

AFTER THE GRAVE:

LANGUAGE AND MATERIALITY

DAVID SCOTT ARMSTRONG AND
PATRICK MAHON

YORK UNIVERSITY,

THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO

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Abstract

The introductory essay highlights a double sense of the word *grave* which is brought together in this issue as a means of getting at an aesthetic and a material zeitgeist: the prevalent feeling is that our current cultural moment harbors material and virtual means of artistic and written iteration that are in profound states of transition. The introduction to this issue focuses on intersections between written language and material sign, text and image, and on the links between the histories of specific art medias that speak to notions of passage and a *passage-beyond*. Commenting on the major essays in the issue and their respective engagements with art and text in light of shifting materialities, the introduction also situates a series of "artist's projects" in relation to the themes of the project.

Beginning with the Grave

The word *grave* in the title of this issue proposes a double sense. It reminds us of the idea of death, a place for human remains, and by implication, of a marker of death. The word invokes another form of marking, one historically associated with print technology: the grave, or *gravure*, an incised or carved out mark in a printing matrix. Thus the term, most readily associated with our mortal passing, also infers notions of reproducibility.

The double sense of the word *grave* is brought together in this issue as a means of getting at an aesthetic and a materialist zeitgeist: the prevalent feeling that our current cultural moment, which appears defined by inescapable states of transition, harbors material and virtual means of iteration that are also profoundly transitory. Technologically, culturally and artistically we exist within a cultural frame where reproducibility is our inheritance and also an albatross: it weighs us down and nudges us, both when its relevant technologies are in use and when they are in decline. Arguably, the concept of reproducibility itself is a reminder of the interest in our age in looking back and looking forward simultaneously — again and again and again.

From art to the grave...and after: this is like a riddle or the beginning of a ghost story. With a list of relevant obituaries too long to announce (...of art, of the book, of print: at the hand of mass media, the internet, the digital...), it is difficult not to argue that we are, indeed, working as artists, designers and thinkers in the context of an "afterlife." But: from art to the grave...and after? The order of our aforementioned trajectory may be incorrect. Perhaps art does not end in the grave but proceeds *from* it, rising phoenix-like; Christ-like; vampire-like to live again.

The Persistence of Art

Contemporary art and design are, in an era of mass culture and digital ascendancy, undergoing an explosion with respect to conventional boundaries and traditional parameters. In light of this, Gianni Vattimo sees our current relationship with the ostensible "death of art" as not leading merely to dissolution into forms of mass media, kitsch or ultimate silence, but rather toward that which is to be *healed* (in the Heideggerian sense of *Verwindung*). Thus, art in the digital age has, in a strange way, been *returned* to us. But a question may be posed based on an implied reversal of this idea which asks why, in an all-pervasive and competitive mass visual culture, *we keep returning to art* — not as witnesses to its death but in an awareness of its persistent life. In doing so, we find art ready, as Vattimo tells us, not to be discarded like an "old, worn-out garment" but to be *exhibited*, "...bear[ing] on its face the traces and passage of time."¹

The lines of the visage we admire or contemplate are, we know, the result of time and insist on the necessity that we consider in tandem the materiality of art itself

and the tangle of language. Material, for our purposes, is a fundamentally temporal thing. Marked by degrees of solidity and fluidity, sensorally embodied, functioning as a commodity or a resource — or 'standing in reserve' — the materiality of art begs scrutiny. And, regarding language, the very thing that makes it possible to hold, memorialize or retain it via art is the thing that also invests it with a vulnerability to corruption; to erasure, loss and decay. *After the Grave* takes up a concern with the 'double pull' of materiality and of language in art, and, ostensibly, with the complex means by which culture speaks and is silent, offers and withholds, albeit with an insistent often physical presence.

Reminding ourselves that language is a form of ever-present *social* material, capable of communication and of forging allegiances and of mutely retreating from the local square or the world wide web, is to bring to bear the limits of its circulation across cultural boundaries. In a globalizing context, language as a socio-cultural material is subject to acts of translation and mistranslation that allow it to be pressed into service, or to *disservice*. Sometimes as a medium of social exchange, language holds infinite promise and yet proves its own inadequacy as a tool, like a still-legible sign on an abandoned store. The social language of art and its myriad vehicles for expression is a subject of study in this issue as well.

