Psychic Fax on Vibrate, Received on Phantom Limbo

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art in Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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ABSTRACT

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Major Director:
Kendall Buster, Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

I offer a cloud of observations about language and art. I will prioritize my questions about how language operates in art, the way it functions within my own studio practice, and locate aesthetic interstices throughout. There will be insights gleaned from the various orderers of order (Lacan, Saussure) and orderers of disorder (Derrida, Agamben), walks in terra-incognita, and even some poetry on my part. I will take this chance to orient myself among different structures and deconstructions that have piled-up around language, aesthetics and art.
I.

Here before you is a cloud of observations about language and art. The cloud will eventually precipitate a pattern, randomized yet subject to basic laws of gravity and language. Using the medium that, at the same time, is under our suspicion, I will prioritize my questions about how language operates in art, the way it functions within my own studio practice, and locate aesthetic interstices throughout. There will be insights gleaned from the various orderers of order (Lacan, Saussure) and orderers of disorder (Derrida, Agamben), walks in terra-incognita, and even some poetry on my part. I will take this chance to orient myself among different structures and deconstructions that have piled-up around language, aesthetics and art. I'll begin my journey in the present with (International Art English), stopping to ask directions from , , , , , and others.

In “International Art English,” a widely read and much commented-on essay published by the online magazine , writers and analyze mutant forms of language and usage in contemporary artspeak, as epitomized by the digital press release. They describe ’s lexical and syntactical deviations from standard (adverbial daisy chains, dependent clauses, nounifications, and an overall ethos that more is more) and trace its stylistic origins to the influential journal with its rhetorical vogue for language that emulates poorly translated poststructuralist philosophy and neo- theory from the . However in-bent and peregrinating, the style connotes academic rigor, was adopted by the
international art community as authoritative, legitimizing language, and is now endlessly proliferated via the internet by agents like [redacted], a massive art promotional listserv.

Without commenting on [redacted] and [redacted]’s methodology or pat point-of-origin story, I find that the article vents collective, deeply felt discontents about art and language, disconnects between descriptive analysis and criticality, and the “metaphysical seasickness” that surfaces when trying to determine what is actually being communicated. I understand [redacted]’s original intent to be one of clarification¹, redressing critical voices that, at the time, portrayed art in gendered, romantic, and vague, mythopoetical terms. But it seems that everything old is new again, and we are now dealing with an outbreak of ambiguous writing. Most threatening, to me, is idea that the keys to the store will be left available to whomever masters this opaque style, based on sounding complex, while actual criticism evaporates, in favor of not offending the advertisers. Further, professional artists today are expected to be fluent in [redacted]—as a sign of recognition and professional complicity between the “content providers” and the academic/institutional/commercial engines supporting their distribution. The problem for the artist is that language does not merely translate but, rather, propagates thought. However attractive [redacted]’s elevating and permissive power may be, it colonizes artists’ thinking and may have long-term effects on how we are able to conceive of and relate to our own words and works. For artists whose practice includes language-based work, claiming our own territory for our art and language becomes important.

¹ Though perhaps the attempt to formulate precise, critical language—with agglutinating clarifications, qualifiers, and delimiters—created a [redacted]’s paradox of specification and obfuscation, approach and perpetual displacement.
Even though I don’t consider myself a particularly academic artist, language has always been a part of my practice—from the sketching phase, to finishing the form, and titling which, for me, completes the artwork and gives pause for humor and final skews. These days, language is the physical substance and subject of an ongoing series of word drawings, which are a little embarrassing, maybe even “unavowable” (Agamben, 53), but I keep making them. It also surfaces in a recent series of cast aluminum sculptures, (2013)—the result of a year-long exploration in the foundry, following an initial impulse to capture in metal a quick, effortless gesture like tying a knot. Rigidly dangling from the wall, the works encourage multiple associations as concrete abstractions on the order of words, letters, icons, or anthropomorphized forms.

Language can be handy when shuffling objects around in the studio. If I’m stuck mid-process, I count the numbers of letters (or syllables, vowels, letters with right angles, letters that share a spirit O and Q, M and N, etc.) in the name of a nearby material, think
about how it affects continuity in the work’s larger ambitions, set up a hierarchy, then implement:

String is a thing made of six letters.  
Arrange the string to have six loops, one loop per letter.  
Locate the fifth loop, which corresponds to the letter “N”.  
Place the fifth loop at the northernmost edge of the plane, following cardinal directions.

