genders. Sexism works through speciesism. Categorization creates discrimination or types and invalidates individuals’ rights. Categorizing as inferior justifies the entitlement to exploit/dominate.

The public display industry, made up of zoos, aquariums and marine parks and the like, exploits and dominates species who have no choice by forcing animals to live impoverished lives in confinement. These environments certainly do not promote animals’ natural behavior, as if they were in their own environments. Restricting a wild animal inhibits its behavioral needs, which in turn, presents an inaccurate picture as to who this animal really is. Additionally, the live capture of an animal not only affects that animal, but the group that animal is removed from. The live capture method is invasive, traumatic and often lethal to the animal. Naming an Orca “Shamu,” or any name like a cartoon character seems to break down the wild animal into a friendly beast who looks forward to a photo op.

This industry depletes existing groups and affects the future of all generations of cetaceans plusshortens the lives of those captured. According to WSPA (World Society for the Protection of Animals) and the Humane Society of the United States, less than
5-10 percent of aquaria and dolphinarium are involved in conservation programs although they claim otherwise. Marine parks also have an issue with space for the animals as even in a “generous” space allocation for a marine park pool, a dolphin has access to less than one ten-thousandth of one percent of their normal habitat size. The argument by marine parks and zoos that they are educating the public is absurd. In fact, they are desensitizing humans in regards to the real needs of any animal in captivity plus placing us in a category as observers of nature rather that as a part of it.

How can oppression dehumanize; meaning reduce humans to animal status yet oppression cannot dehumanize an animal? “Animals exist categorically as that which is not human; they are not acknowledged as having human qualities that can be denied.” “Rather it is the right of a sentient creature to have its interests in remaining unharmed considered equally when weighed against the interests of another sentient creature.”

Intoxicated by the power to exploit, we have ravaged the earth and its creatures, and look upon those other than ourselves as others. We are part of not apart. Until we recognize and most importantly, believe, that all creatures of the Earth’s natural ecosystem have intrinsic worth, our efforts to connect to Nature will continue to be aborted by our own inherent desires, ego and constant interferences.

Humans are not unique in regards to possessing organized brains, having a dialect or the ability to abstract think or reason. Carl Sagan asks:

Is it possible that the intelligence of Cetaceans is channeled into the equivalent of epic poetry, history and elaborate codes of social interaction? Are whales and dolphins like human Homers before the invention of writing, telling of great deeds done in years gone by in the depths and far reaches of the sea (qtd. in Gray, Green Paradise Lost, 12)?

The practice of expiation is long overdue. Labels, labeling, categorizing, and segregation; all of which contribute to Othering, is in our past. Subscribing to Gynocentrism, Androcentrism, and describing anthropomorphically—all contribute to an anthropocentric attitude based on our cultures. If humans are superior or of greater rationality over all creatures, how does that allow the exploitation of things of lesser rationality? It is humans who have signified that humankind represent all that is deserving and superior. We oppress through speciesism yet we are all animalkind, we are all part of the Earth, and there are no, Others.
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22. Dunayer 19.


26. Adams *Neither Man* 77.


Oxford linguist R.M. Sainsbury addresses a particular problem in linguistics known as “reference without referent” in his book of the same title. There exists a class of words, proper nouns, which are clearly signifiers, but their “signifieds” are unclear. In normal language use, common nouns point toward a more or less clear referent. The signifier *cup* points to a signified which is recognized to be a ceramic vessel out of which one drinks a liquid. Most common nouns are of this sort: *book, table, lamp, desk,* etc. Understanding the relationship between signifier and signified presents no particular difficulty in these cases.

But some cases exist where the signified is ambiguous or even absent, and that is true of proper nouns. When you say “I am going to London to see the Olympics,” what exactly do you mean by *London* and *Olympics*? No one sees all of “London.” At most, one sees or experiences a number of metonymies for London: Big Ben tower, Buckingham Palace, Harrods, Parliament, Hyde Park, The Tower of London, etc. The experience of “London” will be different for each person who visits there. For that matter, no one really lives in “London”; one lives in a neighborhood or section of the London area, in the same way that no one really lives in “New York,” but may live in SoHo, the Bronx, etc. Yet all of those metonyms and restricted locations are subsumed into the proper nouns *London* or *New York.* In these cases, we have references, or signifiers, but the referents are not discrete entities like *cup.* Insignificant ways, the referents for proper nouns become less clear the more we try to pin them down.

The problem of reference without referent becomes even more complex with proper names of people. If I walk into a showroom full of dinnerware and someone says, “Would you hand me a cup?” I know precisely what to look for, but if I walk into a room full of people and someone says, “Look at that Mary over there,” I don’t really know what a *Mary* looks like. And one “Mary” will not be like another. What exactly is the referent for a proper noun that names a person rather than an object or place? There are no necessary characteristics to being a *Mary* except, perhaps to be human and female. After that, all bets are off. Adding to the difficulty of proper names is the fact that the same signifier or name applies to a person from christening until death, no matter what changes occur during that person’s life. As Sainsbury and others point out, proper names form a linguistic category which operates significantly differently than the category of common nouns.

The relationship of proper nouns to their referents becomes even more slippery, if possible, when there is no real subject which they name. That is, the city of “London”
people named “Mary” have a physical existence, however vague, which their
signifier points to, but what about a proper name like Sherlock Holmes or Jane Eyre?
Here we have references or signifiers which point to “people” who do not and never
have really existed. Sherlock Holmes and Jane Eyre name fictional characters whose
existence is fantastical and which consists only of the sum total of words, pictures,
films, and commentary that have been produced about them. The signified, when
examined, proves to be a chimera.

This line of inquiry brings us, ultimately, to the question of religious language and what
we name when we use the proper name God. What does the reference or signifier God
or Allah (from the Arabic “the God”) point to? Is the proper noun God like Sherlock
Holmes in that the divine or the divinity is no more than the sum total of words written
and spoken about it in all the religions of the world? Here we are beyond territory into
which even Sainsbury is willing to go very far.\(^2\) We are in an area called theo-linguistics
which exists on the far side of the linguistic wilderness where language becomes very
slippery indeed.

Theo-linguistics asks what exactly we are naming when we say God. Those who
maintain that religion is a bunch of hokum would say, “Nothing. Now that you mention
it, the name God is just like Sherlock Holmes; there is nothing that we are naming when
we use those names. God names a total fabrication of the human imagination, created
in our image to satisfy our primitive and superstitious desire for a god-father in heaven
to explain all we cannot explain with human reason, but God has no more existence
than Sherlock Holmes or Jane Eyre. God is a mere linguistic construct.”

At the other end of the theo-linguistic spectrum, of course, stand the religious
fundamentalists. These true believers seem to know exactly what and who they mean
when they say God and not only that, they seem to know exactly what this old, white,
male divinity recommends about American foreign policy, health care, and gay
marriage because he speaks through AM radio and cable TV!

There is, I believe, a middle position on God language, one which relies on a theory of
metaphor and narrative which I began developing in my book Dangerous Words:
Talking About God in an Age of Fundamentalism. Mythology, or more broadly, poetry,
or even more broadly metaphor, gives us a language to talk about that which,
linguistically, falls into a category that is neither like the common noun—in which there
is reference with a referent—nor like the proper noun—in which there is reference
without a referent—but rather a third category in which there is a referent but the
referent transcends our ability to talk about it as clearly as we talk about a cup or a
Mary or London or even Sherlock Holmes.

Virtually all religious traditions admit that the word or words we use to name our God
or gods are inadequate to truly denote the reality of our experience of the divine. (That
we forget this has led to much of the contemporary world’s tragedy.) Pseudo-
Dionysios, as early as the 5th century C.E., referred to the ultimate transcendence and ineffability of God as “the Divine Dark” and an anonymous medieval author referred to it as “the Cloud of Unknowing.” The Jewish, Zen Buddhist, Islamic and Hindu traditions all acknowledge the final failure of language to point directly at what we experience when we experience the divine, as do the Igbo of Nigeria whose chief divinity is referred to as “He who cannot be named.” Nonetheless, people will be talking about God or the gods as if what they were talking about can be delimited by a name.

I want to approach this problem of theo-linguistics via an analog in the visual arts—in keeping with our conference theme of “WordImage/ImageWord.” In doing so, I want to suggest an outline for an approach to a “theolinguistics” and “theoaesthetics” that will keep us from over-fetishizing and over-objectifying our notions of the divine—or, in religious terms, that would keep us walking humbly before our God.

The history of iconoclasm in western Christian art has been admirably documented in Alain Besançon’s The Forbidden Image. Because Christianity, in essence, grafted together elements of Judaism and Greek rationalism there existed a tension—an enlivening and enriching tension, as far as visual art is concerned—between the Hebraic prohibition against images of God and the rich artistic tradition of depicting the gods in the Hellenic and Roman world. Even as Christianity evolved and debated the meaning of Jesus’s incarnation, visual artists had already begun using Graeco-Roman artistic styles to depict both symbols of and depictions of the God-man Jesus. After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E., orthodox Christianity stated that the historical figure Jesus was both fully divine and fully human, that the single person of Jesus had a dual nature. That paradox—again an enlivening tension—led, of course, to much repression of other, heretical views like Arianism, Monophysitism, etc., which we don’t have time to go into. But it also led to an aesthetic debate and to periodic iconoclasm, which included both the distrust and sometimes the destruction of sacred images.

The iconoclastic controversy in early Christianity hinged on a singular issue: If the proper name of God, as in the orthodox Jewish tradition, is unspeakable because the reality of the divine always transcends any name we can put on it—that is, if the referent God always will elude the reference God—then the same case must be true for any visual image which seeks to depict the divine. To put paint on canvas, to depict the surface manifestation of Jesus, his physicality, his material part, is to miss the divine part of his dual nature. The difficulty is even more pronounced when trying to depict the un-incarnated Father and Spirit. How does one paint the divine which, by definition, transcends any physical depiction in the same way that it transcends any verbal formulation?

A statement by Pope Gregory, written in the 600’s C.E., points towards the Church’s official position. Gregory wrote, “It is one thing to worship a painting, and quite another to learn from a scene represented in a painting what ought to be worshipped. For what
writing provides for people who read, paintings provide for the illiterate (idiotis) who look at them, since these unlearned people see what they must imitate; paintings are books for those who do not know their letters, so that they take the place of books, especially among pagans” (qtd. On 149). The image, for Pope Gregory, is for purposes of edification and instruction of those who do not have access directly to Scripture (149). In a similar vein, Basil the Great (329-379 C.E.) had earlier written, “What telling offers the ears, painting reveals silently by imitation” (qtd. in Besancon 150). And Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335- ca. 395) had written, “The image is a book of language” (qtd. in Besancon 150) The image is “rhetorical,” persuading, instructing, moving, counseling, pleasing, praising, etc. (150), but it was not to be an idol worshipped for itself. After much argument and sporadic destruction of art in the early centuries of Christianity the matter was more or less settled by 843 C.E.

In the end, the resolution of the iconoclastic controversy hinged on the Christian theology of the Incarnation. Depictions of the divinity were made possible by the Incarnation because Jesus himself had physical form and, therefore, could be depicted visually. However, theologians cautioned, we are always to remember that the image does not capture the totality of what it purports to depict. In linguistic terms, the signifier in religious painting merely points to a signified which is recognized to be, in the final analysis, beyond signification.

The rest, as they say, is history—or, more particularly, art history. The ingenious solution to the problem of depicting the essential paradox of Christian theology—the fully-God fully-human Godman—was developed in the Byzantine icon and the canons governing the way in which supernatural realities could be depicted. And these canons form a very long, but surprisingly straight line between the art of the earliest icons and some of the most extreme abstract art of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The iconographic solution to the problem consists of painting the time-bound human figures of Jesus, Mary and the saints against a blank, usually gold, backdrop which is understood to represent the transcendent realm which forms a temporal backdrop to history. This is the divine hypostasis, that which stands beneath the visible, material world. The painterly solution is not to try to depict it in precise detail, since that would always, by definition, be incorrect or incomplete, but to suggest its ineffability by presenting us with an undefined but glowing field or ground from which the figures, depicted according to the strict canons of iconography, stand out.

These artistic canons come into western art, as such, in the early Renaissance, with painters like Giotto whose undefined backgrounds still suggest the divine, ultimately undepictable, hypostasis.

But with the Renaissance discovery of perspective and, more, under the influence of Renaissance humanism, a change occurs in way we depict divine figures. The golden background which represents the divine hypostasis disappears and is replaced by realistic earthly, clearly recognizable backgrounds drawn in naturalistic perspective as
we see in images from da Vinci and Raphael where the sacred figures are set in a place and time that is clearly Renaissance Italy, not eternity. The luminous, numinous background gives way to earthly reality.

Besancon shows how western art, under the dual influences of the Reformation and the Age of Reason, continued to turn the focus of art towards the earthly and material and away from the spiritual realm, especially in the Protestant north of Europe over the next two hundred years. The hypostasis goes largely ignored.

Until, that is, the advent of Romanticism when it returns in a new form. Robert Rosenblum in *Modern Painting and the Northern Renaissance Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, demonstrates how the Romantics, finding the traditional visual vocabulary of Christian religious art exhausted or turned to cliché, discovered in Nature the divine hypostasis that once was depicted in Byzantine and early Renaissance art. That is, in their luminous canvases of natural scenes the Romantic painters revealed the same divine light that the Byzantine icon painter attributed to the Christian God, except that now, instead of the divine light “standing below” the Christian story and traditional imagery, it “stands below” everyday nature.

It was not the mere surface of Nature that Romantic artists were attempting to depict but the power, energy and dynamism “standing below” Nature, what Myer Abrams called a “Natural Supernaturalism,” or that we may call a “hypostatic naturalism.” Romantic artists and poets would have expressed this not as an encounter with a personified God but rather as an experience of what they, following Burke, would have called “the sublime.”

In the luminous canvases by Caspar David Friedrich and other Romantics, we see the painter struggling with the same painterly problem Christian artists struggled with—trying to picture that which, ultimately, is unpicturable. The luminous skies of Friedrich and the glowing centers of J.M.W. Turner’s paintings hearken back visually to the pre-Renaissance backgrounds of Byzantine and Medieval art. As Rosenblum writes, “Friedrich’s painting corresponds to an experience familiar to the spectator in the modern world, an experience in which the individual is pitted against, or confronted by the overwhelming, incomprehensibility of the universe, as if the mysteries of religion had the left the rituals of the church and synagogue and had been relocated in the natural world” (14).

Which brings us, one hundred years later, to the 20th century and abstraction. Because they are often treated in art history classes as primarily experimenters in form and color, we forget that the important innovators of modern abstract art were self-consciously attempting to find ways to directly present the spiritual underpinnings of the world and of the human psyche—or soul—that the modern, scientific-materialist world had largely rejected.
Like the Romantics, many 20th century artists felt that the artistic vocabulary of orthodox Christian art was exhausted by many centuries of repetition. Some early modern artists (e.g. Gauguin, “Yellow Christ,” George Roualt “Head of Christ,” Salvador Dali “The Last Supper.”) tried to find fresh approaches to traditional Christian artistic subjects by changes in color, line and volume, but under the influence of Kandinsky and Malevich, others followed the Romantics and went straight for the hypostasis—taking the underlying spiritual experience of the divine, which is undepictable, and attempting to put it on canvas in such a way that the viewer of the painting experiences the hypostasis directly rather than through the medium of a sacred or natural narrative.

This was deliberate and conscious on the part of many of the artists: Kandinsky, Newman and Rothko, for example, to name just three. In his landmark book, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, Wassily Kandinsky calls for an “art that is above nature” and sets the stage for his own non-representational art as well as that of Malevitch.

Two 20th century American painters—Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko—were very explicit about their intent to depict the undepictable, or the spiritual in their art, and thereby to give the viewer the direct experience of the numinous in the experience of the canvas itself. Their dilemma, as Rosenblum expresses it in Modern Painting and the Northern Renaissance Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko, was “how to express experiences of the spiritual, of the transcendental without having recourse to such traditional themes as the Adoration, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, the Ascension whose vitality, in the Age of Reason, was constantly being sapped” (15). That is, how to depict the spiritual reality without depicting the narrative in which the spiritual has traditionally been embedded.

Newman, after studying Northwest Coast native American art, wanted to use a modernist medium to capture what he saw as the mysterium tremendens et fascinosans in native art and he brought to his experiments in painting a ritual sensibility. Newman’s mature work combined his interest in the sciences, philosophy, religion, Jewish mysticism and the cabala and Christian mythology. By giving his deliberately non-representational art works suggestive titles like “Onement” or “Lama Sabachthani: Stations of the Cross,” he creates, according to Nicole Debrieul-Blondin, a tension “between the suggestive force of the subject and the formal reticence of the painted motif,” forcing the viewer to resolve the tension between the modern minimalist canvas and the ancient religious reference. This becomes, in effect, “a kind of icon without iconography” (159).

The unbounded nature of the canvas and the scale Newman works in suggests to the viewer that the field of the painting extends off into infinity, the “zip” moving upwards and downwards into space. Debrieul-Blondin says Newman’s paintings “were not designed as simple alternative images for contemplation. They were also intended to
open up a space where one could encounter the unsayable and the unrepresentable” (162)

Of “The Stations of the Cross,” Newman said that the subject matter was “the story of each man’s agony.” In the original catalog for the 1966 show at the Guggenheim, he wrote, “This is the Passion . . . the question that has no answer” (In the Tower).

Mark Rothko’s work also seems, at first glance subjectless, divorced of narrative. Unlike Newman, Rothko does not even give the viewer the (mixed) benefit of a suggestive title, preferring instead descriptions like “Orange, Red and Red,” or a simple “Untitled, No. 64.” And yet, he insisted his paintings were not subjectless abstractions. Or, more precisely, the painting itself, as painting, was the medium through which the viewer could experience directly the mysterium which forms the basis of all authentic religious experience. Rothko’s statement of purpose, quoted in Rosenblum, said “I am not interested in relationships of color or form or anything else. . . . I am interested only in expressing the basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on—and the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted by pictures shows that I communicate with those basic human emotions. The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point!” (125).

Because Rothko’s work, though explicitly and intentionally religious, could not find a home in traditional places of worship, the Menil family had Philip Johnson create the chapel in Houston that is now referred to as, simply, “The Rothko Chapel.” The octagonal shape of the building suggests the baptistry of the Duomo in Florence, and the arrangement of the canvases refers to medieval altar triptychs. Rosenblum concludes, “It is as if the entire content of Western religious art were finally devoid of its narrative complexities and corporeal imagery, leaving us with these dark, compelling presences that pose an ultimate voice between everything and nothing. But the very fact that they create their own hierarchy of mood, shape, and sequence, a uniqueness and duplication, of increasingly dark and somber variations of plum, maroon, and black, suggests the presence here of some new religious ritual of undefinable, yet universal dimensions” (218). Anyone who has experienced the space inside the Rothko chapel knows that its sacred quality is as palpable as the sense of the sacred one gets in the Pazzi chapel or any other exquisitely organized small sacred space that is designed not to impress but to evoke the infinite in space and time.

Yet, as these detail slides of Byzantine art and Friedrich’s work show, the infinite was almost always part of religious art in the west, whether it took the form of the shining gold “hypostasis” in “The Heavenly Ladder of St. John Climacus” or the gold mosaic background of “The Last Supper” in St. Appolinaire in Classis or in the brooding sky of Friedrich’s “Monk by the Sea.”
The linguistic analog to all this, I believe, can be found in Samuel Beckett—usually understood as the literary prophet of the void. I believe the use of prolonged silences in *Waiting for Godot* and other Beckett plays is the linguistic analog to the abstract spaces, intense patches of color and formless forms of the 20th century artists who were his contemporaries. As Martin Eslin pointed out in his landmark book *The Theater of the Absurd*, Beckett was essentially a spiritual playwright. That is—as much perhaps as that of any medieval mystery or morality play—his subject matter was the spiritual condition of being human. (In fact, Beckett’s idea for Godot may have been influenced by a Friedrich painting of two men caught in awe of the moon.) Of our problem of reference without referent, Beckett himself wrote, “There is nothing to express, nothing from which to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (qtd. in Esslin 17).

Now, as always, what makes words and images powerful is not what they express but that which lies just outside the borders of their expression, that towards which they point, even if that towards which they point is ultimately beyond the ability of the writer or the artist to depict. The “holy” exists in the electric gap between the concrete reference (the medium of words or paint and canvas) and that which forever eludes our grasp.

NOTES

1. Keeping with standard linguistic practice, words are italicized when referring to the word as a word rather than that which it signifies.
2. Sainsbury refers to the linguistic problem of God in a paragraph citing Bertrand Russell’s brief discussion of the word God, p. 23.

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DO IMAGES TRUMP WORDS IN IDENTIFYING PLANTS?

Maura C. Flannery  
St. John’s University, New York

I make a presentation at this conference almost every year, but I have to admit that it is sometimes a stretch to find a topic that I am knowledgeable about that also fits with the meeting’s theme. This year I had no such problem. It was almost as if the topic had been selected with me in mind. For years I’ve been interested in the visual in biology. By its nature this topic involves both images and words—lots of both—because biologists, more than most scientists, use both words and images to communicate information and ideas about their research.

My current obsession is with herbaria, collections of preserved plant specimens, most of which are pressed plants taped or pasted to sheets of paper and preserved, by the thousands, in cabinets in botanical gardens, natural history museums, and universities. These specimens would be worthless without the labels, the words, affixed to them. At a minimum, a label gives the scientific name of the specimen, who collected it, as well as when and where it was collected. With such information, the plant becomes a unique and irreplaceable document indicating precisely what was growing at a particular place and time.

The first herbaria were created in the mid-16th century as were the first botanical gardens. In addition, this was the time when the first botanical libraries as well as printed herbals with excellent illustrations were created (Brunfels, 1530; Fuchs, 1542). These four were all important to the founding of modern botany, because they provided the information necessary for the comparative study of plants (Hewson, 1999). Obviously, the plants themselves growing in gardens were the best study material, but failing that preserved specimens were valuable, as were accurate images of the plants. It has been argued that botany could not develop as a science until after the invention of the printing press (Ivins, 1953). Without accurate images that can be precisely reproduced, it is often almost impossible to differentiate between closely related species because of the difficulty in putting subtle differences into words, differences that can easily be distinguished with images. In fact, Leonhart Fuchs, author of one of those early printed herbals wrote: “Who in his right mind would condemn pictures which can communicate information much more clearly than the words of even the most eloquent men? Those things that are presented to the eyes and depicted on panels or paper become fixed more firmly in the mind than those that are described in bare words (quoted in Charmantier, 2011, p. 366).”

The illustrations in the early printed herbals were woodcuts, in essence, black and white line drawings, though some copies were hand-watercolored. Such images provided the basic information needed for identification, and they still do. The standard
illustrations in articles on plant systematics are pen-and-ink drawings. There may also be photographs, but most botanists favor drawings because they more clearly present the important morphological characteristics that are the basis of identification. Photographs can’t do this; it takes the mind of an artist with a knowledge of what is important and the skill to know how to communicate this information to others. This type of art is a matter of a balance between filtering out the unnecessary and focusing on the essential.

Perhaps the person most responsible for the selection of important traits for identification is Carl Linnaeus, who developed the classification system which is still in many ways in use today. In analyzing how natural history developed in the 18th century—the age of Linnaeus—Michel Foucault (1970) argues that descriptions of plants and animals became focused on a few key properties to the exclusion of all others. Before that time, descriptions might include myths about the organism, instances of use, miraculous powers, etc., but with Linnaeus and like-minded naturalists descriptions became confined to certain key attributes, visible attributes. Vision is the sense that came to be most valued, so characteristics like scent and taste were no longer considered important, and even color was discounted. What counted were four characteristics: the form of the elements, the quantity of the elements, the manner in which they are distributed in space relative to each other, and the relative magnitude of each element. For a plant, all these are usually presented on a herbarium sheet, even the way elements are distributed in space. For example, despite the specimen’s flatness, a botanist can determine how the leaves are arranged in three-dimensions: whether opposite to each other on a stem, or alternating along the stem, or in a whorled pattern around the stem. These qualities can also be illustrated in line drawings such as those used in Fuchs and Brunfels, and down to present day floras.

