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Speaking in Text: The Resonance of Syntactic Difference in Text Interpretation

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of meaning in such a way as to alter the experience, interaction and expectations of its audience is the question. If so, can such a displacement of experience instigate a critical discourse between designer, culture and the individual?

I is free.

Unless an image displaces itself from its natural state, it acquires no
significance. Displacement causes resonance.

Shanta Gokhal

Often the shift is subtle.

Perhaps the wrong tense is used during the telling of a story.

Time and again the speaker's grammar is corrected

so that he or she will learn to speak without mistake.

Without displacement.

Without identity.

I is free.

Again the voice asserts itself,

claiming a different syntax,

a hidden voice,

a new meaning.

Here language structures the abyss of mental space.

It's an invisible architecture of the speaker's history and identity.

"Speak that I may see you."[1]

Speak that I may hear in your diction

a history different from my own.

Speak that I may see the significance of "to be."

1 What's wrong?

Correct the portions enclosed in parentheses.

1 I (enjoyed) very much.   2 It was not (so) long time.
3 Please answer as soon as you (got) my letter.   4 He is
(studying to learn) Turkish.   5 In (another word), it costs
very little.   6 (Until) a few months, I'll have to go back home.
7 I was planning to go to New York (for visiting) my brother.
8 Please give my regards to (whom they) miss me.   9 (It is a
long time that I didn't have Chinese food.)   10 I have (so)
trouble in English (so) I can't understand my classes.   11 Two
weeks ago our teacher (made a test for us).   12 There is a
board of (censor passes on every movies).   13 No one (maybe)
admitted.   14 My adviser recommended (me to take) four
courses.   15 This story is (very) interesting that I never get
tired of reading it.   16 He has a (gold heart).   17 I (didn't
see) him since October.   18 He doesn't want (that the
opinion of his friends change).   19 They don't have the
modern buildings (as) we have.   20 It is difficult to (say)
them that I don't know.   21 The celebration gives us a chance
to (enjoy).   22 The weather is (too much) cold.   23 That
was the first time (for me to visit) the place.   24 The story
(is telling) about an orphan girl.   25 (May be) he isn't home.
26 I (have received) your letter two weeks ago.   27 Once
upon a time (one of foxes) was very hungry.   28 I (am)
anxious to hear from you for many days.   29 I will never
forget my teachers and (the others my friends).   30 It is one
of the best (high school of) country.   31 This weather makes
me (to think) of home.   32 (Who) wants to enter a high
school must take an examination.   33 That was (my first
time to see) Niagara Falls.   34 (Most of people) think it's
wonderful.   35 (After then), we went to the museum.   36 I
am always happy to receive your (letter).

Figure 1
Angela, Paratore. 1958. *English Exercises: English as a Second Language.*
New York, New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc.

Speak that I maybe see you. It is not the words themselves that signify difference but their displacement within a codified system. The echo of this error carries with it an awareness of the interdependence of form and meaning. Thus a shift in syntax, the laws governing the structure of language, indicates significance through variation. With the renaming of conventional codes, the normally unconscious process of sentence construction is raised to consciousness. Displacement resonates and we are aware of our position in discourse. Language offers itself as a mirror or mask in the process of renaming.

Foucault, in *This is Not a Pipe*, states that, "It is in vain that we try to show, by use of metaphors, images or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendor is not that deployed by one's eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax."[2] What then, is the effect of the displacement of certain codes (syntax), within the system that constitutes language? Here syntax is understood to mean signs and their formal relationship to other signs while semantics refers to signs and their relationship to the objects for which they stand.[3] How is a shift in syntax tied to the construction and interpretation of meaning? For individuals learning to construct these codes in the "correct" way, displacement reveals difference. **You do not speak like me, therefore you are not like me.** A foreign language primer for students learning English as a second language regulates the use of syntax based on codified rules of grammar. Exercises intended to reinforce these codes tell a story of their own (*figure 1*). How much more significant are the "incorrect" answers to our understanding of these students and their position in this new discourse, than the faultless grammar they are designed to teach? How revealing these statements are about our own culture and its mixture of voices.

