

# ***Sign Painting***

by

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## Abstract

My MFA thesis project titled *Sign Painting* includes five oil paintings. Each painting contains two words squished together, eliminating the space between them:

BOXINGGRIN

WHISKYMUSTACHE

SLOWAMBULANCE

PERISHOW

GRIZZLEND

In my painting practice I provocatively invite words into the visual space of oil paint. The provocation comes from the idea that language, which is verbal, and paint, which is purely visual, are opposed. But I have found that language inevitably asks to be painted. Poetic language suits paint because it is especially abstract, often with unusual syntax, and radically departing from regular language. For me, paint and language are in relationships that touch on abstraction, contingency and temporality. The abuttingness of words and the gooeyness of oil paint generate potential – implying other words, other colors, other compositions, ad infinitum. While at first they might appear strange in paintings, words belong.

**Keywords:** painting; modernism; conceptual art; text; language; poetry

*Dedicated to Mike*

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To my dear friend, Maureen Brownlee – thank you for the energy, enthusiasm, and insights you bring to all our conversations, and correspondence, about art and writing— including over the last 10 years!

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# 1. Artist Statement:

## *Sign Painting*

Each canvas contains two words squished together, eliminating the space between them:

BOXINGGRIN  
WHISKYMUSTACHE  
SLOWAMBULANCE  
PERISHOW  
GRIZZLEND

These word combinations, or “portmanteaus,” depict instants in time – the endorphin fueled smirk across the mouth of a boxer, and ephemeral droplets of whisky in a mustache. I use the conventions of painting to thwart the idea that paint and language are opposed. For me, paint and language are in relationships that touch on abstraction, contingency and temporality. While at first they might appear strange in paintings, words belong.

The inspiration for my engagement with paint and language comes from encountering the art and writing of Mira Schor.<sup>1</sup> She reflects:

People who expect painting to provide pleasure only through sensory means in a recognizable space of formalist concerns balk at the demands placed on them by the imaging of language. People who are interested in language-based art such as the work emerging from conceptual art are upset to encounter language within the contingent gooeyness of paint, which they had turned to language in order to avoid.<sup>2</sup>

Her thought-provoking observation outlines the supposed difference between painting and language that has its roots in the conceptual art movement. For the conceptualists, ideas took precedence over the specifics of any medium; the formal concerns that yoked

<sup>1</sup> Her modestly scaled, thick paintings often include single words, such as “trace” and “sign.”

<sup>2</sup> Mira Schor, “Painting in the Stroke Strike Zone,” in *Poetry Plastique*, curated by Jay Sanders and Charles Bernstein (New York: Marianne Boesky Gallery, 2001), 67.

modern painting with self-reflexivity they deemed no longer important, even dogmatic. Victor Burgin summarizes the problem nicely, pointing out that conceptual art was a “revolt against modernism,” specifically Clement Greenberg’s definition of modernism:

...the historical tendency of an art practice towards complete self-referential autonomy, to be achieved by scrupulous attention to all that is *specific* to that practice: its own traditions and materials, its own *difference* from other art practices.<sup>3</sup>

Visual art distinguished itself by focusing on expression that was, “...‘purely visual,’ – radically distinct from, for example, verbalization.”<sup>4</sup> The “non-verbal” of paint is undeniable, but I desire to bring language into the conventions of painting.

Language is contingent on the difference among words, falling before and after each other (spatially and temporally) in a system of relations. In order to signify, “...language works through a process of infinite supplementation where the job of completing or fulfilling meaning is always devolved onto the *next* sign along in space and time: a fully present meaning is thus perpetually out of reach.”<sup>5</sup> Language in painting, then, troubles the “fully present meaning” desired of formal painting. It also invites the thinking that we do in language – about painting as much as other ideas:

Art practice was no longer to be defined as an artisanal activity, a process of crafting fine objects in a given medium, it was rather to be seen as a set of operations performed in a *field* of signifying practices, perhaps centred on a medium but certainly not bounded by it.<sup>6</sup>

My painting will always be in relation to the other ideas, the other mediums, and the other “signifying practices” surrounding it. Hence, it makes sense to include *in* painting another signifying practice – poetry. Language in paint underscores my “conceptual” approach, and at the same time it allows me to engage with the formal qualities of paint. Together, language and paint are desirable.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Burgin, from “The Absence of Presence,” in *Art in Theory/ 1900-2000/ An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1069.

<sup>4</sup> Burgin, 1069.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Bradley, *Derrida’s Of Grammatology* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2008), 71.

<sup>6</sup> Burgin, 1070.

In my artistic practice and research, I have found that language inevitably asks to be painted. A poetic language suits painting because it is especially abstract, often with unusual syntax, and radically departing from regular language. Portmanteaus attract me for the rich imagery that can be generated by only two words.<sup>7</sup> The formal engagement of the portmanteaus, specifically the elimination of the space between words, makes them increasingly contingent on each other for their meanings. The “contingent gooeyness of paint” within the ridges extends the contingency of language. Limiting my writing to the portmanteaus has been surprisingly generative – words imply other words, endlessly.

When asked how the figure/ground or word/ground functions in his work, Ed Ruscha<sup>8</sup> explains: “Well, in some way, certain parts of the paintings can be almost worthless. They start to make a stage. A stage is nothing more than a backdrop for the drama that happens. Paintings of words can be clearer to see when there is an anonymous backdrop.”<sup>9</sup> I am drawn to Ruscha’s reference to drama, especially when I consider how words can be animated by paint, and how they can engage the tension between comedy and tragedy. But I don’t see my backgrounds as anonymous. Rather, I avail the conventions of abstract painting, in particular the notion of flatness, and make the background a part of the work. Flatness is provocative because it was central to modern painting and to “...what an artist could or could not do without violating the principle of Flatness – ‘the integrity of the picture plane,’ as it became known...”<sup>10</sup> I think of flatness as a painting trope, one that I can use to connect my work to the history of painting, while simultaneously enacting my own drama with words. The background, far from being insignificant, allows the words to become.

<sup>7</sup> My recent discovery of the poetry of Dada artist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, which I owe to DD Kugler, inspired me to write portmanteaus. Among my favorite of her many portmanteaus are: crimsoncruising, Noiseflickingswish, Diebitterness, hellmatterself, refleximaginative, and Bottlegreen.

<sup>8</sup> I see my project in relation to artists who have pursued the painting of language, including Mira Schor and Mel Bochner. Ed Ruscha is noteworthy for practicing language-based painting at the very time when conceptual art pointed to the ostensible irrelevance of painting. My use of language differs in the sense that it links to poetry.