Linnaeus is often quoted as denigrating the importance of images in communicating information about plants, but as Isabelle Charmantier (2011) has recently pointed out, the cited statement deals with genera, not species. He was in effect saying that one image cannot stand in for an entire genus which might include many species with disparate characteristics. She notes that when it came to species, he himself sometimes used images in published descriptions. However, he did take the view that images were more important for communicating with non-botanists than with other professionals. His view was also held by Joseph Dalton Hooker, who was himself an accomplished artist, something that was not true of Linnaeus (Endersby, 2008). Hooker’s watercolors were used in publications such as Curtis’s Botanical Magazine which he edited for many years. However, when it came to scientific publications, he considered pen-and-ink drawings were sufficient, if they were needed at all. So for many botanists, at least before the 20th century made the printing of images much easier, words were necessary in describing plants and images were more of a luxury, or a decoration to attract lesser minds. Or perhaps it might be more charitable, and more accurate, to say that images were more for instructing the nonspecialist than for informing the specialist.
When photography was developed, with its supposedly superior ability to present visual information objectively, it was assumed that botanical illustration would become obsolete, but this has hardly been the case. Pen-and-ink drawings remain the standard way for illustrating most of the botanical literature. Photographs are not as good at providing clear depth cues as illustrations can be, and artists can eliminate or underplay extraneous characteristics while clearly portraying the essential ones. Research has revealed that cameras and human vision work very differently, in that the latter makes sense of the world by emphasizing boundaries and the outlines of objects, while cameras treat each piece of information the same. In other words, an illustrator does just what the visual system does in outlining structures and emphasizing boundaries (Kingdon, 2011). It is no wonder that humans find such images satisfying and understandable. Robin Moran, an expert on ferns at the New York Botanical Garden, sees his illustrator, Haruto M. Fukuda, as a valuable research asset because the artist understands this group of plants well enough to have developed a sense of what to stress to make the drawings intelligible to the viewer and to include the necessary elements that Moran also stresses in his written commentary (Moran, 2004).

While images are very important, they obviously don’t replace words in botanical publications, which are full of the latter. In fact, the standard reference for plant classification for the Northeastern United States and Canada is a 900-page manual that has no pictures (Gleason and Cronquist, 1991). There’s a supplement with pen-and-ink illustrations of the plants (Holmgren, Holmgren & Gleason, 1998), but the unillustrated tome is the one usually used by botanists in the field. As one botanist told me, it is not easy to learn how to use or to tote around, but it gives the type of precise, detailed, and concise information needed to identify species relatively quickly. Back in the laboratory or herbarium, where multiple reference works, along with preserved specimens, are available, those field determinations can then be checked for accuracy.

It is often in the field where text and image first come together. Every botanist keeps a field notebook in which to record what is collected. At the point of collection, the specimen is recorded in the notebook, if possible with a species name and always with a collection number. Traditionally, botanists number their collections beginning with one; some have gotten to collection numbers in the tens of thousands. Along with number and name, the collector notes characteristics that will be lost when the specimen is dried, such as the color of the flowers and scent. Also it’s important to record information about the site of collection: was the plant numerous, what other species were in the area, soil type, etc.—the kind of information that won’t be preserved in the plant specimen itself. Today, it is also standard to include geo-referencing coordinates. When back in the lab or office, these notes are then transcribed, though today some people use an electronic notebook in the field, eliminating the need to transcribe—as long as they are near a power source to recharge the device, which has to be tough enough to withstand some nasty field conditions.

The value of field books is such that the Smithsonian Institution has undertaken a project in which many of the field notes in its collection are being scanned and made
available on the web. There is also a blog which describes some of the books and their creators (http://nmmh.typepad.com/fieldbooks/). In one post Emily Hunter (2012a), who trained as an art historian, discusses the description of the plant Solandra guttata, the cup of gold vine, written by the ethnobotanist Edward Palmer in 1906 during a trip to Mexico. The report’s clarity and ability to create a mental picture of the plant in the reader’s mind leads her to write: “There is an art of using the English language to paint a visual picture and convey information to others or even to oneself (to remember at a later date.) As an undergraduate studying art history, the skill of written description was invaluable for relating the look and feel of a work of art. But this skill translates to the sciences as well.” Obviously, this is an argument for words as well as images in taking notes. In a collection of essays about field books, Jenny Keller (2011) writes that field notes and sketches are better than photographs: “Colors in photographs are typically (sometimes dramatically) inaccurate, proportions are often distorted, and key features of the species may not be recorded clearly (or captured at all)” (pp. 162-163).

In still another field book, that of David Griffiths who worked for the USDA in the early 20th century and collected grasses and cacti in the Southwest, there are strange blots with penciled-in outlines (Hunter, 2012b). They turn out to be prints of different specimens of Opuntia or prickly pear fruits that have been cut in half. In the notebook, these prints are surrounded with written descriptions of the fruits and other characteristics of the plants. Nature prints such as these are another form of documenting plant structures, and occasionally were employed because it was often difficult if not impossible to preserve specimens in the field. This may have been the problem with the Opuntia fruits: they were too thick to dry quickly, were heavy to carry, and might rot before they could be preserved in alcohol, which would also have been difficult to tote around. Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland explored South America from 1799 to 1804, and collected thousands of plant specimens. However, the high humidity, rainy conditions, insects, and fungi often destroyed these collections. So for part of the journey they resorted to taking nature prints of the plants in addition to trying to preserve them (Lack, 2001). The prints were a form of insurance against loss of the plants themselves; at least they would have some visual evidence to study later. It must still have been a difficult procedure to make prints in the field, yet worth the effort because they provide a beautiful and informative record of over two hundred species.

Today, there is still another imaging method being used to communicate information about plants, and that is digital scanning. I’ve already mentioned it in terms of scanning herbarium specimens, but this technique is also being used to image fresh specimens. In some cases, these scans are meant to be works of art rather than of science, such as on an image of a fuchsia flower by Syd Johnson. In other cases, as in the work of Niki Simpson, the scans are used to make informative records of a species. It is in the style of a herbarium sheet, but with more elements than the typical herbarium sheet contains. However, there are some botanists who don’t mind including more than the plant itself and its label on a sheet. For example, the orchid expert Oakes Ames,
routinely attached drawings, watercolors, and photographs to herbarium sheets along with specimens (Flannery, 2012). His trust was in a combination of images, but sometimes, in addition, he even attached excerpts from journal articles with text describing the species. He obviously saw each modality providing some information, some truth, that was lacking from the others. There are sheets in his collection, which is housed at the Harvard Herbarium, which have portions of research articles and even entire articles attached to them. Herbarium sheets were obviously working documents for Ames, and he required both text and images to provide the information he needed.

I should also note that these sheets were family affairs for they often included pen and ink drawings and even watercolors by his wife, Blanche Ames, who was an accomplished artist. It is a chart of the taxonomic relationships among economically important plants. Blanche created it, along with several others, in 1916 for Oakes’ economic botany course. This is a digression from the herbarium, but it does fits with the image/word theme. This very powerful image does have some words on it, the names of the plants and a very classy label. It was meant to accompany the words which Oakes presented in his lectures. Here he is following in a tradition among biologists, and in this case botanists, that stretches back into the 19th century. Sometimes these charts were printed and mass produced, such as one of Cinchona, in other cases, they were homemade, such as this one that John Stevens Henslow created for botany course at Cambridge (Walters & Stow, 2001). Charts like this were eventually printed in a more formal style and sold to other educators.

Lorraine Daston (2012) has recently written about what she calls “sciences of the archive,” by which she means areas of research which involve the subject’s history as well as what is being newly discovered. Science is often portrayed as a constant move forward, with its past of little consequence. What is important is what happens in the laboratory, with the library being of use only to provide examples of mistaken ideas that new findings correct. Things are hardly this cut and dried in any science, but there are some for which the archives are particularly important, and as Daston notes, plant systematics is one of them. Someone who discovers what appears to be a new plant species must head not only to the library to find out if there is anything already written about it, but also to the herbarium, or to several of them, to search for similar specimens. Words and images are again related; neither alone can do the job. Daston gives a particularly complex example of this in the 17th-century attempt by the Paris Académie Royale des Sciences to produce a Histoire des plants that would describe all plants, drawing upon specimens, written descriptions, and illustrations. All of these would have to be studied in relation to each other to ultimately come to the correct presentation of the species. Needless to say, this project was never finished, and ended as little more than a mass of undigested data. Sometimes science can drown in a combination of words and images, but that doesn’t negate the importance of each, as well as of the power of their working together.
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IT’S NOT DADDY, IT’S PAUL: THE AFFECTIVE DESTABILIZATION OF THE SIGNIFIER IN ABJECT ART

Patrick Kinsman
Herron School of Art and Design, IUPUI

I have shown two Paul McCarthy videos in classes: “Family Tyranny” (1987) and “Painter” (1995). In both of these, McCarthy is the performer, playing an ambiguous role. In “Tyranny” he seems to be a father figure to Mike Kelley playing the son, and in “Painter” he is a demented New York School painter. McCarthy’s vocalizations—which include but extend beyond speech—both in “Family Tyranny” and in “Painter,” suggest a man who is barely in control of some emotional outburst, or perhaps a man accustomed to undisciplined, animalistic emotions. There is an unpredictable, disturbing violence in McCarthy’s voice which combines working-man roughness (“Dis” instead of “this”) with childish sing-song (“Daddy come home from work again”) and repetitiveness (“a very bad boy”) and an almost tangible psychopathology which could be cold menace or pitiable disability and which often switches from the tone of one to that of the other.

“Family Tyranny” is immediately uncanny. McCarthy seems to be trying to get a reticent child to eat, but this quickly becomes a bizarre “do it yourself” TV program about some unspecified and generational violence: my daddy did this to me, and you can do it to your boy. Any parent of a young child has struggled with feeding, but in “Family Tyranny” we see McCarthy forcefully pushing a plastic cone into a polystyrene ball which is only in the simplest way a face with an open mouth. It isn’t simply metaphor, where the ball-and-cone stands in for some terrifying parent-on-child violence. The images, combined with McCarthy’s narration, summon TV programming such as cooking or craft shows. The reference to “do this at home” intensify the “how-to” program aesthetic, but then the admissions of “being done” summon generations-deep child abuse, or at the very least, uncomfortable discipline: “My daddy did this to me, this is what happened to me.” Between the narration, the images and the contextual information, we can’t tell if we are watching an instructional show about abuse, the confessions of some psychopath, or even a hilarious parody of family discipline. None of these meanings are stable; the video seems to constantly shift from horror to humor and from TV show to interiority. In multiple ways it is familiar, but it is also always transgressing its own, and our, boundaries.

In terms of image and text, Family Tyranny can be seen as all video can: moving images with spoken (or here, vocalized) text. There are two “characters,” McCarthy’s “Daddy” and Kelley’s “Boy,” and a number of comically simple stage setups. Filmed on an easily recognizable television stage, McCarthy pours some liquid into a cone which is
shoved into a ball on a stick. Some of the liquid drips down the pole onto which the ball-and-cone stands. Later, he washes some white sticky substance off of a small doll in a cup of water, while he coos “Sorry, so sorry.” At another point, Mike Kelley is squirming and screaming under a table while covered with a blanket; meanwhile McCarthy pounds a baseball bat onto the table, down into a tall cup of thin white liquid. These are not even theatrical performances, with drama and character; they are more like actors workshopping outside of performance. Were it possible to simply watch “Family Tyranny” without feeling it, the video would seem ridiculous, undramatic and amateur. There is tension in any definition of “Family Tyranny” that could be given: it looks like a cheap public service announcement, but it sounds like some kind of horrifying instructional video on abuse. McCarthy is both “Daddy” and, for those who know his performance persona, the character “Paul McCarthy,” simultaneously. The mayonnaise is simultaneously a food, a mark of discipline (perhaps force-feeding?) and the physically and psycho-emotionally sticky legacy of trauma. This polyvalence is part of the piece’s uncanniness, and what gives “Family Tyranny” its power.

Maggie Nelson, in The Art of Cruelty, asks how this video manages to make us ill at ease, and argues that for emotional impact, artifice and simulation are key (99). This is contrary to, for example, what Linda Williams once called the “body genres” of film, where melodramatic tears or horror shock create those emotions in onlookers. For simulation and artifice to be key to emotional impact in McCarthy, we need not to see and hear, but to re-see and hear. Nelson writes:

   The Father figure is already re-performing these actions on his son—parodically, pedagogically—for the viewer’s benefit [and this] makes the piece more insidious, because it liberates the abuse from the burden of believable representation, and places a crystallized version of its effects on display (99-100).

This means that we are intentionally not given believable representation because the video depicts not the event, but the effects of the event. Since both Father and Son have already experienced the event, there is no before or outside the event. That is, everything that we see—a plastic cone, a topless man, a jar of mayonnaise—is already committed to the video’s affective possibilities. Everything is already guilty.

Affect is usually defined as “emotion.” Quoting Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, who themselves are quoting Gilles Deleuze who is quoting Spinoza, affect is “a body’s capacity to affect and to be affected” (Affect Theory Reader, 2). Affective possibilities are all of the effects that a thing (here, a video) can have; affect is consummately relational. Unlike emotions, such as fear, terror, or anxiety, affect is mobile and transitory, more a movement between states, or before and after states, than the states themselves. Affect can flow regardless of drama; returning to Nelson above, we do not need realism in order for affects to be summoned. Affect is about intensity and forces, and “Family Tyranny” is not deriving its power from realism, but in large part from...
vocalizations (growls, screams, the tone of the spoken) and the treatment of the props, which often connote opposing qualities such as delicacy and strength, control and lack of control, as of Mike Kelley’s flopping limbs when McCarthy pulls him back from the window. The parodically low production values of “Family Tyranny” do not interfere with its affective power, and additionally, add to the piece’s “instructional video” look, which reminds us perhaps of watching such programming in our living rooms, of being “at home” while we watch this video, which only further adds to the piece’s uncanniness. Let us remember that uncanny in German is “unheimlich,” which means, not at home.

Returning to Seigworth and Gregg on affect we see that
“Affect [is] a gradient of bodily capacity—a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations—that rises and falls not only along various modalities of encounter but through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility” (2).

Affect is often written about in these terms: gradient, increments, modulation, rising and falling. Affects are very much like sensory events within a larger, fluid medium: ink in water, or sound in space. There is a sense of mobility, transition, expansion. But affect is also about sensation and sense perception and therefore relations and relationships. In this broad a definition, it is easy to lose track of the specific affective possibilities of “Family Tyranny” but I will argue that since affect is what creates the simultaneous and unsettling mix of sensations associated with viewing this video. High affect accounts for the polyvalence of most everything we see here: McCarthy/and/as/Daddy, mayonnaise as a physicalized mark of psycho-emotional trauma or simply as white goo washed off of a toy, the pounding of a baseball bat on a table as either a sexual metaphor or a repetition of domination, like much of McCarthy’s spoken language. Affect makes signification slippery. It is not a question of whether McCarthy is Daddy or not, but of the affects associated with “Paul” and with “Daddy” as well as those with associated with the slippage from Paul to Daddy and back. The “simulation” noted by Nelson is also key to an affective reading of “Family Tyranny,” to the point that we cannot state at all what the “base signifying level” of the video would even be. Is it the props, the colors, the “Daddy/Boy” relationship, the speech and screams and singing, the references to television?

We could say that “Family Tyranny” is a video about intense emotions. Emotion, however, is much more concrete than affect. This is why I am reluctant to say that “Family Tyranny” is funny, or shocking, or terrifying, but instead say that it is all three and perhaps more. To say the video is highly affective is to establish its complicated relationship with viewers; to say the video is part of “shock art,” for example, is to already concretize its emotional effects and affects. Lone Bertelsen and Andrew Murphie cite Deleuze and Guattari, who have written substantially on affect, describing it as a “passage from one state to another,” as something entirely transitive (140). This is why within the space of a minute, a viewer can be horrified by Mike Kelley’s screams under the table, but then hilariously amused when Kelley shouts, “Not the hiney, Dad!”
A clear emotion is a precipitate of the affects, a point of arrival. One may experience clear emotional reactions during a viewing of “Family Tyranny,” as it is not a strict choice between emotion and affect, but the speed and unpredictability with which the video affectively moves, indicates transition or overlap between emotions, which is affect itself. Bertelsen and Murphee, largely quoting Félix Guattari, continue: “affects, as transitions or passages, are able to link up across senses, across events” (146). In affective terms, then, we might experience “Family Tyranny” as not just about abuse, but as a dream flashback to an encounter with an angry parent, or as an ironic take on instructional television, or as parodic humor. The abuse “narrative” need not be primary in an affective reading. Viewers’ own memories and associations can form affective links, and it is this relationship between high-affect art and the viewer that destabilizes any strictly object-based reading of a video such as “Family Tyranny.”

I would argue that much of “abject art,” a term coined popularly in the 1993 Whitney show, “Repulsion and Desire in American Art,” has high affectivity and thus can be read in this same way. Bertelsen and Murphee discuss the “virtual” aspect of affect, where events in time and bodies in space could have been affected, and acted, differently; they write that “the virtual is the pool of relational potential from which the affective event is drawn” and that “this virtuality also inhabits signs” (153). Affect’s basic relationality has a temporal aspect; we can demonstrate this through abject art with André Serrano’s “Immersion (Piss Christ)” (1987). “Piss Christ” was shown in the 1993 Whitney “Repulsion” exhibit, down a hall, perhaps as a sort of grand final statement. The piece was immediately inflammatory, repeatedly described as a crucifix in a bucket of the artist’s urine. The “narrative” of Piss Christ—if you will, the settled affective reading—became scatology and insult, the great anti-Christian artwork.

This “affective event” was drawn from a pool of virtualities which could have included the strangely floating look of the crucifix, the really quite wonderful saturation of light in Serrano’s photo, associative links to the crucified Christs painted by Salvador Dali, the question of affective piety and embodiment, and so on. These virtual potentials were settled into the anti-Christian reading, a still-affective event, which can be seen as then producing, in the future, the protests surrounding the piece and its eventual attack in 2011 in France. That is, the affective intensity of Piss Christ understood as anti-Christian art set off other virtualities, other “relational potential,” which never unsettled the accepted understanding of the piece, but fell in line with that understanding, intensifying hatred of Serrano’s photograph until it was attacked. At the same time, other affective events fell into this intensification, such as Sarkozy’s March 2011 speech praising the “Christian heritage of France” (see http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/18/andres-serrano-piss-christ-destroyed-christian-protesters). Further, if the attackers of Piss Christ were Christian fundamentalists, and did in fact claim they would “pour donkey piss on the Qu’ran,” then the affective site that is “Piss Christ” has also attracted anti-Muslim and/or xenophobic rhetoric. This rhetoric has wide-ranging affective reach, as we see virtually worldwide now, and we should be impressed that these connections can be made from what is, in strictly object terms, a crucifix bathed in warm yellow light. Once again, the
affective reaches far, far beyond the object, to the point where the affective meanings and associations related to an object overwhelm what that object might properly be said “to be.”
The three Canadian artists whose work I want to describe today are all wonderfully multilingual. No surprise then, they use sound-specific devices in their work. But, in the studio, the fabrication of their work is done in silence. Theirs is a kinetic discipline of meditation and contemplation, one mediating ambient sound into visual art.

Swiss-born artist Hans Joerg Mettler relocated from Ottawa to Berlin four years ago. Mettler’s fluency in English, French, and German is apparent in the street posters and banners he has concocted for Berlin’s Occupy Art movement. The artist also speaks Spanish, Dutch, and Italian, too.

Québec-born artist Michèle Provost works as a Canadian government translator—French to English, English to French. The artist also knows Italian, and can make her way in Spanish. She lives and works in Ottawa.

Ottawa-born artist Christos Pantieras is the son of Greek émigrés. His languages? Greek, English, French. He, too, lives and works in Ottawa.

All three create work incorporating a babble of sensory experiences and languages against a background of constructed silences. Pantieras’s installations, for example, are scented with prayer—candlewax recycled from the candles lit in a neighbourhood church. Provost’s satin-stitch embroideries invite touch. Mettler’s work, photo-based and made for the street, looks like the street, with occasional visitations from summer strawberries, as we see in this scene from the June 25, 2012 Christopher Street parade in Berlin.

HANS JOERG METTLER

For more than a year, the Berlin arts scene has been running its own Occupy protest, one directed at the international art market. Hans Joerg Mettler has been in the thick of it.1

In this photograph, the banner Mettler and another artist are carrying is one he made for the May 12 Sternenmarsch demonstration—literally, a march with or under the stars. Later that same week, Mettler staged a panel discussion to consider the problem of “art speculator” and the “art market.” The artist2 invited economists as well as journalists, sociologists, and artists to form the panel.
Mettler decorated the theatre for the panel's discussion with posters of his own design. All three photomontages included photographs of old walls, their graffiti, posters, and announcements shredded over time. Old walls are documents of chance, a frottage of texture over time.

In all three of the artist's 2012 posters, the subject matter is privilege, the privileges of governance. Hungary's rightist government has come under serious EU criticism; Tunisia, the start of the Arab Spring, must now choose its goals of statehood, society, justice; and in France...who will lead the government—Sarkozy, Hollande, LePen?

As we know, Francois Hollande and the Socialists won the election, but...for how long will they govern?

From Mettler's point-of-view, Berlin's Occupy Art movement is as much an art form as any painting. What, the artist asks ironically, is the “function of political messages?” Is there any “art” to politics?

Irony, however, is not the word to describe the six photomontages comprising the artist's 2001 series Think Different: Power and Decline of the New Economy. Gut fear is the more accurate descriptor.

In this work, the artist combined two sets of photographs. One series was taken in March 2000 of scenes in and around Wall Street; the second sequence were images of plants in the Montreal Botanical Gardens.

“Hey, you don't have to run out” meshes a billboard the artist photographed at the Chambers Street Station for the World Trade Center with a photograph of what looks like a pile of maggots tumbling out of the stairwell. In fact, they are succulents.
“Smash status quo” depicts businessmen in suits walking through a wasteland, their ties aflame, the phrase and picture emblazoned on a billboard. Cacti with long, long needles advance from below.

“Find Out How Much Oxygen Your Blood Can Hold” combines a photograph of tall refinery towers with one of rotting vegetation.

We, the viewers, remember well that September day; none of us could breathe.

*Think Different* was initially exhibited in JANUARY 2001 at a gallery in Zurich. Hans Joerg Mettler had visited Wall Street many times in his life. In March 2000 when he made these photographs, the dot.com bubble had not yet burst, but something, he felt, seemed awry. The artist knew it somehow… More than a decade later, Mettler notes quietly: “It is still disturbing my mind.”

We do not ask artists to be predictive; but, we do ask our best artists to be insightful, to show us what we do not see, the realities we overlook.

In June 2009, Mettler and I were walking in a city square near Berlin's Brandenburg Gate. The artist mused aloud, “Do trees hear us? Do they know what we are saying?” I had no answer for this question. Certainly trees are responsive to environment. Environment includes sound.

That year Mettler set to work photographing the trees of Berlin's Tiergarten. Summer, Fall, Winter, Spring. One year later, he had his imagery—four panels of thirty-two woodsy scenes, each labeled with words, words for the year's seasons, words spoken by people who walk in the gardens today.

The 2010 *Talking/Learning Trees* series is, writes the artist, an “hommage to Berlin's multi-ethnic society today.”
Similarly, artist Michèle Provost's 2005 installation was also an *hommage* to the ambient aural environment. Entitled *It's only rock and roll*, the installation was, Provost stated, “a fan's tribute.”

Throughout the gallery, the artist displayed tapestries embroidered in silk, plus several smaller graphite drawings mimicking the embroideries. In the manner of a sampler, each work presented the viewer with excerpted phrases from forty song lyrics of the last forty years—some well-known, others obscure. No visitor, however, was expected to know all the lyrics referenced in the artist's work. At the gallery in the background, a tape loop of all forty songs played quietly. By sight and sound, the installation keyed memories to places and times half-forgotten. More than nostalgia was at play here. The artist intended the work to be seen as a “collection of short philosophy essays.”

