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WORDS IN

Visible language

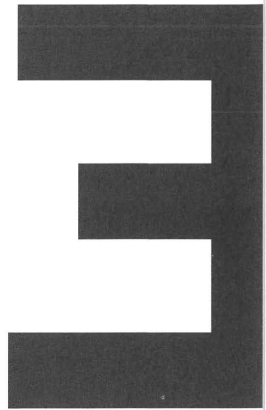
is ubiquitous, taken for granted;

In the two part series Words in Space, these articles explore yet other
conceptions (in a secular sense), reference, transformation and freedom.
A common thread runs through these essays – a glance at their images clearly
whether vernacular or artful. Each in its own way reminds us of
a special event.

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SHARON HELMER POGGENPOHL

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AN INTRODUCTION

it is often processed automatically rather than formally seen.

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A strong cultural thread runs through these essays – a glance
reveals their approach whether vernacular or artful. Each in its
words in space as a cultural event.

TRANSUBSTANTIATION, while removed from its religious significance as used here, signifies the morphing of words into knowledge, words as edible morsels and the mouth as that which eats and speaks. Sydney Shep, a New Zealander, uses his own culture's peculiar attachment to words as food and on food as an opening that allows us to consider other cultural connections between these two seemingly disparate forms of nourishment.

I recall a visit from Gerard Unger, the Dutch type designer and advisory board member, who brought all members of the household their initial letter deliciously rendered in chocolate. This small transubstantiation equates letters with gustatory pleasure – a connection most *Visible Language* readers would relish. On a less pleasurable note, I recall the discovery and mouthing of “bad words” and the parental threat to wash my mouth with soap, which incidentally had the word “sunlight” debossed on its surface.

Shep's article “The Restaurant at This End of the Universe: Edible Typography in New Zealand” is certain to bring forth strange typographic memories as he examines in detail the traditions, metaphors and cultural events that bring food and words together. The next article also has a strong cultural connection, but this time the exploration is based on reference.

To grasp the pleasure and the mystery and even the

REFERENCE, establishes the connection between things and may be precise or subtle, neutral or provocative, accepted or controversial. While not in any sense adjacent to Mexico, the southeastern United States has been a fertile region for fantasy and consumer icons of the cultural other, the Mexican. Maria Rogal suggests that the uniformity of the interstate system has homogenized the travel experience, substituting efficiency and predictability for diversity and a sense of place. Into this bland travel experience the insertion of South of the Border is a quirky, vernacular consumer experience. In her article, “South of the Border... Down Mexico Way,” Rogal examines in detail the characteristics of the “other” as icon, signage, speech pattern and typography.

TRANSFORMATION, the evolutionary or revolutionary changes in the materiality of words as things alters relationships through their mediation. Such mediations often become meditations, here as poetic experiments tied to seasonal change, the release of the book structure, a personal library, “characters” in the cityscape and river currents among others. But the most profound transformation the author describes is that of learning to attend to and imagine language’s possibilities to merge form and meaning. Lucinda Hitchcock, in her article, “Word Space/Book Space/Poetic Space” presents her own visible language projects as well as those of her students. These projects are not the usual two-dimensional, practical explorations, but projects that examine how words and letterforms interact with environmental conditions such as light and its absence, natural, unplanned movement and temperature.

In the spirit of the Hitchcock article, I recall the mystery of skywriting which appeared regularly in the midwestern summer sky when I was a child. Squinting skyward on a clear day, the performance of capital letterforms made carefully in order – in smoke – engaged even the most jaded audience. What was the word? What was the message? And then those high prevailing winds that fattened the letterforms, blurred them and blew them away.

or of cultural practice with language made material

FREEDOM, the absence of coercion or constraint in choice of action, is here used in relation to communication. The final article, “Reflections on Words in Space,” touches upon the issues of how we use communication and how it uses us, particularly in this time of rapid technological expansion. The relationship between words as spoken and as written is once again becoming an issue as technology allows us to return to primary orality, to use Walter Ong’s description. There is also the tyranny of too much information. Running parallel to a discussion of our current circumstance are images that celebrate the diversity of materials, forms and purposes that visible language in its environmental instantiation supports – labeling, selling, evoking, declaiming. . . .

And so this special series closes after examining Words in Space as issues of preservation, remediation, interpretation, navigation, transubstantiation, reference, transformation and freedom. The intention has been to recognize the ubiquity of visible language as it is embedded in daily life and cultural practice. To grasp the pleasure and the mystery and even the humor of cultural practice with language made material.