<sup>9</sup> Ed Ruscha, interview with Fred Fehlau, in *Leave Any Information At The Signal / Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages / Ed Ruscha*, ed. Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge: MIT, 2002), 265.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam, 1975), 50.

In their discussion of modern painting, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari focus on the “ground” of painting: “One no longer covers over; one raises, accumulates, piles up, goes through, stirs up, folds. It is a promotion of the ground, and sculpture can become flat since the plane is stratified. One no longer paints ‘on’ but ‘under.’”<sup>11</sup> Thick ridges of paint evoke what is underneath, especially time; building up a surface with paint could go on forever, and layer upon layer the delineation of a painting by its frame, scale, or dimensions can be philosophically overcome. In my work, paint has an accrued material thickness – a thickness both *of* and *about* paint. Hence, on flat backgrounds I stage the gooey. The paint I mix is thick, and it globs on my brush. There is play in the paint application and in thinking about language, how a word engages with other words linked to it in space and time. I work with my face close to the canvas, inhabiting the space in front of it. I think of this anterior space in relation to the nonlinear, and it provokes the tangential thinking needed to connect elements – in this case the elements of language and paint. Once the gooey ridges are painted, I return and remove excess paint from the insides of the letters, rendering them transparent. Transparency is in dialogue with thickness, its counterpart, and both are explicit.<sup>12</sup>

I’m faced with many choices when I bring words into the coded representational space of painting within the physical immediacy of paint: how to contain the words, how much space they need to occupy, where and how to divide them (for example, using line and/or color). I approach composition in a way that allows me to avail the tropes and devices of painting while staging my words. Initially I had signage in mind. The design for BOXINGGRIN is inspired by the sign for “Sugarrays Boxing and Fitness” club in downtown Vancouver. I like the way the letters bend across it, varying in size. The chevrons, and the inverted chevrons, are used to move the letters horizontally across the canvases and to allow some letters to stretch more vertically, depending on their

<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” in *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia, 1994), 194.

<sup>12</sup> Deleuze and Guattari problematize the idea of flatness in modern painting by questioning its very nature, provocatively suggesting that it might actually be thickness: “...thickness does not need to be pronounced or deep. It could be said that Mondrian was a painter of thickness; and when Seurat defined painting as ‘the art of ploughing a surface,’ the only support he needs is the furrows and peaks of unglazed drawing paper.” (“Percept, Affect, and Concept,” 194). For me this point is humorous given the high seriousness with which modern painters approached flatness. Perhaps they were approaching thickness!

position. The letters squish across and up, engaging the entire composition. Once the words are contained in the chevrons, I consider their relationship to the backgrounds. For instance, I connect WHISKYMUSTACHE (Figure 3) to the background with a line down the middle of the canvas – reflecting about the symmetrical nature of a mustache. In BOXINGGRIN (Figure 1), no line divides the background, and instead the chevron functions as an enclosure, or a ring. In PERISHOW (Figure 7), I use the middle of the H as a bridge between the two words, and then logically I extend a line up the middle of the H to the background.

For the portmanteaus, I conceptualize color relationships by using the text as a parameter. I work with a limited palette, assign each word a color, and then mix a third color to make the greys that flank each composition. Yellow is mixed into each color used in BOXINGGRIN to tie the painting together, visibly and intrinsically. Color is used to accentuate the intention, to show that words *belong* in the paint. Like words, colors embody contingency, relying on other colors around them for their effects. Color is the basis of paint in the way that words are the basis of language. Words in paint will necessarily be in color, so it makes sense to take color cues from the words. For instance, in WHISKYMUSTACHE I use bottle greens and blues, and in SLOWAMBULANCE (Figure 5) I use “emergency” red. The process is intuitive, like brainstorming portmanteaus.

One proposition considered by Jan Verwoert in his essay “Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It’s a Good Idea” is that, “[t]he semantic depth of a painterly formulation can only be adequately appreciated if it is understood as the result of a process of dialogue with the medium.”<sup>13</sup> I use the tropes and devices of abstract painting to represent language. I put into painting what is supposedly outside of it, and at the same time I connect painting to poetry – another form of signifying.

Words and paint are contingent entities. The abuttingness of words and the gooeyness of oil paint generate potential – implying other words, other colors, other compositions, ad infinitum. Abstract painting suits abstract language and I have come to

<sup>13</sup> Jan Verwoert, “Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It’s a Good Idea,” *Afterall*, Autumn/Winter (2005):1, <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.12/why.are.conceptual.artists.painting.again.because>.

see that paint and language, rather than being culturally or theoretically opposed, are materially and conceptually coextensive.

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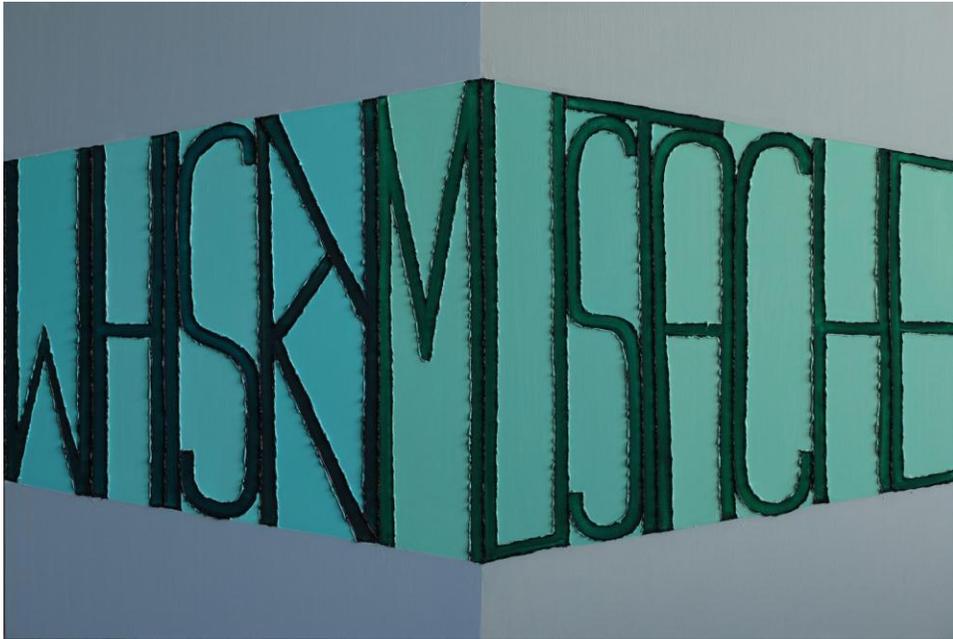
## 2. Documentation of *Sign Paintings*



