BREAKING THE LETTER: ILLEGIBILITY AS INTERSIGN IN CY TWOMBLY, STEVE MCCAFFERY, AND SUSAN HOWE

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyzes different forms of illegibility in the works of Cy Twombly, Steve McCaffery, and Susan Howe within the context of postwar experimental art and poetry in North America. From the 1950s onward, interest in intermedium experimentation prompted American artists and poets to explore the visuality of writing, and to pursue strategies for breaking down the letter as the smallest graphemic unit in alphabetic writing systems through occlusion or eradication. How do we interpret marks that are variously effaced, erased, covered, cut, and fragmented to resist notational decipherment? The dissertation considers the suspension between text and image as "intersign," and proposes "scanning" as an interpretive mode that mediates between seeing and reading, without assuming the priority of verbal or iconic legibility. Such intersemiotic illegibility seemingly escapes interpretation, yet simultaneously invites more complex interpretive strategies that are demonstrated in each chapter. The Introduction provides a theoretical and historical framework for 20th-century inter-arts experiments, while also touching on earlier European avant-gardes, to frame the artists and poets' use of illegibility in the postwar North American context. Chapter One focuses on Twombly's scribblings in paintings, drawings, and prints from 1959 to 1968: by juxtaposing his own name (inscribed in handwriterly marks) with the half-covered inscriptions of names of classical poets like Sappho, Twombly foregrounds the fragmentation of the modern artist's signature. Chapter Two turns to *Carnival*, composed by McCaffery from 1967 to 1977, as a hybrid text that challenges reading habits by its "destructible" book format and complex typewriter techniques. Chapter Three explores Howe's typographic experiments from her early to later poetry, culminating in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), where the cutting up of letters into "microfonts" interrogates the divide between text and image. The conclusion reflects further on the critical and cultural environment where artists and poets looked to each other to explore new possibilities for American poetry. In moving between visual arts and experimental poetics, between art history and literary criticism, and between pictoriality and textuality, the dissertation places the concept of illegibility in a broader interpretive context.

Key terms: Text/Image Relations, Illegibility, Scanning, Intersign, Semiotics, 20th-century Avant-garde Movements, Lettrists, American experimental art and poetry, Conceptual Art, Concrete Poetry, Language Poetry, Cy Twombly, Steve McCaffery, Susan Howe.

INTRODUCTION
Illegibility as Intersign

What kind of criticism, of commentary on the arts, is desirable today?
-Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation” (1964)

The word is not dead. It is merely changing its skin.
-Dick Higgins, “Seen, Heard, and Understood” (1972)

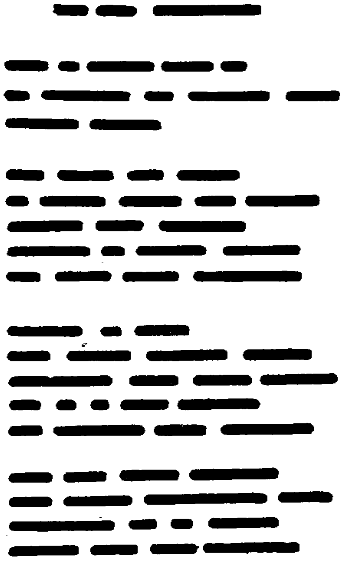


Figure I.1. Man Ray, “Lautgedicht.” *391,* No. 2 (1924), p. 2.

Imagine you are asked to read the above poem by Man Ray from 1924 (Figure I.1). While it is titled “Lautgedicht” (“Sound Poem”), the question of how to “sound” or recite this oft-cited poem remains open, if not impossible, to resolve: at the level of the letter, the text appears illegible. Rather than words, the poem consists of horizontal black lines. Generally, critics interested in the avant-garde have perceived "Lautgedicht" as an instance of erasure.[1] But while the plausibility of erasure is doubtlessly high, there remain several unaddressed ambiguities worth teasing out. Erasure is but one way to interpret the textual illegibility of this hypothetical "poem"; there might be other ways to read the marks on the page without reference to words or letters as linguistic units.

First of all, reading "Lautgedicht" as if it were composed of erased words does not preclude the possible interpretation of the lines simply as lines, a moment where the "text" becomes an abstract image of a text, a schematic presentation of a poem's layout in the same way the grid in modernist painting evokes the rectangular, pictorial space of painting itself. This schematic image becomes more apparent considering that the poem appears as print reproduction, which means that our inference of the poem as erasure would probably not be based on blacking out actual letters.

Second, suppose we grant that "Lautgedicht" performs an erasure, what does it erase? The assumption that only words can be deleted proves more uncertain if we conduct a black sharpie experiment of erasing, for instance, the following poems: "Fisches Nachtgesang" (1905) by Christian Morgenstern, consisting of macrons and breves; "Moonshot Sonnet" by the American concrete poet Mary Ellen Solt (Figure I.2); and "*Sonnet infinitésimal No. 3*" by the Lettrist Isidore Isou, which consists entirely of numerical and other mathematical symbols.

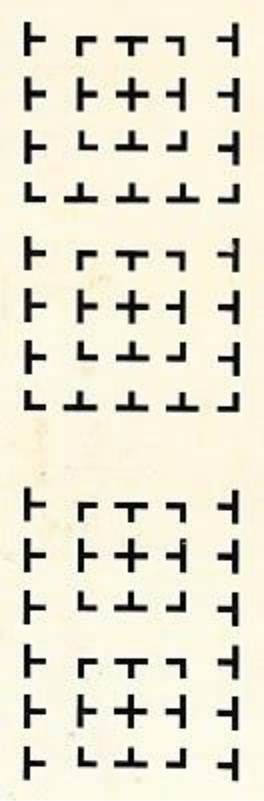


Figure I.2. Mary Ellen Solt, "Moon Shot Sonnet," from Emmet Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*. New York: Something Else Press, 1967, n.p.

Since these examples do not use words and letters, should we read them as poems? Why should we assume that poetry is necessarily made of words?

Faced with Man Ray's work, one's presumption of deleted words is unsurprising given the title and the historically deep tie between language and poetry. But does that association necessarily have to be the case? By calling itself a poem, "Lautgedicht" poses a question about this association: does poetry have to use language, and does the artistic use of language occur only in poetry? It is a question not only posed by Man Ray, but performed by many other language-oriented artworks and visually-oriented poems throughout the twentieth century.

To say that poems are made of words is to tell a common story of the last century's experiments in writing, yet that is hardly the entire story; within related experiments in the visual arts, poems may be made of marks that are illegible as words or letters, but nevertheless invite other kinds of interpretation. Although textual illegibility may only represent an extreme instance against which less visually experimental texts or writings may be read, it is worth looking more carefully at examples of twentieth-century poetry and visual arts where illegibility is strategically deployed, and indeed, emerges as a crucial artistic strategy.

As we saw above, and as I will explore more fully below, the question of illegibility in the 20th-century history of the avant-garde involved a culture in which artists and poets found a common ground for cross-experimentation by revolving around the same kind of sign system, writing. Of particular interest to me are attempts by poets and artists to break down the letter as the smallest graphemic unit in alphabetic writing systems, because this kind of textual illegibility marks the meeting between two kinds of abstraction, that of an abstracted text and that of an abstracted image. It breaches the line between text and image without necessarily resolving neatly into either one or the other, an in-between-ness that can be termed intersemiosis or the intersign. (I will elaborate further on the term below). It is this intersemiotic aspect of illegibility that seemingly escapes interpretation but simultaneously invites more complex strategies of reading.

My dissertation tells one story of illegibility, specifically in experimental art and poetry in North America during the second half of the 20th century. In the context of postwar American art and poetry, illegibility becomes a matter of special interest, because its appearance in both artworks and literary works bridges the two by means of the same sign system. Structurally, the project comprises three chapters on the works of the artist Cy Twombly (1928-2011) along with those of the poets Steve McCaffery (b.1947) and Susan Howe (b.1937). Without claiming a full interdisciplinary reach, the project looks at both experimental art and poetry of the period covered to gain a broader understanding of writing's appearances beyond poetry, particularly in the form of textual illegibility. Rather than seeing it as the end of interpretation, this dissertation takes illegibility as a departure point. Through the three chapters I argue for and demonstrate the centrality of illegibility in 20th-century experimental art and poetry, in which difficulty and fragmentation were norms, not exceptions.

For Twombly, I have chosen works from 1959 to 1968 that show a play between illegibility and proper names in his inscriptions of classical authors like Sappho and his own signatures; for McCaffery, a typewriter work entitled *Carnival* (ca.1967-1975), consisting format-wise of a book whose pages could be detached to form a large panel; for Howe, her typographic experiments from her multilinear word placements in works like *Spinoza's Cloak* (1973-unpublished) and *Eikon Basilike* (1989) to the cut-up fonts in *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007). Together, these works cover a period from the late 1950s to the early 2000s.

In grouping Twombly, McCaffery, and Howe together in this dissertation, it is not my intention to trace a network of personal influences between the three. Despite differences in mediums and modes of circulation, all three exemplify how a certain hybridity of text and image, poetry and art, is achieved in part through the use of illegibility. Situated within their time and context, each of these artists used textual illegibility strategically to question certain assumptions within the artistic disciplines to which they belong. Twombly's handwriterly illegibility, for instance, simultaneously challenges the medium specificity of painting in abstract expressionism and the phonocentric view of writing (i.e. as an immaterial transcription of speech) in conceptualism. The illegibility in Howe's and McCaffery's works, on the other hand, push readers to consider the materiality and visuality of writing in terms beyond the appearance of words or letters.

Accordingly, understanding the challenges textual illegibility presented in the works of Twombly, McCaffery, and Howe also entails modifying and expanding the ways that these three figures have been received within their respective arts. So while the chapters concentrate more on the interpretive difficulties wrought by illegibility, this introduction provides a brief historical contextualization and justification for the methods adopted.

Terms

Before delving into the different postwar movements in art and poetry, some definitions are in order. First, my focus on illegibility limits itself to the level of character or notational illegibility in a given sign system. Pseudowords like "wug" or unpronounceable nonwords like "btgx" are not semantically meaningful in English, but they nonetheless remain alphabetically *legible*. Accordingly, there are two kinds of textual illegibility relevant to this dissertation: notational and eradicative. Notational illegibility refers to a mark whose shape is ambiguous or indeterminate, essentially unfixable as one character in a notation. Notational illegibility becomes especially pronounced in Twombly since his script-making involves handwriting instead of neatly machined fonts. Eradicative illegibility, on the other hand, designates a mark that either has been erased through cutting/mutilation or occlusion/veiling.

I shall use the term "intersign" to help clarify the intersemiotic nature of textual illegibility. I derive this concept from "intermedia," a 1965 coinage of the Fluxus artist and concrete poet Dick Higgins to describe the inter-arts experiments flourishing during the period. (Higgins and his notion of the intermedia will be discussed in more detail below.)[2] One of the rare uses of "intersign" closest to the way I mean it belongs to Philadelpho Menezes (1960-2000), a Brazilian visual and new media poet who also taught as a professor of communication and semiology. Menezes coins the term *intersign poetry* or *semantic visual poetry* to refer to a type of experimental poetry practiced in 1970s Brazil: "In this poetry the iconic visual sign articulates itself with the verbal sign—in what we could call *Intersign syntax*. The poem produces a chain of signifiers to be understood and read something like an *intersign semantics*."[3] An example he picks is the 1971 poem *Koito* (Figure I.3). Composed by Villari Hermann, the flippant poem contains both an aural and a visual play. The title *Koito* (coitus) results verbally by merging the sound of the letter 'k' (*ka* in Portuguese) with the number 8 (*oito*). Visually, the coitus is conveyed by having the branching arms of 'k' penetrating the two hollow bowls in '8.'[4]

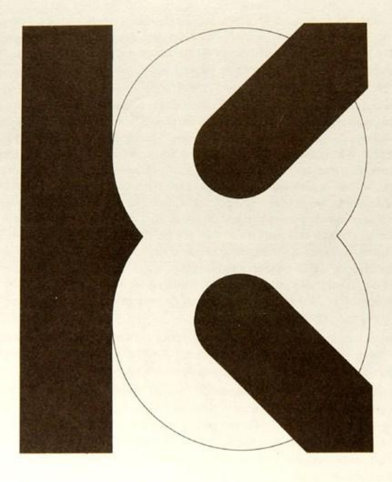


Figure I.3. Villari Hermann, *Koito* (1971).

But as Menezes' interpretation of *Koito* shows, the legibility of the poem's basic components as acceptable notations of 'k' and '8' enables the dual play of the visual and aural levels. Illegibility, on the other hand, functions intersemiotically in a way that is harder to define: it mediates between textuality and pictoriality without being unambiguously determinable as either icon or text *through* notational decipherment. And it is this suggestiveness in textual illegibility of both icon and text that eludes precise formulation. While not textually legible, an illegible mark could still evoke writing qua fragmented or effaced sign. In turn, textual illegibility could additionally suggest pictoriality when inferable as partially abstracted *image* of a text. (This is the case sometimes when textual objects are incorporated *within* the three-dimensional world of a perspective painting.) If a mark is unambiguous and legible in at least one sign system, then it ceases to be an intersign in the same way a textually illegible mark would.

In addition to conceptualizing illegibility as "intersign," I also introduce scanning as a verb that mediates reading and seeing in order to designate the visual comprehension of graphic marks.[5] With regards to the intersemiotic nature of textual illegibility, scanning is relevant in taking into account that an ambivalence could occur at the graphical, presemiotic levels of notational dechipering. [6] Scanning also negotiates conventions of reading texts and seeing pictures by not assuming a linear top-left-bottom-right direction of perceiving a work containing lettristic marks.[7] Within 20th-century typographic experiments in poetry, perhaps it is appropriate that Mallarmé uses "scanning" to describe the simultaneous seeing of the unity of the page and the reading of the lines in his *Un Coup de dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard* (1897), a key precursor to subsequent typographic experiments in the coming century.[8]

How does scanning mediate between seeing and reading? I am far from having an entirely developed response. But I shall propose a provisional one based on Richard Wollheim's theory of seeing-in or the two-fold nature of perceiving pictures. When we see a woman in a representational picture like Manet's *Emilie Ambre*, we simultaneously are "visually aware" of a marked surface *and* the woman being represented.[9] To Wollheim, these perceptual aspects are "aspects of a single experience[,]" not *two* simultaneous or alternating experiences (Wollheim, 3-4). The largest implication of this twofoldness is to refute the idea that representational pictures illusionistically deceive a viewer into mistaking the representation for its referent. Under Wollheim's view, a viewer would recognize a figure as represented *in* a given medium. So "representational content is experiential, but it is not the product of illusion (Wollheim, 3)." In other words, besides the apocryphal yokel mistaking the oncoming train on the film screen for a real one, viewers of representations like films and perspectival paintings are not duped into mistaking the represented objects as the objects themselves.[10]

Any interpretive complacency of a viewer with regards to a painting—focusing more on the content depicted than on the brush strokes, let's say—occurs rather more through a conditioning (social or ideological) that applies equally to numerous "other details of everyday life (Carroll 118)." This means that the complacency about a given formal layout of a work has more to do with *familiarity* rather than *form* per se. Postwar viewers who became increasingly familiar with Pollock's abstract drip paintings could still remain ideologically complacent or even complicit, for example, with the capitalistic workings of the art market. The problem of complacency, then, has to be explained in terms beyond formal qualities of a given work.

How do Wollheim's twofoldness and, consequentially, his rejection of deceptive illusionism apply to scanning? First of all, scanning a text does not imply the existence of a *unique* perceptual experience distinct from reading. Taking an ecological approach, we are simultaneously aware *visually* of the symbols being denoted *and* the type along with the means of inscription used to denote the letters. The difference between reading and scanning lies instead in how much we accord interpretive significance to the letters' visual shapes. But if we do not usually pay attention to font type in reading, this is not a complacency bred by textual legibility as a formal symbol system. Rather, any complacency with regards to type shape would happen more through conditioning and context. Any significance given to typography in *scanning* then is an issue of *interpretation*, not one of a special type of psychology of perception or of a special characteristic of the legibility in any given layout or font. The difference between the New York Times reader (who would usually read *through* the typography when reading for content) and the paper's graphic designer (who would pay attention to font, kerning and layout) is a difference of interpretive attention, not of perception.

So while scanning is relevant to the intersign, it does not solely apply to the intersign. To do so is to confuse the act of perception and the object perceived. The separation between reading and seeing does not necessarily parallel the separation between text and image. Excepting the Braille alphabet, in the most common setting reading in the West necessarily presupposes seeing. It follows then that the assumption of continuity between reading and scanning does not relate only to an intersign. For instance, one can perceive the clean, legible typography in concrete poetry by *reading* them notationally as letter clusters or by *seeing* and taking into account the type of font used.

I have developed the concept of "intersign" and "scanning" as a result of my struggles with different forms of illegibility in Twombly, McCaffery, and Howe. I do not therefore claim universal validity of these terms across arts of different sign systems and periods; indeed, it may be impossible to speak systematically of the intersign, since its suggestiveness of actual sign systems—in our case, icon or text—eludes uniform measurement and notation. In the final analysis, these terms remain provisional, historically bounded, and still in need of a stringent revision. At the same time, it is illegibility's difficulty and elusiveness that push us to consider interpretation beyond the defined levels of words and icons, a move that is key to reconsidering art and poetry in the second half of the 20th century.

40s/50s: Postwar Antecedents

Interpreting illegibility in Twombly, McCaffery, and Howe as intersign is apropos if we take into account: 1. the increasing prominence of writing as a representational means in American art beginning from the 1950s, and 2. the Neo-Dadaist tendency in works like Rauschenberg's combines and Fluxus happenings to challenge the assumption of medium specificity prevalent in the 1940s.

Putting aside the issue of medium specificity for a moment, we should note that the tendency in Occidental experimental writing to rethink fundamentally how they utilize alphabetic writing was not exclusive to the postwar North American context. Alongside precursors and precedents in earlier 20th-century avant-garde movements (including artists like Man Ray and Kurt Schwitters), certain strands of experimental postwar literature and art also explored other means to alter the appearance of writing. During the late 40s and the early 50s, Paris-based Lettrists like Isidore Isou, Maurice Lemaître and Gabriel Pomerand privileged the letter over the word as a fundamental unit for literature. One outcome of this was non-semantic sound poetry, another metagraphy or pictoprose, a form of Rebus writing in French combining the Roman alphabet with pictures and other types of alphabet.[11] Mirroring the Lettrists while also going beyond them in certain ways, in 1949 the *affichistes* Jacques Villeglé and Raymond Hains framed strips of lacerated street posters on canvas and christened the resulting *décollage Ach Alma Manetro*, after the still-legible fragments of words left on the work. By performing the gesture of tearing repeatedly, however, Villeglé and Hains often fragmented letters to the point of even "eroding the smallest semantic units."[12]

Isou's metagraphic or pictoprose compositions, in particular, anticipated the tendency of later artists and poets to reduce letters further into illegible fragments. In 1950, Isou convinced the reluctant the large publishing house Gallimard to print and publish *Les Journaux des dieux*, a 50-page *roman métagraphique* preceded by a 200-page essay on the novel. The essay, entitled 'Essai sur la définition, l'évolution et le bouleversement total de la prose et du roman", provides the foundations of metagraphy.Generally, metagraphy combines alphabetic texts with other kinds of communicative signs such as numbers, drawings and ideograms in both a linear or non-linear manner: "On tient à reduire, pour l'instant, le dessin à la ligne, c'est-à-dire qu'on veut rendre cursif **le dessin** [...] on fait du dessin une écriture./ **Il s'agit avant tout, dans le bouleversement isouien de l'introduction de la peinture dans la prose pure ou dans la prose romanesque. On appelera cette écriture pictoprose**."[13] The aim, then, is to combine writing and images in a way that does not necessarily refer back simply to ancient ideographic writings: "Il ne s'agit plus d'un **graphisme synthétique primitif** (écriture idéographique simple), ni d'un **alphabet pur** ordinaire, mais d'un mélange portant sur un enrichissement sans fin de l'écriture ordinaire ou de **la prose** (136).”

Since Isou's metagraphy emphasizes decipherment in addition to verbal and visual figuration[14], it does not surprise us that he would use the rebus as a model.[15] In a rebus, an image does not merely refer to the thing depicted, but also to the homophonic word or syllable that is part of the solution (e.g. a drawing of a tooth ['dent'] to signify 'dans' ['inside'].) Isou further acknowledges metagraphy's debt to the rebus in saying that the *déchiffrement* will become more and more opaque and difficult when the author realizes his or her freedom in creating her own signs: “**La pictoprose, posant des problèmes de plus en plus subjectifs d'expression aboutit de plus en plus au déchiffrement du rébus et à l'opacité totale des notions offertes** (148).”

The intersemiotic freedom between text and image in the rebus constitutes an ideal blueprint for metagraphy. Based on the rebus, metagrapic works like Isou’s book, Lemaître’s *Canaille* or Pomerand’s *Saint Ghetto des prêts* immediately imply the fragmentation of French words into smaller units such as its syllables and its phonemes. But the more significant implication is that the phonetic aspect of the French language in metagraphy—the correspondence between a symbol and its sound—does not limit itself to the Roman alphabet. Pomerand’s *Saint Ghetto*, for instance, contains different ancient and modern alphabets in addition to pictures. While the main advantages of a single alphabetic system are obvious for rapid, silent reading– imagine a work as long as *Gargantua* in rebuses – early metagraphic works by the Lettrists force readers to slow down and become highly conscious of the process of reading at the level of the word formation itself. While still legible, the notion of legibility in metagraphy challenges the regular legibility of alphabet writing in French.

In the rebus-like metagraphy, moreover, the articulation of a word through different writing systems in a rebus always already appears im-properly as puns ("dent" for "dans"). So even when a particular phrase or proverb governs the syntagmatic organization of a series of images and non-Latin writings, the supposed textual solution of a given rebus is not simply its linguistic equivalents in terms of its sound. Through metagraphy, Lettrism provides a key postwar precedent to conceptualizing the use of writing in art and literature further away from the word or the Roman alphabet. That Isou conceived such a project with an attitude of indifference towards genres (*l'indifférenciation des genres*)[16] also anticipated the intermedial cross-experiments in the arts a few years later across the Atlantic.

Though different from the French postwar context, a similar rethinking of writing among both poets *and* artists also took place in the American context. But the use of writing in American art after early abstract expressionism in the 40s emphatically contained a polemical thrust against the notion of medium specificity famously advocated by the art critic Clement Greenberg. Medium specificity, along with the rejection of content in painting, constitutes the most contentious tenets of his theories with regards to the hybrid works chosen for this dissertation. For this, the appropriate starting point is Greenberg's 1940 suggestively titled essay, "Towards a Newer Laocoon."

A glance at the essay quickly reveals Greenberg's conception of the arts as one of rivalry. This is a necessary move on his part so as to argue for a notion of the purity of each medium. Literature was for him the dominant art form in the 17th and 18th centuries. The result, he continues, was the decline of the pictorial arts due to what he perceives as its submission to the domain of literature.[17] By this, he means the suppression of easel painting as a medium in favor of its imitative and illusionary use to depict the subject matter derived from literature. In the 19th century of French realism and impressionism, painters slowly became aware of its own medium. Abstract painting in the twentieth century thus followed the trajectory of avant-garde painting laid out by 19th-century names like Courbet and Manet. In short, the "history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial of efforts to 'hole through it' for realistic perspectival space ("Laocoon," 34)." Moreover, "[it] is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and truly itself (32)."[18]

Greenberg's argument for the independence of each medium of art then could be tied subsequently to the abstract expressionists' suspicion of language and criticism in the 1940s. As Ann Gibson has well documented, the reluctance, or even outright refusal, of abstract expressionist painters to talk or write about their paintings include major artists like Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Jackson Pollock.[19] For them, to talk about an abstract painting attempting to convey something that is essentially unrepresentable could only mean the "heresy of paraphrase."[20]

50s/60s: The Intermedial Challenge

By the later 1950s and the 1960s, however, several trends emerged as a polemical response to Greenberg and abstract expressionism. During this period, writing ceased to belong solely to poets and critics. Artists increasingly incorporated texts and book editions as parts of their general oeuvre. This is not to say that words have never appeared in modern painting prior to the postwar period, but the polemical dimension of including text in American art only becomes foregrounded as a response to medium specificity.

In conceptual art of the 1960s, the use of text became rather commonplace, if not normative, among artists. Conceptual art constituted a particularly stringent repudiation of modernist painting through its use of reproductive instruments such as the typewriter, photography, and Photostats to question the notion of modern art's objecthood. The project to dematerialize art by rejecting painting and traditional sculpture could also be understood as an anti-commodity critique. The relevant pre-supposition in conceptual art that is questioned here pertains specifically to what Alexander Alberro calls "linguistic conceptualism." Inherent to this "linguistic conceptualism" is a reductivist process to "push the conventional objectness of the artwork toward the threshold of a complete dematerialization."[21] The result, according to Alberro, was a challenge to "the visual elements of an artwork" and the increasing "prominence of text (Alberro xvii)." The increasing use of printed words, along with photography, was supposed to replace the perceived individual gesture of the brushstroke in painting with the alleged impersonality of the two reproductive mediums to present anti-art objects containing analytic propositions about art.[22]

A good example of linguistic conceptualism could be found in Joseph Kosuth, who argues in "Art After Philosophy" (1969) that art is not based on its appearance as object rather than its conception as idea. To further argue his point, he quotes the empiricist A.J. Ayer's evaluation of Kant's distinction of analytic and synthetic propositions: "A proposition is analytic when its validity depends solely on the definitions of the symbols it contains, and synthetic when its validity is determined by the facts of experience." Analytic proposition's validity relies on a non-experiential tautological truth deducible from the proposition's definition itself ("A=A, "All unmarried men are not married"). Synthetic proposition's validity, in contrast, could only be confirmed by experiential observation (A=B, "Jim Osterberg is Iggy Pop"). Conceptual art, writes Kosuth, approximates analytic proposition in not being based on experience, thus not based on experientially observable objects.[23] Said art's validity, so it goes, does not depend on the experiential observation of an object's physical properties. It is for this reason that Kosuth foregrounds verbal elements in his works.[24]

The flaw in Kosuth's phonocentric view becomes immediately apparent in not taking into account the possible gap between an artist's concept or idea of art and its means of communication, a gap pointed out in Roy Harris' biting (and hilarious) takedown:

> The basic problem with conceptualism in its most radical form is exposed as soon as someone asks the question "How does the artist **express** and **communicate** these dematerialized ideas that constitute art?" At least one conceptual artist tried telepathy; but that never caught on (the reason being, according to skeptics, that telepathic works of art were difficult to sell). For a society that does not believe in telepathy, the assumption has to be that *some* physical mode of expression is necessary. Even if the self-centred artist is a monomaniac concerned with no one else, the retreat to "pure ideas" risks being a retreat into vacuity.[25]

The conceptualists' inevitable recourse to language to claim the opposition between ideas and objects meant that the materiality of print "could not—in the final analysis—be ignored," as Craig Dworkin observes.[26] Considerable exceptions to Kosuth's thinking abound within conceptualism among artists who did not take the materiality of writing for granted: Kosuth's teacher Mel Bochner, Hanne Darboven, Dan Graham, and especially Robert Smithson, who famously declared "My sense of language is that it is matter and not idea—i.e., printed matter."[27]

While American artists increasingly adopted writing into their works, several strains of experimental poets around the same period also looked into design and the visual art to rethink the appearance of their works. In this regard, concrete poetry's emergence in the early 1950s and its canonization by the later sixties deserve some consideration here, especially because it formed another nexus of poetic experimentation that figures like Howe and McCaffery engaged critically. Around the time that artists increasingly incorporated texts into their works, in the 1950s concrete poetry emerged as an attempt to bridge poetry and the visual arts. The trend itself resulted from the simultaneous but independent efforts of Eugen Gomringer in Switzerland, the do Campos brothers in Brazil, and Öyvind Fahlström in Sweden. In his 1954 concrete poetry manifesto, Gomringer conceives the concrete poem as "an object containing thought but made concrete through play-activity (denkgegenstanddenkspiel), its concern is with **brevity** and **conciseness**. It is memorable and imprints itself upon the mind as a **picture**."[28] Simultaneous with Gomringer's attempt to blur the perceptual processes of reading words linearly and seeing the overall shape ("constellation") of a poem is his concern with "brevity," echoing the Futurist Marinetti in asserting that "Our languages are on the road to formal simplification, abbreviated, restricted forms of language are emerging. The content of a sentence is often conveyed in a single word (Gomringer, "From Line to Constellation," 67)."

Yet, beyond the reduction of language in concrete poetry to individual words (Gomringer) or even fragmented letters (Franz Mon), other concretists conceived a more far-reaching reformulation of poetry. If painting in the 50s and the 60s could consist of words, experimental poetry of the time could also consist of images. Concretists who created poems out of images include Augusto do Campos's "Olho por Olho" (1964), a pyramidal collage mostly comprising close-up photographs of eyes, and Kitasono Katue's "plastic poems," photographic reproductions of objects like glass or a crumpled paper (1966- Figure I.4).

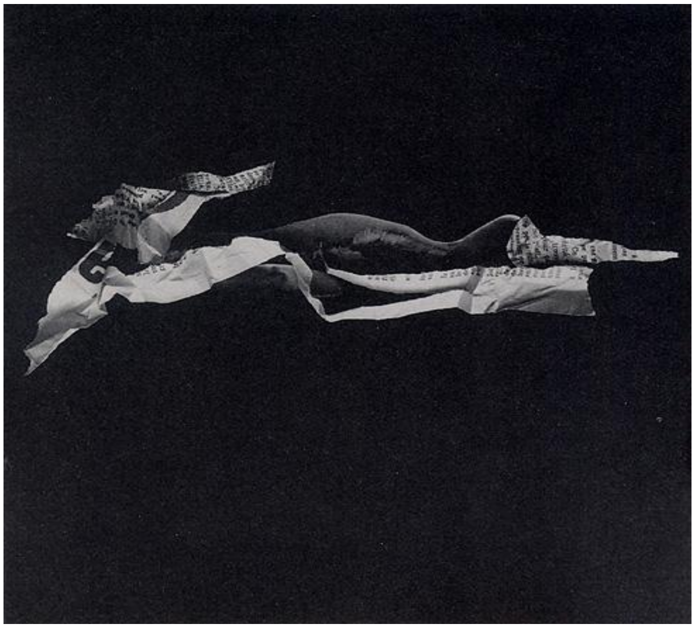


Figure I.4. Kitasono Katue. *Plastic Poems*, p.171.

Katue was a supporter of concrete poetry, which foregrounds typographic design as something to be seen as well as read. But works like his plastic poems contain a more formally radical implication by categorically detaching poetry from the actual use of writing. Such a move paralleled the use of writing in conceptual art to question the narrow association between an art form and the sign system it uses. Commenting much later on the effect of conceptual art on poetry, Dworkin insightfully remarks on this equal possibility in poetry for a "radical renominalization": "the equivalent move for a poetry that wanted to model itself on conceptual art would be to posit a nonlinguistic object as "the poem."[…] a poem without words."[29]

In a similar light, could some of Twombly's paintings count as "poems"? At the very least, they prompt questions about writing in the same continuity as what was occurring in poetry. While Twombly's works predominantly circulate as paintings or drawings, yet they are also works that revolve around questions about writing and illegibility. To go further, the handwriterly nature of his textual marks makes it equally difficult to categorize his works comfortably either as paintings or as literary works. As such, his mark-making cannot be discussed only in terms of either pictoriality or textuality. As an intersign, Twombly's textual illegibility, in addition to his actually legible marks, require an interpreter to cast a two-way glance at both art and literature. What this means in this dissertation is to account carefully for the strategic balance in his handwriterly marks between full legible letters and their fragmentation or effacement into illegibility. Subsequently, the notion of veiled or erased letters as fragmentary writing gains a particularly literary dimension when they appear in Twombly's citations of classical authors like Sappho, whose modern reception actually depends on translations and rewritings of her surviving fragments.

Ultimately, in comparison to the US, concrete poetry gained more acceptance in Europe (Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, The United Kingdom, France, Italy), Latin America (Brazil, Argentina), and Japan. As Solt wrote in 1968, "it would be an exaggeration to speak of a concrete poetry movement in the United States."[30] (It would be interesting to ask whether Twombly's warmer reception in Europe during this time could partially be attributed to a more robust publication and reception of concrete poetry in European countries like France, Italy, and Germany). Despite Solt's assessment, it is significant, however, that the circulation of concrete poetry in America was indebted not only to efforts by fully self-identified concretists like her, but also by Fluxus artists like Emmet Williams and Dick Higgins, both of whom also composed concrete poems.

Higgins' small publishing effort, Something Else Press, made possible the release of the first seminal American anthology of concrete poetry: Emmett Williams' *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (1967). At the very least, Howe would have known of Williams' anthology, since the book was mentioned in one of her diary entries.[31] Higgins was a key figure during the 1960s and 1970s who thought about poetry in continuity with other branches of art. Besides publishing materials related to concrete poetry, he also participated in Fluxus Happenings in the late fifties with John Cage and George Maciunas.[32] Underlying his promotion of concretism was a belief that the larger trend of the arts after 1958 was the crossing between mediums. As noted earlier, he developed the term "intermedia" in a 1965 essay to characterize the cross-disciplinary experiments of the period. To him, concrete poetry emphatically counted as intermedia because of its bridging of poetry and the visual arts.[33] Although, as he acknowleged, intermedium thinking has precedents in European historical avant-gardes like Dadaism, his is a particularly American articulation of the Neo-Dadaist tendency in the 1950s and the 1960s. In other words, intermedia specifically responded to medium specificity and the privileging of painting in abstract expressionism.[34] The inclusion of concrete poetry within Higgins' thinking about intermedia in effect hints at the possibility in this kind of poetry, especially after its first formulations in the 1950s, to detach itself from the expectation that it requires words.

McCaffery, Howe and the Legacies of Poetry as Language Art

McCaffery's early works in the 60s and 70s clearly cengaged the emerging tradition of concrete poetry. Like Katue, though, he was critical of the early concretists. Being British-born—he only moved to Canada in 1968—it was likely that McCaffery encountered concrete poetry when he was still an undergraduate in England, where the concrete poetry scene there and nearby Scotland was more active. In addition to the activities of poets like John furnival, Dom Sylvester Houédard, and Ian Hamilton Finlay, in 1964 the English critic Mike Weaver organized *The First International Exhibition of Concrete and Kinetic Poetry* in Cambridge.[35] McCaffery's description of his first meeting to bpNichol, Canadian experimentalist and McCaffery's longtime collaborator, referred to him as a "concrete poet: "I first met Barrie Nichol in the summer of 1969 through the auspices of John Robert Colombo[…]I approached Colombo with two burning questions: How can I get an editorial job in Canadian publishing? And how can I get in touch with the Canadian concrete poet bpNichol?"[36] During that time, Nichol would have been known more as a concrete poet, with works appearing in Solt's anthology.[37] Despite Nichol's inclusion in Solt's seminal collection, the Canadian experimental scene in the 1970s actually became critical towards the early concretists for their clean and neatly legible typography:

> ["Dirty concrete"] was a familiar usage in the early seventies in my own discussions with bpNichol about the incipient hierarchization within the international concrete movement. We both noted that anthologies were regurgitating the same material which was **straight edged, typographically lucid** (Garnier's work for instance and Eugen Gomringer's as well as Ian Hamilton Finlay's in Scotland and that of the de Campos brothers in Brazil). We both considere that what seemed to offer itself as a vanguard movement dedicated to poetic change was rapidly ossifying.[38]

While Gomringer may have meant his poetry to be seen as well as read, the basic legibility was not in question. *Carnival*, then, could be situated firmly within the notion of the dirty concrete. Mccaffery's work can be viewed in part as a response to the predominantly neat, grid-like typography of concrete poetry. The abundance of textual illegibilities, juxtaposed to actually legible texts, is achieved through overprints and masking using the typewriter as well as rubber stamps, pens, and other inscriptional mediums. Because of the variety of mediums and the manner in which McCaffery presents textual illegibility, the fragmentation he aimed for went further than Mon's broken up letters.

Howe's engagement with concrete poetry in the early 70s, while much more limited and at times altogether dismissive, still merits discussion. It provides information not only on her stint as an artist, but also on the multilayered nature of her later typographic experiments.

As a young painter who moved to New York in 1964 after graduating from Boston Museum of Fine Arts, how did Howe react to the art scene and to concrete poetry?[39] Though she later fully became a poet, her sensibilities were very much "formed in the sixties" during her stint as an artist in New York.[40] In an interview she gave in *Paris Review*, Howe also noted Duchamp's notes and word drawings by Cage and Carl Andre.[41] One immediate difficulty encountered in discussing Howe's output in the 1970s is simply the lack of available documentation on and reception of her art in her time. Nonetheless, the remaining available documents still allow for a revealing glimpse. In particular, her early installation art and a 1974 essay, "The End of Art," published in *Art in America*, gives us a clearer understanding of her art in relation to minimalism and conceptualism, particularly with regards to the material nature of print and mechanically reproductive mediums like photography and xerography. Her most immediately discernible attachment was to minimalist paintings, particularly Ad Reinhardt's black monochromes and Agnes Martin's grid paintings. Howe's essay, for instance, perceives a continuity between monochrome paintings and a shape poem by the Scottish concretist Ian Hamilton Finlay. Titled *Homage to Malevich* (1963), the poem consists of letters alternately spelling "black," "lack," "block,"

"lock." making up a rectangular shape. The many directions one could take in reading the poem parallels, in Howe's view, the way a viewer perceives a monochrome.[42]

Besides writing about the above-mentioned concretists, Howe also maintained an extensive correspondence with both of them: Finlay from 1973 to 1985, and, less intensively, Lax from 1975 to 1983.[43] At the same time, she was not always so generous towards concrete poetry. In a 1981 letter to the poet John Taggart, Howe chastised both concrete poetry and her former artist self for treating language as an object.[44] It is slightly puzzling that Howe would chastise herself so harshly for being an artist who treated poems as objects. Her installation art pieces actually showed an artist who not only explicitly included poems in her work, but did so to the extent of inadvertently forming a conceptual opposition to the dematerialized view of writing in some conceptual art.

Indeed, Howe's installation work in the 1970s could be seen as an indirect response to conceptual art. Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr's anthology of American women poets lists six exhibitions of Howe's in the 1970s.[45] Howe's archive at UC San Diego only contained documentation for, at most, two of her shows from the early seventies. Fortunately, enough remains to provide a good enough look at some of her installations. Titled *Walls* (See Figure I.5), the installation changed from one exhibition to the next. Generally, *Walls* consisted of constructed white "walls" made of sheetrock [46], on which she affixed papers with typed poems and black-and-white book reproduction of nature and landscape photographs (e.g. pelicans, Harry Avery's castle in Northern Ireland, etc.). The relevance of this work in relation to conceptual art could be explained through a happily accidental find in Howe's archive.

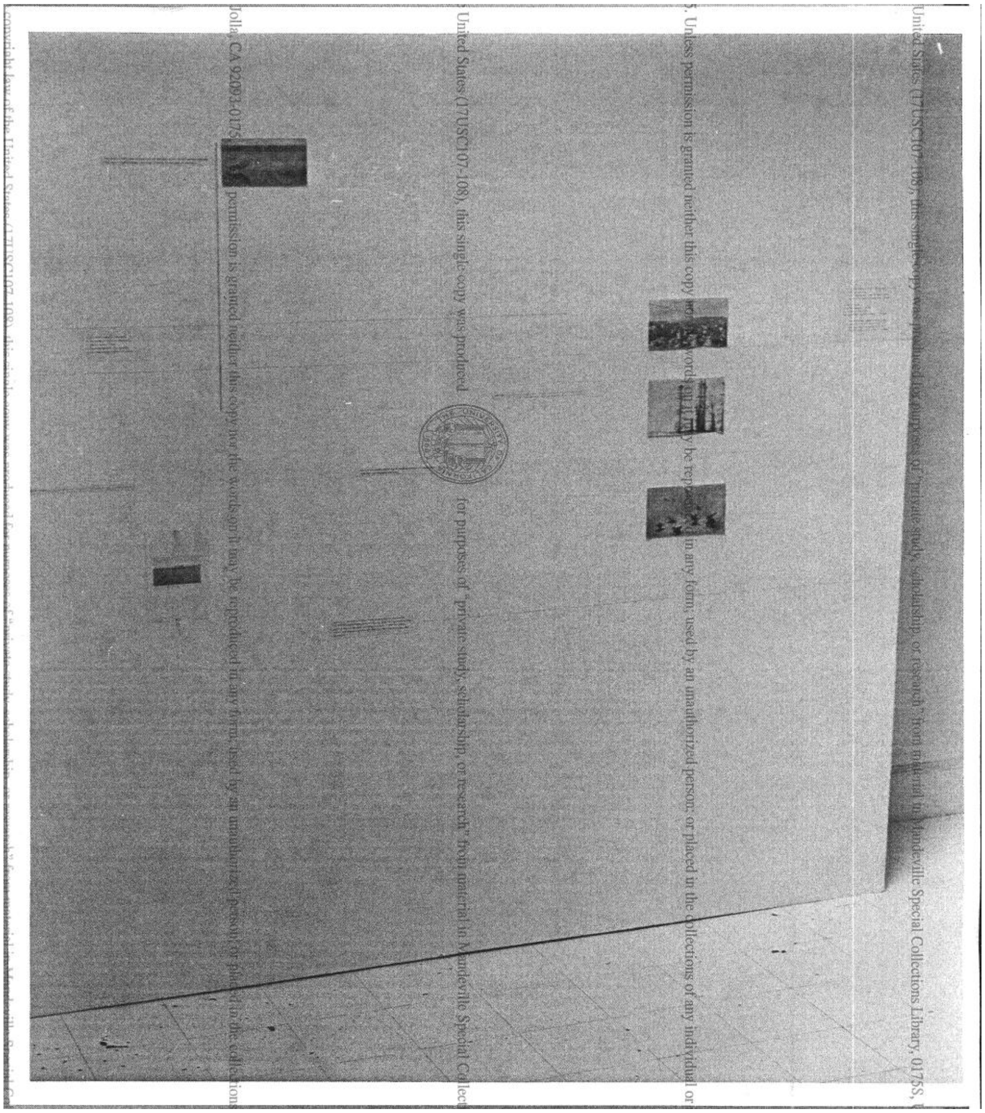


Figure I.5. Susan Howe, *Walls*, 1970/71 [?], Location unknown, UCSD, MSS 201, Box 15, Folder 5. Photograph by Howe.

Among Howe's documentation and typewritten notes for *Walls* was a cutout from an *Artforum* article of a photograph reproduction documenting an installation by the conceptual artist Michael Asher, mostly known for his institutional critique. It seems rather likely that

Howe cut out the article for its reproduction of one of Asher's installations (Figure I.6).[47]

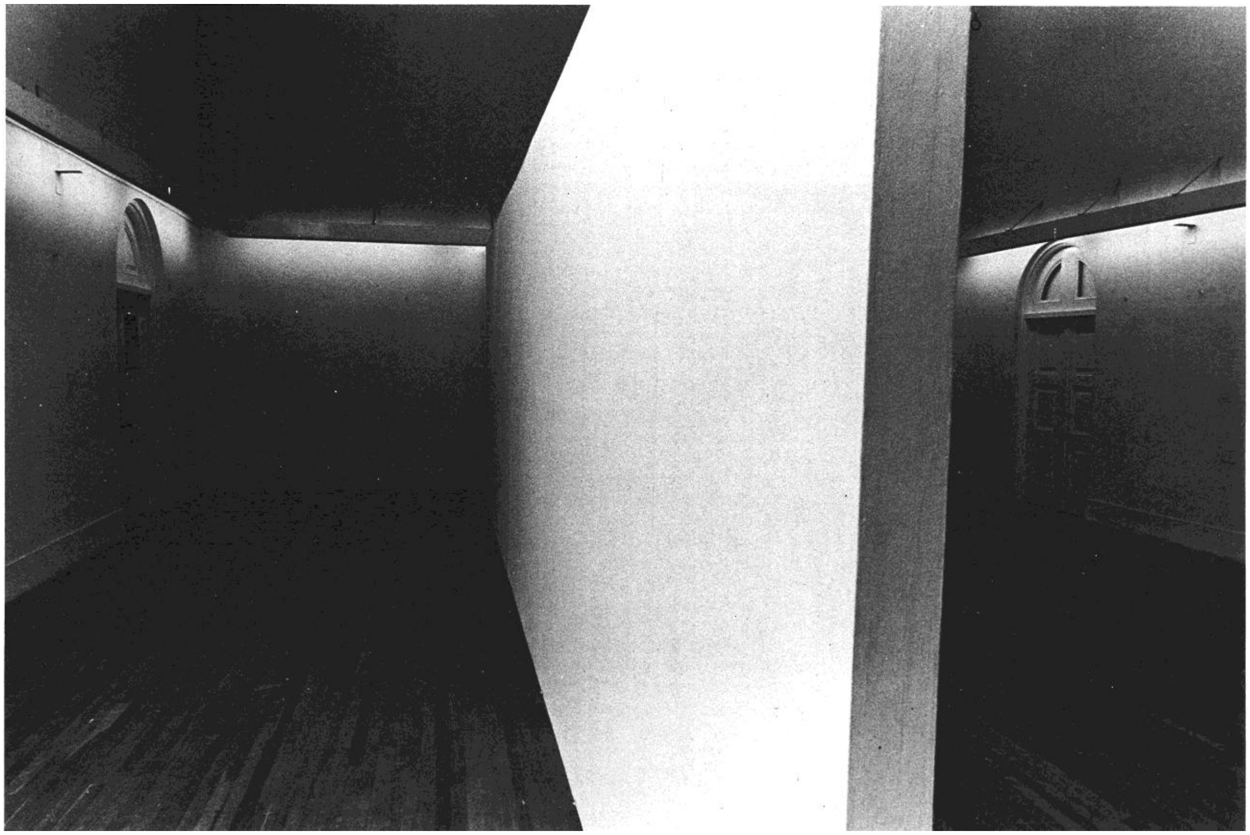


Figure I.6. Michael Asher, *Proposal*, 1969, San Francisco Art Institute.

Dated April, 1972 (thus later than the two exhibition dates for *Walls* in 1971), the text itself cannot be claimed as a direct influence on Howe's initial design for *Walls*. But, considering Howe's move to New York in 1964, it is likely that she encountered Asher thanks to a pair of New York group exhibitions in 1969, first at the Whitney Museum of American Art (*Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials*, May 19-July 6, 1969) and the other at the Museum of Modern Art (*Spaces*, December 30, 1969-March 1, 1970). A comparison between Asher's and Howe's respective installations highlights the ways in which her art inadvertently opposed the tenets of conceptualism, especially with regards to the dematerialization of art through texts and photography.

Instead of working with traditional art objects like sculptures and paintings, Asher involved himself more with the context and area of his installations by relying on "controlled perceptual conditions."[48] His installations emphasized non-visual elements such as noise and air level flowing to the room.[49] In contrast, Howe's *Walls*, as the title suggests, emphasizes the walls as objects and the artifacts on the walls themselves. Howe's uses of photography (qua magazine reproductions) and typewriter in her installation contrasts the conceptualist uses of both mediums as means of documentation. Besides being highlighted as object in Howe's installation work, the *constructed* wall also became a vertical blank "page", a receptacle for the more commonly horizontally perceived materials like typed poems and magazine photograph reproduction. So even as an artist Howe never used typewritten words as a dematerialized artifact.[50]

Charles Olson as a Postwar Figure

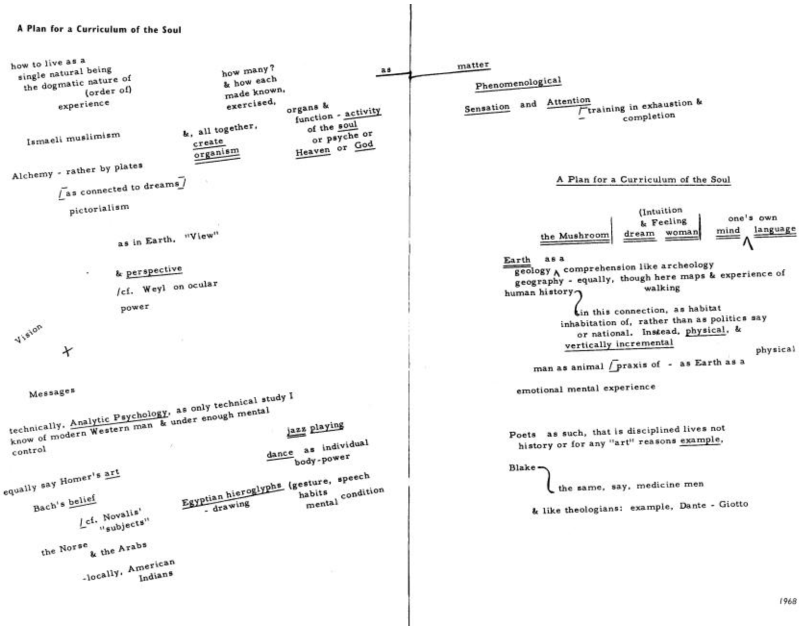
That both Howe and McCaffery did not take the materiality of the typewriter for granted in turn hinted at another relevant nexus of experimentation to which they responded, the postwar poet Charles Olson. I have held off discussing Olson, whom Marjorie Perloff dubs the "*chef d'école* of New American Poetry," so as to use the introduction mainly to foreground the cross-experimentation of sign systems among artists and poets of the sixties. After the above snapshot of this cross-experimentation, and of the expanded notion of what shape print poetry could take, the ground is set to situate Olson within a similar trajectory.

Though emphatically a poet of the New American poetry (ca. 1945-1960), Olson had an interdisciplinary view that encompassed painting and dance. This is in large part thanks to his tenure as teacher and rector at Black Mountain College in Asheville, North Carolina from 1951 to its closing in 1956. Besides teaching alongside John Cage and Merce Cunningham, he was also a participant in the first performance of Cage's *Theatre Piece No. 1* (1952). Cage's piece was perhaps the first known happening, incorporating different art forms such as poetry readings by Cage and Olson, white paintings by Rauschenberg, and dancing by Cunningham.[51]

Olson's poetics and poetry themselves present an illuminating case in American postwar poetry where a phonetic view of writing, which McCaffery later critiqued in Olson, does not imply neglecting its material nature as print. His essay-cum-manifesto "Projective Verse" (1950) shows much pre-occupation with the auditory aspects of poetry, yet also to the extent of how one could regulate them visually. Expounding a breath-based poetics, Olson believes that poetry's fundamental unit is the syllable. Focusing on the syllable, Olson believes, "is to engage speech where it is least careless—and least logical."[52] But it is precisely through such close attention to speech that Olson also contemplates space and page layout. The problem with print, as Olson sees it, is not the print per se but the standardization of mass print. The typewriter, on the other hand, provided free verse poets like Williams and Pound with a "personal and instantaneous recorder of the poet's work (Olson, "Projective Verse," 23)[.]" Hence the importance of the typewriter for projective or open form verse:

> It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its **rigidity** and its **space precisions**, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he **intends**. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. for the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, **silently** or otherwise, to voice his work. It is time we picked the fruits of the experiments of Cummings, Pound, Williams, each of whom has, after his way, already used the machine as a scoring to his composing, as a script to its vocalization (Olson, "Porjective Verse," 22).

Paradoxically, Olson's oral style, which emphasizes spontaneity (and the syllable instead of the word), resulted in a disjunctive syntax, breaking up any sense of a flowing narrative of a unified, speaking 'I' in his poems. For the language poet Barrett Watten, all these are partly possible due to Olson's "basically oral style—sentences in speech are ambiguous; the phrase is the dominant and sentences take their value from that."[53] Yet, since Olson also conceives the page as a score, wherein indications of silence could be included, his disjunctive syntax engendered an equally open layout of his pages. Later on, the peculiarly visual quality of Olson's writings became more and more accentuated to the extent of even moving away from the linearity of the top-left-to-bottom-right scoring of his *Maximus* poems. Nowhere is this more evident that in "Plan for the Curriculum of the Soul (1968—Figure I.7)," a cryptic outline Olson gave to George Butterick, who later became the editor of Olson's works after the poet's passing.[54]



A Plan for a Curriculum of the Soul

how to live as a
single natural being
the dogmatic nature of
(order of)
experience

how many?
& how each
made known,
exercised,

organs &
function - activity
of the soul
or psyche or
Heaven or God

as

matter

Phenomenological

Sensation and Attention
[training in exhaustion &
completion

Ismaeli muslimism

&, all together,
create
organism

Alchemy - rather by plates
[as connected to dreams]
pictorialism

as in Earth, "View"

& perspective
/cf. Weyl on ocular
power

Vision

Messages

technically, Analytic Psychology, as only technical study I
know of modern Western man & under enough mental
control

jazz playing

dance as individual
body-power

equally say Homer's art

Bach's belief
[cf. Novalis'
"subjects"

Egyptian hieroglyphs (gesture, speech
- drawing habits
mental condition

the Norse
& the Arabs

-locally, American
Indians

A Plan for a Curriculum of the Soul

(Intuition
& Feeling
the Mushroom | dream woman | one's own
mind language

Earth as a
geology comprehension like archeology
geography - equally, though here maps & experience of
walking
human history
in this connection, as habitat
inhabitation of, rather than as politics say
or national. Instead, physical, &
vertically incremental
physical

man as animal [praxis of - as Earth as a

emotional mental experience

Poets as such, that is disciplined lives not
history or for any "art" reasons example,

Blake
the same, say, medicine men

& like theologians: example, Dante - Giotto

1968

Figure I.7. Charles Olson, "Plan for the Curriculum of the Soul," 1968. Reproduced from Pierre Joris and Jerome Rothenberg, *Poems for the Millenium, Vol.1* (1995), 410-411.