This valuing and trust in what I regard as found logic is a source of inspiration within all of my material investigations, and language/words offer possibilities as an economical, flexible and immaterial material. As I continue to investigate language/words as things, I will attempt to place them a bit closer to the art object or, at least, closer to the action.

II.

Within my inquiry into language, I feel it is mandatory to do a little groundwork with Lacan’s question “of what does man do when he makes a signifier” (119). In his seminar “The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,” he riffs on the ancient creation parable of the vase, though not in the way that Heidegger’s vase dialectic frames creation and the concept of Being (Heidegger, 164). Instead, Lacan essentializes the vase as both a useful object and a signifier of signifying, whose utility embodies and bequeaths abstract concepts like emptiness and fullness. Further, the vase is a fabricated signifier—one that suggests may well be the first of such signifiers created by human hands. The object represents “the existence of emptiness at the center of the real that is called the Thing” (Lacan, 121). I understand this description of the Thing to be a fantasy space, one that leaves room for the projection of an image-potential (my term) that recognizes the
fluidity of the Thing. Thing represents an abstract symbol, capable of fitting into multiple pre-existing constructs that also have space within them for mutable realities.

I’ll follow [Lacan’s] speculation and join in wildly about the way pre-lingual humans (if it is possible to be pre-lingual and still human) might have first recognized and designated a Thing. I’ll say that the sun is the first Thing and, by this rationale, suggest that Thing is the first word—the first cause, act, and phenomenological occurrence of language. “The fashioning of the signifier and the introduction of a gap or hole in the real is identical” (121). Let’s call this hole in the real the visual effect of looking at the sun-thing. It would be hard to imagine something brighter, some Thing else with such a power to blind.

We all took a look too long
A moment past a glance
When liquid light overfilled our capacity to hold its beam
Followed by the flash
Voiding all vision, a pinhole sting suspended sense with pain
How was it that this Thing so far away could instantly affect?
No Thing more distant,
Simultaneously present and pervasive than the Sun?

Since we’re on the topic of constructing speculative realities through creative acts, I’d like to contextualize this activity with artist [David Dunlap], whose art-work is a perpetual state of production: drawings, sculptures, car as art, home as art, artist as walnut farmer… In his day-to-day practice (no hyperbole as his art is one of incessant routine), he’s occupied with completing drawings, mottos, calendars, real-time observations recorded to the minute, all in uniform sized notebooks, of which he has purchased enough to account for the rest of his life, in an effort to fill an ark which is actually a
modified bookshelf-turned-casket. He is filling the notebooks, then filling his ark with the notebooks, then inevitably, the ark with himself, into a hole in the ground where he will be buried. Of his many aphorisms, repeated in countless drawings, one that returns to me quietly and clearly when considering three hands cupped made the first bowl. This type of thinking dematerializes the creative act as a gesture that predates even the vase described by David Dunlap.

To linger on the vessel, keeping our thoughts on a/the thing, affords me a chance to connect some of the above musings to Derrida, whose “philosophical position...systematically undermines the presumption of a stable interpretive context to which a reader may habitually appeal for the determination of meaning” (79). Within this
poem by Wallace Stevens, there’s something about the jar’s presence in the natural world that displaces its center outside the structure.

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

-Wallace Stevens

Derrida describes the center as a place “not only to orient, balance and organize the structure…but above all to limit what we might call the play of the structure” (83). In the poem, the structural connection exists in placing the unnatural in nature, arbitrarily, as a center outside the structure yet with everything ordered in comparison to it. I’ll circle back to after some more elliptical, associative connections with my past work, a musician, and instances of found logic.

Ground is icy
Exhalations visible
Slipping to play-free
Creates visible my falling actions in
Bruise or
Shiner

At the Same Moment

2009
Since it is at the same moment\(^2\) that we conjure a signifier and make space within reality through a void, it is interesting for me to consider this void or hole or gap as both a physical and psychic space, and attempt to occupy it in the production of artwork. An ongoing performance project [(2012)](2012) features a former plumber who attempts to deal with his leaky roof by making pots to catch the rain. The work includes video, performance, installation, and a related sculpture series. The character is a vessel (who makes vessels) for dramatizing basic artistic dilemmas and minor epiphanies. The problem of what to make is solved by ‘s need for pots, and his persona is an empty form filled by the action of making pottery. Through , daily activities become occasions for performances, and chores such as sweeping generate sculptural visualizations of time passing in ’s world. As eventually discovers, “we fill pre-existing forms and when we fill them we change them and are changed” (, 9).