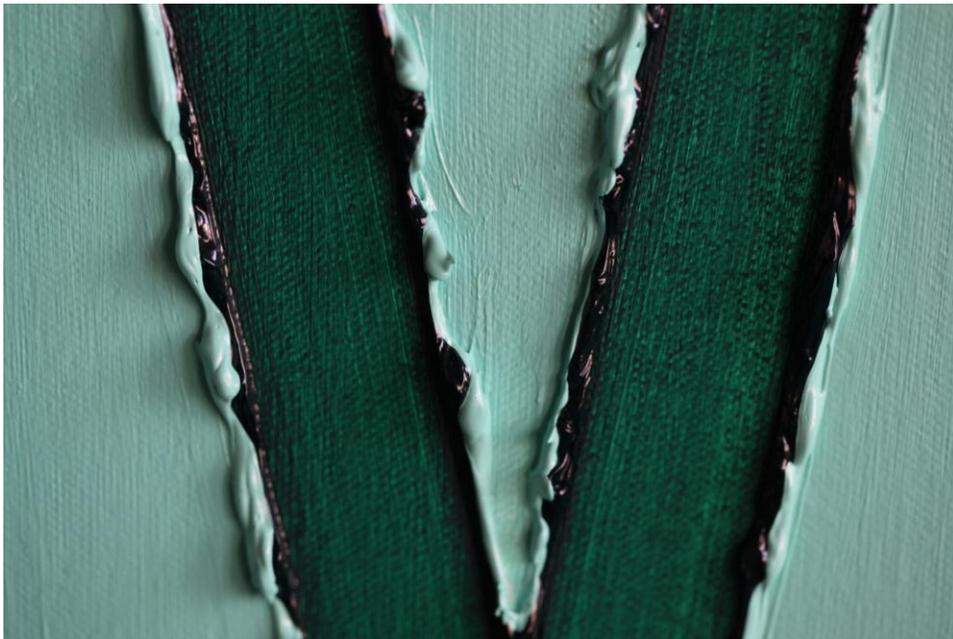
**Figure 1.** *Boxing Ring*, oil on canvas, 51 x 68 inches, 2012



**Figure 2.** *detail, Boxing Ring*



**Figure 3.** *His Ache, oil on canvas, 48 x 72 inches, 2012*



**Figure 4.** *detail, His Ache*



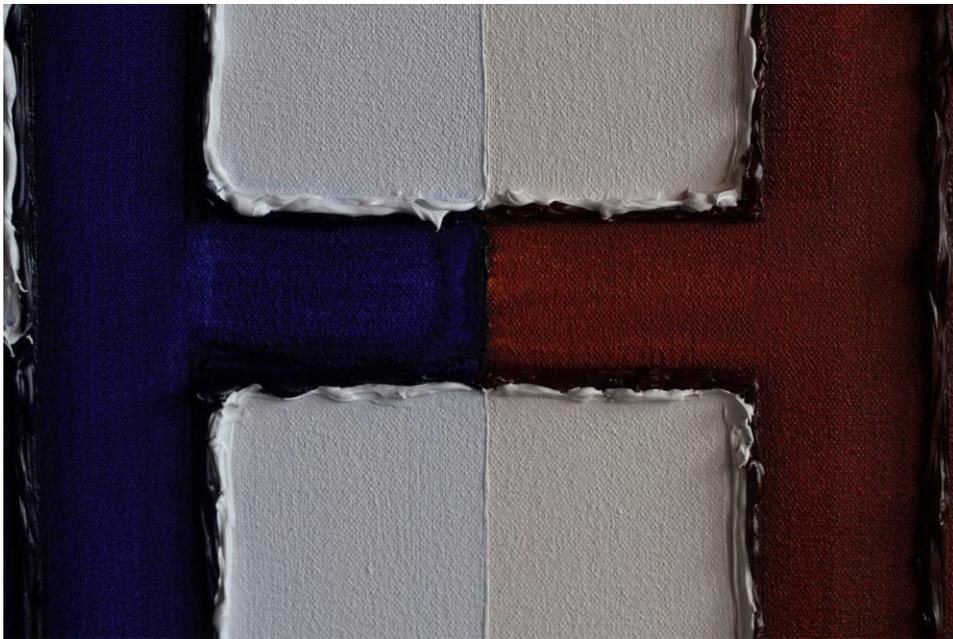
**Figure 5.** *Somnambulant, oil on canvas, 64 x 80 inches, 2012*



