

# Alphabets (seen in profile)

Excerpt from *In the swarm* (LN 2021), scheduled for winter 2021.

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«[...] a rock would be compared to a word. In a sense they are interchangeable... they are both material, and there's no escape from that, and to try and escape from that leads you into a kind of neo-platonic, neo-idealism...»<sup>1</sup>

According to Marcel Broodthaers, «since Duchamp, the artist is the author of a definition»,<sup>2</sup> i. e. of a calculated shift of the object from its context to establish new interpretive paradigms. This position openly conflicts with those rejecting the very possibility of defining *any* artwork.

The methodological approach that follows entails the capability to select signs/objects and manipulate them not as bare finds, but as the native and most specific elements of a new relational perspective. Such thought process obviously makes the need of the inquiry into the very nature of art explicit.

In *One ball total equilibrium tank* (1985), Jeff Koons encased a basketball at the centre of a silicon sealed glass tank filled with distilled water. The absolute realism of the object in place of its representation stands against the neutrality of an intentionally unresolved context. To all appearances, this work comprises several heterogeneous motifs: the geometric exaltation of the full and the empty; the invisible force fields of physics; the ordinariness of a playful childhood called to mind by the ball itself with its unique dark grooves; the socioeconomic implications epitomised by the

*Official Spalding* brand and by the role of basketball in social emancipation.

This *stand-alone* artwork did not conform to the savage neo-expressionist painting dominating in that time, but the matter cannot trivially be settled invoking an *en vogue* remake of the ready-made practice. The deceptively simple arrangement implies quite a complex project, from both a practical and a philosophical point of view.

The gravitational field must be perfectly balanced against the hydrostatic drifts. If attained, the equilibrium would express the unperturbed status of the spirit pending between reality and aspiration. Owing to the extreme instability of a number of parameters, including temperature, the ball is yet never asymptotically stable at the absolute centre of the tank.

Far from being a drawback, this fact suggests a further interpretive level. The resulting "real-time slow motion" stands for both the substantial human ineptitude at the purpose and the elusiveness of that «[...] point of intersection of the timeless/ with time [...]»<sup>3</sup> which the sharpness of a single shot of a bouncing ball would seem to capture.

A similar process of search, displacement and redefinition of the actual connections within a formal balance has stimulated an original approach to writing. At first, all literature at disposal has served as a reservoir of textual elements and of well established models to draw from. The gradual widening of

contemporary perspective has then included the internet as a huger trading area, engendering artworks which exploit networks as relational devices and can potentially merge shreds of any kind of file into powerful markers of new slangs in a broad sense.

As of the early 21st century, the authors of *Flarf* poems, a term coined by Gary Sullivan, have explored algorithms-aided writing techniques, such as the web application [www.googlism.com](http://www.googlism.com), to sample and subvert ready-made text-objects. In that connection, the idea that «whatever-what may be art, or more precisely that whatever-what may become art, is decisively distinct from the notion that everything is art.»<sup>4</sup> Given its extreme delocalisation, this practice has often been referred to in terms of simulated multiple authorship.

Asemic writing is a whole other story. While not entirely defying the rules of language, it insists on their being implicit and relentlessly hints at them. Despite it may subsume obfuscated letters, numbers or other recognizable symbols, it cannot be reduced to textuality corrupted under the syncopated rhythm of handwriting. It is a pretended act of enunciation whose meanings remain beyond reach, undeciphered and not to be deciphered.

Asemic writing does not envisage the outcome of reading. It rather expresses a suspension or a lack of a kind of realism. The symbols in its polysemic spectrum are no longer elements of reality but of an ongoing renegotiation with it. Borrowing the terms from the so-called Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics, underlying meanings are the hidden variables within the "quantum state" of the text.

It is not a matter of definition though. The asemic writer *is not* the author of a new definition, nor is he skilled in drawing unprecedented alphabets of symbols generating mean-

ing according to *other* shared rules. He is neither essentially nor functionally interested in meaning which, in the breakdown of the hyper-connected society, tends to be the dreg of a permanent production and consumption process of second hand information.

The more the traits of what builds signification are pared-down, the more asemic writing becomes a pure experience of aesthetic value, an experience in itself, in no way compensatory to the intrinsic illegibility. Upon close reflection, seeing comes before speaking, objects before words and, ever since palaeolithic graffiti, drawing before writing.