“As a translator,” Provost comments, “I am well aware of the little acts of treason involved in the simple transfer between two verbal codes.”

The artist presents, for example, “Talkin' 'bout a Revolution”—that song we heard first on the radio—in the shape of a disc, a platter we brought home from the record store. Remember? Or, is the disc itself the circle come round again?

Read the phrases. They hang together, perhaps too well: from “talkin' about a Revolution” to “Talking World War III Blues.” Is the needle stuck? Are these today's newspaper headlines?

“Can't buy me love” is another troubling work, this time presented as a tablet of cursive writing, white on black. Read line by line, its words become a keening lament, a roundelay of compressed, didactic obsession: “can't let go,” “can't you hear me calling?,” “can't forget,” “can't live without you,” “I can't stand losing you,” “I can't stand loving you,” “can't wait much longer.” Both artworks are graphite drawings on paper.

Michèle Provost's paper sculptures and gallery installations have been, I believe accurately, described as “concrete poetry.” Her most recent work was shown last May at Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Ottawa. Entitled *Speed Reading*, the exhibition consisted of five sculptural tributes, each a visual honourific extended by the artist to work by authors she admires deeply.

She terms her storylines a “cover version”—not of the author's story—but of the way a reader reads, turning page upon page as fast as possible, says Provost, “...to find out
what happens next!” Hence, “speed reading,” the title of the exhibition.

The pages of Boris Vian's existentialist novel *L'écume des jours*, for example, trail across the floor in accordion pleats of handmade paper,9 8m of paper in all. Upon each page the artist has stitched stenciled letters she cut one by one. The typeface is a Roman font. Each page required a day and a half of cutting and stitching. Yet none of the pages are legible. Only the first letters of every line of the writer’s published novel are here. If there are words to be found, they are there by chance.

Then, on a wall, hung much like a Buddhist prayer scroll, is the artist’s interpretation of Hergé’s *Les Adventures de Tintin: Le Trésor de Rackham Le Rouge*. It is made of handmade blue-grey paper10 covered with black letters, each letter cut from a sans serif stencil, the letter then sewn upon the paper. In all, the scroll is approximately 4m long. The text is one the artist composed by excising the first letter of every speech balloon appearing in Hergé’s graphic novel, a tale of piracy and high adventure beloved by French-speaking children everywhere. The artist also added a few other words here and there to the sequence of first letters.

Comparing her work to Hergé’s, Michèle Provost says: “Read the book. You'll be surprised. You will recognize words, text, and the rhythm depicted with the speech bubbles.”

Provost chose the scroll as her mode of presentation when she learned Steven Spielberg had purchased all the rights to Hergé’s wonderful tales of Tintin. “No one,” says Provost, “no one can own Tintin and Snowy.

To me that is kind of offensive, a display of technological skills without soul.”11

Thus, the scroll. Scrolls are made by hand. No copyright infringement here.

On the scroll’s container, is a label, one the artist cut from the cover of her own storybook, the very first Tintin tale she was given as a child.

*Post-Apothecary*, a recently published collection by Canadian poet Sandra Ridley, is “covered” as a tabletop sculpture. Ridley’s poems are exemplars of precision, sparse, intelligently observed. White space and punctuation marks are also part of the poem. When Ridley gives a reading, she reads her poems with sound and spaces intact, including, Michèle Provost notes wryly, “ampersands, and she uses a lot.12

Using the same methodology as she did for her other tributes to writers, Provost cut letters carefully, sewing them in rows upon paper. Each letter is the first letter of every line of every poem in *Post-Apothecary*. Provost notes, correctly, “Poetry on the page, if you are clever, sits.” The handmade paper is the stuff used by fine dressmakers to cut patterns for their patrons.
The letters are hard to see, however, because they are white letters on white paper. Blue threads tautly stitched onto the pages are sutures holding the letters in place. The edges and shadows of the accordion-folded paper draw our eye further into the mysteries of the suturing, and the mysteries of the poems.


Their subject is hospitalization, illness, institutional incarceration, losing and finding one's will to be...to be somewhere.

Please know. Ridley gave Provost permission to interpret Post-Apothecary. Provost's "cover" is, this writer believes, one more respectful of the poet's work than the publisher's own book design.

CHRISTOS PANTIERAS

Your Word is Bond is the title of the 2012 solo exhibition of work by artist Christos Pantieras. Curated by Johanna Mizgala, the exhibition consisted of four sculptures installed in two rooms of the Ottawa Art Gallery.

“Impress me,” a sculpture placed along the far wall of the first room, is comprised of a set of six reading tables, each displaying a series of illegible e-mails. Using metal type scavenged from old typewriters, the artist hammered e-mail texts onto found paper. Hammering wore the type font to illegibility. So, too, the artist implies, are the messages lovers exchange when a relationship fails to progress, fading away, no matter how many e-mails are exchanged.

The subject matter of Pantieras' work has been for many years memory and loss, and the rituals of language. His Hellenic heritage establishes the location of his work. Always there is a scent of candlewax in the gallery. A neighborhood Greek Orthodox Church provides the artist with beeswax for his work. Pantieras's studio is the church's recycling centre. A candle blessed and lit for prayer cannot be relit for another prayer; the candle must be recycled.
“I Miss Talking to You,” a sculpture completed in 2012, is a large, freestanding, curved wall comprised of bricks of wax, 1,012 bricks to be precise, each one a bit larger than a standard construction brick. Texts of which these bricks are configured can be read, or could be read, if one were very patient. The bricks display all the words a lover writes to say this relationship is over and this is why.

The text itself was taken from a recent e-mail sent by one who had rejected the other. Once upon a time, one might have been more judicious writing such letters to another. Not so today. They litter the internet. Like prayer, the internet appears to be forever, but it is nothing one can hold onto.

“Write Me a Letter,” a work first exhibited in 2003, is a more tender, fragile depiction of heartache. For a number of years after leaving Greece to emigrate to Canada, the artist’s father received letters he did not answer. He married another, not the woman who wrote the letters. “Write Me a Letter” arises from that story.

The artist has fastened waxed envelopes together to create a tall, free-hanging wall. It floats as people walk by. The envelopes are tied together with candlewick strings, one to the other. The envelopes are all empty. No promises given. In front and behind the wall, the artist placed an empty writing table, empty picture frames, and a broken chair. Much in the tradition of ancient Greek epigrams, “Write Me a Letter” commemorates people left behind and the untranslatable words of loss and sacrifice.

Christos Pantieras. Write Me a Letter, 2003

“Long Distance,” too, commemorates writing—indeed, a long swathe of writing, almost 8 m in length. For this 2009 sculpture, Christos Pantieras again typed text from contemporary e-mail messages onto waxed paper, creating there an embossed version of each message. The pages are also fastened together with candlewick strings. Visually beautiful, the dips and loops of the correspondence emanate from an old portable typewriter, then trail off into nothingness. One could easily set the whole of it aflame, watching its loop-di-loops blaze and puddle.
The archetypal meaning of the candle is in its flame.

**IN CONCLUSION**

The rituals of incantation precede text. Our ancestors mimicked birdsong and animal cry to communicate across distance. In our oldest spoken languages, we hear some of this even today. Stop. Just listen. It is all still there. Words. Grammars. All that came later.

Michèle Provost's work with the letters of words reminds us to look, as well as listen. This page, for example, is a detail from her *hommage* to Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, an absurdist classic based on the author's efforts to learn English as his second or third language.

The history of *written* human language, however, arose from the need to establish some sort of mnemonic so others would see what has been understood and agreed to in some other place at some other time.
We learn kinesthetically our mother tongues; then, we are taken by the hand to learn the languages of literacy—speaking, reading, writing—this way, and not that way.

“Black and White January 2012,” a diptych Hans Joerg Mettler constructed from his own journal writings, is one month of a projected year-long series. The black month is, the artist states, “lots of words, lots of noise, nobody should be bothered by content.” The white month, on the other hand, the artist states, is “an anti-Facebook work; nobody should know what I am doing ... PURE in the sense of John Cage.”


There’s the picture.

NOTES

1. New York Times reporter David Segal recently attempted a description of all the artwork stuffed into the warehouses of Switzerland’s Freeport tax haven, billions upon billions of dollars’ worth—art that provides the tax-free product sold in today’s art auctions. He notes in his article: “Global sales in 2011, both at auction and in private deals, were estimated at $64.1 billion, according to Clare McAndrew, an art economist.... ‘People have realized that art is a safe haven asset when other markets are doing poorly.’ Ms McAndrew says, ‘In general, art holds its value over time, and in some cases, it increases.’” David Segal, “The Boom Behind Closed Doors: In Swiss warehouses a growing treasury of art finds a tax refuge,” New York Times, BU, 29.7.12. pp.1, 4.
2. Artist Hans Joerg Mettler has a PhD in Economics. For many years, he was a business journalist working from Brussels and Paris.
3. The series is also inspired, Hans Joerg Mettler notes, by the writings of the 18th century German Romantic writer and philosopher Novalis, aka Georg Philippe Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (1722-1804).
4. On one of the gallery walls for the installation, Michèle Provost listed all the lyrics, song titles, and artists
referenced in the exhibition. The listing handily met the need of the visitor who finds herself half remembering a lyric, a melody, and asks: “... wasn't that by?”

5. Michèle Provost’s selections ran the gamut from the Beatles and the Stones to Lou Reed, Cold Play, Buck 65, as well as others who never made a top forty anywhere anytime.


7. Ibid. Artist’s talk.

8. Boris Vian (1920-1959), Eugene Ionesco (1909-94), Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695), and Sandra Ridley, a contemporary Canadian poet.


10. Ibid. Artist’s talk. The blue-grey paper is “actually stock of leftover wallpaper Saint-Armand made for the Edith Wharton home in the United States.”

11. Ibid. Artist’s talk.
12. Ibid. Artist’s talk.
13. Each brick, cast in beeswax, is h.16.35cm x w.10.16cm x d.20.32cm.

15. Mettler, ibid.

**IMAGE CREDITS**

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**Hans Joerg Mettler**

1. Berlin, Germany. Occupy Art street banner, May 12, 2012


**Michèle Provost**

1. Installation. It’s only rock and roll, 2005. Patrick Mikhail Gallery, Ottawa, Canada.


**Christos Pantieras**

1. Impress me, 2005-09. Six reading tables, each 27cm x 38cm. Embossed
waxed paper.

2. I Miss Talking to You, 2011-12. installation with bricks formed from candlewax procured from a local church, carved text sourced from an e-mail message, dimensions variable. Each of the 1012 bricks measures h.6.35 cm x 10.16 cm x 20.32 cm.


4. Long Distance, 2009. Embossed waxed paper, w.32cm x 792cm, manual typewriter.
A BLESSED SNARL: A NOVELIST’S ENCOUNTER WITH NEWFOUNDLAND THROUGH ITS ARTWORK

Samuel Thomas Martin
Northwestern College

Writing a novel, in my experience, can be like Jacob wrestling the angel, grappling with the flesh-and-blood holiness of another, others, the world. French poet and philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien, in “Hand to Hand: Listening to the Work of Art” (2003), writes that encountering an artwork as a listening-viewer entails a similar experience—wrestling with the irresistible, the beautiful. The “irresistible,” what I would call beauty, can of course take many forms, but for me, in writing my novel, A Blessed Snarl, it took the shape of Newfoundland, my adopted home, in part as rendered in the artwork of three well-known Newfoundland artists: Gerald Squires, Jim Maunder, and Boyd Warren Chubbs. Using Chrétien’s essay “How to Wrestle with the Irresistible” as a lens, I want to tell you the story of writing “with” artworks by these three artists: wrestling their representations of Newfoundland into my novel so that their vision of the place would “bless” my own, like Jacob demanding a blessing of the angel. The aesthetic result of these encounters is that works by each artist not only “title” each chapter section in A Blessed Snarl, but the visual language of these pieces mark the metaphoric language of the novel with the violent intimacy of such encounters (cf. Chrétien 4-5).

Chrétien, in his essay, dives theoretically into the skirmish between the biblical story of Jacob’s “divine” encounter and Delacroix’s “agnostic” rendering of that struggle in the Church of Saint-Sulpice, commissioned in 1849. Chrétien’s essay re-enacts his own violently intimate encounter with Delacroix’s painting (Chrétien 4-5), an encounter in which “the wound blesses and the benediction wounds” (x). As Chrétien shows, Jacob (like a viewer wrestling with a work of art), “[responds] with… joy to the provocative, unexpected presence of something greater than [himself], which comes upon [him] from outside: that is, [he] unreservedly [threws himself] ‘body and soul’ into intimate struggle with this presence. Such total commitment can result only from an undivided, fearless love of such an encountered presence” (x). Chrétien characterizes this as “the irresistible,” that “unexpected presence” that is “greater” than the perceiver—greater and more mysterious, more terrifyingly beautiful.

When I first read Chrétien’s essay, I immediately thought of my first encounter with Newfoundland artwork. I was sitting in a seminar room at Memorial University in St. John’s in the fall of 2008, surrounded by prints of Gerald Squires’ early drawings. I felt irresistibly drawn to them, entangled in their twisting lines so evidently rooted in Squires’ own grappling with Newfoundland’s landscape: my wife Samantha’s and my new home after moving from Hamilton, Ontario. Almost four years later, when I read Chrétien’s description of the “intertwining” of art and viewer that “renders intimacy
adverse and adversity intimate” (15). I did not have Delacroix’s paintings in my head, I had Squires’ lithograph “Winged Torso” in mind.

In this lithograph, which I found online after learning the name of the artist responsible for the prints in my seminar room, I was confronted with a flailing, tortured energy seeking to grasp on to something solid. I felt this flailing in my own mind after finding out, in my second week of classes at Memorial, in the first semester of my PhD program, that the moving truck hauling all Samantha’s and my earthly goods had caught fire before reaching St. John’s. I can tell you this: we felt flayed, burst open; like we were grasping in the dark for some assurance that we weren’t entirely fucked—that we could still make a go of it.

I thought of Squires’ dark lithograph often in the following months as we sorted through the smoke-damaged remnants of our belongings, seeing what could be salvaged. Samantha was able to save some shirts and underwear because an old lady at the Laundromat told her a can of Coke poured in with the detergent would eat away at the god-awful smell of smoke. Samantha had it rougher than I did, because I had classes to occupy me. She had laundry and insurance to fight with, not to mention her own thoughts, the nagging what ifs and whys that plague you after something like this happens. But Samantha’s a fighter.

Much of what I’ve learned about persistence, I’ve learned from my wife, and also from my friend Annie Ling. Shortly after Samantha and I found out that our stuff had been torched, I read on Facebook that Annie’s apartment in New York had caught fire and that she’d lost everything, her newly purchased photography equipment, laptop … everything. She came to visit us in Newfoundland a few months later and we began swapping stories, each becoming entangled in the other’s memories and experiences, recalling the smell of smoke “acrid and thick like vomit on a hot sidewalk,” our pulses pounding in panic whenever anyone struck a match, blew out a candle, or lit a cigarette.

I printed off Squires’ lithograph after Annie flew back to New York, to rebuild her life and finish her fine arts training in photography. And with the image of that “bestial burst of white on pitch” flailing in my mind I began, between classes, to write a story of a girl who moved to Newfoundland after her apartment caught fire and burned to the ground. The girl’s name was Natalie, and I did my best to make sure she was as unlike Annie as possible. After I’d finished and published that story as “Resettlement” in the New Brunswick journal qwerty, I began another related story in which Natalie meets Hab, a preacher’s son newly moved to Newfoundland as well because his dad is the pastor of a new Pentecostal church. In Natalie’s story the abstracted figure in Squire’s lithograph had become Natalie’s mind, grasping for something solid to steady her vertigo. She finds this in Hab, but in his story Natalie becomes the “irresistible,” this girl so far outside his small-town religious sphere who draws him out of himself—involving a major fight over Natalie’s “dead-man’s sweater,” during which Natalie tells Hab to “get the fuck out” of her life, and Hab’s eventual apology—leading to Natalie
sliding “herself in behind him like she used to do, and he feels her open the flaps of [her] big [green] army coat, as if they are wings, and wrap them around his shoulders. His back to her torso and not a word pass[ing] between them for a long time” (52).

Squires image gave me a way of seeing my character’s inner lives, at once blown back, faces turned away from what they find irresistible—for Hab’s mother Anne this is an internet flirtation with an old high school flame that offers her an escape from Newfoundland’s suffocating fog, even though it is Newfoundland’s extremes in weather, belief, and landscape that irresistibly drew her husband Patrick back to the Rock. All of them, in some way, reach out to grasp the beauty that haunts them, lures them like old Irish faeries or fey folk, and wrestles them out of their own self-protective skins.

In the first chapter, titled by Squires’ lithograph, all of the main characters—Natalie and Hab, Anne and Patrick, and Natalie’s house-mate Gerry—are forced out of themselves, stripped bare, made vulnerable. In my PhD studies I’d come across a volume of essays on contemporary Newfoundland literature, edited by my supervisor Larry Mathews, and on the cover was this image, a photo of Jim Maunder’s bronze sculpture “Man Nailed to Fish.” I looked at the bronzed figure’s frailness, the fatigue in his arms from holding that monster cod, the nails pinning his grip. And all I could think about was that this figure could be Patrick after he found out Anne had left him for her old fling she’d met on Facebook, or it could be Hab not understanding his love for Natalie—given her erratic, Ativan-induced mood swings—yet not being able to let her go. So, as with Squire’s image, I wrote with this figure in mind, but in this chapter I wanted Hab to actually see this sculpture, to unconsciously come face to face with his metaphoric other. However, I didn’t want this encounter to become overly serious or be seen as self-consciously metafictional, so I composed the scene through Natalie’s eyes, colouring it with her sense of humour:

Nails are driven through the man’s hands and into the codfish he’s cradling. He is cast in bronze and pinned on a plain white wall like a maritime crucifix. Hab is leaning in so close to the icon’s feet that Natalie thinks he might kiss the crossed toes. She tugs on his hand to pull him back so that the people milling about in the gallery will stop staring at them. But Hab is insistent on the spindly legs, the vacant stare of the figure. So intent that Natalie is sure he has no idea how close his lips are to the statue’s limp cock. (100)

There is something absurd and bawdy about my character’s inability to let certain things go. They—like us, like so many of the Newfoundlanders I came to know in my four years in St. John’s—feel nailed to scaly, stinking, limp-eyed realities, but they hold on, crucified, listlessly tilting their heads and looking out at their world with resignation, knowing they’re naked, unable to free themselves from it.

The resignation I recognized in many of my Newfoundland friends, however, was not fatalism or cynicism, and so though my characters veered toward those ends, they more
often found themselves not trying to look beyond their own horizons but seeing (and seeing anew) the fullness of their own lives—the ways in which they’d been blessed, even if their blessings are snarled with curses, addictions, fucked-up choices, or nightmarish memories. This resignation is not ambivalence, slack jawed come-what-may; it’s not letting go or relinquishing. It’s that long breathless moment in hand to hand combat when you as much hold your opponent as lean on him for support. If it is anything, it is refusing to give in or give up—it is the dogged, clear-eyed will to persist, even knowing you may not win.

It’s Jacob’s orneriness, Job’s faith.

And so Boyd Warren Chubbs’ pen and ink drawing, “The Book of Job: Chapter 6:11,” from his series “I Make A Covenant with My Eyes,” became the image with which I wrote the third chapter of A Blessed Snarl because it was an image that allowed me to see the tangle of resignation and resilience I’d as yet only sensed in my friends and in other Newfoundlanders I’d met, read about, or heard tell of.

Chrétien writes that “[nothing] suffices for the soul but that which exceeds its capacity” (xiv). For Chrétien, the irresistible is defined as “a dramatic, intimate relationship with what is outside our self-understanding—another person, beauty” (xv). This shadow-side of beauty is its depth, its pulse. Marilynne Robinson describes this “shadow” using a phrase drawn from Virgil’s Aeneid that is used when the hero, “Aeneas, a Trojan who has escaped the destruction of his city, sees a painting in Carthage of the war at Troy and is deeply moved by it and by what it evokes, the Lacrimae Rerum, the tears in things” (Robinson 11). Robinson goes on to write that

Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides would surely have agreed with Virgil’s Aeneas that the epics and the stories that surround them and flow from them are indeed about… a great sadness that pervades human life (11).

In Newfoundland, the “tears in things” are especially salty, and the “great sadness” that can pervade the lives of those who live there—islanders and CFAs (Come From Aways)—can be as dense and obfuscating as the seemingly perpetual fog. But this is only half a story: a postcard, a disillusioned tourist’s glimpse, Jacob being crippled after his encounter with the angel, our first six months in St. John’s. In my novel I wanted to evoke and conjure in a reader’s mind what Jim Maunder tries to convey in his sculptures: “the frailty of the human condition and the resilience of the human spirit” (Maunder). Maunder says that with “the naked body, [he] expresses the temporary and vulnerable nature of life, as well as the pure joy and aesthetic beauty of being alive” (Maunder). Squires and Chubbs do this as well in their artworks, and it is this coupling of frailness and fight, resignation and resilience, that I think is a fuller, more rounded story of Newfoundland, one that I still find irresistible when I hear it take shape in the life stories of the Newfoundlanders I’ve come to know—like Peter and Kelly, the parents
of my goddaughter Ava, or Mary and Ed King, our adoptive Newfoundland parents, or Valerie Legge, my professor, mentor, and friend. The aim of the novel was to honor these people (and others) who, though wounded by life, limp on, knowing full well they’re blessed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


I’m a magpie. From my earliest memory, old things, used things, a little shiny but scuffed, scratched, loved like the velveteen rabbit have sparked my imagination. And I collect them because they have meaning for me, a kind of physical history. If you run your fingers along the handle of the hammer your father used to build things with all of his life long, you can, in a way, touch him. You can feel the life in the object.

So I shop. And I track the ground when I walk—trying not to fall, but also not wanting to miss the specific red leaf or smooth stone or wayward shoe buckle that might just be the perfect metaphor.

The works that I’m going to show you today were inspired by something I found in a antique store—a collection of word cards that were used in the 1940s to teach children to read and write. And they exemplify the other primary thread in my work—an on going love affair with poetic language. I’m a reader—fiction for fun and poetry for aesthetic comradeship.

The presentation that I’ve created for you is based on the structure of the work of one of my favorite poets, Frederico Garcia Lorca. Lorca wrote a series of “Suites”—short poems that are organized something like the way that I organize my work—highlighting connections that link sense and nonsense. So my thought was to create a similar loop by using the works that I created with no particular unifying theme in mind other than the media and material linkages and create a written poetic journey that makes the link.

By chance:

*las maravillas pequeñas (the little wonders)*

acrylic paint, vintage paper, photocopy, wallpaper, tissue, sea glass, decorative wood molding, school crayons, tissue, fabric
this dance is easy to learn but hard to teach.

    jump naked into the circle.
    take summer’s outstretched hand
    and follow the rhythm written on your bones by the long hot days.

there is order in it, skip, turn, spin, change partners, begin again
contained like the meadow inside a chain link fence overgrown with jasmine –
natural and human-made structures test the limits
    and find a cloudy harmony
when the music starts.

siempre la lucha (always the struggle)
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, tissue, found wooden heart,
silver wire, vintage snapshot

newborn cradled here, his potential shimmers
    like fireflies in a June twilight
frail,
    lovely,
true.
subtle fences will shape him,
    mud,
    stars,
molecules,
    blood,
    blows,
    brothers.
they leave a sharp crusty fear underneath everything.
    offense the offense.
Defend the defensible.

Bobbing and weaving a new skin
spun from a fathers laugh
    and a mother’s regrets.
Hardened, whole,
rodeas los misterios tiernos  
(you enfold the tender mysteries)

acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, tissue, fabric, vintage handmade bingo balls

something is falling,
like a snowflake from the broken sky through a gleam of sunlight refracting,
reflecting every unknown color.

Something is falling
one slip,
one moment of inattention, that's all it takes,
   blood,  
   bruise   
   hot flush, 
   cold fear.