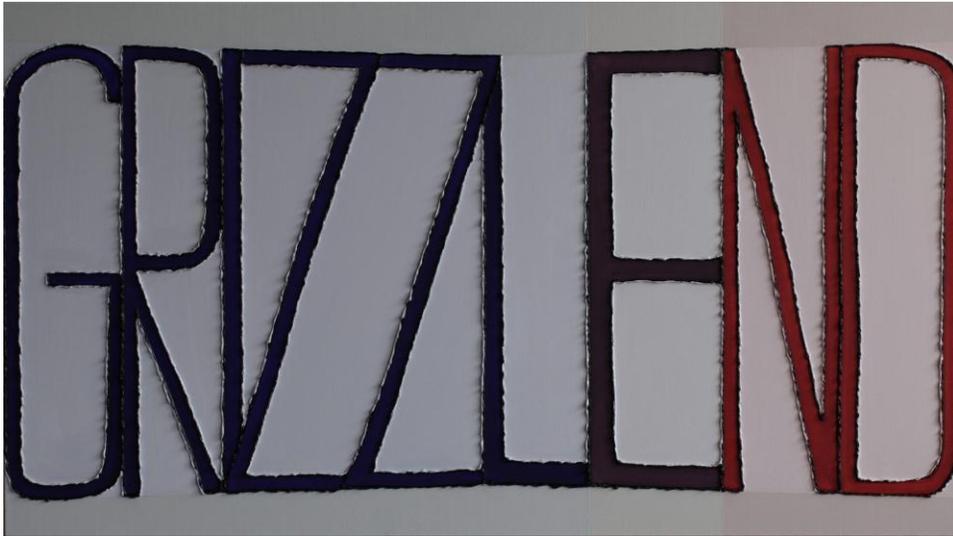
**Figure 6.** *detail, Somnambulant*



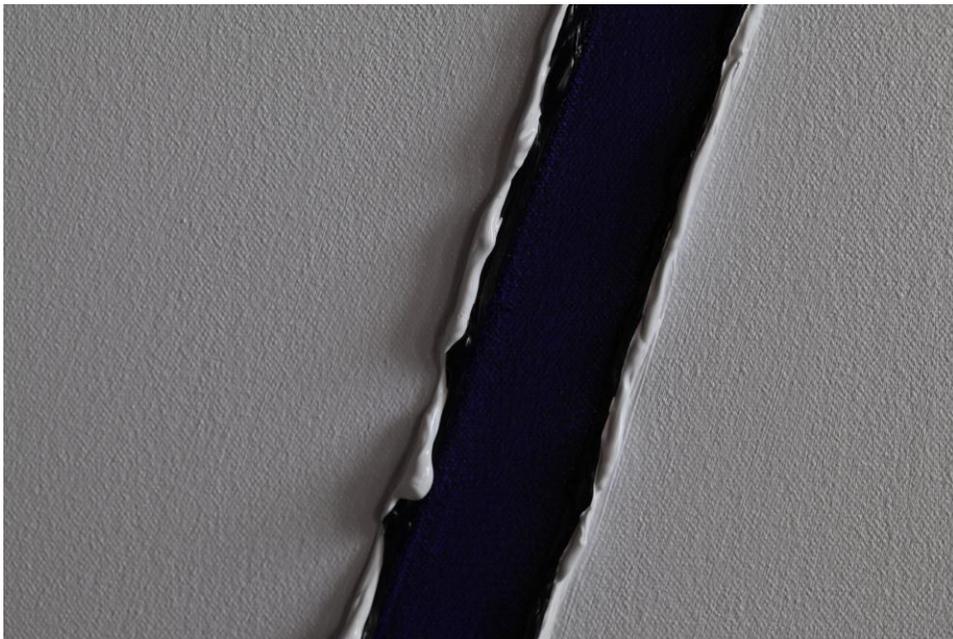
**Figure 7.** *Howl, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, 2012*



**Figure 8.** *detail, Howl*



**Figure 9.** *Grizzled, oil on canvas, 51 x 68 inches, 2012*



**Figure 10.** *detail, Grizzled*



**Figure 11.** *installation view, Audain gallery, September 2012*



**Figure 12.** *installation view, Audain gallery, September 2012*

### 3. Appendix.

#### Paintext

##### Paintext

The following theoretical essay that forms this appendix was written at an earlier stage in the MFA degree (Fall 2011). Still, I consider it to be reflective of my research interests and thinking processes, and I believe it functions as a kind of underpinning to the work I subsequently undertook in my thesis project, *Sign Painting*. I would ask the reader to consider it alongside, and not to “apply” it to the above statement and images that comprise *Sign Painting*. It is quite an exploratory paper, testing out different ideas – the inklings of some might be found in the final work.

Text paintings are saturated with two provocatively different kinds of information: linguistic and non-linguistic. Paint makes explicit the fact that language, as signifier, is material. Language complements paint by connecting it to exterior, tangential references that initiate more than a strictly painting engagement. When written on canvases, words with philosophical, abstract, and fantastical inferences take painting to ideas beyond itself, and to ideas about the beyond. Paint is apt for words because it extends their associative and referential powers: words can be repeated, linked in long chains, and altered in specific painterly ways by taking up scale, color, viscosity and application. Paint is the framework for the transformation and expanded definitions of words; experimental writing practices linked to visual poetry serve to generate them. I wrote two texts, a poem titled *Camping in May* and a word chain titled *Rainbow*, to discuss how experimental writing and a painterly approach can transform words. The inherent thickness of paint, the theoretical endlessness of color, and the conceptuality of spatial

arrangement underpin my philosophy of painting words and my studio practice. The strategies of noteworthy language painters inform me speculatively and often practically. This essay is at once a proposal, an artist's statement and an academic inquiry.

**wakecstaticoffee!** wakecstaticoffee is the first word to appear in my upcoming painting *Camping in May*. Conceptually it is inspired by a word written by James Joyce, silvmoonlake. Visually striking and semantically strange, silvmoonlake is a "montage word" because it performs the *verbivocovisual*.<sup>14</sup> a verbal, vocal, visual constellation in which, "...form and content are isochronous,"<sup>15</sup> or occurring at the same time. But, the montage word moves beyond temporality because it expands spatially and, therefore, conceptually. Word chains are ideal candidates for thick painting because they resist delimitation. In wakecstaticoffee the e in wake becomes the e in ecstatic and the c in ecstatic becomes the c in coffee. Visually linking them informs their content: there is no pause between them and they are all one breath and this instant breath feeds waking up in the morning feeling lively and caffeine is the perfect supplement. wakecstaticoffee links three words in immediacy, but also implies that other words can be added, ad infinitum. Similarly, in painting, colors can be added to other colors in innumerable shades and quantities, ad infinitum. Together word chains and colors signal infinity. Words with overtly philosophical, abstract, or fantastical inferences – such as Atheism, Heaven and Vampire – are particularly resistant to delimitation because they imply multiple associations and references. Indeed, "[t]he question of reference, of the echoes

<sup>14</sup> Haroldo de Campos, "Sanscreed Latinized: The Wake in Brazil and Hispanic America," *Tri Quarterly* 38 (winter 1977), 56, quoted in Marjorie Perloff, "The Invention of 'Concrete Prose': Haroldo de Campos's *Galaxias* and After," in *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 179.

<sup>15</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "The Invention of 'Concrete Prose': Haroldo de Campos's *Galaxias* and After," in *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 179.

or traces of the world which find their way into the linguistic, visual, and material presence of language,” makes concrete definition impossible.<sup>16</sup>

If words and painting are complementary, then why is text painting problematic for visual art culture? Trouble arises because two vectors converge: formalist painting on the one hand and the gamut of language on the other.<sup>17</sup> Painting is expected to provide sensory pleasure that is specifically visual, and hence not language-based.<sup>18</sup> But in the 1960's, conceptual art proved that art should be evaluated for ideas, and it negated the status of the purely optical that defined and formalized Modern painting.<sup>19</sup> Hence, painting and language-based conceptual art are generally polarized. Despite the polarization, a few notable practitioners pursue language-based painting practices: Ed Ruscha, Mel Bochner, Cy Twombly, and Mira Schor. Their works evince a range of material strategies and choices for painting words explicitly. Ruscha, a painter who, “...developed a language-centered practice in the very medium rejected by many Conceptualists,”<sup>20</sup> makes even one word resonate on canvas. Bochner culls words from the thesaurus and paints them in bright successions. Twombly uses his idiosyncratic handwriting to scrawl certain words multiple times across huge canvases in a manner resembling graffiti. Schor makes modest, thick word paintings:

<sup>16</sup> Johanna Drucker, “Experimental/Visual/Concrete,” in *Figuring the Word* (New York: Granary Books, 1998), 120.