I is Free (*figures 2-4*) represents a visual document created to explore the resonance of syntactic displacement within a discourse of cultural identity. When we misspeak, whether it be a slip-of-the-tongue or a grammatical blunder, the semantic information generated through this syntactic violation greatly outweighs that of "correct" English. These mistakes reveal our relationship to the
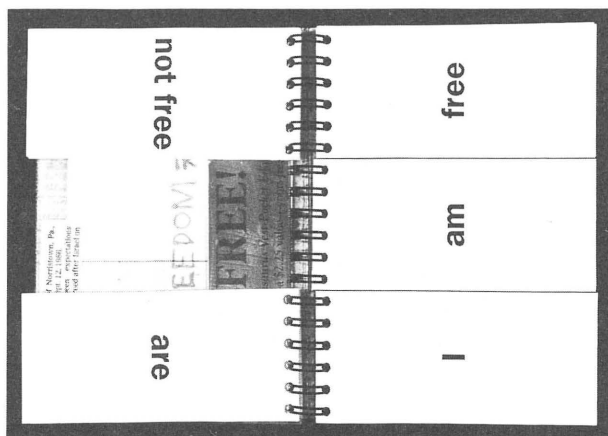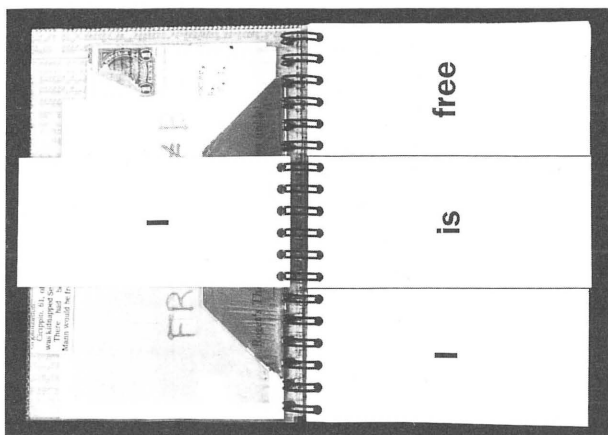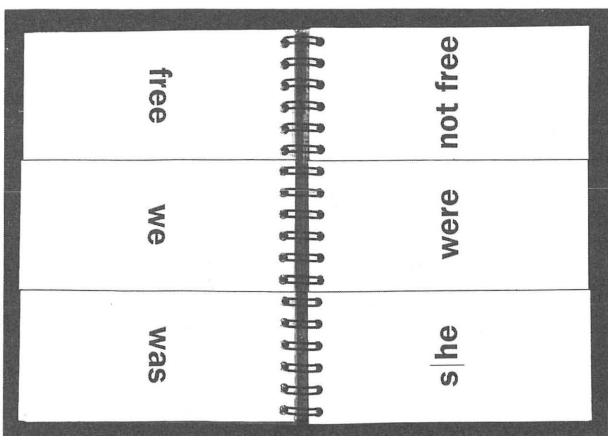
Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

context in which we speak: our discourse holds within it the
architecture of our identity; the possible history of our voice.
Culture and context rendered opaque.

In addition, the commodification of language is addressed
through the pairing of the word "free" with the "to be" verbs.
The philosophical and economic duality of the word "free" sets
up an ideological tension that reinforces the richness of its
contradiction. Recontextualized definitions, or usages of the
word as it appears in popular culture, are drawn from newspaper
clippings, advertisements, graffiti and coupons. This semantic
juxtaposition confronts the reader's expectations and provides a
frame of reference for the syntactic dislocations of the text.
These fluctuating grammatical combinations reveal the wealth of
information to be found when language structures are violated.
Words and phrases shaken from their habitual contexts and
reconfigured syntactically resonate as a more significant level of
meaning is reached.