While still containing legible words and phrases, the poem poses problems for picking a starting point. Published first in *Magazine of Further Studies* #5, the outline was a "distinctive map with 223 names, subjects, ideas, topics, strewed across the **page at all angles**."[55] Though never named a poem, the outline caught the attention of Olson's admirers. "Plan for the Curriculum of the Soul" was included alongside two other artifacts by Olson in *Languag & Structure in North America*, a hybrid 1975 exhibition curatedby the writer/artist Richard Kostelanetz: a photo-reproduction of his 1965 "handscript [circular] drawing" of "A Rose is a Rose of the World," and "Pleistocene Man."[56] Through this curatorial move, then, Kostelanetz put Olson in a wide-reaching conception of what the curator dubs "Language Art." As a result, Olson's manuscripts and outline are displayed alongside experimental works like concrete poems by Solt and Lax, Dan Graham's "Schema" and McCaffery's own *Carnival*.[57] The visual strangeness in Olson's poetry then prevents the printed text from giving an impression of what the poet Charles Bernstein calls the "natural look."[58]

Incidentally, besides concrete poetry, McCaffery's *Carnival* also engaged Olson with regards to the latter's view on the typewriter, albeit in a critical manner. *Carnival*, McCaffery wrote in 2001, was "a personal attempt to repudiate one of **Olson's** theories and to extend another. Respectively: 1) the **repudiation** of a **breath-based poetics**; 2) the extension of the typewriter beyond Olson's own estimation of its abilities (to provide a precise notation of breathing) into a more "expressionistic" as well as cartographic instrument [.]"[59]

If McCaffery was critical of Olson for retaining a phonetic use of writing by emphasizing the breath and the syllable, Howe greatly admired the poet for that exact reason. In her correspondences, Howe often wrote of Olson as a highly visual composer of the page while simultaneously never letting go of the notion of the voice.[60] This was a view that became publicly known when she published "Where Should the Commander Be," an essay comparing Olson's page layout and early Soviet cinema. The simultaneous experimentation of speech and visuality that Howe admired so in Olson thus allowed her to distinguish her experiments conceptually from concrete poetry. The essay further explored the visual aspect of Olson's poetry while also clearly noting its difference from concrete poetry:

> Optical effects, seemingly chance encounters of letters, are a BRIDGE. Through a screen of juxtaposition one dynamic image may be visible. At his worst, he forgets all this and the poetry goes slack. Olson understood (in spite of what he said) that words, punctuation marks, and sets of words, like a film director's sets and props, are sometimes wiser than the author. I don't know of another American poet whose work shows the **pictorial handwriting of his dreams** to such a degree. **He is stuck with this care born from passion. It has nothing to do with the clever optical dynamism of Concrete Poetry.**[61]

Olson's retention of phoneticity and more complex but disjunctive syntax in his typographically unorthodox works gave Howe a model against which she could put concrete poetry in a negative light. Her repudiation of concrete poetry *in toto* as a reductive treatment of words as objects in turn reflected her turn way from the visual arts firmly to poetry. But, as we will see in Chapter 3, the introduction of lettristic illegibility in the guise of cut-up fonts in Howe's later poetry could recall some of the concretist experiments from the 1960s.

Situating the Illegible

We have thus far seen how the push against medium specificity after the 1940s did not ultimately abolish categories in the arts as such. But a phenomenon worth revisiting from the late 1950s to the 1970s was the conscious liberty artists and poets took in interrogating what sign systems their works could utilize as materials. The plays of textual inscriptions in Twombly, McCaffery, and Howe then stemmed from a cross-arts culture where, among others, artworks could contain letters and printed poems images. If the 50s and the 60s indeed signaled an era of artistic cross-breeding, then textual illegibility was one of the bastard offsprings out of those unholy unions. This is not to say that such illegibility was unheard of in either art or poetry (i.e. *collage* or *décollage*). But, as intersign, it carries a particular resonance with the time. It is within such a context that the significance and particular nature of the various textual illegibilities in their works begins to emerge.

Prior to conceptual art itself, there were several artists whose incorporation of texts into their works could already be viewed as a response to medium specificity. Twombly already introduced texts in the form of handwriterly marks into his works as early as 1957. While his inclusion of writing paralleled the larger trend for artists to utilize texts, Twombly's choice of handwritten inscriptions nonetheless puts his art in an idiosyncratic position.

On one hand, Twombly stood at a distance from abstract expressionism in the 1940s, where pure abstraction was privileged, and conceptualism in the 1960s, where language-as-writing in turn became dominant. Twombly's scrawls emphatically differed from the neat legibility and seeming impersonality of typography that appeared in the 1960s (e.g. the advertising and gas station signs in Pop paintings, the Photostat dictionary definitions of Kosuth). Difficult to decipher, if not at times entirely illegible, Twombly's handwriterly marks foregrounds not just the material nature of writing, but also the act of reading itself. This was an aspect in Twombly that the German art critic and curator Manfred de la Motte already realized in 1961: "Twombly's theme is reading, not legibility." (51) On the other, Twombly's handwriting could not be categorized fully as a completely illegible automatic writing of the unconscious, a characterization that was oft applied to the abstract expressionist brushstroke.[62] Twombly's strategic juxtaposition of illegibility and legibility—numerals, alphabets, legible citations of classical authors—made his gestural strokes interpretable according to the period and culture to which he belonged. In the matter of his citations, for instance, it is rarely noted that they appeared predominantly in English translations, thus betraying a historical dimension to his paintings in the form of reception.[63] His handwritten signatures, which I argue in chapter 1 to be crucial to Twombly's art, introduce a script that is notationally illegible yet simultaneously conforming to a socially defined scriptorial practice rather than eluding it. Alongside the English translations, his signatures then act as key historical indicators of his works. One should also not forget that his signatures are often accompanied by the places and dates in which he completed his works. At times, his manner of inscribing the place of his compositions could well be done in a way that calls the viewers' attention. In a series of drawings he did on a boat trip from New York to Naples (1960), for example, Twombly inscribed the phrase "At sea" in parenthesis.[64] Perhaps it is not accidental then that, besides mythological names like Olympia, one of the earliest scribblings Twombly inscribed on his canvasses after the mid-50s was his adopted home "Roma."

As for McCaffery's *Carnival*, this dissertation proceeds in the opposite direction. Though *Carnival* mainly counts as a dirty concrete work created by a figure who is primarily a poet, it is still relevant to analyze the work closely with regards to debates happening in art from the first three decades after the war.

Insofar as it breaks up the linearity of a set text, *Carnival*'s textual illegibility in the form of inkbleed overprints and blotches is emphatically intersemiotic in mediating pictoriality and textuality without being technically legible as either. There is a peculiar echo of the abstract expressionist brush stroke in the way McCaffery understood his non-textual use of the typewriter and other writing instruments for *Carnival*. Besides referring to his use of the typewriter in *Carnival* as "expressionistic," in another occasion McCaffery also describes the inkbleed in *Carnival,* as result of overprinting with the typewriter and rubber stamps, as a "painterly shape": "As a mask bled off a page I would devise another shape that picked up the bleed of the text at the margin […] the mask came about as a way to create a **painterly shape** by censoring the flow of typewritten line."[65] When describing *The Broken Mandala*, another dirty concrete work from the same period as and comparable to *Carnival*, McCaffery asserted in a discussion with Nichol of having had "discarded image, description and had begun to focus on language almost as **paint, a pure graphic substance**."[66] As such, *Carnival* has led at least one critic to conclude that *Carnival* rejects close reading in the sense of a "word-by-word analysis."[67] But if the marks in *Carnival* operate equally on the plane of painterly abstraction, it stands to reason that the interpretation of the work itself takes into account the conventions of painting. For one, the (Greenbergian) Modernist emphasis on flatness as a challenge to the depth of a three-dimensional perspective is lost on McCaffery's work, which is technically reproductive in nature as an offset printwork. The overprint of one mark over another then is not something that is literally given rather than reproduced as optical illusion. While illegible, the acceptance of McCaffery's overprints as overprints in an offset printed work entails the acceptance on the reader's/viewer's part to view them as having depth of superimposition between the marks. This is a relevant point to bring up since McCaffery himself criticized Katue's plastic poems, which are presented as photographic reproductions of objects, for the same reason.[68]

In the case of Howe, situating her typographic experiments, which she continues as a poet, within the intermedia environment of the 60s and the 70s enables a more nuanced interpretation of her use of textual illegibility. Simultaneously, doing so fills a gap in the scholarship on Howe. To this day the general exegesis on her still has not focused so much on her artworks. The available monographs on Howe, Rachel Tzvia Back's and William Montgomery's, conform to this pattern.[69] Perhaps her inclusion under language poetry also has not helped in this respect. While Howe is included in the first anthology of language poetry (Ron Silliman's *In the American Tree*—1986), its early proponents mainly viewed the movement firmly within a mono-disciplinary lineage of American poetry. In lieu of the visual experiments of concrete poetry or the use of language within the visual arts, the primary target of engagement was the continuation of John Stuart Mill's overheard lyric speaker as mediated by the 20th-century confessional poetry. For Perloff, the locus for such poetry in the 1970s was the "burgeoning Workshop activity, poet after poet writing his or her "sincere," sensitive, intimate, speech-based lyric, expressing particular nuances of emotion."[70] In the words of Charles Bernstein, one of the early language figures, "'The voice of the poet' is an easy way of contextualizing poetry so that it can be more readily understood[…]as listening to someone talk[…] but this **theatricalization** does not necessarily do the individual poem any service[.]"[71] While Howe's typographic experiments are in line with the poetics of language poetry in challenging the notion of a unified lyric speaker, that poetics is but one piece of a bigger puzzle.

The language movement did not crystallize as a more self-conscious tendency until late 70s and the early 80s. Howe's play with multi-directional layout and typography, on the other hand, goes back as far as 1973 in the form of an unpublished typescript (*Spinoza's*

Cloak-1973).[72] Recall that this was only a year before the publication of "The End of Art," which engages closely with Finlay's multidirectional *Homage to Malevich*. In spite of Howe's aversion towards concrete poetry as an object, Howe's own works during the time provides a more complex relationship with concrete poetics. Like concrete poems, the non-linear layout of some poems in her 1973 typescript foregrounds the status of the print as a visual object. Even if Howe preferred to see her visual experiments more in line with Olson, the retention of voice in them more often than not points to it being threatened into silence. It is not accidental then that a typographical arrangement comparable to *Spinoza's Cloak* reappeared in a 1989 book dealing with the beheading of the dethroned British monarch Charles I (*A Bibliography of the King's Book, or Eikon Basilike*). Howe's insistence on poetry's acoustic dimension in an increasingly unpronounceable visual arrangement evolved in her later work as cut-up fonts, which will be dubbed microfonts here. In her microfonts, the traces of concrete poetry's visuality and Olson's disjunctive orality collides: a meeting between hyper-orality and hyper-visuality around the notion of *scoring* silences and absences. Tellingly, it was through the microfonts in recent works like "Frolic Architecture" (2010) that Howe was able to cast a continuous backward glance to her *Walls* installation: "I started with words on the **wall**, and now I've framed some of the page proofs from Frolic. And I love to look at them as if they are drawings. I look and say to myself, Oh my God, that one works! Which I can't say about any real painting I ever did. So when I say **I've broken everything open, maybe I've been moving in a circle** (McLean, "Susan Howe, The Art of Poetry No. 97," n.p.)."

All the instances of illegibility outlined in this section not only highlight the need to negotiate reading and seeing in dealing with the intersemiotic nature of textual illegibility, an approach I have dubbed as scanning. In scanning, not only does it become relevant to keep in mind both textuality and pictoriality, but also the ways in which artists, poets, and critics understood the visuality of writing in the intermedia environment of the mid-20th century.

Chapter Outline

The three chapters making up this dissertation delve deeply into the strategic nature of illegibility in the respective works of Twombly, McCaffery, and Howe. Again, I chose these three figures not to map out a network of personal influences. Rather, their works prove salient for highlighting how lettristic illegibility put them within the trajectory of aesthetic fragmentation permeating the arts since Romanticism while also accentuating their particularity as North American works appearing in the second half of the 20th century.[73] A concern with illegibility did not form a mainstream topic in the aesthetic debates of the period. But the appearance of lettristic illegibility nonetheless still can be understood to have a particular interpretive implication when situated within the avant-garde art and poetry of the first few decades after the war. Besides proceeding chronologically, the three chapters also follow a schema tracing the contextual and institutional shift from the art world (Twombly's paintings, drawings, and prints) to a hybrid concrete art/poetry context (McCaffery's verbovisual book/panel work) to poetry (Howe's typographic experiments). In all the chapters, however, I maintain a two-way glance toward art and literary histories, pictoriality and textuality. Starting with Twombly's works, chronologically the earliest in this dissertation, allows us to see how some of his experiments with script's visuality conceptually anticipated some of McCaffery's and Howe's own experiments (occlusive inscriptions, multilinear and discontinuous mark-making, etc.). Another advantage of focusing initially on

Twombly lies in the ways a few but notable art criticisms have really highlighted the complex visuality in his inscriptions. These criticisms in turn can serve as models for understanding the writerly experiments in McCaffery and Howe as objects of visual perception, not merely textual decipherment (i.e. which letter or word is being symbolized).

Chapter 1, "Signed, Twombly: The Handwriterly Marks of Cy Twombly," begins with the illegibility of two proper names in Twombly's paintings, drawings, and prints from 1959 to 1968. The first is the half-covered inscriptions of Sappho, the second is Twombly's own name inscribed as his signature. As citations, the fragmented, half-illegible scribblings of Sappho's name and verse display the complex dynamics of Sappho's reception from the eighteenth century onward. Instead of constituting a protest against antiquity as tradition, Twombly's inscriptions touch on what other scholars already argued about her reception. Sappho, as modern readers know her, is an imagined persona whose construction is predicated upon the fragmentation of her surviving verse instead of hindered by it. In a similar manner, Twombly's notationally illegible signatures, which sometime appear in the middle of the canvas, equally highlight a potentially social dimension in which illegibility could be situated and interpreted. The signature instantiates a distinct scriptional practice wherein notational illegibility is not only commonplace, but also expected. In a legal context, for instance, a signature's notational illegibility serves to prevent forgery. More particularly, Twombly's signature also needs to be located within the history of the modern artist signatures, which relate to legal signatures but clearly following a different set of conventions.

Chapter 2, "Keep One on Your Bookshelf: Trashing and Tracing the Book in Steve McCaffery's *Carnival*," further demonstrates the salience of interpreting McCaffery's *Carnival* from a hybrid framework of art and literature from the 1940s to the 1960s. The intersemiotic dimension we have encountered at the level of the mark is subsequently reflected in the hybridity of its book/panel format. By creating a book the pages of which can be torn to create a panel, McCaffery aims to go beyond the regular size of the typewritten page. [74] In including an instruction to the reader to "destroy" the book, McCaffery's *Carnival* also originally had a political aim: "The main thrust of [*Carnival*] is hence political rather than aesthetic, away from the manufacture of formal objects towards a frontal assault on the steady categories of author and reader, offering instead the writer-reader function as a compound, fluid relationship of two interchangeable agencies within sign production and sign circulation."[75] Like the conceptualists' anti-art art, tied to McCaffery's anti-book project is a notion of commodity critique. By inviting readers' participation in "destroying" the book and transforming it into the panel, the commodity critique is in turn associated with the issue of the readers' liberation from traditional reading habits. The shortcomings in McCaffery's commodity critique through a book's destruction will become apparent in two ways. First, a careful account of the work's construction and instruction to the readers will paradoxically reveal a greater authorial control over the reader's actions, such as the use of perforated paper that sets constraints as to how the pages could be torn and "destroyed." Second, while *Carnival* may be innovative in introducing a hybrid text work inside the gallery walls, the naïveté of thinking that such a move constitute a commodity critique becomes clear when one takes into account the many attempts of artists, including conceptualists, during the 60s to move beyond the institutional confines of galleries and museums. Ultimately, *Carnival*'s complexity goes far beyond McCaffery's own theory of the liberated reader, exhibiting an ambivalence concerning medium and semiotic specificity that echoed many artists' during the period: a very specific emphasis on the materiality of a given medium (book) that also contains an unsuccessful attempt to break away from its format and institutional constraints. A greater critical potential lies more thus in reflecting on the ways *Carnival* hover stutteringly between different formats, signs (illegible or legible), and circulations rather than reaching a reader in one given manner.

In chapter 3, “A Stuttering Mark: Surveying Susan Howe’s Typographic Experiments,” I explore Howe’s typographic experiments from her early to late poetry. Even as early as 1973, around the period of her installation works, she already played with non-linear placements of words in an unpublished typescript. This chapter, then, discusses not only the implications of her experiments with line and word placements, but also with her later experiments that more clearly introduces elementary textual illegibility. “Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierrepont Edwards,” the last section of *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), features reproductions of marks that appear as fragmented fonts or microfonts. Though textual in origin, microfonts no longer necessarily function in Howe’s poems as graphemes, the smallest fundamental unit in written language. Thus appears the possibility of interpreting these marks independent of textual closure, which usually pre-determines them as letters to be read. Simultaneously, Howe’s microfonts equally resist pictorial closure, which pre-determines them as figurally mimetic images. Problematizing both closures, microfonts’ visuality entails an impasse that interrogates the divide between reading and seeing, text and image. Microfont’s illegibility thus transforms the alphabet’s imagetext unity into an internal text/image conflict which paradoxically retains Howe’s admiration of Olson’s attempt visually to indicate pauses in poetry beyond the use of punctuation.

This dissertation does not name all instances of textual illegibility in art and poetry of the second half of the twentieth century, nor does it address other kinds of intermedium experiments and their resulting intersigns. Its limitations aside, I see the project equally as an expansion. The current project owes a debt to Craig Dworkin's *Reading the Illegible*, which makes it possible to think about "strategic illegibility" as an articulable (and worthwhile) contemplation in studies of experimental poetry. In the preface, Dworkin asserts that "the existence of these *types* of works—the knowledge of a tradition of poetic illegibility—has been part of the poetic imagination of the last thirty years. Even if such work are not a commonplace of the poetic landscape, they have been part of the background against which other, less visually dramatic works have been undertaken (Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*, xxii)[.]" As noted earlier, texts ceased to become the exclusive domain of poets, and some poets themselves ceased to think that texts are their only means. I expand Dworkin's investigation to think about illegibility equally in the context of art, for illegibility becomes a crucial strategy for visual artists like Twombly and Beuys. While the use of illegible script-making may not be major preoccupations of artists in the first few decades after the war, their significance for our interpretation of strategic illegibility during this period cannot be ignored. I believe, then, an attempt to grasp the import of artistic illegibility at the level of the letter would be incomplete without accounting for its appearance in domains other than more apparently traditional poetry. This dissertation is a first stab towards such a project. Ultimately, the project is also about criticism as much as illegibility. Just as the word is described by Dick Higgins as "changing its skin" in the experiments of the 60s, an interpretation could equally adapt and change its skin before illegibility. Susan Sontag writes in the essay also opening this introduction that the function of criticism is to "show *how it is* *what it is*, even *that it is what it is*[.]”[76]. But before illegibility description and formal analysis become inseparable, for the scanner perpetually asks what it is that she takes as *form*, or what the ‘is’ is.

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[1] A few examples: – “The poem is blunt in presenting a series of signs that stand for everything that is deleted, defeated, and cannot be divulged.” [Dean Young. “Surrealism 101.” in *Poet’s Work, Poet’s Play: Essays on the Practice and the Art*. Ed. Daniel Tobin & Simone Triplett. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008, 130.]
– “[Man Ray] offers us a “non-text” obtained by erasure.” [Adriano Spatola, *Toward Total Poetry*. Trans. Brendan Hennessey & Guy Bennett. Los Angeles: Otis Books/ Seismicity Editions, 2008, 100.]
– “The aesthetics of cancellation will be addressed elsewhere in this book, but for now simply note how *laut* this seemingly muffled poem is.” [Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003, 73.]

[2] I also prefer “intersign” to “intermedia” to avoid a potential confusion. With respect to inscriptions, alphabetic writing is a more accurately a kind of *sign* rather than a *medium*. The Arabic numeral or the Roman alphabet constitute different sign systems, whereas pencils or pens are different *mediums* for inscribing the former.

[3] Philadelpho Menezes, “Brazilian Visual Poetry, in *Visible Language—Visual Poetry/An International Anthology*, 27 (4), 1993, 399-341. The critic Jean Laude also uses the phrase “champ **intersémiotique**” to describe the temporality or succession imposed in seeing the marks in Paul Klee’s works as containing both aspects of a musical page (score) and a printed page (text). [Jean Laude, “Paul Klee: Lettres, “écritures,” signes,” in *Écritures/Systèmes idéographiques et pratiques expressives*, Actes du colloque international de l’Université de Paris VII, edited by Anne-Marie Christin and Pierre Amiet. Paris: Le Sycomore, 1982, 369.]

[4] Philadelpho Menezes, “Verbal and Visual Intersemiosis in Aesthetical Experiments—the Case of Contemporary Brazilian Culture,” in Irmengard Rauch and Gerald F. Carr, eds., *Semiotics Around the World; Synthesis in Diversity: Proceedings of the Fifth Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Berkeley 1994*. Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 1994, 297.

[5] While scanning is relevant to the intersign, it does not solely apply to the intersign. To do so is to confuse the act of perception and the object perceived. The separation between reading and seeing does not necessarily parallel the separation between text and image. Excepting the Braille alphabet, in the most common setting reading in the West necessarily presupposes seeing. It follows then that the assumption of continuity between reading and scanning does not relate only to an intersign. For instance, one can perceive the clean, legible typography in concrete poetry by *reading* them notationally as letter clusters or by *seeing* and taking into account the type of font used.

[6] Scanning here does not refer to its use in metrical criticism, namely to create graphic marks to represent how the text may be read aloud. The sense I intend lies closer to Jerome McGann’s and Johanna Drucker’s exploration of the Optical Character Recognition scanner for creating digital editions of texts. After getting variant readings through several scans of the same text, McGann and Drucker conclude that “textual ambivalence can be located and revealed at “graphical, presemantic levels.” [Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web*. New York: Palgrave, 2001, 145.] Essentially, both of them emphasize the interpretive role involved in editing a text. Hence every text is always already interpreted prior to circulation. (McGann, 145.)

[7] This sense of scanning finds precedence in Sabine Gross’s experiment of tracking eye movements when readers encounter Eugen Gomringer’s symmetrically shaped, multi-directional concrete poem “Silencio”:“Since the configuration is strongly symmetrical and repetitive, reading this poem should take a few seconds at the most. Yet in the ex-periment described above, after taking in the repetition of the word silence rapidly, the five participants spent between twelve and thirty-one seconds scanning and rescanning the poem before indicating

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that they had indeed finished "reading" it." [Sabine Gross, "The Word Turned Image: Reading Pattern Poems," in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), p. 22 (pp. 15-32).]

[8] "L'avantage, si j'ai droit à le dire, littéraire, de cette distance copiée qui mentalement sépare des groupes de mots ou les mots entre eux, semble d'accélérer tantôt et de ralentir le movement, le **scandant**, **l'intimant même selon une vision simultanée de la Page: celle-ci prise pour unité comme l'est autre part le Vers ou ligne parfait.**" [Stéphane Mallarmé, "Observation relative au poème *Un Coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*," in *Cosmopolis*: *Revue internationale*, Vol. VI, No. 17 (May 1897), p. 417-418. Facsimile reproduced in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le Hasard*: *Manuscrit et épreuves*. Françoise Morel, ed. Paris: La Table Ronde, 2007, n.p..]

[9] Richard Wollheim, "In Defense of Seeing-In," in *Looking Into Pictures: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Pictorial Space*, edited by Heiko Hecht, Robert Schwarz, and Margaret Atherton. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003, 3.

[10] Noël Carroll, *Mistifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 118.

[11] See Isidore Isou, *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et une nouvelle musique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1947;
Mirella Bandini, *Pour une histoire du lettrisme*. Trans. Anne-Catherine Caron. Paris: Jean-Paul Rocher, 2003.

[12] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Villeglé: From Fragment to Detail," in *Neo-Avant Garden and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975*, Massachusets: MIT Press, 2003, 455.

[13] Jean Isidore Isou, "Essai sur la définition, l'évolution et le bouleversement total de la prose et du roman," in Jean Isidore Isou, *Les Journaux des dieux*. Paris: Aux Escaliers de Lausanne, 1950, 136. Unless otherwise noted, all boldfaced emphases are Isou's.

[14] "La prose est brusquement figuration en même temps qu'intelligence (**déchiffrement**) (135)."

[15] For readers unfamiliar with the definition and history of the French rebus, see Jean Ceard and Jean-Claude Margolin, *Rébus de la Renaissance: Images qui parlent, Vol.1, Histoire du Rébus*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1986.

[16] Isou, 148.

[17] Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *The Collected Essays and Criticisms, Vol. 1: Perceptions and Judgments*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986, 25 [23-38].

[18] Greenberg's protégé Michael Fried later reformulated the ideas in Greenberg's "Laocoon" essay in order to attack minimalism in "Art and Objecthood" (1967). To Fried, theatre stands for the binding of

> large and seemingly disparate variety of activities to one another, and that distinguishes those activities from the radically different enterprises of the modernist arts. Here as elsewhere the question of value or level is central. For example, a failure to register the enormous difference in quality between, say, the music of Carter and that of Cage or between the paintings of Louis and those of Rauschenberg means that the real distinctions—between music and theatre in the first instance and between painting and theatre in the second—are displaced by the illusion that the barriers between the arts are in the process of crumbling (Cage and Rauschenberg being seen, correctly, as similar) and that the arts themselves are at last sliding towards some kind of final, implosive, hugely desirable synthesis [Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, 164.]

For Fried, such a theatrical synthesis could only mean art's "degeneration": "The concepts of quality and value-and to the extent that these are central to art, the concept of art itself-are meaningful, or wholly meaningful, only within *the individual arts*. *What lies* between *the arts is theatre* (164)." Cage and Rauschenberg were notably involved with the Black Mountain College in the fifties. Cage taught with Olson and Motherwell, while Rauschenberg enrolled as a student along with Twombly. By singling out Cage and Rauschenberg, Fried inadvertently put the interdisciplinary nature of the experimental college in a negative light.

[19] In 1944, Barnett Newman wrote of Adolph Gottlieb's paintings: "It is gratuitous to put into a sentence the stirring that takes place in these pictures." Rothko, refusing to write a statement accompanying a reproduction of his painting in the magazine *The Tiger's Eye*, wrote to Newman, "I have nothing to say in words which I would stand for […] I am heartily ashamed of the things I have written in the past." Pollock: "*She Wolf* came

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into existence because I had to paint it. Any attempt on my part to say something about it, to attempt explanation of the inexplicable, could only destroy it." (All cited in Gibson, "Evasion of Language," p.208.)

[20] One of the parallels Gibson draws to the Abstract Expressionists' evasion of language was the poetics of New Criticism, namely Cleanth Brooks' notion of the "heresy of paraphrase" in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947). Basically, a thought of a poem could not be expressed other than in the words and structure of the poem itself. The parallel between this New Critical tenet and Greenberg's understanding of Abstract Expressionism lies in the latter's stringent denial of subject matter in abstract expressionist (and, by extension, modernist painting) [Anne Eden Gibson, *Issues in Abstract-Expressionism: The Artist-Run Periodicals*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990, 210.]

[21] Alexander Alberro, "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977," in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds. *Conceptual Art: a Critical Anthology*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999, xvi.

[22] For more comprehensive and critical assessments of conceptual art, see Paul Wood, *Conceptual Art*. New York: Delano Greenidge, 2002; Claude Gintz, *L'art Conceptuel, Une Perspective: 22 Novembre 1989-18 Février 1990*. 2e édition. Paris: Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, 1989; Lucy R Lippard. *Six Years: the Dematerialization of the Art Object From 1966 to 1972: a Cross-reference Book of Information On Some Esthetic Boundaries*. New York: Praeger, 1973; Alexander Alberro, *Conceptual art and the politics of publicity*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003.

[23] Joseph Kosuth, "Art After Philosophy," in *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings 1966-1990*. Ed. Gabriele Guercio. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991, 20.

[24] Echoing Kosuth's position, the art critic Harold Rosenberg wrote that "[Anti-Art modern paintings'] verbal ingredients separates them from images and things merely seen and removes them to a realm founded on the intellectual interrelation among works of art." [Harold Rosenberg, "Art and Words," in *De-Definition of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, 58.] In *Art Discourse/Discourse in Art*, Jessica Prinz also implicitly repeats Kosuth's phonocentric understanding of written language: "Some contemporary artists (Robert Irwin, for example) are as concerned as Kosuth with the "de-definition" of art, yet they **continue to use visual strategies in the process of questioning its boundaries**. Kosuth's art is noteworthy[…] for the way in which it focuses contemporary trends and by means of **verbal techniques** presents art as an activity of definition." [Jessica Prinz, *Art Discourse/Discourse in Art*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991, 51.]

[25] Roy Harris, *The Great Debate About Art*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2010, 31.

[26] Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011, xlviii.

[27] Robert Smithson, bracketed comment dated June 2, 1972 to "Language to be Looked at/ Things to be Read (1967)," in *Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, 61.

[28] Eugen Gomringer, "From Line to Constellation." Trans. Mike Weaver. Reproduced in Solt, *Concrete Poetry*, 67.

[29] Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," xxxvi.

[30] Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1968, p.

[31] Susan Howe, "Notebook," in *Papers*. Mandeville Special Collection. UCSD. MSS 201, Box 35, Folder 11.

[32] See Emmett Williams, *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*. New York: Something Else Press, 1967. Equally seminal is Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. (See endnote 29 in this chapter.)

[33] Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," in *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts*. New York: Printed Editions, 1978, 16.

[34] As he states in the same essay, in "the middle 1950s many painters began to realize the fundamental irrelevance of Abstract Expressionism, which was the dominant mode of the time ("Intermedia, 14)."

[35] Weaver's 1966 article on concrete poetry in *Lugano Review* was perhaps the first widely known attempt to understand concrete poetry systematically. [Mike Weaver, "Concrete Poetry," *Lugano Review*, nos. 5/6 (Summer 1966), 100-125.]

[36] Steve McCaffery, "Introduction," in Steve McCaffery & bpNichol, *Rational Geomancy-The Kids of the Book Machine: The Collected Research Reports of the Toronto Research Group 1973-1982*. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992, p.9.

[37] For a discussion of Nichol's visual poetry, see Gil McElroy, "Ground States: The Visual Contexts of bpNichol," in McElroy, curator, *St. Art: The Visual Poetry of bpNichol*. Charlottetown: Confederation Centre Art Gallery, 2000. Exh. cat. Available online: http://www.angelhousepress.com/essays/Gil%20McElroy%20-%20Nichol%20essay.pdf. Accessed: January 20, 2013.

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[38] Steve McCaffery, ""Re: Origin of the term 'dirty concrete'?" Poetics Listserv. University at Buffalo. Email listserv. Cited in Lori Emerson, "A Brief History of Dirty Concrete by Way of Steve McCaffery's *Carnival* and Digital D.I.Y," in *Open Letter*, Fourteenth Series, No.7 (Fall 2011), 120.

[39] Two studies so far have explored the relationship between her early output as an artist and her poetry. Brian Reed traced the influence of Agnes Martin's grid paintings on Howe's conception and layout of her stanzas as "word squares." [Brian Reed, ""Eden or Ebb of the Sea": Susan Howe's Word Squares and Postlinear Poetics," in *Postmodern Culture* Vol 14, No. 2 (2004). URL: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v014/14.2reed.html. Accessed February 16, 2011.]. Another essay by Kaplan Harris focused specifically on her early artworks and writings. [Kaplan Harris, "Susan Howe's Art and Poetry, 1968-1974," in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Autumn, 2006): 440-471.]

[40] Lynn Keller, "An Interview with Susan Howe," in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring, 1995), 19.

[41] Maureen McLean, "Susan Howe, Art of Poetry No. 97," in *The Paris Review* online (Winter 2012) URL: http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6189/the-art-of-poetry-no-97-susan-howe. Accessed January 15, 2013.

[42] "[Finlay's] poem has so many ways of being read that it is really up to the reader to bring meaning into it, just as one is finally left to find one's own meaning in a Malevich (white) or Reinhardt (black) painting." [Susan Howe, "The End of Art," in Susan Howe, *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1974), 6-7.

[43] See Ian Hamilton Finlay, Letters to Susan Howe 1973-1985. MSS 201-Box 1-Folders 2 and 3, Papers of Susan Howe, Archive for New American Poetry. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California-San Diego; Robert Lax, Letters to Susan Howe 1975-1983. MSS 201-Box 2- Folder 2, Papers of Susan Howe, Archive for New American Poetry. Mandeville Speciall Collections Library, University of California-San Diego.

[44] "As to Finlay etc. and your saying of your reading of Zukofsky that you first in your own work considered object as subject and he taught you otherwise…..This sterility of thinking of words as object is for me the sterility of Concrete Poetry. Another empty exercise. Although perhaps the elimination of the Ego—as opposed to the ever present ego of poets like Lowell, Wakofski, Sexton (UGH) is a good thing and that's what they had in mind too I think. I was a painter for ten years before my work shifted into poetry but if anyone was using words as objects I was—and it has taken me a long time to work through that." [Susan Howe, "Letter to John Taggart, Nov 13, 1981." Unpublished. See John Taggart*, Papers*. San Diego: Mandeville Special Collections Library, UCSD, MSS 11-box 16-folder 17.]

In a letter to Howe, Marjorie Perloff even had to reassure that she didn't mean to characterize Howe as a concrete poet whereby meaning loses its significance in poetry: "As for my thinking you're a concrete poet, no no no[…] Of course meaning is terribly important to you (and to your reader) […] nor do I think visualization means that meaning doesn't matter." [Marjorie Perloff, "Letter to Susan Howe, March 3, 1992." Unpublished. See Susan Howe, *Papers*, MSS 201-box 30- folder 1.]

[45] -Box in BOXES (Group Show), C Space, 96 chambers Street, New York, NY, 1978.
-Narrator and advisor The Juniper Tree, a performance by Joan Jonas. Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art, 1976.
-Word Drawings (group show). Albright Knox Museum, Buffalo, NY, 1973.
-Word Drawings. Ithaca College Museum, Ithaca, NY, 1970.
-Word Drawings. Kornblee Gallery, New York, NY, 1971.
-Word Drawings, Paley and Lowe Gallery, New York, NY, 1972.

[Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr, eds., *American Women Poets of the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, p. 348. Cited in Harris, p.441, ft.3]

[46] According to her notes for the construction:

wall 7 1/2 feet high
12 feet wide

sheetrock wall with taped joints
on a framework of 2" x3" s[sic]
spackle over the joints
then sanded

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painted with roller and **flat white water base paint**
[Susan Howe, Installation notes for *Walls*, MSS 201—Box 15—Folder 3.]

[47] Susan Howe, Installation notes for *Walls*. MSS 201-Box 15-Folder 2, Papers of Susan Howe, Archive for New American Poetry. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California-San Diego. The photograph itself, taken by Phil Linars, reappeared in a 1983 anthology of Asher's collected writings and works with the following caption: "Completed partition wall installation photographed from the passageway between the entry/exit zone area on the left and the open area on the right."[Michael Asher, *Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979*, edited by Benjamin H.D. Buchloh. Halifax and Los Angeles: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 1983, 4.]

[48] Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2001, 253.

[49] Asher's installation in *Spaces* emphasizes the visitors' experience of entering the boundaries within the walls themselves. Rather than a painting, the space of the walls and the surrounding museum space, became the focus of the exhibition itself. In the *Anti-Illusion* installation, to take another example, Asher included a "self-contained blower and plenum-chamber unit with velocity control, custom engineered by and rented from Air Economy Corporation" to construct a "planar body of pressured air, 8 feet high and 5 feet long, extended across an existing 8-foot wide passageway between the large gallery of the fourth floor and Gallery 401." [Michael Asher, *Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979*. Ed. Benjamin Buchloh. Halifax and Los Angeles: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 1983, 8.]

[50] In the same set notes for *Walls*' construction Howe explicitly referred to the text included as poetry:

Paper for **poetry**
white + sturdy
Aquabee Jumbo 9 x 12
vellum finish sketch pad

[Installation notes to *Walls*. MSS 201, Box 15, Folder 3, Papers of Susan Howe, Archive for New American Poetry.]

[51] Olson also happened to be an early supporter of Twombly, whom Olson met when the latter enrolled in Black Mountain in the summers of 1951 and 1952. Olson's admiration went as far as devoting two texts to the artist, one a typed poem he personally handed to Twombly on the occasion of a Chicago exhibition in 1951.

[52] Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Selected Writings*, edited by Robert Creeley. New York: New Directions, 1967, 18.

[53] Barrett Watten, "Olson in Language: The Politics of Style," in *Total Syntax*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1985, 136.

[54] Charles Olson, "Plan for the Curriculum of the Soul," *Magazine of Further Studies,* No. 5 (Fall 1968), n.p..

[55] Joanne Kyger, "The Community of THE CURRICULUM OF THE SOUL," in *Poetry Foundation*. (August 2012). URL: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/08/the-community-of-the-curriculum-of-the-soul/. Accessed February 13, 2013.

[56] Interestingly, Kostelanetz's decision to categorize Olson's manuscript aesthetically is later mirrored in Susan Howe's close reading of Emily Dickinson's manuscripts and fascicles.

[57] Somewhat echoing Kostelanetz, Pierre Joris and Jerome Rothenberg later included Olson's "Outline" in their 1995 anthology, *Poems for the Millenium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry,* Vol. 1. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 410-411.

[58] Charles Bernstein, "Stray Straws and Straw Men," in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1984, 40.

[59] Steve McCaffery, "*Carnival* Panel 2 (1970-1975)," in Jay Sanders and Charles Bernstein, eds. and curators, *Poetry Plastique*. New York: Marianne Boesky Gallery and Granary Books, Inc, 2001, p.70. Created around the same period as Howe's installation, *Carnival* parallels *Walls* in some respects. Howe's installation work fills the vertical space of gallery walls with typed texts and magazine pages that, in a manner of speaking, are more often read horizontally. Like *Carnival*, then, *Walls* underlines the play between verticality and horizontality, art and literature, though not in an as aggressive way as the former. Howe's typed poetry in *Walls* still retains the grid-like layout of the typewriter, something which *Carnival*'s multiple orientation implicitly challenges.

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[60] See Chap. 3, notes 16-17.

[61] Susan Howe, "Where Should the Commander Be," in *Writing*, no.19 (1987), 7.

[62] For the influence of Surrealist automatism on abstract expressionism, see Robert Hobbs, "Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism: From Pyschic to Plastic Automatism." In Isabelle Dervaux. *Surrealism USA*. New York: National Academy Museum in conjuction with Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005, 56-65.

[63] Rebecca Romlinger Roberts stands as a rare and insightful exception to the trend of ignoring the status of translations in Twombly. Roberts argues that the absence of a translator's name precisely contributes to the seemingly timeless nature of the classical poets in Twombly's works. To her, the timeless presence of Archilocos' name in Twombly's *Epigraph* is a "fiction that cannot be breached" by the intrusion of the translator's name [Rebecca Romlinger Roberts, "Cy Twombly, Michael Ondaatje, and the Mystery of the Missing Translator," in *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 66, No. 2, (Spring, 2008), 324.] A translator's name—as "intruder"—would propel viewers to the historical machinations surrounding the work's "immediate visual field," revealing the work's "careful place in the theater of illusion (Roberts, 325)."

[64] See Cy Twombly, *Drawings: Cat. Rais. Vol. 2 1956-1960*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio, Munich and New York: Schirmer/Mosel and Gagosian Gallery, 2012, cat. no. 213-222.

[65] Steve McCaffery, annotation to bpNichol, ""The Annotated, Anecdoted, Beginnings of a Critical Checkliust of the Published Works of Steve McCaffery," in *Open Letter*, Sixth Series, No. 9 (Fall 1987), 72-73, ft.1.

[66] bpNichol, "The Published Works of Steve McCaffery," 86.

[67] Lori Emerson, "A Brief History of Dirty Concrete by Way of Steve McCaffery's *Carnival* and Digital D.I.Y," in *Open Letter*, 14th Series, No.7 (Fall, 2011), 124.

[68]See Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of this point.

[69] Back's 1994 monograph, pioneering as it is, skips Howe's three poetry chapbooks and begins its focus on a work published in 1978, Secret History of the Dividing Line. (Harris, "Susan Howe's Art and Poetry," 441).

[70] Marjorie Perloff, " Avant-Garde Tradition and Individual Talent: The Case of Language Poetry," in *Revue française d'études américaines*, No. 103 (Feb 2005), 123.

[71]Charles Bernstein, "Stray Straws and Straw Men," in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984, 41.

[72] Susan Howe, *Spinoza's Cloak*. MSS 201-Box 9-Folder 9, Papers of Susan Howe, Archive for New American Poetry. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California-San Diego.

[73] For a relatively recent book that treats the fragment as an operative trans-historical concept covering both classical fragments and contemporary art works, see William Tronzo, ed., *The Fragment: An Incomplete History*, Los Angeles, 2009.

[74] "In [*Carnival*] the carriage capacity limitations are actively confronted. By rejecting its dimensional restrictions of size and by forcing it to operate modularly as a smaller unit in a much larger surface, both the page (and its traditional function *in* the book) are destroyed. *Carnival* is an anti book: perforated pages must be physically released, torn from sequence and viewed simultaneously in the larger composite whole." [Steve McCaffery and bpNichol, *Rational Geomancy-The Kids of the Book Machine: The Collected Research Reports of the Toronto Research Group 1973-1982.*Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992, 65.]

[75] Steve McCaffery, "Diminished Reference and the Model Reader," in *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973–1986*, 13-29. New York: Roof Books, 1986, 15.

[76] Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1966, 14.

CHAPTER 1
Signed, Twombly: The Handwriterly Marks of Cy Twombly

Introduction: Perverse Palimpsest

In person, Cy Twombly was quite open in admitting that he derived inspirations from his reading of contemporary and classical writers.[1] Despite his admission, critics are often still divided between detecting either an admiring or protesting attitude in his half-illegible inscriptions of canonical names and texts. The most vocal of those considering Twombly's citations as protest may be Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois.[2] Essentially, Bois and Krauss interpret Twombly's scribbling as one would a graffiti, a rebellious and performative act of defacement that negates the canonicity of the classical authors. On the opposite side stands those who see Twombly's citation as more open-ended, if not altogether admiring.[3] Within this general debate, I devote the current chapter to ask what it means to take one part of Twombly's mark-making seriously as handwriting and citational practice. As Roland Barthes wrote in one of his essays on Twombly, "L'œuvre de TW—d'autres l'ont justement dit--, c'est de l'écriture[.]"[4] In line with the dissertation's larger argument, such an inquiry means emphasizing the occasions when Twombly's illegibility become intersigns. Scanned intersemiotically, Twombly's handwriterly mark-making can highlight the subtle aspects of handwriting both in its *notational* feature (how it denotes characters) and its *script* feature (how it looks).[5]

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In July, 1959, the newlywed Twombly spent his honeymoon in Sperlonga, a small seaside Italian town. A series of 24 drawings, *Poems to the Sea*, perhaps remains his most renowned work from the stay. But another drawing composed in Sperlonga contains an odd detail absent from the drawings in *Poems* (Figure II.1). The recent catalogue raisonné of his drawings lists the untitled drawing as being signed and dated upper right on recto in pencil (p.157- See Figure II.2). Towards the bottom center, though, exists another set of inscriptions bearing Twombly's name along with the date and place of the piece (Figure II.3). Distinguishing the bottom inscriptions from the upper ones are the cross out marks accompanying the former. Exemplifying what I call occlusive illegibility, the cross out scribbles practically signal deletion. At least, that would have been the assumption that the catalogue's editor Nicola Del Roscio held in listing the upper right marks as *the* signature.

Figure II.1. Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1959.

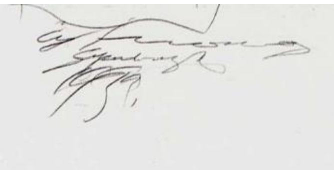

Figure II.2. Cy Twombly, detail of center Signature in *Untitled*, 1959.

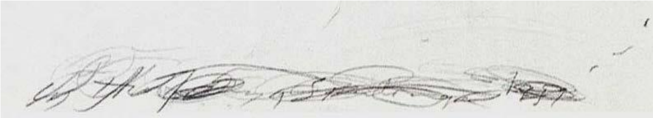

Figure II.3. Cy Twombly, detail of crossed out signature in *Untitled*, 1959

But if the bottom inscriptions were to be deleted, Twombly could have simply erased the penciled marks. How should one react in scanning the paper space and finding the cancelation made visible as trace? Answering this question requires us looking at another name Twombly inscribes on this drawing, that of the Greek poet Sappho (Figure 4).

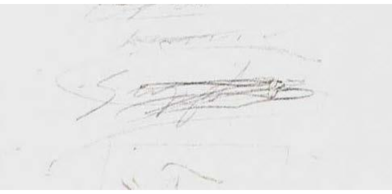

Figure II.4. Cy Twombly, detail of crossed out "Sappho" in *Untitled*, 1959.

Situated at the center, Sappho's name bears cross out marks comparable to the ones gracing Twombly's name at the bottom. As with Twombly's bottom signature, the crossing scribbles can signal deletion. Yet that notion stands in tension with the oval surrounding the name. If the oval marks a visual emphasis, it is nonetheless ambiguous whether it brings attention to the effaced name or to the effacement itself. By possibly highlighting the effacement itself, the encircling oval precludes an interpretation simply treating the cross marks as *pentimento*. The ambiguity wrought by the oval makes it possible to take into account both the occluded *and* occluding marks. The marks are combined in a way that makes it plausible to view the oval as being above both "Sappho" and the cross-out marks. Visually it is more likely that the cross-out marks occlude most of the marks we interpret as "Sappho", leaving only the S untouched. But the same does not apply to the oval. Due to the possibility to see the oval as the superimposing mark, it becomes more difficult to fix definitely the foreground-background relation in this set of marks.

Twombly's half-covering of Sappho's name shows that his partial occlusion can function beyond mere cancelation. If anything, his use of occlusion through cross out pencil marks or thick paint blotches brings calls attention to those occlusive marks themselves. In other words, the *look* of the occlusion matters as much as its potential to signal deletion. The cross out marks amplify the tension generated by a trace of a presence that verges equally on a disappearance. Twombly's partial occlusion thus functions more as pseudomutilations rather than actual mutilations.[6] We don't have to interpret his occlusive cross outs only in the way we understand cross outs on our grocery list. Barthes alludes to the strategic function of what he calls Twombly's "perverse palimpsest."[7] Rather than simply signaling negation, the goal of Twombly's palimpsest or occlusion is to make the effacement itself visible/legible. That this effacement could be made visible is exactly due to the partial nature of his occlusions, often leaving viewers with a *residue* of legibility. The occlusions in Twombly's art not only draw a viewer into performatively completing what she believes to be partially obscured marks. It is precisely through these partial processes that the viewer could infer that a mark undergoes negation.

Twombly's handwriterly marks from the later 1950s onward form a significant move given the era's dominance of abstraction in American painting. In being minimally or partially legible, his textual marks are not reducible to the unconscious and illegible gesture in the abstract expressionist's brushstroke. At the same time, in not being easily legible the same marks also call attention to the different visual aspects of writing. This means that his writerly marks are also not reducible to mere notations. Twombly's works give us enough to read without however making the reading an easy or transparent process, thereby also foregrounding our act of comprehension.

The role Twombly's illegibility may play beyond negation will be even clearer in asking what exactly constitutes an artist signature. (I limit the term "artist signature" only as it appears in the artist's works). Returning to his "valid" signature in the Sperlonga drawing, we will find another illegibility already mentioned in the Introduction, the notational kind. Compared to reading a typewritten text, it is relatively more difficult to decipher the signature letter by letter. The different curves and lines blend to such an extent that produces shape or notational indeterminacy. (For instance, it is practically impossible to decide where the 'o' ends and the 'm' begins.)

But notational illegibility does not negate a signature. On the contrary, its illegibility conforms to a social practice. A so-called illegible signature, common in everyday signatorial practices, betrays what linguist Roy Harris considers two contradictory "macrosocial purposes." A signature "has to meet both the requirement that it be written by one specific individual and at the same time the requirement that the individual, in so doing, conform to a previously graphic habit (Harris, *Rethinking Writing*, 183)." Within a legal context, a signature has to be graphically idiosyncratic enough so as to prevent forgery, but also has to be mainly uniform in its iterations so as to be repeatably recognizable qua signature. As such, the idiosyncrasy is expected but cannot be totally arbitrary (183).[8] It is in a signatorial illegibility that Twombly would assert his individuality most strongly. But, rather than bucking social practice, this idiosyncracy conforms to a social practice. While needing to be legible by others, the signature often has to be idiosyncratic enough so as to prevent forgery (181).

Peculiarly, the descriptions one usually ascribes to the Abstract Expressionist brushstroke comparably apply as well to the handwritten signature: "[En la signature] persiste la valeur **du geste, de la trace**, **la revanche de l'illisibilité**, quelque chose comme le dernier carré réservé aux fantaisies du scripteur pris dans le sérieux de l'écrit et la gravité du nom propre."[9] The modern signature instantiates a distinct scriptorial practice where its inscription bases itself on the name without being reducible to it. Per Harris, names "of all kinds can be appended to or included in documents without being *eo ipso* signatures (Harris, *Rethinking Writing*, 164)." The distinction Harris draws between a name and a signature essentially highlights the particularly graphic nature of the latter: "Reading aloud fails to distinguish phonetically between name and signature […] In this sense, the signature is essentially a phenomenon of writing (164-165)." The distinctness of signature as a graphic phenomenon is further emphasized in its appearance as artist signature. The functions of Twombly's artist signatures are distinct from legal signatures. They do not validate his works the same way legal signatures validate contracts. Twombly's artist signatures perhaps function more as what Béatrice Fraenkel terms "autodésignation": "Ce sont des "actes onomastiques" visant à installer, à l'intérieur d'une oeuvre, une sorte de présentoir réservé à l'ostention, voire à l'ostentation, de son créateur (*La Signature* 108)." If we accept the artist signature as an onomastic act, an ostension and ostentation of its creator, we can now look differently at the bottom, crossedout signature. Not tied to any requirement of validating an artwork, the crossed out signatorial inscriptions nevertheless still convey an act of ostention.

Conversely, the effect of self-presence wrought by illegibility in Twombly's signature also appears in Sappho's name. Twombly's half-illegible scribbling of Sappho touches upon the larger issue of her reception, which has not always been in the sights of art historians writing on the postwar period. This is where the inclusion of literary scholarship on

Sappho's reception and translation proves salient. Perhaps no spelling of a poet's name than Sappho's better exemplifies the problems in transmitting and translating antiquity. Behind each spelling of her name lies "a story, the **fiction** of what Sappho was for the period during which she bore a given name."[10] Very little is known of her biographically, and of whatever poetry is attributed to her, we hold mere fragments. All of these render her proper name difficult, if not impossible, to fix.[11] It is exactly due to the paucity of biographical information and the fragmented state of her surviving verses that Sappho stands for a perpetually empty persona to be recovered yet paradoxically imagined as an integral whole.[12]

Twombly's frequent citations of classical poetry also put him at an even further remove from the insularity of both abstract expressionism and conceptual art. Not only did he look to literature for inspiration, but he also did so while simultaneously adopting its sign system (i.e. writing). A half-effaced scribble of Sappho's name, combined with bits of linear handwriterly marks, sufficed to render a series of drawings as ***Poems** to the Sea*, leaving it ambiguous whether the title was fully tongue-in-cheek or was also an occasion for reconceiving the material and the sign system of which poems are made. It is as if for Twombly, literature became synonymous with the act of writing itself. The perceived result is an increasing audience participation in foregrounding the act of reading as much as legibility. By doing so in an unorthodox manner, Twombly performs what Manfred de la Motte conceives as crossing "the border into literature, which originally thought it could not survive without letters."[13] In inscribing actually legible texts, Twombly made it possible to conceive paintings as being covered with the same signs that writers use. In juxtaposing them with illegibility, however, he breached the equally medium-specific notion that poems are made of legible words and letters. In the cases when Twombly combines literary citations with a degree of textual illegibility, the latter then acquires an emphatically literary dimension.

Nowhere is this aspect more evident than in his scrawling inscriptions of Sappho's name and surviving fragments.[14] This evocation of the literary simply by means of writing continued throughout Twombly's life beyond early citations of Sappho and Mallarmé. Later in his career, Twombly consistently included poets and poems in several of his major series of paintings. (Rilke in *The Analysis of Rose as Sentimental Despair* (1985), Kusunoke in *Blooming: A Scattering of Blossoms and Other Things* (2007), Patricia Waters in *Coronation of Sesostris* (2000)).

Through Twombly's choice of translations, we could surmise that he at least had a minimal awareness of the fragmentary state of the surviving Greek short form poems around Sappho's time. For his citations of Sappho, Twombly relied often on Richmond Lattimore's *Greek Lyrics* (1955). The anthology's preface is worth delving into, since therein Lattimore lets the readers know of the fragmentary state of the texts collected within: "in a way they have a kind of unity, because of the period in which they belong [7th-6th centuries], because of their relative brevity and self-sufficiency, and because of **the shared accident of their destruction**."[15] The fragmentary state of the Sapphic texts then hardly makes them unique. Rather, it *unifies* them with the surviving fragments of the entire period. Afterward, Lattimore notes that the "lyrics" in the anthology came from very few fully preserved manuscripts: "We have manuscripts proper only for Theognis and Pindar, and for Pindar all but the victory odes are fragmentary. For other poets, we have only a collection of **quotations from subsequent authors and scraps of papyrus from Alexandrian Egypt**—mostly fragments, but sometimes poems quoted or preserved in full (*Greek Lyrics*, v)."

Thus the majority of what modern readers consider Greek lyrics arrived in their hands as translations of fragments and citations.

This illusion of timelessness in Twombly, in turn, could be interpreted in a more complex manner since Twombly's art presents the authors' names, Sappho's included, in a way suggesting illegibilities, incompleteness, and cancelation. What if that timelessness is invoked but at the same time questioned through the use of partial illegibility?