<sup>17</sup> Mira Schor, “Painting in the Stroke Strike Zone,” in *Poetry Plastique*, curated by Jay Sanders and Charles Bernstein (New York: Marianne Boesky Gallery, 2001), 67.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 68.

<sup>19</sup> Jan Verwoert, “Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It’s a Good Idea,” *Afterall*, Autumn/Winter(2005):1, <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.12/why.are.conceptual.artists.painting.again.because>.

<sup>20</sup> Lisa Pasquariello, “Ed Ruscha and the Language That He Used,” *October*, Vol. 111 (2005): 89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397674>.



**Figure A1. Mira Schor, *Sign*, oil on linen, 12 x 16 inches, 2005; Used with permission from the artist**

Her use of thickness is a point of departure for furthering words about the further. For example, a word about the beyond, such as Heaven, is well situated in a thick painting because thickness, like Heaven, is boundless. Heaven is conceptually unlimited. Thick paint is materially and hence conceptually unlimited.

Thickness and color transform words and deliver them to a tissue of tangential associations, including infinity. Thick paint *materializes* words even while their immaterial meanings escape and slip into a play of connotations, associations and references. Since, “the ‘thickness’ of words refers quite literally to their dimensions on the page as physical piles of ink – in other words, to their status as marks...,”<sup>21</sup> thick paint is especially appropriate. Thick painting is thought-provoking considering the dogma of flatness that defined Modern painting in the 1960’s. Critic Clement Greenberg insisted that painting should be autonomous, and the central question around painting was “[t]he

<sup>21</sup> Jennifer Ashton, “Making the rose red: Stein, proper names, and the critique of indeterminacy,” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: American Poetry and Theory in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 91.

question of what an artist could or could not do without violating the principle of Flatness – ‘the integrity of the picture plane,’ as it became known.”<sup>22</sup> Despite Greenberg’s ideology, it is mistaken to define sensation in modern painting by pure visual flatness because of “...the fact that thickness does not need to be pronounced or deep...when Seurat defined painting as ‘the art of ploughing a surface,’ the only support he needs is the furrows and peaks of unglazed drawing paper.”<sup>23</sup> This shift in focus from the ground as something to be covered up to the ground as something to be built up points to affirmation because material thickness, “...does not allow itself to be reduced to any formal depth.”<sup>24</sup> Philosophically, building up a surface could go on forever, and so our willingness to delimit a painting by its frame can be overcome by thickness. Unlike the scale and dimensions of painting supports, paint itself resists delimitation because it always implies what is under and what is more: “One no longer paints ‘on’ but ‘under.’”<sup>25</sup> Hence, paint refers to accrual and there is no conceptual reason why it should stop. Paint is ad infinitum. Paint accrues like moments, and so it is a model for life: “And what is a painter? A bird-catcher of instants.”<sup>26</sup> Painting happens temporally, but conceptually it expands because it is spatial.

**shake.** The name Virgil is scrawled across a huge canvas in Cy Twombly’s messy, personal handwriting. His gesture could be described as “pictorial nominalism,”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word* (New York: Bantam, 1975), 50.

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” in *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia, 1994), 194.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 194.

<sup>26</sup> Helene Cixous, “The Last Painting or the Portrait of God,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2000), 583.

<sup>27</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Cy was here; Cy’s up,” *Artforum*, September (1994): 2, [http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly\\_writings6.htm](http://www.cytwombly.info/twombly_writings6.htm)

meaning that names have no corresponding reality. On the other hand, the name Virgil, "...not only calls up a whole idea (though an empty one) of ancient culture but also 'operates' a kind of citation: that of an era of bygone, calm, leisurely, even decadent studies: English preparatory schools, Latin verses, desks, lamps, tiny pencil annotations."<sup>28</sup> While Virgil may only be a sign it is far from being empty. The assertion that language is arbitrary and that a word is merely, "...the copy in sound of a nerve stimulus,"<sup>29</sup> is shaky. In his philosophy on truth Nietzsche foregrounds the arbitrariness of the signifier; no reality exists between words and what they designate: "we believe that we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colors, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things – metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities."<sup>30</sup> This formulation is exemplified in Rene Magritte's oil painting *The Treachery of Images*. The image of a pipe with the words "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" written underneath is tautological: the text is telling us that the image is not a pipe while depicting a mere representation of a pipe. Magritte's formula persuades us that the truth value of representation and language is suspect. The pipe is a ghost, an unanchored and floating signifier without a signified, let alone a referent. However, this proposition is disingenuous because words have associative and referential powers notwithstanding the arbitrariness of the signifier.

Unlike nouns, proper nouns are particularly referential because they are unique. But Gertrude Stein performs the feat of making nouns function like proper nouns by

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (California: University of California Press, 1991), 162.

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2000), 55.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

repeating them.<sup>31</sup> In her sentence “a rose is a rose is a rose” the word rose does not refer to a noun, a flower, but instead it becomes “the very function of reference”<sup>32</sup> that belongs to proper nouns. The message in Stein’s repetition, “...would be something about the impossibility of language to be adequate to the object. Gertrude Stein seems to say: my creation escapes me.”<sup>33</sup> By repeating the word rose she usurps the generic quality of the noun and instead invests it in suggestiveness. The device of repetition could be effective for word painters, but also presents challenges. How many times can a word be repeated before, “...‘[i]t loses its meanings and becomes a hollow and redundant thing, and attains its own hard, enigmatic body [?]’”<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, repetition creates investment in the spirit of a word. For example, when I thickly paint the word Van using vivid colors I invest it in its multiplicity: it might refer to Vancouver, Van Morrison, Van Gogh, van Dyck, van Eyck, vanguard, or even a vehicle. The capitalization of the first letter versus the whole word creates certain readings, particularly the possibility of an abbreviated name. A painting Van Van Van could signal the importance, obsession, or love of a person, place or thing.

**my darling:** Ed Ruscha is a painter working against Foucault’s articulation from his essay on Magritte titled “This is Not a Pipe” that the connection between words and things is arbitrary, and for that reason somehow bankrupt.<sup>35</sup> For example, *Annie, Poured From Maple Syrup* is virtually a portrait, telling us who Annie is, even if she is fictional.

<sup>31</sup> Ashton, “Making the Rose Red,” 85.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 94.

<sup>33</sup> Helene Cixous, Foreword to *The Stream of Life* written by Clarice Lispector (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), xv.

<sup>34</sup> Clarice Lispector, quoted in Helene Cixous, “The Last Painting or the Portrait of God,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2000), 595.

<sup>35</sup> Pasquariello, “Ed Ruscha,” 90.

