

GUEST EDITOR *Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl*

WORDS IN SPACE

ISSUE 34.2

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VISIBLE LANGUAGE 34.2

Special Project of Visible Language in Two Issues

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Words in Space

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WORDS IN

Visible language

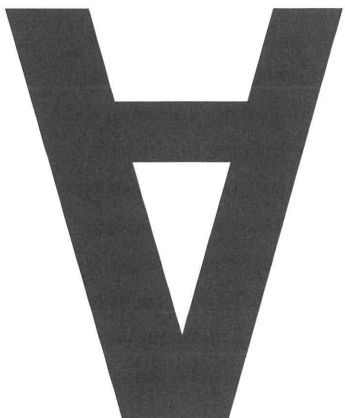
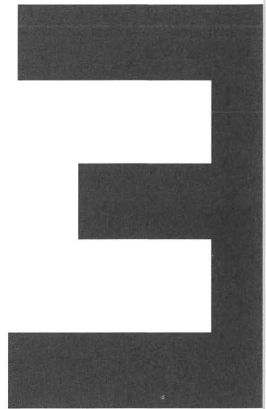
is ubiquitous, taken for granted;

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.

Continuing the special
Space, these articles explore
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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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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.

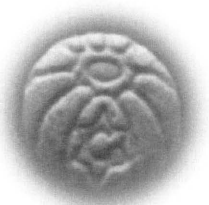
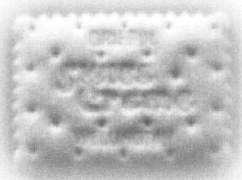
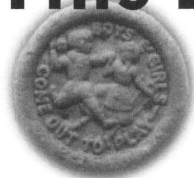
In the spirit of the Hitchcock article, I recall the mystery of skywriting which appeared regularly in the midwestern summer sky when I was a child. Squinting skyward on a clear day, the performance of capital letterforms made carefully in order – in smoke – engaged even the most jaded audience. What 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.

The Restau at This End of the Universe : Edible in New Zeala



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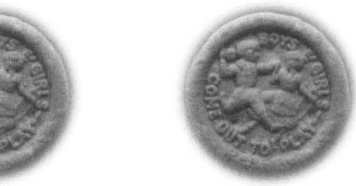
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SYDNEY J. SHEP

Typography

Large-scale food signage occupies a significant place in the landscape of New Zealand popular culture. As advertising billboard, it charms, distracts, and sells; as roadside marker, it enables simple or complex locating behavior; as outdoor sculptural installation, it functions as tourist commodity, identifying place with the sustainable objects of primary production. This paper examines the role of typography embedded on, dislocated from, and replaced by, edible foodstuffs in the production and consumption of visual culture. It questions why typography is placed on an edible substrate which, when consumed, facilitates both the acquisition of knowledge and its reprocessing into the communication practices of speech and writing. It explores why removable object labeling and separable packaging destabilize this integral and integrated association between food and knowledge, opening up a(n) in/visible space for the manipulation of desire and the politics of dissimulation. And finally, it traces the impulse to replace type with radically over-sized, non-edible representations of edible foodstuffs to create a virtual landscape of timeless, unsatisfied desire.

If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food. Like the post-structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable, as gift, threat, poison, recompense, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation.¹



Cocktails

I'd like to open with a rather famous literary example. At the beginning of her fantastic adventures, Alice falls down a rabbit hole, wanders down a long passage, and comes upon a long, low hall with a single piece of furniture upon which sits a golden key. The key opens a little door to an even smaller passage leading to a lovely garden, tantalizingly all just out of reach for an obviously oversized Alice. We'll let Lewis Carroll/Charles Dodgson continue the story:

There seemed to be no use in waiting by the little door, so she went back to the table, half hoping that she might find another key on it, or at any rate a book of rules for shutting people up like telescopes: this time she found a little bottle on it ("which certainly was not here before," said Alice), and tied around the neck of the bottle was a paper label, with the words, "DRINK ME" beautifully printed on it in large letters. It was all very well to say "Drink me," but the wise little Alice was not going to do *that* in a hurry. "No, I'll look first," she said, "and see whether it's marked '*poison*' or not"; for she had read several nice little stories about children who had got burnt, and eaten up by wild beasts, and other unpleasant things, all because they *would* not remember the simple rules their friends had taught them: such as, that a red-hot poker will burn you if you hold it too long; and that, if you cut your finger *very* deeply with a knife, it usually bleeds; and she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked "*poison*," it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later.

However, this bottle was *not* marked "*poison*," so Alice ventured to taste it, and finding it *very* nice (it had, in fact, a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast), she very soon finished it off.²

Signalled by the typographical lacunae of asterisks, Alice drinks the cordial, shrinks to fit through the door, but has forgotten the key, now languishing just out of reach for a now obviously undersized Alice.

Soon her eye fell on a little glass box that was lying under the table: she opened it, and found in it a very small cake on which the words "EAT ME" were beautifully marked in currants. "Well, I'll eat it," said Alice, "and if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door; so either way I'll get into the garden, and I don't care which happens!"³

In both instances, the agent of physical transformation is food, the cue for that transformation mediated by beautiful writing. But note the difference between the two typographically rendered injunctions: "DRINK ME" \neq "Eat Me." The first is hand-rendered by that visual genius of *Punch*, Sir John Tenniel, in Victorian ornamented capitals with lachrymal terminals verging on the bulbous. "DRINK ME" is printed on a label loosely attached to an otherwise undistinguished bottle (SEE FIGURE 1). In consuming the liquid,



FIGURE 1

"DRINK ME."

(Sir John Tenniel, Lewis Carroll.
Alice in Wonderland.)

both bottle and label remain as evidence of that consumption; the liquid itself is identity-less. Alice's caution in partaking of the mysterious liquid proves she has learned her lessons well. Patent medicines were among the first labeled products, a legal requirement from the late seventeenth century in England, with duty payable on each separately branded item.⁴ Given the dubious properties of many of them, the fantastic claims to cure anything from constipation to frigidity, and the ease with which the 'medicine' could be separated from its package, "DRINK ME" was a fairly ambiguous message. However, Alice exhibits no such caution when faced with the words "Eat Me" picked out in currants on the cake. It is as if the product endorsement is self-evident; words inseparable from, and indeed baked into the foodstuff, have an incontestable truth quotient. The brand is the product; the contract between producer and consumer is linear and transparent. And, as if the words are not self-evident enough, Tenniel feels no obligation to depict the very small cake, beautifully marked in currants, decorated according to taste.