The question of Sappho's reception in relation to postwar painting may not be so far-fetched if we look at the example of the widely read art/poetry magazine *Tiger's Eye*.[16] Taking its name from William Blake's "The Tiger," the magazine began under the auspices of the poet Ruth Stephan and her husband, the painter John Stephan. While consisting of only nine quarterly issues from 1947 to 1949, the magazine nevertheless forms an important document of the period, publishing writings from modernist poets like William Carlos Williams and reproductions of paintings by early abstract expressionists like Pollock, Rothko, and Newman. Specifically pertinent is *Tiger's Eye*'s third issue (dated March 15th, 1948), which is devoted to the reception of Greek culture and literature in American postwar art. The artist most eager to distance himself from a perceived Greek heritage was Newman, who also served as the issue's associate editor.[17] For Newman, nostalgia for Greek classicism belongs to Old Europe, a heritage of which American painting should not take part.[18]

But an unaddressed notion in Newman's judgment, along with other essays in the same issue, is how Greek literature itself is transmitted to the modern audience. Telling in this regard is the issue's opening: a translation of Sappho's hymn to Aphrodite by the Victorian scholar John Addington Symonds. In the table of contents, the translation is annotated: "Who, since the 7th century B.C., has surpassed Sappho's love lyrics?" While *Tiger Eye's* inclusion of a Victorian-era translation may well be due to copyright issues, it also reflects Prins' argument that "what we [20th-century readers] call "Sappho" is, in many ways, an artifact of Victorian poetics (*Victorian Sappho*, 3)." In Symonds' hand, the "dazzling"

Sapphic fragments are to be read as "the ultimate and finished forms of passionate utterance."[19] By proclaiming the fragments as "finished," however, Symonds inadvertently reveals the adjective's multiple valences: "completed long ago, no longer complete, and yet unto themselves complete (Prins, *Victorian Sappho*, 64)." Sappho is at once dead yet perpetually idealized.

Citing Newman as an example, I do not claim that all American artists of the period were hostile towards or unaware of Classical literature. Rather, the crucial point is to note the absence of any awareness that Sappho's modern reception highly depends on the fragmentary state of her surviving verse. Regardless of the attitude a given artist in the third issue of *Tiger's Eye*, rarely was there a consideration of how that antiquity was and is transmitted in the first place. This chapter is hardly the place for an historical inquiry of postwar artists' awareness of classical reception. But I want to use Twombly's intersemiotic oeuvre as an entry point for us to pose larger questions about literary afterlife in postwar art. As mentioned briefly in the Introduction, Twombly's works are intersemiotic not only because they thematically bridge art and poetry, but also because the bridging does not appear as ekphrasis, but rather as writing, thereby employing a traditionally literary sign or symbol system. It is not insignificant then that Twombly's citations of classical literature always appear in translation, turning his literary inscriptions as indices of timeliness as much as timelessness.

Accordingly, Twombly's citations of Sappho provide the occasion to explore the ways in which illegibility enables future reception and interpretation instead of prohibiting them. Textual illegibility does not render either Twombly or Sappho absent. Abstracted, the fragmentation of Sappho drives her modern reception, to the extent of making it impossible to discern what true descriptions one could ascribe to her proper name. Twombly's signature, on the contrary, evokes not only an act of ostension, but one whose notational illegibility serves as a simultaneous indice of a highly individualized *and* a highly public being.

To develop the current discussion on Twombly's strategic illegibility in inscribing Sappho's name and his own, the rest of the chapter concentrates on works he composed in different formats between 1959 and 1968—drawing, painting, and printmaking. These works not only help in shedding light on Twombly's onomastic inscriptions, but equally on the deeper significance of his handwriterly marks. As Richard Leeman points out, the beginning of Twombly's inscriptions of actual words and names (Roma, Olympia) in 1957 coincided with the beginning of Twombly inscribing his signatures in his works (*Cy Twombly: A Monograph*, 87).

In the next two sections, I develop the respective implications of the two kinds of illegibility mentioned by discussing occlusive illegibility in relation to Twombly's inscriptions of Sappho's name, notational illegibility to his signature. While this division of illegibilities along the proper names carries an organizational convenience, we saw in the Sperlonga drawing that the division is by no means fixed since the bottom crossed-out signature contains both occlusive and notational illegibilities. The second half of the chapter looks at cases where Sappho's reception could be further present in the juxtaposition of her name next to those of her Latin admirers, Catullus (*Catullus*- 1962) and Horace (*8 Odi di Orazio*- 1968). It is in these two works that the dual issues of Sappho's reception and Twombly's signature converge forcefully to demonstrate further that illegibility in Twombly's hands functions as a complex intersign going far beyond a mere negation.

Poetics of Occlusion

Continuing the brief interpretation opening this chapter, in this section I further explore what may be called Twombly's poetics of occlusion. As exemplified in the Sperlonga drawing, his way of introducing illegibility in inscribing Sappho's name often involves partial occlusion either through paint or cross out pencil marks. Twombly's *Poems to the Sea*, also composed in Sperlonga during his 1959 honeymoon, well illustrates the strategic functions of partially occluding Sappho's name. Heiner Bastian, who published the five-volume catalogue raisonné of Twombly's paintings, notes that, besides Mallarmé, Sappho forms the other inspiration for his drawings in 1959.[20] *Poems to the Sea* (1959) notably also initiated Twombly's use of literary titles.[21]

Interpreted self-reflexively, Twombly's occlusion brings attention to the act of effacement itself, a move already encapsulated in Barthes's perverse palimpsest. Along a similar line of inquiry, the German critic Richard Hoppe-Sailer goes further by describing Twombly's partial occlusion in one painting as exposing the history of the painterly process:

> The layers of paint underneath are in part still visible, in part concealed[…]they appear as emergent to the extent that the superimposed layers of paint over an original shape becomes evident as an act of painting over and as the gesture of such an act. In other words, the uppermost layer of paint or signs cannot be considered as *pentimento*, for it does not improve and correct something that has gone before within the intention of rendering it invisible[...] for as with a cross-section through an **archaeological** excavation, we view the superimposed layers of painting, exposing the history of the painterly process [.][22]

Twombly is far from deploying a *pentimento* that completely erases and cancels the marks underneath (both in terms of the visibility of the underlying marks and the visual semiotic function). Rather, his are *pentimenti* that present an indeterminate sense of history in the process. As such, it could resonate thematically with reception itself, which in Sappho's case strangely mirrors the way Hoppe-Sailer discusses the formation of mythology itself with regards to Twombly's inscriptions of Venus' name. The mythology of Venus, Hoppe-Sailer argues, "can no longer be identified with definable and recognizable iconographic elements […] We can therefore no longer question whether the representation is commensurable with the represented, as what is represented can no longer be defined in terms of context (136).” Hoppe-Sailer’s argument about Twombly’s scribbling of Venus’ name in relation to myth formation applies on some level to the partial illegibility in Twombly’s inscription of Sappho itself. The contextual origins of Sappho as a person have been lost to such an extent that numerous fictions have sprung up to construct her as a mythological persona.

Sappho’s name partially re-appears twice in the drawing numbered VI—once on the upper middle area, once the upper right (Figure 5).

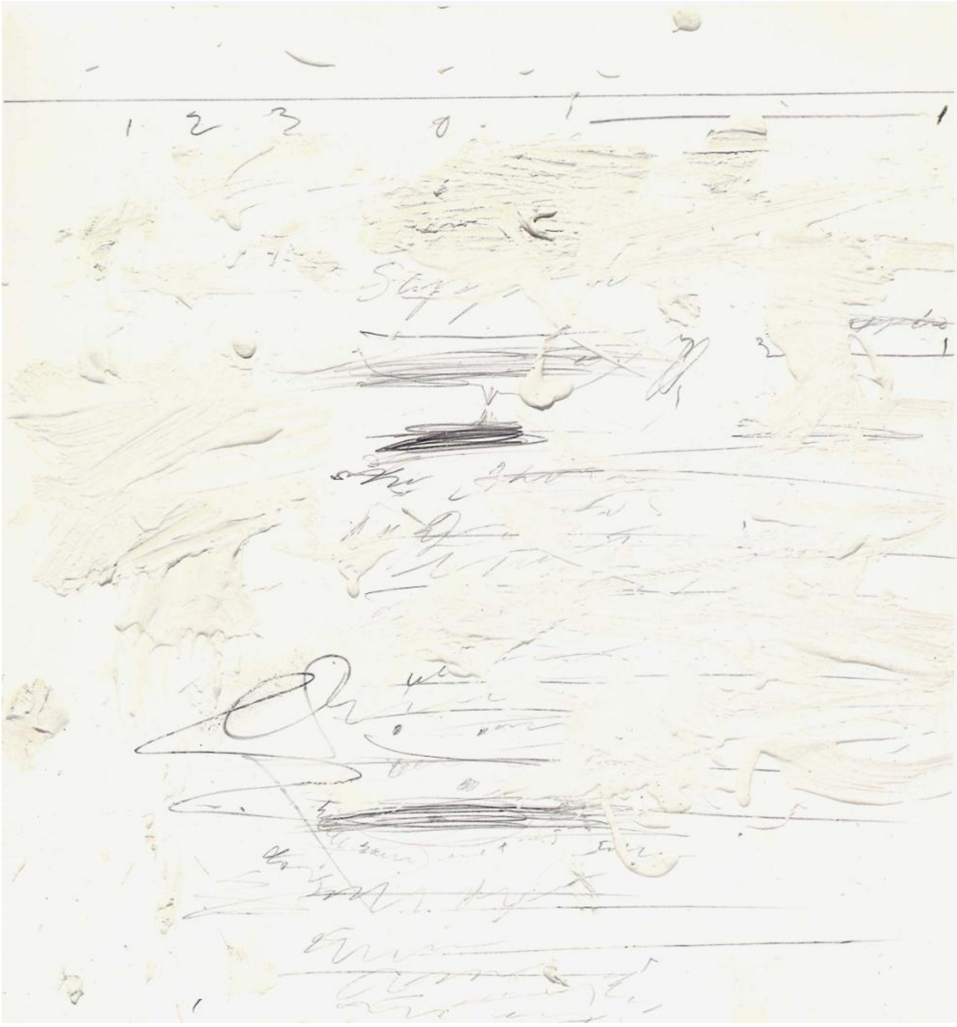

Figure II.5. Cy Twombly, *Poems to the Sea*, VI.

Unlike the one in the middle however, the inscription of what seems to be her name on the right—were it to be the case—contains completely non-visible covered parts. The only visible parts were possibly a portion of ‘a’ and ‘appho’. The occluded parts of the inscription on the middle, in contrast, are still visible through the white paint. Read textually as proper names, both marks could complement each other in displaying the unoccluded visible parts that incidentally could join verbally to form the name “Sappho.”

Besides in VI, Sappho also appears in XIII (Figure 6).

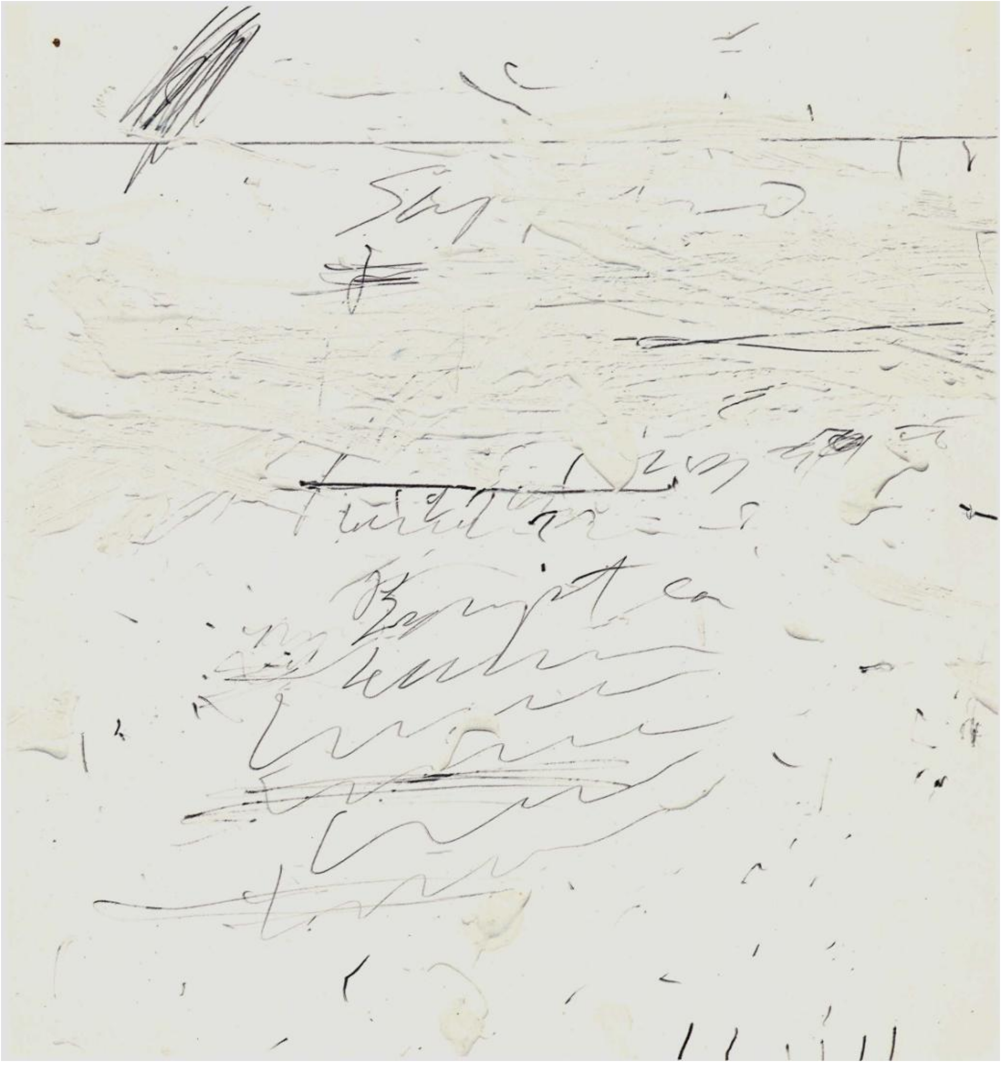

Figure II.6. Cy Twombly, *Poems to the Sea*, XIII.

Combined with the two inscriptions in VI, the three occurrences of Sappho in *Poems* suggests a retained visibility in the form of a legible text that is only partially occluded. Even the oil paint over ‘Sappho’ in XIII does not fully cover the textually legible mark. Glossing carefully over the oil paint, a viewer could make out the supposedly missing part of the scribbled name. The occlusions in Twombly's art not only draw a viewer into performatively completing what she believes to be partially obscured marks. It is precisely through these partial processes that the notion of occlusion itself is brought to the viewer's attention.

Another way to determine occlusion in Twombly's works is by inferring it from the visible part(s) of the occluded mark. This is the case for the partial appearances of Sappho in two of the drawings in *Poems*. But, compared to the first way of determining occlusion, deciding that the phenomenon occurs based on what seems to be the visible part(s) of an occluded mark requires more of an inference than minimal but actual visibility. Hypothetically, one could draw two lines at exactly the opposite ends of a black circle to give the illusion of a straight line being occluded by the circle. It is certainly more likely than not that Twombly did fully scribble the names Sappho twice in VI. But that we could only infer that plausibility is not insignificant. Once revealed explicitly, though, such mechanics of visual and textual closure (to fully form the name Sappho) rather adds to our uncertainty with the marks veiled by the white paint. The allegedly inscribed 'Sappho'on the right side of VI, at most, only shows us 'ppho' and seemingly a part of 'a'. The partial visibility of what could be a letter 'a' certainly heightens the semiotic resistance of Twombly's hand-inscribed scribbles. With regards to this mark that is possibly 'a', the ambiguity of the scribble is furthered by the adjacent white paint.

In *Poems*, the occlusion Twombly plays with can sometime intensify into a competition between his two methods of introducing occlusive illegibility: the white paint splatters and the black scribbles. Generally, Twombly's white paint impasto in *Poems* seemed to receive its manipulation from near-horizontal brushstrokes or diagonal ones that tilt upward when seen from left-to-right. These brushstrokes, though, were applied after

Twombly initially poured or dripped the oil paint. In lieu of thickening the impasto, though, the brushstrokes actually thinned out the poured paint, in the end often revealing the occluded black scribbles partially. Besides thinning out the paint, the brushstrokes could also give its surface a striated, rock-like texture (ex. XVIII). The striation is especially pronounced on the white impasto that partially covers the name "Sappho" in the middle. The roughness of this brushed impasto in turn recalls Twombly's earlier outputs from the early 1950's, which critics and writers like Charles Olson associated with archeological diggings. In a short text on Twombly, perhaps the earliest criticism on Twombly, Olson highlights the primitive look of the artist's early paintings: "the dug up stones, the thrown down glyphs, the old sorrels in sheep dirt in caves, the flaking iron—these are his *paintings*."[23] Kirk Varnedoe notes the implication of "things revealed" through the change from darker to lighter palettes in Twombly's post-1953 works. But the shift in the general color should not obscure the fact that Twombly's works in the late fifties and early sixties actually play more with occlusion, therefore still giving an impression archeological diggings of earth surfaces.

Another Automatism: Handwriting Exercises

As exemplified by Twombly's signature, another kind of illegibility besides occlusion that figures quite highly in his works is notational. Besides in his signature, notational illegibility appears as well in his other handwriterly marks: regularized and linear set of scribbles, inching them closer to actual writing in a variety of works spanning his entire career. In the following section on notational illegibility, I situate Twombly's signature in the larger context of his deployment of handwriterly marks that, while not notationally legible, still nonetheless intersemiotically suggests alphabetic writing. Far from being merely perfunctory in a legal manner, Twombly's signatures can become part of Twombly's general play with illegibility. Contrasting painters who inscribed their signatures into a three-dimensional perspective (e.g. Homer), his departure from perspective and rapprochement to handwriting paradoxically enables his signature to interact with his other textual marks. To return once again to the Sperlonga drawing, if we accept the middle inscription as the signature, then the series of framed x's above the signature could evoke the crosses that an illiterate, incompetent, or disabled person would affix in lieu of his or her name. As Fraenkel remarks, "[la] croix que l'on trouve accollée aux noms des lettrés dans leurs souscriptions, ou bien trace seule par les illettrés, jouait, symboliquement, le role d'un nom collectif: chacun, n'était-il pas l'enfant de Dieu (Fraenkel, *La Signature*, 99)?" I use the term "handwriterly" to indicate a looser criterion of mark-making than a strict construction of legible graphemes. Just as his art could indicate a disappearance of writing through half-illegibility, equally could it hint at writing without fully realizing it as an actual letter. The reason I chose the term "handwriterly" for Twombly's marks instead of directly calling them handwriting is precisely to loosen the link between writing and speech. His handwriterly marks highlight aspects of writing and reading that do not presuppose *total* conformity to an alphabet's use as notation.

The handwriterly aspect in Twombly's mark-making becomes clearer if we compare Twombly's later pencilwork against his earlier pencilwork. Generally, Twombly's earlier pencil or crayon works before 1956 still bore the hallmark of Pollock's allover paintwork (Figure II.7).

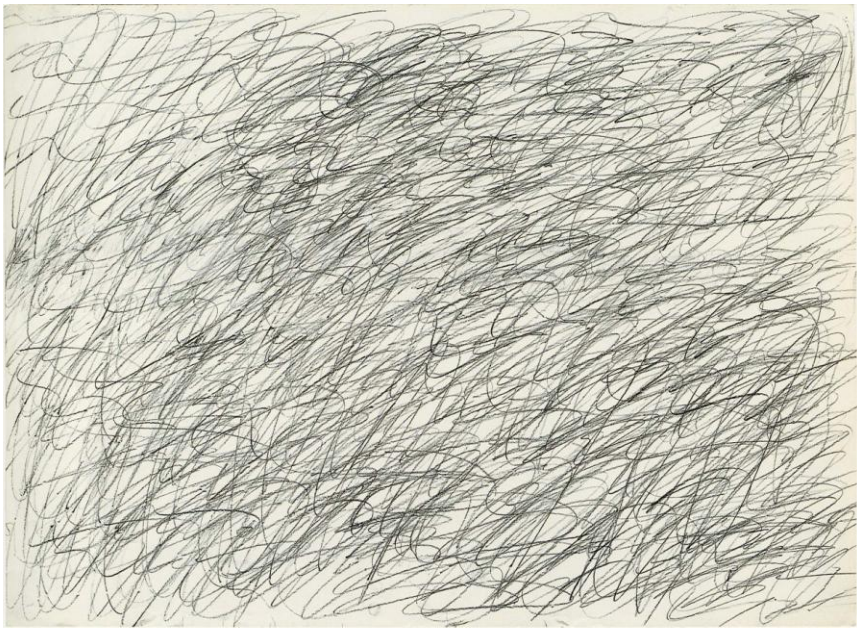

Figure II.7. Cy Twombly, *Untitled* 1956.

It was only from the later 1956 onward that his lines became more sparing, eventually leading to a relatively more schematic linearity that approaches regular handwriting layout. As the decade came to a close, Twombly further approached writing by organizing some of his scribbles more closely as quasi-columns in 1959 (Figure II.8).

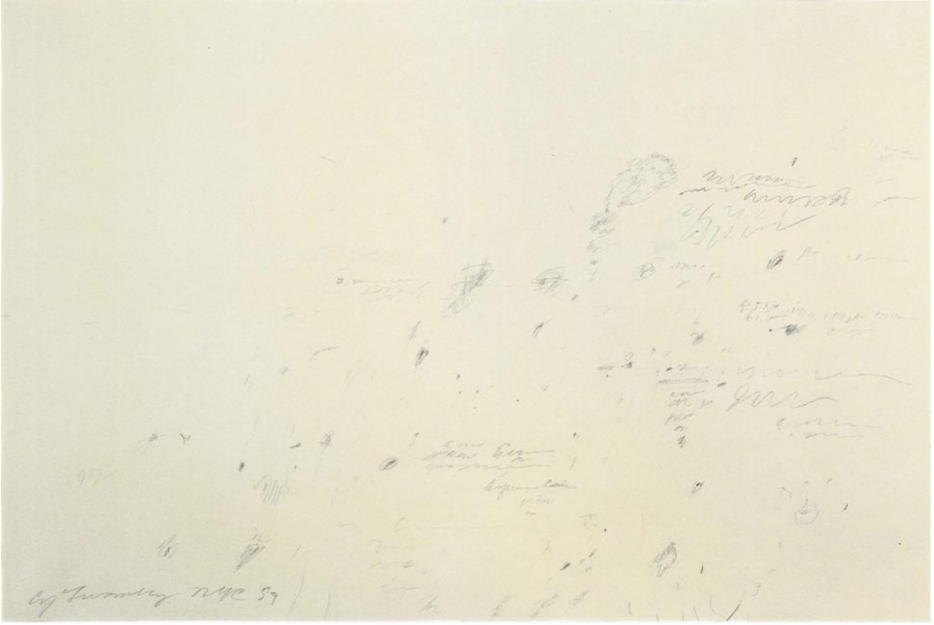

Figure II.8. Twombly, *Untitled* 1959.

This column-like arrangement reappears in some of the drawings from *Poems to the Sea*. In this light, the title *Poems* itself suggestively frames the columnal scribbles to be visible as a layout of a poem. Besides the column-like ordering, there are also other indicators of order that one could associate with the impression of writing in *Poems*: the mostly horizontal top lines in each of the 24 drawings and the sequentially legible numbers that often accompany them. The line at once suggests a pictorial horizon of the sea, a ruled writing paper, and another framing device within the frame of the rectangle paper. Underneath the long horizontal line at the top, Twombly draws shorter horizontal lines that equally look like a schematic line connoting orderliness thanks to the accompanying number sequence nearby the shorter lines. From these two details we perceive not only a more precise evocation of linearity, but also the plausible left-to-right direction of reading were one to count the numbers upward.

The linearity in *Poems* and other drawings from 1959 would reappear in Twombly's works from the mid- to late sixties. This is especially conveyed through semi-regular ovoid marks (Figure II.9).

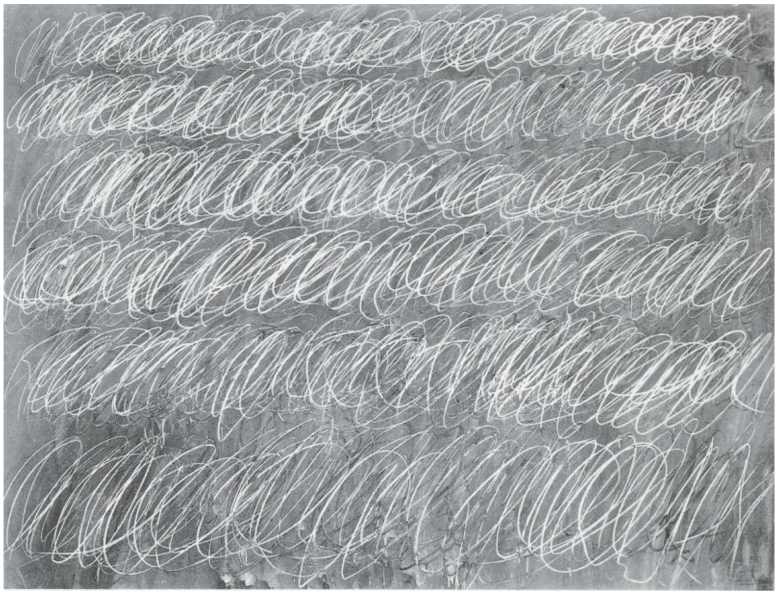

Figure II.9. Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1968.

Twombly painted the dark ground paintings a few years after his re-experimentation with splattered color paints in paintings like the ill-received *Discourse on Commodus*, which critics refer to as the period of Twombly's baroque excess.[24] It is worth pausing here to discuss the reception of the dark ground cycles in relation to his effusively colorful early sixties output to highlight aspects in Twombly that resonated with the American art world of this decade.

One of the most quoted negative reviews of the *Commodus* show came from the minimalist Donald Judd. After calling the show a "fiasco," Judd's review makes clear what he hated and liked about Twombly: "In each of these paintings there are a couple of swirls of paint mixed with a little yellow and white and placed high on a medium-gray surface. There are a few drips and splatters and an occasional pencil line[…] The poster for the show is an example of Twombly's earlier work and is easily the best thing present. Twombly usually scribbles on a white ground, using color infrequently."[25] While clearly betraying his own prejudices, Judd nonetheless threw a very good light on what sets Twombly's mid-to-late-fifties work apart from Abstract Expressionism, namely his discontinuous pencil and crayon lines. Twombly's evocation of handwriting may have its own connotation of personal expression. But the sveltesse of his pencil and crayon lines in the later fifties neutralized the virile gesturality of abstract expressionist brushstrokes like Pollock's. Kirk Varnedoe interpreted the dark ground paintings as a sign of Twombly's penitence for his baroque excesses of the early sixties: "In contrast to the misfortunes of *Commodus*, this new aesthetic […] had a chaste severity that suggested the artist had ceased being erudite and had gone back to school, renouncing former pleasures and submitting himself to a penitent discipline many Americans found more admirable and less discomfiting."[26] Though still evoking handwriting, the dark ground paintings of the mid- and late sixties showed an alignment that was perhaps unintended between Twombly and minimalism.

Like the 'coolness' of minimalism, the suggestion of Palmer hand-movement exercises In Twombly's ovoid marks additionally reveals an impersonal dimension. Twombly's personal expression "becomes no longer something realized in the impulses of scattered, separate moments, but something subsumed within a stream (Varnedoe, "Inscriptions in Arcadia, 41-42)." The curator's comment carefully retains Twombly's abstract expressionist heritage ("personal expression") while also realizing the new orderliness. What emerges then is never quite an explicitly anti-subjectivist art à la Judd, but one that certainly removes Twombly a further step apart from Abstract Expressionism.[27] At least two other critics in the sixties caught the disciplinary suggestion of Twombly's dark ground ovoid marks. Max Kozloff saw the scribbles in the chalkboard works as "so unrelated to Surrealist automatism or Expressionist "action.""[28] Another critic, Robert Pincus-Witten, perhaps wrote the most insightfully minute description of the dark ground cycles:

> Paint […] is rejected as the means of recording gestural traces—rather paint is used to create the "feel" of the ground, that is, it is employed as a "pile up" of dusty and erased surface. The thing drawn (and erased and redrawn and erased and redrawn, ad infinitum), that is the thing written and rewritten, is delineated out of a material which masquerades as chalk (actually a wax crayon), the binder of which breaks down during the writing to fuse in part with the housepainter's gray paint and to dryly adhere to the grainy surface of the canvas.[29]

Not only does Pincus-Witten perceive Twombly's avoidance of what is now an Abstract Expressionist cliché (paint as gestural traces). He also notes the constant swing between erasure and redrawing ("ad infinitum"). The liquidity of oil paint, which Twombly exploited heavily in the late fifties and the early sixties, is gone and replaced once more with house paint, which dries more quickly. This aspect of the house paint that Twombly preferred for his background corresponds subsequently to the brittleness of the white crayon, altogether adding to the relative impression of austerity and coolness of the dark ground paintings.

Twombly's mark-making may contain echoes of Surrealist automatic writing.[30] But the other possible automatism is of a neuromuscular nature, something highly emphasized in the Palmer method Twombly learnt as a child (Leeman, *Cy Twombly: A Monograph* ,178). Instead of imitating from copybooks, the pedagogy of the method begins with arm-movement exercises accompanied with repetitive scribbles of ovoids and vertical lines (Figure II. 10).

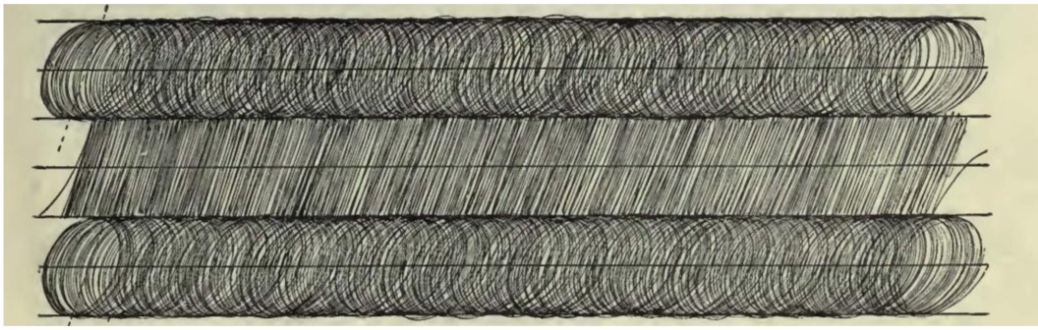

Figure II.10. A.N. Palmer, sample exercise from *The Palmer Method of Business Writing*, p. 19.

The method's implication, Tamara Plakins Thornton argues, was a regulatory rather than a liberatory automatism: "Palmer's image of the writing arm as a kind of perpetual motion machine […] is reminiscent of the scientific research that redefined the laboring body as a human motor […] What Palmerians described as the exhilarating rhythm of modernity might have been nothing other than the deadening regimen of the factory or office."[31] The mechanical aspect of the writing, Plakins Thornton further remarks, was also evidenced by the metaphor Palmer used in passages like the following: "Learn to run the writing **machine** […] The arm is the **machine** and the **engine** that moves it is above the elbow[…] Do not think of writing or penholding at this point, but give all your attention to position, muscular relaxation, and the running of the **writing machine**, until good position and easy movement have become natural."[32] The rapidity for which the Palmer method aimed had to do more with increasing productivity and reducing fatigue rather than artistic spontaneity. In the preface of his manual, Palmer indicates that it “has not been written to exploit any one's skill as a pen artist. It aims to be of use to those who are ambitious to become good, practical **business** writers (Palmer, *The Palmer Method*, 2).”[33]

Twombly’s handwriterly ovoid marks simultaneously evoke the personal and the impersonal, the individual and the communal, an interaction equally present in the handwritten signature. But the signature does not entail an illusion, but an actual script that could at times contained illegibility when *read* strictly in the notational sense as an alphabet. As a script that could be both illegible and part of a widely practiced script-making, the signature then contains one feature that distinguishes it from the rest of Twombly’s handwriterly marks. Richard Leeman’s short text of Twombly’s signature in his monograph will help here in inadvertently showing the consequence of not differentiating Twombly’s signature.

To discuss Twombly’s signature, Leeman uses the distinction Jean Laude draws between an “intransitive sign” and a “transitive sign” in Paul Klee. An intransitive sign comprises “a pure, nondelineating orthography, a trace of mark acting on the surface or on the plan that it helps to constitute.”[34] A transitive sign stands as “the sign of something. It is sometimes a pictogram, sometimes an ideogram.”[35] Additionally, Leeman also borrows conceptually from Barthes’s description of the artist’s handwriting as a gesture: “[Le] geste, c’est la somme indéterminée et inépuisable des raisons, des pulsions, des pareses qui entourent l’acte d’une *atmosphere* (au sens astronomique du terme). Distinguons donc le *message*, qui veut produire une information, le *signe*, qui veut produire une intellection, et le *geste*, qui produit tout le reste (le “supplement”), sans forcément vouloir produire quelque chose.”[36] Combining Barthes’s gesture with the notion of the intransitive sign, Leeman concludes that the “intransitive nature of handwriting—that is, of its line, its graphic substance—is the same as that of the scribble, at that fundamental level where writing and drawing are indistinguishable in being generated by **gesture** for the **pleasure** of it (Leeman, *Monograph*, 88)[.]"

To arrive at this general characterization of Twombly's handwriting, Leeman opens with the artist's signature as an example: "It is possible to consider words for their graphic substance, independently of their meaning: an open, nondescriptive line, an arabesque. It is so with Twombly's **signature**, which began to appear in the picture field[…] at the same moment that his more specific working with line led to his including words in the composition (87)." Twombly's signature, though, complicates Leeman's and Barthes's characterizations of the artist's handwriting as intransitive and gestural.[37] First, though Twombly may well have derived a gestural pleasure out of inscribing a signature, it is hard to assert that his signature constitutes an essence of writing as Barthes would define it: "TW dit à sa manière que l'essence de l'écriture, ce n'est ni une forme ni un **usage**, mais seulement un geste, le geste qui la produit *en la laissant trainer*: un brouillis, presque une salissure, une negligence ("Non Multa se multum," 146)."[38] Twombly's signature *does* conform to modern Anglo-European customs ["*usage*"] regarding artist signatures. Were Leeman to retain a view of Twombly's handwriting as gestural *completely* in Barthes's way, then Twombly's signature will have to be excluded as an example. Yet could Twombly's signature be excluded from the criterion of intransitivity that Leeman establishes? If "the intransitive nature of handwriting" is "of its line, its graphic substance," then Twombly's signature is simultaneously intransitive and transitive. Once again, what constitutes a script-based signature is its autographic and oft-illegible "graphic substance," not the pronunciation of the name on which it is based or its rewriting into a notationally more legible font. Any account of Twombly's handwriting that includes his signatures will then have to develop a more complex view than the ones

Leeman and Barthes have proposed. Even if one grants there is an affective element of gestural pleasure to Twombly's signature, it does not mean that such a gesture lies outside of form or custom [*usage*].

So far, my respective foci on occlusive and notational illegibilities have divided neatly between discussions of Sappho's name and Twombly's signature. As indicated in the chapter's opening, both issues of Sappho's reception and Twombly's signature come together incidentally in works where Twombly inscribes the names of Sappho's Roman admirers: *Catullus* (1962) and *8 Odi de Orazio* (1968). The chapter's remaining two sections will be devoted to these works. He composed them in a way that makes it possible to recognize these Latin poets as Sappho's translators and admirers. At the same time, his inscriptions of their names also deserve comparison to how he signed his own name within these works. Both works demonstrate an interaction not only including the names of Sappho and her Roman translators, but also Twombly's name qua signature. By juxtaposing Sappho's name and her imitators', Twombly yet again reveals another way to understand his citations as demonstrating a continuing reception. Incidentally, it is in both *Catullus* and *8 Odi di Orazio* that Twombly's visual plays with his signature become increasingly more complex. In *Catullus* Twombly incorporates his own signature into the play of reception between Sappho and Catullus. Here not only do we find again an intersection between Twombly's signature and Sappho's name, but also a more complicated combination of occlusive and notational illegibility. In the printwork *8 Odi*, on the other hand, Twombly juxtaposes his handwritten signature next to its printed reproduction, effectively pointing to the paradox of a reproduced signature on a printwork.

Intersecting Signatures: Catullus and Twombly

In *Catullus* (1962-Figure II.11), Twombly inscribes Sappho's name on top and Catullus' at the bottom center. The co-presence of both names in this work more strongly signals Sappho's literary reception by future poets. The appearance of Catullus in the same visual space as Sappho betrays a moment when the boundary between the timeless author and the translator collapses.

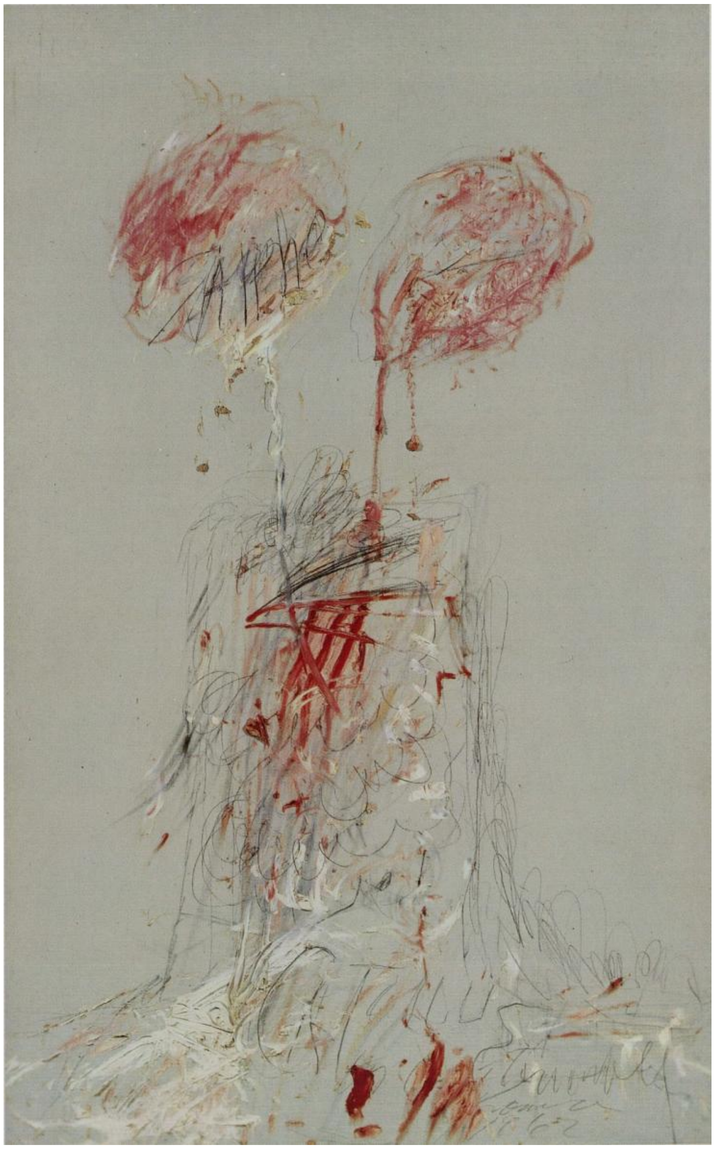

Figure II.11. Twombly, *Catullus*, 1962.

Catullus translated Sappho's famous ode, commonly referred to as fragment 31, for his own poem by inserting the name of his own beloved Lesbia and his own name.[39] Catullus also notably adopted the Sapphic meter in this imitation, an act he repeated for Catullus 11. Unlike for his other poems, the result is not only a determination of the beloved as feminine (the mistress Lesbia)—the original Greek ode is more ambiguous on this point—but also an early example of "the male writer who sees himself as Sappho's poetic double [.] (DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho*, 35)."For the painting, the discussion of a "poetic double" should take into account not only the relation between the poets' names (Sappho-Catullus) but also a larger one between the names and the two painted circles at the top of the canvas. Leeman has commented extensively on the prevalence and implications of this doubling of names in Twombly's *Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus*, which Twombly painted in the same year as *Catullus* (Leeman, *Monograph*, 78-81). For Leeman, the difference of saturation or shading between the two circles of paint in *Achilles* from red to light pink mirrors the respective position of the names in the inscribed title below the circles: "[The] viewer may see a process taking place, a transformation, a **narrative**, from the red of flesh and blood to the light pink of the 'pale corpse' of Patroclus, the 'thin smoke' into which he dissolves after revisiting Achilles in a dream (79)[.]"[40] *Catullus* plays with doubling in a way comparable to *Achilles*, albeit with some considerable differences.

Like the relation between Achilles and Patroclus in *Achilles*, the relation between Sappho and Catullus bears on the possible way one views the two circles of paint in *Catullus*. First of all, between Sappho and Catullus, who sees himself as Sappho's male double, one finds a poetic doubling coupled with a gender inversion. It is in this light relevant to look at the last two stanzas of Catullus 11, the other poem which adopted the Sapphic meter:

May she have joy & profit from her cocksmen
go down embracing hundreds all together,

never with love, but without interruption
   wringing their balls dry;

nor look to my affection as she used to,
for she has left it broken, **like a flower**
at the edge of a field after the plowshare
   brushes it, passing.[41]

Catullus' adoption of Sappho in the poem does not cease at the meter. The simile of his love to a flower recalls a famous fragment of Sappho's:

like the hyacinth in the mountains that shepherd men
with their feet trample down and on the ground the purple
   flower.[42]

Another drawing by Twombly himself demonstrates the common association of a flower to womanhood, as mirrored in Sappho's hyacinth fragment (Figure II.12).

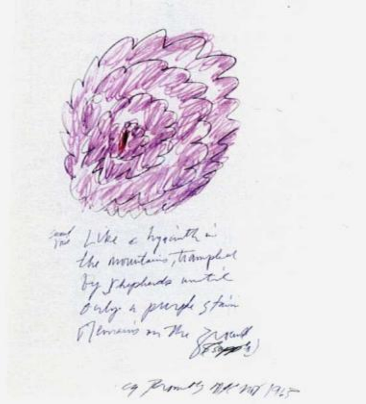

Figure 12. Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1965.

The "middle, the lap of the rose," writes Laslo Glozer, "blossoms above the Sapphic fragment (*Like a hyacinth*…) is slashed boldly with red; vaginal."[43] Yet in Catullus 11 the simile of the cut flower notably applies *not* to his beloved Lesbia, but to his love ("at my love…"). The virility of the plough belongs instead to Lesbia, who could simultaneously hold 300 adulterers/lovers and break their loins. In Catullus 11, then, the male persona identifies himself with Sappho notably through an inversion of femininity and masculinity in the flower symbolism. It is after noting this intricacy of the poetic doubling between Sappho and Catullus, where the gender inversion is mediated by the shift of the flower symbolism, that the two circles in *Catullus* gains a possible interpretability as stylized flowers. Incidentally, the smattering of fairly circular reds at the top of the painting is comparable to his later paintings such as *Blooming: A Scattering of Blossoms and Other Things* along with *The Analysis of Rose as Sentimental Despair*, where the circular reds are more strongly interpretable as flowers thanks to the poems inscribed in the paintings. For all of the poems Twombly cited contain flowers as subject matter (Kusunoki's peonies, Rilke's roses).

For *Catullus*, however, the determination of the red circles as flowers remains far from certain. Like Leeman's discussion of the circles in *Achilles Mourning the Death of Patroclus*, it is a provisional iconic determination that stems from language and poetry. Twombly makes the ephemerality of this determination apparent by clashing the inscriptions of the names visually (and materially) against the equally red and white paint shades surrounding the name. Just as the painted circles and the pencil-inscribed names could correspond, so could they clash. Upon a closer look, Twombly's inscriptions of "Catullus" and "Sappho" are quite clear and legible. The legibility is in part due to the inscriptions scratching through the oil paint, a move Varnedoe significantly characterized in another work by Twombly as displacing the expressionist brushwork (18). Looking carefully at the inscriptions of Sappho's and Catullus' respective names would also reveal that Twombly inscribed them after applying the paint on the same space where their names appear—The entire name Sappho, the letter 'C' for 'Catullus'.

By having Sappho inscribed in the same space as one of the circles suggests graphically how Twombly stands a distinct step apart of the Abstract Expressionists. Twombly's *Catullus* does not merely use writing and literature as part of its mark-making, but it does so to an extent of graphically making the writing compete against the thick oil paint. Any possible determination of the circles as flower entails not just recognizing the literariness of the names “Sappho” and “Catullus”, but also delving into the discourse on literary reception that underlines the thematic relation between the two names. Put differently, the interpretation of the circles as flowers depends upon delving into a literary discussion of Catullus as Sappho’s gender-inverted poetic double through the equally inverted adoption of the Sapphic fragment on the hyacinth. Such a literary interpretation cannot eliminate the open-ended nature of the circles, which ultimately remains a painted abstraction. Simultaneously, the opposite interpretation of the circles as abstract paint would be immediately complicated by the competing (and scarring) presence of Sappho’s inscribed name.

Since Sappho’s name highlights the graphic quality of writing when clashing against the surrounding paint, it is likewise illuminating how Twombly’s own signature highlights the visuality of script even though it contains notational illegibility. The relatively clearer notational legibility of “Sappho” and “Catullus” does not extend to his signature. Twombly’s last name is harder to decipher. Besides the possible ‘y’ between the capital ‘T’ and ‘w’, the ‘l’ and ‘y’ have the peculiarity of sharing a curve. What Twombly’s cursive signature accentuates then is its higher difficulty of readability since the marks do not divide easily into component letters as a font with clearly delineating interletter spaces. His signature then could not be broken down notationally to spell out his last name.

Moreover, in the space to the left of where Twombly’s last name appears we could see the red paint potentially covering his first name. The covering of the first name by the red paint contrasts greatly with the decisive inscriptions of both “Sappho” and “Catullus” cutting through the paint. Further complicating the onomastic interaction in *Catullus* is the possible conflation between Catullus’ name and Twombly’s signature. The ‘s’ in Catullus coincidentally continues beyond the shape that would suffice to give us the letter ‘c’. This continuation, in turn, seems to curve in a way that makes it possible to read it as forming the C for "Cy". For one, if Twombly decided to inscribe his first name, any possible scribbling that would spell "Cy" are occluded by red paint. This covering stands in contrast to the C we see in Twombly's inscription of "Catullus", assertively cutting through the thick layer of the surrounding white paint, which was possibly still wet when Twombly inscribed the names.

The additionally odd detail about the paint covering the possible appearance of Twombly's first name in his signature is the configuration of the occluding paint streaks. Consisting of five different vertical streaks of differing length and width, the configuration is such that an impression forms of Twombly applying the paint by smearing his hand with paint and running it over the canvas to cover up part of the signature. If this were the case, then Twombly interestingly gave a counter-example to the notion that the abstract expressionist brushstroke, in action painting, is but a development of the painter's signature. In *Les Mots dans la peinture,* Michel Butor formulates this notion: "Une bonne partie de la peinture gestuelle, de l'"action painting", peut être interprétée comme un développement de la signature; l'artiste en effet prétend ne nous intéresser que par son graphisme, c'est-à-dire la façon dont il manie son pinceau ou sa plume, ce qui l'identifie véritablement dans sa griffe, fait qu'elle est indubitablement sienne."[44] But *Catullus* demonstrates that a signature style is not interchangeable with a signature. If anything, the two could be differentiated to the extent of visually competing with each other. Though both the streaks and the signature come from the hand, the different mediums used (paint, pencil) and the distinguishing scriptive nature of the signature should be taken into account.

It is quite evident now that Twombly's signature forms part of the onomastic play of reception within *Catullus*. The same level of conflict between paint and pencil surrounding the interaction of "Sappho" and the painted circle on the top left repeats itself subtly in

Twombly's signature, where the first name is potentially occluded by the red paint. Inversely, the inscription of Catullus' name is also partially illegible in a way that links to Twombly's own name. The "A" in "Catullus" is partially occluded by streaks of white paint. The first 'U' and the first 'L' are barely legible. The second L is inscribed faintly, but in a manner that bears some resemblance to how Twombly writes the second 'U'. The undulating curves of the 'S', as noted earlier, continues downward to the point of having the possibility to visually suggest the 'C' of Twombly's signature. The 'C' and the 'T', on the other hand, are the tallest letters inscribed (peculiarly suggesting the forming of Twombly's monogram: CT). So the onomastic play does not solely occur between "Sappho" and "Catullus", but also between "Twombly" and the Latin poet. Exploiting both occlusive and notational illegibilities, Twombly thus inserts his name into the line of reception that more recognizably characterizes the relation between "Sappho" and "Catullus."

Printed Signature: *8 Odi di Orazio*

Besides Catullus, Horace is another Roman poet who figured in Twombly's art as an admirer of Sappho, as evidenced by Twombly's two-series screen printwork *8 Odi de Orazio* (1968).[45] Here it is worthwhile to compare the extent of Horace's adoption of the Sapphic meter for many of his odes to Catullus', who only used the Sapphic meter twice. [46]

In contrast to *Catullus*, Twombly's presentation of Sappho's reception here is subtler. One of the prints include the words "Sapphic + Adonic" followed by the scansion marking of the Sapphic stanza (Figure II.13).

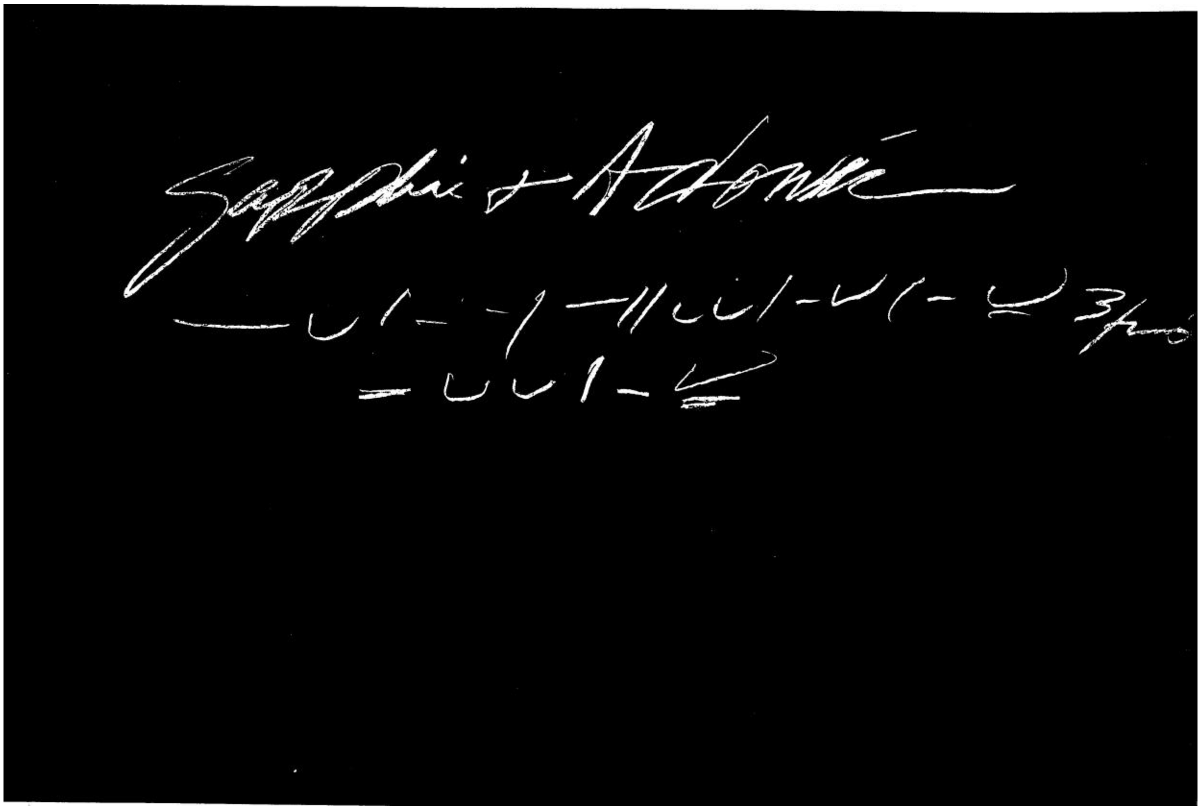

Figure II.13. Cy Twombly, from *8Odi di Orazio*, 1968.

The Sapphic meter contains three eleven-syllable line and one adonic line. The adjective "Sapphic" could alternately designate a variant of the hendecasyllable itself. The version Twombly inscribed, though, is its manifestation as the Latin form of the stanza, first adopted by Horace in his imitation of the Sapphic meter. The anceps (free syllable) in the fourth syllable of the Sapphic hendecasyllable is replaced in the Horatian version with a long syllable. Twombly's inscription of the Latin Sapphic meter, displaying the shift from free to a long fourth syllable in the hendecasyllabic line, demonstrates the change that comes with the reception of Sappho. According to Andrew Becker, "Horace's Latin Sapphic is more fixed than his Greek models: not only is the fourth syllable always long, but there is an expected caesura after the fifth syllable, immediately preceding the pair of short syllables."[47] Through Twombly's inscription of the Horatian Sapphic adaptation, Horace appears in *Odi* as a pedagogical model in addition to as a canonical poet.

Horace's role as an instructional figure becomes even starker if we note the chalkboard-like appearance of *8 Odi*. Coincidentally, besides the scansion of the Latin Sapphic meter, Twombly also includes in *Odi* another print bearing the ovoid marks characteristic of his paintings from this period (Figure II.14).