Magritte's *The Treachery of Images*, on the other hand, tells us what is not. Magritte is the negative voice. On the contrary, for Ruscha, "a career spent giving language weight, texture, and body does not square with the poststructuralist dismissal of the plenary sign as illusory or with its certainty that language is bound to fall short in approximating reality or mediating any nonlinguistic object."<sup>36</sup> Quite the opposite is true; words can be chosen and used to affirm meaning. Words are "...tangible matter, matter that might indeed signify in concert with meaning..."<sup>37</sup> Ruscha creates meaning by the words he chooses and how he paints them. For example he has painted a specific line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* multiple times, namely the line spoken by King Claudius who, while praying, mutters "My words flye up, my thoughts remain below, / Words without thoughts, never to Heaven go."<sup>38</sup> Hamlet, who is secretly observing the praying, decides in that moment not to kill the king fearing that he undeservedly will go to Heaven. But the remorseless Claudius knows that his prayers are empty: without thoughts.<sup>39</sup> The implication for Claudius and for Ruscha, "...is that 'words without thoughts' do not matter... unless they connect to an idea or object beyond the words..."<sup>40</sup> Words are important and, "...Ruscha attempts to conjoin, not sever, semantic sense and physical form..."<sup>41</sup> Insofar as ideas should not be separate from the language used to express them, Shakespeare provides excellent examples at the level of punctuation. In a speech by Hamlet (Act 2, Scene 2, lines 343-45), "Hamlet is having difficulty in expressing himself, as evidenced by the

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 91.

<sup>38</sup> Shakespeare, William, *The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*, prepared and annotated by Neil Freeman (Vancouver: Applause First Folio Editions, 2000), 2.2. 1490-91. References are to act, scene, and line.

<sup>39</sup> Pasquariello, "Ed Ruscha," 91.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

punctuation and phrasing going awry – as if his feigned ‘madness’ has led him almost to a momentary loss of reason.”<sup>42</sup> In *Hamlet* language mirrors thought.

Including punctuation, language can be transformed to reflect thought and thought processes. In *Heave n* semantic sense meets physical form when the n in heaven is displaced to the bottom of the canvas:



**Figure A2.** Anna Marie Repstock, *Heave n*, oil on canvas, 42 x 50 inches, 2011

Performing this simple gesture reveals the complexity of the word and its connotations. To heave is an emotional reaction, such as “her chest heaved with emotion,” and refers to emotions about heaven as a concept and as a place. While the word heavy is not present it is, nevertheless, evoked because the downward movement of the text within the chevron suggests weight. Materially transforming the word heaven generates multiple meanings. Moreover, to change the signifier to completely alter the signified is a

<sup>42</sup> Neil Freeman, in *The Tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmarke*, prepared and annotated by Neil Freeman (Vancouver: Applause First Folio Editions, 2000), 50.

function of poetry. Instead of collapsing, the meaning of words becomes greater. The displacement of the n in heaven disrupts the signifier and unleashes signification.

The successions of words in Mel Bochner's paintings *Meaningless* and *Nothing* feel like they could go on forever. The use of commas and dashes between the words instead of periods facilitates the idea of endlessness. Indeed, there is a "swell of signification" that makes us feel the expansiveness of language.<sup>43</sup> For his *Thesaurus Paintings* he unfolds a signifying process by culling dozens of words from the thesaurus and including all of them in a single painting. For example, in *Meaningless* all the synonyms for the word meaningless are painted brightly in rows on a burnt orange background; the synonyms range "...from the well-behaved 'irrelevant' to the rudely blunt 'crapola' to the singsong sounds of 'blah blah blah' and 'gobbledygook.'"<sup>44</sup> *Nothing* behaves similarly. In *Nothing* a dark black background buoys up synonyms for that word, and color is used to alter the importance of each word by being either bright or dull: "And in *Nothing* the ceaseless chatter of 'colorful' language (both literally and figuratively) – 'a fart, a fuck, a rat's ass' – certainly evokes the concept of language as taking up space..."<sup>45</sup> The following word chain titled *Rainbow* is conceptually linked to Bochner's successions: **heavenoiribaldogruntsniffsauntersliverainbowow**. Instead of separating the words with spaces or commas, the words are intimately linked by their last letters, as in *wakecstaticoffee*. Here, the n in heaven becomes noir and the r in noir becomes ribald and the d in ribald becomes dog, etcetera. Heaven and noir set up a dark imagery, implying bleakness. Ribald steers it away slightly, and the imagery of a

<sup>43</sup> Johanna Burton, "The Weight of the Word: Mel Bochner's Material Language," *Mel Bochner Language 1966-2006*, ed. Elizabeth Stepina (Chicago: Yale University Press, 2007), 30.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

dog, probably mangy and skinny (would devour liver), ambling across a landscape, could be desolate but for the sliver of rainbow. However the last onomatopoeic words are the dog's existential barking: bowwow. This word chain will be painted using the colors of the rainbow in order. Thus, heaven will be red, noir orange, ribald yellow, and etcetera. But further, where the n in heaven *becomes* the n in noir, red will blend with orange to create a red-orange, thus fusing the words in immediacy. Color is used conceptually to enhance the intimacy of the word chain by fusing words and implying a never ending rainbow of colors.

White is usually the way a painting begins because canvas must be primed and primer is typically white. White paint reflects light away from it and, “[t]he penalty for this apparent purity is that it absorbs almost no light into its own body, and – for lead white at least – this means that its own heart is black.”<sup>46</sup> Historically, poisonous lead white caused the death of artists.<sup>47</sup> Because of its toxicity Lead white is no longer available, but it would have provided death connotations to the painting *Heave n*. Instead, in one version *Heave n* is painted entirely in a thick Zinc white. An entirely bone black treatment would have worked well also since black has a death connotation: In the 17<sup>th</sup> century bone black, a bluish black, “. . .was usually derived from the thighs of cattle or the limbs of lambs: uncontroversial powdered and burned scraps from the slaughter-house’s remainder pit.”<sup>48</sup> Using one color to make a painting, in other words painting a monochrome, has stakes in the history of post painterly abstraction and minimalism. Even when only one color is used there is obscurity. A monochromatic painting is obscure because, “it is true that the monochrome area of plain color is something other

<sup>46</sup> Victoria Finlay, *Colour* (London: The Folio Society, 2009), 100.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 92.

than a background.”<sup>49</sup> For example, Yves Klein’s monochromes, painted using his patented International Klein Blue pigment, suggest infinity, and not only because they are in relation to his photograph *Leap into the Void*, an image of Klein leaping from a rooftop, arms outstretched. No, blue particularly, “...takes on the infinite and turns the percept into a ‘cosmic sensibility’ or into that which is most conceptual or ‘propositional’ in nature...”<sup>50</sup> Indeed blue, especially bright blue, is a field color proposing natural, atmospheric space.<sup>51</sup> Painters can use this fact to either create or avoid metaphorical associations.