Art Intersecting and Displacing Language

The physical fact of language — uttered, inscribed, marked or frozen in front of our faces in the cold light of bitter days — reminds us that there is no communication without the phatic exchange of substances.² Johanna Drucker

... writing is language *displaced* from the mode of immediate gesture or speech to the mode of the momento — something like the sea shells and the driftwood and the footprints on the beach. Writing is leftovers...³ Robert Bringhurst

Theorist Johanna Drucker, whose incisive writing on the art of the book and on language

as a material of communication and art, reminds us in the foregoing that language is by nature, an *exchangeable material*. Poet and design theorist Robert Bringhurst complements Drucker by arguing that the exchange of language is inevitably a means to displacement. In the visual arts there has been significant recent work demonstrating a preoccupation with language, particularly at the intersection of the visual and graphical, showing us the readiness within language of a momentum directed toward *displacement*. In such discursive work, the world is framed and unframed according to the material and metaphoric possibilities *inherent* in language and its trajectories. The writings and works of Robert Smithson serve as reference points for these ideas in that language in the artist's work becomes a 'heap' made of both print and minerals. For Smithson it is difficult and even pointless to separate the print from the matter, in light of the common phrase 'printed matter.' In his hands language is a thing "to be looked at and/or [a thing] to be read" and, further, "language operates between literal and metaphoric signification."⁴ For Smithson there is little distinction between art, language and the industrial extraction and circulation of material goods. Each similarly belongs to an expanded concept of *displacement*, where a primary substance is shaped, formed, moved around, deposited and discarded; holding signification and laying in waste or in reserve.

It is important to remind ourselves at this juncture that a significant if common feature of both art and writing over the last one hundred years has been the collapsing of the distance between image and text. In visual art, we see this activity in early Cubist collages and later in the skittering calligraphies upon Cy Twombly's giant canvasses. Images that move toward text and back appear paradigmatically in the seminal works of the Lettrists and within concrete visual poetics as well. Artist Blair Brennan in his essay included in this issue inhabits the voice of the *artist-poet*, reminding us simply, that "Words are things."

It is difficult, though sometimes necessary, to separate the mark from its materiality, the inscription from the ground. Yet to emphasize the distinctions between the word and the material and thereby allow the edges and limits of visual and textual language forms to bounce off each other requires a certain trust in the resilience of art and language. If we forget the inherent materiality of language, we forget the dynamic, physical weight it bears upon us. Such a form of amnesia might also make us forget that

language is not a purely human, cultural construction, an instrument of our will, but that it also belongs to the non-human realm of the material and the physical. Language does not, therefore, transcend the physical world, with its material resistances and impermanences, but is a condition of it, immanently shaped by it. So, ultimately, the de-centering of the human subject in regard to language occurs when the material itself rears up as a form of resistance to signification, and thus becomes simply unintelligible.

Contemporary artists are particularly intent, it seems, to draw attention to the potential brokenness of language and to the aspects that contribute to its *inability* to foster communication. American artist, Glen Ligon, in his epic text paintings entitled *Black Like Me* (1992), allows his stenciled written lines of apparent self-disclosure to become obliterated as the text becomes thickened with excess black pigment. In the works of Chinese artist Xu Bing, *The Book from the Sky* (1987-91) and *Square Word Calligraphy* (2001), both written about in this issue, ironic strategies relating to calligraphy, printing and translation form the basis for cultural projects that astound the viewer with their ability to visually engage while producing a sense of pervasive cultural and linguistic mystification.

Printed, Filmic and Cross-Cultural

This issue of *Visible Language* capitalizes on intersections between written language and material sign, text and image, and on the links between the histories of specific art medias that speak to notions of passage and a *passage-beyond*. David Scott Armstrong's essay, "Sfumato: or Print: Like A Vanishing Point Grown Over By Its Picture Plane," presents a series of linked ruminations on the function of print and the art of printmaking in an increasingly digital age. Situating his arguments in relation to the theories of Walter Benjamin and other twentieth century modernists, Armstrong's discussion is wide-ranging and occasionally rather elastic. As a writer, he looks backwards and forwards at the same time to remind us that the paradigms to which our contemporary reproduction technologies adhere are rooted in earlier, albeit equally sophisticated frameworks.

The encodings and transgressions of language and cultural and material objects within the realm of social and globalized exchanges is explored in Patrick Mahon's essay "Xu Bing, Ed Pien and Gu Xiong: Lost and Found in Translation." Focusing on the contemporary painting and graphic practices of three Asian-born artists now living in

North America, Mahon shows how the material inscriptions of language are born out of culturally specific negotiations of present and past, homeland and the site of displacement. Importantly, it is the cultural arena of art that enables such cross-cultural translations to be negotiated and to offer unfolding 'readings.'

Tess Takahashi's essay "After the Death of Film: Writing the Natural World in the Digital Age," articulates the complex narrative that leads from analogue to digital film/video and demonstrates the important historical reflexivity that motivates some of the most compelling experimental film today. Offering an incisive analysis of the materiality of film with respect to some of its discursive 'languages,' Takahashi infers that significant parallels exist between the world of time-based image production and the history and context for an analysis of the graphic image arts. Takahashi's essay reminds us not only that film and video have histories that 'loop' back upon themselves, but also offers a productive context for thinking through the opportunities that the shifts in the materials and languages of art may propose.