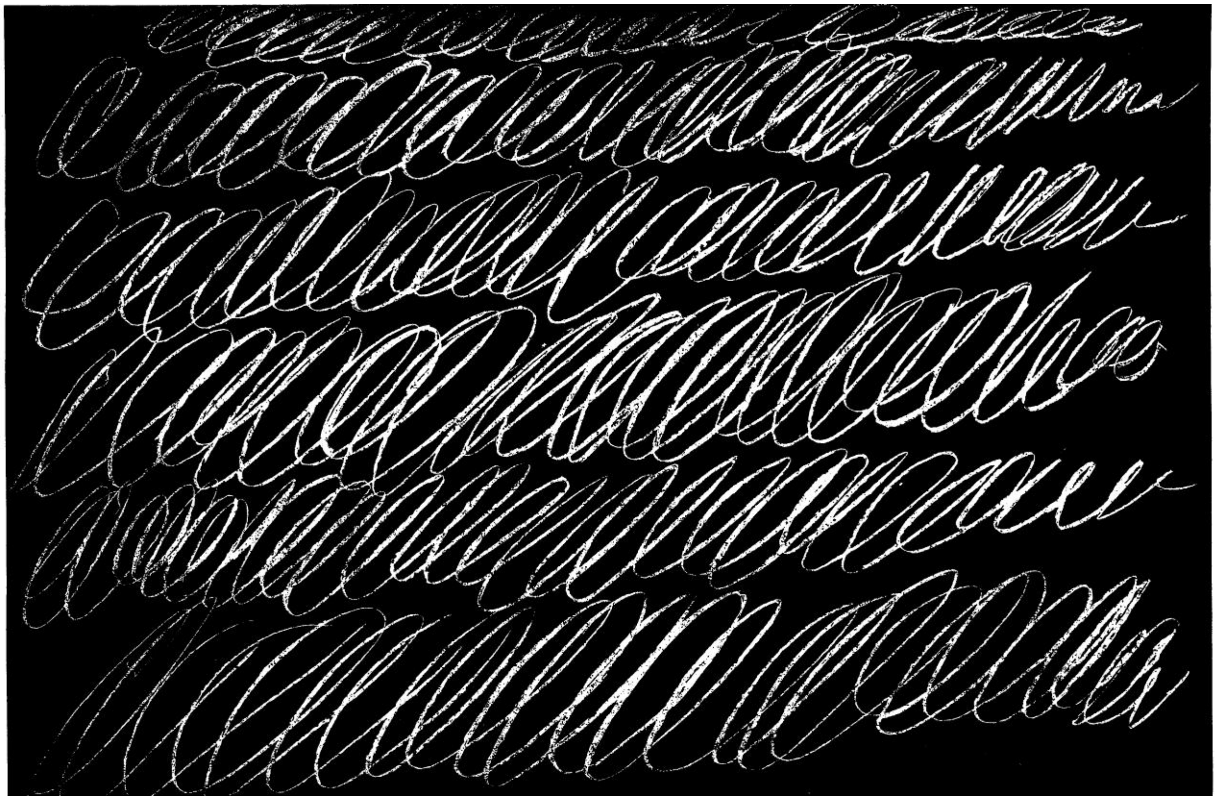

Figure II.14. Cy Twombly, print from *8 Odi di Orazio*, 1968.

As seen earlier, these ovoid marks exude sign of control and streamlining. How different they are from the pencil scribbling of an earlier work like *Criticism* by virtue of the orderly and serial linearity. Instead of purely aggressive protest, they register the repeated erasure and rewriting of a child learning to write before a chalkboard. These white crayon marks remind us that erasure and overlayering, in its fluctuation and ambiguity, could point to appearance as well as to a disappearance: a possible preliminary exercise before writing.

Just as beginning Palmer arm-movement exercises had a pedagogical role of disciplining young children' development as a scribe, so could the graphic scansion of the

Latin Sapphic meter. Twombly's Sapphic stanza is a sloppily written script, approaching a child's handwriting. But instead of a merely bored pupil writing a Latin author's name in protest—this is Rosalind Krauss's persistent trope on Twombly[48]—what also emerges is the child learning poetic meter during the "*cours latin*." Like his grey ground cycles from the same period, *8 Odi di Orazio* thus had the likewise unmistakable connotation of classroom pedagogy, a visual disciplinary and regulatory guide for the voice.

One could also find a subtle exemplification of the Horatian Sapphic meter through allusion in one of the other prints in *Odi* (Figure II.15).

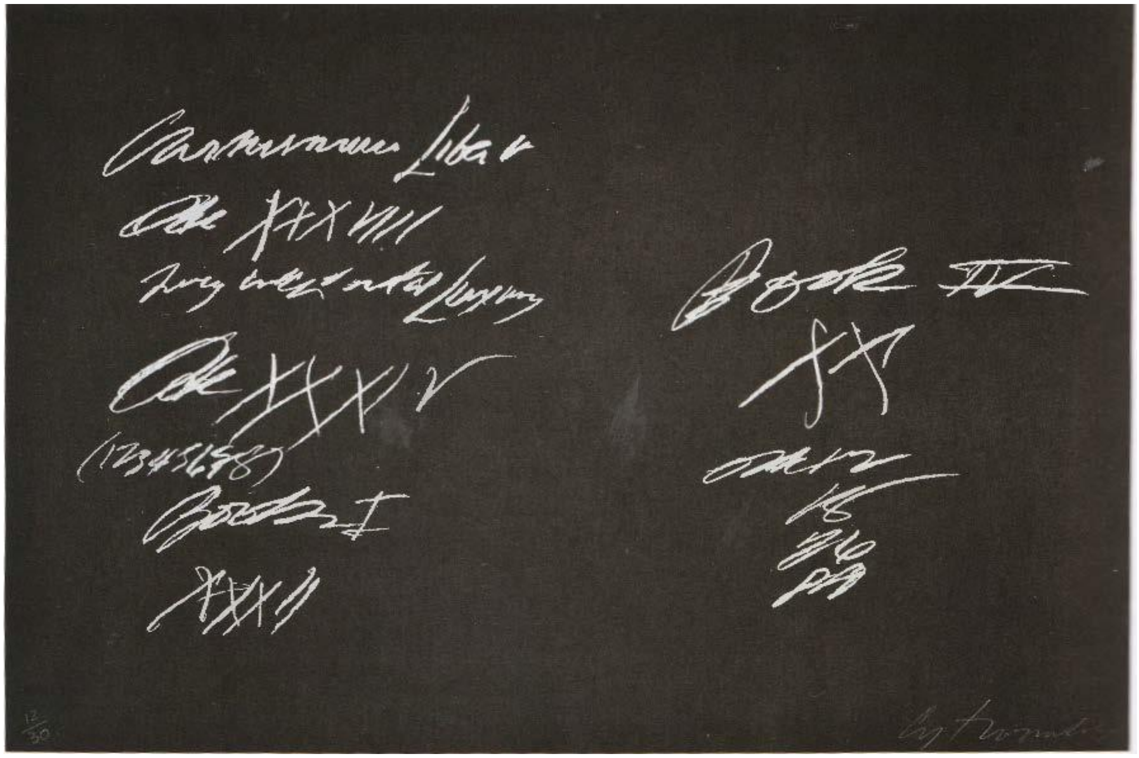

Figure II.15. Cy Twombly, print from *8 Odi di Orazio*, 1968.

The barely legible "Ode XXXVIII" on the second line must refer to Ode 38 in the first book. Of all the four books of Horace's *Odes*, the first book contains the largest number of odes, numbering 38 in total. Coincidentally, in this ode Horace gives us his exemplary adoption of the Sapphic meter.[49] Another hint of the Sapphic stanza appears in the final two lines on the left side of this print, —"Book I" and the roman numerals "XXXII"—giving us ode 1.32, which does employ the Sapphic meter.[50]

The communal instead of the personal connotation of the Latin Sapphic scansion is further reinforced by the fact that *8 Odi* is a screenprint work instead of a painterly one. The reproductive (and reproducible) character of *Odi* emphasizes repeatability. The idea reproducibility is also emphatically evident in several aspects of *Odi* that approach the format of a book. First, due to Twombly's complex evocation of Horace's *Odes*, the word "book" occurs several times in both series of *Odi*, sometimes in English, other times in Latin ("Liber") to refer to the volume number of the *Odes*. Second, both series contain sixteen prints printed recto/verso on 8 boards. Third, there is also a half-size decrease in width for the second series—39,7 x 59,5 cm for the first, 39,7 x 29,8cm for the second, which brings it somewhat closer to a book format if we consider all the details I just mentioned. Fourth, the black rag boards of the second series are folded along the middle, rendering some of the prints to look like facing pages of a codex book (Figure II.16).

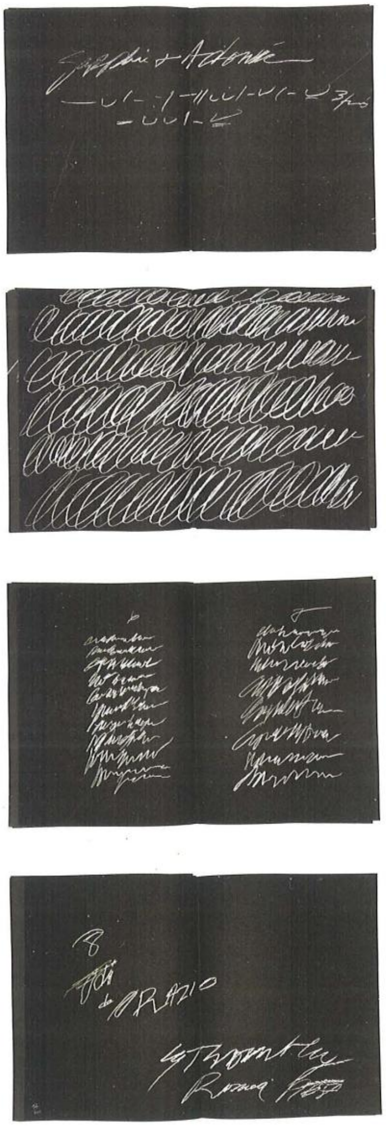

Figure 16. Cy Twombly, print samples from second series of *8 Odi di Orazio*, 1968.

And lastly, the portfolio packaging of the first series—landscape orientation of the text, loose ribbon binding—shifts to a portrait-orientation packaging and textual layout, which, housing folded rag board sheets, appears closer to a large-size book cover.

Despite the reproductive nature of printmaking, the limited nature of *Odi*'s printing should also be taken into account. In line with the trend of releasing limited-edition prints, Twombly personally numbered and signed each print edition of *Odi*. In reproductions of the 12th copy from both series in the Grosshaus catalogue, we could see Twombly's inscribed numbering on the lower left—respectively, “12/30” and “12/100”—and his signature on the lower right. While Twombly utilized pencils for most of the numbers and signatures are, on the print bearing the work’s title in the first series he employs white crayon to sign his name (Figure II.17).

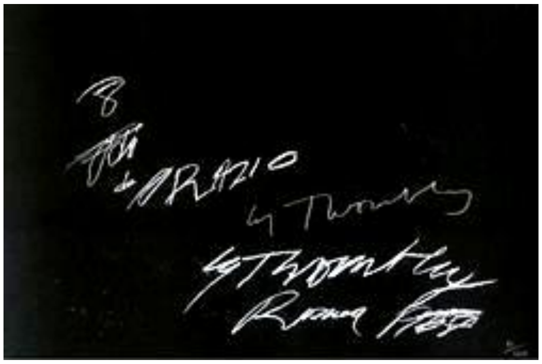

Figure II.17. Cy Twombly, crayon-signed sheet from *8 Odi di Orazio*, 1968.

The handwritten signature is unusual due to its large size in comparison to the penciled signatures on the other prints and its central positioning.[51] Moreover, the print itself already contains a printing of his name. The positioning of the printed name at the bottom right, along with the inclusion of the place and date of the work in the same area, makes it plausible to treat it as a printed signature. But what is the relation between the inscribed signature and the printed one? Does the inscription imply a more stringently autographic notion of a signature: does a signature need to be manually inscribed? In this view, a mechanically printed signature would not give us a signature but an *image* of one. If such is the implication, how could we further understand the printed signature? Like the Sperlonga drawing, this particular print from *Odi* presents an issue of two competing signatorial possibilities that, upon closer scrutiny, eludes an easy response. While many of Twombly’s artworks prior to 1957 did not bear his signatures, in works that did contained inscribed signatures. This is a trend that applied as well to his printmaking. In line with the tradition of limited-edition prints, Twombly still manually numbered and signed or monogrammed each edition, either in recto or verso. A notion of autography still operated within Twombly's signatorial activity. The crayoned signature on sheet 8 of *Odi* follows an autographic notion of signature and perhaps significantly increases its sale value. But it does not, however, cancel the onomastic action of the printed signature at the bottom.

In *Odi*'s case, Twombly's crayoned signature, comparable in size, emphasizes its graphic, non-phonetic nature. The inscribed signature reinserts the notion that the mark has to be inscribed manually by its creator. As its juxtaposition next to the printed signature shows, visual uniformity is a necessary but not sufficient condition of a signature. If anything, the idea of visual uniformity between print and script presupposes different degrees of uniformity. Accounting for minute variations in handwriting, two iterations of a signatory's signature could not be uniform the same way mechanically printed signatures would be. Two handscribed signatures superposable on each other would be suspect, since it is rather improbable that one could reproduce a signature in exact uniformity with its previous iteration (Fraenkel, *La Signature*, 205). As written sign, the signature conceptually occupies a space between an animal imprint and a mechanical action of an instrument, simultaneously demanding conformity to a model but also its variant (Fraenkel, 205). *Odi*'s juxtaposition of the printed and the inscribed signatures throws light on this particular constraint surrounding the inscribed signature in two ways. First, by showing the allowable visual difference between two signatures, Twombly demonstrates the variance Fraenkel talks about as a constraint governing handwritten signatures.

The introduction of a *handwritten* signature on the print highlights even more the peculiarity of the printed signature. Mechanically uniform in its iterations, Twombly's printed signatures lack the corporeal variance of the inscribed signature. Pointing all this out is not to privilege the handwritten over the printed signature. The focus, instead, should be on the peculiar mixture of variance from and conformity to a model in handwritten signature.[52] Twombly's inscribed signature on sheet 8 assumes an extreme individuation of event with each repetition of an inscribed signature.

This idea of uniform repeatability is also present in Twombly's inclusion of the Horatian Sapphic meter in metrical scansion, though in differing ways from the hand-inscription and transformation of Twombly's name into a signature. Twombly's hand-inscribed signature assumes extreme individuation of the event of each autographic inscription. The repetitions and repeatability evoked in the Sapphic stanza, on the other hand, presuppose an abstraction that opposes individuation. First of all, the print gives us a metrical scansion of the Horatian Sapphic stanza, an abstraction, instead of actual individual examples of the stanza from Horace's odes. Moreover, technically speaking, the print technically only provides the scansion for the Sapphic and the Adonic lines, not the full stanza. It is only with the indication "3 times" that viewers could mentally multiply the Sapphic line and consequently imagine the full Sapphic stanza. Subtly, then, this print introduces an incompletion that necessitates the viewer's participation.

But, in its own way, the print bearing the scansion of the Horatian Sapphic also reminds its viewers of the particularities and changes wrought by repetitions. The more Sappho's name is repeated in different declinations, the more she became abstracted as a voice and a persona. What was once called an Aeolic metrical line became, by the time of Horace, synonymous with Sappho's name (Sapphic), ultimately arriving at a disembodied notion of her voice in the Sapphic stanza. Besides showing the *Horatian* adoption of the Sapphic stanza, *Odi* also introduces another horizon of reception in the English declination of the adjective "Sapphic" and the indication for the required repetitions ("3 times") to acquire a full Sapphic stanza. That English is used both to decline Sappho's name to a common name, and to indicate the repetitions of the Sapphic line betrays an additional layer of historical frame through which Sappho is translated and adopted. From Sappho's Aeolic Greek to Horace's Roman Latin to Twombly's English. The legibility of Sappho's declination into "Sapphic" and the correct depiction of the Horatian Sapphic and Adonic lines should not make us forget that even this metrical scansion is, strictly speaking, incomplete. The full stanza still requires the viewer/reader understanding the English indication "3 times." In this respect, the indication 3 times strangely also echoes the three different languages used in three different periods—ancient Aeolic Greek, Roman-period Latin, along with 20th-century Italian and English—with which *Odi* plays.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, Twombly's adjoinage of legibility/illegibility in his handwriterly marks remain idiosyncratic when read against his preceding or succeeding generations of artists. But it is exactly in their idiosyncracy that we find their subtlest insights. First, I hope to have shown that Twombly's scribbling of classical authors can potentially reveal the historical machinations behind its initial impression of canonical timelessness. Second, while owing a debt to the abstract expressionist gesture, his handwriterly marks nonetheless evoke a more recent episode of writing in American history. Beyond the graphisms of cave paintings and the abstracted *enfant sauvage*, they also evoke the early 20th century. It was the time when handwriting was viewed through graphology as an expression of individuality while still used widely in commerce and pedagogically taught to instill discipline among the young. Appearing in the 50s, Twombly's was a handwriting that, when seen solely as a gesture of personal expression, actually betrays the eventual workplace replacement of Palmer as business handwriting by the typewriter.[53] It remained for a later artists and poets like McCaffery to respond critically to the utilitarian use and ubiquity of the typewriter as a means of communication, a subject that leads us to the next chapter.

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[1] For example, see his interview with the curator Nicholas Serota in "The History Behind the Thought," in Cy Twombly, *Cycles and Seasons*. Nicholas Serota, ed. London: Tate/ D.A.P, 2008, p.50: "I need, I like emphasis…I like something to jumpstart me—usually a place or a literary reference or an event that took place, to start me off. To give me a clarity or energy."

[2] See Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois, *L'informe: mode d'emploi*. Paris: Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1996, 148-152; Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 256-266; Rosalind Krauss, "Cy Was Here; Cy's up" in *Artforum International* (September 1994), 70; Yve-Alain Bois, "Der Liebe Gott Steckt im Detail: Reading Twombly" in *Abstraction, Gesture, Écriture*. Zurich: Alesgo AG, 1999, 61-78.

[3] See Richard Leeman, *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*. Paris: Flammarion, 2005; Nicholas Serota, ed., *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*. London: Tate/D.A.P, 2008; Louis Armand, "Introduction to *Cy Twombly: Fifty Years of Works on Paper*." in *Pinakothek der Moderne*. Munich: *Pinakothek der Moderne*, October, 2004, n.p.

[4] Roland Barthes, "Cy Twombly ou *Non multa sed multum*," in *L'Obvie et l'obtus: Essais critiques III*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982, 146. Originally published in Yvon Lambert, ed., *Cy Twombly: Catalogue raisonné des œuvres sur papier*. Milan: Multiphla Edizioni, 1979, n.p.

[5] The distinction between *notation* and *script* belongs to Roy Harris. The notational sense of the term *letter*, he argues, "does not capture the sense in which there are important differences between capitals and 'small' letters, between roman and italic letters, etc." These are differences "learned and taught" as part of our "alphabetic literacy." [Roy Harris, *Rethinking Writing*. London: Continuum, 2001, 97.]

[6] Instead of just showing cancelation, the additional effect of pseudomutilation is to cast light on the "process of comprehension" itself "because the reader knows that the mutilation has been brought about by the author, who knows that the reader will perceive and know this, and moreover that the reader knows that the author knows that the reader knows that the author knows this (and so forth)[.]" [Willie Van Peer, "Multilated Signs: Notes toward a Literary Paleography," in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 18, no. 1 (Spring, 1997), 45.]

[7] "la fleur a été écrite, puis désécrite; mais les deux mouvements restent vaguement surimprimés; c'est un **palimpseste pervers**: trois textes (si l'on y ajoute la sorte de signature, de légende ou de citation: Sesostris) sont là, l'un tendant à effacer l'autre, mais à seule fin, dirait-on, de donner à lire cet effacement: véritable philosophie du temps." [Roland Barthes, "*Non Multa sed multum*," 152]. In "Sagesse de l'art" Barthes goes even further by suggesting that the palimpsestic processes in Twombly devoids itself of actual cancelation: "l'artiste **feint** d'avoir "raté" quelque morceau de sa toile et de vouloir l'effacer; mais ce gommage, il le rate à son tour; et ces deux ratages superposés produisent une sorte de **palimpseste**: donnent à la toile la profondeur d'un ciel où les nuages legers passent les uns devant les autres sans **s'annuler**." [Barthes, "Sagesse de l'art," 165.] The occlusionary logic that Barthes calls "palimpsest pervers" serves to highlight occlusion itself as a visible mark.

[8] Per Béatrice Fraenkel, a "personalized" signature pre-supposes an accounting of a sequence of letters spelling out the signatory's name as much as an encoding (*"chiffrage"*). But such coding does not assume two systems of writing. Instead, it is within the same writing that the two different registers inhere. The *chiffrage*/letter dichotomy then reflects the signatory's position as both a private and a public being: "Le signataire moderne ne s'affirme plus comme lettré, manipulateur de systèmes d'écritures, mais comme familier de l'écrit possédant **son propre style graphique**. Cette différence de registres participe d'un clivage du sujet moderne en ses deux natures, privée et publique." [Béatrice Fraenkel. *La Signature: Genèse d'un signe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992, 104.]

[9] Béatrice Fraenkel, *La Signature: Genèse d'un signe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992, 23.

[10] Joan DeJean, *Fictions of Sappho:1546-1937*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, 1. For other reception studies of Sappho, see Page DuBois*, Sappho is Burning*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995*;* David M. Robinson*, Sappho and her Influence*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1963 [1923]*;* Ellen Greene*,* ed., *Reading Sappho: Contemporary Approaches*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997*; Re-reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

[11] As Glenn Most amusingly puts it, the various Athenian sources identified so many female and male lovers of Sappho that one may wonder how "she could ever have found time to compose her poetry (was this why she preferred to write short poems rather than long ones?)." [Glenn Most, "Reflecting Sappho," in *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*. Volume 40, Issue 1 (1995), 17.]

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[12] Yopie Prins attributes this long imagination of Sappho's biography to lyric reading, a mode of reading the personal pronoun 'I' in poetry as a sign of the poet's presence within the poem as a voice or a speaker. Challenging such interpretation, Prins argues that, "[to] the contrary, Sappho is an overdetermined trope within a history of continual transformation that never ends, enabling us to read lyric as structure for **shifting** identifications rather than the **fixing** of an identification." [Yopie Prins, *Victorian Sappho*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, 20.]

[13] Manfred de la Motte, "Cy Twombly," in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio. Trans. Jeremy Gaines. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002, 51.

[14] In the same essay on Twombly, de la Motte also makes a telling comparison between Twombly's "scribble" and concrete poetry: ""The elementary fun in babbling and articulation, the fascination with the gestures of language and the self-presentation of the course of language, where language is not a means of communication—all of this is starting to be significant in contemporary literature (F. Mon, F. Kriwet,…) (de la Motte, "Cy Twombly," 51)[.]" Regardless whether his statement proves accurate or otherwise, de La Motte's essay significantly poses a parallel between Twombly's foregrounding of the act of reading and what was happening then in literature as manifested in concrete poetry.

[15] Richmond Lattimore, "Preface," in *Greek Lyrics*, translated by Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955, v.

[16] In her survey of postwar artist magazines, Ann Gibson describes *Tiger's Eye* as "one of the most widely read of all the avant-garde magazines" in the late forties. [Ann Eden Gibson, *Issues in Abstract-Expressionism: The Artist-Run Periodicals*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990, 26.]

[17] Here is a passage from the essay:

> It is interesting that when the Greek dream prevails in our time, the European artist is nostalgic for the ancient forms, hoping to achieve tragedy by depicting his self-pity over the loss of the elegant column and the beautiful profile. This tortured emotion, however, agonizing over the Greek objects, is always refined. Everything is so highly civilized[…] The artist in America is, by comparison, like a barbarian. He does not have the super-fine sensibility toward the object that dominates European feeling.//This is, then, our opportunity, free of the ancient paraphernalia, to come closer to the sources of the tragic emotion.

[Barnett Newman, "The Object and the Image," in *Tiger's Eye*, No. 3 (March 15, 1948), 111.]

[18] Not coincidentally, a painting of Newman's with the title *Death of Euclid* is reproduced ten pages before the essay. Read in light of his essay, the title of his painting not only suggests a distance from Greek classicism, but also geometrical perspective in Western painting from the Renaissance onward. (Euclid, after all, was one of the Greek figures Raphael includes in *School of Athens* (1510-1511). On the well-known exploration of nationalist politics behind postwar American art, see Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.

[19] John Addington Symonds, *Studies of the Greek Poets*, *3rd Edition*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1893 [1873], p. 294.

[20] "Im Sommer 1959 arbeitete Twombly einige Monate in Sperlonga. Es entstand dort u.a. eine Reihe von etwa 35 inhaltlich zusammenhängender Zeichnungen, die sich thematisch mit den **Versen der Sappho** befassen. Twombly verwendete in fast allen diesen Blättern we[ss]e ölfarbe, Bleistift und nur sehr sparsam farbige Kreide. Die ölfarbe lie[ss] er auf das Papier tropfen—in einigen Blättern ist sie mit den Fingern verrieben." [Heiner Bastian, Remark on Plate 21 in *Cy Twombly*, *Zeichnungen 1953-1973*, edited by Heiner Bastian, n.p.. Berlin/ Vienna: Propylaen, 1973.]

[21] Nicholas Cullinan, "Et in Arcadia Ego," in Serota, ed., *Cy Twombly: Cycles and Seasons*, p. 73.

[22] Richard Hoppe-Sailer, "Aphrodite Anadyomene: On the Constitution of Myth in the Œuvre of Cy Twombly" in Nicola Del Roscio, ed., *Writings on Cy Twombly*. 2002: Schirmer/ Mosel, 129.

[23] Charles Olson, "Cy Twombly," in Nicola Del Roscio, ed., *Writings on Cy Twombly*. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002, 11.

[24] In the mid-50s Twombly already experimented with using dark grounds, the most known result of which may be *Panorama* (1955).

[25] Donald Judd, "In the Galleries: Cy Twombly." Arts Magazine (May/June 1964), Complete Writings 1959-1975. Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 128-129.

[26] Kirk Varnedoe, "Inscriptions in Arcadia," in *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*, exh. cat., curated by Kirk Varnedoe. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1994, 18.

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[27] Richard Leeman also discerns a sense of order in Twombly's more linear mark-making during this period when assessing *Letter of Resignation* (1967), a series of 38 plates on paper. Leeman notes the "linearization, enumeration, division of the surface and erasure" as signs of Twombly trying to "master the space of the page and the graphic action, to achieve a greater degree of control: a *disegno* that has the most accomplished form of handwriting (Leeman, *Monograph*, 179)."

[28] Max Kozloff, "Cy Twombly at Castelli Gallery," in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio. Munich: Schirmer/ Mosel, 2002, 54.

[29] Robert Pincus-Witten, "Learning to Write," in *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002, *56*.

[30] This is a characterization that remained consistent even until Twombly's passing in 2011. Roberta Smith wrote in her New York Times review that Twombly's "raw mark making could be seen as Surrealist automatism pushed to unprecedented extremes." [Roberta Smith, "An Artist of Selective Abandon," in *New York Times*, 7/6/2011. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/07/arts/design/cy-twombly-an-art-who-emphasized-mark-making.html. Accessed: December 20, 2012.]

[31] Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1998, 164. Plakins Thornton's great insight is to draw a parallel between the disappearance of handwriting due to devices like the typewriter and the telephone, on one hand, and, on the other, its retention due to the rising working class interest in graphology columns. The notion of handwriting as individualistic essentially arose as a response to the de-individualizing effect of industrialization. [See also Leeman's short discussion of the Palmer method, which cites Plakins Thornton's book, in *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*, 171-174.]

[32] A.N. Palmer, *The Palmer Method of Business Writing*. Cedar Rapids: A.N. Palmer Company, 1915, 11. [Originally published in New York in 1901]

[33] It may be tempting to pose the neuromuscular view of rapid automatism in the Palmer Method as the complete opposite of how Surrealists like André Breton understood speed as the key to automatic writing. In the first Surrealist Manifesto, Breton did assert the importance of speed in writing automatically: "*Placez-vous dans l'état le plus passif ou réceptif que vous pourrez... écrivez-**vite** sans sujet préconçu, assez **vite** pour ne pas vous retenir et ne pas être tenté de vous relire*." [Breton, André. "Premier Manifeste du Surréalisme." In *Les Manifestes du Surréalisme, suivis de Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste du Surréalisme ou non du Surréalisme en ses œuvres et d'éphémérides Surréalistes*. Paris: Le Sagittaire, 1955, 28.] But the following sentence in the manifesto shows how much the neuromuscular view of automatism is presupposed *within* the Surrealist view : "*La première **phrase** viendra **toute seule**, tant il est vrai qu'à chaque seconde il est une phrase, étrangère à notre pensée consciente, qui ne demande qu'à s'extérioriser* (28)." Even when the writing could be foreign to a "pensée consciente," Breton's instruction unintentionally betrays the muscular automatism that underlies the forming of a sentence.

[34] Jean Laude, "Paul Klee," in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 2 Vols, edited by William Rubin. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984, 492. Cited in Leeman, *Monograph*, 88.

[35] Laude, "Klee," 492. Cited in Leeman, *Monograph*, 88.

[36] Barthes, "Non Multa sed multum," 148, cited in Leeman, *Monograph*, 88.

[37] In another passage from the same section in "Non Multa", Barthes also discusses Twombly's gesture as the opposite of an action, which he dubs as transitive: "Qu'est-ce que qu'un geste? Quelque chose comme le supplement d'un acte. L'acte est transitif, il veut susciter un objet, un résultat (148)."

[38] "L'essence d'un objet a quelque rapport avec son déchet: non pas forcément ce qui reste après qu'on en a usé, mais ce qui est *jeté* hors de l'usage. Ainsi des écritures de TW. (Barthes, "Non Multa," 146)."

[39] Ille mi par esse deo videtur,
ille, si fas est, superare divos,
qui sedens adversus identidem te
    spectat et audit

dulce ridentem, misero quod omnes
eripit sensus mihi: nam simul te,
Lesbia, aspexi, nihil est super mi
    <vocis in ore;>

lingua sed torpet, tenuis sub artus
flamma demanat, sonitu suopte
tintinant aures geminae, teguntur

---

lumina nocte.

otium, **Catulle**, tibi molestumst:
otio exsultas nimiumque gestis:
otium et reges prius et beatas
perdidit urbes.

To me that man seems like a god in heaven,
seems—may I say it?—greater than all gods are,
who sits by you & without interruption
watches you, listens

to your light laughter, which casts such confusion
onto my sense, **Lesbia**, that when I
gaze at you merely, all of my well-chosen
words are forgotten

as my tongue thickens & a subtle fire
runs through my body while my ears are deafened
by their own ringing & at once my eyes are
covered in darkness!

Leisure, **Catullus**. More than just a nuisance,
leisure: you riot, overmuch enthusing.
Fabulous cities & their sometime kings have
died of such leisure.

[Catullus, "Catullus 51," in *The Poems of Catullus*. Trans. Charles Martin. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990, 51.]

[40] Leeman also includes the lines from Pope's translation of *Iliad*:

…and with his longing arms essay'd
In vain to grasp the visionary shade!
Like a thin smoke he sees the spirit fly,
And hears a feeble, lamentable cry.

That Leeman discusses *Achilles* with regards to Pope's translation, which Twombly quoted at times, trades upon the possible valence of "shade" as both a painterly term and, in Pope's eighteenth-century translation, as a ghost (Leeman, *Monograph*, 77).

[41] Catullus, "Catullus 11," in *The Poems of Catullus*, 14.

[42] Sappho, "Fragment 105b," in *If not, Winter: Fragments of Sappho*. Trans. Anne Carson. New York: Knopf, 2003, p. 215. Sappho's lines contrast the hyacinth among the pastoral mountains against the shepherd as a georgic or farming symbol. Like Sappho, in addition to indicating a pastoral *topos* ("mountains" vs. "the farthest meadow"), Catullus posits the pastoral flower against the georgic touch of the passing plow. In his essay on "Catullus 11" Putnam argues that there is an unmistakable sexual connotation lurking behind the description of a flower being trampled or destroyed by a georgic act or instrument dating back as far as Pindar, where "the plough is a sign for the male, and there is no more universal symbol [sic] than a flower for the woman (Putnam 99)." [Michael J. Putnam, "Catullus 11: The Ironies of Integrity," in *Catullus*, edited by Julia Haig Gaisser. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 99.]

[43] Laszlo Glozer, "Twombly," trans. Daniel Mufson, in Cy Twombly, *Photographs 1951*-2007, Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2008, p.19.

[44] Michel Butor, *Les Mots dans la peinture*. Genève: Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1969, p. 101. For comparison, see also Pollock's handmarks in *Number 1, 1950* (*Lavender Mist*).

[45] For a brief survey of Twombly's printmaking activity, see Sarah Kirk Hanley, "Twombly's Poetics in Print." in *Art 21*. August 12, 2011. Accessed November 28, 2012.

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[46] In Ode 3.30, the last of the *Odes* published in 23 B.C.E, Horace assumed the persona of the lyric 'I' in boasting that he shall have everlasting fame for being the first to "weave" Aeolian songs [Aeolium **carmen**] into Italian measures.

[47] Andrew Becker, "Listening to Lyric: Accent and Ictus in the Latin Sapphic Stanza," *Classical World*, Volume 103, Number 2 (Winter 2010), 168. Becker further notes that the caesura after the fifth syllable is nearly a fixed feature in the first three books of Horace's *Odes*. Later Latin poets up to the fourth century C.E. retained this regularity in Horace's early Sapphic hendecasyllable as a rule in their imitation of the Sapphic meter (168).

[48] Rosalind Krauss, "Cy Was Here; Cy's Up."

[49] For a short but detailed metrical analysis of this poem, which Becker considers a "Model Sapphic," see Becker, 170-172.

[50] Horace's adaptation of the Sapphic meter did not stop with the *Odes*. Under the commission of Emperor Augustus, the poet composed the hymn *Carmen Saeculare* in 17 B.C.E. Horace composed the hymn in Sapphic meter and intended it for public recitation. The adoption of the Sapphic meter, argues Michael Putnam, can be due to "the meter's very facility […] This relative simplicity would make Horace's words easy for his choristers to memorize and for the audience to comprehend on the first hearing." [Michael J. Putnam, *Horace's Carmen Saeculare:Ritual Magic and the Poet's Art*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001, p.107.]

Horace's ode 4.6, composed at least 5 years after *Carmen Saeculare*, not only uses the Sapphic meter, but also contains an instruction on how to recite the public hymn:

Lesbium servate pedem meique
pollicis ictum

rite Latonae puerum canentes,
rite crescentem face Noctilucam,
prosperam frugum celeremque pronos
volvere mensis.

nupta iam dices "ego dis amicum
saeculo festas referente luces
reddidi carmen docilis modorum
vatis Horati.

mark the Sapphic measure and the rhythm
    struck on my lyre,

as you celebrate Latóna's son
and the shining Moon with waxing torch,
promoting harvests and at speed to cycle
    headlong round the months.

When a married woman, you'll say: "At the
Festival Centennial, I
performed a song that pleased the gods, trained in
    verse of bard Horace."

[Horace, Ode 4.6, in *The Odes of Horace*. Trans. Jeffrey Kaimowitz. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2008. 155.]

Besides alluding to his *Carmen Saeculare* in the last stanza, the above lines from Ode 4.6 instructs the chorus specifically how to chant the Sapphic meter. The meter then does not only stand as a Hellenic model for imitation, but also as a means for Horace to *teach* his chorus how to voice his version of the Sapphic hendecasyllable. Sappho accordingly became for Horace a model that was to be passed on to his successors. Simultaneously, his reception of the Sapphic was not a strict imitation in lieu of an adaptation. His adaptation shifted between the first three books of the *Odes* and later works like *Carmen Saeculare* and the fourth book of *Odes*. As Becker shows, the caesura in *Carmen*'s Sapphic hendecasyllables changed from after the fifth to the sixth syllable to make them more easily pronounced by the learning students. [See Becker, "Listening to Lyric, 168-170.]

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[52] Twombly's juxtaposition of printed and handscribed signatures pits two different history of signatorial methods in Western printmaking. Prior to the creation of limited edition prints in late-nineteenth-century, a printed signature or monogram included within a given printwork sufficed. This means that a signature printed and multiplied in printworks is accepted qua artist signature. It is only after the creation of limited edition prints that artists manually sign and number each edition of the printwork. [See Theodore B. Donson, *Prints and the Print Market: A Handbook for Buyers, Collectors, and Connoisseurs*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1977.]

[53]The historian Bruce Bliven grandly wrote in 1954 that

> the typewriter has revolutionized communications, helped in the dramatic expansion of business, increased profits by decreasing the cost of making them, freed mankind **from the drudgery and illegibility of handwriting**, saved incalculable hours of time, transformed the appearance of offices, given birth to a myriad of related and dependent business machines, influenced the language and changed the methods of primary education.

[Bruce Bliven Jr., *The Wonderful Writing Machine*. New York: Random House, 1954, 19.]

CHAPTER 2

Keep One on Your Bookshelf: Trashing and Tracing the Book in Steve McCaffery's *Carnival*

Introduction: Tear Carefully

In a part of chapter 1 we encountered the potential of Twombly's occlusive illegibility to reflect Sappho's *Nachleben* in the modern literary imagination. But this strategic literariness of Twombly's illegibility is only fully apparent once his handwriterly inscriptions are interpreted seriously in the contexts of both art *and* literature, an approach that also does not merely gloss over any trace of legibility in his marks. Steve McCaffery's hybrid book/panel work *Carnival*, the subject of this chapter, requires a similar approach in the opposite direction. If critics have mostly discussed McCaffery's general body of works as poetry, *Carnival* calls for an elucidation that considers its intermedial construction and its intersemiotic mark-making in the dual context of poetry and the visual arts of the time. Panel One of *Carnival* was composed from 1967 to 1970 and published in 1973. Panel Two (Figure III.1), the focus of the current chapter, was composed from 1970 to 1975 and published in 1977. While *Carnival* does fall within the Canadian tradition of the dirty concrete, the work emphatically indicates and profits from its suitability for gallery and museum exhibitions.

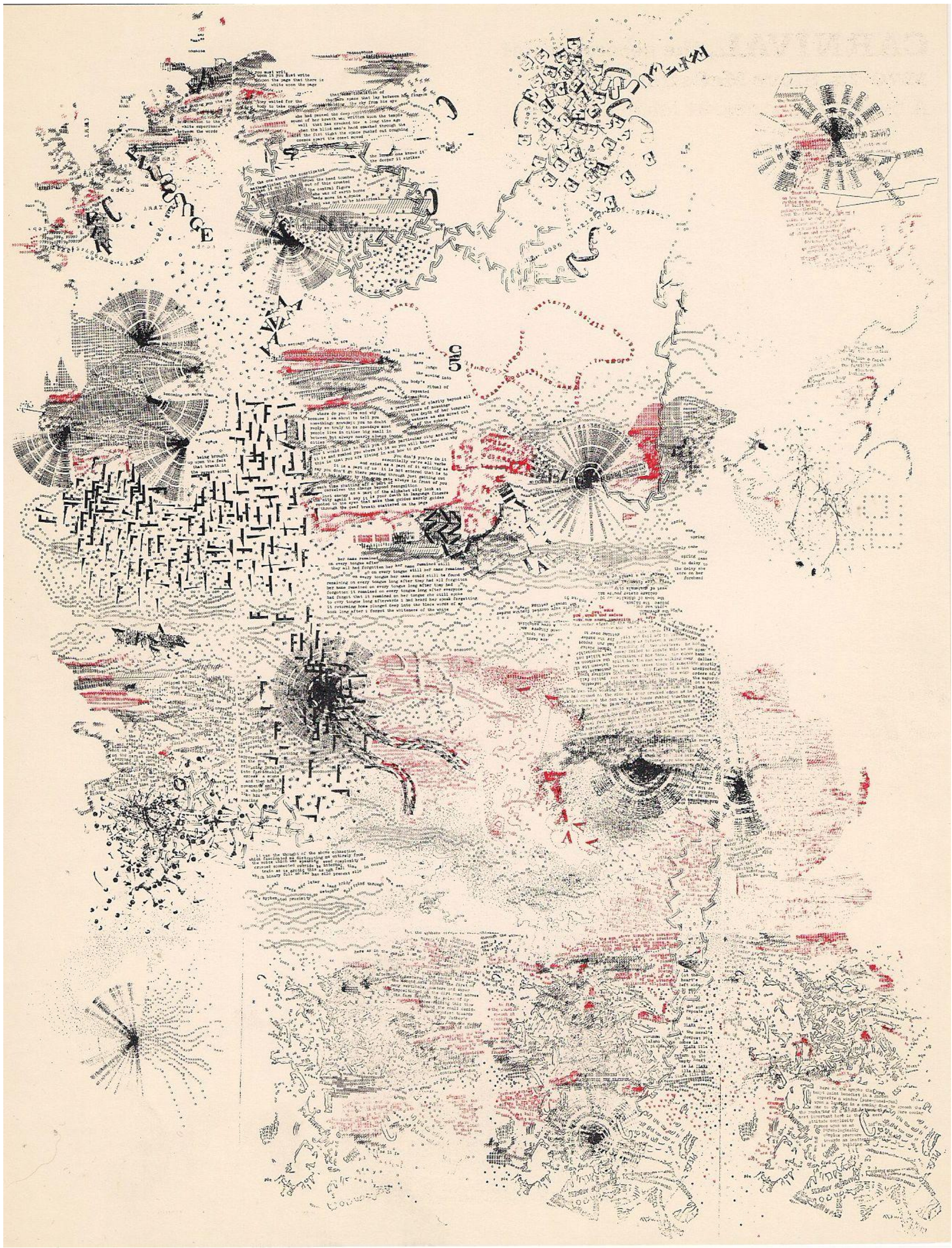


Figure III. 1. Steve McCaffery, *Carnival: The Second Panel: 1970-75.* Toronto: Coach House Press, 1977. Reproduction of the assembled panel on accompanying postcard.

As McCaffery designed it, several features of *Carnival* do point towards art. Initially bound as a book, each panel consists of sixteen 8.5" x 11" perforated pages that could be detached and arranged into a large panel measuring 44" x 34". As we saw in the Introduction, sections of *Carnival* also appeared in exhibitions as wall panels and in various anthologies of intermedia works amalgamating poetry and art. As its exhibition appearances suggest, the immediately recognizable one is the projected abandonment of the book format for the wall panel, signaling its appropriateness to be displayed in a gallery setting. Hinting at the book/panel duality even further, the accompanying instructional 6" x 8.25" postcard for Panel Two dubs *Carnival* a "book wall panel." Building upon the book/panel contrast, McCaffery writes in Panel Two's introduction about the work's anti-book aim. The audience actively participates by "destroying" the book prior to constructing the panel: "*Carnival* remains merely a virtual panel, whereas a mounted panel is a "book destroyed.""[1] The pages then combine in a way comparable to "the components of a multi-panel painting." For critic Fiona McMahon, the work's full realization lies in the panel assembly, whereby the reader becomes an active participant by detaching the pages and assembling the panel to achieve "poetry's transferral to a painterly medium."[2]

With her destruction of the book and construction of a new panel out of the pages, the reader then is envisioned by McCaffery no longer as passive consumers of books who do not take into account their material nature. In the process of foregrounding the reader, the figure of the author allegedly recedes, something made clear in McCaffery's preface to Panel Two: "**Carnival** from Med. L. **carnelevale**, a putting away of the flesh and hence a prelental language game in which all traces of **the subjective 'I' are excommunicated. In this way to consider the sheer weight of linguistic presence in our lives and to confront it as material without reference to an author or to any otherness**." *Carnival*'s alleged destruction of the book also functions as a critique of commodification. An apt example of the anti-commodity interpretation of *Carnival* is the Canadian Marxist critic Clint Burnham's. For Burnham, *Carnival*'s unusual book format deconstructs the "historical normalization of the book":

> That is, the book must be taken apart so that the pages may be joined together. […] And so the invitation to destroy it […] is insistently dialectical. That is a commodity that invites destruction evidently parodies the "built-in obsolescence" of late capitalism—from cars that wear out to the various "generations" of computers or to paperbacks that are "stripped" (their covers torn off and sent back for refund) when they do not sell is the requisite three weeks. [3]

McCaffery himself discusses the issue of readers' freedom in abstractly Marxist terms:

> Language Writing involves a fundamental repudiation of the socially defined functions of author and reader as the productive and consumptive poles respectively of a commodital axis. The main thrust of the work is hence political rather than aesthetic, away from the manufacture of formal objects towards a frontal assault on the steady categories of author and reader, offering instead the writer-reader function as a compound, fluid relationship of two interchangeable agencies within sign production and sign circulation ("Diminished Reference," 15).[4]

Echoing the anti-commodity aim of having readers participate in destroying the book, McCaffery also introduces numerous instances of illegibility in *Carnival* to emphasize the visuality and materiality of writing apart from its notational use. One consistent manifestation of his use of illegibility is as overprints (which then introduce occlusive illegibility). In its simplest formulation, overprint is the super-imposition of mark on the same or overlapping space as a previously inscribed mark. Deriving his formulation from a poem by the Vancouver poet bill bisset (figure III.2), McCaffery describes overprints as total obliterator of legibility:

> Overprint (the laying of text over text to the point of obliterating all legibility) is Bissett's [sic] method of deterritorializing linguistic codes and placing language in a state of vertical excess. Overprint destroys the temporal condition of logic and causality, **obliterating** articulation and destroying message by its own super-abundance. In this way semantic property reduces to a common, un-differentiated equivalent graphic substance, whilst spatial difference is rearranged to intercept the material surface of the code causing it to physically collide and jam.[5]

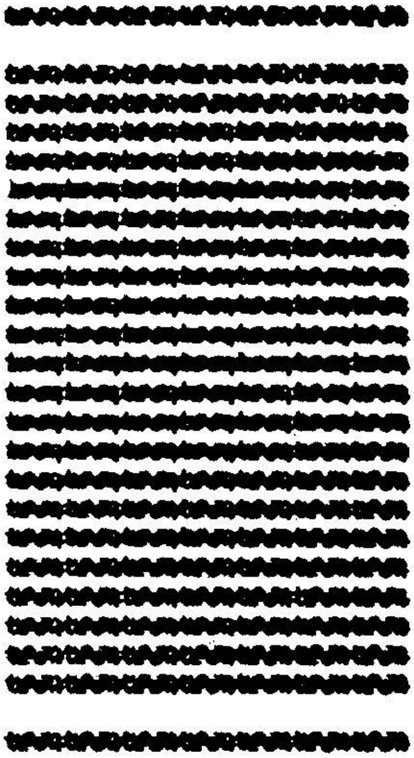


Figure III. 2. bill bissett, from *Vancouvr mainland ice & cold storage* (London: Writers Forum, 1973).

Carnival's illegible marks thus promote readerly freedom the same way its book/panel transformation calls for the audience's active participation in detaching the pages. The reader is additionally active and free in not being bound by a regular narrative model of linear writing and purely textual use of letters, a theoretical model McCaffery discusses in the introduction to the second panel:

> There are no clues to passage for the reader other than the one phrase of Kung's: 'make it new', move freely, as the language itself moves, along one and more of the **countless reading paths** available, through zones of familiar sense into the opaque regions of the unintelligible, and then out again to savour the collision of the language groupings.[6]

Overall, McCaffery conceived of *Carnival* as manifestation of a liberatory view that presupposes obliterating the book form as commodity, the reified reading habits of the passive reader, and the linguistic meaning and layout of regular textuality.

But if we take a more critical approach to McCaffery's rhetoric and *Carnival* itself, his formal and political aspirations hide the myriad of ways the work puts constraints and limitations among its implied audience. Making those constraints in the production of the work clear will limit the ambitious reach of his claims while also actually make us aware of *Carnival*'s material complexity as a concretist artifact from the intermedial period of the late 60s and the early 70s. A good start is the instruction printed on Panel Two's accompanying postcard: "Buy two copies. Keep one on your bookshelf. Take the other & **tear** each of the 16 text pages carefully along the perforation." First, if *Carnival* entails the book's destruction, why does the instruction command readers to purchase another copy *qua* book for the bookshelf? This gesture strongly hints at a paradoxical persistence of the book form in *Carnival*, which, as we will see later, the work ultimately fails to erase. Second, the imperative to tear the pages "*carefully* along the perforation" strikes an odd tone in the context of a supposedly liberatory work. This adverb controls the act of tearing (destroying) the book by imposing certain constraints on the reader. The perforation of the pages further aids the careful detachment of the pages, in turn preserving the rectangular dimensions intended for the panel assembly. A *je-m'enfoutiste* tearing will then threaten the full panel assembly.

In essence, *Carnival* will seem absolutely nonrecuperable (uninterpretable) only if one assumes a one-genre and one-medium interpretative lens, namely the literary and the textual. The challenges to conventions within either a tradition of a single medium (book), genre (literature), or symbolic system (writing) do not necessarily entail avoiding conventions within the tradition of the visual art, the other end of *Carnival*'s intermedial experimentation. Moreover, there are elements in *Carnival*'s dual formats that go against McCaffery's rhetoric of book destruction in retaining traces of the book format, even if those elements are to be discarded as trash. A critical intermedial and intersemiotic approach to *Carnival* not only allows us to understand the composition of the work in a better light; it also refutes the unqualified notion of a reader liberated in her encounter of the work once the construction and the mark-making are better understood. As the postcard instruction shows, if one set of constraints is abolished in *Carnival*—linear and legible text, the bound pages—then another set of constraints subtly takes its place ("tear…carefully").

In line with the overall argument, in this chapter I discuss the subtle retention of order and authority in *Carnival* on three levels: mark-making (overprints), construction (binding, perforated paper) and circulation (as book for sale, as exhibited pre-constructed panel, as online artifact). Before proceeding to the work itself, however, the first part of the chapter contextualizes *Carnival* within Mccaffery's broader theorizing of readerly liberation. Doing so is not insignificant insofar as his erudite use of technical jargons in his essays connotes an *authority* of the theorist over readers. I will therefore address the problem of authorial control in McCaffery's theorization of readerly freedom to show the aptness of highlighting order and author-ity in *Carnival*.

The succeeding part of the chapter then demonstrates that *Carnival* orderliness and authorial authority are rather transformed, not abolished. But this orderliness will become apparent only within an intermedial and intersemiotic frame of interpretation. At the level of mark-making, salient is the role of *Carnival*'s occlusive illegibility play as intersigns. First of all, my view on *Carnival*'s overprints diverges from McCaffery's by arguing for the existence of several kinds of overprints. Some types of overprints do challenge or even obliterate textual legibility, as McCaffery asserts. But there exist another kind of overprints in *Carnival* that reinforce textual legibility. Additionally, scanning *Carnival*'s overprints temporarily beyond textual legibility will show overprints' potential play with occlusion and depth perception, elements of visual perception that are not negligible considering the modernist painting's anti-illusionary emphasis on flatness. As for *Carnival*'s construction, its perforated pages are important devices for regulating the ripping to occur in transforming the book to the panel form. To recall the postcard instruction above: the perforation is supposed to allow a "careful" detachment of the pages that ironically retains a linear order by limiting the ways in which readers could undo or destroy them. The use of perforation therefore qualifies the claim to readerly freedom in *Carnival*.

Finally, in the chapter's last part I analyze the work's circulation as reproductions in instructional postcards, exhibition catalogs, anthologies, and the internet. This is to highlight the gap between *Carnival*'s panel as it hypothetically exists in the reader's hands and as it has existed as panels in gallery or as postcard reproductions. Galleries constitute, unsurprisingly as much as books, sites and modes of circulation with their own conventions. Beth Learn, the co-curator for Kostelanetz's *Language & Structure* exhibition, insightfully comments on the effect of a work's reproduction in different settings. The book/panel duality, within which *Carnival* conceptually operates, elides the complexities of how the work could and did circulate as reproductions: "The interdisciplinary character of **Language Art** is at once its most confusing and intriguing quality. There is no easy way around media inference, and simply to switch from "book" to "gallery" (vice versa) has not been satisfactory. Work of this nature easily finds its way into anthology or other publication format—often as reproduction, excerpt or document[.]"[7] Thus, adhering too closely to McCaffery's understanding of book/ panel duality—book signalling readerly limitation, panel readerly freedom and participation—blinds us of the restraining function of *Carnival*'s anthology and electronic versions.

Death of the Theorist

The first step to understanding McCaffery's subtle retention of authority as an author is to cast a critical glance at his theoretical essays, to engage him as a *theorist*. Overall, McCaffery's concept of the liberated reader *vis-à-vis* his general output—*Carnival* included—contains several contradictions meriting engagement here since it aids in understanding the relation between author and reader in *Carnival*.

There are two relevant aspects in McCaffery's writing on readerly freedom. First is the use of specialized jargons in his theorization of readerly freedom, affirming an *authority* as theorist. As Kent Lewis remarks: "At every stage of his career […] McCaffery typically marshalls a giddying array of technical terms, historical precedents, theoricians, expertise, definitions, social contexts, pseudo-science, catalogues and categories—an imperious erudition that is suffocating to newcomer and veteran alike […] **It's as if poetic flux terrifies him towards ever more dictatorial criticism**."[8] Lewis is far from being the only one who notices this discrepancy in McCaffery. In an encyclopedia entry for McCaffery in *Contemporary Poets* (2003), John Robert Colombo writes that the difficulty of McCaffery's work provides a huge stumbling block to commentators.[9] Richard Kostelanetz himself reveals an equally telling sentiment in his entry for the Four Horsemen in *Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (1993). "McCaffery," writes Kostelanetz, "deserves a separate entry here, if I could figure out how to summarize his difficult, perhaps excessively obscure work."[10]

Generally speaking, encountering McCaffery's works seems to necessitate initially submitting to the tenets of his theory, particularly surrounding readerly protocols and liberating textual signifiers from referentiality. He dispenses with regular textuality in *Carnival* to liberate the reader from being consumptive to productive. In seeing non-linguistic marks, the reader's perception also becomes emancipated from regular linguistic uses of scripts. But simultaneously can McCaffery's accompanying theorization of that freedom become more rigid and prescribed. In a polemical exchange with a reviewer, he defends his use of jargons in a very revealing language: "I'm similarly accused of using jargon-. Well. what is jargon? It is the necessary vocabulary of skills determined by factors of linguistic economy that intersect with the exigencies of specific expertise […] **jargon is a precise and instrumental use of proper terms and phrases vital to the efficient operations of a discrete community of users**."[11] McCaffery's explanation of jargon could not have been more opposed to the democratic idea of the liberated reader espoused in essays such as "Death of the Subject." The irony of the passage is evident if we compare it to McCaffery's originally democratic aim for introducting illegibility and indeterminacy in his works.