If blues, and greens, are used to paint the words “**our eyes tra versing la la kes am brrr shallows/ our hands brushing leafy budding branches,**” then the natural world is literally evoked. While color is part of the vocabulary of reception, less fixed and more fluid readings can be engendered by choosing nonliteral colors. As Ruscha remarks: “I am careful not to be literal...If I paint a picture of the word ‘COOL,’ I don’t use a lot of blue or other cool colors; instead, I find myself deliberately taking another route.”<sup>52</sup> By using an unpredictable color words can be steered away from definition and toward wider interpretations. In terms of how it works, red is the opposite of blue because it is most often the colour of tangible objects.<sup>53</sup> For example, red is roses and stop signs. Further, red belongs to things because “...the concept of red is impossible. One could go so far as to say that it has no meaning. Color cannot be abstracted from its

<sup>49</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, “Percept, Affect, and Concept,” 181.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Harrison, “Abstract art: reading Barnett Newman’s *Eve*,” in *Frameworks for Modern Art*, ed. Jason Gaiger (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 134.

<sup>52</sup> Ed Ruscha, Ruscha in Karlstrom, “Interview with Edward Ruscha,” p. 150, quoted in Lisa Pasquariello, “Ed Ruscha and the Language That He Used,” *October*, Vol. 111 (2005): 97.

<sup>53</sup> Harrison, 133.

material ground, but it also cannot be seen except in contrast to other colors.”<sup>54</sup> It is impossible to define colors even while they delimit objects. Thus when we look into the large abstract field of red that is Barnett Newman’s painting *Eve* we are jarred, even disturbed.<sup>55</sup> Newman unconventionally used a non-field color, a deep red, to create a large field because he, “...was not aiming to evoke the kind of naturalistic atmosphere traditionally associated with landscape. And yet he did not want the painting to appear as a mere flat two-coloured slab hanging on the wall.”<sup>56</sup> By reversing an understanding of red, Newman establishes the viewer in an unexpected relationship to space. Newman’s use of red is an example for abstract painters who want to avoid figurative and symbolic associations, and for unwanted literalness and metaphors in word paintings.

One strategy is to use color matter-of-factly by choosing it from a color chart, such as the kind found in hardware stores. For example, “[w]e don’t say that a certain blue in a color chart is a melancholic or sad blue: it is just blue. Color-chart color is color that is relentlessly indifferent to us.”<sup>57</sup> Beyond indifference, color is readymade, “...Marcel Duchamp’s term for the mass-produced objects that he designated as works of art merely by selecting and then adjusting them in some way.”<sup>58</sup> The expressive, emotional power of modern painting is demystified by Duchamp’s point that paint is a scientifically manufactured commodity. However, color is undeniably expressive and

<sup>54</sup> Luce Irigaray, “The Invisible of The Flesh,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux (New York: Routledge, 2000), 567.

<sup>55</sup> Harrison, 134.

<sup>56</sup> Harrison, 145.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ann Temkin, “Color Shift,” in *Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to today* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 17.

emotional: “at one pole color is meant to be subjective, intuitive, expressive, translating into a language of aesthetic feelings and emotions; at the other it is objective, scientific, systematic.”<sup>59</sup> These poles are often troubled because a systematic use of color can feel expressive.<sup>60</sup> For example, Gerhard Richter’s Color Chart paintings feel dramatic despite that he randomly chose colors from charts and meticulously replicated them large scale. By drawing on all-purpose materials, Richter removes subjectivity and the artist’s romantic engagement with choosing color. Of course he chose these particular color charts, but his choices are undermined because “the samples are only a selection made by the artist from the enormous range of available colors, which itself is surely only a sample of the even greater range of possible colors.”<sup>61</sup> Despite being readymade paint color is unlimited.<sup>62</sup> Matter-of-fact color evokes infinity.

Rather than being formulaic, color “...is open-ended and serial – in theory it could extend indefinitely.”<sup>63</sup> No matter what the selection of colors in a chart, they can be extended forever by being mixed with endless shades of grey in infinitely varying amounts.<sup>64</sup> The kind of extension implied by Richter’s Color Charts is both spatial and conceptual because he is working with, “...color as pure difference, stretched out to infinity.”<sup>65</sup> Like thickness which includes what is under and what is more, color mixes with other colors and there is no conceptual reason to stop. In *Yonder is the Clock* the word Yonder is thickly painted across a rectangular, landscape oriented, surface:

<sup>59</sup> Briony Fer, “Color Manual,” in *Color Chart: Reinventing Color, 1950 to today* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 28.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

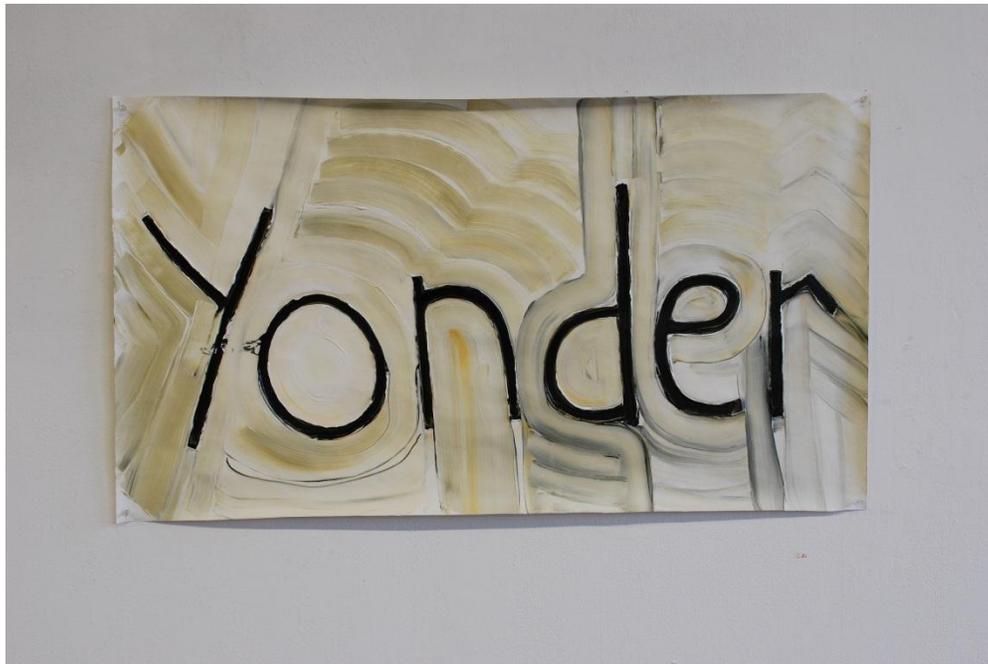
<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



**Figure A3. Anna Marie Repstock, *Yonder is the Clock*, oil on paper, 36 x 52 inches, 2011**

The letters, a dark olive green mixed from Payne's Grey and Transparent Orange, are painted on a sepia colored ground. Blending of colors is facilitated by painting the letters into the surface while it is wet. Olive green and sepia organically mix in the process, and by virtue of happenstance more colors are created. Hence the word Yonder is coextensive with the surface. Y o n d e r, pronounced Y a w n d e r, is languorous and feeds temporality while conceptually expanding.