Premise

If we consider design as the logic of relations in its semiotic
sense, then form should be seen as derivative: it should emerge
from the reasons for creating that form. But form is always a
part of meaning, a factor determining content [4] (As visual signs
are the entities through which we, as designers, define content).
Syntax, whether verbal or visual, is directly tied to meaning and
its interpretation. The visual signs of any work help to define
form and structure and are significant in their semantic function.
When these visual signs are acted upon so that their relationship
is somehow altered, its intended message is transformed as well.
Figure 5 illustrates the failure of a language system to support
the meaning intended by the designer when its syntax was
mistakenly redirected. The original poem consisted of a word
"spelled" out of the missing letters from the four sets of
alphabets, G-O-N-E. When invited to have this poem published,
formal changes made in the translation basically erased all
semantic implications of the original piece.

A B C D E   A B C D E
F H I J K   F G H I J
L M N O P   K L M N P
Q R S T U   Q R S T U
V W X Y Z   V W X Y Z

A B C D E   A B C D F
F G H I J   G H I J K
K L M O P   L M N O P
Q R S T U   Q R S T U
V W X Y Z   V W X Y Z

Figure 5a
Thomas Ockerse, 1972

ABCDE   ABCDE   ABCDE   ABCDF
FHIJK   FGHIJ   FGHIJ   GHIJK
LMNOP   KLMNP   KLMOP   LMNOP
QRSTU   QRSTU   QRSTU   QRSTU
VWXYZ   VWXYZ   VWXYZ   VWXYZ

Figure 5b
Ockerse poem as
designed / published by
G.J. Rook for Exp/Press
Card, 1972.

"When the results are compared, it is clear that the two typefaces do not represent the same meaning in their configurations of an alphabet system or in their ability to define an important syntax throughout. . . This syntactic consistency has definite semantic implications for the entire object. In this respect it is obvious that the significant components of the poem's original content were simply deleted, in the same way sentences or stanzas might be deleted from a conventional poem."[5]

This misrepresentation demonstrates the functional and visual link between syntax and semantics. But what does this relationship reveal and how can it be investigated within the realm of typography? What effect does syntactical displacement have on meaning and its interpretation?

I've wondered why it took us so long to catch on.
We saw it yet we didn't see it.
Conned, perhaps,
into thinking that the real action was metropolitan
and all this was just boring hinterland.
It was a puzzling thing.
The truth knocks on the door and you say,
"Go away. I'm looking for the truth,"
and so it goes away.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

Gilles Deleuze writes, "Our civilization is not one of the image, but rather, a civilization of the cliche."[6] We often read images or texts on the level of metaphor and perceive meaning as something fixed and stable, already existing. This "way of seeing" has a long history and can be traced back to early models of pictorial space. It is in the *Sophist* that Plato first observes that painters suggest proportions not by following some objective canon but by judging them in relation to the angle from which they are seen by the observer.[7] During the Middle Ages, this mode of representation prevailed with the scientific and practical development of the technique of perspective. The various devices and models of perspective were just so many different concessions to the actual location of the observer in order to ensure that he looked at the figure in the "correct" way. Similarly, the laws governing textual

interpretation at this time were the laws ". . . of an authoritarian regime which guided the individual in his every action, prescribing the ends for him and offering him the means to attain them."[8] Because we carry with us this long history of prescribed vision we are comfortable in our acceptance of its truth. Our challenge comes in seeing an image as an image, without metaphor or preconstructed meanings. But to find again, to restore all that does not appear in the image requires disturbing the comfort and security of stable meaning. Meaning must be set into motion, a disengagement that leads to a different conception of reality and representation. Here no single reading can exhaust the dimensions of the text.