Carnival's illegible marks, for example, are supposed to promote readerly freedom the same way its book/panel transformation calls for the audience's active participation in detaching the pages and pursuing "countless reading paths." Recall that in the essay "Death of the Subject" McCaffery believes that works like *Carnival* constitutes "a frontal assault on the steady categories of author and reader, offering instead the writer-reader function as a compound, fluid relationship of two interchangeable agencies within sign production and sign circulation (15)." Taken as a whole, what McCaffery's theorization shows is that understanding the aim of *Carnival*'s semiotic liberation from linguistic constraints depends on a theoretical language use that diametrically opposes that liberation itself: a precise understanding of theoretical concepts, a certain hyper-literacy that also assumes textual transparency of the letters used to circulate that theory. The gain in definitional precision for McCaffery goes hand in hand with the potential reduction of readership in relation to stylistic difficulty and theoretical erudition. Through his jargons the poet-theorist participates in a "linguistic economy" within a discrete community of a certain expertise. The juxtaposition of his criticism and creative work would then result in a contradiction. "McCaffery implies," observes the experimental poet Christian Bök, "that there are such things as competent readers that can discern a presumably intended meaning, and yet elsewhere McCaffery argues polemically against, what he calls, 'a closed model of the reader whose functional capabilities are rigidly prescribed [.]'"[12]

The use of technical jargons itself does not pose a problem if one acknowledges the privilege implied in the theoretical "linguistic economy."[13] In question is not the exclusivity itself, but the contradiction of using jargons in a theory proclaiming readerly freedom. Readers aiming to understand his push for emancipatory reading thus have to submit initially to a theoretical authority. This authority moreover is not exclusively McCaffery's, but also academia's, a small community with the privilege of education. The narrowness of such a community poses a problem insofar that his criticism does not acknowledge the constraints of theoretical authority pre-conditioning the notion of readers' liberation. The rising threat is then the possible contradiction that could accompany a jargon-infused theorization of a reader's role in relation to an author.

The second salient aspect in McCaffery's theorization of readerly freedom is exactly the discursive construction of the implied reader within that theory. The construction inevitably assumes and *defines* the parameters of what she could or could not do. Peculiarly, the last paragraphs in the second version of McCaffery's "Death of the Subject" seemingly acknowledge this paradox. These paragraphs do not specifically address McCaffery's authoritative notion of jargons nor do they speak in a tone of explicit self-criticism. The target remains objectively language writing in itself. But they do address the authoritarian implication of language writing's explicit theorization of the reader's role:

> Language Writing proposes not only the unbinding of signs and referents and the polysemous development of the signifier, but also a closed Model Reader predetermined by the productional disposition he is compelled to adopt. She is constituted upon a series of prohibitions (you can't consume, you can't reproduce an identical message, you can't subvert a representation). Hence the emancipatory character of the reading becomes a **mandatory** liberation (McCaffery, "Diminished Reference, 28).

After realizing the contradiction of a "mandatory liberation" of the closed Model Reader, McCaffery admits that so-called popular novels like crime fictions—Mickey Spillane's and Arthur Hailey's are his examples—actually have less of an imposed and over-determined readership. Consequently these novels might allow for more of an aberrant reading ("Diminished Reference," 28). The second version of McCaffery's essay ends with a includes an example, taken from Umberto Eco's work, of an aberrant but politically relevant reception of what McCaffery dubs an "insipid, bourgeois consolatory fiction." Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, ridiculed by Marx and Poe alike, nevertheless ended up influencing the 1848 revolution (McCaffery, "Diminished Reference," 29, ft.30). At its most autocratic, the talk of open readership in McCaffery's theory can reify the reader's freedom the moment she becomes theorized. So the democratic aim of rethinking author/reader rapport, as part of theoretical conceptualization in works like *Carnival*, will have to take into account the way the author or the artist conceives of his or her audience in the composition of a participatory work. Next to paper and ink, the reader turns into material at the author's disposal. She is not author, but authored.

Occlusions—Illusions

The larger problem in his theorization of readerly freedom in turn helps explain the unaddressed tension between readerly freedom and authorial constraint in *Carnival*, a tension to which I turn my attention in the rest of this chapter.

Picking up from the discussion of Twombly's occlusive illegibility in chapter 1, I want to begin scanning *Carnival* in its mark-making, particularly McCaffery's use of overprints to introduce occlusive illegibility. Before proceeding further, one should note that *Carnival* retains legible words and letters in many parts. While at places we see potentially textual marks strewn non-linearly throughout, their legibility as letters is not in doubt. At times, though, the clear textual legibility could also function pictorially. The letter-cluster on page 3 exemplifies this possible interaction (Figure III.3).

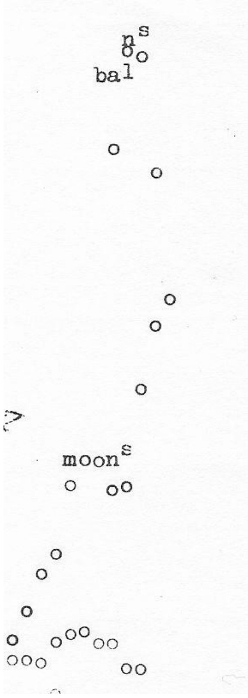


Figure III.3. Steve McCaffery, *Carnival: The Second Panel*, detail of [page 3].

Read left to right, the cluster constitutes 'baloons', approaching 'balloons.' But read top to bottom, and with multilinear reading, the cluster reads 'snoobal', approximating 'snowball'. Both possible word formations invite a pictorial interpretation of the circular 'o'. This pictoriality of 'o' is further evoked in the possible word 'moons', which rhymes with 'baloons, a few inches below the 'baloons'/'snoobal' cluster.

But rather than showing the pictorial potential of letters, the case for adopting an intersemiotic framework of interpretation for *Carnival* will be stronger in engaging its illegible overprints. Paying a much closer attention to the overprints' visuality reveals features of McCaffery's mark-making that will not be obvious in a purely textual interpretation: (1) that there are several kinds of overprints, at least one of which retains textuality and (2) that even where overprints become textually illegible, they still rely on depth illusion in conveying occlusion qua print reproduction. The salience of (2) will become evident when we see that some parts of *Carnival*, the so-called “tissue texts,” challenge this depth illusion while other parts paradoxically retains it. The issue of depth perception as illusion is also relevant since in one of his writings McCaffery problematizes the same aspect in Kitasono Katue’s *Plastic Poems*.

The topic of overprints, we noted earlier, comes up in McCaffery’s essay on the typewriter work of bissett [sic]:

> Overprint achieves a state of being without being-in, a living without life, motion without definition, writing without the written. In the **text on text** that avoids identity and pulverizes all relations into totality, that cannot be read but seen, Bissett is beyond all specific poetics. Lack of aim…lack of definition, lack of meaning…simply the need to expel…waste produce…energy…excess…an economy of total and irreducible non-conservation.[14]

Overprints, in short, signal excess and uncontained flow that threatens textual legibility and destroys linguistic semantics. The focus is to see

> the letter not as phoneme but as ink, and to further insist on that materiality, inevitably contest the status of language as a bearer of uncontaminated meaning(s). Ink, as the amorphous liquid that the word and letter shape into visible meaning, is shown to be of the order of a powerful, anti-semantic force, perhaps the “instinctual” linguistic “unconscious” repressed within writing.[15]

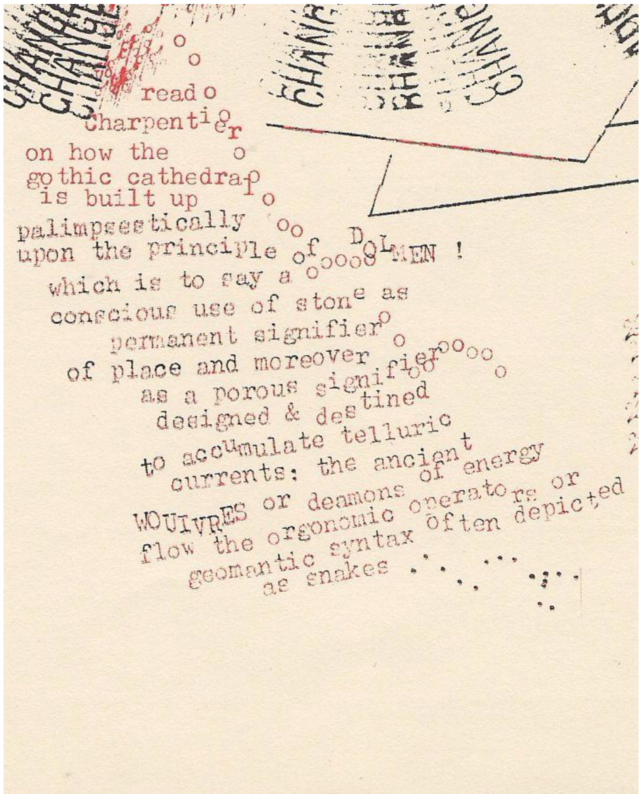
Set next to the letter, overprints present the greatest menace to textual legibility.

Bissett’s overprints in his poem (see figure III. 2) are more determinately illegible textually. But not all the overprints in Panel Two behave in the same way as bissett’s. This particular Panel shows a widely diverging range of overprints with differing implications in relation to textual legibility. At some places the overprints obliterate textual legibility, at others reinforcing it. This way, lettristic legibility could be co-extensive with overprints. To move beyond McCaffery’s complete equation of overprint with textual obliteration, some provisional distinctions for *Carnival*’s overprints are in order: one-place (homotopic) vs. multi-place (heterotopic), one-mark (homographic) vs. multi-mark (heterographic). The homotopic or one-place overprint contains at least two inscriptions (one original plus one repetition) on the same place, therefore not necessarily obscuring the original symbols. The heterotopic or multi-place overprint contains at least two repeated scriptions on different places, potentially obscuring the original characters. The multi-place overprints could further fork into two sub-categories: one-axis or multi-axis orientations. The former relatively retains the same or a similar viewing orientation (e.g., two repetitions of the symbol 'c' retaining left-to-right reading orientation from same view of a given page). The latter contains at least two scriptions with hugely different orientations (e.g., two 'c's that are upside down to each other). (To avoid redundancies, any future mention of one- or multi-axis orientation implies a multi-place overprint. The one-axis orientation of the one-place/one-mark overprints will be implied rather than stated.) The homographic or one-mark overprint contains at least two repeated inscriptions of the same symbol, while the heterographic or multi-mark overprint contains at least two repeated inscriptions of different symbols. The categories above are admittedly relative and pragmatic. Homotopy, for instance, is not always fixed since precise inscriptional repetition on the same place is possible with a typewriter but not always perfectly executed in Panel Two. Nonetheless, these categories apply plausibly enough to allow us to recognize the different, if not at moments inter-opposing, implications of the various overprints.

The two kinds of overprints I particularly want to talk about are the multi-place/multi-mark overprints and the one-place/one-mark ones. If multi-place/multi-mark overprints could lead to textual illegibility, the one-place/one-mark ones actually could retain textual legibility. A typically deconstructive response might complicate the binary between one-place/one-mark and multi-place/multi-mark overprints. I do not deny the possibility, but my immediate goal is to initiate thinking about *kinds* of overprints in *Carnival*. This already moves us away from the simple equation of overprint with textual obliteration.

Nowhere is overprint's potential to reinforce legibility better illustrated than in the dual-colored textual marks on page 4 in Panel Two (Figure III.4). In themselves, the two different colors give us a visually legible evidence of superimposition and overprinting itself. This kind of overprints could in turn even correspond to the linguistic meaning of the textual marks. Reading textually, one could get the following phrases:

> read
> charpentier
> on how the
> gothic cathedral
> is built up
> palimpsestically
> upon the principle of DOLMEN !
> which is to say a
> conscious use of stone as
> permanent signifier
> of place and moreover
> as a porous signifier
> designed & destined
> to accumulate telluric
> currents: the ancient
> WOUIVRES or deamons of energy
> flow the ergonomic operators or
> geomantic syntax often depicted
>   as snakes



read o
Charpentier
on how the o
gothic cathedral o
is built up o
palimpsestically oo
upon the principle of ooooo DOLMEN !
which is to say a o
conscious use of stone as
permanent signifier o
of place and moreover oooo o
as a porous signifier
designed & destined
to accumulate telluric
currents: the ancient
WOUIVRES or deamons of energy
flow the orgonomic operators or
geomantic syntax often depicted
as snakes

Figure III.4. McCaffery, *Carnival: The Second Panel*, detail of [page 4].

In the possible passage McCaffery is referring particularly to a book titled *Les Mystères de la cathédrale de Chartres* (1966) by Louis Charpentier, which provides one religious frame with which to understand McCaffery's conception of the dynamics in *Carnival*'s inscriptions.[16] This is evident in the citation of the link Charpentier builds between the cathedral and older gaelic beliefs in the energy flow and spiritual mystery of the land on which the cathedral was built (DOLMEN, the geomantic energy depicted as the snake *wouivre*). In light of McCaffery's mystical Gaelic serpent, the smattering of black (penned?) dots following the word "snakes" can swerve from being a punctuation symbol (period) to a flowing play of eluding linearity much like the inscription of "WOUIVRES."

The swerve of possible interpretation of the dots in figure III.4 between silent textuality (punctuation mark) to silent visuality (a series of telluric dots?) marks the ambivalence (if not outright contradiction) I highlighted above in McCaffery's attitude toward articulate textuality. In the context of this particular part of *Carnival*, he uses Gaelic mysticism as a theory to allegorize a liberated practice of writing and reading. Recall that McCaffery's is an output that ambivalently strives for poetic freedom within a jargon-filled and erudite theoretical frame. Essentially, liberated reading and writing necessitates an even more rigid and specialized language. This is a tension that haunts the entirety of *Carnival* as an avant-garde project. That contradiction, however, can also provide the most illuminating key to understand the intricacy of his inscriptional decisions in the work. Our ability to view the non-linear dots in III.4 as having an interpretive significance, for instance, obtains only within the intertextual framework of Charpentier's book, whose citation is openly acknowledged in *Carnival*. Going further, such ambivalent tension between poetic freedom/ theoretical articulation presents itself again in the way the overprints occur on the part highlighted in figure III.4.

The red/black overprints strategically occurred in the text discussing *wouivre* starting from the adverb "palimpsestically", an adverb peculiarly apropos of our current theme. The one-place/one-mark overprint, then, could be said to occur somewhat like the adverb, where a new inscription is laid atop a previous one. But instead of erasing the original inscription, the one-place/one-mark overprint keeps, if not adds to, the textual legibility. The reinforcement especially obtains when the first typed inscription does not fill up the entire graphic space of a given letter, which happens often with typed texts. Such a move is common enough in everyday typewriting, where we would hit the 'backspace' button to retype the same letter so as to compensate for a weakly impressed first typing. As this letter-cluster on page 3 makes clear, the interacting swerve between pictoriality and textuality already presents itself at the level of the letter, which still counts as a grapheme. [17]

That one-place/one mark overprints reinforce textual legibility does not mean that its reading and interpretation is an entirely transparent enterprise. The one-place/one-mark overprint in this passage, for one, retains textual legibility while also giving off a blurred effect. The effect results from the relatively faint original red markings beginning from "palimpsestically." The thinner amount of ink applied here is even more palpable in comparison to the non-overprint typed red marks above the adverb ("read/charpentier/on how the/ gothic cathedral/ is built up"). The blurred effect also happens due to the slight imprecision and equally thin ink in the black stamping of 'p' and 'a' on the red "**pa**limpsestically." It is for this reason I noted that the one-place overprint does not *always* obtain in a precise, fixed manner. Even the reinforced textual legibility through the one-place/one-mark overprint does not necessarily furnish a text as clear as a regularly typed text (i.e., even pressure and sufficient ink). This type of overprint points slightly towards illegibility, though crucially still not to the extent reachable through multi-place/multi-mark overprints.

The distinction between the non-overprint red marks ("read/charpentier…") and the red/black overprints ("palimpsestically…") arguably is where the tension between poetic freedom and articulate theorization re-emerges. For the citation of Charpentier appears as non-overprinted red marks and in a more linearly horizontal layout. The one-place/one-mark black-on-red overprints beginning from "palimpsestically," however, performatively enact the concept of the telluric current in a twofold but opposing manner.

The words after "palimpsestically" a one-mark/one-place overprint that reinforces legibility while at the same time blurrily pointing ever slightly towards occlusive illegibility, a phenomenon which would fulfill McCaffery's aim of disrupting traditional writing and reading. Like the possible interpretation of the series of dots after the word "snakes," one way for the one-place/one-mark overprints to gain interpretive relevance is through the "content" of the phrases in III.4, namely the theoretical musing on Gaelic mysticism. The light hint of illegibility in the blurriness of the one-place/one-mark overprint not only anticipates the more extreme illegibility in other kinds of overprints. Ultimately, it provides the ambivalent bridge between a liberatory textual practice and the hyper-literate theoretical language needed to frame project conceptually.

In the multi-axis/multi-mark overprints reside a stronger underlying tone of anti-representation, as the result of the swerve between textuality and abstract visuality. Earlier the circular geometric form of the 'o' becomes visually, or even pictorially, significant by virtue of the aurally derivable words "balloons" and "snowball." Both lettristic and pictorial possibilities in interpreting the mark 'o' remain unperturbed. The multi-place/multi-mark overprint, on the other hand, raises a more difficult issue of interpretation with regards to the textuality/visuality swerve. Besides destroying the discrete unity of an individual letter, at their most extreme inkbleed overprints evoke an abstract visuality that allegedly escapes representation. It is at this point, though, that the interpretation could shift from a purely textual one to one pertaining more to depth illusion, bringing us closer to pictures and vision studies. The shift is salient not for the mere sake of finding a new interpretive paradigm, but for foregrounding one aspect of picture-making widely problematized in twentieth-century Anglo-European painting. For this reason would be relevant a brief discussion what

McCaffery calls "tissue texts" in *Carnival*'s Panel Two along with his critique of depth as a three-dimensional illusion in the *Plastic Poems* of the concretist Kitasono Katue, whom I mentioned briefly in the Introduction.

The easiest place to begin understanding "tissue texts" is in McCaffery's own writing. In 2002, McCaffery explains the processes involved in creating tissue texts: "During 1969 I created a series of 'tissue texts' by typing and/or rubber-stamping directly onto tissue paper, from which were generated a number of photostatic and xerographic 'variants' that freeze the piece in various crumpled states. Most of the original tissue text matrices were subsequently and deliberately destroyed. However, a few survive (McCaffery, *Seven Pages Missing, Vol. 2*, 364)." The notion of originality is challenged by the use of "metaxerography" instead of straightforward xerography. Rather than using the original typed tissue text as the object to be reproduced, McCaffery deliberately used a xerographic result to compose the next xerographic marks. As the poet tells us, the original tissue texts themselves are destroyed. The ephemeral nature of the original is further indicated by the fragility of tissue paper. Peculiarly, the crumpling destruction, and disposal of the tissue text actually reflects the regular use of tissue paper, as something to be quickly disposed of after use. The ephemerality of the tissue text, then, stands in contrast to the preservative nature of writing paper as a means of recording.

Besides Panel Two, tissue texts also appear in a few small-scale works composed roughly around the same time as *Carnival*. While there may be many unpublished tissue texts, McCaffery includes two such pages in the 2002 anthology of his collected works (Figures III.5 & III.6). (His explanation of his tissue text method I quoted above in fact came from this anthology as a note to "Tissue Text: OXO.")

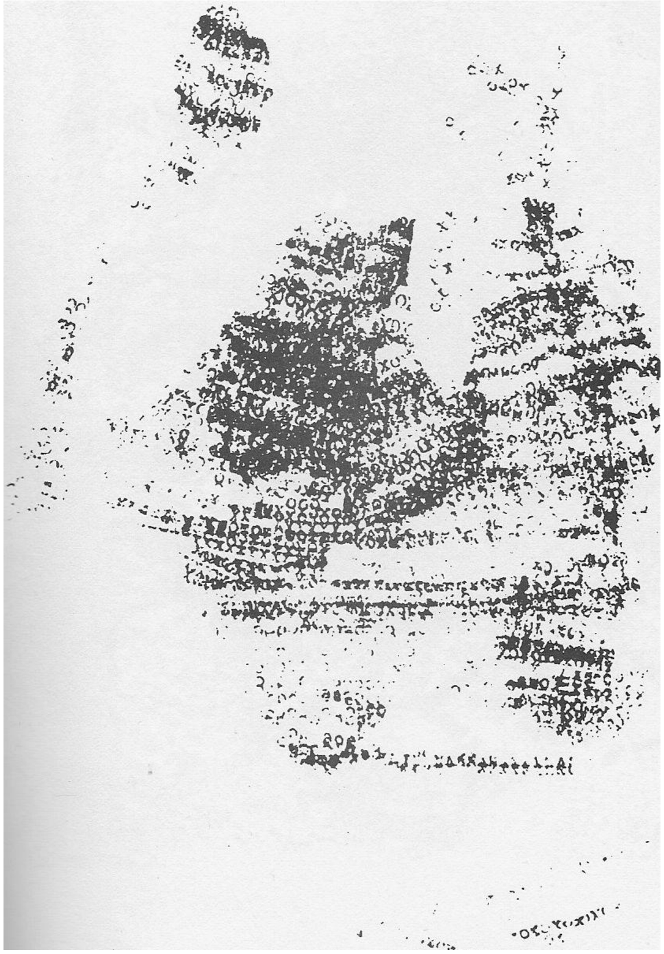


Figure III.5. McCaffery, “Tissue Text: ‘OXO’,” in McCaffery, *Seven Pages Missing, Vol. 2*, p.29.

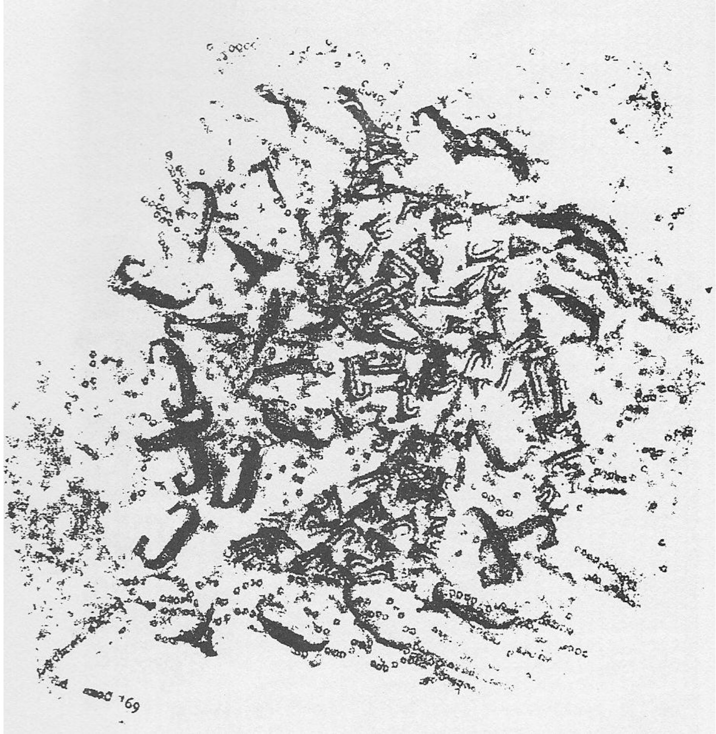


Figure III.6. McCaffery, “Tissue Text: Random ‘C’ Field,” from McCaffery, *Seven Pages Missing*, Vol. 2, p.30.

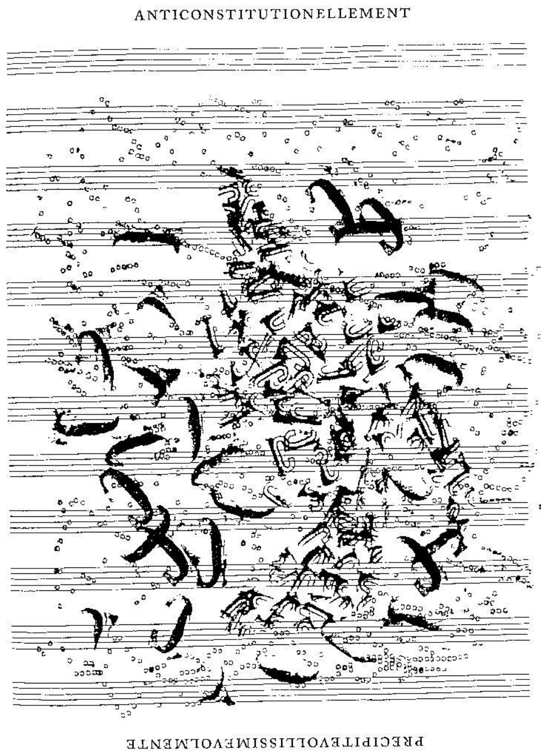

ANTICONSTITUTIONELLEMENT
PRECIPITEVOLISSIMEVOLMENTE

Figure III.7. McCaffery, "Concerto for Two Adverbs," in McCaffery *Seven Pages Missing, Vol. 2*, p.90.

The constellation of 'c's in "Tissue Text: 'C' field" re-appears in variant form in another work (Figure III.7) and three pages of Panel Two (Figures III.8, III.9, & III.10).

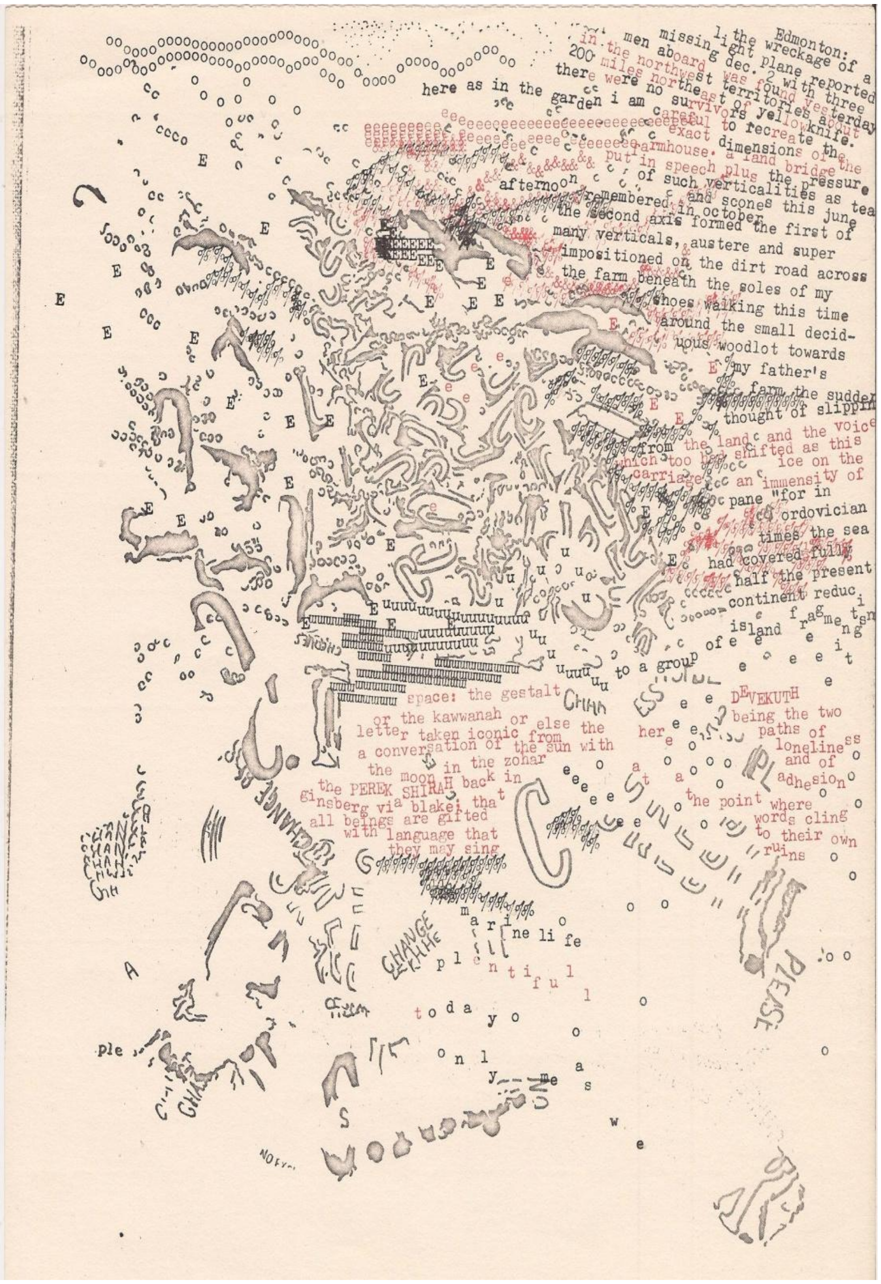

Edmonton:
the wreckage of a
light plane reported
missing dec. 2 with three
men aboard was found yesterday
in the northwest territories about
200 miles northeast of yellowknife.
there were no survivors
here as in the garden i am careful to recreate the
exact dimensions of the
farmhouse. a land bridge
put in speech plus the pressure
afternoon of such verticalities as tea
remembered in october and scones this june
the second axis formed the first of
many verticals, austere and super
impositioned on the dirt road across
the farm beneath the soles of my
shoes walking this time
around the small decid-
uous woodlot towards
my father's
farm the sudden
thought of slippin
from the land and the voice
which too had shifted as this
carriage an immensity of ice on the
pane "for in
ordovician
times the sea
had covered fully
half the present
continent reduc
island fragments
to a group of
space: the gestalt
or the kawwanah or else the
letter taken iconic from
a conversation of the sun with
the moon in the zohar
the PEREK SHIRAH back in
ginsberg via blake: that
all beings are gifted
with language that
they may sing
DEVEKUTH
being the two
paths of
loneliness
and of
adhesion
here
the point where
words cling
to their own
ruins
CHANGE
marine life
plentiful
today
only
me
as
we
PLEASE
ple

Figure III.8. McCaffery, *Carnival: The Second Panel*, n.p. [page 14].

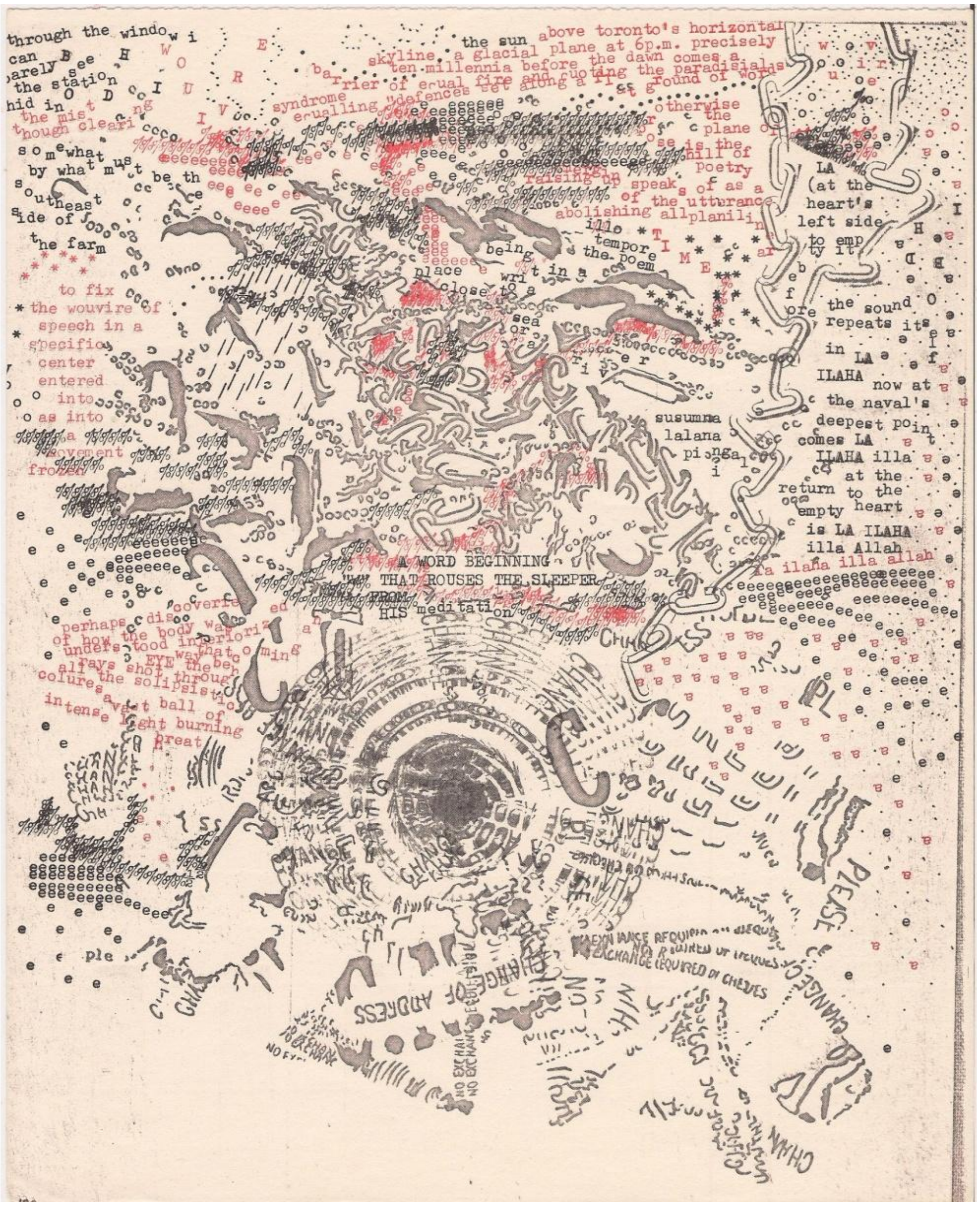

through the windo
can barely see
the station
hid in
the mist
though clearing
somewhat
by what must be th
southeast
side of
the farm
the sun above toronto's horizontal
skyline, a glacial plane at 6p.m. precisely
ten millennia before the dawn comes a
syndrome
otherwise
the plane of
is the
hill of
poetry
abolishing all
illo tempore
the poem
being
place
close to a
sea
to fix
the wouvire of
speech in a
specific
center
entered
into
as into
a
movement
frozen
LA
(at the
heart's
left side
to empty it
the sound
repeats its
in LA
ILAHA
now at
the naval's
deepest point
comes LA
ILAHA illa
at the
return to the
empty heart
is LA ILAHA
illa Allah
la ilaha illa allah
susumna
lalana
pingala
A WORD BEGINNING
THAT ROUSES THE SLEEPER
FROM
HIS meditation
perhaps discovered
of how the body
understood
EYE
all the solipsistic
colures
a vast ball of
intense light burning
great
CHANGE OF ADDRESS
PLEASE
EXCHANGE REQUIRED OF CHEQUES
NO EXCHANGE

Figure III.9. McCaffery, Carnival: The Second Panel, n.p. [page15].

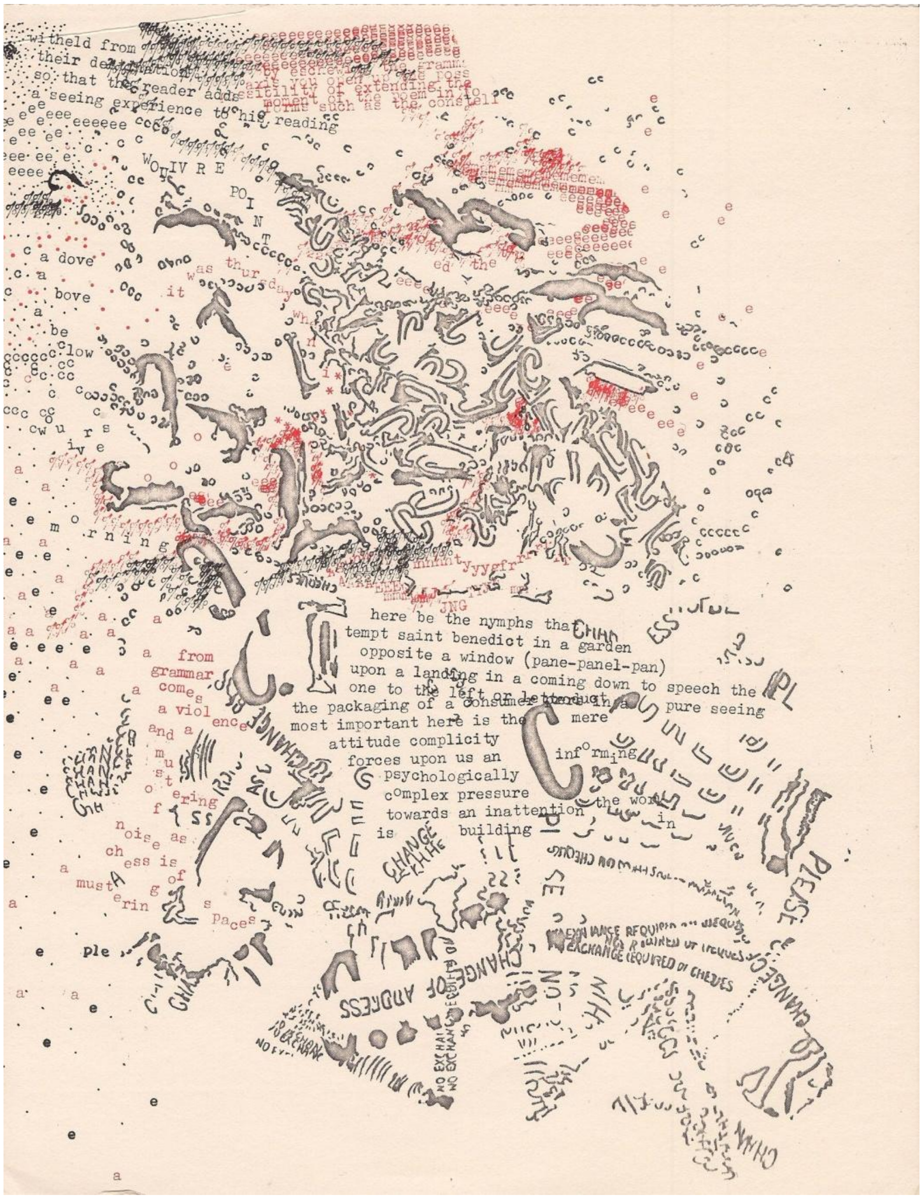

witheld from
their de
so that the reader adds
a seeing experience to his reading
a dove
bove
be
low
m o r n i n g
from
grammar
comes
a viol ence
here be the nymphs that
tempt saint benedict in a garden
opposite a window (pane-panel-pan)
upon a landing in a coming down to speech the
one to the left or letter
the packaging of a consumer product in a pure seeing
most important here is the mere
attitude complicity
forces upon us an informing
psychologically
complex pressure
towards an inattention the word
is building in
CHANGE
CHANGE OF ADDRESS
PLEASE
EXCHANGE REQUIRED OF CHEQUES

Figure III.10. McCaffery, *Carnival: Panel Two*, n.p. [page 16].

The tissue texts in Panel two reveal an especially complex link between paper and ink as competing materialities in the work. The faintness and blurriness of the 'C' marks on the last three pages of Panel Two make it hard to interpret semiotically the crumpling of a tissue text. The disintegration wrought by serial metaxerography renders impossible any attempt to distinguish the crumpling as a way of making flat surface into an uneven, protruding surface.

Rendering three-dimensionality by means of disintegrative xerography back into a two-dimensional flatness of inscription thus provides a pictorially anti-mimetic gesture. Indirectly echoing Greenberg's theory of modernist painting, McCaffery well understands the import of flattening three-dimensionality on the surface. Such a gesture is the means through which he, along with fellow Canadian concretist Nichol, could criticize another Katue's use of photography to depict his plastic poems.

In *The Toronto Reseacrh Group Report*, a journal for the group McCaffery founded with Nichol, both of them write theoretically on the use of crumpled pages in Kitasono Katue's *Plastic Poems*, which we have encountered in the dissertation's introduction. Among his *Plastic Poems*, the Japanese concretist composed a poem consisting of a photographically reproduced crumpled page (See Figure I.4). The TRG report commends Katue's work, along with that of the German concretist Ferdinand Kriwet, for removing the "verbal signifier as a first order system of mediation, replacing it with the photo-page as a direct corridor to the signified."[18] But the report also criticizes him for using the photo as a means of documentation: "the photo-documentation indicates a return to more traditional book practice involving[…] a mode of two-dimensional preservation[…]deeply embedded in that basic creed of journalism: 'exact reportage' (McCaffery and Nichol, *Rational Geomancy*, 71)." The phrase "two-dimensional preservation" contains essentially two related but distinct critiques of representation in Katue, one of a documentary preservation of one-to-one mimetism in photography, another of representing three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional plane.[19] I keep the two aspects apart here since McCaferry's own tissue text marks in *Carnival* avoid one aspect while implicitly repeating the other.

Given the section's investigation of the materiality of Katue's crumpled paper, the most plausible reading of the phrase "direct corridor to the signified" is the conceptually more immediate pointing to the paper as a material object. Crumpled, the paper itself becomes interpretively relevant as a material object. The resulting textual illegibility in Katue from the crumpling gives way to the materiality of the paper itself. But, as photographic reproduction, this materiality of the crumpled sheet becomes a pictorially legible visuality. McCaffery and Nichol further emphasize the physicality of the crumpled paper by critizing Katue for not allowing the recipients of his work to tear the page, something that *Carnival* supposedly allows readers to do, and crumple it on their own. Failing doubly to avoid photo-documentation and to provide a participatory instruction to crumple the page, Katue's work turns out to be "less effective than it might have been and remains allied to traditional, reified "art" (72)." In essence, Katue's crumpled poem remains "a static image of a previously dynamic action (71)."

McCaffery's tissue texts in *Carnival* repeat the same physical gesture of rendering three-dimensionality of a crumpled paper back onto the two-dimensionality of a flat surface. But, through xerography, McCaffery could use reproduction without repeating the naturalistic aspect of Katue's photo-documentation. Xeroxing an already xeroxed sheet gives a mimetically less faithful reproduction compared to photography. Subtly, metaxerography's disintegration of any naturalistic mimetism in photographic reproduction also destroys the representation of three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional flat surface. Katue's plastic poem shows much more unambiguously the resulting lines of the crumpled paper. As for McCaffery's tissue texts, however, any resulting line is difficult, or altogether impossible, to be discerned and used as guide to depth determination. Lines and superimpositions that usually help convey depth are flattened in McCaffery's tissue texts thanks to metaxerography. The Xeroxed trace of crumpled tissue paper in Panel Two thus foregrounds the materiality of the ink over that of the paper.

Yet, despite the flattening of three-dimensionality in the tissue texts, there is a detail on page 14 of Panel Two countering the tissue texts' flattening of three-dimensionality. A scan along the left edge shows a relatively linear cluster of marks that however does not line up with the vertical linearity of the page's edge (Figure III.11).

Figure III.11. McCaffery, *Carnival: The Second Panel*, detail of print mark on [page 14].

The black marks show an accidental non-alignment between McCaffery's manuscript and the offset print process, leaving a trace of the gap between the manuscript page and the printing plate. The three-dimensionality obscured in the metaxeroxed tissue texts unintentionally resurges at the edge. This nonalignment between the manuscript and the plate ironically shows us the page contour, thereby making *Carnival*'s audience aware of the page apart from the book and the panel. The page becomes an unavoidable and complicating element in interpreting *Carnival*.

The marked non-alignment on the edge of page 14 reinstates depth and three-dimensionality to our viewing—visually cuing us to the pictorial illusion of having the manuscript paper occluding the printing plate. This depth illusion consequently opposes the flattening of the tissue texts in the middle of the page. The faintness and thinness of the ink adds to the resonance between the tissue texts and the marks on the leftside edge. The marks along the edge showing the printing plate appear furthermore on two edges—topside and right side—of page 15, which also contains another reproduction of the random 'c' field tissue text (Figures III.12 & III.13).

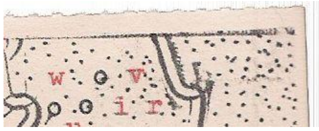


Figure III.12. McCaffery, *Carnival: Second Panel*, detail of [page 15].

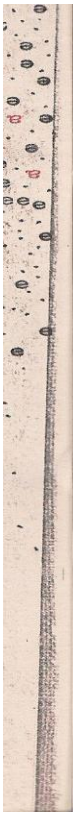


Figure III.13. McCaffery, *Carnival: The Second Panel*, detail of [page 15].

The obliteration of three-dimensionality through the tissue texts' metaxerography becomes overturned by offset printing, another form of reproduction. The re-emergence of depth in the marks along the edges thus leaves *Carnival* open to criticism that is comparable to the one for Katue. Both these marks and the tissue texts involve the application of ink to the page surface. Its use in each case entails different visual foci. The tissue texts foreground the dark inscriptions over the light surface, but the marks on the edges invert that contrast. The result for the latter, then, involves a pictorial effect evoking chiaroscuro, where the light foreground (the paper) rests over the dark-colored background (the offset cylinder).

Printing errors like those found on the edges of Panel Two's pages are admittedly marginal. But it is exactly in those minute traces of the printing component—most likely the offset cylinder—that *Carnival*'s appearance in the medium of offset lithography becomes most highlighted. It is the unintended moment when the reproductive nature of the circulated version is revealed through an error. This way *Carnival*'s construction perhaps approaches what Caroline Bayard describes as the "constructivist" aspect in the 1960s concrete typewriter work of fellow Canadian poet bill bissett:

> Letting the demands of the medium take the initiative is key to the constructivist process. In giving considerable initiative to the signifier one in fact is allowing physical components and chance occurrences (typewriter ink, spots, smudges, lapsus, involuntary errors) to partially take over and determine both the outline and the semantic impact of the text.[20]

Bayard's notion of "constructivism" applies to the errors in *Carnival*'s printing marks in crucially highlighting a degree of *lost* control even in the most willed act on McCaffery's part in designing *Carnival*. Besides revealing the medium of the circulated *Carnival*, the lost control in the printing error also marks the moment where readers can engage in a way of interpreting *Carnival* that McCaffery himself might not have envisioned. My way of discussing these printing errors may not be the only way that readers can encounter *Carnival* in a way that is not prescribed by McCaffery. But it nonetheless demonstrates one possibility of engaging *Carnival* more critically.

In line with the marks along the edges of pages 14 and 15, depth illusion also appears as a central presupposition in *Carnival*'s overprints in itself. Here I want to briefly digress and discuss more recent discourses on occlusion, when an object blocks another object from view partially or completely. According to the visual theorist Robert Schwartz, "to determine that [an object] hides or blocks [another object] from view requires or presupposes a decision that [the first object] comes between [the perceiver] and [the second object]."[21] Occlusion, then, is not a cue to depth rather than a *type* of depth in itself.[22] Transferred to our viewing of overprints, we could say that to scan and interpret certain marks as occluding overprints already presupposes the depth to be inferred. The concept of overprint in itself presupposes depth relations between two marks, one superimposed on the other. Asserting the circularity of this presupposition may not form the profoundest insight. But it is a notion that carries critical purchase in the context of a creative work that not only utilizes depth illusion through its mark-making, but more largely through offset *reproduction*.

The transfer of McCaffery's overprints in the manuscript into offset prints complicates our visual comprehension of these marks dramatically. The occlusion of one mark over unobservable parts of another becomes only inferable, but not determined physically. At least on one point (Figure III.14), the unobservable parts of the occluded object could be inferred only as a pictorial illusion.

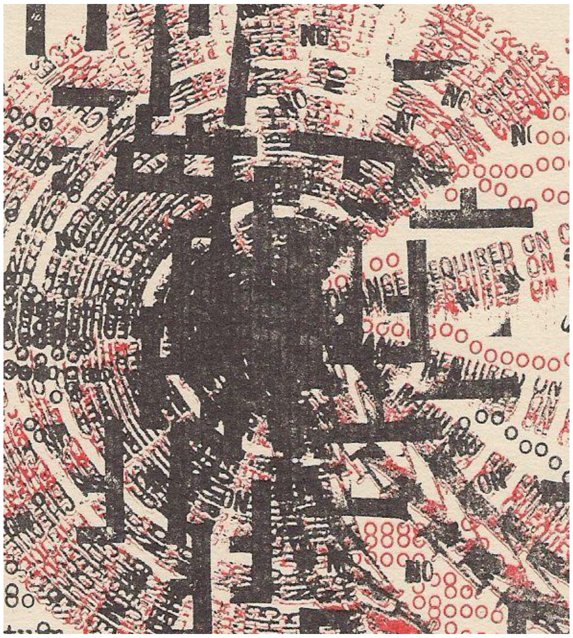
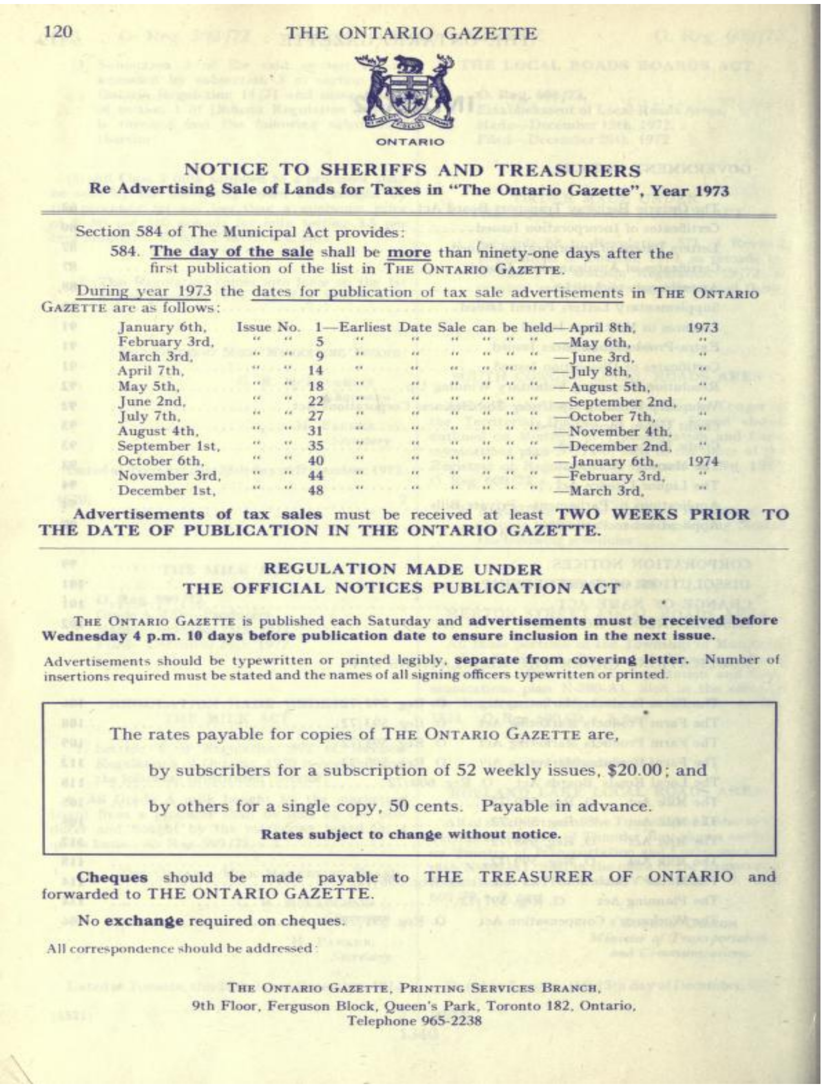


Figure III.14. McCaffery, *Carnival: The Second Panel*, detail of [page 10].

As offset print, the middle mark(s) of the rubber stamp circles actually fade slightly to reveal the off-white grain of the paper, showing us again what could be a printing error. Between the black ink and the white paper, though, we do not see a hint of red ink that presumably forms part of the rubberstamp phrase "**no exchange** required on cheques." In offset print form then, this part of Panel Two only prints the supposedly uppermost visible part of an overprint. But, as a result, the overprint is an assumption achieved through the visual illusion of depth by assuming the black middle blotch as overprinted depth instead of a single flat ink mark in offset print. *Carnival*'s overprints play with and seemingly challenge representations of depth, but do not abolish it.

If we treat the detail of the overprinted phrase "no exchange required on cheques" intersemiotically, its significance cannot be overstated. On one hand, the detail of McCaffery's repeated rubberstamping of the phrase "no exchange required on cheques" is notable for its appropriation and subversion of administrative language. Since McCaffery had been based in Toronto since the late 60s, the most likely source whence the phrase was derived is the subscription notice in the 1973 issues of *The Ontario Gazette*, a weekly publication of the government of Ontario detailing changes and enactments of regulations (Figure III.15). In choosing to make the phrase partially illegible through overprints, Panel Two in a way subverts the financial language as used in the Ontario government's official publication by partly disrupting its legibility and annulling its administrative use. McCaffery's move in this regard somewhat parallels what Benjamin Buchloh sees as the conceptualists' critical appropriation of administrative language in their use of the typewriter.[23]



120 THE ONTARIO GAZETTE

ONTARIO

NOTICE TO SHERIFFS AND TREASURERS

Re Advertising Sale of Lands for Taxes in "The Ontario Gazette", Year 1973

Section 584 of The Municipal Act provides:

584. **The day of the sale** shall be **more** than ninety-one days after the first publication of the list in THE ONTARIO GAZETTE.