Something is falling,
falling fast,
   too fast – a comet reborn as it touches the earth.

Something is falling
it didn’t mean to,
it didn’t have to.
It was just a normal day.

something is falling.
el corazón se abre en silencio (the heart opens in silence)
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, tissue, fabric, pomegranate, gold leaf

everything paused,
   an answer to the unasked question.

for an instant the blackbirds were still in mid flight.
   the termites ceased their relentless chewing,
   the prayer flags fell limp with anticipation.

all the bright radio waves flattened out,
   the clatter of traffic
and breakfast cooking
faded into grey silence.

the shadows moved shyly backwards
   and the sun held its breath
for just that moment
as love like lava moved inexorably toward home.

respírame, suspirar, respírate  (breathe me, sigh, breathe you)
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, hand stitching, tissue, sticks,
leather cord, glass grapes, hand stitching, fabric, glass watch crystals

I sense you moving like raindrops on sand,
   indelible invisible tattoo inside the skin of this moment.
you hover here at my shoulder
   a presence familiar as dishwater
and as warm and soft.

stretching out across the horizon
     the clean wind like an umbilical cord
     sustains us in this black velvet dream.

dissolving,
the darkened moon pulls the ocean towards climax.

fickle, she turns,
expansive, fleeting as breath.

below the moonlit surface,
     sound is muffled,
     whisper heart sighs,
     outside and inside melt into each other.

a bright flame in the center radiating outward.
sensation traces slippery spirals
     and the stars recline in a love song.

in this bed of souls there is life in the threaded needle,
there is peace
and a turning of years in each breath.
a veces necesitan una mapa de calles (sometimes they need a roadmap)
acrylic paint, vintage paper, photocopy, ball chain, pulleys, brass abacus,
Christmas light bulbs, wire, battery, rhinestones, Yellowstone Park sticker,
USGS map, taxidermy eyes, tissue, fabric.

proud mountains and obscure valleys,
the topography of union,
  hilarious,
  mystical like a ouija board

Yes? No? Maybe?

spirits roam waiting for the door to open.

take the planchette in your hands
  tell me your heart,
  recite for me the poetry of your body
  don’t be shy, I want to know.
spell it out for me, love

Hello? Goodbye?

sonando como sueños (sounding like dreams)
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, fabric, tissue, glass globes,
chiffon scarf

silk threads are by far the strongest.
deceptively delicate
they bind with unexpected ferocity.

awake in this veil,
they twine like the wildwood flower
drawing us closer and closer yet,
any unoccupied space a memory.

Edges soften,
there is only this jungle,
this night,
  wet,
  sweet,
  with the sound of small animals and flowers opening.

*pétalos de la luna* (petals of the moon)
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, fabric, smooth stones, chiffon scarf, glitter rhinestones

deep blue eyes forever,
in baby dreams a moment that reaches forward and backward,
fairy tale colored
  with the soft milky scent of honey flower.

this child was always mine.

He skips over the wild grass
the blue blue spring air rising through the eucalyptus,
  buoyant
  and strong like the waxing moon.
el camino que se aleja de todo (the road that leads away from everything)
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, tissue, fabric, compass, silkworm cocoons, butterfly, sewing pins

we made our nest with silk threads, they hold us unyielding, the familiar embrace comforting and claustrophobic. We made it ourselves, but, it is too small now, the soft edges bite and strangle. In time the way opens. Outside, a generous hurricane searches for the damp transparency of our wings.

hemos perdido aun este crepúsculo (we have lost even this twilight)
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, tissue, wire, USGS map, drawing pen nibs, stamps from Colombia, fabric

a dusty back road,
radio crackles like smug sandwiches
  wrapped in waxed paper
  and mortality.

in your soul, a quiet
  common as reminiscence.

you save the slivers of soap
  and broken rubber bands,
you parse the pure light as if it were a foreign language.

tear off the paper,
  devour it,
you are starving.

there will always be more.

secretos anhelando de su patria (secrets longing for their homeland)
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, hydrometers, found metal box, cord, lock,
ceramic chicken, sewing strawberry, plastic figure, fool’s gold, colored pigments
in glass bottles, saint charm, tiny jewelry box, Milagros, chiffon scarf

this is it, all there is.

there is no current wearing away the edges,
   no channel cut by that mournful river.
there is no weedy root
   bleeding its messy uncertainty.

entropy soldiers on, but we don’t care.

we have dusted our treasures,
fingers in our ears
   lalalalala.

the secret tastes like an apple in fall,
   juicy,
   dangerous.
then it is gone,
   unremarked,
   a dead woman’s house.
pañuelos blancos de adiós (white handkerchiefs of goodbye)
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, tissue, fabric, metallic thread

the echo of sacred song floats across the wet pavement
its mournful undulation borrows harmony from the rainy night

in the close woolen comfort of a man,
I soothe his regret for a time.
It hovers between the raindrops
and gathers around our feet
   in puddles of useless longing.

volvió al mundo al revés (it turned the world upside down)
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, tissue, fabric, glass bottle, millenary flowers
matches, vintage snapshot

on that far horizon, glowing violet, moving fast.

the dark birds circle like a crazy compass.
   the air is magnetic,
   attraction and repulsion in balance.

but this can’t last.

the shadows are thick,
   wounded,
   and growing violent.
it looks enormous even at this distance,
    when it comes
    nothing else will be real.

can you see it?

we should run,
    there is no shelter on this plain,   and what about the children?

*remendando tan tierno (mending so tender)*
acrylic paint, vintage paper, photocopy, sewing needle, pearl headed
pins, embroidery floss, vintage thread samples, pearls, scissors, chiffon
scarf, fabric, tissue

in spite of hope, not everything can be mended.
patchwork dreams stitched to shoulders,
    inescapable,
    itching like tiny ants.

mystery and sweet blood the birthright.

in the garden,
    a deep well of blackbird feathers and forgotten bones sanctifies the earth,
    its dark grace delirious   and absolute.

*el camino entre las estrellas de la muerte (the path between the stars of death)*
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, fabric, embroidery floss, dried leaves,
palm bark, tissue
there is this humming
chanting or honeybees, I don’t know.

at the edge of attention,
it grows,
  absorbs the breath before it is breathed,
  wraps itself around any secret faith or intention.

it rises tight as a mainspring and as obsolete,
  threatening ruin,
  then absolution.
a cyclone wailing bright pain.

the humbled sea grass smells like compassion.

tú recuerdo es de luz (your memory is of light)
acrylic paint, photocopy, vintage paper, tissue, fabric, weed seeds

you are light on water
skittering like a butterfly drunk on love.

you are flowers floating in memory
  beautiful,
  ephemeral,
  imprisoned in that dark ocean.

you are what you remember
  the crackle of sunburn on your shoulders,
  the delicious salty smell of sex,
  the deep brief peace behind your eyes.

this earth breeds obstacle and grief,
  twin shades,
  forces of oblivion.

yet, I remember you,
  I remember light.
WORD & IMAGE: SOME COMPARISONS OF CHINESE & WESTERN ART

Eugene E. Selk
Creighton University

The synthesis of word and image and the aesthetic of this synthesis have been part of Chinese painting since at least the 8th century. But this is not the case in the West. Only occasionally, and then fitfully, has word and image been combined in Western painting. The following is an exploration of the similarities and differences in the use of word and image in Chinese and Western art. I could not hope to add much to Michael Sullivan’s masterful exploration in *The Three Perfections* (1974, revised 1999) of the synthesis of word and image in Chinese art. What I will do is add a bit of history (Sullivan’s book is not primarily an historical study) and make some comparisons with Western Art. I begin with a brief history and some examples of word and image in Chinese art.

WORD AND IMAGE IN CHINESE PAINTING: THE BEGINNINGS

As in most cultures, the earliest Chinese paintings were petroglyphs dating from the Paleolithic and Neolithic periods (in China, Neolithic, 3500-1750 B.C., Paleolithic, 2.6 mya – 3500 ya). Writing did not exist at the time, unless one counts petro glyphs are a type of writing.¹ The contemporary historian of Chinese art Wu Hung observes that the ninth century Chinese critic, Zhang Yanyuan first noted that it was the separation of image from word which initiated painting as an independent art.² Zhang’s wonderful insight may be true of virtually all cultures. What is unusual and to some degree unique about Chinese painting, however, is that after the separation of image and word, a tradition arose and continued through most of the history of Chinese painting which closely integrated image and word.

Inscriptions on scroll paintings emerged in China in the 4th century. One example is one of the scenes from the scroll, *Wise and Benevolent Women*, from the 4th or 5th century. This scene, *The Story of Ban Zhao*, depicts an intellectual lady of the court who refuses to sit in the same sedan chair with the emperor in order to preserve sexual proprieties. The writing is set in boxes. The boxes have no formal relationship to the images.³
I mention only one other early painting, Lu Hong’s (Daoist hermit, active in the early 8th century) *Ten Views from a Thatched Lodge*, from the early 8th century. Its main features are about the self-identity of a scholar-artist. The painting depicts a country estate owned by the painter. The artist appears in most scenes listening to the sound of a stream, or standing on a small hill, or conversing with a fellow hermit inside a cave. What is new about this work is that the images and words were created by the same person. Each section of the painting begins with an inscription that identifies a site and describes it in both prose and verse. Wu Hung comments that the scenes “develop a visual context in which the inscriptions can be appreciated as calligraphy created by the same brush.”

These tentative historical beginnings led to a 1600 year tradition in Chinese painting of harmonizing in the same work word and image. I will briefly highlight a few works from this long history before I turn to some analogues of the use of word and image in the West.
1600 YEARS OF WORD & IMAGE IN CHINESE PAINTING:
SOME EXAMPLES

The synthesis of word and image in Chinese painting was strongly influenced by the famous six principles of Xie He. Xie (active ca. 500) wrote a work around the year 500, *Classified Record of Ancient Painters*, in which he lays out six principles of painting. I mention only three. The first, “spirit consonance” suggests that, in the act of painting, the painter ought to, in order to give life to the painting, attune himself with the cosmic spirit (*ch'i*). The second, “bone-means brush,” proposes that the painter express this cosmic spirit in and through the character of the brush stroke. This applies both to calligraphy and images. These first two principles lay down the aesthetic for the close harmony of word and image. Calligraphy and images express the spirit of the artist. Both are forms of expressions through the brush and it is a natural move to combine both in works of art. As Chiang Yee notes, “the treatment of the brush stroke is the basis for both calligraphy and painting.” The sixth principle states, “by copying, the old masters should be preserved.” I will say a bit more about this principle later.

Here is a painting from 1347 by Wu Zhen (1280–1354, Yuan Dynasty). The subject, bamboo, is common in Chinese painting. In the prose inscription, Wu writes of having studied bamboo painting half his life and of now being old. He continues that he has seen many works attributed to Wen Tong and Su Shi, but genuine ones are rare. One exception, a work by Wen Tong is “quite beyond comparison with the vulgar mannerisms—of the forgeries.” But my effort to imitate it has not been able to attain “one-tenthousandth” of its quality, because my brush force is not yet mature, “as can be seen from this [painting].” Comments of this type—highly personal, expressing the mood of the artist while creating the work, returning to the old masters in accordance with Xie He’s sixth principle, and a statement of conventional modesty—are common in Chinese paintings. Note that the inscription is now part of the painting, placed in one of the spaces within the painting.

Wu Zhen (1280–1354), Stalks of Bamboo by a Rock, hanging scroll, ink on paper. National Palace Museum, Taibei.
The following painting from three centuries later shows the persistence of this type of inscription. Wang Yuanqi (1642-1715) writes on a landscape painted on an autumn day in 1696:

> By a dim light and during heavy rain I painted this in the style of Wang Meng to counteract a mood of depression.⁸

Like Wu Zheng’s inscription, it includes the usual bow to one of the old masters, and a comment on his mood on the occasion of creating the work.

**FIN DE SIÈCLE ART IN CHINA**

The tradition of integrating word and image continued into the 20th century. In this painting, *Returning Fisherman* from 1917, Wang Zhen (1867-1938) returns to his childhood memories of growing up along the Huangpu River. The inscription on the painting reads:

> The fisherman exchanges his fish for some wine. He lives east of willow-covered shores south of the [Yangzi] river. Returning contentedly before dusk in the setting sun, Laughing and calling to his children, as he gets tipsy in the spring breeze.⁹

The style of the painting shows the influence of Western realism, but the subject matter, the use of ink and empty space, and the inscription remain traditional. The pattern of the calligraphy harmonizes with the pattern of the trees and of the fishing pole.

Another turn of the century painter, Li Ruiqing (1867-1920), painted works which explicitly combine calligraphy with images which are calligraphic in style.

Li Ruiqing (1867-1920), *Blossoming Plum* (ca. 1915). Ink & color on paper. An overhanging plum branch reaches down to a stream.

On the painting, he writes:

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Though a new branch is in full bloom,
The old tree remains gnarled and twisted.
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This is a scroll of bell-and-tripod seal writing. Please do not treat it as a painting.\textsuperscript{11}

In his \textit{Buddha of Longevity} (1917), Li inserts the inscription on the face of a rock. Notice the style of the calligraphy changes dramatically from the earlier \textit{Blossoming Plum}.

![Buddha of Longevity](image)


After the 1949 revolution, the style of art sanctioned by the Chinese Communist Party was Socialist Realism which for the most part sundered the age-old dialogue between word and image. And the few exceptions, such as Pan Tianshou’s (1897-1971) landscape illustrating a poem by Mao Zedong (1959), are not very successful in the use of word and image. Sullivan comments that the insertion of a poem by Mao Zedong in this painting “added nothing to exploring the possibilities of ‘three perfections.’”\textsuperscript{12}

![Landscape](image)

Pan Tianshou (1897-1971). Landscape illustrating a poem by Mao Zedong [the work has no formal title]. 1959. ink & color on paper. Pan Tianshou Memorial Museum, Hanzhou, China.
During the Cultural Revolution, posters incorporated calligraphy, but now usually to shout a political message, a far distance from the personal reflections and poetry of artist-scholars.


Go to the Countryside and Border Where We are Most Needed by the Motherland, 1970. Poster. Collection Of Yang Pei Ming, Shanghai. Propaganda Poster Art Center.

After the Cultural Revolution, many artists returned to traditional styles, but also incorporated influences from the West. Shilu’s 1978 painting *Pines on Mount Hua* is modern in style, yet retains traditional subject matter and the inscription within the space of the painting. The inscription reads:

I love the many pines on Mount Hua,
Tall, noble, and dignified,
Their trunks climbing skyward to compete with the sun and the moon.
Weathering the bitter winds,
Shaking their branches, they reach for the border of heaven.
Bestride blue dragons, they hold their heads aloft.
Lifting the clouds they stand.
Ceaselessly they push against the sky.
In the 1970s, Shilu (1919-1982) developed a style using jagged brushstrokes. In these two works, Shilu uses this style of brushstroke to match the subjects of the images—wobbly movements of three baby donkeys and the flickering movements of ducks dipping into water. And he uses a style of calligraphy to match the style of the painting.  

I close this section with a brief look at a contemporary Chinese painter who currently resides in the United States but who spent most of life in China, Lu Wujiu (b.1918). *The Song of Lake Yuan* consists of a series of panels painted between 1993 and 2005. The works combine western abstraction—Lu studied in the United States in 1959-60, and absorbed the late phases of the abstract expressionist movement—with traditional Chinese brush work and calligraphic inscriptions.
In addition to the abstract nature of these works, there is a departure from classical works in the placement of the inscriptions. Instead of being integrated with the painting or placed in spaces within the painting, the inscriptions are placed in a vertical strip on the side of the paintings.

**COMPARISONS WITH WESTERN PAINTINGS**

Western painting does combine word and image. Much of western painting until the nineteenth century is based on narratives and the paintings are illustrations of the narratives—Giotto’s fresco cycle on the life of St. Francis in Santa Croce (Bardi Chapel, Santa Croce, Florence), Michelangelo’s grand scheme for the Sistine Ceiling—creation, the fall of humankind, and the emergence of a new man in Noah, Benozzo Gozzoli’s
scenes from the life of Augustine in Sant’Agostino (San Gimignano), and hundreds of others. But over the centuries of art depicting stories from classical mythology, the Jewish and Christian scriptures, and the lives of saints, only rarely are inscriptions incorporated into the paintings. And when they are, such as Benozzo Gozzoli’s *Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas* (1471, Louvre), the text of the open book is not so much about the content of the inscription as it is a symbol that Aquinas was an scholar and a teacher.

Benozzo Gozzoli, *Triumph of St Thomas Aquinas*, 1471, fresco, Musée du Louvre.

Many Pre-Raphaelite paintings are depictions of stories—from the bible, from Arthurian legends, and from Dante and Shakespeare. This is no great departure from a long tradition in Western painting. The exception is the occasional Pre-Raphaelite painting which places text within the painting. An example is Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Proserpine* (1877, Tate Gallery, London). Rossetti’s model, Jane Burden, is cast as the classical Greek goddess, Proserpine (Proserpina). The text at the top on the painted scroll is a poem by Rossetti. The inscription on the bottom is Rossetti’s name, the title and date, 1877, of the work.¹⁵

But in this and similar Pre-Raphaelite paintings, the poem or story is separate from and not part of the composition of the painting. The framing and placement of the inscription is similar to the 4 th century Chinese work discussed above, *The Story of Ban Zhao*.

What about Jasper Johns, and other Pop and Post-Painterly Abstraction painters who occasionally incorporate letters, numbers, and words into their paintings?

These works also do not fit the Chinese model. Here the words and numbers are the subject of the painting; the words are the image. Moreover, in Johns’ use of letters and numbers, there are no poems or reflections by the artist. Johns simply uses these
everyday objects like he uses targets and maps. His purpose, in his own words, is to choose as subjects of his paintings things that give me “room to work on other levels.”

What about many conceptual art works? Conceptual works typically place a priority on the ideas of the artist over the object, and the expression of these ideas in very temporary proposals, charts, photographs and maps. But notice that compared to calligraphy in Chinese paintings, there is no special emphasis in creating fonts which are expressive and painterly. Moreover, in conceptual works, the words typically dominate; or more accurately, the ideas behind the words become the work of art. I am not aware that this has ever been the case in the history of Chinese painting. The focus is on both the word and image, and word and image as a unified whole. In conceptual art, the word tends to replace or become the image. This is clever and provocative, but hardly a synthesizing of word and image. The image is gone.

Joseph Beuys (German, 1921-1986), *Eurasia*  
*Siberian Symphony* 1963, 1966, Museum of Modern Art, NY


Perhaps illuminated manuscripts are the closest genre of western art to the harmony of word and text in Chinese art. One peripheral similarity is that the subject matter of the illuminations was quite standardized. For example, Books of Hours begin with an image of the Annunciation for Matins, then the Visitation for Lauds, and so on, ending with the Coronation of the Virgin for Compline. This might be compared with the rather standard subjects of Chinese artist-scholars in scrolls—landscapes, bamboo, birds, flowers, fish and crustaceans, and scholars studying in a pavilion surrounded by gardens and mountains.

Another marginal similarity (marginal to the word-image harmony) is the weight of tradition. Medieval illuminators worked with accepted subjects and accepted symbolic systems (e.g., the red rose symbolized martyrdom, the white rose purity, thorns the suffering of Christ). Under the influence of Xie He’s sixth principal, tradition plays a huge role in Chinese painting. And thirdly and more significantly for the word-image issue, although scribes and illuminators were different artisans, normally the styles of the two harmonize. And lastly, the function of one of the genre’s of illuminated manuscripts, Books of Hours, was to serve as a devotional aid in prayer and meditation. This might be compared to the use by scholar-painters of their works for reflection—albeit the subject of scrolls was usually but not always, secular. But what at first glance appears to be a close resemblance is fractured by closer examination. First there is a significant difference in the social role of the artist. Medieval miniaturists were craftsmen, as were medieval sculptors and painters. By contrast, China scholar-painters (which goes back at least to 12th century) painted for pleasure and for reflection by themselves and their circle of fellow literati.
Second and most importantly, in medieval illuminated manuscripts, the text dominates, perhaps not always visually but certainly in importance. The miniature painting is an accessory to the text; the purpose of the miniature painting is to highlight the text. The text is always what is most important. By contrast, in Chinese painting the text and image are usually equal in importance. Moreover the text is usually a comment on the painting, rather than with illuminated manuscripts, the painting is a comment added to the text.

CONCLUSION

Although there are analogies (similarities) between Western and Chinese art in the use of images and words, there are significant differences. In the history of Chinese art, the harmony of word and image has been a persistent motif from the 8th century to the present. This reflects the aesthetic of Xie He that a good painting is the expression of the spirit of the artist through the brush. This applies equally to calligraphy and image. The dominance of narrative painting for much of the history of western art might be regarded as a form of synthesis of word and image. But in these works, the work of art is ABOUT a story; the story is not immersed IN the work of art. Finally, in Chinese painting, the style of calligraphy is typically chosen to fit the style or subject of the painting, and as such enhances the unity of the work.

NOTES

2. Ibid., 15.
3. Michael Sullivan, *Three Perfections: Chinese Painting, Poetry, and Calligraphy* (NY: George Braziller, 1974; revised 1999), 23. The figure’s size is determined by social status; the scene is very static.
5. Ibid., 83, col. 2.
9. Ibid., 45.
11. Fong, *Between Two Cultures*, 56.
My artwork emerges from writing and textual investigations, sometimes integrating poetry in illuminated public artworks, for example, or combining language explorations in video and sound based projects that have for many years skittered around the edges of direct verbal expression. It is only recently that I’ve begun to refer to myself as an artist and a writer, this reticence driven perhaps in part by my fascination with, and fear of, both the specificity and the vagaries of language.

For the past two decades socio-environmental themes and ideas explicated by objects, texts, drawings, photographs and ephemera, have grounded my work. By the late 1990’s, I began to long for less optical and corporeal visual means for expressing complex emotional and psychological investigations, particularly as they relate to experiences of “home” and “place” and “landscape”. In subsequent projects I turned more decisively to language as an essential vehicle for delivering content and stimulating internalized pictures in the mind's eye of the viewer/reader.
LABOR, a project created for the Neuberger Museum Biennial Exhibition of Public Art in 1999, features a clear acrylic lectern and podium, and a solar-powered LED-illuminated panel inscribed with a poem written in response to the seventeenth-century agrarian history of the surrounding landscape. The site, an out-of-the-way wooded copse partially surrounded by a colonial-era stone fence built to contain and demarcate former farm fields, indulged my growing commitment to making land art that “disappears itself” and illuminates the surrounding landscape. Borrowing from and re-contextualizing the economic principles of 18th century philosopher John Locke, LABOR comments on the educational mission of the museum while it connects and contrasts contemporary site use with the social and natural history of this landscape as family farm carved from wilderness. Employing spare poetic language, the project reveals linkages between the historic ideal of “manifest destiny”, and land use principles of present-day environmentalist movements. It serves as meditation on the ways in which individual freedoms, free agency, and choice—social values of great significance in American culture—can for better or worse determine the course of one’s life.

In more recent work, free verse and narrative poetry coupled with photographs, moving images and drawings form ideograms for expressing the concrete, the abstruse and the ineffable in experiences that often as not conflate in our memories of place. Images and words coalesce as symbols for meaning—completing the integration of audience with text, image, context, and content, and helping stimulate the act of “picturing” on the part of the viewer/reader.
The concept for 16 Sunsets Over The North Sea, an installation composed of four LED illuminated photographic transparencies and four Norwegian Modern lounge chairs, emerged during a three-month residency in 2005 at USF Verftet/Stiftelsen Kulturhuset in Bergen, Norway. Fascinated with the summer phenomenon for which northern Europe is famous, each night I pulled a chair to the tiny balcony of my studio overlooking the Norwegian Sea and watched in wonder as the midnight sun set and rose again over the course of only a few hours. Having recently lost my father after a prolonged illness, I found myself ruminating on the larger issues of our human presence on, and inevitable absence from, this earth. The series of photographs taken from my window coupled with the following poem provided a visual and textual vehicle for contemplating experiences of family, nature and death:

Picture yourself living
in the most perfect place in the world
every aspect just right just the way you want it
each day splendid in every detail
the air crisp the sun golden
a slight chill foretells the coming autumn
and no one you love is dying
no disease or suffering
mars the otherwise smooth progression
of hours from sunrise to sundown
the table set for a family meal
gathered around it
the people you hold most dear in the world
all smiling safe contented
living in a land of plenty just the way you want it
picture it in your mind’s eye

“How To Make A Place In The World,” a solo exhibition of eight installations
mounted by the Indiana State University Center for the Arts in 2010,
investigates home and place, both as metaphor for larger issues surrounding
preservation of traditional human cultures and natural places, and as
documentation of human communities that are fast disappearing. Such places
are largely rural and isolated and for many decades have been experiencing
significant ecological and environmental upheaval resulting from industrial
development, economic strains, and changing demographics. In my part of the
world – the piedmont region of the Blue Ridge Mountains – acid rains from
coal-fired power plants are devastating sizeable forested tracts along with the
understory of plants and organisms which support them. Perhaps even more
troubling, these conditions in turn traumatize the land by stripping it of its
natural abilities to absorb water thereby increasing conditions favorable for
extensive erosion and massive flooding.