Whether she eats or drinks, Alice embarks upon a physical transformation which enables if not symbolizes access to new experiences and knowledge. A female, a garden and food all conjure up visions of Eve, Paradise and the apple. But rather than presented with an extra-textual serpent inciting the fall by orally persuading alimentary and metaphorical consumption from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Alice is initially confronted with writing, after having fallen, down the rabbit hole. Her own encounter with the serpent occurs later in the piece when she meets a hookah-smoking caterpillar regally mounted on (for Alice, anyway) an oversized mushroom (SEE FIGURE 2). In this instance writing is no longer the passport to knowledge, but has, in fact, destabilized an Alice who cannot now answer even the simplest question of the caterpillar's catechism, "Who are *you*?" The caterpillar's cryptic advice "One side will make you grow taller, and the other side will make you grow shorter"⁵ infuriates Alice with its imprecision, particularly as the caterpillar, by moving off

the object he refers to, severs the direct connection between his speech and his referent. Unlike her previous encounters with writing articulated in the imperative, this confusing verbal rhetorical balancing act opens a space for interpretation and misinterpretation. Such ambiguity was erased in Walt Disney's animated version (1951) in which the Caterpillar's words were graphically though ephemerally rendered by multicoloured smoke rings which took the form of letters and things.⁶



FIGURE 2
Caterpillar.
(Sir John Tenniel, Lewis Carroll. *Alice in Wonderland.*)

These examples from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* offer three semiotic models of the relationship between food as/and knowledge and food and/as communication. A bottle with an attached paper label "DRINK ME" and a cake with "Eat Me" written in baked-on currants represent two models of how we perceive, read and thus consume the world. When type is replaced by speech, in an inversion of the traditional progress of language, the word is made flesh in the shape of an oversized mushroom and the edible substrate itself becomes the communication medium.

The sociology of food has, in recent years, become a fashionable field of critical inquiry. Anthropologists, historians, nutritionists and philosophers have joined sociologists in scrutinizing cultures of eating, notions of taste and the historical development of cuisines. A notable cast of characters has been summoned to the disciplinary redoubt: from Roland Barthes' early structuralist model of a grammar of food (incomplete and foresworn later in his post-structuralist career) to Claude Lévi-Strauss and his linguistic analysis of Amerindian food systems; from Michel Foucault's exploration of writing and the body to Mary Douglas's study of food as a sophisticated interpersonal and intercultural form of ritual communication. From the mid-1980s, developmentalists such as Martin Harris, Jack Goody, Stephen Mennell and Sidney Mintz have moved away from a specifically structuralist framework to situate food in historical, evolutionary, economic and political contexts underpinned with a recognition of nutritional needs and cultural meanings.⁷ However, although Terry Eagleton points out that "edible écriture"⁸ or the relationship between eating and writing permeates our linguistic landscape of gastronomical metaphors, the role of typography in this relationship has been, à la Beatrice Warde, a crystal goblet – transparent and invisible.



Appetizers

So, what is the relation of food to knowledge and what does it mean to place typography on an edible substrate? To answer the first, we'll have to enter the land of milk and honey, then cleanse the palate with a morsel of fruit. To answer the second, we'll have to wait for the main course.

In medieval Jewish society, the Feast of Shavuot marked the initiation of the child into the rituals of learning to read.

The boy about to be initiated was wrapped in a prayer shawl and taken by his father to the teacher. The teacher sat the boy on his lap and showed him a slate on which were written the Hebrew alphabet, a passage from the Scriptures and the words 'May the Torah be your occupation.' The teacher read out every word and the child repeated it. Then the slate was covered with honey and the child licked it, thereby bodily assimilating the holy words. Also biblical verses were written on peeled hard-boiled eggs and on honey cakes, which the child would eat after reading the verses out loud to the teacher.⁹

This celebration combines the reading of words with the physical consumption of language and the digestion of their import. In the process, the potential for knowledge is transferred via that organ of liminality synonymous with eating and speaking – the mouth – to be re-articulated in the vocal repetitions of Torah learning. The use of food to reward knowledge acquisition is as common as withholding food as punishment. Similarly, the force-feeding of language (eat my words) or the re-ingestion of bad words when the decorum of utterance is transgressed entails cleansing the utensils of food preparation (washing the mouth out with soap).

Now, learning with honey-coated horn books in a later period, may have proved an effective way to promote knowledge, but somehow the idea didn't catch on. Honey-coated breakfast cereals of the twentieth century replete with the saturation of cereal box packaging surfaces are probably the closest preparation for the classroom reading ritual that we have today. Another edible foodstuff, however, did provide an inducement to reading: gingerbread. Originally made of rye-flour, spices (including ginger) and honey, slabs of "book" gingerbread impressed with the alphabet were used to teach, then reward children for mastering their letters in northern Europe and England in particular from at least the fourteenth century through to the beginning of the twentieth (SEE FIGURE 3). Some of these "books" were shaped like the traditional hornbook, complete with handle, though not accompanied by the "wit-pricker" or stylus used for tracing the letters. Others were square slabs with pre-scored sections which could be broken off letter by embossed letter, much like the modern chocolate bar. Pictorial, emblematic and figural moulds were also used, some recording significant historical events, others illustrating popular storybook and nursery rhyme characters.