This advocacy of artistic structures that demand a particular involvement on the part of the audience challenges conventional representation. The multi-angled, super-imposed profiles of the filmed space; the variants of the magazine caption (Barthes); and the heterogeneity of the dissonant chord; all express an ideal embracing multitudinous and contradictory forms of expression. Bertold Brecht, in his conception of the epic theater, sought a similar end for his work, finding a voice within the realm of counterpossibility. His use of gest—of montage—was an attempt to use aesthetic form to mirror social reality; to question critical structure with critical structure. As Walter Benjamin notes, "Montage became the modern, constructive, active, unmelancholy form of allegory, namely the ability to connect dissimilars in such a way as to shock people into new recognitions and new understandings."[9] Implicit knowledge based on experience is made explicit through a process of self-awareness and reflection. This brandishing of nonconventional representation forced the interpreter to vacillate between possibility and paradox. Fixed interpretations were thrown into flux as ambiguity and multiplicity convinced people that their truths were provisional. They were made to supply the missing pieces for the puzzle — the puzzle that was their experience.

Expectations

Because we must be trained to expect structure before we can experience its violation, the issue of expectation must be addressed. Morse Peckham, writing on the phenomena of cognitive tension, found that, ". . . the frustration of an expectation becomes meaningful for the very reason that it makes the relationship between expectation and resolution explicit before bringing it to a conclusion."[10] This cycle of crisis and resolution requires that the interpreter confront the reality of the representation (referent) as much as the reality of the sign (meaning). Such a process makes explicit our contextual expectations and the restraints imposed on our way of seeing. In simple terms, the way of listening to a composition by Bach is radically different from the way of listening appropriate to a work by John Cage. Similarly, a novel by Beckett in a significant sense must be read differently from a work by Homer. Each require different perceptual-cognitive attitudes, or ways of approaching the information.[11]

These attitudes, or expectations, guide our interpretation in specific and often unacknowledged ways. Perceptual psychologists have studied the nature of cognitive structures that direct the way we gain visual information and have found that analysis of skilled sequential behaviors ". . . all suggest the existence of guiding structures of 'expectations,' 'cognitive maps,' or 'deep structure.'"[12] Stereotyped vision sees only those patterns which its stereotypes have permitted it to anticipate. But critical meaning is neither imposed or denied by these expectations. Rather, the visual codes that trigger the expectations are so firmly rooted in our language of seeing that no crisis of representation arises. No questions are asked by either the message or the receiver and significant communication is left unrealized. It is only when these expectations are somehow violated that the possibility for active (critical) interpretation arises.

Questions can be raised as to the degree to which expectations, based on visual structure, guide and limit the interpretation. One can ask whether 1) what is found is what the text says by virtue of its textual coherence and of an underlying signification system or 2) what the interpreter found in it by virtue of their own system of expectations.[13] Looking, like speaking, is not an act of indifference. These expectations are

a condition of the learning of the language of the visual. Many of our affairs are conducted under the assumption that our sense organs provide us with an accurate record independent of ourselves.

"Numerous experiments have shown that if a configuration is encountered which is not conventionally interpretable, which has no semantic function, which cannot be categorized by some existent categorical system, the perceiver cannot tolerate such a degree of cognitive tension and forthwise makes sense out of it, makes it meaningful, by assigning it to the range of an existent category, even when such assignment is wildly inappropriate."[14]

In trying to speak about what the world is like we must always remember that what we say depends on what we have learned; we ourselves, as producers of language, and of meaning, come into the process.

In the beginning was the gest he jousstly says, for the end is with woman, flesh-without-word, while the man to be is in worse case after than before since sheon the supine satisfies the verb to him! Toughtough, tootoological. There is the first person shingeller, Art an imperfect subjunctive.

Joyce

"When I choose to use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means exactly what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is the master—that's all.