Flood Stage considers croplands and harvests, weather patterns and the passing
of seasons, landscapes and their native flora, birds and animals - all of which
have traditionally informed human understanding of commitments to
community. Projected video, the artist book, large-scale drawings and narrative poetry coalesce, merging memories and temporal experiences to explicate places that nourish us physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Flood Stage serves as a deliberation on changing landscapes and the transitory times in which we live; words become essential vehicles for delivering content and stimulating imagination to conjure internalized pictures in the mind's eye of the listener/viewer.

Implicit in my installations and object-and-text-based works is the invitation to “read” them textually and visually. In the process, images, objects, words are integrated to help establish a subjective and intimate sense of “place” that may change from one viewer to the next. The spaces of these projects are meant to envelop the viewer not in “nature” as a general concept, but in nature that is sensuous, even carnal.

Over the past decade and despite the subjective content of my artwork, rather than taking a primary role in the explication of ideas, the art object with its elastic range of interpretive possibilities is receding with each new project. It seems somehow counter-intuitive that this work that speaks in such corporeal terms of love of land has come to rely on language to summon personal images—verbal pictures that entice the reader/listener/viewer into a personal experience and interpretation of places and landscapes.

Perhaps in these times, as inundated—bludgeoned, really—as we all are by visual imagery in our everyday lives, it has become more difficult for me to trust pictures alone—as devalued as they’ve become—to speak eloquently, deeply and emotionally for places and things—rivers, boulders, soil, plants, animals—that hold great meaning for me.

Those of us who, as children, read under the covers with the flashlight on until way past bedtime, or fell asleep listening to our favorite radio programs turned down low, understand the near-illicit thrill of the mind’s eye making its own sweet and satisfying pictures from language and words. I suppose language and reading, text and image, function in my work in very simple, old-fashioned ways, as means for inviting audiences to parse meanings and visual resonances in order to reconstruct—mnemonically, aurally, pictorially, sensorially and psychically—specific and identifiable places—of their own—to love and preserve and nourish.
I am an artist, and the form of art I practice is the writing of poetry. Indeed, I mean to speak to you today, at least in part, as a poet. Complications to that intention are the several other things I am. In my day job I am an art historian and a literary historian. I have in my role as a scholar published essays and books that involve the consideration of both images and words, often in relation to one another. With regard to ekphrasis and the ekphrastic poet, one might use a scientific analogy and say that I am both the zoologist and the specimen animal. Being of at least three minds on my subject I am perhaps not entirely to be trusted, but I hope you will listen to me anyway.

What, then, does a poem inspired by a work of art actually do? Is the goal of an ekphrastic poem to tell the truth about a work of art? Or is it tell the truth about the poet? The answer to that question is complicated. Neither yes nor no is an adequate answer to either question. Before commenting on some of the strategies an ekphrastic poet might utilize I would like to discuss the nature of such poems as intellectual inquiries.

Let’s talk first about some classic ekphrastic poems that can be seen to fail to tell the truth about the artwork. A frequent flaw in past critical attentions to ekphrastic poems has been the tendency on the part of the critic to be too ready to credit the poem’s presentation of a work of art as an unequivocally true interpretation of the work of art. In such cases, the critic commonly reports the poem’s version of what the artwork is about and then interprets the artwork as if the artwork obviously has the meaning the poet found there. In such cases, there is a pretense that the critic is examining the artwork as well as the poem, but the reality is that the poet’s interpretation of the art work is simply being stated twice. I have advocated elsewhere that the critic of the ekphrastic poem should put aside the poem—bracketing the poem out of mind as much as possible, while analyzing the artwork. The same, of course, would be true for cases where artworks are inspired by poems. Bringing the inspiring work into focus before attending to the responding work can help the commentator to do justice to both the images and the words.

It is important to note, however, that finding an ekphrastic poem flawed in its interpretation of a painting, does not necessarily mean that the poem is unsuccessful. It can be argued, for instance, that W. H. Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” and W. D. Snodgrass’ “Matisse: ‘The Red Studio’” tell us more about Auden and Snodgrass than about Breugel and Matisse respectively; and yet my views concerning the art-historical unreliability of these two poems does not lessen my admiration for them as poems. An ekphrastic poem is a performance of a work of art in words, and, though the
persuasiveness of the poem’s interpretation of the artwork is one of the ways the poem can be excellent, it is not the only way. Just as a film inspired by a novel can be successful aside from its truth to the novel so can an ekphrastic poem succeed even when it does not capture a persuasive interpretation of the artwork.

The Auden poem is, no doubt, familiar to most of you. [At this point I read an excerpt from “Musée des Beaux Arts” by W. H. Auden.]

One the symptoms of the inattentiveness with which Bruegel has been treated in commentary on “Musée” is the failure of Auden critics to note the iconographical problem that the version of The Fall of Icarus that Auden saw in Brussels was not the original. Although the original may be lost, most art historians believe another copy, which includes the figure of Dedalus flying across the sky, is probably truer to the original than the version Auden made famous. Having the grieving Dedalus hovering in the sky makes a significant difference in the narrative implicit in the picture and reduces the applicability of Auden’s interpretation to the work of art Bruegel created. The shepherd who has his back to Icarus’ disappearing legs does not seem to be “turning quite leisurely from the disaster” but, is, rather, looking up at a strange old man flapping around in the sky. Of course, Auden cannot be faulted for this problem. He did not know—and probably would not have cared had he known—that he was writing about a copy possibly made by Bruegel’s son. Auden left his “Old Masters” vague and only mentioned Bruegel as an “instance.” In any case, a debunking of Auden’s interpretation of The Fall of Icarus does not devalue “Musée des Beaux Arts” as a work of poetic art. Auden’s poem can be considered a prime example of what Harold Bloom has called has referred to as a strong misreading. Although Bloom’s concern in A Map of Misreading is with poets fruitfully misreading predecessor poets, the term can be utilized to describe what happens in many of the best poems inspired by visual works of art. Thus Auden can be seen to have wrestled with an “Old Master” by writing a poem that powerfully reconstrues or misconstrues Bruegel’s picture for poetic purposes. It is a shame, in certain respects, that Auden’s “Musée” is so widely anthologized in high school and college textbooks as the single (or nearly single) example of Auden’s work. When “Musée” is read beside other Auden poems, it is easy to see that his concern with humanity’s indifference to human suffering is evident in a variety of ways in a variety of his poems and that Auden’s Bruegel is a product of Auden’s modernist Age of Anxiety and not of Bruegel’s Northern Renaissance. By the way, I once had a conference interchange about these matters with Arthur Danto in which Danto accepted the points of my Auden-was-wrong-about-Bruegel argument, but, then, jokingly declared that he still wanted Auden to be right.

Despite my view that ekphrastic poets are often wrong about the work of art, I do not accept the view that a poem cannot tell the truth. This conviction of mine that a poem can achieve a persuasive interpretation of a work of art collides with a famous assertion put forward in the 1920s by I. A. Richards. Richards viewed his insistence that poems can make only “pseudo statements” as protective of the credibility of poetry as a form
of art. Everything in a poem, Richards argued, is involved with the poem’s obligation to be adequate as a work of poetic art. Influenced, whether he was aware of it or not, by lingering nineteenth-century aesthetic ideas derived from people like Walter Pater—and which later informed the methods of New Critics such as Cleanth Brooks—Richards was assuming an art-for-art’s-sake point of view that disables the intellectual life of poetry. This attitude towards poetry was most famously expressed by Archibald MacLeish in his elegant declaration that a poem “should not mean but be.” There is, of course, an almost hilariously ironic self-contradiction in MacLeish’s statement, which is the concluding line of his otherwise imagistic poem “Ars Poetica.” MacLeish’s assertive poetic last line is itself clearly an effort to make his poem “mean.”

Ezra Pound made an interesting counter claim in favor of accepting the presence of meaning in poetic works when he asserted that one of the valid forms of criticism available in the arts is “criticism in new composition.” Making a work of art in response to another work of art seemed to Pound a fine and viable strategy. Pound clearly felt that the authority of a work of art as a work of art would lend its statements concerning other works of art more credible. He saw nothing about meaningful assertion that necessarily interfered with artistic legitimacy.

I like to think that I subscribe to the stance of Pound rather than to that of Richards. As an art historian, it is important to me to strive to tell the truth about artworks; however, I have to admit that Richards has a point. A poet’s obligation, as an artist of a form of literary art, is, first and foremost, to do what he can to deliver to the reader a satisfactory work of poetic art. Subscribing as I do to both polarities, I endeavor in my art-inspired poems to perform the work of visual art well by telling a version of the truth, as I understand it, directly or, as Emily Dickinson says, by telling it “slant,” while, at the same time, endeavoring to perform well as a poet. It is not an easy task that I set myself when I write poems inspired by art, and I do not, of course, always succeed. As my ekphrastic poems perform their poetic forms, I endeavor to capture the work of art and my experience of it; however, it is inevitably the case that my art-inspired poems develop as riffs or variations on aspects of the inspiring work. In fact, the term “variations” is key to my understanding of what ekphrastic poems do, and I have been flirting with the idea of giving my next collection of such poems the title Variations.

To show what I mean by variations I would like to turn to W. D. Snodgrass’ Matisse poem and the poem I wrote in response to it. As you will see, my poem plays its variations with and against the artwork under consideration as well as with and against Snodgrass’ well-known poem. In his poem “Matisse: ‘The Red Studio’” W. D. Snodgrass presents a surprising interpretation of the Matisse painting that is on view a short distance from here at the Museum of Modern Art, and, as I have previously indicated, it can be argued that Snodgrass is telling us more about his personal feelings concerning the devouring nature of human relationships, a motif evident in many of his confessional poems, than he is about the Matisse painting. [At this point I read parts of “Matisse: ‘The Red Studio.’”]
I would like to share with you now a poem that I wrote in response to both Matisse’s *Red Studio* and Snodgrass’ poem about Matisse’s *Red Studio*. [At this point I read “Matisse Replies to Snodgrass: A Poem About a Poem About a Painting.”] [

“My mind turned in in concentrated fury, 
Till he sank. . . . 
His own room drank him. 

Looking into my red studio, 
were you surprised to find no one there?

Calm yourself, my friend. I was only out 
of sight, preparing the space for visitors.

Since I am not a part of what I see, 
I leave myself unframed. Do you understand?

This room is decorated for pleasure, 
colored warm to comfort your needled heart.

My art is an embrace, not a devour. 
Come inside. A painted chair awaits you.

I will be there. Together we will share 
a refreshing drink of my bright scarlet air.”

By writing a poem contra Snodgrass I could be regarded as speaking up for the true interpretation of Matisse’s painting—certainly that assumption is implicit in the voice of Matisse that I offer in my poem. My poem, in fact, adopts what most art historians and critics think is Matisse’s view of Matisse. (Matisse once remarked that he regards his work as “an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter. . . .” that can “something like “a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue.”) I must admit, however, that, by subscribing to Matisse’s view of Matisse, I am, not so much declaring adherence to absolute truth, as I am making a choice of a strategy that has some rhetorical advantages and that enables me to perform a Matisse variation that I find persuasive and attractive. Though Snodgrass may have been wrong in various ways about this painting and Matisse’s work generally, a pro-Snodgrass argument can certainly be mounted to assert that Matisse’s work has a variety of ferocity to it that is beautifully performed in Snodgrass’ poem. Perhaps
Snodgrass’ poem, despite the confessional self absorption that undergirds it and gives it power is more persuasive than my poem admits. Despite the confidence with which my poem declares allegiance to Matisse’s view of Matisse, another side of my brain understands that Snodgrass is not necessarily as wrong as I make him out to be. Furthermore, Snodgrass’ poem speaks powerfully of the nature of art as a force that can devour the artist, a compelling idea whose interest for the reader transcends the correctness or incorrectness of Snodgrass’ interpretation of Matisse.

To conclude my presentation, I would like to draw your attention to material presented in my handout that I will not be discussing in detail. In that handout I provide a kind of answer to the question: What sorts of ekphrastic poems do poets undertake?

Previous studies of ekphrastic poetry—such as those by Hollander, Loizeaux, and Heffernan—organize their examples of ekphrasis for their own convenience, primarily it would seem, so as to give themselves nice clumps of material for their chapters. That is understandable and reasonable for their purposes, but I have never found such categories conducive to grasping what the genre can be for poets interested in undertaking it. My list of strategies comes from many years of paying attention to poems written by others as well as from the exigencies of the choices I have made, myself, as a poet.

My list of ekphrastic strategies is, as follows:

1. description of the artwork;
2. interpretation of its meaning;
3. rendering of a Keatsian “frozen moment” implicit in the scene;
4. monologue or dialogue presented as the thoughts of depicted figures, the artist, or the painting itself;
5. third-person narrative used to tell the story observable within the artwork;
6. mini-biography of the artist or a portrayed personage based on what can be seen in the artwork;
7. description of the artwork’s situation as an object in a gallery, museum, or other context;
8. surrealistic (dream-like) fiction inspired by elements in the art work.

Those strategies can, of course, be developed in a wide variety of ways. They are pragmatic approaches that can enable the creation of a poem.

I do not have time today to discuss examples of my eight strategies, but my handout includes two examples of each strategy. Most of the example poems are relevant to more than one category. My assigning of them to only one category is, therefore, a simplification. In each case I provide an example by a writer whose work I admire. I also, for each case, I have indicated a poem of mine that uses the strategy. By so doing I am not claiming that my poems are equal to the classic pieces I pair them with. As I am offering in this paper a “practitioner’s poetics” it would seem relevant for me to offer
ample evidence of my own practice. All but one of the examples of my poems can be found in my 1999 book *Imaginary Museum: Poems on Art.* Many of the art works referred to in the poems included in the handout can be readily found and viewed online.

**List of Strategies for Ekphrasis**

1. **Description of the art work:**
   - A. “The Hunters in the Snow” by William Carlos Williams
   - B. “Seurat’s *Evening at Honfleur*” by Joseph Stanton

2. **Interpretation of its meaning:**
   - A. “Musée des Beaux Arts” by W. H. Auden
   - B. “Vermeer’s *A Woman Weighing Gold*” by Joseph Stanton

3. **Rendering of a Keatsian “frozen moment” implicit in the scene:**
   - A. “Winter Landscape” by John Berryman
   - B. “Edward Hopper’s *Approaching a City*” by Joseph Stanton

4. **Monologue or dialogue presented as the thoughts of depicted figures, the artist, of the painting itself:**
   - A. “Giovanni da Fiesole on the Sublime, or Fra Angelico’s “Last Judgment” by Richard Howard
   - B. “Matisse Responds to Snodgrass: A Poem about a Poem about a Painting” by Joseph Stanton

5. **Third-person narrative used to tell the story observable within the art work:**
   - A. “Getting Up” (inspired by Balthus’ *Getting Up*) by Stephen Dobyns
   - B. “Bruegel’s *The Harvesters*” by Joseph Stanton

6. **Mini-biography of the artist or a portrayed personage based on what can be seen in the artwork:**
   - A. “Self-Portrait” (inspired Pieter Bruegel’s *Self-Portrait*) by William Carlos Williams
   - B. “The Hour of Cézanne” by Joseph Stanton

7. **Comment on the artwork’s situation as an object in a gallery, museum, or other context:**
   - A. “Edward Hopper Retrospective” by Tony Quagliano
   - B. “*Nighthawks* as Noir” by Joseph Stanton

8. **Surrealistic (dream-like) fiction inspired by elements in the artwork**
   - A. “Don’t Let That Horse,” (inspired by Marc Chagall’s *The Equestrienne*) by Laurence Ferlinghetti
B. “Joseph Feher’s The Anchor Takes Command” by Joseph Stanton

NOTES

6. The conversation with Arthur Danto took place during the presentation of my paper on “Auden and the Ekphrastic Fallacy” at a philosophy conference in Hawai’i in 1993.
7. I. A. Richards, Poetries and Sciences (New York: Norton, 1925). Similarly, Susanne Langer contends in Feeling and Form (New York: Scribner’s, 1953) and other books of hers that a poem cannot make “discursive” statements because what a poem expresses, if it is a poem, are „forms of human feeling” that are entirely separate from assertions of fact.


Picture-book writer and artist Edward Gorey transcended categories. In his uniquely odd way, Gorey was a master of works in which words and images share something akin to equal weight. He was remarkably inventive and was able to bring to bear his inventiveness to pursue the wide variety of genres and themes in which he took a delighted interest. His works can, somewhat paradoxically, be best appreciated as parodies of those genres and themes, but it also needs to be understood that play of his parodies unfolds in special, multilayered ways. Gorey is commonly both making fun of a genre or theme and having fun with it. He writes the sorts of things that interest him, but he plays with them. When, to name a few of his favorite forms, he writes a murder mystery, an alphabet book, or a collection of cautionary tales, he is both joking about the clichés of the genres and using those clichés in witty and enthusiastic ways. The playful nature of Gorey’s practice is often enhanced by combining the various forms in surprising ways so that, for instance, he gives us an alphabet that is also a murder mystery in *The Deadly Blotter*. The mission for Gorey is not primarily to laugh at mystery novels or alphabet books or cautionary tales. He does laugh at them in certain respects, but what he wants most to do is to enjoy the fun his elegantly off-kilter version of these forms have to offer. Gorey chosen genres and themes are beloved toys in the personal playground that is his picture-book art. A whimsically parodistic bent is the natural tendency of Gorey’s mind, but his equally compelling inclination toward taking pleasure in the things that attract his interest commonly puts his satirical tools into the service of bemusement rather than ridicule.

The advantages of alphabet-book genre to an author are considerable. One advantage is that such books provide arbitrary frameworks for collections of items or brief stories. Once the general nature of the alphabet has been selected, a pattern has been introduced that needs only to be pursued until a satisfactory set of items has been generated. The parallel nature of the things collected in the alphabet means that the writer will often be struck by ideas for other items while in the midst of finishing the already conceptualized things. Gorey clearly loved the way alphabetic structures enabled him to generate a 26-item set. The advantages of this structural strategy and the interesting challenges its formal limitations impose has made it a popular genre with writers and illustrators of books for children. The compositional attractiveness of the form is not the only reason for its proliferation, of course. In fact, the primary reason why alphabet books for children are published in great quantities is that they sell well to parents, teachers, and librarians who purchase children’s books, routinely assuming that repeated reiterations of the alphabet contribute significantly to the enhancement of children’s reading and writing skills. Although sales volume never seems to have been a major concern for Gorey as he selected the topics and structures
for his books, the popularity of his early alphabets undoubtedly reinforced his desire to
do more. Gorey also enjoyed that the very fact that the notion of the alphabet book was
itself a cliché meant that there was the considerable potential for surprise, even shock,
when one confronts the reader with alphabets of very unusual kinds. Gorey seemingly
never tired of making the familiar genre of the ABC book into a vehicle for bizarrely
avant garde literary-visual performance. He tried his hand at other arbitrary-structure
genres, notably the counting- or number-book genre, but no other such genre offered
as many advantages as the alphabet book and he kept coming back to his abecedariums

THE FATAL LOZENGE

One of Gorey’s earliest alphabetic productions is The Fatal Lozenge, a collection of
rhyming quatrains, each of which tells its own dismal little story of a bad thing done or
suffered or both. Each tiny tale has an implied plot that could have been developed
into a story of more substantial length. Leaving each tale a fragment is, as we so often
see in Gorey’s works, a means to a collection of uniformly strong performances. Each
poem presents the climax of a sad or horrifying little drama. Some pieces feature a
villain and a victim: C is a Cad who deserts his mistress, K is a Keeper who beats his
prisoner with a truncheon, M is a Magnate who contemplates child enslavements and
“other projects still more mean,” U is an Uncle who plans to have his niece and
nephew “come to harm,” and so forth. In other poems there is no clearly established
villain and the suffering protagonist seems the victim of a generalized misfortune: B is a
Baby whose daily familiarity with a frightening bearskin rug will cause him to “grow up
to be a thug,” D is a Drudge overworked to the point of failing strength, N is a Nun who
is fearfully bedeviled by insanity, G is a Governess whose mind is failing due to “cold
and hunger and ennui,” and O is an Orphan who perishes “in some squalid street.”
Still other alphabetic sufferers seem to have fallen into difficulties as the result of bad
choices they have made: F is Fetishist who worships a hassock, H is a Hermit burning
in the sun and thereby losing his reason, S is a suicide who regrets her imminent death
only after she has leapt off a cliff, and W is for a Wanton who lures men with erotic
enticements despite her awareness of “its dangers.” In cases where the misery seems
self inflicted we could regard the piece as a cautionary tale, but the intermixture of
such cautionary pieces with other sorts of horrors prevents there being any chance of
the work qualifying as genuinely moral instruction, although the rhetoric of all the
pieces parodies the tone of didactic tracts. Some of these little works seem merely
pathetic, others disturbingly horrific, while a scattered few feel a little like Greek
tragedies—the suicide’s hopeless changing of her mind as she plunges through the
moonlight seems a particularly striking example of the tragic mode. Two of the villain
pieces would seem to clinch the status of this alphabet as unsuitable for children: the
Proctor who has lured a school boy by buying him ice cream in hopes of practicing
vices on the child that “few people know exist” and the Zouave who impales a “hapless
tot” on his sword. Of course, adults would be the ones who would hesitate to give this
book to children because of the more disturbing pieces, but when one considers the
popularity of violent video games with kids of all ages, it seems likely that the most
seemingly problematic poems would be among the pieces many kids would regard with
highest interest. Here we find ourselves revisiting the violent comics debate of the
1950s. That Gorey regarded *The Fatal Lozenge* as a book for children is testified to by
the end papers of the book on which he provides two pictures of children holding
alphabet blocks in their hands as they look upon the prostrate bodies of fallen adults
with alphabet blocks lying on top of them. Witty as always, Gorey seems to be
suggesting that though kids have been the victims within the book, we still have time to
do in mom and pop in the end papers.

One of the alphabetic items in *The Fatal Lozenge* is unique in its revelation of an
important aspect of Gorey’s aesthetic with regard to foul play. A fan of the murder
mystery, in particular the works of Agatha Christie, Gorey often affects a detached
stance in his works. In this regard he is in concert with such solvers of crime as
Christie’s Hercule Poirot. Assuming the stance of a detective (and the murder-mystery
writer who has created such detectives), Gorey contemplates the dire deed with
fascination of one who needs to solve it. The sole item in *The Fatal Lozenge* that
directly depicts this stance is the poem for the letter J, where we are given a Journalist
who “surveys the slaughter / The best in years without a doubt” as he pours himself a
drink and wonders “how it came about.” In his case the inhumanely cool detachment
of the journalist is satirized to some extent, but the attitude of the detached observer of
murder-mystery-genre scenes of the crime is a stance we see again and again in the
works of Gorey.