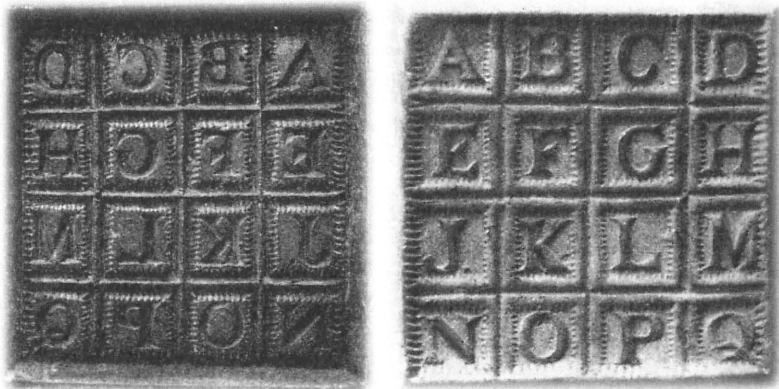


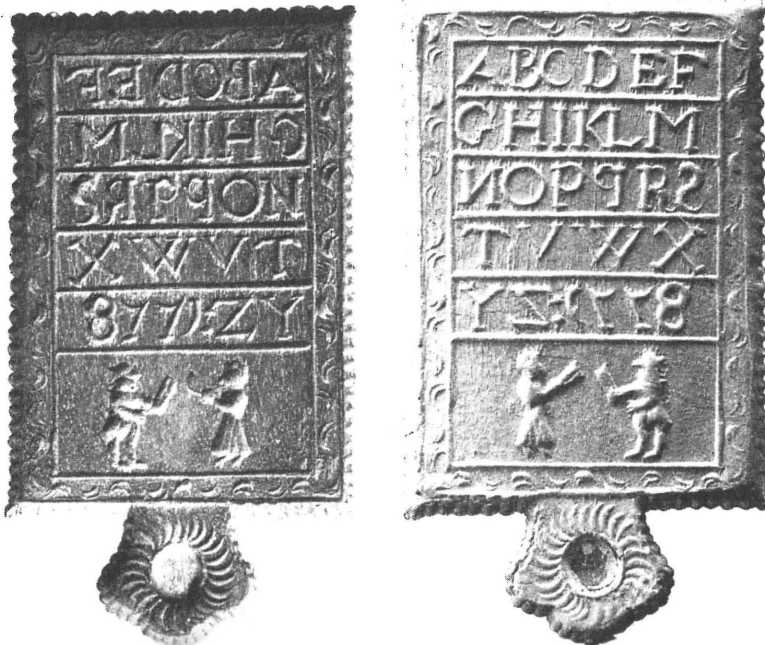
FIGURE 3
*Specimens of moulds and biscuits of book gingerbread,
circa 18th century Holland and England.*
(Tuer. 1897, *History of the Hornbook*, 440, 441)

Many of the more expensive and elaborate forms of white (as opposed to 'red' or common) gingerbread were gilded as a special treat or for the banquet table. In 1721, Matthew Prior versified the relationship between learning and eating:

To Master John the English Maid
A Horn-book gives of Ginger-bread:
And that the Child may learn the better,
As he can name, he eats the Letter:
Proceeding thus with vast Delight,
He spells, and gnaws from Left to Right.

Similarly, an anonymous writer from around 1835 remarked:

The bakers to increase their trade
Made alphabets of gingerbread,
That folks might swallow what they read,
All the letters were digested,
Hateful ignorance detested.¹⁰



I know of no study which highlights the role of the baker in shaping educational practice and promoting the dissemination of knowledge. Significantly perhaps, bakers were named as one of the desirable immigrant classes given free passage to New Zealand in the nineteenth century along with carpenters, agricultural labourers and domestic servants; anyone involved in the knowledge industry (such as printers, papermakers, bookbinders, stationers and even schoolteachers) were not included. However, the dark side of the baker's art is rarely addressed. Hansel and Gretel stumble upon a gingerbread house in a dark wood; by eating this confection, they are rewarded with the knowledge of terror and cannibalism.¹¹

The synonymy of food and knowledge is deeply embedded in the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the Eucharist, that cornerstone of Christianity, the transubstantiation relies upon the recognition of the symbolic relationship between (indeed, the identity of) the comestibles of bread and wine and the word made flesh in the shape of the body and blood of the man/god, Jesus Christ. Alimentary signification resonates in the Old Testament as well. Adam and Eve, for example, discovered the consequences of mis-reading when they ate the forbidden fruit, that emblem of the knowledge of good and evil, a symbol loaded with one meaning by God, and re-interpreted with another meaning by the tongue of an eloquent serpent. Despite being in the shape of a familiar object, the apple required an extra-alimentary text, a kind of "DRINK ME" label attached to but separable from the edible object; and perhaps it was this separation of text from object, signified and signifier, which catalyzed the fall. But, what if the apple had had "eat me" written or carved on it? What if ENZA, the New Zealand Apple and Pear Marketing Board had had its evil way?

It's time to cleanse the palate.

The pip and stonefruit industry of New Zealand has a long history of product identification. Apples, pears, peaches and the like were sold loose from the barrel or crate in the local grocers, but required more authoritative and authenticating labeling when exported overseas. The wooden crate with its highly colourful label is a testimonial to branding ingenuity (SEE FIGURE 4). The Auckland Farmers' Freezing Company Limited produced an annual guide to the cooperative's rules on everything from freezing to branding fruit cases. In the 1929–30 edition, they complained that "there is much difficulty in delivering fruit as required owing to submarks sometimes being so indistinct and small as to be difficult to find." The solution was as follows: "it is essential that the owner's name or number, also the name of the variety and size of the fruit should be stenciled on both ends of the case in letters not less than one inch in length, in black ink."¹² This over-exuberance of printing and stenciling did not pre-empt the government inspectors who regularly pried open cases to confirm and clear the commodities contained therein before sending them overseas (SEE FIGURE 5).



FIGURE 4
Two fruit cases for export market with color lithographed labels circa 1940–60 (private collection)

FIGURE 5
New Zealand Government fruit inspectors at work inspecting apples. ("Making New Zealand Collection," photographer L.W. Tiller, reference number C-23548-Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand)

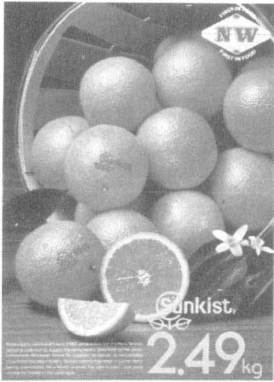


FIGURE 6
Sunkist orange advertisement.
New World Supermarkets 1987.
(reference number
Eph-B-FOOD-Shop-1987-01
Alexander Turnbull Library,
Wellington, New Zealand.)

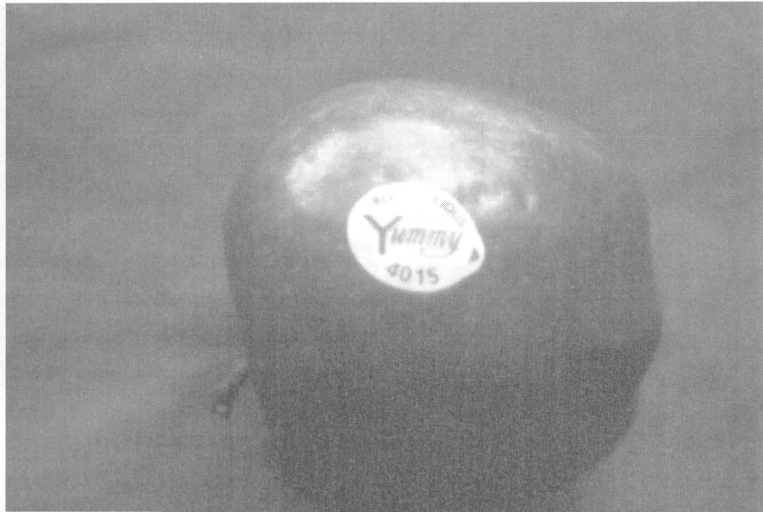
The next step was obvious as New Zealand moved from “DRINK ME” towards “Eat me” labeling. Unlike citrus fruits which could be physically branded with the corporate mark by being stamped with an impregnating dye (SEE FIGURE 6), apples and pears required stick-on labels, made firstly of paper, now plastic, the latter hopeless for recycling in the compost bin. Labels today include variety name and grower name or number, and at times a slogan or jingle (SEE FIGURE 7). Now, I don’t know about you, but how many times when you go to the supermarket are you insulted by this labelling strategy? You know what an apple is; you know what a Braeburn or a Pacific Rose, or a Delicious looks like. Do you really have to be told that it’s “Yummy” (SEE FIGURE 8) or “Ripe for Tonight?” Why does such knowledge have to be shoved in your face – on every single piece of fruit? Have we lost all our botanical lore as well as our ability to identify the subjects / objects of consumption, the relationship between visual recognition and taste buds now severed irrevocably? Are we the “export” market monkeys for fruit? Are we so suspicious of the tamper-potential of modern self-serve shopping that these marks of authentication are now also required for the domestic market? Are Nature’s foodstuffs now overwritten with simple linguistic cues, creating an alphabetic primer for the illiterate, indoctrinating the consumer into the ritual of reading? Or is it all part of a complex branding exercise?