Fantasy space and found logic
Ever shifting
Sets of logic that guide
Morph and make meaning in real time
Placing feet on the bridge, to go across, connect land masses
Or
At the very least sand bars

III.

Furthering the notion of void-filling as a creative act, musician uses “preexisting forms” and his own weird whorl of words in the production of his work. His

\(^2\) In 2009, I installed the artwork on the fender racks of the Governors Island Ferry Terminal in NYC, for the exhibition . Describing the simultaneous physical presence and absence, the arrival and departure of the two ferries that shuttle people from to , the work is “permanently” installed. Though, within the stipulations of the artwork it will eventually be erased by the inevitable rubbing of the ferry along the racks, further complicating the relation to “at the same moment” w/r/t physical objects connecting, rubbing, erasing, and scratching away the paint.
sound is visually nostalgic, its origins based in the home-taping aesthetic and committed to a clumsy analog, with layers of individual tracks (drums/guitar/bass/strings) wobbling in and out of sync and a generational tape-hiss that some listeners, like myself, remember from audio cassettes left in the sun to warp. This "visual" sound, for me, is ultimately rooted in his lyrics, as he plays seriously with words-as-content vs. words-as-structure vs. words-as-expressive-objects. It is his multilayered use of words, as a material capable of performing multiple functions, as well as a means to an end within a song structure (being a classic example) that bears the strongest relation to my own approach in the studio. A real-time analysis of the creative process, time stamped within the song, questions the structure of an artwork, as well as the position of the artist.

will I write a song you love today?  
there's no way to tell and who cares, well I don't  
thank the lord  
that my standards for success are so low

every time I pick up the pen I get interesting results  
every time I sit down and I try I get interesting results  
at least interesting results

will I write a song I like today?  
decidedly no, there's no way, but okay  
I guess I'll just go sing  
what's on my mind

every time I pick up the pen I get interesting results  
every time I sit down and I try I get extraterrestrial results  
I get these interesting results

This song about a song plays seriously with the creative act as a prompt for construction and has a lot to do with articulating desire. After repeating “I'm not gonna try,” the specificity of the phrase becomes sticky and adheres to pop trope staples: love
and desire. In the next quotation by Agamben, we can reframe the absurdity of the song within the difficulties associated with describing. “We are unable to put our desires into language because we have imagined them” (Agamben, 53). The unarticulated relates to the struggle to communicate our desired images and imagined desires. Agamben goes on to say that we will put this work off “until the moment when we begin to understand that desire will remain forever unfulfilled—and that this unavowed desire is ourselves, forever prisoners in the crypt” (54). He introduces the problems in language as a bridge over the void (circumscribing and containing the very gap it closes) that eliminates desire.

In the Pink song, the desire for words is what produces words. Words that, in turn, become the song. Pink continues to talk around the making of a song, keeping it just out of reach, so that the process of creation can continue. He gently makes fun of romantic ideas about artistic struggle while also pointing to a way out—freedom from perfection, in the making or the doing, rather than perfect results.

In the generic phrase "I'm not gonna try any more," there is a fracturing of meanings. At once addressing the literal meanings of the lyrics, upon adding harmony, the statement dissolves into a pop staple: giving in and submitting to the romantic and pragmatic purpose of producing material nakedly. Here Pink extends a permission within this particular song that informs his entire process—that of expression being tied to the process of art making. For me, this attitude or ethic represents a policing of ideas via
materials. **Pink** simultaneously employs words within the song structure (verse/chorus) and changes the nature of their right to exist by alternately describing the longing and emotional state of the words as the song’s subject and substance. For **Pink**, words become the tools, the raw material, and the process for making a song, while at the same time resisting inherent Meaning or Truth lurking "in" or “behind” the lyrics. Words are a means of action rather than a cause for explication, and so he avoids the classic artistic dilemma of one’s work being "reduced" to mere words.

III.