Each poem in *The Fatal Lozenge* is technically impeccable as verse, and an
improvement in that respect over the collection of limericks, *The Listing Attic*, which
Gorey had published two years earlier. High praise for that earlier collection by
Edmund Wilson in the *New Yorker* in 1959 had been tempered somewhat by Wilson’s
remark that, “Brilliant though many of the inventions are, they are sometimes allowed
to suffer from the lameness of Gorey’s verse.” Wilson’s complaint was that the
“effectiveness of certain of the best” limericks in *The Listing Attic* are “seriously
impaired. . . by an awkwardness of metre and phrasing.” This lone criticism in what
must otherwise have been, for Gorey, a thrillingly positive review was something he
seems to have taken to heart. In his return to the use of poetic form in *The Fatal
Lozenge*, there are signs that Gorey is endeavoring to make sure his verses are perfectly
polished.

In *The Fatal Lozenge* a simple form is adhered to strictly. Every first and third line of
every quatrain is eleven syllables in length. Every second and fourth line is eight
syllables in length. Some might regard the reliance on eleven-syllable lines as a sign of
a problematic metrical deviation from iambic pentameter. What that eleven syllable line
supports, however, is a unique and highly effective rhyme scheme. Each of those longer
lines ends in “feminine rhymes” in which multiple syllables are rhymed; for instance,
“ices” is rhymed with “vices” and “plying” is rhymed with “dying.” Meanwhile, all
second and fourth lines are eight syllables in length and end with one-syllable
“masculine rhymes” so that we have “late” rhyming with “plate,” “eyes” rhyming with
“sighs,” “qualms” rhyming with “alms,” and so forth. The consistency of the syllable count assures a regular iambic rhythm. To get the rhythm to work Gorey seems to rely on his ear fairly effectively and avoids the sorts of awkward spots Wilson noted in the earlier sequence of poems. Gorey is, however, rightly concerned in The Fatal Lozenge more with felicity of diction than with rhythmic regularity. Following the example of such predecessors as Edward Lear, Gorey aims for the witty effects available in multisyllabic words. Though his poems are, in a sense, heavy with the weight of the dire events that transpire in his four-line stories, the poems are clearly in the tradition of highly skilled light verse. As so often in Gorey, one is faced with paradoxes. A light verse of sprightly elegance gives us little glimpses into horrific things. Furthermore, the horror does not operate entirely as horror because the consistent feel of parody that his work projects. Gorey has things both ways. He is making light of the horrific at the same time as he is telling us, even seriously warning us, that the world is full of horrors.

THE GASHLYCRUMB TINIES

The Gashlycrumb Tinies is, by far, the most famous and admired of Gorey’s alphabets. It could also be regarded as the most interesting test case in the consideration of whether his most characteristic books are suitable for children. As in The Fatal Lozenge, we have in this second published alphabet rhetoric suggestive of the cautionary tale; once again only some of the tales indicate that caution would have helped prevent the calamity. Some of these “tinies” did dangerous things and suffered the consequences, but others were victimized in random ways that would support Gorey’s oft-expressed view that everyday life can be dangerous.

As was the case with its predecessor, this alphabet is a poetic work. In this case, each alphabetical item is one-line in length and ends a in word that rhymes with the ending word of the following or preceding item. This system of couplets gives the book a speed and simplicity that enhances the impact of each of its arresting pictures, as does the consistency of the approach in which each letter gives us the surprising death of a child. Each demise is unique and visually striking in some way. All the pictures are strong and some could be described as powerful, particularly the first two. For the letter A (“A is for Amy who fell down the stairs”) there is the fall of pale Amy down beautifully crosshatched stairs that descend diagonally to fill the entirety of the picture. For the letter B (“B is for Basil assaulted by bears”) the apprehensive face of Basil turns above his dark sailor-suit to regard the gigantic, furry forms of the bears that angle towards him from both sides. All lines of the remarkable poem that composes the text of this book are in iambic pentameter and the rhythm of the poem is handled with impeccable consistency.

The compelling simplicity, clarity, and sardonic wit of The Gashlycrumb Tinies account for its widespread popularity. Despite its killing off of twenty-six kids, it has proven to be an easy book for children to enjoy. The fact that this alphabet is consistent in its doling out of dire fates, in that every single child character is killed off, would seem, in
an odd sort of way, to make it less troublesome for arbiters of children’s reading than *The Fatal Lozenge*, where a few particularly grim items stand out from the rest in their nightmarishness. That every single item in *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* has a child’s downfall as its point makes for an evenhandedness that allows the overall light verse treatment to keep the emphasis on the wittiness of the work as a whole. Also, in this work we do not have full depictions of disturbing adult villains. In one picture we have the adult arms of a thug reaching out toward a child and in another we have the remains of the handiwork of an axe that was obviously wielded by an adult, but we are entirely spared in this book from the full-figured presence of adult evil doers. The emphasis remains entirely on the kids who have met the cruel fates.

In order to understand how Gorey is able to be so humorously grim one has to disabuse oneself of the idea that Gorey is endeavoring to be spooky in a Halloween sort of way. He apparently hated the word *macabre* and disliked the frequency with which it was used to describe his work. On several occasions he described the subject of his work as “everyday life,” and he certainly felt that death is right around the corner for all of us. It also must be understood that children are the central personages in many of his works largely because Gorey identified with children in the respect that he saw them as exemplary of the vulnerability of humankind. A gifted only child in his youngest years, Gorey seems often to have been left to his own devices. Much of his work as a maker of original picture books seems to have grown out of his sense of the child’s dilemma of helplessness. Where a child’s experience can be considered as evident in Gorey’s work it is important to note that he is not so much writing for children or about actual children as he is writing from the perspective of the child version of himself that he remained very much in touch with throughout his life. As with Sendak and many other of the best writers of children’s picture books, Gorey creates his childlike material as a child, rather than for children.

It is evident from the early stages of Gorey’s work in the alphabet-book genre that he is aware of the potency of the paradox presented by writing an alphabet book with disturbing contents. *The Gashlycrumb Tinies* with its brief lines and absurdly disturbing demises catches the feel of a primer for the young while at the same time putting forward a catalog of dire events in a calmly factual manner. The expressionless tone adopted by Gorey here will be reiterated in many of his later books. Having been involved in the staging of satirical productions when he was a student at Harvard, Gorey understood well the comic strategy of the straight face.

**THE CHINESE OBELISK**

This alphabet is one of the first books in which Gorey offers us a protagonist that is obviously a character depicted to resemble himself. One cannot, of course, say that the work is autobiographical in view of how absurdly anti-realistic a few of the alphabetical incidents are, including the concluding unlikely catastrophe that causes the demise of the protagonist. Gorey suggests himself as a character in this book by depicting a
bearded fellow wearing Gorey’s infamous attire, a full-length fur coat and white sneakers. He makes this identification explicit by starting the alphabet with “A was an Author who went for a walk.” The next frame in the book, the item for the letter B, is probably the most autobiographical bit in the book. In that segment the “Author encountered “a Bore who engaged him in talk.” This episode shows the Author leaning away from the discourse of a gesticulating stranger. No doubt Gorey, as his fame grew, had often to endure the talkative advances of fans and would-be groupies.

The random nature of the incidents that follow make the book seem a lighthearted exercise in surrealistic accident. Although the work has a feeling of continuity provided by the premise that we are observing a protagonist who is out for a walk, there are only minimal suggestions of a plot. Those suggestions are just enough, however, to give the book the feel of being a story as well as an alphabet. The narrative thread is enforced by the way Gorey uses the concluding frames of the book to provide his firmest suggestions of plot. With a strong sense of conclusion supplied by the death of the Author, his funeral, and the disposition of his estate the story ends with a solid and darkly comic thump.

The lighthearted melancholy of the conclusion is enlivened by a variety of particularly deft touches of humor. The “Exequies sparsely attended” are witnessed only by the cleric reading a Bible over the open grave and by a little Dog who had “appeared to be hurt” and was one of the oddest of the Author’s alphabetic sidewalk encounters in the early phases of his walk. The silliness of a dog attending a funeral is augmented by the wittily sober depiction of the sadly sermonizing priest. The best odd note of all could be the final frame in which the alphabet concludes with “Z is for the Zither he left to the maid.” The picture of the maid with zither in her lap and a dismayed expression on her phase is wonderfully ambiguous: Is she dismayed over the death of her employer or by the utter uselessness of the exotic musical instrument she holds in her lap and must decide what to do with? One suspects the latter is the likelier explanation.

It is worth noting that the silly-sad death of the protagonist by means of a characteristically Gorey-esque sort of misfortune, crushed as he is by the unlikely fall from the sky of an ornately carved urn, makes an important point of connection with regard to the endless array of fatalities that depopulate the various amphigories. By killing himself off in this fairly early work Gorey demonstrates, if we needed such a demonstration, that he identifies with the destroyed more than with the destroyers. Horrific things happen throughout Gorey’s work, but there is ample evidence that, though he projects a tone of detachment as a matter of policy, he is often in empathy with those who suffer the cruel fate. As fascinated as he is by cruelty, which he loves to contemplate in the manner of an Agatha Christie crime solver, it is ultimately with those that die that he feels a connection. It’s not that he is sympathetic with the victims exactly, but rather that he operates from a conviction that he himself is as liable to succumb to such a fate as they have been.
Among the delightfully odd features of this book, which can also be seen in other books by Gorey, is the placement of little scraps of discarded paper on the ground in almost every scene. While this could be regarded as simply a reflection of the reality of littering on a typical big-city street, there is also the contribution these little, crumpled white shapes make to each composition, providing a small counterpoint to the overall design. This use of odd little details in accentual ways is frequent in Gorey’s more complex books. Sometimes the little shapes serve only compositional purposes, but in others the little items play subtle roles in extending or altering the implied narrative.

In almost all of his books he inserts a tiny blank business card in only one of the pictures, usually seen at an angle, discarded on the floor or ground. In the second version of The Chinese Obelisks the business card can be seen on the ground of the picture for the letter T—off to the left side of the image, away from the figure of the Author who is reacting with dismay to the sound of a “Thunderclap horribly loud.” Some fans of Gorey search for the arbitrarily placed card as one of the first things to look for in a Gorey book. The presence of the not-easy-to-find single card in each book constitutes a kind of find-me game for readers, and, of course, Gorey loved games.

In The Chinese Obelisk Gorey’s surrealistically wandering plot makes possible the shaping of each incident into one half of a couplet the rhythm of which he can carefully manage. As any silly thing can be the thing that happens next, Gorey can allow his word choice and rhythm to control what transpires. This nonsense method also keeps the contents of the poem unpredictable and keeps the writer mostly aloof from the odd unfolding of the developments. Perhaps with Edmund Wilson’s criticism of the irregularity of the rhythms of some of the limericks in The Listing Attic in mind, Gorey has chosen to make The Chinese Obelisk precisely regular in its metric. For most of the couplets he employs iambic pentameter. The couplets that deviate from that are regular in another way; in each of these instances the iambic rhythm is violated only at the end of the line where there is an extra unaccented syllable. That allows those lines to end with witty feminine rhyme, similar to those he employed more consistently in The Fatal Lozenge. Here he occasionally resorts to little trills of feminine rhyme, as when thinking rhyming with sinking and gutter rhyming with shutter.

A very unusual strategy was taken by Gorey in his presentation of The Chinese Obelisks when he came to include it in his Amphigorey Too collection. For the only time in any of the four Amphigorey books he presented a sketchy, draft version of the book as well as the polished final version. The decision to do this may reflect his affection for a book in which he pictures his own demise. Whatever the reason for this double inclusion it gives us a unique opportunity to examine how the jaunty liveliness of Gorey’s sketched whimsicalities become the more soberly exact witticisms of a finished book.
THE UTTER ZOO ALPHABET

*The Utter Zoo Alphabet* relies on Gorey’s frequent strategy of writing one couplet for each letter. His subject in this case, a listing of nonsense animals, lends itself well to this form. Because the name of every creature is an entertainingly silly neologism Gorey can easily manipulate the length and accentual pattern of the name to serve the purposes of his verse. Furthermore, the attributes of these non-existent animals can be goofy in any manner Gorey decides upon, which allows him another sort of control over the rhythm of his lines. Not compelled to name actualities, or even plausibilities, Gorey can control every syllable to keep to whatever rhythmic music he prefers. In *The Utter Zoo Alphabet* Gorey follows his usual practice by being precisely regular in his rhythm, departing from iambic tetrameter only occasionally to employ feminine rhymes, which maintain the regularity in a slightly more fancy way.

The remarkable precision of the verse in *The Utter Zoo* provides an interesting organizational structure for this delightfully odd menagerie. For *B* we get “The Bloggerslash” which “conceals itself / In back of bottle on a shelf.” For *O* we are presented with “The Ombledroom” which “is vast and white, / And therefore visible by night.” As so often in Gorey, the book ends on a dire note, which lends a sense of finality to the alphabetic listings—in this case the concluding item concerns the odd tragedy of the Zote: “About the Zote what can be said? / There was just one, and now its dead.”

The illustrations for *The Utter Zoo* admirably support and amplify the humorous silliness of each of these beasts, yet within the oddness of each of depiction there is always a kind of method to the madness, a nonsensical logic that determines for Gorey what the imagined animal should look like. The Boggerslash is an expanse of fur that can be seen “concealed” behind clear glass bottles on a shelf. It is not possible to determine which end of the creature is which as no appendages, tail, or face can be observed; all Gorey chooses to tell us about it is that its most characteristic behavior is its ridiculous habit of hiding in a place where it is easily visible, though not easy to sort out. Gorey clearly enjoys depicting the distinctive peculiarities of the creatures he has imagined. For instance, we can see that he relishes the task of drawing the Kwongdz— which is presented as a tiny, hairy bird clutching a beautifully detailed tree limb with its absurdly enormous toes. The visualizations of the beasts are deftly counterpoised against the pathos-laden silliness of Gorey’s verse characterizations of them. That these illustrated couplets are touchingly sad as well as amusing can be seen in, for instance, the weirdly catastrophic situation of “The Epitwee” who is “inclined to fits / Until at last it falls to bits”—meanwhile in the illustration we are shown the Epitwee disassembled into six sections with its legs and arms reaching up plaintively toward the unresponsive darkness of the sky and its crescent moon. Then there is the shy furtiveness of the pathetic Fidknop that is said to be so “devoid of feeling” that it drifts “about beneath the ceiling.”
THE ECLECTIC ABECEDARIUM

The long history of the alphabet book as a didactic tool that offers moral instruction as well as language-use development is key to the droll pronouncements offered in The Eclectic Abecedarium. Gorey’s satirical bent is magnificently well served by the preachy rhetoric of this little book—which gives him the opportunity to subvert by imitating, while mocking, the sermonizing tracts that earlier alphabetizers instituted in their stern little volumes. The Eclectic Abecedarium, which is one of the tiniest of Gorey’s many small books, comes across as a primer imparting moral instruction, presumably directed toward children because its prescriptions and tone are suggestive of traditions of such primers for children dating back, in America, to colonial times. That most of the depicted characters appear to be children further strengthens the impression that the instruction is aimed at the young.

Once more Gorey makes alphabetic use of iambic couplets—in this case iambic dimeter; each line is only four syllables and two metrical feet in length. In this case each couplet is an admonition, a little bit of didactic instruction. The alphabetic words appear at the end of one of the lines of the couplet. Each illustration is displayed horizontally and all four corners of each picture are clipped off, as if each picture were a photo secured in an old-fashioned photo album. The tiny images of children enacting the matter of the admonitions are simply drawn, usually in either profile or full frontal poses. Most of the images are neatly symmetrical. There are three sorts of compositions: either a figure is positioned in the middle of the image, two figures are balanced on opposite sides, or a figure is placed on one side in balance with a large object placed on the other side.

Thus, each picture seems to support the moral simplicity of the didactic proscription with a visual simplicity.

Sometimes the statements are direct assertions of supposed truths—such as “A hidden Bird / Is often heard” and “It takes élan / To wield a Fan”—but more frequently the couplets are directives as to how we should act. Occasionally we are given moral (or at least behavioral) instruction—such as “Betray no qualms / When asked for Alms” and “A careless No / Leads on to woe.” Other times the advice is practical advice of a trivial nature—“Pick up loose Crumbs / Upon your thumbs” and “For catching Hail / Keep by a pail.” What such phrases do not explain is why one would ever want to pick up loose crumbs or catch hail. Still other couplets suggest cautionary tales—such as “Be loath to drink / India Ink” and “Forbear to taste Library Paste.” Among the most vigorous of the images are those in which the consequences of not heeding advice are visually indicated, as when “Don’t leave the shore / Without an Oar” is demonstrated by showing a boy throwing up his hands in dismay as he sees himself and his boat on the verge of plunging over a waterfall. The appearance of a favorite Gorey motif more subtly suggests a cautionary admonition when “Don’t overturn / The garden Urn” is illustrated by showing a girl standing in a tentative manner next to a large urn, which, were she to overturn it, would surely crush her in the emphatic manner suffered by the Author character in The Chinese Obelisks.
THE GLORIOUS NOSEBLEED

For each of the alphabetic items in The Glorious Nosebleed a picture suggests a distinct story which is made explicit in the text through a single sentence. Each of the sentences ends in an -ly adverb that declares something about the nature of the depicted moment and provides the alphabetic indicator. The pictures are beautifully drawn in exquisite detail in one of Gorey’s most carefully hatched styles. Some of the images and their accompanying captions could, if taken in isolation from the book as a whole, come across as crucial moments in elaborately plotted novels; however, other images seem only trivial incidents happening to well-dressed, seemingly wealthy people placed in strikingly odd situations.

“She wandered among the trees Aimlessly” is the statement that starts the book as a caption for a drawing of a woman who has made confused meandering tracks around and between three tree trunks. The woman is dressed in a dark, tightly fastened jacket and grayish slacks. Her wandering tracks are visible as lines in the surrounding thin layer of snow. There is also snow on the sides of the trees and one assumes that it is quite cold. The woman holds a purse and a package tied with string in her gloved hands. Why she is wandering and where she wants to go are entirely unknown.

The next alphabetical item is one of the most startlingly entertaining in the book. It shows three blond children, two girls and a boy, all attired in white clothes and dark socks. The three children pause on the land side of a small dock. On the other end of the dock is a bizarre, shaggy creature that has apparently just emerged from the ocean. The creature is ridiculous ugly in a peculiarly Gorey-esque way. This stray beast from the sea slumps half on and half off the end of the dock and fixes its eyes morosely on the children. The caption describes this odd intersection of characters by declaring that “The creature regarded them Balefully.”

As the alphabet continues to unfold, striking pictures illustrate such captions as “She knitted mufflers Endlessly” and “He fell off the pier Inadvertently.” Sometimes a simple statement is illustrated in an extraordinary manner, as when “She toyed with her beads Jadedly” serves as the caption for a picture in which a woman in white is reclining on cushions and a pale fur rug, which appears to be a polar-bear skin, amid an elaborate arrangement of curtains, sashes, and carpets upon carpets, while a heavily bearded man in a gorgeously hatched fur coat stands beside her offering a ferocious looking bear’s head on a platter on top of a bed of lettuce. The woman ignores him and his odd offering because she is, as the caption tells us, entirely engaged in toying with her beads.

The images throughout The Glorious Nosebleed are arrestingly rendered and among Gorey’s best, and their compositional effectiveness is made all the more wonderful by their pairing with the droll, perfectly ridiculous, and yet oddly appropriate captions.
The last letter in the sequence is used by Gorey to insert one of the many cameo appearances his self portraits make in his books. He covers the letter Z by depicting himself, bearded and balding, and characteristically arrayed in fur coat and white sneakers. He shows himself as an author with a small pad of paper and a pen in the action of taking notes. The caption declares his literary role as a recorder of what he has supposedly observed—“He it all down Zealously—despite how obviously unlikely the book’s depicted incidents have been. This concluding entry is a good example of how Gorey endeavors to keep the structure of a book in mind even when its form is arbitrarily dictated by the episodic, abstracted one-letter-after-another nature of the alphabet. His alphabets, as with most of his books, begin with some sort of entry at the start and some sort of concluding comment at the end, even though the introductory and conclusive aspects of those statements may be so muted as to be almost invisible.

**THE DEADLY BLOTTER**

This alphabet is one of the many works by Gorey that reflect his life-long fascination with murder-mystery novels. His obsession with and frequent re-reading of the works of Agatha Christie are related to this preoccupation. As in some of the best known novels of Christie and others of her ilk, this book presents the scenario of a presumably large mansion in which a substantial number of wealthy guests have gathered. Though poetically terse and careful of word choice, this alphabet is presented in a prosaic style, as befits its novelistic sources. The challenge Gorey has set for himself in this book is to make every word a vehicle for the alphabetic sequence.

His first picture is captioned by the words “Alarming behavior,” the next gives us “Corpses” and then we have “Detective enters”; thereby the first three pictures provide us with the letters A through E while getting us well into the briefly rendered murder mystery. The procedure of making every word alphabetic is maintained almost all the way to the end of the story, where, in the caption of the last picture we are told that “Extenuation yields zero”; as in so many alphabet books, the letter X has caused the author to resort to a special approach because so few words begin with that most challenging of letters. This is a tiny book, but its cast of characters is almost as large as that of a typical Christie novel. There are eleven characters, counting the two policemen who haul off the guilty party at the end of the tale.

First we are introduced to the about-to-be victim in an introductory panel beneath the title. With a typical Gorey twist the victim is engaged in the act of writing when the fingers of one hand of the prospective murderer can be obscurely discerned on the column behind him. The idea that an author is the one to meet a dire fate is a recurring theme in Gorey’s work. The title of the piece would seem to indicate that a “deadly blotter” will cause the victim’s death, but the murderess, when she is finally revealed turns out to have weapons more potent than a blotter in her hands, as she is wielding a pair of large knitting needles in most of the scenes in which she appears.
The unfolding of the story in the sequence of panels shows the pipe-smoking detective performing an active investigation and interrogation, which provokes various sorts of picturesque reactions from the suspects till finally the guilty woman with her knitting in hand is exposed and dragged away in custody.

As is usual with Gorey, even in simply drawn picture stories like this, the characters are arrayed in a balletic fashion, seeming to subtly dance their various actions and reactions. A judicious use of solid black and solid white masses in the clothing, furniture, and an ample array of pillows is set off by the contrasting insertions of gray elements supplied by means of various sorts crosshatchings.

**THE JUST DESSERT**

In *The Just Dessert* alphabet Gorey employs the practice we saw in *The Deadly Blotter* of having his alphabetic words tell a story of sorts. No words, in this case, are used beyond the alphabetic ones, though the rarity of story-advancing words that actually start with the letter X has led him to use the word *explain* as his alphabetic word for that problematic letter. This playful sequence is rendered in the same sort of simple, sketchy style Gorey used for *The Deadly Blotter*. This time he does not force himself into a genre mode; this work’s plot is humorously buffeted in several directions. Gorey seems to have decided to allow word combinations that happen to provide his alphabetic sequence to dictate the minimal plot. *The Just Dessert* is labeled by Gorey as his eleventh thoughtful alphabet while *The Deadly Blotter* is marked as his seventeenth. These subtitles suggest that *The Just Dessert* was written first, and its pleasantly plotless drift may have been a precursor to the more focused story presented in *The Deadly Blotter*.

The story in *The Just Dessert* concerns the interactions of one man and two women. The three figures appear to be arrayed in antique clothing of perhaps an eighteenth or early nineteenth century sort. Other elements in the story include a statuary bust on a column that gets broken and repaired within the main action of the tale, a white bull terrier, a white crescent moon, and a black sun. The moon and sun are presented as highly interested bystanders to the action, as is the dog. A window and a doorway are frequently compositionally important to the stagelike scene, as are a pair of trees and a bolt of lightning. The odd final development in the tale, which seems to have given the sequence its name is the sudden appearance of a large tureen with a huge spoon in it. The story ends as two woman approach the tureen of Zabaglione and the bull terrier tries enthusiastically to climb into the tureen, while the man hangs back at the doorway. The Zabaglione, if not the plot, appears to have thickened.