FIGURE 7
Labeled fruit, New Zealand 1998.



Paracelsus, that medieval philosopher, medical practitioner and cosmologist, divided the world into three books: the book of God, the book of nature and the book of man. He believed that if we looked hard enough, we could see the hand of God inscribed on the natural world in the form of a language of letters which often corresponded to marks inscribed on man in the language of physiognomy. This physical branding meant an unambiguous identification of the object. However, criminals, dissemblers and women were much harder to read as they appropriated and subverted the language of identification and thus representation for their own purposes. Product branding operates in a similar fashion. "Brands are like letters. They can be transformed into symbols. They can become shorthand ways of communicating. ... Symbols come to stand for other things in our minds and the act of consuming a brand can become a symbolic way for us to express our identification with the entities associated with it."¹³ Are we taken in with what Daniel Boorstin called the "advertising penumbra," that blurring of form, content and reputation as well as that blurring of wants, needs and functions? If à la Emerson, "a commodity is the length and shadow of an ad," then Boorstin argues that "the advertising penumbra is surely one of the ways which our experiences and our feelings about any commodity is made more like any other. The specificity of the product is increasingly lost in the image of the package, its trademark, and its reputation."¹⁴

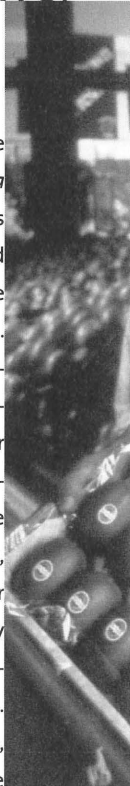
FIGURE 8
"Yummy" contemporary fruit label,
New Zealand 1998.



So, are we actually eating an apple whether it be Braeburn, Pacific Rose or Delicious, or are we eating a symbol? If the latter, are we back to Adam and Eve and the Garden of Eden? You may well wonder! In 1998, a Gisborne fruitgrower developed a revolutionary technique for growing corporate symbols in his products. Imagine, Sheraton Hotels serving apples and pears with their own logo not on the paring knife, the silver tray, or the monogrammed serviette, but firmly and inseparably part of the flesh of the fruit. Product/genetic engineering at its transformative best? Next step, bar codes grown in and on the skin. The symbolic value of the comestible erases the primary alimentary identity.

“Who can possibly estimate the hidden power of actually eating a corporate logo?”¹⁵

Admittedly, some fruit does require typographical assistance. The classic example is the New Zealand kiwifruit, the humble *Actinida chinensis*, which has suffered from an identity crisis ever since its introduction (SEE FIGURE 9). In 1959, the New Zealand fruit and vegetable cooperative, Turners and Growers, met to deal with the problem of the “chinese gooseberry” as it was initially marketed. In the aftermath of World War II, the potentially lucrative American market was suspicious of anything “chinese” and to add insult to injury, gooseberries were taxed at a considerably higher import duty than uncategorized fruit.¹⁶ Putting two and two together, the company coined “kiwifruit” and launched into the most successful horticultural boom of all time. In the mid 1980s, the boom bust for two reasons: technology sharing with other countries, which left little or no export demand; and the ability to forge little paper labels which had hitherto identified this unassuming fuzzy fruit with the green inside as “authentically” Kiwi. Once the brand equity of the symbolic name declined in value, a new name was invented and repackaging of the chinese gooseberry began all over again. Market research revealed that the name “Zespri” won out hands down (SEE FIGURE 10). Why?



Nothing to do with New Zealand, or even with a horticultural product. “Zespri” connotes cool, youthful, full of zest, a little zing, a lot of esprit. So too are wine spritzers, deodorant and toothpaste. Time will tell with this re-branding strategy. In the interim, the product itself is being re-engineered almost beyond recognition. The newest *Actinida* on the block is a yellow-fleshed variety. The identity stamp “Hort 16A, New Variety Class II” parades ambiguously and spuriously on the back of the Zespri label, and is not yet inflicted on the fruit’s surface; but in modifying the identity of the fruit and changing the terms of its representation the consumer contract between name, brand and object is unsettled.

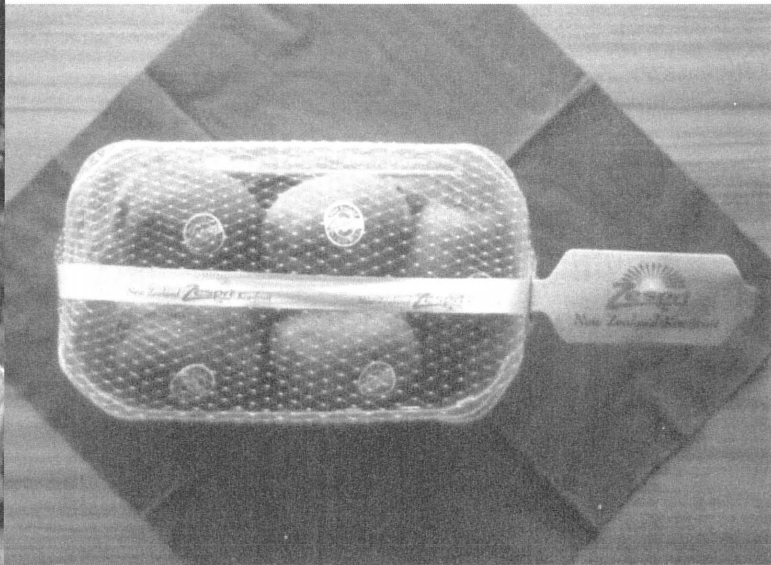


FIGURE 9

“One of our industry’s greatest assets is our brand.”