During year 1973 the dates for publication of tax sale advertisements in THE ONTARIO GAZETTE are as follows:

January 6th,	Issue No.	1	—Earliest Date Sale can be held	—April 8th,	1973
February 3rd,	" "	5	" " " " " "	—May 6th,	"
March 3rd,	" "	9	" " " " " "	—June 3rd,	"
April 7th,	" "	14	" " " " " "	—July 8th,	"
May 5th,	" "	18	" " " " " "	—August 5th,	"
June 2nd,	" "	22	" " " " " "	—September 2nd,	"
July 7th,	" "	27	" " " " " "	—October 7th,	"
August 4th,	" "	31	" " " " " "	—November 4th,	"
September 1st,	" "	35	" " " " " "	—December 2nd,	"
October 6th,	" "	40	" " " " " "	—January 6th,	1974
November 3rd,	" "	44	" " " " " "	—February 3rd,	"
December 1st,	" "	48	" " " " " "	—March 3rd,	"

Advertisements of tax sales must be received at least **TWO WEEKS PRIOR TO THE DATE OF PUBLICATION IN THE ONTARIO GAZETTE.**

REGULATION MADE UNDER THE OFFICIAL NOTICES PUBLICATION ACT

THE ONTARIO GAZETTE is published each Saturday and **advertisements must be received before Wednesday 4 p.m. 10 days before publication date to ensure inclusion in the next issue.**

Advertisements should be typewritten or printed legibly, **separate from covering letter.** Number of insertions required must be stated and the names of all signing officers typewritten or printed.

The rates payable for copies of THE ONTARIO GAZETTE are,

by subscribers for a subscription of 52 weekly issues, $20.00; and

by others for a single copy, 50 cents. Payable in advance.

Rates subject to change without notice.

Cheques should be made payable to THE TREASURER OF ONTARIO and forwarded to THE ONTARIO GAZETTE.

No **exchange** required on cheques.

All correspondence should be addressed:

THE ONTARIO GAZETTE, PRINTING SERVICES BRANCH,
9th Floor, Ferguson Block, Queen's Park, Toronto 182, Ontario,
Telephone 965-2238

Figure III.15. Government of Ontario, "Regulation Made Under the Official Notices Publication Act," *The Ontario Gazette* (January 13th , 1973), p.120.

On the other hand, this move to disrupt textuality simultaneously equally depends on readers of *Carnival* accepting the pre-supposition of depth in encountering the illegibility of the overprints. McCaffery's liberatory aims for *Carnival* thus have to be qualified due to the nature of its mark-making circulating among the larger pubic in the form of print reproduction. The disjunctive quality he sought in Panel Two's juxtapositions of other means of scription besides the typewriter (i.e. rubberstamps, xerography) remains to a certain extent illusory:

> *Carnival* was essentially a cartographic project; a repudiation of linearity in writing and the search for mapping…As a mask bled off a page I would devise another shape that picked up the bleed of the text at the margin[…] the mask came about as a way to create a painterly shape by censoring the flow of typewritten line. It was a method of arriving at a **collage effect without resort to the actual adhesion of different fragments to a support surface**[.].[24]

McCaffery's characterization of the divide between the painterly shape and the typewritten line as a "collage *effect*" reveals quite a lot. A certain discrepancy intervenes between what occurs on the surface as *effect* and the material ("support surface"). As effect, the collage-like disjunction between the typewritten line and the painterly shape retains a certain mimetic illusion. Through a textual lens, much of *Carnival* is non-mimetic. There what could be read as letters do not always function phonetically (thus denoting a sound). But the "collage effect" would be mimetically illusive in the sense that a fragmentation is achieved without "the **actual** adhesion of different fragments." Problematizing depth illusion through photo reproduction in Katue, McCaffery would have to accept a comparable critique against *Carnival* as offset reproductions. Thus in the end his work could not escape also being what Mccaffery and Nichol have called, apropos of Katue's photographed crumpled page, a "static image of a previously dynamic action."

Careful Construct

If the use of offset printing subjects *Carnival* to the same critique McCaffery and Nichol launched against Katue, this distance between poem and audience is one supposedly remediable through McCaffery's use of perforation, a feature in *Carnival* that brings our focus now away from its marks and toward its construction. The perforated pages allegedly allow for more readerly freedom and active, *physical* participation in transforming *Carnival* into a panel. But, as I remarked briefly at the beginning of the chapter, perforated pages also impose constraints on readers. This section expands on this ambivalent function of the perforation while also highlighting the importance of the page in *Carnival*'s construction. The use of perforation itself subtly marks the page—although through cutting, not ink—as an important component in the work.

To reveal *Carnival*'s orderly construction, it is necessary to complicate the book/panel binary that McCaffery espouses and reception like McMahon's retains. The binary renders complete the jump from literature to art, from text to word-less visuality. The clean break of the binary in turn harmonizes the reader's role as manual operator with her independence from linguistic constraints in interpreting the inscriptional marks. Against framing *Carnival* as a bi-format, uni-directional work (book→panel), I propose a tri-format, multi-directional scheme (book←page→panel). In lieu of a total shift to a panel, *Carnival* equally suggests fragmentation and incompleteness. This tri-format will turn *Carnival*'s page into a much more problematic construction in its being between book and panel.

The role of the page in *Carnival* tends to be obscured if the work is only framed in a book/panel duality. Yet, following the tri-format I proposed, the jump from book to panel highly depends on the initial "destruction" in *Carnival*, namely its initial fragmentation into discrete pages. The jump from book to panel could under this light be viewed in a more discontinuous light. For the continuity implied in the expansion to a large panel—McMahon's "painterly medium"—finds its opposing tendency in *Carnival*'s fragmentation into single pages. Marjorie Perloff's dubbing of *Carnival*'s first panel as a "page experiment" instead of a "book experiment" is in this regard inadvertently insightful.[25] It is the page, as the revelatory trace of the orderly book that conceals the authorial control on the audience. The conceptual shift I offer emphatically deviates from McCaffery's own understanding of the page in *Carnival*: "*Carnival* repudiates the single page as its format and its unit of sequence, replacing 16 sequential pages by a 4x4 panel (thereby expanding the surface and redistributing sequence to an experience upon a single surface)[.]"[26] At the material level of the paper a discontinuity is introduced by the page's singularity. The discontinuous grid assembly of the panel could suggest an orderly discontinuity that actually affects the "painterly flow" of the non-verbal letters. The paginal edges become the material interrupting the flow across the pages. McCaffery's etymological discussion of the word 'panel' itself in Panel Two's introduction hints at the discontinuous nature of the page in relation to the larger panel: "**PANEL** among its several meanings there [these?] are pertinent: L. **pannus** a cloth or rag, that is a fragmentary surface to assign some purposes to [his emphases]." The etymological description of 'panel' opens up the possibility of perceiving even the larger notion of the panel, as a whole, already as a fragmentary surface. On one hand, *Carnival*'s large panel assumes a sense of unity that would sublate the jagged fragmentariness of each sheet. On the other hand, even the unity of a panel McCaffery evokes contains a trace of the fragmentary.

Carnival further foregrounds the discontinuous singularity of its pages in both the page layout and binding format. Besides having each page appear on single-side sheets, its design also does not bind the sheets in the dual-page codex form. So the book form of *Carnival*'s two panels already generates a singular view of each page. Comparing a prior version of *Carnival* to the published version highlights the latter's discontinuity even more. Besides posting online versions of *Carnival*, the current Coach House website also published the "ur-text" and "outtakes" of the work. Unlike the published panels, *Carnival*'s ur-text was composed on a tele-scroll.[27] A continuous paper roll would allow for a sustained act of typing that avoids the pauses introduced in the standard practice of changing individual sheets. The continuous paper of the scroll opposes the discontinuity introduced by the page in the published version. Coincidentally, McCaffery exploits role continuity in another work titled *Pluralities* [dates]. Documentation photos of this work show him rolling a long typed scroll paper down the stairs, out of a hotel and into Lake Muskoka in the Ontario province (Figures III.16 & III.17).

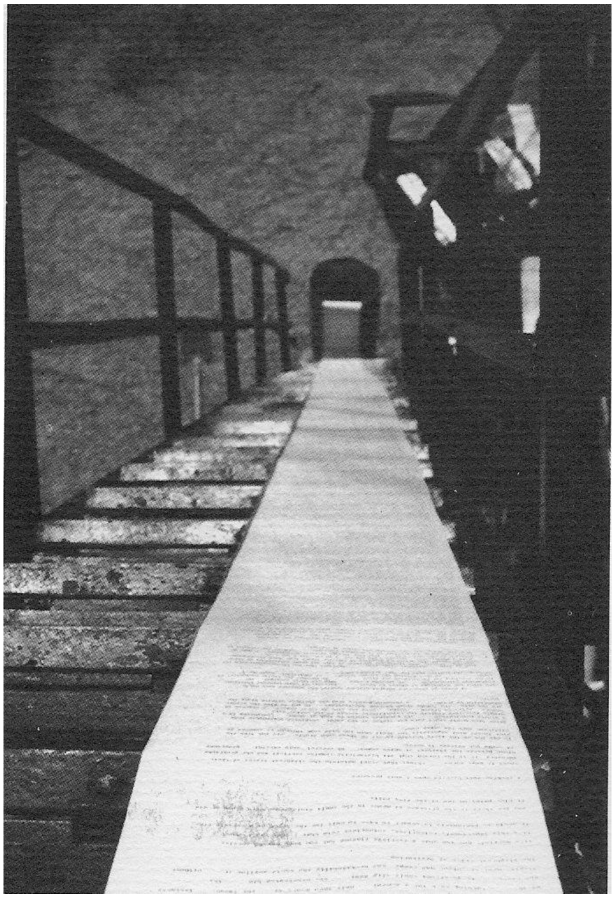


Figure III.16. Steven R. Smith, "Documentation of Steve McCaffery's *Pluralities*," in *Open Letter*, Sixth Series, No. 9 (Fall 1987), 93 [Originally n.p.].

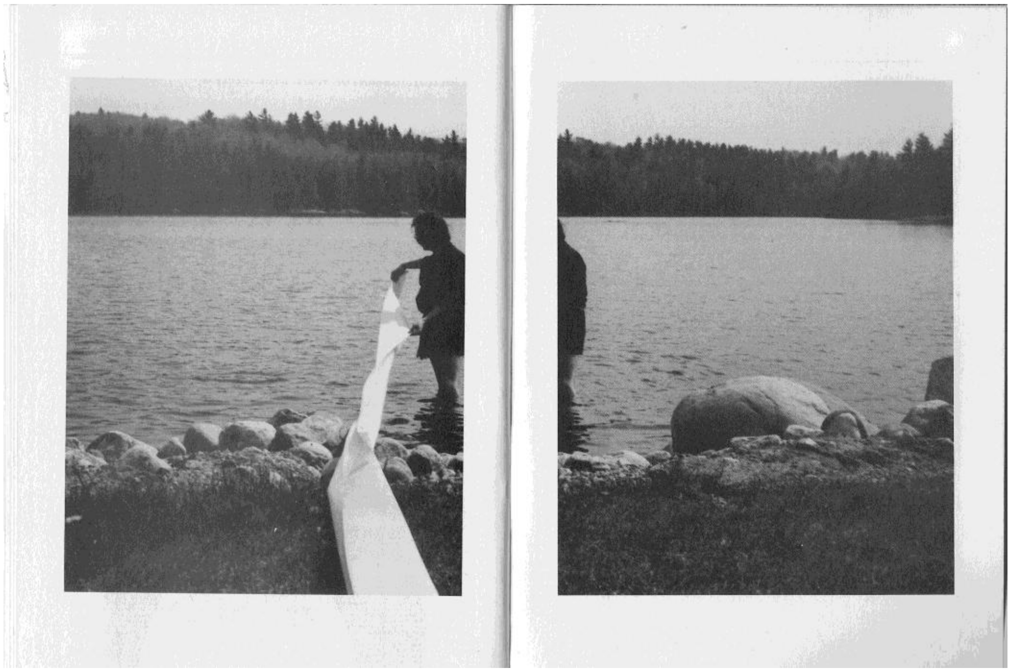


Figure III.17. Steven R. Smith, "Documentation of Steve McCaffery's *Pluralities*," in *Open Letter*, Sixth Series, No. 9 (Fall 1987), 94-95 [Originally n.p.].

The scroll's unrolling goes together with the poet's location shift. Both object and poet roam outside the confines of the typewriter platen or the gallery wall.[28] Set against *Pluralities* and the ur-text scroll, *Carnival*'s discontinuous construction becomes gradually harder to ignore. This uniform discontinuity and discreteness in turn ensure the larger orderliness of *Carnival*'s construction. After looking at the single-page layout, one could now return to *Carnival*'s perforated pages with an even greater awareness of the page's key function in the work. The *linear* perforation, most likely machined with an electro-pounce, allows the reader to "tear off" the page and supposedly destroy *Carnival*'s book form so as to transform the sheets into a large panel. But the anti-book gesture sounds rather tame if we recall the instruction in Panel Two's postcard ("tear the pages carefully").

McCaffery's implied emphasis of the adverb "carefully" in his instruction becomes even clearer in comparing the act demanded by the imperative to the one found in his 1982 film *Paradise Improved*. The film has McCaffery starring as a protagonist ripping apart a copy of Milton's *Paradise Lost* with wild abandon. Afterward he recomposes the torn pages into a new work.[29] In relation to *Carnival, Paradise Lost* serves McCaffery as a rejected model of writing. Panel Two's introduction inadvertently hints at this rejection by quoting Pound:

> To 'see again'
> the verb is 'see,' not 'walk on'
>
> a profound phrase which I take to be Pound's ultimate stand in support of static, synchronic vista (Dante) as opposed to the dynamic line of processual flow (n.p).

The implied intertext in McCaffery's assessment of Pound's lines is a passage from the latter's essay on Vorticism: "Dante is a great poet by reason of this faculty [of presenting the "Image"], and Milton is a wind-bag because of his lack of it."[30] Further down in his essay, Pound specifically names Dante's *Paradiso* as "the most wonderful image." Reflecting Pound's judgment, McCaffery writes that "Dante climbed, in the **Paradiso**, out of narrative into a non-narrative summation of the story line—as if art struggles to distance that which threatens it in closest proximity: language itself (McCaffery, "Introduction to Panel Two," n.p.)."[31] Also like Pound, McCaffery views Milton's poem as exemplifying the "dynamic line of processual flow." A good reason for this conjecture is the use of *Paradise Lost* in the *Toronto Research Group Report* on narrative: "[In] both prose and the visually continuous poem (Milton's *Paradise Lost* for instance) the page has no optical significance. Being to a large extent a working out of information through duration, prose structures tend to be temporal rather than visual (McCaffery and Nichol, *Rational Geomancy*, 61)."

In the present context, challenging McCaffery's characterization of either Dante or Milton misses the relevant point. What matters is his retention of Pound's judgment—Dante the Imagist, Milton the "wind-bag"—to propose a non-narrative simultaneous seeing. In the same report deriding Milton we thus find the following formulation:

> In Steve McCaffery's *Carnival* the carriage capacity limitations are actively confronted. By rejecting its dimensional restrictions of size and by forcing it to operate modularly as a smaller unit in a much larger surface, both the page (and its traditional function *in* the book) are destroyed. *Carnival* is an anti book: perforated pages must be physically released, torn from sequence and viewed simultaneously in the larger composite whole (McCaffery and Nichol, 65).

But in comparison to the tearing in *Paradise Improved*, the tearing demanded for *Carnival* feels incredibly controlled and orderly. It is doubtful that the protagonist in *Paradise Improved* is Milton's implied reader. In this way the film's poet-protagonist asserts a readerly freedom that not only goes beyond the one implied in *Carnival*. McCaffery, both as the protagonist and as the filmmaker, literally and institutionally becomes the author. Hence *Paradise Improved*. Rafael Barreto-Rivera even compares *Paradise Improved* to *Radi Os*, Ronald Johnson's 1977 erasure poetry based on *Paradise Lost*.[32] But the same autonomy does not hold for *Carnival*'s implied reader. Were the reader to have the similar autonomy, she should be able to conceptualize *Carnival*'s panel assembly in less than the full rectangular form. Only then could the emancipated reader not become identical with *Carnival*'s implied reader addressed by the postcard instruction ("tear the pages carefully…").

The straight, evenly mechanical aspect of the perforation maintains a linearity regimenting the implied reader's book destruction. Precluded is a disorderly tearing. *Carnival*'s demanded destruction of the book does not therefore obtain in the robust sense as seen in *Paradise Improved*. In the film, the act of destroying narrativity includes literally destroying that narrativity's material support. In contrast, *Carnival* exhibits a more complex process since the challenge to linear narrativity at the level of mark-making does not necessarily go together with its highly controlled construction. The orderly straightness of a line that McCaffery challenges at the level of mark-making reappears in an inverted manner–from the addition of ink to the cutting of paper–as a perforated edge on *Carnival*'s pages.[33]

Staple Support

There is also another unaddressed consequence of the use of perforation in *Carnival*. After detaching the pages, the reader is left with remains of paper strips (Figure III.18).

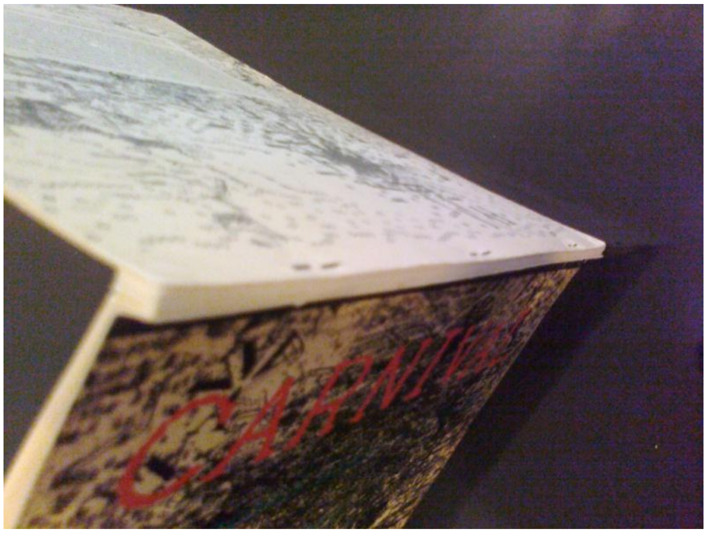


Figure III.18. Steve McCaffery, *Carnival: Panel Two*. Detail of strip remains. Photo by Mikey Rinaldo.

The strip remains were part of the same sheets making up *Carnival*'s sections. While not part of the large panel, the paper strips provide the space for *Carnival*'s tri-stapled binding, thereby leaving a trace of the book in its place. This neat separation between the panel and the book stands in stark contrast to McCaffery's wild mark-making on the pages. The fonts on the pages break down, bleed, assume painterly shapes. But the sheets themselves connote an order supposedly demarcating the book and the panel formats. Against the other sides of a rectangular page, the perforated side introduces a stronger discontinuity to the assembled panel by indicating the book format's top orientation. So what enables readers/viewers to separate book and panel neatly paradoxically reveals the traces of the book's binding and orientation.

Nichol's 1987 bibliography of McCaffery's publications sheds more light on the deeper implications of *Carnival*'s perforated pages. The bibliography is also invaluable since it contains footnoted annotations by McCaffery himself for several of the entries. Aware of the import of a book's material construction, Nichol carefully lists the construction details for each work. The use of perforation is noted for both panels of *Carnival*:

> *Carnival, the first panel: 1967-70*
> 18 sheets, offset, **perforated**
> Coach House Press. Toronto. 1973.
>
> *Carnival, the second panel: 1971-75*
> 22 sheets, offset, **perforated**
> Coach House Press. Toronto. 1977.
> (Nichol, "Published Works of McCaffery," 72-73.)

As we can see, the entry for *Carnival*'s first two panels includes details such as the perforated pages. Yet why does it neglect the tri-staple binding of the book form? The bibliography lists the use of staple binding in other works from the same period:

> *Collborations: collbrations*
> (with bpNichol)
> 14 pp, offset, **stapled**.
> grOnk series 6 no.5. Ganglia Press. Toronto. 1971.
>
> *Maps: a different landscape*
> 6pp, offset, self-covers, **stapled**.
> grOnk series 6 No.8. Ganglia Press. Toronto, 1971.
>
> *from Carnival: Panel Three*
> 23 sheets, computer printout, **stapled** in card covers.
> Coach House Press Manuscript Editions. Toronto. 1976[sic]
> (Nichol, "Published Works of McCaffery, 83-87.)

A few entries even carefully detail the *kinds* of staple binding employed:

Shifters
16pp, offset, **saddle-stapled**.
grOnk Intermediate Series No.6. Ganglia Press. Toronto. 1976.

from The Abstract Ruin
8 sheets, offset, **corner stapled**
published as Y.E.R No.I (Ganglia Press, Toronto, 1976)

Two Sections from Legend
(With Bruce Andrews, Chares[sic] Bernstein, Ray DiPalma & Ron Silliman)
24pp, offset, self-covers, **saddle-stapled**.
published as EPOD NO.2, Baltimore, 1978.
(Nichol, "Published Works of McCaffery," 87-88.)

All the examples of staple binding cited just now refer to works produced around the same time McCaffery worked on *Carnival*. Read against the other entries, the unmentioned tri-staple binding of *Carnival*'s first two panels strikes an odd tone (Figure III.19).

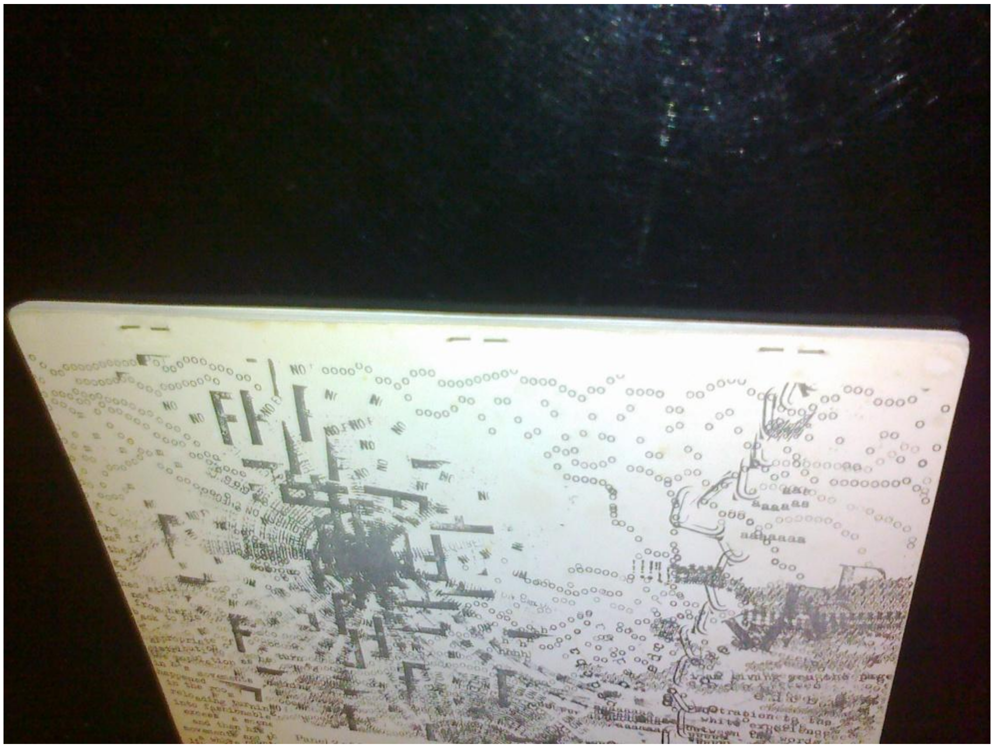


Figure III.19. Steve McCaffery, *Panel Two*. Detail of the tri-staple binding from the back-cover view. Photo by Mikey Rinaldo.

The omission might indicate the more ephemeral nature of its binding. That is, instead of having something more permanent like stitched or saddle-staple binding for codex books, *Carnival* only utilizes a more provisional stapling for the loose pages. This way the loose individual sheets foreground the work's discontinuous singularity much like the use of perforation. Given how carefully detailed is Nichol's bibliography, however, one also notes that the entry for the *Abstract Ruin* lists the use of corner stapling. Corner stapling, as opposed to saddle-stapling, equally connotes a set of loose sheets, akin to how student papers utilize a corner staple on the top left. If corner stapling is comparably ephemeral with regards to *Carnival*'s tri-staple binding, then why does the bibliography mention the former and elide the latter? Subtly, the omission of the tri-staple binding could also conceptually signal *Carnival*'s uni-directionality of the book/panel shift. Though not always the case, the reader would notice the tri-staple binding while holding *Carnival* as a book in her hands. In contrast, the bibliography entry entails treating the binding *not* as the material part of the work. But this means the only format considered in *Carnival* would either be as individual pages or as assembled panels, but not as books.

The bibliography's omission of the tri-staple binding may or may not be intentional on either Nichol's or McCaffery's part. But the omission plausibly functions in two gradual steps: first to indicate the binding's ephemerality and then to exclude it altogether from the work's materiality as manifested in the full panel assembly. The entry draws attention away from aspects of *Carnival* that may well bear on assessing the unorthodoxy of its multiple formats. It is as if an urgency inheres in the bibliography to register *Carnival* not merely as a neutral history of its materiality. Instead, one additionally reads a record that inadvertently preserves McCaffery's own conceptualization and understanding of his composition.

The bibliography's omission of *Carnival*'s tri-staple binding raises an issue for the notion of bibliographic destruction not because of the binding in itself. The relevant point of concern is that the binding *survives* even after the panel transformation in resting on a set of thin linear paper strips. The bundled strips notably were part of the same sheets that constitutes *Carnival* in the panel form. The possibility of neatly separating the surviving tri-staple binding from the detached pages rests on the use of perforation. Again, perforation in *Carnival*, the use of which Nichol's bibliography notes, has the unintended effect of regimenting the ways one could "destroy" *Carnival*'s book format. Before the implied reader's manual obliteration there occurred already a controlled ripping through a careful mechanical piercing of the paper surface. And that controlled piercing of the page belongs to McCaffery as mediated by Coach House as printer and book designer. Yet it is exactly on these strips that the binding, the framing that is the revelatory trace of the book, remains.

Instructive also are other parts of *Carnival* besides the binding strips that will be discarded when the panel transformation is complete. It is, for example, within the discarded cover and introductory pages that the critic Andy Weaver finds another detail undermining the work's anti-commodity rhetoric. Since the cover and the introductory pages do not constitute the "*real* text," Weaver argues that those discarded elements contain precisely a contradictory economic trace. The text critiques "consumer capitalism (through its attacks on unified subjectivity, on signification, on linearity, on the reader's desire to master and thus truly *own* the text)" while at the same time advertising the work's availability for purchase on the cover and announcing the availability of the First Panel for $2.50.[34] Another detail from Panel Two's discarded/supplementary pages that adds to Weaver's point is the announcement that "**Color Xeroxes of the five-color** original of the second panel of

Carnival are available from the **author** for $75 by writing to **him** at 52 Claxton Blvd., Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M6C 1L8. **Only 50** of these, **signed** and **numbered**, will be made available." Retained here are quasi-auratic and more limited reproductions of the second panel ("Color Xeroxes of the five-color original") and McCaffery's *signature*, a notationally illegible indication of a unified subject advertising a possible financial exchange. McCaffery's advertisement of limited edition Xeroxes is especially ironic considering the modern history of printmaking in the West. The practice of limited edition prints only went back as far as the late nineteenth century. The manually autographed signature, moreover, was not customary in modern printmaking until the 1870's.[35] The individual numbering of each impression "serves to assert, rather than deemphasize, the uniqueness and originality of a nonunique object (Donson, *Prints and the Printmarket*, 71)." Along with the return of the author in his signature, the idea of originality is oddly asserted in the manual numbering of the colored Xeroxes. It is in the unused parts of *Carnival* that a trace of commodity remains (*qua* advertised book and limited edition multiples). They are the bibliographic waste that viewers are supposed to look away from as they assemble the intended sixteen sheets. The full panel, then, sublimates and represses the book as commodity, the traces of which persist as trash, the residue haunting the transformed commodity of the idealized panel.[36]

A Wider Compass of Circulation

The challenge *Carnival*'s reproductive aspect presents to McCaffery's liberatory, anti-commodity rhetoric also appears at the level of its circulation. Besides its initial dissemination as a perforated-page book, *Carnival* also finds itself traveling as reproductions: as instructional postcards, as online versions on Coach House's website, and as exhibited panels. What these reproductions tell us is that even the panel assembly itself does not guarantee a recipient's freedom once we take into account that the reproductions appear as *fully* assembled panels. Essentially *Carnival*'s other circulation modes function as models for future assembly. These models merit discussion for repeating not merely a single way of putting the pages together, but also for maintaining the page sequence of both panels' book format.

One can begin by looking at the instructional postcard that accompanies the publication of both panels of *Carnival*. Aside from the imperative to tear the pages "carefully along the perforation," the postcard also instructs the owner of *Carnival* to assemble the pages in "squares of four." But envisioning the large panel as a series of four squares does not preclude the retention of the book format's page sequence. Schematized, the assembled panel maintains the book format's page sequence in the following way:

1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16

So, though we have the panel assembly that destroys the book form, the assembly model subtly retains the book format in keeping a certain order of the pages.

In relation to the accompanying instructional postcard to *Carnival*, a commentary on the work by Peter Jaeger is appropriate to mention here. He claims that a reader can arbitrarily construct the order of the pages in the panel assembly: "*Carnival* offers readers a productive role not only because it asks them to physically manipulate the book, but also because the text's instructions do not indicate the precise manner in which the panels are to be re-assembled […] the order of combining the "sixteen square feet of concrete" panels is left up to the reader/operator of the text."[37] Jaeger essentially repeats McCaffery's original optimism on *Carnival*'s potential to turn reader into "operator." Speculatively speaking, McCaffery himself might not object to Jaeger' assertion. In *ABC of Reading TRG*, Jaeger rehashes his argument for the reader's freedom to put together *Carnival*'s pages as she sees fit. Curiously, in the same discussion on *Carnival* Jaeger concedes one crucial constraint. Christian Bök and Darren Werhsler-Henry, more recent Canadian vanguardist poets, pointed out to Jaeger that the instruction postcard's reproduction of the assembled panel cannot be ignored. Incorporating their objection, Jaeger concludes by mediating the opposing tendencies: "*Carnival*'s second panel invites readers to chart their own territory, while simultaneously providing them with a legend to map the tract (Jaeger, *ABC of Reading TRG*, 22)." Jaeger's concession, though, misses the opportunity to flesh out the deeper implications of *Carnival*'s miniature circulation in postcard form.

The question at hand is not whether one reserves the liberty to assemble the pages any which way. Instead it is whether the arbitrariness means one still holds *Carnival* in her hands instead of *Carnival Improved*, whereby a future reader supersedes McCaffery's conception of the implied reader who tears "carefully." As creative and liberating Jaeger's suggestion is, there is no evidence whatsoever in *Carnival*'s instructional postcard to support it. Besides including the postcards with the book sale, Coach House also sold at least the postcard for Panel One separately, as noted in Nichol's 1987 bibliography of McCaffery's works up to that year:

Carnival

6 x 8 ¼ postcard image of entirety of Panel I
published as part of Panel I but also sold and distributed separately by Coach House Press. Toronto. 1973 (84).

The card's circulation as its own commodity reinforces therefore an assembly model that consequently suggests a visual instruction accompanying the verbal one on the back side.

Besides the postcard, an even stronger indication of page sequence in *Carnival*'s panel assembly exists in the archival scans of the assembled panels at Coach House's website.[38] The online assembly for Panel Two, to take one example, retains the same assignment of individual sheets as that on the instruction postcard. Finally, the same sequence appears in Alan Riddel's *Typewriter Art* anthology (1975-Figure III.20) and a gallery exhibition titled *Poetry Plastique* from 2001 (Figure III.21).

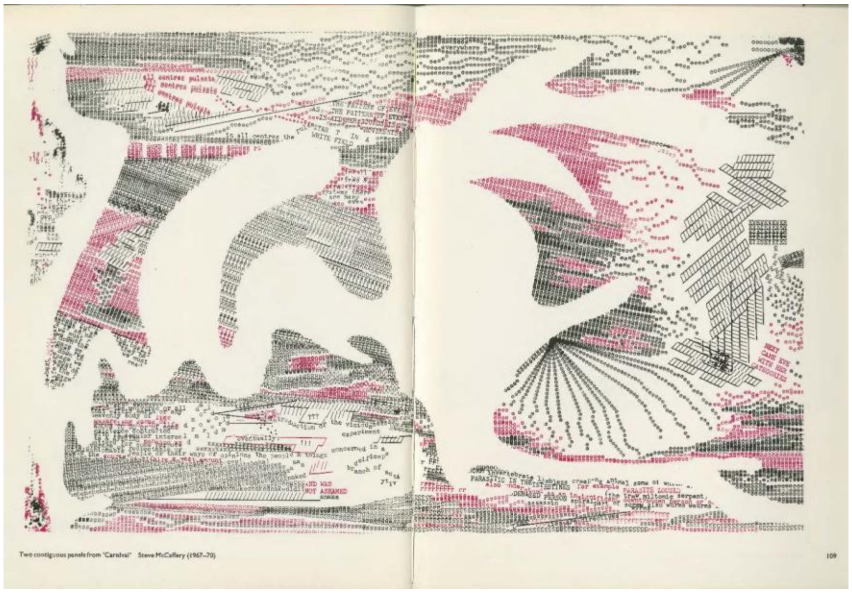

Two contiguous panels from 'Carnival' Steve McCaffery (1967–70)
109

Figure III.20. Alan Riddel, ed., *Typewriter Art*. London: London Magazine Editions, 1975, pp.108-109. Reproductions of *Carnival: Panel One*.

Figure III.20 is a reproduction of Panel One's appearance in Alan Riddell's *Typewriter Art* anthology. It is a detail of the assembled Panel One, listing the juxtaposed pages as two "**contiguous** panels."[39] The pages in question are from pages 6 and 7, which would place them on the second row of the assembly.

	6	7	

Riddel's anthology provides an elegant solution to reproducing *Carnival*'s two pages beyond the unusual multi-formats of its original publication. The anthology sets the pages in codex form, with page 6 on the lefthand side and 7 on the righthand. But doing so actually underscores *Carnival*'s page sequence even when the work might already be assembled as a large panel. Recall that the original published version utilizes a single-page layout. In the anthology layout the repressed book form unintentionally re-emerges. Besides being set on two facing pages of the codex form, *Carnival*'s two pages incidentally appear at the part where the saddle-stitching is palpable in the gutter between the two. One wonders then whether those perceiving *Carnival* in the anthology perceive a book, panel, or neither.

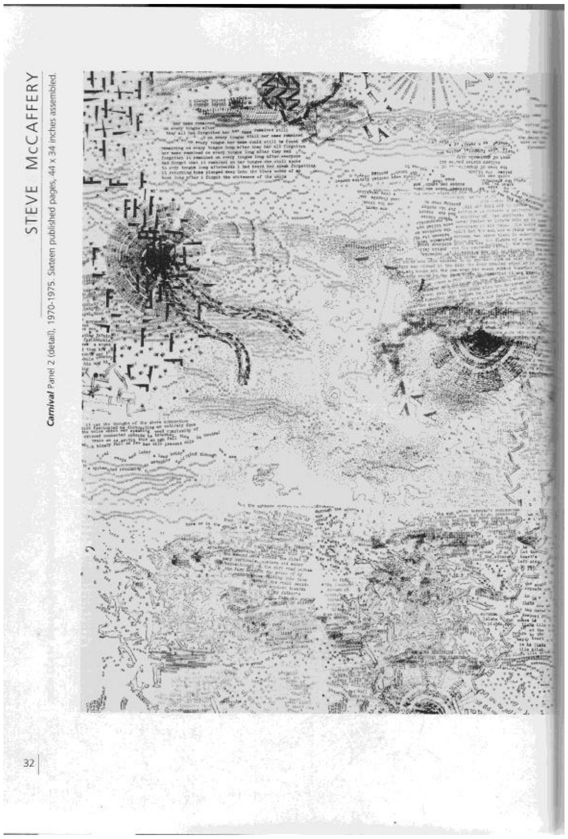

STEVE McCAFFERY
Carnival Panel 2 (detail), 1970-1975. Sixteen published pages, 44 x 34 inches assembled.
32

Figure III.21. Jay Sanders and Charles Bernstein, ed. and curators, *Poetry Plastique*. New York: Marianne Boesky Gallery and Granary Books, 2001, p. 32. Documentation photo of *Carnival*'s assembled second panel.

Figure III.21, from the *Poetry Plastique* exhibition catalog, is a detail of the assembled Panel Two. More specifically, the photo shows the intersection between the following four pages at the bottom half of the assembly:

	10	11	
	14	15	

The postcards, the different exhibition assemblies, the website— all these additional modes of *Carnival*'s circulation are hardly negligible as implied models of assembly. Their import grows even more in noting the small number of the original circulation. Panel Two's colophon lists the original printing at 750 copies. (The circulation would be further limited if buyers actually heed the postcard instruction to purchase two copies for both the shelf and the wall.) So the majority of *Carnival*'s future reader will encounter *Carnival* pre-assembled by a figure other than herself. Besides McCaffery, the circulation of *Carnival* as assembled panel relies much on different operators within the economy of both print and electronic publications along with gallery exhibitions. Granted we are speaking of a small, mostly non-profit, post-sixties print culture of the North American avant-garde. But that does not mean that this culture did (and does) not affect the work's reception. Jaeger's suggestion for arbitrary placement of pages to assemble the panel is not wrong per se. But it does raise the question whether such freedom is anticipated within McCaffery's understanding of the work's panel construction. As seen in the *Poetry Plastique* exhibition, the panel's exhibition in a gallery pre-determines the assembly model, which presupposing the traditional division between viewer and object in the gallery space. *Carnival*'s circulation as reproductions and exhibited panels show that the initial perception of freedom in format or generic shift—book to panel, literature to art—inevitably encounters another set of constraints.

Coda: Carnival Improved?

I begin this chapter from the micro level (mark-making, construction) and slowly move toward the macro level (circulation). Throughout the chapter I continuously demonstrate the limitations of perceiving *Carnival* in the mono-directional book-to-panel opposition. On the contrary, *Carnival*'s minute formal details undermine any rhetoric of *Carnival* as an anti-book (*ergo* anti-commodity). Far from being merely a formal investigation, the inter-generic and inter-medial issues discussed strongly bear on assessments of *Carnival* on a larger scale. While challenging certain reading conventions, *Carnival* nevertheless cannot elude the customs of gallery audiences, where viewers are usually forbidden from touching and changing the orientation paintings on the wall. Considering the other set of constraints awaiting *Carnival* once it is framed within the visual arts, it is rather naïve to believe that the book format's careful destruction succeeds as an anti-commodity gesture. Admittedly, these are points I could only argue at the speculative level. Admittedly, the question of how *Carnival* was actually perceived by audiences in language art exhibitions like Kostelanetz's *Language/Structure* remains unresolved. Part of the problem resides in the historical invisibility among critics of such hybrid text/image works. (So far I have been unable to locate a review of Kostelanetz's exhibition).

The main issue hindering the possibility of a larger understanding of *Carnival* perhaps lies first of all with our lack of vocabulary for describing and interpreting works like McCaffery's. As habitual readers of poetry, we should learn (and continue to learn) to scan beyond the letters and discover significance in marks, traces, and spaces without fonts. It is my hope then that this chapter establishes at least a provisional but applicable set of terms for dealing with *Carnival*'s intermedial and intersemiotic complexity. Only then could works like *Carnival* be more visible historically as a hybrid object. For one, the complex survival of the book form as transformed pages and as discarded trash may in turn reflect the complex financial and ideological relation between small presses like Coach House (*Carnival*'s publisher) and federal funding agencies like the Canada Council for the Arts or the Ontario

Arts Council during the 1960s and 1970s.[40] According to critic and former Coach House editor Frank Davey, the press' editorial team after 1975 inherited the publishing ideology of departing editor Victor Coleman that was "**vaguely** left-of-centre romantic **liberal**," mistrusting bureaucrats along with mainstream publishers.[41] As Davey further assesses, however, Coach House's vision during the time was limited in an iconoclasm and disruptions that depended paradoxically on "there being stable systems to disrupt (52) [.]" While Coach House's general editorship mistrusted bureaucrats, their existence in the 70s nonetheless were deeply embedded within the world of administrative funding for the arts.

Furthermore, while *Carnival* is an anti-book work, the *Nachleben* of its original printings in the rare books market tells a different story. In his monograph on McCaffery, Burnham is quick to articulate the ways in which *Carnival* constitute an anti-book work. But at one point he reveals a telling anecdote McCaffery told him: "Ephemeral works like *Carnival* resist library demands (it is really organized like a notebook), fall apart easily, and so on (but they are often appropriated into the economy of rare books; McCaffery has an amusing story of being disgusted one time in England after seeing a book of his for sale for more than one of Coleridge's) (Burnham, *McCaffery and his Works*, 45)." Despite altering the appearance and construction of the book, in a lot of ways the remaining copies of small press works like *Carnival* still circulated as a book. In the case where it did circulate in a panel format, it did so while already becoming constructed (exhibitions, postcard reproductions, etc.).

In the end, what possible affirmative view of *Carnival* can we advance? *Carnival* does push us to rethink our assumptions as readers/ viewers, though not in the manner and framework of McCaffery's theory of the liberated reader. *Carnival*'s paradoxical retention of the book form very much hinted at the ambivalence Alexander Potts detects in 1960s avant-garde's polemics against Greenberg's medium-specifity: "On the one hand there is a privileging of medium and the literal materiality of the art work, and on the other, a powerful impulse to move beyond the constraints of medium as traditionally defined, to the point where the formal categorization of works of art as either painting or sculpture begins to seem irrelevant."[42] Similarly, then, *Carnival* opens up multiple possibilities of interpretations not due to a one-directional shift to art, but exactly in an ambivalently multi-directional back-and-forth between a bound book, single pages, and a transformed wall panel. The moment the book is conceived as something to be destroyed, the more we pay attention to what constitutes the modern book (binding, pages, etc.). *Carnival* embodies two seemingly oppositional impulse: a focus on materiality and medium against "a powerful impulse to move beyond the constraints of medium."

Carnival is by no means a failed work due to shortcomings in McCaffery's theory of readership. If anything, McCaffery's *Carnival* invites further possibilities of interpretation due to its inconclusive hybridity and ambivalence with regards to formats, materials, and the written sign (letters repeatedly inscribed as overprints). We saw previously that taking the literal materiality of *Carnival* seriously actually complicates the aesthetic and political ideals behind the work. The appearance of mystical formulations in the work like the celtic *wouivre* and the sacred mandala in Hinduism indicates the impulse to move beyond the material constraints of medium that counters, on the other hand, McCaffery's insistence on the materiality of *Carnival* (e.g. the inkbleed in the overprints). *Carnival* remains a work whose political promises are suggested and at the same time destined to fail in their material and literal realization. But, as Potts further argues, for an art work to be convincing in its suggestion of ideals and political possibilities, "the art work as actual thing has in part to block easy access to the very ideas and affects it seems to realize (Potts, 301)." In other words, *Carnival* invites further reflection on the readers' part exactly because the work's conception and execution does not line up together neatly.

Another possible point of comparison for understanding McCaffery's project as an anti-book within an art world context is the general emergence of artists' books in the 1960s (e.g. Ed Ruscha's *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* or *Royal Road Test*), where we can find a comparison for *Carnival*'s anti-commodity aspirations and eventual failures. The generally Marxist but definitely egalitarian views in the rhetoric surrounding *Carnival*'s construction echoed a period in which some minimalist and conceptualist artists critiqued the commodity aspect of art by rethinking the appearance, constitution, and circulation of its artifacts . As an outcome, many artists dabbled with the medium of the codex book. In 1976, Lucy Lippard conceived the artists' books as "the easiest way out of the art world and into the heart of a broader audience."[43] The argument went, thus, that the reproductive and more inexpensive nature of the artists' books allowed more accessibility in both terms of their publication and consumption. But as Johanna Drucker warns, the democratization envisioned in the rise of artists' books becomes uncritical when the notion becomes one among the "misconceptions or myths of artists' books" if it conflates relative "affordability" with "the accessibility of content."[44] (As we saw above, a reading of *Carnival* and McCaffery in general is largely helped by a familiarity with the theoretical jargons he often deployed in his works and essays.)

This last section has outlined several possible ways of expanding our exploration of *Carnival*. My critical take on the work in relation to McCaffery's anti-commodity rhetoric should not be conceived as a judgment of the work's merit—whatever that means. In only discussing *Carnival*, this chapter barely scratches the surface of the labor entailed in situating the implications of intermedial avant-garde publications in the Canadian literary culture of the 1970s. A fuller accounting of *Carnival*'s significance in this period will also require a much larger study on the relationships between experimental poets and artists in Toronto, if not in most of the major Canadian cities. In addition to *Carnival*, other concrete or post-concrete works published within the Canadian small press culture also participated in concrete poetry's radical rethinking of the material of which poetry can consist, a move that is also present in the experiments of Susan Howe, the subject of our next chapter.

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[1] Steve McCaffery, "Artist's Statement," From Charles Bernstein and Jay Sanders,Eds, *Poetry Plastique*. New York: Boesky Gallery and Gallery Books, 2001, 70.

[2] Fiona McMahon, "Iconicity and Typography in Steve McCaffery's Panel-Poems," in *Revue LISA* (VOl V-no. 2, 2007), 134.

[3] Clint Burnham, *Steve McCaffery and His Works*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1996, 44.

[4] Originally composed in 1977, *circa* Panel Two's publication, under the title "The Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-communication in Recent Langugage-Centered Writing." He later revised and retitled it as "Diminished Reference and the Model Reader" upon its inclusion in *North of Intention* (1986), his first book of criticism. [Steve McCaffery, "Diminished Reference and the Model Reader," in *North of Intention: Critical Writings 1973–1986*, 13-29. New York: Roof Books, 1986.

[5] Steve McCaffery, "Bill Bisset: A Writing Outside Writing," in *North of Intention*, 104.

[6] McCaffery, Introduction to *Carnival: panel Two 1970-1975*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 1977, n.p.

[7] Beth Learn, "Preface," in *Language & Structure in North America: The First Large definitive Survey of North American Language Art, November 4-30, 1975*, edited and curated by Richard Kostelanetz. Toronto: Kensington Arts Association, 1975, 6.

[8] Kent Lewis, *A Primer for the Gradual Understanding of Steve McCaffery*. Diss. Vancouver, B.C.: University of British Columbia, 1997, p.22.

[9] John Robert Colombo, "Steve McCaffery," in Thomas Riggs, ed. *Contemporary Poets. 7th Ed.* Detroit: St. James Press, 2003, 759.

[10] Richard Kostelanetz, "The Four Horsemen," in *The Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes*, *2nd Edition*. London: Routledge, 2000, 222.

[11] Steve McCaffery, "Critical Responsibilities," *Books in Canada* 19. 9. (Dec.1990) 24.

[12] Christian Bök, "*Nor the Fun Tension*: Steve McCaffery and his Critical 'Parodoxy'." *Open Letter*, Eighth Series, No. 3 (Spring 1992), 100.

[13] I do not want to conflate the privilege evoked here with the issue of class privilege. Pierre Bourdieu's classic study *La Distinction* already showed the correlation between class privilege and education in twentieth-century France. But, as Burnham reminds us, McCaffery was born into a working class household instead of a bourgeois or an educator's: "His biography is of interest only in that he did not, unlike most writers in Canada,

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come from a middle-class background. McCaffery was born in Sheffield, England, in 1947, to Edwin and Kathleen. Edwin was a glassblower and later a postman. Steve grew up in Barnsley [South Yorkshire], the birthplace of J.B. Priestly and of Ebenezer Eliot, the Corn Law Rhymer." [Burnham, *Steve McCaffery and his Works*, 2.] Barnsley, notably, was an industrial town centered on coal-mining and glassmaking when McCaffery was growing up. Later McCaffery rendered *The Communist Manifesto* into Yorkshire dialect as *The Kommunist Manifesto* or *Wot We Wukkerz Want*. [See the reprinting in Steve McCaffery, *Seven Pages Missing. Volume Two: Previously Uncollected Texts 1968-2000*, pp. 171-180.] Being a sympathetic reader of McCaffery, Burnham also reminds us that a working, but not a deep, knowledge of literary theory suffices for "studying McCaffery's work (*McCaffery and his Works*, 6)."

[14] McCaffery, "Bill Bissett," 104.

[15] McCaffery, "Bill Bissett," 103.

[16] Louis Charpentier, *Les Mystères de la cathédrale de Chartres*. Paris: Robert Laffont, 1966. As the mystical aspects of *Carnival* lie beyond this article's scope, I could only refer briefly to the book to show McCaffery's debt to it. See, for instance, p.48: "Or, le remarquable instrument qu'est le dolmen, table de pierre soutenue par deux, trois ou quatre supports, ressemble un peu à une lame de xylophone[…] C'est, a la fois, un accumulateur et un amplificateur de vibrations./Et la valeur de l'onde tellurique prend, dans la chamber dolménique, toute sa puissance, puisqu'elle aboutit à une caisse de résonance."

[17] My use of 'swerve' to describe the pictorial/textual simultaneity alludes somewhat to McCaffery's use of the word to describe on homophonic puns, alternative word spelling, and non-linear word formation of a given letter-cluster. A chapter from *Prior to Meaning* presents in detail the poet's conception of the swerve. The chapter is in itself performative through its employment of a two-column format. The right column is the text with regular spellings, the left with increasing alternative or deviant spellings. McCaffery derives his concept of the swerve from Lucretius' baptism of the swerve in atoms in *De Rerum Natura*. The Roman poet compares the atomic swerve to change in meaning through change in spelling. The same atoms could create fire and wood with a slight change in atoms just as 'flame' ['lignes'] shifts into 'elm' ['ignum'] with little spelling change [Steve McCaffery, "Zarathustran 'Pataphysics," in *Prior to Meaning: Protosemantics and Poetics*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001, 20.] From this, McCaffery concludes that

[a]toms are to bodies what letters are to worfs: commonly heterogneous, deviant, and combinotary particles.

[a]toms are to bodies what letters are to words: commonly heterogeneous, deviant, and combinatory particles ("Zarathustran 'Pataphysics," 21).

Among the possible combinations in this lettristic atomism, McCaffery lists

punks, acrosticx, anygrans, metaframs, parafrans, and teztual patapraxes[.]

puns, acrostics, anagrams, metagrams, paragrams, and textual parapraxes ("Zarathustran 'Pataphysics, 21)[.]

In his brief list the use of the letter qua letter goes unquestioned. The juxtaposed columns of deviant and regular spellings still assume the common point of treating alphabets as written symbols.

[18] Steve McCaffery and bpNichol. *Rational Geomancy-The Kids of the Book Machine: The Collected Research Reports of the Toronto Research Group 1973-1982*, co-authored with bpNichol. Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1992, 72.

[19] The relation between photography and representation brings its own baggage of debates and criticisms, upon which I will not touch. The relevant point in the current chapter is to follow the view of photography the TRG adopts in its critique of Katue.

[20] Caroline Bayard, *The New Poetics in Canada and Quebec: From Concretism to Post-Modernism*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989, 145.

[21] Robert Schwartz, *Visual Versions*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006, 110.

[22] For a classic formulation of this view on occlusion, I direct readers to James J. Gibson, *The Perception of the Visual World*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1950, 228: "The visual superposition or overlapping of surfaces…is

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an important type of depth perception, not a cue for depth perception." (Cited in Schwartz, *Visual Versions*, 111.)

[23]Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique (Some Aspects of Conceptual Art 1962-1969)," in *l'art conceptual, une perspective*, edited by Claude Gintz, 41-54. Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1990.

[24] Steve McCaffery, Annotation to bpNichol, "The Annotated, Anecdoted, Beginnings of a Critical Checkliust of the Published Works of Steve McCaffery," in *Open Letter*, Sixth Series, No. 9 (Fall 1987), 72-73.

[25] Marjorie Perloff, "Inner Tension/ In Atttention: Steve McCaffery's Book Art," in Perloff, *Poetry On and Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1998, 266.

[26] McCaffery, Annotation to Nichol, "Published Works of Steve McCaffery," 81.

[27] http://archives.chbooks.com/online_books/carnival/images/ur.gif

[28] McCaffery's own comment on *Pluralities* also deserves inlcusion: "I set up a telex roll in a hotel room and started to write; the roll went through the window, down the wall, across some grass and into the lake where it disintegrated. (It exists now only in a photo documentation by Steve Smith.) The scroll in both these performances demonstrated its social status as a species of waste production. The paper roll (toilet paper, adding machine ribbon, typewriter ribbon) invariably exhausts itself, it is non-recoverable; or else it divides into fragments that only then enter into exchange (the cash receipt for instance.). My interest in both these pieces was to link this socio-economic status of the scroll with a controlled (i.e. 'aesthetic') 'production'." [McCaffery, Annotation to Nichol, "The Published Works of Steve McCaffery," 80-81.]

[29] Since the film was never widely circulated, thus very difficult to obtain, my account has to depend for now on Rafael Barreto-Rivera's and Johanna Drucker's respective descriptions of the film:

> […] *Paradise Improved*, McCaffery's playful film/ video (created in collaboration with photographer and sometime cinematographer Marilyn Westlake, some years ago). This witty work depicted a somewhat Beckettian protagonist (played by Steve McCaffery) who tears up, leaf by leaf (in a defoliated autumnal forest setting), a copy of Milton's 'hypertextual' *Paradise Lost*, suggesting with irreverent visual insistence that the dissatisfied reader of Milton's work (in this case the protagonist, who is really a writer-performer in disguise, playing a part semiotically controlled by the pre-existence of an obviously coherent, though filmically unreadable, 'text')—in tearing up the received Milton text; picking up the torn pages from the ground (like so many fallen leaves); and putting them back together at random—becomes, effectively, the creator (not unlike Ronald Johnson in his *Radi os* interlucation of the same hypertext) of another original work, more in tune with the literary requirements of our age than *Paradise Lost*, presumable, could ever be./ At the end of *Paradise Improved*, the image of the protagonist's disembodied hand(s) is shown in the act of returning the randomly packed, newly reconstituted 'text' that Milton's *Paradise* has become to the bookshelf from which it was first taken. (Rafael Barreto-Rivera, "Dr. Sadhu's Semi-Opticks, or How to Write a Virtual-Novel by the Book: Steve McCaffery's *Panopticon*." in *Open Letter*. Sixth Series, No.9 (Fall 1987), 44.)
>
> A copy of **Paradise Lost** was taken from its shelf, its pages torn out and scattered in a wooded area[…]The pages were allowed to fall and settle for four days, and then were gathered back up and the ones recovered were put back into order as **Paradise Regained**. [Johanna Drucker, "Interview with Steve McCaffery," *The Journal of Artists' Books*, No. 6 (Fall 1996), 8.]