**FIGBASH ACROBATE**

*Figbash Acrobate* is a uniquely Gorey production. Each letter is formed by acrobatically contorting the figure of Figbash—a long-armed, and short-legged creature invented by
Gorey to serve as a character in several of his books and plays. This creature slightly resembles the title character of *The Doubtful Guest*—possessing, as it does, the flat, beaky head also common to the characters in *The Unsung Harp* and a few other early works. Gorey stitched together many doll versions of Figbash, and this odd character seems to have been something of a personal symbol for Gorey. Gorey’s balletic interests certainly come into play in *Figbash Acrobate* as Figbash is twisted and turned for alphabetic purposes as Figbash enthusiastically performs the twenty-six letters. Gorey also has Figbash shape himself as the numerals from zero through nine.

Concluding this consideration of Gorey’s alphabet books with *Figbash Acrobate*, an entirely wordless book, can serve as a reminder that, though Gorey considered himself a writer first and an illustrator second, the visualization of his fancies was always at least half the story. Gorey’s endless playing of the image against the word, the word against the image, enabled him to be creative and entertaining in ways that those who only write cannot come close to equaling. He is an exemplary figure in the world of picture-book art.

It should be noted before moving past Gorey’s alphabetical antics that there are many non-ABC instances where he uses compositional strategies that are related in various respects to his beloved alphabetical schemes. Obviously his counting books, which might also be called numbers books, are a case in point. One popular example is his *Categories*, a collection of numbered cat pictures. Although this book derives from and parodies counting books designed to teach children their numbers, the subtlety of this production, with its deft and subtle display of numbers from 1 to 50, means that it is unlikely to be put to use with small children. Gorey is clearly into the numbering play of *Categories* for the whimsical fun of it, with his clever use of roman numerals being particularly indicative that this book’s numbers would not be easily deciphered by any child under the age of twenty. Other examples of non-alphabetized alphabet books include Gorey sequences that riff on various individual letters such as the play with the letter Z in *The Izzard Book*. Mention should be made, too, of the richly allusive alphabetical shenanigans Gorey engages in on the covers of his Amphigorey books in which each of the covers displays letters that cleverly spell out the word amphigorey while playing with and against each other in attractive dances of wit that end with linguistic jokes that are silly in various lovely ways. On these covers a fur-coated figure of Gorey with his back turned to us can always be discerned quietly presiding in person in a low-key, cameo-appearance way in the midst of the fun. These covers manage to be both goofy and intellectually distinguished—the quintessential Gorey paradox.

**SELECTED INDIVIDUAL BOOKS BY GOREY**


*The Eclectic Abecedarium*. Boston: Anne & David Bromer,1983. [Collected in *Amphigorey Also*, 1983]

COLLECTIONS OF GOREY

PAINTED WORDS: THE UNION OF TEXT AND IMAGE IN THE ART OF GLENN LIGON

Catherine St. John, D.A.

If art, in a literal sense, can be written, as in Ruscha’s word drawings and Twombly or Basquiat’s graffiti-like scrawls, the history of art is constantly being rewritten.


A dynamic relationship between text and image has existed at least as far back as Mayan glyphs, Chinese ideograms and Egyptian hieroglyphs. The curators of “Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art” which recently opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver, Colorado have coined “conceptual writing” as a term for text based work. The exhibit presents language-based pieces from the 1960s to the present by Kay Rosen, Frances Stark and Glenn.

Ligon, among many other painters, sculptors and installation artists. Ligon is regarded primarily as a text painter and language is central to his aesthetic. Ligon has stated “For several decades I have worked primarily with text, making paintings, prints, and installations that encourage a viewer to oscillate between reading and looking.” (Kuo, 505) One of the most characteristic aspects of Ligon’s art is his use of language spatially. Viewers moving through his exhibitions enter his paintings. Almost like turning pages, they experience the formal repetitions in his narrative work. As quotations assert their presence on the picture surface, sections evolve from preceding “words in space,” and space becomes time.

For the last twenty five years, Glenn Ligon’s paintings, drawings, prints and multimedia projects have provided the context for interrogating the ways we process language. He transforms words already used by others and, through the process of recontextualization, they attract attention as works of art with unique graphic characteristics. The original body of work that he has produced combines his interests in language and the construction of identity. An artist with demonstrably political intention, his work addresses issues of identity, race, and society.

His stenciled canvases convey the awareness that the voice of African American artists has been missing from the history of art, that there exists a significant body of work by a number of diverse artists who are African Americans. Without assimilating the presence of color, the story of the visual arts in America is incoherent. In a post-
modern strategy that unites two sign systems, text and painting, he rewrites African American cultural influence on the shaping of modernism and American art. He mines the conceptual possibilities of words by using hand-stenciled text in oil stick. As phrases blur, they become visually abstract thereby highlighting both the tangibility and intangibility of a community’s historical lack of representation. Reflecting on this experience of the in between, he makes concrete a history told from the position of the excluded.

Ligon relies heavily on the legacy of writers. In using black paint coarsened with sparkling coal dust that gradually becomes smeared and illegible, he reflects on language as a tool of cultural domination and critiques an alienating society that surrounded African Americans. By copying lines from Zora Neal Hurston, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and others, he dislocates language and establishes a co-presence with those writers. While his art is fundamentally about language, his works are also investigations of his artistic practice. Words become objects as viewers shift from reading. Ligon has said that stencils give quotations more distance and allow him to continue to be painterly. How do we read or perceive “word-pictures? As language or aesthetic objects? In an interview with Jason Moran, Ligon explained that by putting text into his work, it gave content to the abstract painting he was doing. He said “At some point I realized that the text was the painting and that everything else was extraneous. The painting became the act of writing a text on a canvas, but in all my work, text turns into abstraction.” (Moran, 82) Blurred words become visually abstract. Ligon’s creative process can be traced in the pure linear energy that defines his work.

Our understanding of the world is permeated by language. The meanings of words and their impact shift depending on the speaker and the listener and are constantly taken out of context or misinterpreted. In ‘Ed Ruscha-Ribbon of Words,’ Ruscha states “It seems difficult to untangle the relationship between art and language.”(Berggruen, 99) The trouble in reading Ligon’s painted texts has to do with his ambivalence about the ability of words to communicate. Ligon requires the close reading associated with books and invites us to think of the language we think in (Ligon, 27). Ligon has said “My work confounds legibility. That my paintings are messy and hard to read is part of the point. Words are messy things.” (Ligon, 110)

What is the difference between reading and looking? Seeing is an intentional process which slows the viewing experience. As viewers become increasingly involved, they act as collaborators in the production of meaning. With words as central to his art, ideas are paramount. As words take over Ligon’s canvasses, he challenges viewers to question in what ways language carries with it the prejudices of the past. Glenn Ligon’s life is a life lived black and his art mirrors how he sees the world. He has constructed simultaneous identities that have enabled him to participate in more than one code of belonging. Ligon believes his job is to produce good questions, not answers. Ligon presents archival evidence of black Americans and while he emerged when a generation of artists dealt with race and sexual identity, his work speaks more broadly,
“not just to African Americans or gay Americans, but to all Americans.” (Glenn Ligon: AR 21) His conceptual text art parodies racial bias and cultural insensitivity. Speaking through other people’s texts, Ligon’s work is not necessarily autobiographical but more self-referential, his voice standing in for the collective voice of generations. (Baerwaldt, 7). In the process of writing and revisiting the past, he pushes content about race in different directions, while at the same time remaining painterly in his practice. Ligon’s retrieval of Gertrude Stein’s 1909 phrase “Negro Sunshine” as seen in his wall mounted neon sculpture reaches back a hundred years to address today’s audience that is supposedly beyond race. (Meyer, 392)

Pointing to issues of black inequality, his art reflects the tensions between the need to address social concerns on the one hand and the desire to be free of racial discourse on the other. Ligon explores and represents his own racial history in his work while at the same time critiquing the portrayal of blackness. Embedding words in blackness while stenciling and gluing coal-encrusted letters to canvas, Ligon investigates the ways that language functions as a means for reinforcing stereotypes.

James Baldwin’s 1953 essay “Stranger in the Village” is the text that Ligon has used the most in his language based pieces and it begins “From all available evidence no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came….” “Stranger” was the title of Glenn Ligon’s exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem consisting of ten black canvases and works on paper. Glenn Ligon views the same issues as Baldwin’s to be at the core of his own art which is basically about a sense of exile from the United States. For Glenn Ligon, ideas about racial prejudice are essentially instilled, colored in, by the social environment.

The most sign-like of Ligon’s language based art is Untitled (I Am a Man). It is not a sign but a painting of a sign. How do we locate ourselves within a narrative in order to feel included and accounted for? Ligon has said that “… in a world where the boundaries of national, sexual, and racial identity are up for grabs, who is to say what the real ‘I’ is. I am curious about this breakdown in certainty.” (Hopper,1) Ligon adopts an implied autobiographical approach that represents human experience. As a skilled narrator he adds both individual and collective memories to our collective story.

In Going to Meet the Man, the most radical of James Baldwin’s works, he expresses the painful social and personal reality of being black in America, Glenn Ligon speaks about lingering at the borders of visibility. While Ligon’s paintings are acts of erasure and imply disappearance, they are also means to reflect on language, identity and theory. The text of Ligon’s 1991 Untitled (I am an Invisible Man) quotes Ralph Ellison’s 1955 novel. “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance; of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids.” Below the midpoint of the work, the subject is lost and the smudges equal metaphors for the struggles of everyday life. (Meyer, 32-35). The texts are obscured by the material in which they are rendered.
Making the invisible visible is a theme that has been addressed in a number of works of art during the last few decades. As part of the celebration of the centennial of the birth of photographer, writer, musician, and filmmaker Gordon Parks, 1912-2006, Glenn Ligon was invited to curate “Contact: Gordon Parks, Ralph Ellison, and Invisible Man” at Howard Greenberg Gallery that focuses on Parks’ 1948 photographic collaboration with Ellison. In Ellison’s novel, the narrator lives in the basement of a New York apartment house lit with 1,369 light bulbs powered at no cost due to a tapped electrical line. It had been the light that illuminated the blackness of his invisibility.

In 1966, Noah Purifoy, a central figure in Southern California art, collected three tons of debris from the 1965 L.A. Watts riots and turned it into 66 Signs of Neon. Made from the recycled lead drippings of the signs, these sculptures served as strategies for the re-representation of blackness. In 2001, the Canadian artist Jeff Wall took up the challenge of making the invisible man visible in his highly specific room After Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue. Working on a large scale, he took elaborately staged photographs that were presented as color transparencies set in light-boxes. They were illuminated from behind by fluorescent bulbs.

More recently, Glenn Ligon has used neon for signage in well defined series. These are astute commentaries on the complexity and quality of American art. Highlighting the importance of seeing African American art in a broader context, as objects commensurate with other examinations of culture, viewers find his neon work at the intersection of several cogent themes in contemporary art including race, gender, absence and presence.

Prologue Series # 1 (Text from Ralph Ellison) was a fundamental inspiration for the use of text in Ligon’s work, challenging the viewer to further question understandings and misunderstandings of black race and culture. The text addresses many of the social and intellectual issues faced by African Americans in the early twentieth century including identity as well as black nationalism. As fragments of writing progress logically, words that allude to many misconceptions of race get smeared toward the center canvas of the triptych.

The avoidance of color in Glenn Ligon’s classic works suggests that “color” is off limits. We are aware of the signifying functions of black and white in his work and of his thematic engagement with race. They also connect Ligon with artists like Motherwell, Kline, Ryman, Rauschenberg, Still, Reinhardt and others who use black and white. The title of Ligon’s Prisoner of War series comes from Jean Genet’s memoir. “When I said that we were the ink that gives the white page meaning” is a phrase that invokes cultural difference. For Ligon, identity is constantly being negotiated against a shifting framework of external contexts and conditions.
In conversation with Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, Glenn Ligon coined the phrase “post-black.” As a curatorial concept, the idea of postblack black art applied to the work of a new generation of black artists who are not as focused on race as those that preceded them. Though their work reflects complex notions of blackness, they are adamant about not being labeled ‘black’ artists. Instead of being defined by their responses to black issues, they prefer to explore the unlimited opportunities of invention. When the act of creativity takes precedence, the viability of “black art” is challenged. The irony, however, is that while Ligon suggests his desire for a deracialized reading of his art, his work is steeped in racial themes. Instead of removing the racial context as “post-black” implies, he uses race as a concept to invite us to rethink how art conveys meaning. Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?

In prompting thinking about communication and identity, Ligon makes language into “…a physical thing, something that has real weight and force to it.” (Bradley,45). As visual expressions of ideas in words, he deconstructs and reconstructs, as well, codes related to gender and sexuality. During an interview in Art Monthly, Glenn Ligon said “I think the text in my work is often difficult to read because the ideas in the text are difficult. The difficulty of, say, Baldwin’s trying to decipher his place in the world.” (Baerwaldt,1)

Scott Rothkopf, the curator who organized the 2011 Glenn Ligon: AMERICA retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art feels that of all of Ligon’s text pieces, Warm Broad Glow, 2005, is his “…most distilled and elegant visual rephrasing of borrowed words.”(Rothkopf, 45) It is a conceptually assured work that has beautiful formal qualities. The medium of the sign is neon and paint and it is rendered in old typewriter characters, each one dipped face first in black paint so light escapes from behind. The front is painted black and its inside, the non-viewing area, is painted white.

It is comprised of lines taken from Gertrude Stein’s 1909 publication of Melanctha, the second story in Three Lives. The simple phrase “Negro Sunshine” that Ligon has taken from Stein’s tiny volume measures sixteen feet across and is three feet high. As Richard Meyer has noted, her phrase reaches “back ‘before black’ to the lexical and historic moment of ‘negro.’ “(Meyer, 44) Richard Wright called Stein’s work the “first long serious literary treatment of Negro life in the United States” in which his ears were opened for the first time to the magic of the spoken word. (Van Vechten,338)

Ligon views the publication as an indictment of conventional notions of black subservience that remains embedded in white society. The phrase also points to the liberal complacency that society has progressed far enough that we can use words like Negro without hesitancy. Ligon interrogates the ways in which one inherits deeply ingrained perceptions and conventions in representing ourselves to ourselves and others. Ten or so years ago, Ligon’s Brooklyn studio was upstairs from a neon shop.
During his first visit, he jokingly asked one of the fabricators how to make black neon. (Rothkopf, 44). Enthralled by this new medium, he has created a series of neon works that continues until today. Glenn Ligon always finds new ways to make art and to present it. I met Glenn Ligon in 2003 when I attended his talk at MOMA QNS. Those of us in the audience joined him later in the galleries when he shared some of his responses to the works of Baldassari, Twombly, Warhol and Om Karawa. Since then I have admired the small, elegant installation of his art at Bill Hodges Gallery. With the opportunity to spend more time with his work, social objects take on new meaning. The 2011 Glenn Ligon retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art provided a different and interlocking sensibility, a fascinating look at politically provocative visually striking work.

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Philosophy wants to arraign it [the frame] and can't manage it. But what has produced and manipulated the frame puts everything to work in order to efface the frame effect, most often by naturalising it to infinity, in the hands of God (one can verify this in Kant). Deconstruction must neither reframe nor dream of the pure and simple absence of the frame. These two apparently contradictory gestures are the very ones—and they are systematically indissociable—of what is here deconstructed.

-Jacques Derrida

While researching my grandmother’s grandfather, the venerable poet Amir Minai, I came across the writings of the Harvard professor Annimarie Schimmel mentioning this last of the Urdu formalists as “the high-sounding Amir Minai (1828-1900) who continued the Lucknow tradition.” I got curious and soon was reading more Annimarie than Amir. She had co-authored a monograph on Islamic Calligraphy that I encountered at the same time as another scholar had included me among the contemporary artists that she was planning to present at this conference. As indeed it is a rare experience to both present and be presented, I decided to propose a paper at the same conference. An unidentified image in Annimarie’s monograph on Islamic Calligraphy was conveniently at hand and thus:

The paper examines an unnamed image on an unnumbered page in a 56 page article by Annemarie Schimmel and Barbar Rivolta titled “Islamic Calligraphy” copiously illustrated with 67 images in The MOMA Bulletin, 50: 1, (Summer, 1992). More accurately the article has “1+3-56” pages and equally 1+3-67 images, as it is bookended with two pairs of unnumbered leaves, each consisting of a large image that remains unnamed, un-cited and un-referred to in the main text; the paradoxical logic of the parergon: neither work nor outside the work. The paper proposes to read one of the four images: a word inscribed four times in rotation, drawing our attention to its wordless centre.

The unidentified image is on page 2 of the book that is online:

The thesis being:

When the oral word is written down it becomes an image: seen, as much as heard. When the word is perceived to be sacred, the very name of God, than the image becomes the trace of a divine signature. However if the religion is aniconic that eschews idolatry, and if the word of God being inscribed is “God” then the form deflects the gaze away from itself as it resists turning into a icon by way of becoming a paradoxical aniconic-icon to return the viewer/reader/hearer to the visual’s aural origins.

After the abstract was accepted I came across an oblique reference to the unidentified image in the main text of Islamic Calligraphy, “Perhaps the finest expression of purely decorative script,
or calligrams, especially the fourfold ... the name of God (inside front cover), ...confer a blessing ... to the objects they adorn.” So I began my presentation with that quote and a poem that occurred as I travelled to the conference via the scenic Adirondack route from Montreal to New York. The poem is dedicated to my grandmother’s grandfather as it was a chain of events that began with him that led to my reading the calligraphic image, which in turn led me to its source: a seven centuries old Qur’an stand (rahla) from Isfahan that was in the Islamic Collection of the Metropolitan Museum, NY, currently on display in Gallery 450:


I encourage you to view it online (and eventually view it at the MET).

View From A Moving Train

Infernal orange of leaves in Fall
Overarching blueness of the sky
Cloudscape in various shades of gray
Water rippling hues of aquamarine.

If this be beauty, all told
It is a mere expression of an elusive code
Unfolding a frightening eloquence that enfolds
In utter awe: infinity that it beholds.

The poem encapsulated the thesis that just as the tree expresses the seed’s code in conversation with its surroundings while the seed itself is trying to manage unmanageable infinite creativity so also is the Muslim not seduced by his own seductive calligraphy that inscribes the very name of God. What prevents the calligraphic name from lapsing into an icon of worship is the resonance of the aural code that the calligraphy merely directs the astute viewer to and which the attuned perceiver hears: The Recitation (or in Arabic: Al Qur’an) claimant to Infinity.

READING THE FRAME
(i.e. the border around the square face of the image on pg.2 of “Islamic Calligraphy”)

We are in the realm of two unavoidable words, no matter their indefensibility: the Infinite and the Absolute. Little wonder that the frame of the image being read is inlaid with precisely these two motifs: the Absolute Heptaparallelohedron and the Infinity Loop. The Heptaparallelohedron is absolute because it is the only ‘solid’ or geometrical configuration in the universe that is in total equilibrium: viz. the distance between all vertices are equal and also equal to the distance between the vertice and the volumetric centre. The Infinity Loop of mathematical literature is an abstraction of the ancient ouroboros symbol (the endlessness of a snake twisted into the figure

eight horizontally while eating its own tail). With its relentless alternation of the absolute and the infinite, the frame frames our reading of what it frames.

READING THE FRAMED
(i.e. the image on pg.2 of “Islamic Calligraphy”)

If in the frame the absolute and the infinite alternated sequentially and hence temporally; when we now examine the image being framed, we again perceive the juxtaposition of the two as a
simultaneous superimposition ie. spatial double-exposure. Beneath the uncompromising name of the absolute “Allah” is carved another layer of infinite arabesque vines. The first letter aleph establishes the diagonal as it is the diagonal that determines and stabilizes the sides of the square. However the diagonals stroke is offset from 45 degrees so that with its fourfold repetition the resultant square at the centre of the rotation is in a dynamic orientation; akin to the Ka’aba at the centre of anticlockwise circumambulations by pilgrims shorn in their white shrouds in Makkah. The plan of the Ka’aba too is a dynamic square with its four corners, and not sides, oriented to the cardinal directions.

Aleph, the first letter or Allah, measures but is not measured. All the remaining letters of Arabic that follow the first letter are dependent on aleph for their enunciation as each contains aleph in its utterance while aleph is in no such need as it pronounces itself with the exhalation of breath. Aleph itself is proportioned by the first stroke of the calligraphic nib that manifest itself as a dynamic square ie rotated as a diamond, akin to the Ka’aba and likewise akin to the dynamic square in the middle of the image that we are reading, made by the circumambulating calligraphy. As Arabic is read from right to left, the word necessarily rotates anticlockwise much as the white-shrouded pilgrims do around the black-shrouded Ka’aba. Verily, traditional calligraphers attest, the circumambulating pilgrims are themselves letters being inscribed by the Calligrapher.

The Ka’aba in Arabic or kobe in Greek or cube in English is veiled black on black concealing calligraphy that the sheen of silk against matte threads reveal at close-up. But bands of golden threads woven around the Ka’aba proclaim verses from the Qur’an, trapping light into letters that circumambulate the walls of the Ka’aba in a clockwise direction. This juxtaposition of counterpoised movements: anticlockwise of pilgrims around the Ka’aba in plan and clockwise calligraphy of Qur’an verses around the Ka’aba in elevation raises a question when we recap all the alternations, or coincidences, of opposites:

- the frame’s absolute heptaparallelohedron and the infinity loop;
- the static square of the frame and the dynamic rotated square at the centre;
- the framed absolute name of God and the arabesque infinite vine carved in the layer beneath.

Hence the anticlockwise movement alerts you to seek out its opposite ie a clockwise movement that is lurking undetected beneath the infinite vine layer ie the third layer of carving; the clockwise calligraphy of the word “Ali” the name of the fourth Caliph.

At the Ka’aba there are two sets of significant directions:

1. centripetal circumambulations (both anticlockwise pilgrims and clockwise calligraphy)
2. centrifugal expansion/contraction ie the pilgrim performing his ritual prayers facing the Ka’aba with body postures that take her towards and away from its centre.

Likewise “Ali” can be read as both centripetal given the position of the final descender of the calligraphic stroke ie the clockwise motion that led to its detection; or centrifugal as the main body of the word moves away from the centre. Subsequently when the MET made the Qur’an Stand available for examination, I discovered the name of the Prophet beneath the arabesque
vine in the other square face of the Qur’an stand, “Muhammad”, in a contra-centrifugal movement ie radially towards the centre.

In retrospect this paper was a journey from my grandmother to her grandfather and back to my other grandmother. While one drew my attention to her grandfather Amir Minai that led me to the subject of this paper; the other bequeath me a traditional rahlā ie Quran stand, with its enigmatic chiasmic joint, that I carried with me when I moved to Canada. In the past few years I have made rahlās in the traditional way out of timber, as well as travelled to Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and India to swap notes with other traditional woodworkers; while also researching them in museums in London, Istanbul and finally tracing the nameless image in the “Islamic Calligraphy” monograph to the seven centuries old rahlā that made its way from Isfahan, via Paris to the MET in New York. The object performing its etymology as rahlā means “journey”.

While this account restricts itself to analyzing the image carved on a rahlā, it is only a subset of bigger thesis that explicates on the rahlā itself as a meta-frame with a reciprocal relationship with the Qur’an, the meta-framed, both in the manner of its construction as well as its performance. In both the trenchant tectonics of traditional making, as well as its traditional usage, renders the iconic form paradoxically aniconic. This is the subject of a future more comprehensive paper explaining why the significance of the rahlā with its enigmatic chiasmic joint, continues to support Qur’ans all over the world as it has been doing for over a millennia.

Note: I am indebted to Sheila R. Canby, the Patti Cadby Birch Curator in Charge Department of Islamic Art at the Metropolitan Museum for her encouragement and for making the seven centuries old Quran stand in MET’s Gallery 450 available for my examination.

NOTES
5. Schimmel, Annemarie (1992) pg 53/54
8. The word can equally be read as “Ilm” ie knowledge, given the calligraphic licence of the calligraphic stroke.
“What’s become of words and text in a visual world?” is a question posed by The New York Times in May of this year. Have words and text, as suggested, “been turned into mere accessories?” According to the article, With More Pictures, Fewer Words: “Text is losing clout with an image-hungry audience constantly searching for, posting and reposting photos. . . . Everyone is in an archival roller-coaster process of picture language.” That roller-coaster is also gobbling up the language of poetry, now coming to terms with the ever-more democratized and recent arrival of videopoetry.