New Zealand Kiwifruit Marketing Board, 1992.

(Reference number Eph-B-FRUIT-1992-01-15

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand)

FIGURE 10

A basket of Zespri, New Zealand 1998.



The Main



FIGURE 11
 "Strike gold! with the greatest cheese promotion ever." Anchor Farm Products Co-operative Limited, 1982.
 (Reference number Eph-C-CHEESE-1982-01
 Alexander Turnbull Library,
 Wellington, New Zealand.)

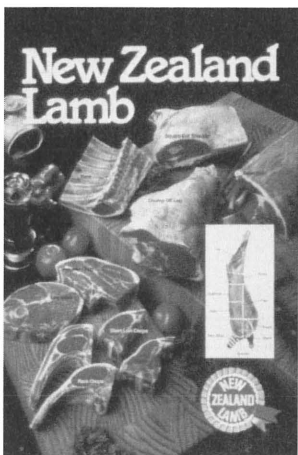


FIGURE 12
 New Zealand Lamb.
 New Zealand Meat Producers' Board, 1989
 (Reference number Eph-D-MEAT-1989-01
 Alexander Turnbull Library,
 Wellington, New Zealand.)

It's time for the main course and my second question: what does it mean to place typography on an edible substrate? I could offer a smorgasbord to stimulate the visual taste buds. Pass the bread and butter and cheese and you'll see what I mean (SEE FIGURE 11). Or what about the roast lamb, beef and pork with its quality assurance stamp echoing the physical branding of the live animal (SEE FIGURE 12)? Of course, I was desperate to locate some alphabet soup, but to no avail. It seems to have fallen out of fashion down-under, or else the technology of production is lost. Perhaps we really aren't supposed to play with our food after all, although fridge magnet poetry seems to have generated a more sophisticated notion of food and knowledge today, even retailing in five different languages. I'd really prefer, however, to move back to 1840 and the most important transportable staple of the time: cabin bread. All 14,000 kilos of it (SEE FIGURE 13). I want to commence the main course by serving up a short history of biscuit manufactory and then pass around various condiments to spice it up: developments in packaging, changes in retailing, behavior-modifying strategies in the advertising industry and patterns of consumer buying and eating. A tall order, one could say.

REQUIRED ON ACCOUNT
 OF THE
FRENCH GOVERNMENT

Biscuit	- - - -	14,000 kilogrammes.
Flour	- - - -	3,000 ditto.
Coffee	- - - -	660 ditto.
Sugar	- - - -	280 ditto.
Salt Pork	- - - -	1,130 ditto.
Vinegar	- - - -	300 litres.
Mustard Grain	- - - -	50 kilogrammes.

The whole must be of the first quality. The Biscuit and Flour in barrels if possible.

Tenders for the above will be received under sealed cover on Monday morning o'clock, at Barrett's Hotel.

Samples of each article will be required to be sent with the Tenders.

Port Nicholson, December 26, 1840.

[PRINTED AT THE "GAZETTE" OFF

Course

The lowly biscuit is an underrated and undervalued commodity which underpinned the entire colonial immigration enterprise. It doesn't figure in our gastronomically inventive metaphoric language: there is no suitable equivalent for "taking the cake" and Marie Antoinette certainly did not exclaim "let them eat biscuits!" George Bernard Shaw may have coined "to take the biscuit" while touring New Zealand, 'John Bull's other island,' but the phrase never really took off. And yet, one pound of biscuit per day was rationed to each steerage passenger during the long three month trip from Britain to New Zealand; that's at least eighty-four pounds of biscuit for the duration of the trip, unless the ship met with rough seas or becalming weather (SEE FIGURE 14).¹⁷

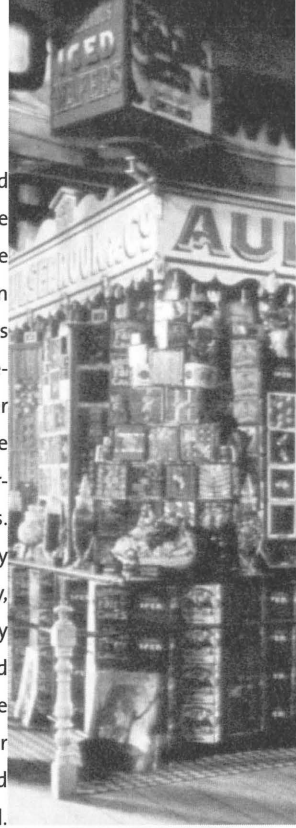


FIGURE 13
*Broadcast advertising items
required by the French Government,
1840. (Reference number F-48015-1/2,
Alexander Turnbull Library,
Wellington, New Zealand.)*

FIGURE 14
*Contemporary cabin bread,
New Zealand, 1998.*

Navy biscuits pre-dated the invention of tinned food as a way of sustaining military forces on the open seas and in land engagements. Before mechanization of the industry in Britain, a gang of five men could produce 100 lbs of biscuit in 36 minutes, including the 15 minutes required for baking. The 'driver' made the dough which was in turn kneaded by the 'breakman.' On the moulding board, individual slips of dough were hand-shaped and docked, that is, pierced full of holes by means of a docker, "a hoop of tin or brass, in which is set a frame of points, something like a harrow."¹⁸ The 'furner', 'mate' and the 'idleman' then pitched the formed biscuits into pre-heated ovens. In 1833, the demand for quantity, consistency and extended shelf life led to a mechanization of the process. From mechanical mixing and kneading, through rolling and rough cutting, the dough was friction-fed along a continuous web to the fine cutting and stamping plates where each 18" square of dough was cut into 42 hexagonal biscuits, docked and stamped at the same time with a broad arrow and the number of the oven. No extraneous labeling required here! (The relationship between biscuit manufacture and paper-making has yet to be written.) 10,000 biscuits an hour and 7,354 tons per year was the yield.¹⁹

Navy biscuits were initially packed into wooden barrels and shipped around the world. However, salt water creeping into the barrels and spoiling the biscuits often meant the difference between life or starvation on the high seas. The next innovation came not in manufacturing, but packaging. Tin-plate containers had a long history dating back to the Roman times. In the nineteenth century, the tin containers from which the local grocer selected, weighed out and packed in paper bags various loose foodstuffs migrated to the home with highly decorated food storage containers and sealable shakers for spices and condiments. The popularity of biscuit tins for shop and home is witnessed by the fraternal collaboration between the tin box makers Huntley, Boorne, & Stevens and the Reading bakers Huntley & Palmer. By 1883, ten million plain tins came off the assembly line to be filled with these justly famous crackers and biscuits. The exterior surface of the tin box became the perfect medium for advertising. Prior to 1876, labelling was possible either with a printed paper band glued around the box, or hand-painted with enamel then baked. Huntley, Boorne, & Stevens pioneered transfer printing directly onto the tin and helped redefine the history of the color printing process. The result was an increasingly florid use of available space as tins became three-dimensional canvases for exuberant visual display (SEE FIGURE 15).