[30] Ezra Pound, "Vorticism," in *Ezra Pound's Poetry and Prose: Contributions to Periodicals*, arranged by Lea Bacheler, et al. New York: New Directions, 1991, 276.

[31] McCaffery, "Introduction," in *Carnival: Panel Two*, n.p.

[32] Barreto-Rivera, "Dr. Sadhu's Semi-Opticks," 44.

[33] Readers who still feel that *Carnival*'s perforated pages are trivial could consult the second issue of McCaffery and Nichols' *Toronto Research Group* where they talk about the use of paper in art and literature. Here is a telling passage: "There is a rich history of differing papers chosen both for covering material and for the pages

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themselves. From Gertrude Stein's use of individual wallpaper as covers for the *Portrait of Mabel Dodge* to the striking soft cover chosen for Claes Oldenberg's MOMA catalogue of the soft sculptures. Not seen in much adult literature, however, is the integration of texture as an element of plot." [McCaffery and Nichol, *Rational Geomancy*, 174.]

[34] Andy Weaver, ""The white experience between the words": Thoughts on Steve McCaffery's *Carnival, the second panel: 1970-75*" in *Open Letter*. Fourteenth Series, No. 7, Fall 2011, p. 133.

[35] Whistler was perhaps the most well known artist to help introduce the handwritten signature to printmaking in the form a butterfly shaped out of 'W'. [See Theodore Donson, *Prints and the Print Market: A Handbook for Buyers, Collectors, and Connoisseurs*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1977, 43-44.]

[36] The phrase is Patricia Yaeger's: "…residue is a way of haunting the commodity." "The Death of Nature and the Apotheosis of Trash,or Rubbish Ecology" PMLA 2008, 335.

[37] Peter Jaeger, "McCaffery's Visual Errata." (http://www.ubu.com/papers/jaeger.html) <Accessed 10/18/11.>

[38] URLs: http://archives.chbooks.com/online_books/carnival/1_assembled.html and http://archives.chbooks.com/online_books/carnival/2_assembled.html. Accessed December 18, 2011.

[39] Alan Riddel, ed., *Typewriter Art*. London: London Magazine Editions, 1975, 108.

[40] For an overview on the uneasy relation between the Canadian artists and bureaucrats after World War II, see George Woodcock, *Strange Bedfellows: the State And the Arts In Canada*. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntrye, 1985. See also Frank Davey, ed., "Coach House Press, 1965-1996," a special issue of *Open Letter* (*Ninth series*, *Number 8*: *Spring 1997*)

[41] Frank Davey, "The Beginnings of an End," in *Open Letter*. Ninth Series, Number 8: Spring 1997, 51.

[42] Alexander Potts, "Tactility: the interrogation of medium in art of the 1960s," *Art History*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2004), 284.

[43] Lucy Lippard, "The Artists' Book Goes Public," in Joan Lyons, ed., *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*. Peregrine Press and Visual Studies Workshop, Rochester, NY, 1985, 45.

[44] Johanna Drucker, *The Century of Artists' Books*. New York: Granary Books, 1995, 72.

CHAPTER 3
A Stuttering Mark: Susan Howe's Typographic Experiments

Intro: A Stuttering Mark

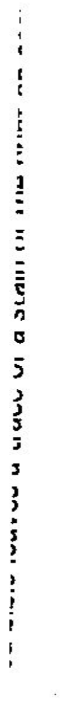


Figure IV.1. Susan Howe, *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), 125.

Let's begin with the end—or what appears so (Figure IV.1). The poem concludes Susan Howe's "Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierrepont Edwards," the final section of her 2007 book *Souls of the Labadie Tract*. The placement of the poem in itself signals a terminus. But far before the book closes, the preceding pages already challenge a reader's simple expectation of a legible text. After opening with a scanned reproduction of a dress fragment, "Wedding Dress" proceeds with pages full of textual mutilations. Besides half-effaced letters, unorthodox textual orientations and scattered font placements equally overwhelmed one's vision. Echoing the fragmented dress, letters become obliterated—image and text inching toward oblivion.

But it is in "inching," in not being totally obliterated, that the poem still minimally invites reading. Squinting before the marks, while also changing our page view from portrait to landscape orientation, we may "decipher" the phrase "a trace of a stain of." This process notably presupposes textual closure, where we first determine the marks in the middle as incomplete *textual* signs and subsequently *infer* whole letters from those marks. The second step, though, immediately falters in facing the poem's marginal marks. How do you read the dot at the top? It remains mute before us like a period, but never does it form one. If the second step fails, a *reader* may still insist on the first step in textual closure to account for the marginal marks. Considering what appear as broken fonts near the center, the dot could be inferred as part of an illegible letter, a textual remnant thematically reflecting the disintegrative gesture in the synecdochal syntax of "trace **of** a stain **of**." In this way the dot harmoniously corresponds to the phrase.

The interpretation above nevertheless overlooks one potential tension caused by the illegibility: constructing the verbal phrase "trace of a stain of" necessitates neglecting the illegible marginal marks from the decipherment. The elementary comprehension of reading would first separate the middle marks from the surrounding illegible marks. Moreover, verbally articulating the phrase "trace of a stain of" visually ignores all the marks on Howe's poem as marks, as trace, as stain. Calling the dot an "illegible letter" then does not involve reading a letter so much as reading legibility into it. That the dot derives from a text can only be inferred, not read.[1] As readers, we are stuck between determining the marks as textual and being unable to decipher fully what characters for which they stand, especially the marginal ones. It is within this unresolved in-betweenness that Howe's poem forcefully initiates textual reading and immediately pulls away from it.

After delving slightly into the poem, readers can hopefully catch a glimpse of the complex nature of Howe's cut-up fonts, dubbed here as microfonts. As I have emphasized throughout this dissertation, the visuality of textual illegibility can be intersemiotic in equally pointing towards pictoriality: a reader may also perceive the poem as a vertical sliver or cut. But I will return to Howe's last poem at the end of this chapter to show that the pictorial view also does *not* capture the radical negativity of the marks as intersigns. Through a more sustained reading (or, rather, scanning), we will see that the poem's marks function intersemiotically in equally suggesting and denying the pictoriality of the marks. What the poem ultimately presents is an irresolution that refutes both textuality and pictoriality while keeping the two as phantoms in constant tension with each other.

That the last poem of "Wedding Dress" maintains such a tension in turn demonstrates some continuity between her early visual experiments and her later works as a poet. Rather than making this chapter purely an exercise in scanning, I will first provide a survey of her decades-long experiments with typography and layout. Accordingly, the chapter divides into two general parts, respectively titled "Surveying the Letter" and "Breaking the Letter." The reason is to argue the larger point that microfonts, which appeared in her later poetry, demonstrate her reframing of various experiments with language the during the 60s, notably concrete poetry and Charles Olson's increasingly disjunctive poetry. Howe redeployed and incorporated some of the same typographic manipulations—multi appearing in the 60s into her own poetics: a poetics committed to recovering voices she sees as marginal and silenced in American history.[2] Rather than a naïve recovery, hers is a poetry "built around figures of absence: it acknowledges silence in the moment of bespeaking it."[3] It is exactly through the visual experimentation of poets like Olson, whom she admires, and concrete poets, towards which she felt ambivalent, that Howe was able to conceive of a mode of mark-making like mutilated fonts and multilinear layout that reflect her two-layered aim to recover marginal historical voices while also resisting any pretense of a full recovery (legibility) of those voices. "Historical imagination gathers in the missing."[4] The microfont foregrounds silence while retaining the minimal suggestion of a textually mediated voice, in essence embodying a semiotic hesitation I call a stuttering or *stammer*ing mark, borrowing on her understanding of the term: "Stammer. Hold back in doubt, have difficulty in speaking."[5] The extended interpretation of the last poem, taking into account its relation to other parts of *Labadie Tract* as a whole, demonstrates the complex convergence in the microfont between Howe's earlier preoccupations with typographic experiments and her later historical poetics.

I. Surveying the Letter

The End of Art, The Beginning of Poetry

Far from being an isolated case of typographic play, Howe's microfonts result out of a long preoccupation with the look of the text going as far back as the 1970s. In the dissertation's introduction I briefly sketched how her early artist works and writings engage textual experiments in art and poetry during the time. It bears repeating here that it was her experience as an artist in the 60s and the 70s—"those very wordy times"—that set her apart from other figures in language poetry: "I came through my poetry through my art work, and my sensibility was very much formed in the sixties (Keller, "Interview with Howe," 19)." At issue essentially is her ambivalence towards foregrounding the material visuality in her works at the expense of ignoring the acoustic dimension of the writing. Though she deeply admired contemporary visual artists such as Reinhardt and Martin, She often exhibited a fear that too much focus on the look of words or letters will ignore sound in poetry. On the other hand, at one point she did take concrete poetry seriously, going as far publishing an essay on the subject.

In "The End of Art," Howe compares the monochrome paintings by Malevich and Reinhardt to Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Homage to Malevich* (Figure IV.2), which was composed while Finlay was in correspondence with Reinhardt.

lackblockblackb
lockblackblockb
lackblockblackb
lockblackblockb
lackblockblackb
lockblackblockb
lackblockblackb
lockblackblockb
lackblockblackb
lockblackblockb
lackblockblackb
lockblackblockb
lackblockblackb

Figure IV.2. Ian Hamilton Finlay, *Homage to Malevich*, from *Rapel* (1963), n.p..

The essay's relevance for this chapter lies in how Howe interprets the poem by paying attention to the work's tension between a reading based on words and another based on letters. As John Palatella observes, Finlay's poem becomes the bridge in Howe's essay between monochrome painting and her own poetry.[6] Howe's analysis associates the poem's layout with the look of monochromatic canvases. She begins notably by focusing on the letters, emphasizing the rectangular visuality of the poem:

> First I see a group of letters in a rectangle – then the words lack, block, and black. The b running down the right hand column seems arbitrary. Is this to be read horizontally, vertically, or all at once? […] this poem has so many ways of being read that it is really up to the reader to bring meaning into it, just as one is finally left to find one's own meaning in a Malevich (white) or Reinhardt (black) painting. If you give this poem time and thought, you begin to see that there are tightly linked elements here.[7]

She does not assume what she immediately sees are words. From "letters in a rectangle" to words, her reading reveals the convention of word formation, which combines unspaced letter sequences as words. Right after reading the letters as words ("lack, block, black"), she again pays attention to the letters independently of words by noting the arbitrariness of "the b running down the right hand column." Howe's commentary foregrounds the reader's role in inquiring whether the poem is to be read "horizontally, vertically, or all at once (Howe, "The End of Art," 7)." Her understanding of meaning does not depend solely on words. It is an imagining of meaning akin to finding "one's own meaning in a Malevich (white) or Reinhardt (black) painting (7)." By reading the poem vertically, paying attention to the uniform rows of letters, Howe focuses more on the poem's shape and visuality (approaching a monochrome canvas).

Further down, the link between Finlay's poem and the individual works of Malevich and Reinhardt becomes more explicit:

> The black (figure) and block (ground) balances with lock (stability) against lack (instability). Something open versus something closed. Are lack and black one and the same image, or exactly opposite? Are block and lock alike? All this is exactly what the title or subject suggested – Malevich's search for formal invention. Do black and white open or close? Are they absence of presence? Sense or nonsense? Here, just as in Reinhardt, it is hard to

> separate color from color, shape from shape. Here form and content are completely bound (locked) together (7).

'Lack' and 'lock,' 'black' and 'block,' "sense" and "nonsense" correspond to the constant push and pull between words and letters in Finlay's poem. The lack of interword space and the equal spacing between the letters also highlight this tension. Unlike a regular text, the words in *Homage* furthermore do not result from interword space since the letters are equally spaced. In fact, there is no interword space in *Homage* that usually acts as word boundary. This absence highlights the word-form convention's place within a European reading convention (left to right, top to bottom), blurring the border between verbal and syntactic construction.

By saying that in *Homage* "form and content are bound (locked) together", Howe is focusing on Finlay's poem as a two-fold representation of Reinhardt's and Malevich's monochromes. First, the poem linguistically describes the painting through the words 'black', block', 'lack' and 'lock'. In this way Finlay's *Homage* exemplifies *ekphrasis*, an allusion in an artwork to another artwork of a different medium (ex. Keats' poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). Second, *Homage*'s shape itself visually represents the black canvases. The poem's rectangularity represents the frame, its black ink the oil paint. *Homage* touches therefore on the tradition of the shape poem or the calligram, where a poem's overall shape reflects its textual subject matter. Later we will see that the isomorphism between form (overall shape) and content (text) common in concrete poetry will actually be a point of contention in Howe's microfonts.

Though Howe mentions Malevich's white painting, *Homage* could also visually allude to the latter's *Black Square* (Figure IV.3).

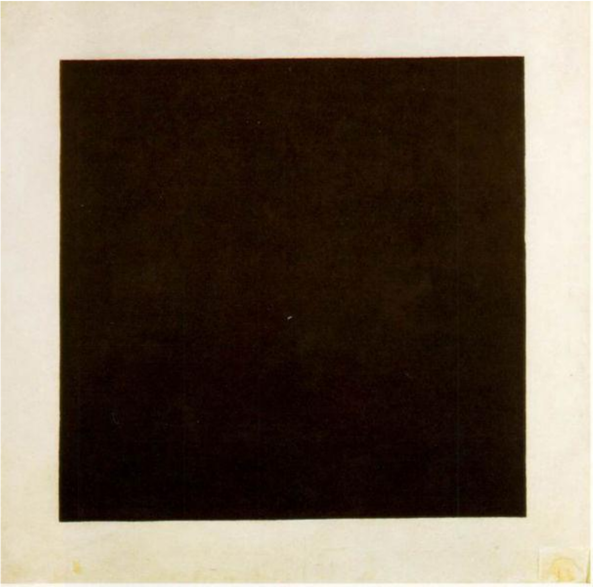


Figure IV.3. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915, oil on canvas. St. Petersburg: Russian State Museum.

So both Malevich's painting and Finlay's poem approach each other in becoming a "black block." Reinhardt's remark on his own black monochromes (Figure IV.4), cited in Howe's essay, could also help explain *Homage*: "one horizontal form negating, one vertical form (formless, no top, no bottom, directionless)[.]"[8]

Figure 4. Ad Reinhardt, *Abstract Painting*, 1960-1966, Oil on canvas, 152.4 cm x 152.4 cm, New York: Leo Castelli Gallery.

Homage is not exactly "directionless" like Malevich's or Reinhardt's monochromes. Articulating words like 'black' and 'block' still necessitates a left-to-right reading after all. Moreover, Finlay's poem is not strictly speaking a square (15 horizontal letters, 13 vertical). Rather than a complete lack of direction, Finlay's poem implies multilinearity through the absence of hierarchy in orientation. One could, on one hand, read from left to right and construct words out of the letters; on the other, from right to left, top to bottom, remaining at the level of letters and foregrounding the poem's pictorial rapprochement to Reinhardt's directionless canvas.

At the same time, Howe does not rely on vertical interpretation alone in engaging the poem. Instead, she remarks further on the tension between the horizontal and the vertical readings. The former constitutes words, the latter merely aggregates letters:

> The two words lack and lock, look alike, but mean opposite things. Modified by a variable (b) they form two new words, block and black. The b at the end which at first seems arbitrary now makes perfect sense. An extra that has created something else. Carry it over to the left and begin with black. The vertical letters l, k, and b, positioned as they are, make vertical lines that pull the eye up and down, and that pulls the o, a, and c letters apart (the o's and the a's are the only ones that vary). The round short letters give a horizontal tug which prevents the poem from being read up and down (Howe, "The End of Art," 7).

There is equal attention to words and letters in the passage. On one level, Howe does subjugate letters to words: the "b at the end" makes sense as the missing letter (the "lack") for 'black" and "block." On another, she emphasizes the poem's verticality and horizontality solely by virtue of the letters' position and shapes. The lack of interword space and the equal spacing between the letters also highlight this tension. Unlike a regular text, the words in *Homage* furthermore do not result from interword space since the letters are equally spaced. In fact, there is no interword space in *Homage* that usually acts as word boundary.[9]

Spinoza's Cloak: Words as Objects

Despite her careful interpretation of Finlay's poem in 1974, we also saw that in other occasions Howe could be rather dismissive of concrete poetry. In 1981, after becoming a full-fledged poet, Howe criticized herself and concrete poetry for treating words as objects:

> As to Finlay etc. and your saying of your reading of Zukofsky that you first in your own work considered object as subject and he taught you otherwise…..This sterility of thinking of words as object is for me the sterility of Concrete Poetry. Another empty exercise. […] I was a painter for ten years before my work shifted into poetry but if anyone was using words as objects I was—and it has taken me a long time to work through that.[10]

But the multi-directionality Howe believes crucial to her interpretation of *Homage* was already a central concept in Gomringer's poetry during the 50s. So while her comparison of *Homage* with monochrome paintings is valid, concrete poetry's challenge towards the traditional top-left-to-bottom-right reading already occurred early on in the emergence of concretism. (Here we should also note that Howe's discussion Finlay's poem itself is based on Mike Weaver's 1966 survey article on concrete poetry.) The inversion and avoidance of left-to-right reading direction, Gomringer believed, was his most important contribution to concrete poetry (Gomringer, "From Line to Constellation, 67). Perhaps the poem "Wind", which Howe cited briefly in "The End of Art," best exemplifies his point. If anything, Gomringer's poem goes further than "Homage" in presenting a more challenging alternative to the left-to-right reading orientation by making possible to form words in several directions, including a diagonal arrangement.[11] Finlay's poem, in comparison, mostly maintains word formation in a gird-like, left-to-right manner.

In a much more asymmetrical manner compared to Gomringer or Finlay, Howe herself experimented with multi-direction layout as early as 1973 through 4 poems in her unpublished *Spinoza's Cloak*, one year before the publication of "The End of Art." One poem from the collection in particular challenges a regular monolinear reading by arranging the words in a way that makes it difficult to find a starting point (Figure IV.5).

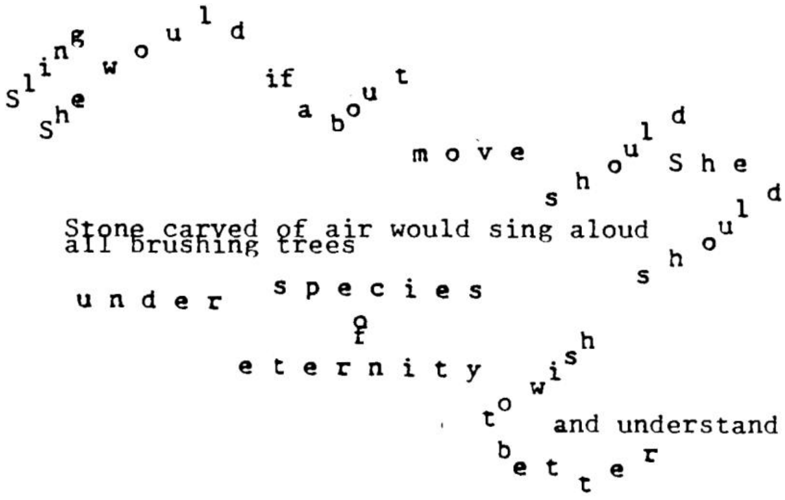

sling would
She
if about
move
should She
should
Stone carved of air would sing aloud
all brushing trees
under
species
of
eternity
wish
to
and understand
better

Figure IV.5. Susan Howe, *Spinoza's Cloak* (1973), unpublished typescript, n.p..

Given the parallel in the multi-directional layout, what exactly distinguishes Howe's poem from Finlay's and Gomringer's? One, unlike concretists like Finlay and Gomringer, Howe's poem still retains syntax and phrasal groupings, whereas concrete poetry generally aims to reduce the composition to single words, if not single letters and letter fragments. In this way, Howe's poem seems denser and more cluttered next to the typographically neat works of Finlay. More importantly, the second distinguishing aspect of Howe's early works is that the treatment of "words as objects" equally implies an attention to sound. Without assessing the fairness of her criticism, to Howe concrete poetry's reduction of language to single words emphasizes the visual at the expense of the aural. This was evident in a notebook entry comparing her texts for *Walls* and concrete poetry from December, 1970:

> I'm not interested in
>
> making concrete poetry.

> These words are visually
> beautiful to me—Sometimes
> of course this visual quality depends on some
> suggestion that word may hold for me, some beauty
> or some sound. […]
> sometimes I have
> no idea what a word [continued on next page]
> means but the sound
> suggests something to me
> it may have nothing to
> do with that the word
> was supposed to mean[12]

The acoustic aspect of poetry plays an equally important role as its visual aspect in Howe's poetry. At the same time, this acoustic aspect is not synonymous with a word's semantic meaning. As she admitted later, despite her experiments with the look of the page, Howe never ceases to emphasize sound in her poetry: "Well, in spite of all my talk about the way the page looks, and particularly in regard to these pages constructed as if they were a sort of drawing, strangely the strongest element I feel when I am writing something is **acoustic** (Keller, "Interview with Howe, 13)." In the same letter where she criticizes herself for treating "words as objects," Howe continues:

> I know for a sure thing that the deeper you go into writing the more **musical is meaning** and in **sound is meaning**. The heart is music if you can reach it. But I think beyond that the heart is in the perfect marriage, a sort of holy trinity of **music/word/object**
> |
> meaning [penned in: But is a word its meaning?]
> where do sound and object divide or do they flee in a mutual flame from hence—single natures double name [sic]. What a mystery (Letter to Taggart, Nov 13, 1981).

The notion of "meaning" for Howe, then, seems to be closer to "significance." The sound of words or the layout of a poem are not strictly part of a poem's verbal meaning, but they could be interpretively significant. On another note,"Object" here appears to signify the visuality of writing. Through the term Howe envisions a visuality divorced from verbal meaning; hence her dismissal of concrete poetry and her own artworks as treating "words as objects." It is ultimately irrelevant at the moment whether concrete poetry truly neglects aurality. What matters is that to Howe concrete poetry emphasizes visuality to the extent of ignoring the acoustic aspect in poetry. On the other extreme of the trichotomy lies the sound ('music') that is equally removed from semantics ('word'). Through the trichotomy of music/word/object Howe could simultaneously conceptualize visuality and aurality that move away from the word while being likewise haunted by it. Set in the opposite extremes, the "music" and the "object" of Howe's poetics could also exist together—"perfect marriage, "holy trinity"—in their "flight" from the word ("where do sound and object divide or do they flee in a mutual flame…").

But the triad of "music/word/object" Howe described in 1981 is already detectable in *Spinoza's Cloak*. The poem balances visual and acoustic playfulness while never departing from linguistic meaning at the level of words. Besides maintaining words, the text itself contains a figuration of voice in the phrase "would **sing** aloud."[13] On one hand, Howe visually plays with Spinoza's phrase "**Under** species of eternity" (***Sub*** *Specie Aeternitatis*).[14] On the other, she also poses an hypallagous voice in the subjunctive mood— in this case a transfer of an animate action (sing) to an inanimate object (stone or tree)-- through the linearly positioned "Stoned carved of air **would sing aloud**/ all brushing trees [.]"[15] Set in the more traditional layout, the implied voice clashes with the unorthodox layout of the scattered letters, thus bringing to the fore the complex tension between the poem's visual and acoustic dimensions.

The sounds in "would sing aloud" echo harmoniously among the scattered layout in "sling she would--about –should." The difference in the layout between the phrases, however, would put the two in semantic opposition. In this respect "**sling** she **would**," an act of the hand, opposes "**would sing** aloud," an act of the mouth. There is a highly performative dimension to this conflict. By manually "slinging" the letters, Howe emphasizes writing's visuality beyond its role as something to be recited as a poem ("sing").

The Sound of Olson

Opposing the typographic experiments of concrete poetry, Howe's adamant marriage between "music" and "object," sound and image subsequently finds a model in Charles Olson. In Olson Howe saw a poet who successfully combined both in his poetry, as evident in her letters to two different poets:

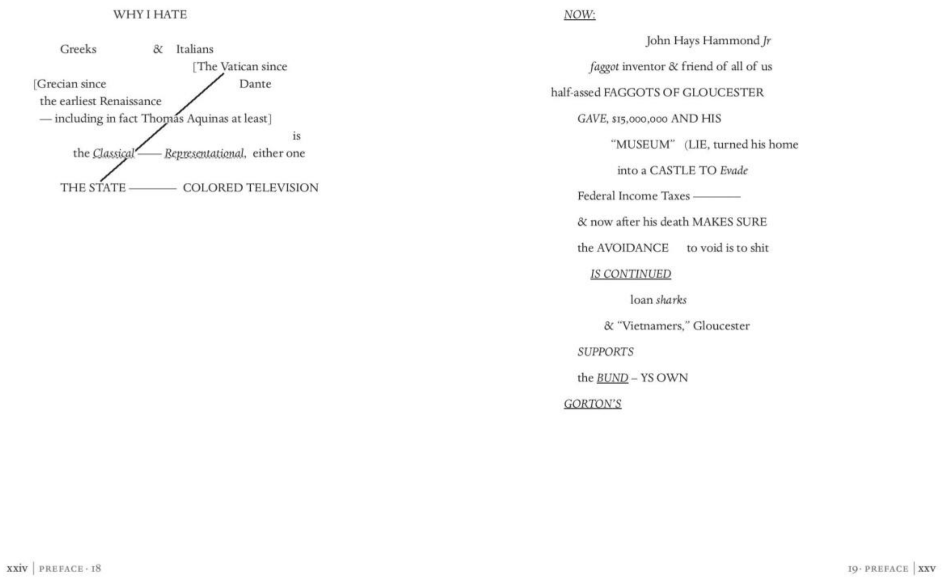
> I do remember though that the early copy I had of Maximus used to exite [sic] me very much just because of the space. I think in a certain sense Maximus may ONLY be for viewing [.][16]
>
> Olson is a very visual poet. One of the really original things about him as far as I am concerned is his PLACEMENT OF THE WORDS ON THE WHITE SPACE OF A PAGE. I cant [sic] think of another poet aside from Mallarmé with that stunning visual sensitivity. Look the way Zukofsky—say—just runs lines on and on and on. A poem like As the Dead Prey Upon Us is voice and vision absolutely tied into one passion. I cant [sic] put my finger quite on what I mean but I know that was his lesson to me.[17]

As cited in the introduction, Howe perceived Olson's visual arrangement of his typewriter-mediated poetry as having nothing to do with the "clever optical dynamism of Concrete Poetry (Howe, "Commander," 7).

The key in Olson's typewriter poetics is that the harmony between "voice and vision" not only pertains to the regulation of pronunciations, but also the length of pauses through spacing. This is the subtler implication of his analogy of a poet's typewriter to a composer's musical score or partiture, where pauses could be indicated within the music. Olson illustrates this scoring of silence in "Projective Verse" using the opening line of his own poem, "The Kingfisher":

> If a contemporary poet leaves a space as long as the phrase before it, he means that space to be held, by the breath, an equal length of time. If he suspends a word or syllable at the end of a line (this was most Cummings' addition) he means that time to pass that it takes the eye—that hair of time suspended—to pick up the next line. If he wishes a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma—which is an interruption of the meaning rather than the sounding of the line—follow him when he uses a symbol the typewriter has ready to hand:
> What does not change / is the will to change ("Projective Verse, 23)[.]

But, if Olson's production and reception in the 1960s could tell us anything, his projective, speech-based poetics can also result in a disjunctive syntax that challenges the unity of a sentence. Transferred to the page, the most extreme outcome of Olson's disjunctive syntax was a layout that disrupts the regular reading direction. This radical potential did manifest itself in Olson's 1960s output like "Pleistocene Man" (Figure IV.6) and "Plan for the Curriculum for the Soul."



WHY I HATE

Greeks & Italians
[The Vatican since
[Grecian since Dante
the earliest Renaissance
— including in fact Thomas Aquinas at least]
is
the *Classical* —— *Representational*, either one

THE STATE ——— COLORED TELEVISION

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NOW:

John Hays Hammond *Jr*
faggot inventor & friend of all of us
half-assed FAGGOTS OF GLOUCESTER
GAVE, $15,000,000 AND HIS
"MUSEUM" (LIE, turned his home
into a CASTLE TO *Evade*
Federal Income Taxes ———
& now after his death MAKES SURE
the AVOIDANCE to void is to shit
IS CONTINUED
loan *sharks*
& "Vietnamers," Gloucester
SUPPORTS
the *BUND* – YS OWN
GORTON'S

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Figure IV.6. Charles Olson, "Pleistocene Man," in Albert Glover, ed., *Curriculum for the Soul*, Canton: Institute of Further Studies, xxiv-xxv.

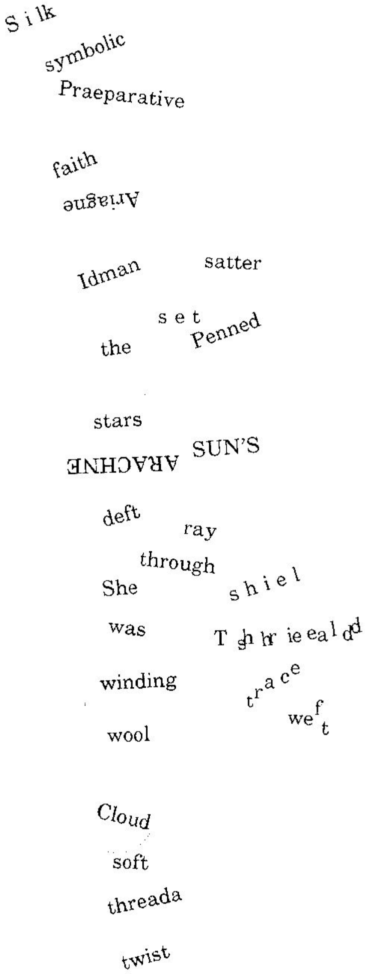
In the two pages of "Pleistocene Man," for example, phrases are introduced but often left unfinished sententially to make place for other phrases, creating a cacophony of voices threatening a notion of a single speaking 'I'. What is maintained is not only a fragmentary notion of voice, but one that is interlaced with silences without turning completely mute. It is precisely this possibility in Olson's poetry that caught the attention of more visually experimental writers like Richard Kostelanetz, who put the New American poet alongside concrete poets and conceptualist works in a wide-reaching "Language Art" exhibition (1974).[18] Rather than being the completely diametrical opposite of concrete poetics, Olson's own poetics could in retrospect be pushed to a comparably experimental visuality. But the play with layout and type in his late poetry calls attention to rather than away from sound, especially concerning the notion of voice. Howe's simultaneous focus on writing's visual and acoustic aspects in *Spinoza's Cloak* stands then in a certain parallel with Olson's late-yet-still-phonetic variant on the original formulations contained in his earlier "Projective verse."

***Eikon Basilike*, or the Emergence of a Republican Text**

Olson's "Pleistocene Man" exemplifies a case in which a disjunctive play with syntax at the visual and aural level could dismantle the notion of a single, speaking 'I' by suggesting multiple voices. In Howe's later poetry, though, the similar disruption of the notion of the speaking 'I' can equally serve to convey the idea of silence as a voice *lost*. The appearance of this potential in her later experiments with text layout emphatically ties to the development of a historically minded poetics.

As Howe delved into archival and textual scholarship while writing *My Emily Dickinson* (1985), she became interested in recovering what she perceived as marginal and silenced voices in the annals of American historiography, comprising among others female colonists and Puritans like Mary Rowlandson and Anne Hutchinson. But Howe's recovery of these figures in her poetry and scholarship simultaneously resists assimilating those voices into a normalizing, linear narrative. Her disjunctive historical poetry, then, recognizes the gaps and the absences surrounding these figures, "No punctual authentic self," remarks Peter Nicholls, "awaits discovery here; or rather that alien self is discernible only in the marks that testify to the violence of erasure."[19] As Howe herself states, "The tradition that I hope I am part of has involved a breaking of boundaries of all sorts. It involves a fracturing of discourse, a stammering even. Interruption and hesitation used as a force. A recognition that there is an other voice, an attempt to hear and speak it. Its [sic] this brokenness that interests me."[20] It does not strike one as surprising then when Howe would experiment with text layout in order to convey the "stammering," the "interruption and hesitation" in her historical poems.

At its most extreme, the presentation of disrupted voice in Howe's poetry can ultimately point to death, evident in works like *A Bibliography of the King's Book or, Eikon Basilike* (1989— Figure IV.7).



S i lk
symbolic
Praeparative

faith
Ariagne

Idman satter

set
the Penned

stars
ARACHNE SUN'S

deft
ray
through
She shiel
was T sh hr ie eal dd
winding trace
wool weft

Cloud
soft
threada
twist

Figure IV.7. Susan Howe, *Eikon Basilike* (1989), last page.

In *Eikon,* Howe's exploration of asymmetric, non-linear layouts in *Spinoza's Cloak* notably reappeared.[21] Marjorie Perloff uses *Eikon* to characterize Howe's poetics as multi- or postlinear, where the emphasis falls on the word, not the line:[22]

> Howe's use of cut-ups and found text […] come out of the concrete poetry movement, but her typographical devices (mirror images of lines, overprints, broken fonts) are designed to question the authority of the historical document, even as she selects certain passages and, so to speak, overstresses them […] where every word has the "aura" Howe speaks of in her statement on the line: in which the number "I" (as in Charles the First) is given a full stress.[23]

During one interview Howe remarked on *Eikon*: "so unclear, so random [was the work] that I was crossing into visual art in some sections and that I had unleashed a picture of violence I needed to explain to myself. The end breaks out of all form completely. You could read the last page in several ways."[24] In essence, the unusual typography attempts to convey the historical violence that was Charles I's beheading:

> In the "Eikon Basilike," the sections that are all vertically jagged are based around the violence of the execution of Charles I, the violence of history, the violence of that particular event, and also then the stage drama of it. It was a trial, but the scene of his execution was also a performance; he acted his own death. There's no way to express that in just words in ordinary fashion on the page. So I would try to match that chaos and violence visually with words. (Keller, "Interview with Howe," 8).

Even Perloff, the staunchest advocate of Howe and the avant-garde, admitted her unease with *Eikon Basilike*'s typography in a personal letter to the poet on January 3, 1989:

> I do have a slight hesitation about the typography. It may just be me. But I find it difficult to have to turn the page all the way around and read the backward words and although I can see what effect you're trying to create and appreciate the artistry of it all, I find p.6 a little confusing. That's awful to say given the trouble you've given it just the right visual layout. It reminds me of the unease I sometimes feel reading Apollinaire's calligramme.
>
> On p.40—where again typography is complex: I like very much your way of creating doublings—e.g. Ariadne/ led Theseus or Ariadne/ let down/ from and so on. But again, could it perhaps be as effective if the lines were straight, not diagonal or curving? Just a thought.[25]

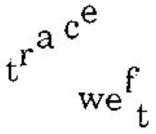
In *Reading the Illegible*, Craig Dworkin already identifies a visual precedent for Howe's violent multilinear poems in a page of *Clarissa Harlowe*, Samuel Richardson's 18th-century novel. The prose breaks down into multilinear verse in *Harlowe*, Dworkin remarks, to represent a letter written by the protagonist right after her ravishment (*Reading the Illegible*, 35).[26] A specific model of understanding *Eikon*'s jagged lines, however, could derive more immediately from the book's theme itself.

Like Finlay's *Homage*, *Eikon's* "crossing into visual art" problematizes the Western reading orientation. They coerce readers to turn the book clockwise or counterclockwise, creating conflicts between the different orientations. Considering Charles' execution, the multiple reading orientations evoke the monarch's fleeting vision – a rolling head post-decapitation. Steve McCaffery, with whom Howe briefly corresponded, already detected this performative aspect in a letter to Howe: "I [have] been thinking of your book as a marvelous reenactment of regicide, performed on the text, and hence a formally "Republican" text."[27] The loss of a stable orientation in reading, tied to the king's severed head, also implies the loss of this orientation's sovereignty. Howe's page arrests the movement of this head towards death. It is violence enacted in her cutting of the lines to create the page: "First I would type some lines. Then cut them apart. Paste one on top of another, move them around until they looked right. Then I'd xerox that version, getting several copies, and then cut and paste again until I had it right (Keller, "Interview with Howe," 8)." Copying and pasting, Howe simultaneously destroys and re-articulates. Yet the re-articulation does not preserve the king's vision, which would be mirrored typographically as a traditional reading orientation. As the head rolls towards death, suggesting loss of vision, multiple reading orientations actually appear on the page.

The theatricality of Charles' public execution did not go unnoticed by Howe ("…the stage drama of it. It was a trial, but the scene of his execution was also a performance; he acted his own death "). Its representation on Howe's page, in turn, creates identification between the king and the reader. Yet in lieu of an emotional identification common in the Aristotelian view of catharsis, the identification Howe evokes in this drama is ocular. Ocular identification pushes its own limits by situating a reader's vision within the king's detached head. It threatens to overwhelm the reader's subjectivity by connecting her to a disappearing subject. "The absent center," writes Howe in the book's opening, "is the ghost of the king." Through the king's decapitation, or the destruction of the sacred image (*eikon basilike*), Howe could link the otherworldly conceptual leap towards death as the unspeakable other and the worldly political transformation of English bourgeois society. As she admitted, the ghost haunting this leap is no other than the opening of Marx's *Der Achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*: "Marx saw the revolutionary situation as theatrical spectacle […] The spectacle of the killing of the king accomplished the bourgeois transformation of English society, Marx wrote […] The ghost is still walking around (Howe, "*Talisman* Interview, 176)." [28] When asked subsequently what is left in Howe's poems when words undergo fragmentation like the destroyed sacred image, Howe replied: "There is another leap into another situation. The ghost […] is the only thing we have. And a ghost represents death. There is death. I almost never put the word *death* in my poems. It would be too easy. I have always felt death to be the unspeakable other (Howe, "*Talisman* Interview," 177)." The reader/viewer arrives then at the paradox of being suggested the limits of the senses through the highly visual act of ocular identification.

Eikon's typographic experiments essentially motivate a tortuous route of interpretation that ends back at the regular reading orientation as its terminus. But upon the return this starting terminus is not something stable so much as something already set in motion. One could only understand what is initially ungraspable through the means of what is already graspable. An experiment in reading orientation makes sense only in terms of the conventions in a given print culture. But much like the quest of Sophocles' Oedipus for what turns out to be self-knowledge, this interpretive move threatens a proper place instead of assigning it. Howe's multilinear changes in reading orientation perform a movement in which the regular orientation itself is not the anchor or terminus. It is only a part of the unstable changes implied by the severed head. The regular orientation becomes thereby dehierarchized as a stable visual anchor.

The gradual loss of a stable reading becomes more attenuated on the bottom right part of the last page, which subtly hints at the fragmentation of the word towards the letter (See figure IV.7 for the full page.)



trace
weft

With the letters unaligned, the formation of 'trace' as a word pushes the reading upward albeit still from left to right. The appearance of 'weft', on the other hand, is more complex. The term designates "the threads that cross from side to side of a web, at right angles to the warp [vertical] threads with which they are interlaced (OED)." Even if the layout of 'trace' is unaligned, it still hints at a single diagonal line. 'Weft', in contrast, implies three different lines of reading. The first is the almost-horizontal 'we' followed by the supra-positioned 'f' and the sub-positioned 't'. The non-aligned letters in 'trace' themselves imply Howe's cutting of individual letters in creating the Xeroxes. Moreover, the similarity in shape between the serifed 't' and 'f' evokes mirroring, making the 't' almost a vertically inverted 'f'. In addition to being a weaving jargon, 'weft's' non-linear alignment performatively suggests a woven cloth being undone. The horizontality of 'weft' as a word contrasts with the verticality of the quasi-inverted shapes of the 'f' and 't'. The non-linguistic nature of this vertical visuality – seen, not read – establishes a tension with the horizontal direction of reading 'weft'. The undoing of the word 'weft' as writing occurs like the unraveling of the horizontal weft and the vertical warp in weaving. Vertical seeing thus opposes horizontal reading within the metaphor of an unraveling weave.

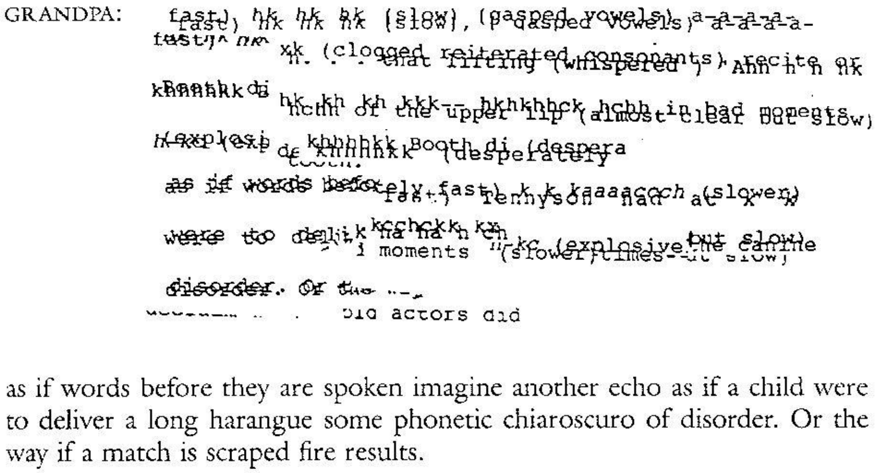
At first glance, Howe's attempt to convey absent marginal voices in her historically-oriented poetics from the eighties onward distinguish her later experiments from her early ones. Yet it is through the same concept of a "stammering" voice (i.e. incompletely silent) that allows a continuity between her earlier play of "words as objects" and her later historical poetry. One can then understand how her poetics combines two seemingly disparate notions: an emphasis on sound coupled with an increasingly fragmentary mark-making. This way, Howe can frame her visual experiments as a reformulating of the visual poetics in both concrete poetry and Olson. What could equally emerge as sound in her poetry then are the pauses and the silences engendered by the resulting difficulty of reading the unorthodox typography and the layout. Microfonts, then, appeared in her early 21st century works as a continuation and further reformulation of this relation between sound and sight in a way not limited to verbal meaning.

Ether Either: Microfont as a Dramatic Text

Howe's tendency to break textuality into smaller and smaller shards did eventually arrive at fragmentation at the level of the letter (microfonts). A key text for helping us understand the tie between them microfonts and her ealier works is her 1998 essay "Ether

Either." Part of an anthology of essays on sound in poetry, "Ether Either" weaves accounts of Howe's own migratory childhood with those of Henry Irving's, a Cornwall-born thespian. The essay's relevance lies in the connection Howe makes between a stammering voice, of which Howe already wrote about in 1990, and its possible corresponding visual mark in the microfont.

Irving struggled to succeed on the stage due to the "debilitating **stammer**" he suffered when he was twelve ("Ether Either" 117). In conjunction to the narrative on Irving is a typographic collage that corresponds to Howe's reminiscence of her American grandfather: "**Mark** Anthony DeWolfe Howe was a **stutterer**; so was his brother Wallace (Figure IV.8)."



GRANDPA:

as if words before they are spoken imagine another echo as if a child were to deliver a long harangue some phonetic chiaroscuro of disorder. Or the way if a match is scraped fire results.

Figure IV.8. Susan Howe, "Ether Either" (1998), 123, collage with continuing prose.

The microfonts in this collage resonate with the description of her grandfather's speech impediment. First of all, Howe frames the microfonts on this collage in the visual layout of a dramatic text. This visual marker of pronunciation makes the collage a re-presentation of her grandfather's stammer. This visual/dramatic link in turn connects Mark Howe's stammer with the stage actor Irving's. As a potential dramatic text, Howe pushes us to occupy the role of the grandfather's speech—a common motif of modern lyric poetry after Mill—while blocking the possibility by sporadically precluding regular textual closure and phoneticity. Besides the layout assigning a dramatic role (GRANDPA:), the theatricality is also signaled by the word 'actors' in the collage's lower part. The prosopopoeia that occurs here is not the neat division between an absent person's literal silence and metaphoric life through an imagined speech. It is equally a textual and visual process replete with its performative stutters. Note the hesitancy, the "echo" of "as if's" in the prose ("**as if** words **before** they are spoken **imagine another echo as if** a child **were** to deliver…"). These echoes of as ifs emerge visually in the collage's lower left jumbled "as if words befo/ were to del/ disorder." Between the scanned word-collage and the typeset prose occur crossings between prose and collage, Howe's and Mark's voice.

Especially revealing is Howe's painterly description of voice in the prose immediately following the collage: "as if words before they are spoken imagine another echo as if a child were to deliver a long harangue some phonetic **chiaroscuro** of disorder. Or the way if a match is scraped fire erupts ("Ether Either" 123)" The contrast of chiaroscuro could metaphorically cross over to the opposition between voice and silence in speech. If chiaroscuro usually functions as *splendor* (highlight), the phonetic chiaroscuro in a stutter does not highlight the words instead of threatening it. This way silence enters into a disorderly *internal* conflict with sound in speech, as embodied by Mark Howe's stammer.

But the incompleteness of the mirroring in the collage also suggests skepticism about the ability to do so completely. The visual echoes of "as if words…" in the collage could still function glottographically while also making the conflation between the prose and the collage, between Howe's and Mark's voice impossible. The vocally unpronounceable microfonts clash with the clear assignment of a dramatic speaker. With microfonts Howe plays with the uncritical assumption of a dramatic identification of a speaker in reading—an historically influential model of poetry reading after Mill. By using microfonts to suggest stammer, though, Howe also challenges the assumption of a pure non-linguistic visuality. She does not let go of aurality as mediated through text. Tied to aurality, microfonts account for silences as much as sounds. Hence Howe's decision to use microfonts to enact stammer.

Howe's microfont collage insist on aurality (as disorderly silence) in the form of a legible dramatic imperative (GRANDPA:) while blocking the possibility of performing Mark Howe's stammer in any orderly glottographic manner. The dramatic imperative presupposes speech while the microfonts, on the right side of the colon, threaten its actualization. It is a willful imposition of silence as existing within the boundary of speech mediated by a dramatic text. So Howe's stammer constitutes the point in microfont where one does not achieve either a complete speech or a complete visual muteness that stands outside language. As a challenge to glottography, which only assumes phonemes and morphemes, microfonts become aural in Howe's imaginative attempt to account for silence.

By juxtaposing microfonts with a legible dramatic text layout Howe insists on what seems impossible: the simultaneous push for an asemantic aurality and visuality. Howe's microfonts stuttering marks, visual attempts to convey silence as part of aural phenomenon—the dramatic assignment of the role 'GRANDPA' visually indicates an imperative to speak—no matter how disorderly and acoustically threatening it becomes in a stuttered speech. Now we can see that articulating this interweaving relation between silence and voice in Howe's microfonts is not only key to highlighting an instance of an intersign work, but also to argue for the centrality of this intersemiotic approach to mark-making in

Howe's poetics. Howe's appropriation of Mark Howe's stammer sets silence not as an absolute boundary separating writing and speech. Through an aestheticized stuttering, silence is disorderly woven with sound in speech as microfont: the stuttering mark suggestively scoring Mark's stammer.[29]

II. Breaking the Letter

The Errand Sign and The Concrete Trace

"Ether Either" has provided us a glimpse of how silence remains inscribed and is inscribed as remains in Howe's microfont collages. This pairing of sound and sight through silence repeats itself with the surge of microfonts in pages like those of "Fragment of the Wedding Dress." In these pages readers discover the "perfect marriage" of music/ word/ object in a mutually negating manner, colliding most violently in the sliver poem. Now I return to the poem to flesh out its intersemiotic potential, where the intensity of the text/image clash only becomes clear if we take into account the poem's relation with other parts in *Labadie Tract*.

The flight of Howe's poem from reading may in turn push us to consider the set of marks on a pictorial level. Shifting back from a landscape (side) to a portrait (bottom) viewing orientation—the traditional reading orientation—one could make out a shape of a vertical sliver. In his review, Andrew Zawacki reads the sliver in biblical terms, suggesting the Word's/world's imminent perceptual disappearance:

> The Word, once said to be "In the beginning," is exhausted and wanes at the end—of the world, or at least of this poem. The typefaces of "Fragment," some bolded, others italicized, many illegible or misaligned, are resolved only to the degree they disappear. A *textus* in the

> dual sense of textile and text, the volatile poem is a polygraphy that atrophies, or entropies, unraveling to barely a **thread**.[30]

By describing the sliver poem as both textile and text unraveling to a "thread", Zawacki brings attention to the title and the dress fragment. *Mutatis mutandis*, the text-to-image jump could apply to the microfonts. Illegible as text, the last poem stands as a picture. The radicality of the image as the negation of textuality appears very strongly in this light,.

Seen as a sliver, the poem's shape also suggests a cut on a page not unlike Lucio Fontana's cut canvasses in his *Concetto Spaziale* series from the 50s and 60s. A similar but more appropriate point of comparison, though, would be the concrete poem "Fontana" by the Czech dissident collagist Jiří Kolář (Figure IV.9).

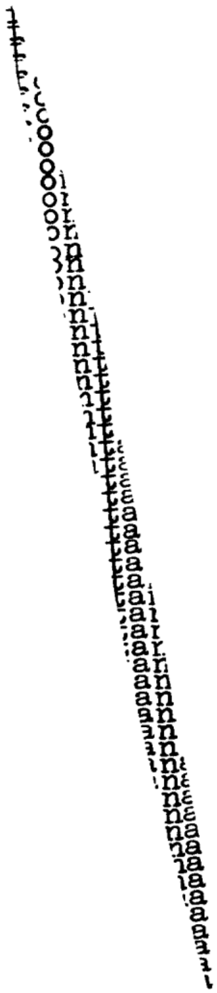


Figure IV.9. Jiří Kolář, "Fontana," from *Das Sprechende Bild,* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1971, 33.

So far I found one review of Howe's *Souls of the Labadie Tract* does treat the last page as a cut the way the shape of Kolář's poem represents Fontana's cut. "In *Souls*," Kim Minkus writes, "Howe moves closer to the purity of the blank page; essays are brief and the use of image is scant. The final poem appears as a vertical cut in the page, with portions of letters barely showing through – a broken mark on the purity of the paper."[31] Kolář's concrete poetry appeared in both Williams's *Anthology of Concrete Poetry* and Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, the two collections of concrete poetry that Howe definitely read around the time she published "End of Art."[32] Though "Fontana" is included in neither, both anthologies nonetheless contain a similarly shaped poem titled "Brancusi," which itself imitates Brancusi's *Bird in Space* sculptures. Considering the similarity between the last poem of Howe's "Wedding Dress" and Kolář's "Fontana," it becomes increasingly hard to read her earlier rejection of concrete poetry at face value. What we find in her last poem then seems to be two continuations of earlier concretism. One is the harmonius marriage between the supposed content of a poem (i.e. broken letters spelling trace of a stain) and its form or shape (an image of a sliver). The other is the more radical tendency after early concrete poetry to move away gradually from whole letters and situate silence as that which negates textuality (which appears in Kolář's other works).

Yet, as "Ether Either" shows, Howe reframes the resulting illegibility in her own idiosyncratic poetics, which hinges on the conception of silence as not lying outside the spectrum of possible sounding in poetry.[33] How can one then mark silence as an acoustic element in Howe's microfont? This is the question that will guide us in the remaining pages. In the opening I suggested that, when scanning the poem as an intersign, one will find the pictorial interpretation faltering as much as the textual interpretation. Before showing how the pictorial interpretation can fall short as well, I shall first highlight and acknowledge the poem's pictorial potential as a sliver. My goal in doing so is to articulate how much the poem's tension between pictoriality and textuality reflects a larger clash between text and image in *Labadie Tract*. First of all, strongly reinforcing the potential of the poem to be seen as a sliver is the simultaneity of microfonts's appearance in the book with a reproduction of the dress fragment of Sarah Edwards, the wife of the 18th-century Puritan preacher Jonathan

Edwards (Figure IV.10). In this respect, the appearance of the dress fragment as image coincides with the emergence of illegibility.

Understanding the opposition the image poses to textuality, however, further requires a longer detour in comparing the image of a fragmented woven cloth to the metaphoric evocation of writing as weaving in *Labadie Tract*'s opening, which focuses on Jonathan Edwards himself. Once the relation between the dress fragment and the book's opening text becomes clear, however, the same image of the dress also paradoxically contains a pictorial detail that will allow us to perceive the last poem obstinately remaining as textual illegibility. We will find that the movement of text to image in the microfonts can never be total because they remain stubbornly intersemiotic, in the end lining up with Howe's own poetics of silence. I admit that the path I pursue in the following pages can seem cumbersome, but my insistence in doing so is to show even more the demands Howe's illegible microfonts put upon our interpretation.