The power of image, in particular moving images, in collaboration with words has unleashed an avalanche of new media artists, videopoets, who have let loose a jumble of poetic text, sound and images on our omnipresent computer screens. As Mitchell Stephens in The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word says, this new art form “currently in the process of being born,” is feeling its “way toward a new relationship with words, sound and each other,” where “highly kinetic moving images . . . reimagine, not merely re-create the world.”

As a poet teaching in an art college for the last 20 years, I have had an abiding interest in the relation between word and image. However since 2004, when I began to practice videography myself with some seriousness, I have had an ongoing ambiguity in my work about how image and text/voice interact on the moving screen. So the theme of this conference, “Word/Image” has given me the right opportunity to explore what has been lurking in my thoughts, and underpinning my work now for at least 8 years.

My ideas on this are driven by two sources:

1. a statement by the then Chair of the Department of Illustration at Ringling, Tom Casmer, who remarked to me that any good illustration of a text does not repeat in visual language the literalness of the story it illustrates, but rather takes the opportunity to expand imaginatively on the words; and

2. an edict by Tom Konyves, who has been called a video poetry “pioneer” because he is credited with coining the term “videopoetry” (1982), and is the first person to produce a “Manifesto” (2011) on what constitutes a videopoem. In his “Manifesto,” Konyves claims that any image on the screen should not capture words in a literal way, but allow for a space to imaginatively build on those ideas. He says:
To see an image as a representation of the audible text or to hear the words as they are displayed on the screen violates the premise that poetic juxtaposition is the presentation of distant realities; inevitably, the viewer is prevented from forming their own imaginative associations between the elements presented, resulting in the demystification of these associations, diminishing the poetic quality and experience of the work.\(^4\)

While I agree with the concept these words suggest, I also know that the juxtaposition of image in ways that are at odds significantly with what is being spoken or written on the screen can easily become nothing more than a discombobulated mess. No need to reinvent surrealism, or Dadaism in videopoetry. The clearer the semantics, either visual or verbal, of a videopoem, the better the poetic experience becomes.

For example, one of the early experimenters with this form is Billy Collins, a recent Poet Laureate of the US (2001-03). He has collaborated with various media artists to “illustrate” on screen the presentation of his poems. They are typically cleverly done by accomplished media artists, and do create an intriguing “showing” of his poems. One of his better known pieces “The Dead” (animated by Juan Delcan) has cartoon figures enacting the words of the text while it is read out loud. This poem draws the audience into an unusual space where the dead become “alive” so to speak on the screen, and grab the viewers’ full attention as the poem unfolds:

The dead are always looking down on us,  
they say, while we are putting on our shoes  
or making a sandwich,  
they are looking down through the glass-bottom boats,  
of heaven as they row themselves slowly through eternity.  
They watch the tops of our heads moving below on earth, 
And when we lie down in a field or on a couch, 
dragged perhaps by the hum of a warm afternoon, 
they think we are looking back at them, 
which makes them lift their oars 
and fall silent and wait, like parents, 
for us to close our eyes.\(^5\)

Ron Silliman, poet and recognized web-blogger of a site on poetry, says of Billy Collin’s work, “The Dead”: “neither poem nor cartoon threaten to break any new ground whatsoever. … [It’s] nothing more than a reading of the piece over which a cartoon has been superimposed.”\(^6\) As simple a premise as this poem has, and as literal a rendering as the animation provides, I have to disagree with Silliman (and by extension, Konyvers) on the “nothing more” premise; Collins’ use of animation in translating “The Dead” into a visual language goes a long ways to enhance the viewers’/readers’ experience of the original text.
The goal Konyvers has of making videopoems a literary genre in their own right has in some ways brought about an ineffectual distinction which excludes a wealth of forms not in concert with his limited definition. For him, the only legitimate “videopoetry” is a construct that “augments the suggestive power of poetry by unexpected juxtapositions.” It cannot simply “demystify a poem by [the use of] complementary “visuals.”” Such a distinction seems overly restrictive, particularly in light of Konyvers’ own videopoems, where the “unexpected juxtapositions” of the visuals could use a bit of remystifying on their own.

For example, in his videopoem, “Poems for the Rivers Project,” Konyvers states on his YouTube posting of it: “In the summer of 2003, my 18-year-old son Alexander was working for a “Rivers” project at the Surrey Art Gallery – he kept pestering me to submit a poem. I wrote a 13-line poem which we posited over Alex’s abstract water-related images, all sustained by the drone of an unrelenting Didgeridoo. The poetic narrative is resolved by a verbo-visual pun on the underside of the Alex Fraser Bridge.”

It’s a 2-minute piece that is hard to attend to for its full duration; the abstraction of the water and splash images, which are lovely in themselves, are not supported by an interesting enough poetic text to carry the piece for that long:

```
never step into the same river
  twice
  twice searching for answers
on the shore
  in the cool moonlight
time stands still
  It’s alright to cross now
I hear him whisper
and I believe him
even when the rush I feel
  translates as “my blood”
and the bridge of these lines
  is pronounced “Alex Fraser Bridge”
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For me, there are no clear “unexpected juxtapositions” in this work, regardless of the fact that the water and its splashes become abstract. Never mind that the “verbo-visual” pun is comparatively literal in itself, brings us back to the literal, rather than creating for us some other universe.

On the plus side, Konyvers’ “Manifesto” addresses three facets of videopoetry: its definition, its constraints and its categories. He defines videopoetry as “a genre of poetry displayed on a screen, distinguished by its time-based, poetic juxtaposition of images with text and sound. In the measured blending of these three elements [image, text and sound], it produces in the viewer the realization of a poetic experience.” Fair enough, this definition arguably covers the bases well.
Of a videopoem’s constraints, Konyves writes: “Text, displayed on-screen or voiced, is an essential element of the videopoem. A work which does not contain visible or audible text could be described as poetic, as an art film or video art, but not as a videopoem. Imagery in a videopoem—including on-screen text—does not illustrate the voiced text.” But perhaps there is a broader notion of the term “illustration” to be considered than the one Konyves suggests here, for it is one which his work does not always clearly support.

The fact of the matter is the multiple permutations of the use of sound, text, and images create a vast array of choices by which to layer a videopoem. The categories of videopoems that Konyvers identifies in his “Manifesto” include the following five:

CIN(E)POETRY is a “videopoem where the text is animate and/or superimposed over graphics, still or moving images;” Example: Bridget Lowe, “The Pilgrim is Bridled and Bespectacled” (animated by Angella Kassube)

PERFORMANCE is “the on-screen appearance of the poet speaking directly or indirectly into the camera;” Example: Saul Williams, “Said the Shotgun to the Head” excerpt

VISUAL TEXT “displays the text on-screen, superimposed over images;” Example: Vangelis Skouras, “iPoem 6”

SOUND TEXT “presents text on the soundtrack. Juxtaposed with video images on the screen, it is expressed through the human voice;” Example: John Ashbery, “Paradoxes and Oxymorons”

KINETIC TEXT is “the animation of text over a neutral background.” Example: Ari Grunzeweig, “A Few Good Men”

The usefulness of these distinctions begs the issue of how one can best convey meaning through the layering of text, sound, and image. It is all poetry-on-screen, juxtaposed with other media. The more interesting question is what works and why, and what ways of layering image, sound and text create a richer, more enhanced poetic experience for the viewer/reader than the written text alone can?

Of these categories of videopoetry, the most obvious translation from one art form to another by simply recording an event is Performance poetry. But there is a lot to be said for observing the poet performing his or her own work; the drama, the tonal intonations, the rhythm all come across audibly with indispensable clarity, and do indeed enhance the poetic experience. Not to have heard Gertrude Stein, or Ezra Pound, or Saul Williams or Allen Ginsberg recite their own poems is to miss an essential quality of their work. As I imagine it would have been also with Homer’s recitations, had his work been written down while he lived. So viewing the poet reciting
his or her work does add an essential quality to the poetic experience, as does the layering of other sound or text with visual images, even if slightly “less” so.

That said, these distinctions for me are more taxonomic than useful in relation to unpacking a poem. For the premise of this line of reasoning hinges on whether one views the inception of videopoetry as residing originally in the visual or in the verbal medium. As a poet, when I began experimenting with the hybrid genre, it was as a way to enhance my poems, and to engage the audience on another level, a way to draw their attention while I surreptitiously inundated their auditory senses with words. I thought of it as sneaking up on the listener with language while they were otherwise engaged in a visual experience. I have since come to recognize that sustaining the undivided attention of the viewer/listener is only part of the creative endeavor; there is also the challenge of creating an open space that engages multiple points of view, while perception and comprehension intermingle in a montage of meanings. If it can do that, then it has risen to the challenge of videopoetry, as a genre in its own right.

But this is not quite as simple as you, as we, might think. What’s right about Konyver’s visual-verbal rapport in videopoetry is that the work, the hybrid, is rooted in the Imagination, in Urthona in the Blakean sense of the word, as Earth Owner. The work itself hinges on metaphor, on symbol, on image, both visual and verbal. Perception, that which goes by fast, is all image. And it keeps going by; it never stops. And thus the world of spirit does talk with us, and we do hear it, and sometimes when we don’t deny or hide from it, it comes sailing like wind through, on the stream of image.

The relation of word/text/sound to moving image (that is, narrative, melody, sequential time) and to still image (i.e., symbol, codified slice of life), plus the effect that differing, even opposing ways of layering image, text and sound, have on the poetic experience belies the open nature of the hybrid beast, videopoetry. There are a number of choices, for instance, videos where images don’t match words, but don’t necessarily interfere with the verbal vector either. Take Anne Carson’s first lines in “Reticent Žonnet” as an example where she says:

A pronoun is a kind of withdrawing from naming—because naming is heavy

How to you visualize this line? What does a pronoun look like on the screen/on the page? What does naming look like? What images would come to mind were you to frame an image with these words? That Anne Carson in this instance chooses dance as image, chooses the moving body to articulate the words, does not interfere with the verbal intent, whatever it may be, or however you choose to read these lines. The body movement does focus our minds to a narrow slice of awareness, and the words that follow roll over us as a rolling pin does dough.

Or you may find a videopoem where “a love poem is cast in the voice of a surveillance satellite” like, iSpy by Martha McCollough. The viewer is immediately drawn into the
universe created by the blue cast of the background and white machine-made circles and lines swamping the screen. It’s mesmerizing, like a clock is when you can’t sleep. In experiencing the whole of the videopoem, the viewer-listener becomes a willing participant in suspending disbelief. It all happens and is real, because the visually fascinating, constantly morphing scenes hold onto their blue insistence, as clocks and boxes and circles and propellers float, drift or fly by. What is created by the visual composite is a tone that effortlessly sustains the words voiced-over in robotic form. The ensuing experience of the videopoem creates a cognitive pleasure which may be one obvious off-shoot of the intersection of image and word. Is this something we should we exclude from the “videopoem” label?

Or you may come across a videopoem where the images are vaguely similar to the vocalizations, as in Aaron Fagan’s “My Entrepreneurial Spirit.” In this work, the frames of objects suggested by the spoken words appear also in the evolving image-stream. They are not exact, but are not enough off to throw the receiving mind into a quandary. The puzzle instead becomes the intent of the words, which seem to be saying something that wants very much to be heard.

Another type of videopoem I’ve uncovered is one that encourages silence, one that creates gaps between words, and which may suggest intention in “no-words”. In Aaron Fagan’s “Naked Leaf Dissolve,” for example, there is a long opening silence on the screen, with only the image of a man walking in snow along a long, vertically-barred metal fence. Half-way through the entire length of the videopoem (3 minutes), the man stops, turns to the camera (slightly off full frontal) and reads a poem with sound effects overlaid so that occasionally they drown out the words. The listener must struggle to hear, and wonders about the need. The message is as much in the silences and the noise as in the words. And yet when the words do shine through, they have a breathtaking intensity and depth to them.

All of these videopoems remind me why I am repeatedly drawn to this hybrid genre. It’s not to digest a specific complex of word/image as its maker may or may not have intended. And it’s not to measure it against a specifically-defined form in its outrush. It’s to relish the change of mind that comes from unpacking a loaded videopoem, from discerning its innermost tenets, to uncovering its convoluted architecture whose image and word edifices appear at unexpected moments, and feed into the harvesting of my own imagination. As Megan Snyder-Camp says of John Ashbery’s poems in general:

Work, in that context—the work of bridging gaps, navigating a sharp turn, weighing one thing against another—feels like play. I get lost in it, I resurface, I dive back down. I show up muddy to lunch. I’m not trying to get exactly out of the poem what the poet put in; I’m certain that I won’t. What I get, rather, is exactly what I need, which shifts with each reading.15
Or shifts with each viewing could be said. Likewise, the work of a well-hewn videopoem is to open connections between our senses, between the visual and auditory that veer us toward an immenseness of possibility.

NOTES and BIBLIOGRAPHY

A blanket of quiet moist air enfolds his body. The evening is filled with mystery and danger slowly approaching from the water and from the land. He walks along narrow pathways consumed by his thoughts. He knows the words of poets. His favorite is the one long departed, the one of unlimited blackness of a shiny raven hair: Her words full of exquisite rhythms and energizing void dance in front of his eyes. In the past with warm loving gestures he opened the scrolls of her floating passions. He does not need to do it anymore. Now he echoes her words’ vitality, he echoes them on paper. He knows her poems intimately, he imagines them. He is Katsushika Hokusai, she is Ono No Komachi. She thinks, she imagines then she writes, he sees, he imagines then he designs. Here we are talking about formal imagination, the one of which Gaston Bachelard speaks with such engagement in his *Water and Dreams*. The formal imagination leads us into the innovative, the picturesque, the varied, and the unexpected. One can move the same route everyday; this route will become familiar, but its familiarity does not prevent the unexpected from happening. Imaginative powers are saved from boredom and stimulated by excitement.

Is it a sin though to what many artists, designers and sometimes poets and writers do themselves: to translate the words into images? Is it a sin to provide their visual private interpretations into public visions? Is it? Are we going to remember the images rather than the words? What’s more memorable: A voice of a poet allowing us to close our eyes and cross the borders, free ourselves from paralyzing shackles, let us discover ourselves with our own strength or a guiding visual gesture of an artist’s personal vision? Questions, questions, questions. Yet answers are not written in stone. They sometimes are escaping, fleeing us as images and words do. Thus it is impossible to say what does envelop a body in a more persuasive way: a word or an image. The realm of imagination though is crucial and incomparable.

Ono No Komachi’s words veil and unveil simultaneously. They charm, mystify and clarify, there is just a matter of finding a space, a void for them to float in. Her words’ soft lightness and their dark tones make themselves so human, so humanly available to us, her readers.

There is nothing more exciting, more thrilling than opening a book. Reading is an intimate experience and it is an action far removed from passivity. The same can be said about looking at images. Words and visual gestures posses an extraordinary vitality. Words and images can make us imagine, think, and thinking can be a dangerous activity. There is nothing more debauching than thinking. Nothing’s sacred for those who think. Hokusai’s private visions of Ono No Komachi’s poems become brilliant in
his approach to every single word and its flow. His images allow us to read Ono No’s poems as if we were listening to her words. She does not need to be around us because Hokusai’s gesture of a word on a paper gives a beautiful and simple association with its rhythm and sound. Her words are carriers of precious thoughts, his images strengthen their precious role: A translation of thoughts without interference. The placement of letters, their sizes, a floating figure of Ono No, lack of any kind of background, all of them, capture a style of Komachi’s poetry. The words - she carefully selects, the images are under his guidance. A pulse of presence is alive when she writes:

*How sad, to think I will end as only a pale green mist drifting the far fields.*

A designer, an artist can take a poem and activate it by his images. A poet, a writer can be inspired by images and give them a gift of written words. *Beautiful things are a source of energy.* Mihoko Koyama says and her words resonate deeply.

Poets are usually affected by minute changes to the environment, its political and social climate, its dangers and its happy moments. They are incomparable observers and commentators. Most of them take their environment in a holistic way as an old wise medical doctor.

Wislawa Szymborska, a Polish poet of subtle and delicate observations was an unpretentious humble yet an eloquent observer of humanity and culture. Images interested her, they were for her to look at and to imagine and to write a poem. When I read Szymborska’s *People on the Bridge* I think how much of understanding, perhaps instinctual, the poet had for Japanese Ukiyo-e. The limitless void, nothing fixed, everything in a forever movement, nuances of being there, fusing the then and now.

She writes:

*Thanks to a rebel,*

*one Hiroshige Utagawa*

*(a being who, by the way, passed away, as is proper, long-ago), time stumbled and fell. A silent rebel recognizes and cherishes another rebel.*

*The poet continues:*

*For generations it has been considered in good taste to hold this painting in high esteem, to praise it and be greatly moved by it. For some, even that is not enough. They hear the pattern of rain, feel the chill of rain drops on necks and shoulders, they look at the bridge and the people on it as if they saw themselves there, in that never-ending race*
along the endless road, to be traveled for eternity
and they have the audacity to believe
that it is real.

It is a poem of an unparallel resonance where a sheer importance of an image and a
word are embraced in a kiss.

It recognizes tactile presence and metaphorical connections.

The time is 1917, the place is Russia. The time is confusing, tragic, filled
simultaneously with angst and hope. The place is desperately difficult to describe, but it
is the one of disparity where 90% of population is illiterate and 10% highly above
literacy level. You are a poet and a believer in a new order.

The new order demands a marriage of convenience between art and technology and an
engagement with proletarians. You are not an elitist. How can you be if you are devoted
to change? Your aim is to reach the class of the poor, uneducated, illiterate. How? With
poetry, with a new type of poetry denying its ancient place among the class of the
fortunate. Can you sit though in the middle of a factory and read a romantic poetry of
bourgeois poets. NOOOOO! Vladimir Mayakovsky stands among the workers, He is
persuaded, he knows he can wipe out old aesthetic junk with the screams of his poetry.
It is about the red winning over the white, it is about the comrades’ glorious victory
over the sun, victory over the past regime, it is about the proletarians’ magnificent
future. The future, he later discovers, with an absolute disillusion, it was not destined to
be so magnificent.

There is possibly nothing that one can compare to the presence of the poet passionately
reading his works yet, Mayakovsky’s friend El Lissitzky provides his clever and
economic vision to Mayakovsky’s language.

A sheet of paper is not a void in Lissizky’s work, it is rather something pragmatic and
useful. He organizes Vladimir’s words according to the volume of the poet’s screams.
Mayakovsky’s screams will later become a cry… as he tragically realizes that a language
can be an instrument of oppression and united with an image can become even more
than oppressive- it becomes tyrannical. Lissitzky’s design is on the edge of cerebral and
intuitive. That’s why we are engaged as readers and like Russian workers we are pushed
into the world of sounds connected to the world of images. Impossible to be separated,
they become the VOICE. The verses and design resist the softness of romantic sounds
and they lack, supposedly the deception of the past. They resist any thought that is not
theirs, and they believe they resist the exploitation. They introduce The Brave New
World. According to them it is not a chaos, it is the order of bravery. The past is
sinking, there is not even a minute drop of it worth to be saved.

Mayakovsky screams:
Spit on rhymes and arias and the rose bush and other such mawkishness from the arsenal of the arts...Give us new forms!
How small is something we fight against,
How monstrously big is that what fights against us...

If words and images have borders they possibly be able to distinguish the inside from the outside and vice versa. I however do not see them separate, they are rather beautifully united. For some though THE WORDS are written and they should stay like that: written signs within a limited space. How poor our lives would have been if the words would been caged without any possibility of becoming sounds and visual marks. There are many precious examples of that fusion where words and images are highly organized and yet freely floating. Maya Lin’s book Boarders is one of them. An autobiography of words and visual gestures: an intimate view of Lin’s works. Can anyone find a better writer-designer able to captivate a thought, a genius loci than oneself?

Possibly not. Interpretations are interpretations only, and we would like to get to the core, to the heart of the story. With Maya Lin we go beyond the expected and predictable.

She is in charge of space, void and word. Our fingers feel the void, our eyes perceive beauty of simplicity.

Maya Lin’s Boarders are without boarders—we travel with them reaching far removed horizons, turning pages of exciting white void to finally discover a page inhabited just by one word, a line, a dot, or a sketch. A placement of a dot or a word on a page gives our sight a balance. The balance between the presence and absence, silence and sound. It is also the evidence of how the designer is able to effortlessly negotiate between the intuitive and cerebral. The extraordinary core of Lin’s work is the realization she builds in us: we understand with vivid reality as in Brodsky’s words: Aesthetics is the mother of ethics.

(Ethics reside in beauty and beauty resides in ethics.
Griffin- who is he? And who is Sabine? It is January 29th, Griffin writes:

Sabine,

If you are reading this, you exist. (Is that true? I mean, it should be bloody obvious to me, but it isn’t.) If I invented you, then you do not exist. Right? But how then you still write to me?
The story is more than engaging. You open the book Sabine’s Notebook and you are transported into the intimate world of correspondence between Sabine and Griffin.

Sadly, we stopped writing letters. Most of us are on Facebook, Twitter, God knows what the future will bring... We are far removed from the thrills of opening an envelope and look at letters written by our friends and loved ones. What will happen to us? Do not get me wrong! I am not against our bright technological future, the brave new world, but let us be wise about it!!!

Nick Bantock, a British writer and illustrator settles on Vancouver Island and yes, he is on an island and he needs to write letters. In his work Sabine’s Notebook he creates two charismatic personalities- Sabine and Griffin and allows US to OPEN their letters. A basic ethics tells us not to read someone else’s letters and in Bantock’s book we are facing a dilemma: to open or not to open Sabine’s or Griffin’s letters. After a moment of passing hesitation we do open them. We read their words with an appealing delight. We are allowed in. We also travel with Sabine and Griffin to the unknown lands and explore the spaces where Bantock’s imagination guides us. We do it with untamed curiosity. The letters are of breathtaking beauty: words and images are happily united.

On the last postcard sent by Sabine to Griffin she writes:

Griffin,

I received your Paris card.
I waited, but you did not return on the 23rd.
I waited until the 31st, but you did not return.
What happened?
Where are you?
Write to me, Griffin.

Sabine

We wait with Sabine for Griffin’s letter and perhaps before Nick Bantock creates a new book of the series we are imagining Griffin and Sabine’s adventures ourselves for ourselves.

Helena Hadala works in her studio filled with daylight and gentle words of poetry. For a skylight is like a skin. Leonard Cohen sings.

The artist’s life stops when she listens to poetry as if she cannot speak for elsewhere. Her acuity of vision is sensual and absorbing like an enriching dream.

The artist establishes important connections between honest, direct, poignant
perceptions and a free form of expression where refreshing quality of words is revealed in colour, compositional relations as well as in an intimate size of her works. Deng Ming Dao’s poetry also courageously rejects monumentality, and in the age of monstrous measures, it provides the reader with something familiar and touchable. Hadala sensitively responds to the poet’s aim by an enduring creation of an intimate scale.5

The brilliant translation of WORDS into the intimacy challenges predictable views of reality.

The ambiguity of presence and absence augment significance of words and their organic fusion with images. With Dao’s absorbing words and Hadala’s luminescent imagery we dive to spaces somewhere deep in us where we can rediscover our genuine sensitivity. The pulse of reality is filtered through a kaleidoscopic prism where evocative intensity and pleasure meet each other.

Hadala’s playful and precise translation of Dao’s poems allows the artist to create a magical balance embracing a polyphonic rhythm where sounds of silence become voids of images. Dao writes:

“Shadows on a lit screen, puppets of remembrance.”

Hadala abandons hierarchical relations in her works; foreground and background are consciously blurred to introduce the desire for her search beyond the visible. To be on the edge of appearances and telling the moment becomes Hadala’s credo. As Paul Klee says: “The goal of art is not reveal the visible, but to reveal the invisible.” Wislawa Szymborska writes with a delightful insightfulness about one of the paintings by Vermeer that charmed and inspired her:

So long as that woman from the Rijksmuseum in painted quiet and concentration keeps pouring milk day after day from the pitcher to the bowl the World hasn’t earned the world’s end.