Biscuits would have remained in the barrel or the tin if it were not for an aggressive advertising campaign coupled with an innovation in packaging design at the turn of the twentieth century. The makers of Uneeda Biscuits, Nabisco, patented the “In-Er-Seal” sealed paper wrapper in a folding box. This device promised freshness and portability, and guaranteed clinical-style hygiene. It also signaled the demise of bulk retailing in the face of personless self-help shopping. Yet, the advertising campaign was very clever: “it did not seek to sunder shoppers’ relationships with people they trusted, their grocers, but it sought to introduce them to something they would be able to trust even more, packaged, branded, advertised products.”²⁰ The Uneeda, yes you



do need it, biscuit phenomenon brought with it a whole battery of different retail and consumer assumptions and galvanized a rethinking of the role of branding in relation to foodstuffs.

The stage was set for a completely new packaging material and quality assurance standard. In 1911, a revolutionary process and product was invented: Cellophane. It was first manufactured in France in 1913 and licensed by Du Pont Chemicals in the USA in 1923. Moisture-proof cellulose film, a chemical cousin to rayon, replaced wood, tin and paper as the packaging dream material, and in so doing, changed the face of packaging in the twentieth century. Cellophane not only promised and delivered freshness, portability and hygiene, but brought the mystique and illusion of barrier-free shopping. Transparent film enabled the consumer to see exactly what he or she was buying. Advertising designers spared no effort in dressing up or dressing down the product according to its latent sex appeal. But wait a minute – biscuits, sexy?

Cellophane developers recognized that while cellophane's transparency was appealing, it was its ability to reflect light which transformed non-descript, vapid foodstuffs into sexy objects of desire. "Glistening cellophane contributed strongly to the perception that the goods inside were fresher, cleaner, safer than those packed loose, or even than goods packed in conventional opaque containers."²¹ Cellophane's sparkle whetted shopper's appetites and ushered in a whole era of impulse buying. Shop fittings were altered to increase space and light, thus enhancing the packaging aura. The advertising 'package pyramid' was developed as an impressive and imposing display of consumer intimidation (SEE FIGURE 16). After WWII, petroleum-based plastic films used in packaging extended the selection of consumer cravings. The package material itself substitutes for the spray oils, paints and water spritzers used by food stylists for photographs in top culinary magazines in order to fashion mouth-watering sensory impressions. Shoppers really do put their money where their mouths are.



FIGURE 16
Boxes and containers of biscuits, chocolates and cakes to advertise the Aulsebrook biscuit factory, 1911. ("Steffano Webb Collection," photographer Steffano Webb, reference number G-9094-1/1 Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.)

FIGURE 15
An industrial stand at an exhibition, possibly the Christchurch Exhibition of 1906–1907, advertising Aulsebrook and Company, biscuit manufacturers ("Steffano Webb Collection," photographer Steffano Webb, reference number G-5016-1/1 Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.)

When you put yourself behind a shopping cart, the world changes. . . . During the thirty minutes you spend on an average trip to the supermarket, about thirty thousand different products vie to win your attention and ultimately to make you believe in their promise. When the door opens, automatically, before you, you enter an arena where your emotions and your appetites are in play, and a walk down the aisle is an exercise in self-definition. . . . With its thousands of images and messages, the supermarket is as visually dense, if not as beautiful, as a Gothic cathedral. It is as complex and as predatory as a tropical rain forest. It is more than a person can possibly take in during an ordinary half-hour shopping trip. No wonder a significant percentage of people who need to wear eyeglasses don't wear them when they're shopping, and some researchers have spoken of the trancelike state that pushing a cart through this environment induces. The paradox here is that the visual intensity that overwhelms shoppers is precisely the thing that makes the design of packages so crucial. Just because you're not looking at a package doesn't mean you don't see it. Most of the time, you see far more than a container and a label. You see a personality, an attitude toward life, perhaps even a set of beliefs.²²

If fifty-six percent of all buying episodes fall into the category of "simple locating behavior,"²³ that is, looking for the familiar package, the known visual identity, then the other forty-four percent is spent in navigating between the sirenic rocks of reading and impulse buying. If packaging alone can whet the appetite, what about the product itself? Uneda could run an entire advertising campaign without once referring to the taste, smell, look, sound or feel of its crackers. In the sterile, detached, depersonalized world of the supermarket, these sensory cues are perforce obliterated. "Universal packaging and the self-service store have removed most of the old-fashioned sensory experiences from food shopping. . . . Because the evidence no longer exists, some things can no longer be proved. One can only say that in pre-war days eggs had thicker shells and bread tasted better, and hope to be believed."²⁴ I'll return to the downside of food archaeology in a moment.

Let's chew on these biscuits a little longer.

Unless Nabisco was advocating consumer betrayal, its product ultimately had to fulfill the promise of its marketing strategy. One way to accomplish this was to extend and transfer the brand endorsement to the product itself. In the case of the biscuit, it was possible for the edible foodstuff both to carry the marks of manufacture and to function as a vehicle for advertising. Uneeda, as with virtually all modern crackers, water biscuits and cabin bread repeats the historical branding of the docker. This mark of identification is also a mark of authentication and legitimation, irrespective of brand. Carr's of England, of table water biscuit fame, was one of the first manufacturers to combine the docking with baking its company logo right onto the biscuit.²⁵ In the homemaker's kitchen a comparable fingerprinting process occurs, flattening soft dough with a fork or pricking firm dough with its tines produces the mark of the hand. Similarly, cutters and stamps on hand-rolled doughs such as shortbread and gingerbread still create an identifiably hand-made product. Soft drop-style dough creates the rough and ready trademark of today's home-made, hand-made, home-style biscuits. "Home-style" is the buzz word of contemporary commercial bakers and advertisers as they re-invent the modern housewife, load her with the symbology of nostalgia and endeavor to reclaim a market niche in a world whose food-eating habits have changed dramatically since the erosion of the ritual of morning and afternoon tea. However, "home-style" biscuits can convey only one message. And as rich as that message may be, it does not permit distinction between brands.



FIGURE 17
 Examples of brass biscuit stamps,
 Aulsebrook's brand,
 Christchurch, New Zealand
 (private collection).