Lewis Carroll

If one takes as language the systematic organization of our cultural codes—our inherited cultural horizon, within which meaning is made (and consciously formed)—expectation, based on how we learn to see and speak about the world, cannot be separated from the process of interpretation itself. The ongoing dialectic between the visual structure of what we experience and the contextual expectations this structure connotes, is rooted in the notion of language as a system that organizes differences into information that, as coded process, conveys meaning. Rather

than attesting to some fixed truth, such a system attests to its own truth or way of seeing: it pinpoints coordinates of meaning and plots them ". . . not against some master template of absolute value but in relation to each other, in the relative value of difference."[15] These differences become increasingly syntactic in the face of semantic necessity. A change in the syntactic structure affects the total organization of the discourse and determines both the density of its resonance and its provocative power. Such a change creates a dialogue between past and present forms and reveals representation as a construct, its meaning shifting and moving in a process of continuous displacement. Syntactic difference, the transformation of established visual and verbal structures through displacement, empowers the interpreter to "see" beyond the first reading, to enter into the silences between meaning in motion.

How strange a thing this Art of Writing did seem at its first Invention, we may guess by the late discovered Americans, who were amazed to see Men converse with Books, and could scarce make themselves to believe that a Paper could speak.

John Wilkins

Structures may deaden people to the impact of a certain image or, on the contrary, make them alive to them in a new way. In *Finnegans Wake*, James Joyce renamed structure as interval as a means of "retrieving that fantastic wealth of perception and experience stored in ordinary language." [16] When Joyce writes, "Otherways wesways like that provost scoffing bedoueen the jebel and the jypsian sea," [17] conventional codes are continually violated to create an open and ambiguous text. Syntax refuses closure and is recodified in terms of a musical score. The text personifies sound, its syntax molded to evoke rich aural connotations. At the same time, Joyce is also questioning the "representation" of language—violating its codes intentionally to talk about language at the level of language. Joyce's experimentation with semantic structures caused great anxiety in readers and critics alike as they sought to unify a syntax that embraced fragmentation and nonclosure. The form of the text

was transformed from a structure that moved to a structure within which the reader moved.

By disrupting and recodifying syntactic structures we are led to look at the ways in which the visual format of the text can change and intensify the ordinary continuities of language. Such a change in the visual structure enhances the reader's internal enactment of it, allowing the reader to sense a movement, rhythm, form—perhaps even its voice. This approach asks that meaning be sought in the arrangement of letters and words themselves before asking what the text as a single voice represents.

It follows, then, that the relationship between visual syntax and the semantic implications of any text must be understood in terms of the reader's experience with the piece of writing. Changing its physical form, altering its rhythm, emphasizing visual and verbal linkages, recodifying systems of punctuation, alters the manner in which the text is read. This transformation of the reader's experience has consequences on the level of interpretation. Visual syntax has the potential to transform meaning as typographic gestures create effects with both visual and aural dimensions. It was El Lissitzky who wrote,

"One must demand of the writer that he actually pay attention to typeface. After all, his thoughts reach us by means of the eye and not the ears. Therefore expressive typographic plasticity ought by its optic action to produce the same effect as both the voice and gestures of an orator." [18]

A text is meant to be looked at (not recited) and heard (with the internal ear). This internal enactment of the visual defines the distinction between silent reading and oral performance and also highlights the difference between poetry's use of visual devices and that of a text. In poetry, the intention is primarily aural, whereas with text, the subtleties do not translate to actual verbal speech but play with silent mediation. How can a change in visual structure affect that mediation between what our eye sees and what our inner ear hears?

In opposition to figure poems in which the text has the outlines of an object central to the poem, the configuration of the text is argued to be meaningful only when it pursues the goal of accenting statements, groups of words, or of establishing new relationships between units of text. This requires that the text be perceived as a system of interrelated parts, and its syntactic possibilities used as a blueprint for visual expression. The goal is to enhance or disrupt the rhythm of reading to make conspicuous the process of thought.