The cross-section into my inquiry lies here: words as things; words that act in multiple ways to further form and content. I feel that the strongest link I share with this artist is how we both allow words to serve as a means to a creative process. **Saussure** suggests that the only way that we can really use language is to ignore the individual problems with words, otherwise the entire semiological system will fail, “from the very outset we must put both feet on the ground of language and use language as the norm of all other manifestations of speech” (15).

Against this idea of trying to shore-up the ordering structure in language, I will have a lot more in common with **Derrida** and deconstruction with respect to my studio practice. **Derrida**’s relentless method of questioning meaning in a text shares similarities with questioning the individual materials, forms, and conceptual avenues that construct meaning in an artwork. My next task is to further investigate words as materials, words
as mutable, shapeable symbols, as periscopes to alternate meanings, and prompts for construction. Words can land on the page as formal acknowledgements of structure, both as emotional declarations and as knowable, communicable sentiments from a philosophical framework of deconstruction.

In Of Grammatology, Derrida characterizes the problematic relationship between written and spoken language as having its origins in Western dichotomies of body and soul. In the same way that the spirit is housed in the body, writing is characterized (by thinkers such as Saussure) as “the clothing of speech…a garment of perversion and debauchery, a dress of corruption and disguise, a festival mask that must be exorcised” (35). I share skepticism about language as a progression of corrupted forms. As opposed to spirit trapped in flesh, or pure thought clothed in words—perhaps flesh creates spirit and language creates thought; a generative rather than corrosive medium.

The historical privileging of spoken over written language aligns the written word with displacement and debasement associated with the material world. I would reclaim the written word both as material and as an agent of creative dispersal. This is an attempt to blur any fixed origin, or “transcendental signified” (49) while still reaping the benefits of the communicative properties of language. What interests me are the unforeseen paths available within systems or realities, and making decisions that travel away from the structure in opposite, askew, mirrored, reversed, flipped ways. Regarding written or spoken language’s relation to thought and it’s supposed dilution, it is often true that my thoughts are unknown to me, until I begin to speak or write. And that speaking and
writing unlocks overlapping but distinct areas of thought unique to themselves, so that it is impossible, even, that one could disfigure the other.

Entertaining, for a moment, the possibility that writing \textit{does} displace one further from the unity of thought, I can nevertheless take advantage of this derivative status as a productive position that allows language to move beyond the boundary of my original context. \textit{Boil the Ocean} (2013) is part of my ongoing series of word drawings. Attempting to exploit the material properties of written language and expand my original intent, I might anagram-atize the drawing as \textit{Bathe Ice Loon} (equally absurdist imagery that delivers an unexpected connection to the foul crowned as the state bird of \textit{Minnesota}, which is my place of birth and bathed in ice for a more than half the year). Creating space for play within a signifying chain, I’m able to follow nomadic associations that point, inwardly, to the structural stuff of words and letters and, outwardly, to the fracture and manufacture of meaning. Language and materials co-evolve as hand-over-hand tools for doing art’s work.

Perhaps the problem of \textit{IAE} and its relationship to practice—as doubt’s anodyne or a pre-set thought generator—can be dealt with by extreme abuse of the ordering nature of language itself, with the artist flaying and systematically undoing and redoing. In asking questions about language and art, I hope to find out what they can do for each other as generative and destructive forces. For myself, I want to know what parts of my thinking are being decided for me through collective word choice and how words and language
operate, so I can have more autonomy over their presence and, hopefully, order language towards creative action. It’s up to me to stake my own territory within usage, where the hierarchies of language are as shifting as tides, and each day a new approach to words could be as logical as yesterday’s version. If my concern is the way certain language will occupy and possibly rule my writing and thinking, it seems the only reasonable response would be to find ways to respect and disrespect language on my own terms constantly, consistently.

The space where I feel this “problem” (colonizing thought) can be reconciled with individual, creative use of text is through systematic mutations of language that value all the ways abstraction can periscope and provide visible, physical, and image based representations that join ideas not previously connected. This periscope is a metaphor for the ways that an image of something from another “place” (either foreign or opposite to the place occupied by the artist) can bounce through multiple right angles, filtering and changing, so the image has the energy to travel from one space to another intact, while moving through inhospitable or airless zones. These watery spaces are not necessarily uninhabitable. If, after all, you know how to float, water is not a hostile body at all.
Bibliography


List of Images

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Vita

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