One advantage of mechanized biscuit manufactory over domestic home baking is the level of detail which can be translated onto an edible substrate of flour, sugar and water. European-style biscuit doughs, particularly the plain, sweet "Nice" variety brought to New Zealand by early biscuit entrepreneurs, clearly took the impression of brass stamps with their various relief and intaglio lettering styles (SEE FIGURE 17). Commercial manufacturing techniques, then and now, can guarantee uniformity and enable printing on dough to an increasingly intricate degree. The ability to retain absolute legibility ensures product definition through brand name, product name and decorative elements unique to the product line. Unless the machine or operator breaks down, each biscuit is like its neighbor, uniform in shape, size and message (taste too, we hope), ready to be packaged and sold to the consumer, who in turns endorses the product by eating it and its message bite by bite.

What is the advantage of imprinting over any other manufacturing technique? I can think of at least four reasons: the mark of manufacture is a seal of quality and authenticity, guaranteeing goods which are untampered and unforged; if and when the biscuit is separated from its package, it is still identifiable; the psychological advantage of a uniform, known quantity is important to the consumer/customer and satisfies his expectations, either in the mad dash through the supermarket or in the unthinking reach for a munchie; the object is its own promotional tool, whether sitting on a tray with other biscuits, or placed in the mouth (type side up? letters towards you or your audience?); and finally the food archaeologist's task is made a whole lot easier. As for the latter, one could say, quite rightly, that food truly belongs in the category of ephemera. It is bought, eaten and apart from a few crumbs, disappears into the digestive tract to be transformed into something rich and strange, the intellectual capital of energy. Like the ubiquitous poster or billboard, food grabs your attention, communicates a nugget of information and then is rendered superfluous, pasted over with another meal, denied an

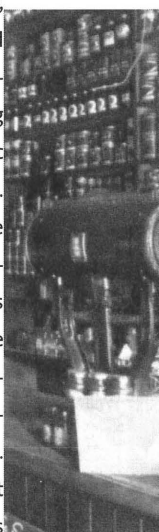


FIGURE 18
 Interior view of a grocer's shop, prior
 in the Wanganui region, circa 1890
 ("Tesla Studios Collection,"
 photographer Frank J Denton,
 reference number F-16594-1/1
 Alexander Turnbull Library,
 Wellington, New Zealand.)

after-life. Certainly its packaging and advertising is catalogued in ephemera collections the world over. How often, however, is the foodstuff saved with its package? If a visual record (forget about the other senses) is not preserved, what is left? Can you research packaging divorced from its contents? Imprinted biscuits furnish a particularly salient example of the archival record. They are an amazingly rich form of informational record, yet how often are they kept, let alone catalogued and accessed? In an unusual instance of fortuitous preservation, the remains of a Huntley and Palmer's biscuit, still in its original greaseproof wrapper, specially designed for and taken on Scott's ill-fated 1912 Antarctic expedition and found beside his body, was auctioned in late 1999 by Christie's in London and bought by a mystery bidder for £3,910. While mouldering biscuits are probably not to every librarian's or archivist's taste, they are a fascinating window on an historical moment. Let's taste a few New Zealand examples.



Commercial biscuit making, primarily of the cabin bread variety, started in the colony as early as 1843 with Bycrofts of Nelson and Auckland. Hudson of Dunedin began production in 1854, Aulsebrooks of Christchurch in 1863, with Griffins of Nelson following in 1880. Plain and cream crackers were next on the domestic manufacturing menu, followed by sweet and fancy biscuits. Before 1950, biscuits were shipped from the factory direct to the grocer in 25 lb tins. Like canned food, biscuits were one commodity which could unite geographically isolated New Zealanders together in communal eating habits.²⁶ Not restricted by the government's transportation regulations which, until 1975, required virtually all transport over 150km distance to be accomplished by rail, biscuits were as portable as their naval ancestors. The grocer stacked the colorful tins along the floor, against the counter, on his shelves and sold biscuits loose to customers in brown paper bags, "the ubiquitous pre-1950 package;"²⁷ he also did a roaring business in the broken biscuit trade (SEE FIGURE 18). Companies advertised their familiar tins in the various industrial exhibitions and trams provided a new form



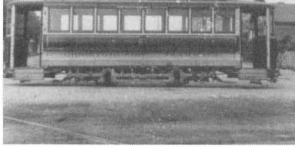


FIGURE 19
 Tram in the Christchurch area,
 circa 1880–1920. (“Steffano Webb
 Collection,” photographer Steffano Webb,
 reference number G-19548-1/1
 Alexander Turnbull Library,
 Wellington, New Zealand.)

Please use our Slogan:

**“MENNIE’S
 for ME”**

when ordering

BISCUITS

Procurable at Auckland Warehouse and all Branches
 of The Farmers’ Union Trading Co. Ltd.

To our many friends throughout the Country we
 extend Hearty Good Wishes with this
 New Catalogue.

J. M. MENNIE Ltd.
 Manufacturers - Auckland

44 ADVERTISEMENTS

**E. WATERS,
 WHOLESALE AND RETAIL CONFECTIONER,
 82, QUEEN STREET, AUCKLAND.**

Licenses: Special Home for Ladies. Tea, Coffee, and Refreshments

RESULTS OF EVERY DESCRIPTION ALWAYS ON HAND.
 All kinds of Confectionery, Sweets, and Wedding Cakes made
 at the shortest notice.

CONFECTIONERY.
E WATERS CONFECTIONER.
 Manufactures now at his Bakery, Queen Street, and at his WHOLESALE
 TRADE
 South Market, Islands, Frysburg, and Confectionery
 Lozenges, with Hot Water.

BOILED GOODS OF EVERY DESCRIPTION.
 All Goods are guaranteed pure and better than the imported, and are
 sold at lowest prices.

WATERS’ SOLUBLE CHOCOLATE:
A Beverage for the Healthy, the Family, and the Convalescent.

This preparation owes its characteristic properties and fine aroma to the use of
 the finest Swiss and Belgian Cocoa Beans, and of being carefully pre-
 pared from every day according to precise methods. It is not only palatable,
 but strengthening and healthily nourishing. (See advertisement on adjacent 43
 and 44 pages.) This chocolate is especially recommended in the important
 article. In fact it possesses every requisite quality to ensure a permanent and
 extensive popularity. Sold at E. Waters Confectionery, Queen Street, Auckland,
 and all other places. A liberal discount on parcels over 125.

“Having had Mr. Waters’ Chocolate I find it to be very palatable, and
 believe it to be strengthening and useful. Especially being so fine and other
 qualities as this chocolate is so highly recommended.”—(Signed) Wm. H.
 Robertson, M.D., N. Z., &c.

“Auckland, 20th June, 1914.”