Artist's Projects

With the many notions concerning language and materiality buoying up a sense of possibility, the co-editors invited a selection of artist's to contribute writings, art works or both, to a series of artist project pages for the issue. The artist's works and writing in these pages span a range of interests and approaches, yet can be seen as united in their address to ideas concerning the challenge to link language and materiality in the contemporary moment. Seen here is a collection of artist's works that take up a concern for the physical act of marking, for writing and recording, whether by way of machine or hand. Others display an interest in the pertinent relationships between present and past, between pre-existing cultural forms or conventions concerning cultural expression and language and their subsequent 'reframing' as contemporary art, as critique and as dialogue.

The conflation of text and image is an apt one in this context and is beautifully albeit incisively handled in the complementary page spreads by artist Jeannie Thib. In her work, Thib draws upon a historical selection of decorative textile patterns, selecting and reducing elements to arrive at a set of signs/glyphs. Making use of the conventions of images as a field and text as figures, she also discloses something about the arbitrariness of

linguistic signs.

Both Blair Brennan and Joscelyn Gardner highlight language and the implements whereby it was sometimes painfully inscribed upon a 'body' through references to cultural and historical violence and ownership. Blair Brennan's work redeploys the activity of branding in light of its direct relation to rural raising and marking of cattle. The artist describes his own reluctant membership within a 'heritage' culture, yet finds in it a conflicted if far-reaching mythology. So, for Brennan, it is not just the word alone that carries power, but the act of its inscription that denotes its transformative potential.

Joscelyn Gardner, on the other hand, is compelled to confront her own complicit heritage by examining her white Creole family history, the roots of which go back to 17th century Barbadian plantation slavery. In her carefully described lithographs, we observe language used as a 'tool' of control, ownership and appropriation. Utilizing a hand-made printing approach, Gardner engraves physical marks into her lithographic stones and thereby inscribes a troubled historical/cultural reality within a stirring though delicate work.

Whereas Brennan appears to use the 'brand' as a reflexive ethnographic critique, artist Barbara Balfour utilizes the discipline of cursive handwriting as a means to invent a critical 'field' that describes the self as a set of contradictions. Here the artist has set herself to the task of repetitive writing, insisting on a machine-like accuracy that operates in ironic contradistinction to the work's seeming invitation to a 'close encounter' with the subjectivity of the artist; based on the use of language as a paradigmatic means to self-disclosure.

David Merritt and Patrick Mahon each deal in their individual practices with notions of circulation via carefully drawn graphic works. David Merritt's work focuses on the circulation of language through what he calls an 'inverted logic' of both the visual and aural. His drawings of song titles, which have been culled from their gathering places in the 'boneyards' of music industry web sites, reveal an intended collapsing together of a number of orders: drawing and writing, inscription and performance, gathering and dispersal.

The circulation of both language and cultural goods from one cultural site to another is also taken up in the work of Patrick Mahon. Yet in Mahon's work the focus is on the symbolic function of money as a shifting cross-cultural site of value, transaction and

exchange. The determination of value, whether government issued (printed/minted), or as cultural object (art) — as well as the intersecting of differing cultural means of exchange — is addressed in his *Drawn like Money* Series.

David Scott Armstrong's (*After Turner*) is based on ideas that literalize 'circulation' in a film-like sequence resulting from the artist's invention of a machine that references an apocryphal story of one of J.M.W. Turner's researches as an artist. Armstrong's extravagant lateral engagement of art history, print technologies and allusions to moving image productions yields a project that models some key questions concerning the past and future of print technology in a compelling way.

Micah Lexier's six-page spread of *Revelations* announce themselves as a page-sized 'apocalypse.' If we look at these left hand/right hand markings as an essentially additive equation: $1+1$ (for how do you truly subtract an inscribed mark?), the sum is not *two* but *zero*, and we are left with the paradox at the heart of material language. Always more — or less — than the sum of their parts (statement and cancellation), they remain present in the world as absences.

Conclusion

Is it possible to subtract a materially inscribed mark from its context, from itself? Material language takes place within a field of inscriptions, exchanges and erasures, forever repeating itself — and also always differing from itself. It traces a path between itself and other, between form and formlessness, ultimately offering itself as a site of negotiation and transition between the receiver of language and the world. After the Grave explores the relationship between marking and visual/graphical language in the works of theorists and contemporary artists, focusing on the physical/material means by which artworks function communicatively. Within the essays to follow in this issue, and in the written and visual works included, language operates as both material and metaphor: a *grave* that marks what has come before and what will follow after.

1

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2

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3

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