**shake my darling  
body towards firm ament**

The second line in *Camping in May* is: shake my darling / body towards firm ament. The narrator wakes and reaches to the other side of the bed to rouse her partner. It is necessary to put the word body on the next line otherwise the text would read "shake my darling body" which would be the body of the narrator and not another person. Creating two lines is more explicit than leaving a large space between darling and body on one line. Importantly, there is another person since it is a love poem and

two people are camping together. Firm may refer to a man's erection upon waking, but it joins with ament to spell firmament, the expansive sky. The two campers gaze up at the sky in a way that is impossible in the city and contemplate the heavens and infinity. The arrangement of these words is conceptually inspired by Tom Raworth's poem *These Are Not Catastrophes I Went out of my Way to Look for*.<sup>66</sup> In this poem the narrator is sitting on the toilet biting his nails, reading comic books, smoking and flicking ash into the bath. He looks down between his legs and reads:

between my legs i read

levi stra  
origina  
quality clo

leaning too far forward  
into the patch of sunlight (*Collected Poems* 37)

One analysis suggests that the poet is contemplating the label on his jeans, partly obscured by being creased between his legs: "Levi Strauss /original/ quality clothes"<sup>67</sup> More meanings accrue though, and "... 'clo' can also refer to closet (as in water closet) or to the 'closure' [Claude] Levi Strauss was always looking for in his structuralist systems – and that Raworth himself rejects."<sup>68</sup> This creative reading surmises that the spatial arrangement of words is integral to the meaning of the poem.

Certainly concrete poets have done the work of situating words in a meaningful relationship to space and making space work as a physical agent, inextricable from the

<sup>66</sup> Tom Raworth, "These Are Not Catastrophes I Went out of my Way to Look for," in *Collected Poems*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003) 37.

<sup>67</sup> Perloff, "Introduction: Differential Reading," in *Differentials: Poetry, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), xxiii.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, xxii.

meaning. In Eugen Gomringer's concrete poem *wind* for example, the placement of the word wind makes it look buffeted or jostled by actual wind:

Had he simply printed the word 'wind' in the center of the page, it would simply have sat there. Arranging it spatially so that we can read the word in four directions, he 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 them.<sup>69</sup>

Words are material and their spatial arrangement is vital to their meanings. Despite the focus on language, visual poets resist reading words: "...the concrete poet is concerned with making an object to be perceived rather than read. The visual poem is intended to be seen like a painting."<sup>70</sup> Like visual poetry, text painting means thinking about words perceptually since the canvas is like the page, but invariably much bigger and in less conventional dimensions. But perceiving and reading happen simultaneously because word placement is not the only issue. Harold de Campos puts forth the concept of text: "The *text* is defined as a 'flux of signs,' without punctuation marks or capital letters, flowing uninterruptedly across the page, as a *galactic* expansion."<sup>71</sup> Accordingly, the distinction between 'visual poem' and 'prose' blurs so that Gertrude Stein's successions of words can be seen as innovative, despite that they remain tied to the margins of the page.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Mary Ellen Solt, "A World Look At Concrete Poetry," in *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (London: Indiana University Press, 1970), 9.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>71</sup> Haroldo de Campos quoted in Marjorie Perloff, "The Invention," 183.

<sup>72</sup> Perloff, "The Invention," 179.

***Camping in May***  
**wakecstaticoffee!**  
**shake my darling**  
**body towards firm ament**  
**licorice black coffee twisting in our bodies**  
**our eyes tra versing la la kes am brrr shallows**  
**our hands brushing leafy budding branches**  
**silveriverunsilveriverunsilveriveruns roughly, for miles**

*Camping in May* will be painted thickly on a large canvas (4 by 5 feet). Matter-of-fact color will be used to augment the concreteness of the text, especially the word chains that come at the beginning and end, and the important line break separating the word *darling* from the word *body* to create the image of two people lying together. Whatever colors are chosen, all will be dirtied by black, a reference to coffee, to licorice, and to the blackness of the firmament as it approaches outer space. Since black can be mixed with other colors in varying shades and amounts ad infinitum, it is apt content for an existential text with implications of star gazing. A separate bright color will be used to paint the words **tra la la** in line five to highlight the music in the poem and in one's mind. In the last line the paint will be wetter and runnier to make the words in **silveriveruns** move into each other in a watery continuousness. The paint applications and strategies for *Camping in May* will reveal the concreteness of language as material and simultaneously the non-literal, immaterial, tangential resonances of words.

*Camping in May* and *Rainbow* are the result of writing experimentally with painting in mind, but the paintings still need to be executed. Therefore, because of the nature of invention in the creative process, a considerable amount of practical and philosophical research is yet to be done. Until the paintings are underway the thesis is subject to change, but the underlying theme of my thick textual paintings remains infinity. To restate it: the inherent thickness of paint and the endlessness of color resist

limitation. When combined with words about the beyond and with generative word chains, thickness and color materialize a conception of infinity. This painterly conception of infinity is pseudo philosophical, but Thomas Nagel's rigorous essay "The Absurd" gives me ideas about infinity that inspire me artistically. A proper discussion of infinity in relation to Nagel's essay is required in future. Briefly, he states that we should appreciate our cosmic unimportance instead of despairing about it, and embrace the capacity we have, "...to transcend ourselves in thought."<sup>73</sup> In other words, we have the ability to view ourselves, "...from a perspective broader than we can occupy in the flesh."<sup>74</sup> The incalculable mind allows paintings to be materially apprehended, but then it conceives beyond them: thought springs from matter. When matter in painting includes words it supplements thought. Thick paintings of word chains are extra supplemental. Numerous words can be painted in a chain, and even when they reach the canvas edge they go on. Apart from words like Heaven and Atheism, there are words like carrot and driveway. Some words seem more vital than others, but they are all relative. The relative importance of words and their painterly formulations is my pursuit.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E.D. Klemke (New York: Oxford, 1981), 161.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

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