But what is the nature of the role that typographic distortion plays in the interpretation of a text? Taking a cue from e. e. cummings, we can say that visual distortions may be visual in nature but non-visual in function; they may function to regulate the speed of the reader's comprehension of words and sentences; or they may be used to create, reinforce or violate rhythmic ideas.[19] In each case there is a desire to direct the reader's experience.

Syntactic distortion affords the opportunity to intensify a statement or to subvert or violate a conventional interpretation. In addition to visual effects, a text may gain significant sound values from breaking up and rearranging words. When e. e. cummings writes: [20]

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nouns to nouns
wan
wan
too nons too
and
and
nuns two nuns
w an d
ering
in sin
g ular unthe knowndulous s
pring
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it is the fragmentation, repetition and unusual word breaks that constitute the poem's richness. Its semantic implications would be lost if presented in a conventional free-verse format. Cummings' overall intent, then, is not primarily visual: he is regulating the manner in which the reader reads.

Investigation

The following figures represent a typographic study developed to question the arbitrariness of print conventions (punctuation, alignment, capitalization, etc.) in relation to the semantic potential of a non-poetic text. The intention was to use indentation and other typographic devices for visual and rhythmic purposes beyond the effect of creating verselike lines or melodic phrases. John Sparrow, in his study of inscriptions, found that the quality of the impact that a piece of writing makes upon our minds may, in part, be determined by the layout and particularly by the lineation of the text in which it is embodied on the page. [21] From this we can conclude that the meaning of a text does not depend primarily on the concreteness of words or on their referential quality. Meaning is directed by what happens on the printed page
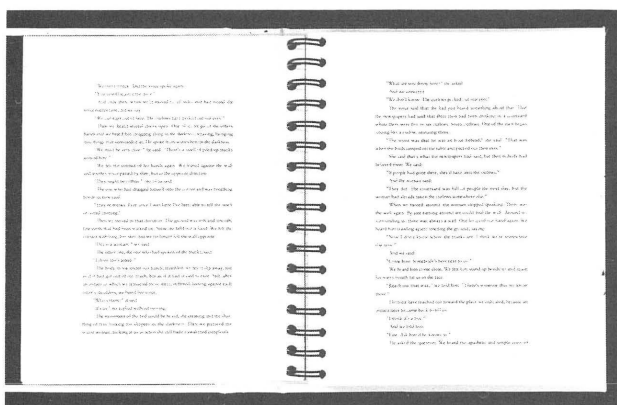

Figure 6

itself. And, as Walter Ong notes, "Print situates words in space more relentlessly than writing ever did. Writing moves words from the sound world to a world of visual space, but print locks words into position in this space. Control of this space is everything."[22]

The change in visual structure from figure 6 to figure 7 has aesthetic as well as semantic implications. The use of the double dash, line spacing and indentation has the effect of opening up the visual space on the page, particularly if there are several instances in close proximity. They—their content, their sound, their look—are more noticeable than if they were buried in the lines of a paragraph. The reader is encouraged to read across and within the text, identifying visual and verbal linkages made evident through their fragmentation and isolation in space. Further, the visual appearance of the text influences our expectations as to the context of the writing. Where figure 6 is seen to represent a typical page of text from a book, figures 7–9 take on the associations of a poetic text. This perceived shift in context brings with it a new set of expectations for the reader and establishes an interesting paradox. If the rhythms and consequently the meaning of the text can be altered by changing not the words themselves, but the context in which they are understood, then it follows that ". . . poetic effects are as much the consequence of the attitude and condition of the reader as they are the products of the writer's intention." [23]
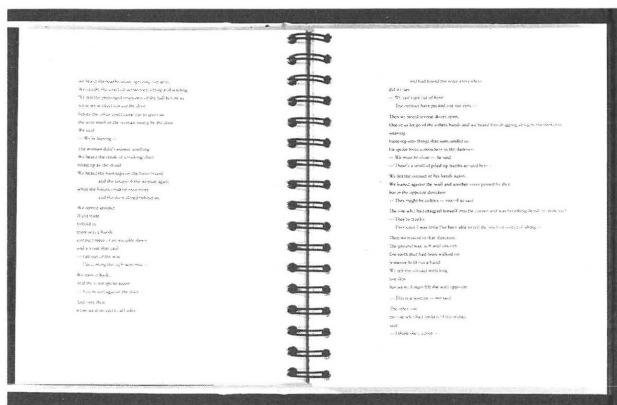