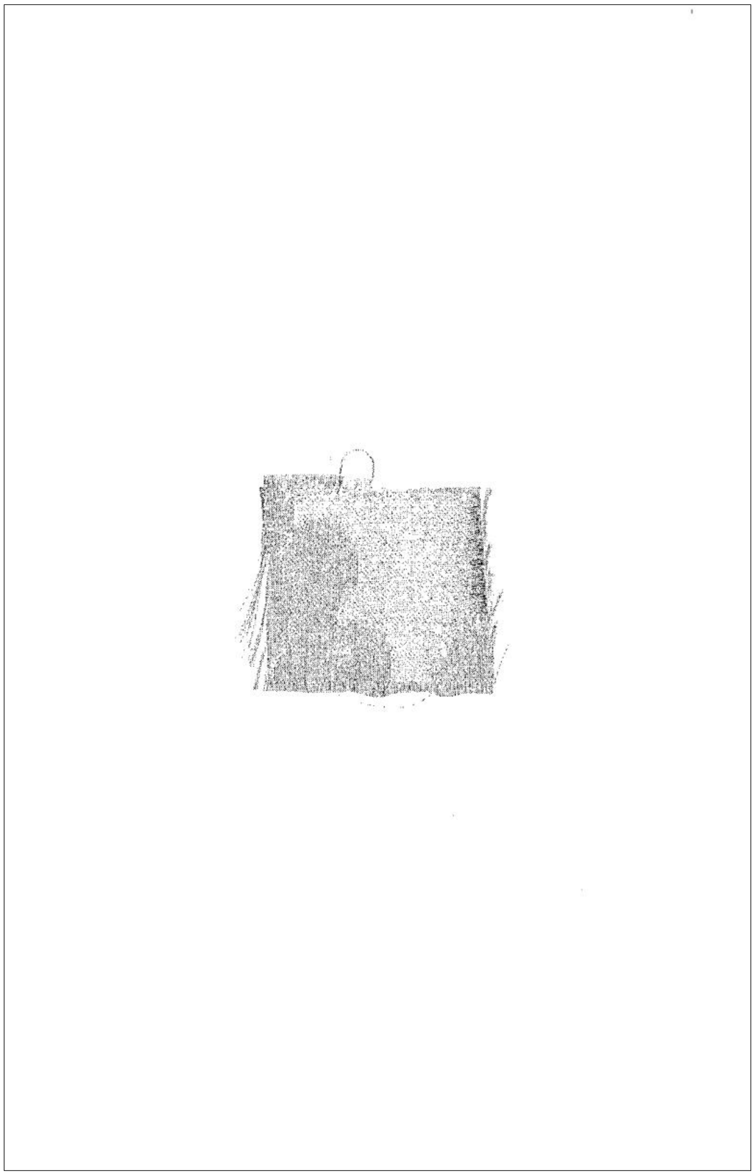


Figure IV.10. Dress Fragment from “Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierrepont Edwards,” in Howe, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, n.p..

From Text to Image

Like in *Eikon Basilike*, in *Labadie Tract* Howe again links fragmentation to a metaphor of writing as weaving. In the book, Edwards and the Modernist poet Wallace Stevens are key predecessors for Howe’s play with text/ile metaphor and textual fragmentation in *Labadie*

Tract. While Stevens' relevance here cannot be overstated, I will nonetheless limit my discussion to Edwards.[34]

Labadie Tract opens with two epigraphs by Edwards and Stevens on silkworms:

> The silk-worm is a remarkeable [sic] type of Christ, which when it dies yields us that of which we make such glorious clothing. Christ became a worm for our sakes, and by his death kindled that righteousness with which believers are clothed, and thereby procured that we should be clothed with robes of glory. (Vid. Image 46. See II Sam. 5.23,24; and Ps 84.6: The valley of mulberry trees.)
>
> The poet makes silk dresses out of worms.

On the page titled "Errand" immediately following the epigraphs, Howe describes Edwards' habit of pinning small paper notes on his coat while in commute. Similarly Howe also describes Stevens commuting while writing on scrap papers in another entry titled "Errand." Here is a passage from Edwards' "Errand":

> As an idea occurred to him, he pinned a small piece of paper on his clothing, fixing in his mind an association between the location of the paper and the particular insight. On his return home, he unpinned each slip and wrote down its associated thought according to location. "Extricate all questions from the least confusion by words or ambiguity of words so that the Ideas shall be left naked" he once wrote. Poetry is love for the felt fact stated in sharpest, most agile and detailed lyric terms. Words give clothing to hide our nakedness. I love to imagine this gaunt and solitary traveler covered in scraps, riding through the woods and fields of Massachusetts and Connecticut (Howe, *Labadie Tract*, 9).

The quoted passage in the excerpt ("Extricate…")comes from stylistic notes he wrote on a manuscript for scientific writings: "When I would prove anything, to take special care that the matter be so stated that it shall be seen most clearly and distinctly by everyone just how much I would prove; and to extricate all questions from the least confusion or ambiguity of words, **so that the ideas shall be left naked** (my emphasis)."[35] Writing for Edwards thus should be clear, expressing "Ideas" in their "nakedness." Edwards' aim for clarity and non-ambiguity actually reflects his larger Puritan sensibility concerning language. According to the historian Perry Miller, Edwards' preference for simple language rejected the ostentatiously ornamental rhetoric of Scholastic theology.[36] Rhetorical figures were mere ornaments that, when taken to the extreme, can threaten agreement on the interpretation of Biblical passages. If the mind frames a proposition on Christ's suffering, metaphors such as the silkworm and its resulting cloth only constitute detachable ornaments, " a separable gem affixed to the logical structure (Miller, "Introduction," 13)." So behind Edwards' advocacy of plain language was a belief in that simplicity leading to one unadorned, absolute interpretation and revelation.

After citing Edwards' dictum for stylistic clarity to reveal "ideas" [sic] in their nakedness, Howe wrote two sentences on poetry: "**Poetry** is love for the felt fact stated in sharpest, most agile and detailed lyric terms. **Words give clothing to hide our nakedness**." Curiously, Howe's comment on words as clothes derives from a collection of texts by Edwards from which *Labadie Tract*'s epigraph is also derived. Here is the passage to which she subtly alludes:

> **We, in our fallen state, need garments to hide our nakedness** (having lost our primitive glory) which were needless in our state of innocency. And whatsoever God has provided for mankind to clothe themselves with, seems to represent Jesus Christ and his righteousness[…] And the beautiful clothing from the silkworm, that that worm yields us at his death, represents the glorious clothing we have for our souls by the death of him who became a man, who is a worm; and the son of man, who is a worm, and who said he was a worm and no man [Psalms 22:6]. […] And Christ, through exceeding great sufferings, yields us his righteousness, that is as fine linen, clean and white, and presents us without spot to the Father (*Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, 56-57).

Reflecting the passage that becomes *Labadie Tract*'s epigram, in this passage Edwards asserts that mankind's salvation does not imply a return to a primordial nakedness ("innocency"). Rather, Jesus turns himself into "fine linen, clean and white," to clothe man upon being presented "without spot" in his return to grace.

In turn, by combining different texts from Edwards' writing Howe's "Errand" in effect juxtaposes two metaphoric uses of nakedness that were originally separate in Edwards:

one to describe Edenic innocence, another to characterize a plain and simple language. Yet what is odd in her citation is the substitution of "words" for Edwards' original metaphor:

Edwards- We, in our fallen state, **need garments to hide our nakedness**…

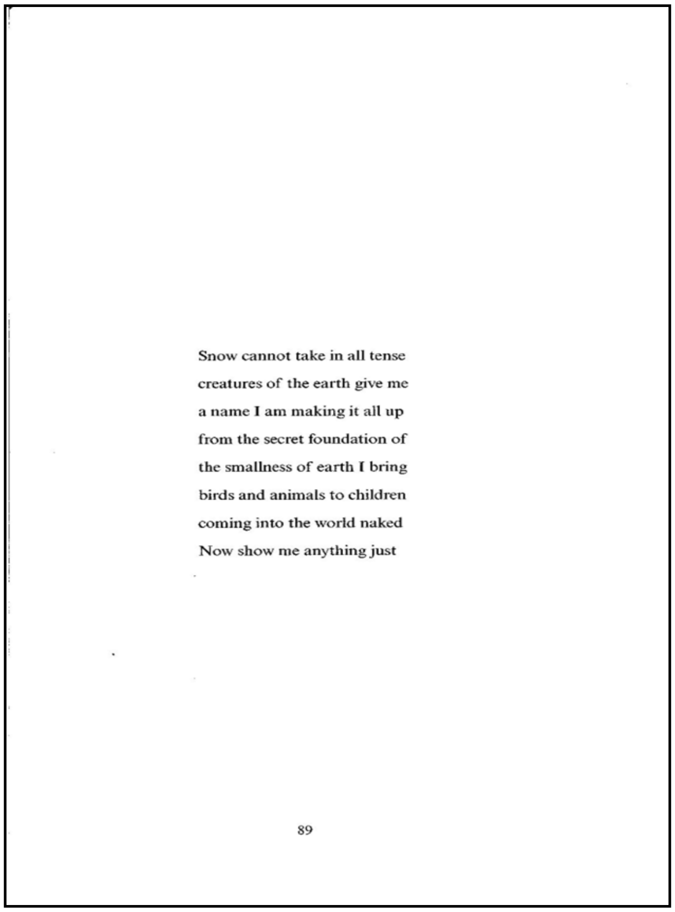
Howe- **Words give clothing to hide our nakedness**.

Thus Howe implicitly links Edwards's theological metaphor even closer to Stevens' poetological metaphor of clothing ("The poet makes silk **dresses** out of worms.") By linking the weaving/clothing metaphor to poetry and not merely to language in the general sense, in the subtlest manner possible Howe foregrounds the possibility of understanding the metaphor of writing as clothing as something that *obscures* ideas rather than revealing them in their nakedness, thus also subtly going against Edwards' stylistic dictum for clarity.

Years before the *Labadie Tract*, in *My Emily Dickinson* (1985) Howe describes Emily Dickinson's "My Life Stood- a Loaded Gun" as conveying an equally plain Puritan style : "Written in the plain style of Puritan literary tradition, there are no complications of phrasing. Each word is deceptively simple, deceptively easy to define." [37] Yet for Howe Dickinson's plain style *hinders* the path to meaning: "But definition seeing [*sic*] rather than perceiving, hearing and not understanding, is only the shadow of meaning. Like all poems on the trace of the holy, this one remains outside the protection of specific solution (Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 35)." The simplest word describing the simplest fact reverberates with abstraction precisely due to its simplicity. Howe's judgment here echoes Miller's valuation that Puritan literal style enables both realism and "implicit symbolism" which overflows with "spiritual overtones (*My Emily Dickinson*, 54)." In this view Dickinson, whom Howe discusses in relation to Edwards, inherited Edwards' theology in the most pessimistic light. Dickinson escapes "the violence of definition," making it impossible to capture her "in one interpretation (*My Emily Dickinson*, 106)." The result is not the revelation of "Truth" in the simple Puritan style that Edwards envisioned, only "mystery beyond mystery (Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 138)." This theological negativity notably precisely becomes an affirmative generic feature of poetry and its interpretation: "Poetry is affirmation in negation (138)." Howe's privileging of words' ambiguity qua poetry means that poetic writing in "Errand," metaphorized as clothing, can be desirable for its potential to *obscure* as it is to *reveal*. In mutual determination, Howe's implicit privileging of interpretive uncertainties works in tandem with her focus on textual fragments. It makes sense then for Howe to end "Errand" by noting her love of imagining Edwards' coat covered in scraps.

Once we are aware that what is foregrounded in the text-as-weave metaphor in "Errand" is its latent obscurity, we can now appreciate how Sarah Edwards' dress fragment simultaneously forms a conceptual opposition to textuality while in a way continuing and transforming that metaphor qua text into image. Sarah's dress conceptually enacts a reversal of Edwards' scrap-embellished coat. Instead of paper on clothing, the page shows a representation (as scanned reproduction) of fabric affixed on paper. As image, the dress potentially functions as something that covers writing, signaling illegibility. This tension between text and image is possible given the dress' chiastic relation with Edwards' scrap notes on his coat. In addition, the dress fragment appears in a section where microfonts indicate a flight from textual legibility. The gender also shifts-- from Edwards the theologian to Sarah the devout wife. The dress's main effect is the literalization of the weaving metaphor that becomes even more performative considering its co-appearance with microfonts in "Wedding Dress." Sarah's dress fragment is again reproduced in full color as the cover for Howe's 2010 collection *That This*. The word Howe uses to describe the fragment is telling: “I keep going back in my mind to the **tiny square remnant** of Sarah Pierrepont’s wedding dress. This love relic has lasted over two hundred years in the form of a Prussian blue **scrap**.”[38] Howe’s characterization of the fragment— “tiny square remnant” and “scrap”—reinforces the chiastic relation between Edwards’ scrap paper to Sarah’s “Prussian blue scrap.” Paradoxically, accounting for the dress fragment’s suggestion of negating textuality necessitates an understanding of the negation in the writing-as-weaving metaphor as *legible text*. So even when the dress fragment seems to signal an end of text, that sense of rupture could only become apparent through its relation back to writing itself in *Labadie Tract*’s opening “Errand.”

The dress piece’s placement in the book furthermore strategically evokes both tradition and its disintegration. Its rectangularity recalls the stanzas’ shape and layout in the preceding pages (Figure IV.11).



Snow cannot take in all tense
creatures of the earth give me
a name I am making it all up
from the secret foundation of
the smallness of earth I bring
birds and animals to children
coming into the world naked
Now show me anything just

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Figure IV.11. Susan Howe, Souls of the Labadie Tract (2007), p.89.

All the poems in the section prior to "Fragment" are framed as centered rectangles. The rectangularity in these pages usually forms either a monostanzaic or a bistanzaic poem. As a border, the dress fragment separates the book's more traditional print poems from Howe's microfont collages. Conceptually, the dress's placement also marks the border between the textual fragmentation in Edwards' paper scraps and in Howe's own microfonts. At this stage it would be appropriate to distinguish semantic non-clarity – ambiguous metaphors, polyvalent words – from elementary illegibility. In the context of "Fragment of the Wedding Dress," elementary illegibility becomes an immediate issue in comprehending microfonts. The aphoristic writings of Edwards represent a compositional fragmentation that Howe's microfont poetry takes to another level. This is not to say that his writing is by any means facile or entirely coherent. Edwards also amassed a huge collection of short prose fragments which went undeveloped; they are only posthumously published in several volumes under the title *Miscellanies*. And this basic legibility is exactly what Howe's microfonts exploit and problematize. The dress' rectangularity also recalls the scraps Stevens and Edwards carried while in commute, a resemblance Zawacki also notes while simultaneously alluding to the unfinished fragments of Pascal's apology for religion: "Stevens and Jonathan Edwards […] each composed *pensées* while in transit, committing perceptions to paper slips that might well have resembled the swatch of Edwards's wife's dress (Zawacki, "Ghosts," n.p.)." The resemblance between the "paper slips" and the dress fragment hints at the link one could draw between the latter and Howe's stanzas. Centered on the page, the squared piece of cloth also mirrors the layout Howe often uses for her rectangular stanzas.

From Image to Text

Through the metaphor of an unraveling weave, we can now perceive a move from text to mute image (opening metaphor in "Errand"→dress fragment→breakdown of fonts to a vertical sliver). But, inversely, by looking more carefully at the dress fragment as *image*, there is a way to reverse the direction towards mute abstraction. For one, there remains the possibility of further fragmentation in the wedding dress in the jagged threads of its edges. While defining the rectangularity, the edges also suggest roughness and disintegration by virtue of the visible individual threads. The roughness thus anticipates the breakdown of fonts in the following pages. The dress' individual threads that are nevertheless still held together later break down into single lines, notably evoked in the last page.

Following the suggestion of further fragmentation in the wedding dress, one could then go even further with the fragmentation on the last page. In line with the dress fragment's edges, the intermark spaces in the last poem of "Wedding Dress" not only suggest the possible interruption of perceiving the poem as a pictorial shape of a sliver, but also a further segmentation of the marks into discrete shards: a disintegration from the dress (stanza) to the thread (last page's line) to the dot. So the interpretation of the last poem as a vertical silver falters if we account for the spaces residing between the marks. This is where I respectfully disagree then with reviews like Minkus' and Zawacki's, both of which deem the last poem as an intimation of a cut à la Kolář's "Fontana" or a thread associated with the text/tile metaphor. Implicit in Minkus' interpretation, for one, is a pictorial presupposition of not only a line, but a cut through which letter portions reveal themselves. This additional presupposition essentially constitutes a spatial inversion, where something above the page is seen as something under. For Minkus the poem's two-dimensionality pictorially represents a three-dimensional incision. But the marks suggesting a pictorial cut are actually scanned reproduction inscribed on the surface, not something burrowed underneath an incised page.[39] It is a vertical cut *on* the page, not "in the page"-- any possible letters something barely showing *on*, not "through." In retrospect, to view the poem in a shape of a sliver means performing another kind of closure by filling in the spaces between the marks. While plausible, much like the textual closure, the pictorial closure could equally be shown not to capture the further complexity of *Labadie Tract*'s last poem as intersemiotic.

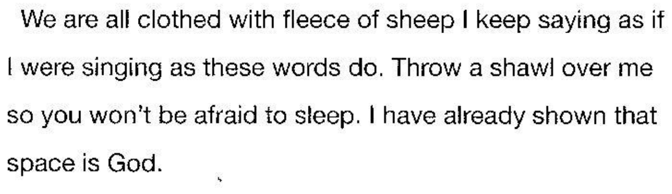
If anything, Howe's idiosyncratically hyper-aural poetics puts a demand for the intermark spaces to be taken into some account. Disrupting the move from text to mute image, it is within these intermark spaces that language-as-text (re)-emerges and semiotically disturbs the image of the sliver. This would occur we view the intermark spaces as interword and interletter spaces, which is plausible given that Howe produced the manuscript by cutting a text. Text intrudes in these gaps not as a sound instead of as indications of pauses between words and letters. In the absence of full letters, the interword and interletter spaces become a series of "visual noises" interrupting the clean picture of a thread. The accumulation of interword and interletter spaces in Howe's poem is actually the locus where language resides as silence. But the silence in these spaces is the emphatically banal but necessary part of language instead of its categorical exclusion. In a double move, Howe turns the blank spaces into the features that would actually both support the image of the sliver (as subjective contour to be filled in) and simultaneously disintegrate that pictorial possibility. It is a constant intrusion of language-as-text as negative graphic spaces between words. Interword and interletter spaces form a crucial part of ordering alphabetic writing into uniform and syntactically disjoint units. In these spaces resides therefore the elusive ghost of textual legibility that haunts microfonts.

An admittedly possible objection to reading the intermark spaces as interword spaces is its circular presupposition of the marks as being part of text, an aspect that is itself precisely problematic. Interpreting the intermark spaces as interword spaces to argue for the presence of language already presupposes text itself in the first place as the frame of interpretation. Like Minkus' review, this implies reading the marks as letters not by means of recognition but through interpretive closure and inference. *Labadie Tract*, though, seems to encourage the circularity for two reasons. First, Howe writes elsewhere in the book that "lots of blank space is essential to acoustically locate each dead center phoneme and allophone tangle somewhere between low comedy and lyric sanctity (*Labadie Tract*, 18)." Applied to the last page of "Fragment," the passage could read as the formally graphic necessity of spaces between words to mark linguistically the oral separation between words or even phonemes and allophones, the phonetic variants of a given phoneme.

Following the first, the second reason is that the insistence on language-as-text, if it *appears* at all, emerges as blank space. This is the poem's radical aurality. The blank spaces in Howe's last poem accumulate to constitute a chain of silence. The catch in admitting this premise is that the notion of aurality operating in the book has become considerably expanded: language survives as text in *Labadie Tract*'s last poem as indications of its silence. These interword and interletter spaces, crucial as they have been in the evolution of Western writing, are not themselves considered *sensu strictissimo* as linguistic signs. If we define glottography as textual indication of phonetics, then the poem's aurality moves away from it by using visual indications in a text to mark silences. Thus is the link between text and speech retained without relying on regular definition of glottography. If anything, the intermark spaces operate equally in within a pictorial frame. Exploring the issues of treating the poem pictorially paradoxically also allows us to conceive the poem's possible further pictorial disintegration to a fragment smaller than the pictorial line.

In the end, what are the dots, what are the minuscule dashes at the margins of the poem? In line with *The Labadie Tract*'s poetics of fragmentation – the dual nature of the wedding dress scrap– the marginal dot can potentially stand on its own. At that *point* one might well wonder how the dot would function as a sign. As text, it is not a period since it is supposedly a part of a letter. It might be an image, yet perpetually unclear an image of *what*, because the possible shape of a sliver is annulled by the intermark spaces. What if in the beginning was not the word but that intersemiotic point of visuality, assenting neither to textuality (words) nor to pictoriality (sliver)? The biggest tension in this poem, then, is that any insistence of language as manuscript origin and generic expectation perpetually clash with a reader's frustration in encountering the marginal dots and lines. Language through blank textual spaces appears authoritatively like the absent and inaccessible God at the center of Edwards' severe Puritan theology.

Coincidentally, the penultimate poem of "Fragment" on the facing page appears with its basic legibility intact (Figure IV.12).



We are all clothed with fleece of sheep I keep saying as if
I were singing as these words do. Throw a shawl over me
so you won't be afraid to sleep. I have already shown that
space is God.

Figure IV.12. Susan Howe, *Souls of the Labadie Tract* (2007), 124.

The lines come from Edwards' writings, and among them is an appropriation of the following passage from "Of Being": "I have already said as much that space is God (*Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, 203)." In changing the sentence to "I have already **shown** that space is God," Howe again foregrounds the mute visuality *within* the bounds of language. Like an absent but authoritative God, language is blank space, the *topos* on which any visual-textual experiment is possible.

Conclusion

Silence thus registers both graphically and acoustically in Howe's poetics, a banal point were it not for her insistence on its link to an inscribed mark. Besides demonstrating the salience of concepts such as the intersign and scanning, in this chapter I also hope to have shown the need for critics to read her later works fully in light of the many cross-experimentations in art and poetry during the 60s as well as her later historically haunted poetics. It was after all during the time of her production of microfonts that she ironically again looked to art for a model. Right around the time of publishing *That This*, she again reaffirmed the imagination of silence as capable to be marked acoustically during a talk at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2007:

> I just have to say that I've done a lot of work with manuscripts. Emily Dickinson, particularly, and I think her late manuscripts should be shown as drawings. . . . [**Joseph**] **Beuys** said one of the most wonderful things in one of his lectures, that I always say now when I'm trying to persuade people about manuscripts. He said that "every mark on paper is an acoustic signal." That is something I truly believe. Every piece of a letter, every shape of a letter, every word, how words are placed on the page, the minute you put a mark on a page, it's acoustic.[40]

David Grubbs, the composer who collaborated with Howe on two readings and recordings that include sections of *Labadie Tract*, wrote of his simultaneous confusion and fascination of the "curious formulation" that "every mark on paper is an acoustic signal":

> What does it mean? What does it mean to Susan? Does it mean that every mark is capable of being translated into sound? Does it mean that every mark waits to be translated into its unique, determinate sound? Should the emphasis in this particular quotation — "every mark on paper is an acoustic signal" — be the suggestion that encoded within visual imagery is the experience of duration?/ It was with this statement that Susan concluded an introduction to her own work. There was a long pause. She also seemed to be weighing the many things that this statement could mean. It was an especially rich silence (Grubbs, "Shadowy Hush Twilight.")

Just as the composer ponders the strange possibility, ours is the task to contemplate a similarly strange conception of her typographically experimental poetry, the complexity of which only appears within an intersemiotic framework between text and image.

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[1] My vague conflation of ‘marks,’ ‘trace,’ and ‘stain’ indicates the immeasurability of these marks as disjoint units. They are not graphemes, the smallest measurable units in a writing system, instead of marks which could at times be *read* and *completed* as letters. Keep in mind also that we are seeing a print text, not an actual manuscript in which Howe did cut an original source text. A generous interpretation incorporating both manuscript and print at most could only state they were but are not letters (trace).

[2] This is not the place for a full presentation on the general relation between Howe’s poetry and her historical research. Fortunately, that relation has pre-occupied the majority of scholarship on her. See, among others, Marjorie Perloff, “"Collision or Collusion with History": The Narrative Lyric of Susan Howe” in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Winter, 1989), 518-533; Ming-Qian Ma, “Poetry as History Revised: Susan Howe's "Scattering as Behavior toward Risk"” in *American Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (Winter, 1994), 716-737; Ming-Qian Ma, “Articulating the Inarticulate: Singularities and the Counter-Method in Susan Howe” in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995), 466-489; Peter Nicholls, “Unsettling the Wilderness: Susan Howe and American History” in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Winter, 1996), 586-601; Peter Nicholls, “"The Pastness of Landscape": Susan Howe's "Pierce-Arrow"” in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Autumn, 2002), 441-460; Megan Williams, “Howe Not to Erase(Her): A Poetics of Posterity in Susan Howe's "Melville's Marginalia"” in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), 106-132; Marjorie Perloff, “Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's Albany, Susan Howe's Buffalo” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Spring, 1999), 405-434; Fiona Green, “ "Plainly on the Other Side": Susan Howe's Recovery” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring, 2001), 78-101; Jenny L. White, “The Landscapes of Susan Howe's "Thorow"” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (Summer, 2006), 236-260; Gerald L. Bruns ,“Voices of Construction: On Susan Howe's Poetry and Poetics (A Citational Ghost Story)” in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring, 2009), 28-53. For monographs on Howe that also discuss her works in relation to history, see Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: the Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002; Stephen Collis. *Through words of others: Susan Howe and anarcho-scholasticism*. Victoria, B.C.: ELS Editions, 2006; Will Montgomery, *The Poetry of Susan Howe: History, Theology, Authority*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

[3] Susanne Rohr, “Arrows to Pierce Dust”: Susan Howe’s philosophical Poetry,” in *Another Language – Poetic Experiments in Britain and North America*, edited by Kornelia Freitag and Katharina Vester. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2008, 43.

[4] Susan Howe, “Introduction: Frame Structures,” in *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979*. New York: New Directions, 1996, 3.

[5] Susan Howe, “‘Encloser,’” in Charles Bernstein, ed., *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. New York: ROOF Inc., 1990, 192.

[6] John Palatella, “An End of Abstraction: An Essay on Susan Howe’s Historicism,” *Denver Quarterly* Vol. 29, No. 3 (Winter 1995), 75.

[7] Susan Howe, “The End of Art”, *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1974), 7.

[8] Howe, “The End of Art”, 5. See Ad Rseinhardt, *Art-as-Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*. Ed. Barbara Rose Stella. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991 [1975], 82.

[9] In the essay, Howe also links the multi-directionaility of Finlay’s *Homage* to the monochromes of Malevich and Reinhardt:

> The black (figure) and block (ground) balances with lock (stability) against lack (instability). Something open versus something closed. Are lack and black one and the same image, or exactly opposite? Are block and lock alike? All this is exactly what the title or subject suggested – Malevich’s search for formal invention. Do black and white open or close? Are they absence of presence? Sense or nonsense? Here, just as in Reinhardt, it is hard to separate color from color, shape from shape. Here form and content are completely bound (locked) together. [Howe, “The End of Art,” 7.]

[10] Susan Howe, Letter to John Taggart, Nov 13, 1981. MSS 11-box 16-folder 17, Papers of John Taggart, Archive for New American Poetry. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California San Diego.

[11] Cf. Solt: “Arranging it spatially so that we can read the word in four directions, [Gomringer] is able to introduce an element of play into the "reading" of the poem that captures the nature of the wind far more truly than a longer poetic statement of many words. The letters actually seem to float as if the wind were acting upon

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them.” [Mary Ellen Solt, “A World Look at Concrete Poetry,” in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, edited by Mary Ellen Solt. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968, 9.]

[12] Susan Howe, Notebook. MSS 201-Box 41-Folder 4, Papers of Susan Howe, Archive of New American Poetry. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California-San Diego.

[13] I thank Yopie Prins for this suggestion.

[14] In more idiomatic English: “From the viewpoint of the eternal.”

[15] The syntactic ambiguity in attributing the singing to either the stone or the trees should not detract from my point about the figuration of a voice on the page.

[16] Susan Howe, Letter to John Taggart, Feb 10, 1985. MSS 11-box 16-folder 19, Papers of John Taggart, Archive of New American Poetry. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California-San Diego.

[17] Susan Howe, Letter to Charles Bernstein, May 10, 1984. MSS 519-box 29-folder 10, Papers of Charles Bernstein, Archive of New American Poetry. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California-San Diego.

[18] See Introduction, 27-28.

[19] Peter Nicholls. “Unsettling the Wilderness: Susan Howe and American History.” in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 37, No.4 (Winter 1996), 589.

[20] Susan Howe, “‘Encloser,’” in Charles Bernstein, ed., *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. New York: ROOF Inc, 1990, 192.

[21] As she describes in the opening, *Eikon*’s historical source is Charles I’s *Eikon Basilike*, *The Pourtaicture of His Sacred Majestie in his Solitude and Sufferings*. The king wrote the book—filled with essays, prayers, and emblems—before his public beheading in 1649 as the result of the English civil war. Unsurprisingly, Charles’ work was a defense of the crown. Howe’s *Eikon* itself is more immediately based on the Victorian scholar Edward Almack’s research on the king’s book.

[22] Marjorie Perloff, “After Free Verse: New Nonlinear Poetries” in Marjorie Perloff, *Poetry On & Off the Page: Essays for Emergent Occasions*. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1998, 157.

[23] Marjorie Perloff, “After Free Verse,” 158.

[24] Susan Howe, “*Talisman* Interview, with Edward Foster” in *The Birth-mark: Unsettling the Wilderness in American Literary History*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993, 165.

[25] Marjorie Perloff, Letter to Susan Howe, January 3, 1989. MSS 201—Box 30—Folder 1, Papers of Susan Howe, Archive of New American Poetry. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California-San Diego.

[26] See also Rachel Tzvia Back, *Led by Language: the Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002, 42-44.

[27] Steve McCaffery, Letter to Susan Howe, June 12, 1995. MSS 201-Box 25- Folder 14, Papers of Susan Howe, Archive for New American Poetry. Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California-San Diego.

[28] Here is the passage from Marx’s 1852 text:

> Aber unheroisch, wie die bürgerliche Gesellschaft ist, hatte es jedoch des Heroismus bedurft, der Aufopferung, des Schreckens, des Bürgerkriegs und der Völkerschlachten, um sie auf die Welt zu setzen. Und ihre Gladiatoren fanden in den klassisch strengen Überlieferungen der römischen Republik die Ideale und die Kunstformen, die Selbsttäuschungen, deren sie bedurfte, um den bürgerlich beschränkten Inhalt ihrer Kämpfe sich selbst zu verbergen und ihre Leidenschaft auf der Höhe der großen geschichtlichen Tragödie zu halten. **So hatten auf einer andern Entwicklungsstufe, ein Jahrhundert früher, Cromwell und das englische Volk dem Alten Testament Sprache, Leidenschaften und Illusionen für ihre bürgerliche Revolution entlehnt**.

[Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte.” In *Werke, Band 8*. Berlin DDR: Dietz Verlag 1972, 116.]

[29] The reference to the antanaclasis of the word ‘mark’ here acknowledges Howe’s own punning of the word in an earlier book (1978): “MARK/border/bulwark. an object set up to indicate a boundary or position/hence a

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sign or token/impression or trace[…]*for Mark my father, and Mark my son*[.]" [Susan Howe, "Secret History of the Dividing Line," in *Frame Structures: Early Poems 1974-1979*. New York: New Directions, 1996, 90-91.]

[30] Andrew Zawacki, "Ghosts: Susan Howe's *Souls of the Labadie Tract*," in *Boston Review* online (May/June 2008). URL: http://bostonreview.net/BR33.3/zawacki.php. Accessed May 14, 2011.

[31] Kim Minkus, "*Souls of the Labadie Tract* by Susan Howe: Review," In *The Poetic Front*, Vol.1, No.1 (2008). URL: http://journals.sfu.ca/poeticfront/index.php/pf/article/viewFile/10/8. Accessed May 15, 2011.

[32] See Jiří Kolář, "Brancusi," "Le poème évident," in Solt, ed., *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, 142-143; "Albers," "Brancusi," and "Tinguely," in Williams, ed., *Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, n.p.

[33] Put in comparison Howe's sliver actually goes further than Kolář's in instantiating mute visuality by having absolutely no mark that counts as a letter. "Fontana" still utilizes legible letters and words set in a regular horizontal orientation (strictly speaking: "o,n,t,a,n,a"). The slight downward diagonality of the poem's shape, moreover, suggests the possibility to form Fontana's name by reading left to right, top to bottom. In contrast, we saw already that Howe's poem sets pictoriality and textuality in a clash by setting the potential legibility of the marks as text in a landscape orientation of the page. The pictorial shape of a sliver, on the other hand, would be achieved through perceiving the poem from a portrait orientation.

[34] The book's title itself came from Stevens' Germanic Pennsylvania ancestors the Labadists, 18th-century Dutch Protestants who settled in Pennsylvania. "I found the term 'Labadists,'" Howe explains, "in reference to the genealogical research of Wallace Stevens and his wife Elsie Kachel Moll Stevens during the 1940s." [Susan Howe, *Souls of the Labadie Tract*. New York: New Direction, 23.] "Fragment," *Labadie Tract*'s last section, combines at least two known sources: a documentation of scrap of material relating to Stevens in the Beinecke Rare Book Manuscript Library and the proceedings of the *Transactions of the Connecticut of the Academy of Arts and Sciences* in December 1949. [See Montgomery, *The Poetry of Susan Howe*, 195 ft.37.]

[35] Jonathan Edwards, "Natural Philosophy: Cover-leaf Memoranda," in Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 6: Scientific and Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Wallace E. Anderson. New Haven: Yale UP, 1980, 193. In contrast to the manuscript transcription, Howe's version capitalizes 'ideas' as "Ideas.' The first print version of the memoranda, in Sereno Dwight's *The Life of President Edwards*, also does not capitalize 'ideas.' Dwight's is most likely the version Howe consulted since Miller cited Dwight in the introduction to Edwards' *Images*. See Sereno Dwight, *The Life of President Edwards*. New York: G. & C.H. Carvill, 1830, 702; and Jonathan Edwards, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1977, 141, ft.21.

[36] Perry Miller, "Introduction," in Edwards, *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, 4.

[37] Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*. New York: New Direction, 2007 [1985], 35.

[38] Susan Howe, *That This*, New York: New Directions, 2010, 32.

[39] I owe this insight to Rebecca Porte. (Personal communication)

[40] Susan Howe and David Grubbs, "Soul of the Labadie Tract: A Discussion, School of the Art Institute of Chicago." *SAIC* video (Nov. 15, 2007). URL:http://www.saic-media.net/video/saicmedia_video_intro.php?vFile=art_design/special_collections/joan_flasch/111507_DavidGrubbs. Accessed May 23, 2012.

Quoted in David Grubbs, "Shadowy Hush Twilight: Two Collaborations with Susan Howe," in *Voiceworks* (May 18, 2010). URL: http://www.voiceworks.org.uk/sounding_board/shadowy_hush_twilight_two_collaborations_with_susan_howe_david_grubbs.html. Accessed May 20, 2012.

CODA
Possibilities of Poetry

The crossing between art and poetry in the latter half of the 20th century took many forms. The previous chapters do not present the only—let alone comprehensive—model of understanding illegibility within the intermedia environment that took roots in the 1950s. In some ways, this project qualifies as what Marjorie Perloff terms *arrière-garde*, a critical uncovering of a previous avant-garde that is done "neither with reaction nor with nostalgia for a lost and more desirable artistic era[.]"[1]If there is a "rear guard" component to this dissertation, it is not in trying to uncover hidden artifacts. In the art world, works by Fluxus artists and Twombly continue to be subject to major exhibitions and scholarly exhibitions. As for McCaffery and Howe, the recognition of their works is evident not only in the continually growing secondary literature but also by the major awards they received or were nominated for in the past decade.[2] The "rear guard" component lies rather in investigating how those objects were circulated and received within an intersemiotic crossing of art and poetry.

In the first chapter, taking Twombly's scribbles seriously as literary citations demonstrates how his works form part of the larger reception of classical authors like Sappho in the 20th century. Rather than blocking access to the past, lettristic illegibility resumes the Romantic fragment tradition by playing a key function in enabling modern readers and translators to imagine the past as an accessible and integral whole. It is mistaken, I believe, to take Twombly's citations as either rebellious or merely frivolous. For one, his accurate scribbling of the Sapphic meter within a series on Horace demands a knowledge of Horace's adaptation of the meter in his odes. The other implication of Twombly's script-making is to foreground the interpretive significance of the non-semantic visual aspects of writing; Hence the import of scanning in discussing Twombly. Any interpretation of Twombly's scribbles would fall short if it ignores the details of the different illegibilities in his works (half-occlusive illegibility of his citations, notational illegibility of his signature).

In contrast to Twombly, in Howe and McCaffery one finds two poets whose typographic experiments not only resonate with the inter-arts milieu after the 50s, but also demand an accounting of how our perception and interpretation receive these experiments as objects of visual perception. In *Carnival*'s overprints, for example, the optical illusion of depth perception becomes a relevant factor in understanding them as *reproduced* occlusive illegibilities. This was not the case with the veilings or crossmarks of classical authors in most of Twombly's works (excepting the printwork *8 Odi di Orazio*). Aside from the intersemiotic mark-making, *Carnival*'s hybrid format also invites comparison to different artists' attempt to challenge modernist medium specificity from the late 50s onward. The then-emerging tradition of concrete poetry, out of which *Carnival* emerged, proved to be a key framework for different North American poets to pursue intermedium and intersemiotic experiments on a similar level as 1960s artists and sculptors. Like many of the artists' attempt to rethink their medium, in *Carnival* inheres an equally ambivalent tension: on one hand an emphasis on the materiality of the book (paper, ink), on the other an impulse to break through the material and institutional constraints of the given medium (the ideal of transforming into a gallery wall panel).

As for Howe, we have seen a roundabout and tortuous way in which her late experiments enabled her to form a visually and textually sophisticated response to the experiments she encountered in the 1960s and the 1970s, either within the art world or within the minor but emergent concrete poetry tradition. Through microfonts, she is able to juxtapose (though perhaps not reconciling) two seemingly contradictory tenets in her poetics: a lettristically illegible collages meeting a hyper-aural treatment of marks as acoustic indication of voice. The collision of the two results in a concept of silence that lies within the notion of voice, instead of outside of it—a stubborn retention of a lyric 'I'. The absurdity and strangeness of such a poetics provides exactly the productive occasion for her readers to imagine an ethical attempt to foreground voices Howe considered marginalized from history (i.e. female Puritan antinomians, early American colonists). At the same time, the resulting silence as tied to simultaneously hyper-aural and hypervisual microfonts also points to the failure and impossibility of the project in the first place. The combination of Howe's earlier visual artistic preoccupations and her later historical poetics does not put an end to interpretation instead of actually enabling its multiplication. Her overall body of works, implicitly informed by the poetic tradition of the fragment, peculiarly, then, resonate with Twombly's own fragmentary way of making his inscriptions of classical authors like Sappho strategically illegible. Altogether combined, the different illegibilities in the works of Twombly, McCaffery, and Howe provided particularly difficult challenges and obstacles that actually prove crucial to grasping the full interpretive implications of the 1960s political and artistic utopianism on the artists' and poets' part to question the institutional and formal constraints they perceived as governing the genres, mediums, and sign systems in which they produced their works.

The 1960s indeed was a period in which experimental poets not only looked into the other arts for models and inspirations, but they did so with a willfully far-reaching and eclectic view of what "stuff" poetry could be made of. No longer limited to canons of texts historically defined and taught as poems, experimental figures like Higgins expanded the notion of what could also count as models for writing. Though not all artists or writers thought this way, Higgins was not alone in such a pursuit. To make this point further evident, it is relevant to consider the fate of some of textual experiments by artists from the 60s as they become reframed and reprinted in anthologies.

Even if one cannot discount the specific contexts and the polemics of writing's appearance within the arts, the adoption of the same sign system among the two groups made possible the reception of artists' textual productions, like the conceptualists', beyond their immediate circumstances. While conceptual art ultimately failed to abolish the notion of the art object through the use of text, it nevertheless suggested possibilities for writerly experimentation. Surely the polemical dimensions behind the conceptualists' use of writing would "be lost in the literary world, where it is more readily assumed that print is a material to be read."[3] Yet one unexpected result of conceptual art's use of writing was an expansion of its audience to include experimental poets.[4] A great example was the reception of a piece by the conceptualist Dan Graham. In 1966, Graham published a single-page work consisting of an instruction to the editors of wherever the work appears to present the different variables—such as the number of words, the kind of type used and the percentage of "area not covered by type"—constituting the text's appearance in a given publication. So, it works as a "template" for an editor to "calculate and complete."[5] What is telling is the work's alternating titles as it appeared in different publications. When published in the noted art journal *Aspen* (no.5/6, Fall-Winter 1967), the work was published as "Poem, March 1966" and described as "conceptual poetry". But its subsequent publications in the sixties and the seventies the titles alternated between "Schema" and "Poem-Schema."[6]

Though appearing as "Schema," the inclusion of Graham's piece in a 1970 anthology titled *Possibilities of Poetry* by the "artist/writer" Richard Kostelanetz is notable. Much later in the 21st century, Craig Dworkin and conceptual writer Kenneth Goldsmith continued this reception within a realm closer to poetry by including Graham's piece in the anthology *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (2011) with the title "Poem-Schema."[7] The inclusion of Graham's text in the experimental poetry anthology *Possibilities of Poetry* (1970) is especially telling given that Kostelanetz served as the volume's editor. Like Higgins, Kostelanetz also sought to bridge poetry and art.

Besides in *Possibilities of Poetry*, this tendency is further evident in his curation of *Language & Structure*, a circulating exhibition in 1974 that began in Nova Scotia School of Art and Design, Halifax. (The college itself happened to be a seventies hotbed for conceptualism in Canada.)

Kostelanetz's exhibition was, per the subtitle, "The First Large Definitive Survey of North American Language Art." In the foreword to the catalogue exhibition, Kostelanetz defines "literature", a term appearing with quotation marks, specifically as "the artistic structuring of language[.]"[8] But read in light of the participants of the exhibition, his notion of "artistic structuring" turned out to be extremely catholic. In one stroke, the exhibition combined conceptualists (Robert Smithson, Lawrence Weiner, Vito Acconci), Fluxus artists (George Maciunas, John Cage), concretists (Mary Ellen Solt, Robert Lax), a filmmaker (Jonas Mekas), a choreographer (Merce Cunningham), composers and musicians (Steve Reich, John Cage once more, Glenn Gould-spelled "Glen Gould"), along with poets who later became key figures in language poetry (McCaffery with his *Carnival*, Bp Nichol, Bruce Andrews, Ron

Silliman, Jerome Rothenberg).[9] Being curator and editor of exhibitions and anthologies like *Possibilities of Poetry*, *Imaged Words & Worded Images* (1970), *Language & Structure*, Kostelanetz cast a wide net over what he conceived as the "artistic structuring of language" in different disciplines. Esentially, any work that deals with language and writing could count as "literature." A he repeats in the conclusion to the accompanying catalogue essay for *Language & Structure*, one goal of the exhibition is to expand " our conception of "literature" to include works with words that scarcely resemble traditional writing (Kostelanetz, "Writing," 68) [.]" Far before the revival of interest in conceptualism among writers during the nineties and the aughties, his editorships and curations already documented the reception of conceptual art's use of text beyond art and into experimental literature.[10]

The expansion of literature Kostelanetz aimed for in his curation *Language & Structure* contains a related aspect that bears some commentary here. Besides perceiving the crossing between literature and other arts, he equally emphasized a literature composed on a medium then not traditionally considered artistic, let alone literary: "a related purpose [of the exhibition] is instilling a closer attention to the words that are sometimes found in **initially non-literary media**. In both respects, this exhibition deals with the possibilities of **artistic writing and reading** (Kostelanetz, "Writing," 68) [.]" His inclusion of works composed through photostat and xerox (e.g. Vito Acconci, Jane Augustine) extended this view of literature *vis-à-vis* newer reproduction technologies that were not yet in wide use by writers.[11] I find Kostelanetz's conflation between medium and context/genre to be a non-issue in the long run. (To take an earlier historical example, long after Henry James and Mark Twain no writer from the 1960s would question the typewriter as the writer's medium of choice.) But this conflation precisely gives us a contemporary counter-example to Kosuth's immaterial and impersonal view of photostats, famously exemplified in *Art as Idea as Idea*. As poet-*cum*-curator, Kostelanetz here not only asserted the physical nature of works done as Xeroxes and Photostats, but also the possibility of thinking of such works as "artistic." While his use of the adjective "artistic" (or even "aesthetic") may open another set of debates during the period, Kostelanetz nevertheless revealed a vision of one who exactly wanted to bring more attention to words appearing on mediums then perhaps considered as non-literary. Kostelanetz's inclusion of works on "non-literary media" in *Language & Structure* also asserted the potential for cheaper reproduction technologies to manufacture literary objects, but also *objets d'art* whose commodification in turn took place in art galleries and museums as well as the book market. "Poetry," Higgins once wrote, is the "**poor man's art**."[12] But the perhaps unintended result of this mode of thinking in the sixties was the increasing entrance of literary works into the market circulation of the art world.

Besides Higgins' concept of intermedia, anthologies and exhibitions like Kostelanetz's provide us then the entry points to and frames for understanding the use of writing and illegibility across the arts in general in the first few decades after the war. In the same spirit as Higgins', Kostelanetz's conception of what poetry could be could not have been more ambitiously intermedial:

> Though I once said that my creative work made me "a poet," I now speak of myself as an "artist and writer," wishing there were in English a single term that combined the two[…]the principal problem with person-centered epithets such as "painter" and "writer" is that they become not descriptions but jails[…]for it should be possible for any of us to make *poems* or *photographs* or *music*, as we wish, and, better yet, to have these works regarded plainly, as "poems" or "photographs" or "music."[13]

Tellingly, it was with the same wish that Kostelanetz later opened his obituary of Higgins in 1998: "For well over three decades I thought the late Dick Higgins among the principal writers/artists of my generation, long wishing that there were in English a single word that combined both these epithets[.]"[14] To the majority of present-day poets and critics, Higgins and Kostelanetz may not seem important figures for exploring the poetry of the 1960s and the 1970s. Yet for those interested in the ways in which poets of the period looked to the different arts as a way to rethink poetry's appearance and material, Kostelanetz and Higgins arguably remain indispensable. In their own ways, both these figures strangely retain a hyper-idealized vision of poetry or literature. "Literature," if we recall, is for Kostelanetz any work dealing with the "artistic structuring of language." Higgins, on the other hand, believes that "all arts [are] a different species of poetry."

While figures like Kostelanetz and Higgins provide the possible historical perspective one can adopt as a "rear-guard" method of understanding the period, I hope to have shown that this method also benefits from a rethinking of our assumption of signs when we do include and believe in close reading as an interpretive method. The moment when artists and poets began to destroy the unit-y of letters, our elementary notion of what could constitute a sign in encountering the illegible merits being transformed, not abolished into a resulting absence of close interpretation. With regards to the cross-experiments between arts and poets, the time is not only ripe for revisiting intermedial works after the 50s, but also for reconsidering our interpretive methods as demanded by the complexity of intersign illegibility.

Fortuitously, more recent poetic trends after the first wave of language poetry in the 70s and 80s implicitly seem to continue Kostelanetz's hybrid conception of language art. Three years after Higgins' sudden passing from a heart attack in '98, the language poet Charles Bernstein and curator Jay Sanders presented an exhibition at the Marianne Boesky gallery titled *Poetry Plastique*, whose inclusion of McCaffery's *Carnival* I discussed in Chapter 2. Sanders wanted to flood the gallery not with "Poetic" artwork, but with actual poetry, made by poets."[15] While the statement applies more specifically to contemporary poets like Christian Bök or Mira Schör, Sanders' curation includes McCaffery's *Carnival* and Smithson's

“LANGUAGE to be LOOKED at and/or THINGS to be READ” among the “historical progenitors” to such cross-pollination in millennial poetry. Essentially, Sanders and Bernstein echoed Higgins’ and Kostelanetz’s conceptions of intermedia and language art in the seventies, two models that envisioned a more sustained continuity between experimental writers and conceptualists.

Unlike Kostelanetz’s language art curation in *Language & Structure*, however, the hybridity that *Poetry Plastique* promoted caught the attention of at least one major publication. A few weeks after the exhibition’s opening on February 9th, the art critic Holland Cotter published a favorable review in the New York Times, optimistically remarking that “the cross-disciplinary concept behind the show is ripe for further exploration.”[16] Particularly noteworthy is the way Cotter ends his review:

> Meanwhile, art and texts mutually ignite elsewhere in the city these days: in **Cy Twombly**'s not-to-be-missed "Coronation of Sesostris" paintings, based on a poem by Patricia Waters, at Gagosian Gallery (980 Madison Avenue, at 76th Street, through tomorrow); in a collaboration between the painter Max Gimblett and the poet John Yau at Ethan Cohen Fine Art (37 Walker Street, SoHo, through March 10); in a series of collaborative prints by contemporary Puerto Rican artists and poets at El Taller Boricua (Lexington Avenue at 106th Street, through tomorrow); in an exhibition of contemporary text-based works, "A Way with Words," at the Whitney at Philip Morris (120 Park Avenue, at 42nd Street, through March 30); and in a jewel of an exhibition of artists' diaries, with bold little drawings and sonnet-size personal jottings, at the Archives of American Art (1285 Avenue of the Americas, at 51st Street, through May 31).

The *Poetry Plastique* exhibition, taking place at a Chelsea gallery, could then be perceived with other “art/texts exhibitions” that ranged from Twombly’s *Coronation of Sesostris* to Puerto Rican collaborative printmaking to “artists’ diaries,” a continuous multiplicity that eluded the majority of artists in the 1950s and the 1960s in addition to the language poets in the 1970s and the 1980s. After the first wave of language poetry, younger poets and critics continue to look into conceptual art for models of conceptual writing, a phenomenon evident in publications like *Notes on Conceptualisms* (2009) and the anthology *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (2011).[17] But such an attitude was already present in

Kostelanetz's curation and persisting, if not now growing, nowadays at a time where the pre-language poetry situation is open to re-assessment and the post-language moment remains to be defined.[18] While this dissertation ultimately may not devote enough space to key hybrid art/poetry figures like Kostelanetz and Higgins, the moment is nevertheless ripe for current *arrière-gardists* to dig even more deeply into the period to construct a larger historical picture of how different experimentalists conceive of the crossing of art and poetry in terms of experimenting on writing's visuality. I like to think that this dissertation at the very least points towards such a direction though its main preoccupation remains close interpretations of a few works more in search of a methodology of interpretation.

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[1] Marjorie Perloff, "From Avant-Garde to Digital: The Legacy of Brazilian Concrete Poetry," in *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry By Other Means in the New Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010, 53.

[2] Two of McCaffery's books have been nominated for the Canadian Governor's General Award. Howe became the recipient of the 2011 Bollingen Prize in American poetry.

[3] Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," xlvii.

[4] This is not to say that conceptualism itself was a completely insular world. The journal *0 to 9* (1967-1969), edited by the conceptual artist/writer Vito Acconci and the poet Bernadette Mayer, published poems alongside works by conceptualists like Smithson and Sol LeWitt.

[5] (editorial notes in Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, eds., *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011, 290.)

[6] See Dan Graham, "Poem-Schema" *Art-Language: The Journal of Conceptual Art* I, no. 1 (1969), 14; Dan Graham "Schema," *Possibilities of Poetry*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz. New York: Dell, 1970, 182; Dan Graham "Schema," in *Extensions* I, no. 1 (1968), 23; Dan Graham, "Schema," *Studio International* 1983, no. 944 (1972), 212. Graham's publications cited in Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," l, fts, 17-21.

[7] Dan Graham "Poem-Schema," in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011, 291.

[8] Richard Kostelanetz, "Writing: Degree Zero," in *Language and Structure in North America: The First Large Definitive Survey of North American Language Art, November 4-30, 1975*, exh. cat., curated by Richard Kostelanetz. New York: RK Editions, 1975, 51.

[9] For a complete list of the works exhibited, see Kostelanetz, cur., *Language and Structure*, 71-80.

[10] In "Total Syntax" Barrett Watten discussed Robert Smithson's works and writings in relation to the syntactic of Ron Silliman, Clark Coolidge, and Steve Benson: "In this language a temporal syntax could only be a repetition, accreting in the image Smithson gives of a heap. The heap of language can only be added to in time by the production of more language ("Total Syntax," in *Total Syntax*, 73)."

[11] Per the exhibition list:

Acconci, Vito

Book Four, from 0 to 9 books (m) [magazine]
1968 xerox.

Augustine, Jane
Eros Sore Rose (p) photostat.
Krazy (p) photostat.
2r de 4ce (il) 2-mult (p) photostat.
2r de 4ce (il) 4-mations (p) photostat.
Deep (p) photostat.
Dissolve (p) photostat.

[*Language & Structure*, 72]

[12] Dick Higgins, "Some Poetry Intermedia," in *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes Towards a Theory of the New Arts*, New York: Printed Editions, 1978, 17.

[13] Richard Kostelanetz, "Art Autobiography," in Kostelanetz, ed., *Visual Literature Criticism: A New Collection*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1979, 177-178.

[14] Richard Kostelanetz, "Dick Higgins (1938-1998)," in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 21.2 (1999), 12.

[15] Sanders, Jay, "Introduction," in *Poetry Plastique*, curated by Jay Sanders and Charles Bernstein. New York: Marianne Boesky Gallery and Granary Books, Inc., 2001, 9.

[16] Holland Cotter, "ART IN REVIEW: *Poetry Plastique*," in *New York Times* (Feb 23, 2001). URL: http://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/23/books/art-in-review-poetry-plastique.html. Accessed February 10, 2013.

[17] Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place, *Notes on Conceptualisms*. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009.

[18] In 1995 and 1996 Pierre Joris and Jerome Rothenberg published the two-volume anthology *Poems for the Millenium: The University of California Book of Modern and Postmodern Poetry*. Aside from "language" poets like Barrett Watten and Ron Silliman, the second volumes also comprises works by those better known as visual artists: Asger Jorn, Christian Dotremont, Tom Phillips. McCaffery and Jed Rasula, in turn, published *Imagining Language* in 2001. Their anthology contains a more radical project to account for experiments in writing beyond poetry, juxtaposing to explicitly literary or visual art experiments to mystical writings by Jacob Boehme, cipher writing by the philosopher Francis Bacon and linguistic textbooks by Francis Lodwick.

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