Words always set up conventional frames whose content is visual and phonic at once, but this duality must be surpassed to differently trigger the textual stimulus.

As the semantic, phonetic and orthographic elements are overcome and melt into the asemic compound, the text is nonetheless charged with signification. In this forge of permanent creation, illegibility points to some ultimate spiritual unity.

Every piece of writing is thus original, in the sense that it is at the origin of a set of signs which will not likely be further manipulated or used elsewhere. No agreement is made between writer and reader about the respective tasks. Whether the document is produced by a dot matrix printer or a stained paper is involved, I here echo the words of the American anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir: «no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.»<sup>5</sup>

Despite Marcel Duchamp once stated that «as soon as we start putting our thoughts into words and sentences everything gets distorted, [...] we never understand each other»,<sup>6</sup> asemic writers do not distrust language. They address it from a different perspective, un-

dermining the often tacit idea that reality is either just a language habit or a legacy. Words and sentences are not their aim. They focus on broader patterns which such words and sentences may be traced to. The iteration of stressed traits and the tendency to cluster them suggest a hierarchy, but the word-sign duality never gets solved. No syntactical residual points to a precise language.

Words are no longer meeting points of signs. The edge between meaninglessness and signification remains unguarded.

Rather than the total equilibrium envisaged by Koons, asemic texts undergo a permanent Brownian motion, wherein all possible trajectories are subsumed. The ridged design of printed alphabets merges with other smoother primary signs, as if the text were incessantly ground by some uncalibrated machine of enunciation.

The strong relational force between the signs themselves tends to shift the focus from orthography and syntax to almost topology, plunging the texts into unprecedented metric spaces.

No longer does the artist act «[...] like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing».<sup>7</sup> His invasive surgeries cut the nerves of communication and dissect texts and layouts against the intangible backdrop of digital languages.

He is committed to reversing the osmosis of capitalistic propaganda driven by ever more aggressive jingles, slogans and banners rapidly mutating like viruses. As opposed to these flawless micro-textual assembly lines, asemic texts are flickering pointers, muted enunciators, not oriented semiotic segments, challenging the reader to renegotiate an active relationship with the text itself, hanging in the balance between reading and watching but contrasting both.

Meanings are like tree rings compressed

within the text, whose presence is intensified, but never resolved, by an all-pervading bark of signs.

Unlike Pierre Huyghe's *Timekeeper* (1999), where a series of concentric paint layers reveals the timeline of the gallery wall, the asemic coating of a text prevents the corrosion of its meaning. Huyghe's procedure recalls Mimmo Rotella's *décollage* and again puts forth the issue of multiple authorship. The paradox of multiple *distinguishable* copies of the same artwork comes likewise into play.

«Asemic writing is somewhat like dramatic writing and even entertainment script forms [...]»,<sup>8</sup> a persuasive flux of characters into which «each reader-writer-viewer breathes unique life [...] and individual signs like actors.»<sup>9</sup>

In the gap between meaninglessness and signification the text is exposed to itself.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Smithson, Robert: *The Collected Writings*, (ed. J. Flam), Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1996, p. 209.

<sup>2</sup>Haidu, Rachel: *The Absence of Work. Marcel Broodthaers, 1964–1976*, Cambridge (MA) 2010, p. 183.

<sup>3</sup>Eliot, Thomas Stearns: *The Dry Salvages* (V, vv. 18-19), in: *Ibid.: Four Quartets*, New York 1943.

<sup>4</sup>Kyndrup, Morten: *Art and the Enunciative Paradigm. Today's Objectual De-differentiation and Its Impact on Aesthetics*, in: «Nordisk Estetisk Tidskrift», 25–26, (2002), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup>Sapir, Edward: *The Status of Linguistics as a Science*, in: *Ibid.: Culture, Language and Personality*, (ed. D. G. Mandelbaum), Berkeley (CA) 1958, p. 69.

<sup>6</sup>Duchamp, Marcel, cit. in: Tomkins, Calvin: *Ahead of the Game*, London 1968, p. 34.

<sup>7</sup>Duchamp, Marcel: *The Essential writings of Marcel Duchamp*, (ed. M. Sanouillet and E. Peterson), London 1975, p. 138.

<sup>8</sup>Jacobson, Michael: *SCRIPTjr.nl Interview Conducted by Quimby Melton*, in: *Works & Interviews*, Leipzig 2016.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*