Figure 7

But we can go further than this. Rhythms and intonational sequences which we regard as poetic are found in many different expressive contexts. Richard Bradford, in an article entitled "The Visual Poem in the Eighteenth Century," discovered that ". . . by implication, it would seem that our

response to such sequences is determined by our visual recognition of the text. Text presented to look like poetry may in fact be read as poetry."[24]

Historically, printed text was seen as something to be read aloud. As seen in figure 8, the verse-like appearance developed out of a desire to enhance the rhythm of reading by breaking the text based on natural breathing. Visual convention was replaced by an aural interpretation emphasizing the rhythmic intonation of the passage. This recognition and use of the aural value of writing revealed an approach for a dimensional and differentiated text interpretation.

When punctuation and spacing are used to gain special effects from the temporal or visual factor in language a kind of visual syncopation emerges. Figure 10 shows a case where simply breaking the text line each time the pronoun "we" appeared, causes a new visual and semantic framework to emerge. The voice of the "we" in the text penetrates both the eye and the internal ear. Replaced by an insistent and syncopated voice, the neutrality of the text is lost. As a result there is the potential for a re-reading of the text.
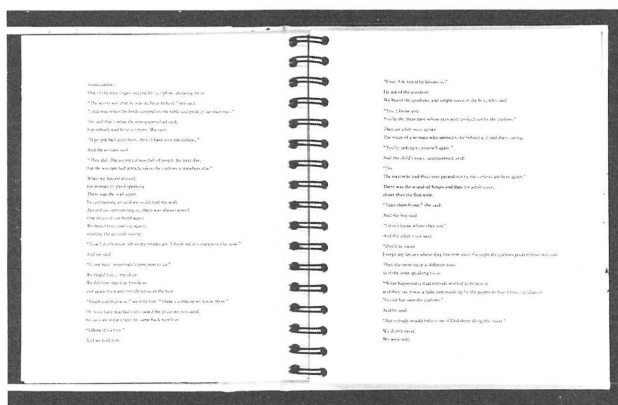

Figure 8

Intentional silences (space) differ radically in semantic terms from accidental silences based on convention. Arbitrary line length, based on typesetting technology, ignores textual intonations specific to any piece of writing. In such cases the

author's voice disappears beneath the surface of consistent and nonvarying line length. An awareness of graphic space as a structural element can make this voice explicit. When a text uses pause and intonation as significant elements of its composition, the voice of the writer re-enters the text. Space and time reveal a rich and varied landscape saturated by previously hidden textual relationships. The intrusion of the pause into the syntax of the sentence influences visual and semantic structures.

Conclusion

For any piece of communication the meaning of the whole is not a *picture*, but the knowledge acquired from the path of that process which makes any picture visible. [25] This path emerges from the interaction between the visual signs of any work and the meanings they evoke through the act of interpretation. The functioning of a text must then be explained by considering not only its generative process but also, as the previous discussion has indicated, the role performed by the interpreter and the way in which the text foresees and directs this kind of interpretive coop-
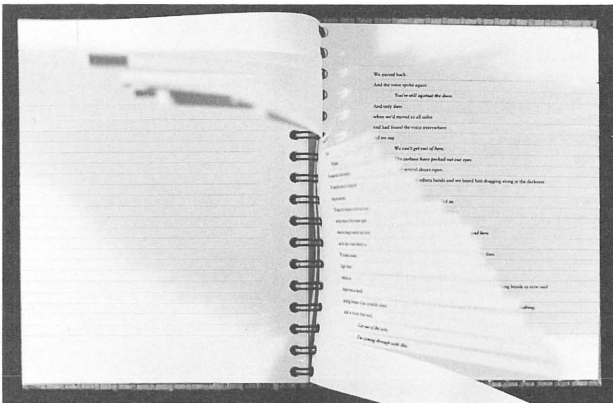

Figure 9

eration. The resonance of this meaning increases as the process of reflection deepens. Typographic design that questions convention engages readings beyond itself and acknowledges the privileged role of the interpreter in the communication process.

We return finally to a question that underscores this discussion of the transformation of syntax and its effect on the construction of meaning. Who owns the interpretation? Is it the writer or the designer? The reader or the social milieu? Because every interpreter mediates a text to his or her own reality, perhaps it is the latter that holds real significance. Although each work has its own set of constraints, its own limits and its own rules, its meaning can never be fully determined by its visual form. Rather, the language that it speaks can change the way it is experienced by the interpreter. **Speak that I may tell you what I see.**
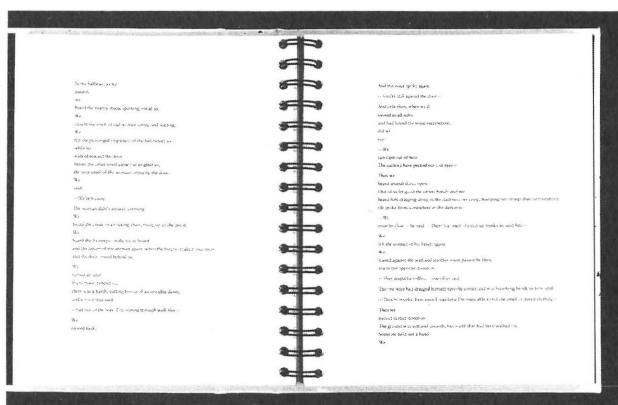

Figure 10

Endnotes

1   Edmund Carpenter. 1970. *They Became What They Beheld*. New York, New York:
    Outerbridge and Dienstfrey, 22.

2   Michel Foucault. 1982. *This is Not a Pipe*. London: University of California Press, 2.

3   Charles Peirce. 1984. Collected Papers. Charles and Paul Weiss (eds.). Cambridge,
    Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

4   Andrew Waterman. 1989. Soundings Along the Lines. *Visible Language* 23:1, 130.

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6   Trinh T. Min-ha. 1991. A Minute Too Long. *When the Moon Waxes Red. Representation,
    Gender and Cultural Politics*, New York: Routledge, 115.

7   Umberto Eco 1989. *The Open Work*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University
    Press, 7.

8   Douglas Hofstadter. 1979. *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*.
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9   Walter Benjamin. 1966. *Understanding Brecht*. London: Verso, xiii.

10 Morse Peckham. Art and Disorder. *Literature and Psychology*, XVI (spring), 89.

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15 Bill Nichols. 1981. *Ideology and the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other
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21 Eleanor Berry. 1989. Visual Form in Free Verse. *Visible Language* 23:1, 99.

22 Walter Ong. 1982. *Orality and Literacy*. London: Routledge, 67.

23 Richard Bradford. 1989. The Visual Poem in the Eighteenth Century. *Visible Language* 23:1, 9.

24 Richard Bradford, The Visual Poem, 10.

25 Joseph Kosuth. 1991. Art After Philosophy and After. *Collected Writings 1966-1990*.
    Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 53.

The founding document of present day New Zealand, the nine sheets of the "Treaty of Waitangi," is explored in terms of the Maori chiefs' signatures signatures and their significance in European and tribal custom. The original signatures were extremely small as the space designated for them was only 5 mm — they were dominated by the attempted English spelling of the chiefs' names. The author enlarged the signatures in order to better examine their form and study their inter-relationships. These signatures were further enlarged and manipulated to become a series of nine silkscreen prints celebrating the event.