“This Chocolate, of which you sent me a sample, makes a very
 pleasant and refreshing beverage. I find it most useful and strengthening,
 and the taste is excellent, equal to that of any French or English Chocolate.”—
 (Signed) W. H. Robertson, M.D.

“Auckland, 20th June, 1914.”

FIGURE 20
 “Mennie’s for me” J.M. Mennie Ltd.,
 Auckland, 1925 (Reference number
 Eph-B-RETAIL-FTC-1925-044
 Alexander Turnbull Library,
 Wellington, New Zealand.)

FIGURE 21
 Advertisement for E. Waters, Wholesale
 and Retail Confectioner Auckland, 1925
 (Reference number F-124046-1/2
 Alexander Turnbull Library,
 Wellington, New Zealand.)

of ambulatory advertizing (SEE FIGURE 19). Despite such market penetration, food advertizing was generally uncommon before 1950 in print media such as newspapers, magazines and books with the exception of some proprietary items like Highlander Condensed Milk, Bournville Cocoa, Kirkpatrick’s Jams and Aulsebrook’s and Griffin’s biscuits. However, when the Auckland-based Mennie’s biscuit company put an ad in the 1925 Farmers mail-order catalogue, they put their money where their customers’ mouth was. Using a uniquely designed display face which imitates the process of rolling out dough, Mennie’s reinforced the relationship between type and food by impressing its brand name on the biscuit (SEE FIGURE 20). More common were ads for various food tradesmen, such as this master of desserts whose corporate identity is composed by means of a range of typographic confections available in the printer’s ornamental display case (SEE FIGURE 21).

Today, Griffin’s probably has one of the widest typographic selections for your afternoon tea (SEE FIGURE 22). Original Round Wine, Original Vanilla Wine and Original Super Wine each redefine the round picture plane with the unique identifiers of name, location of manufacture and type of biscuit. The simple intaglio, no-nonsense sans serif capitals of Round Wine are modified in Vanilla Wine with crisp, nineteenth century ornamented serified capitals promoting value-added taste. Super Wine defies its humble origins by foregoing the docking pricks entirely and supplements the round quality guarantee stamp found on the package with high relief heraldic letters and ornament. This more complex stamping process may be in danger of less definition according to the quality of the dough and its packaging, but market research has revealed that Super Wines outsell all the other players in Griffin’s wine biscuit line-up. “Super” suggests performance enhancement and empowerment at the same time as a radically different treatment of the surface decoration singles it out from its mates.

The use of typography to encourage playful consumer interaction with the product is repeated to greater or lesser degrees with other Griffin's biscuits. "Smooth, gentle" Milk Arrowroots "baked with the goodness of milk & honey" convey their message in unassuming condensed sans serif caps. Original Malt Biscuits offer a slight flair with addition of an italic brand name, while Krispie, toasted coconut flavored biscuits made with real coconut, are self-evident in their genre, boasting an italic script face, to give it a tropical pizzazz (SEE FIGURE 23). Iced biscuits are in a league of their own. These fancy biscuits contributed to a greater acceptance of bought biscuits and contributed to the dramatic rise in consumption from 4 to 6 kg per annum per person between 1900 and 1940 to nearly 10kg per person per annum in 1990.²⁸ Cameo Creams don't need any elegant words to offset their folk art, floral arabesques. I include it simply as an example of the detail biscuit makers are capable of producing in the name of food science (SEE FIGURE 24). Swiss Creams use a semi-calligraphic fluid outline face to evoke a charming mountain view seen from the comfort of the lowlands: a different mood completely from Griffin's Dark Chocolate Wheaten Biscuits with their heavy stamp on rough-cast dough with drawn swirls of chocolate on the bottom – or is it the top (SEE FIGURE 25)? Finally, "proudly exported to countries around the world" are pictographic animal crackers and Choc Tiny Toys (SEE FIGURE 26). The Griffin brand name is now on the delivery truck, advertising the product at the same time as its method of conveyance. Yet, these carriers of brand equity are unmatched by the novelty series "Funtime Rhymes" with its nursery rhyme images and first lines baked in in solid relief (SEE FIGURE 27 & 28). At what point does language migrate from oral culture, to paper, to the oral fetish of the biscuit? What role do these biscuits serve: didacticism; reading reinforcement; a tasty reward for the consumption of knowledge? We circle back to food and knowledge. And yes, in the absence of honey, "Funtime Rhymes" do have icing you can lick off – should naturally-colored tongue pink be to your taste.



FIGURE 22
Griffin's Wine series biscuits,
New Zealand, 1998.

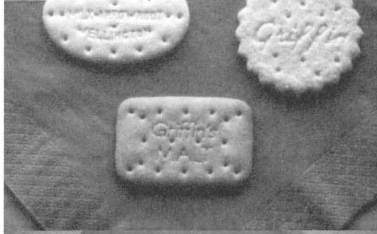


FIGURE 23
 Griffin's Arrowroots,
 Malt and Krispies biscuits
 New Zealand, 1998.



FIGURE 24
 Griffin's Cameo Cream biscuits,
 New Zealand, 1998.

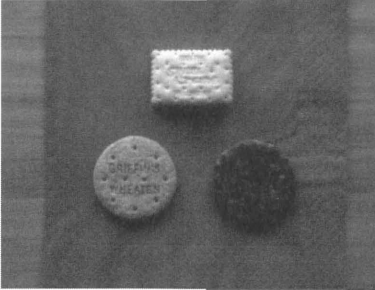


FIGURE 25
 Griffin's Swiss Creams
 and Wheaten biscuits,
 New Zealand, 1998.



FIGURE 26
 Griffin's Tiny Toys biscuits,
 New Zealand, 1998.

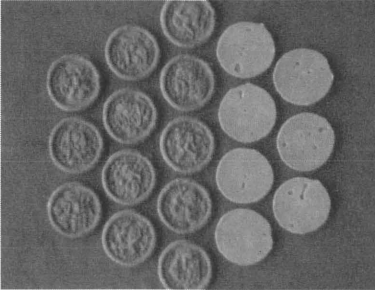


FIGURE 27
 Griffin's Funtime Rhyme biscuits,
 New Zealand, 1998.



FIGURE 28
 "Boys and girls go out to play,"
 Griffin's Funtime Rhyme biscuits,
 New Zealand, 1998.



A Sorbet-ic Interlude

Typography on the edible substrate of the humble biscuit has cleverly solved the problem of product identification when separated from its container or packaging. Instead of the “DRINK ME” form of labeling, biscuit manufacturers offer the identity of “Eat me.” But what about our third semiotic model? As you will recall, Alice was confronted with a hookah-smoking caterpillar and an oversized mushroom. Without the aid of imprinted language but with the aid of words made flesh, the object itself became the communication medium capable of transformative powers when consumed. In the realm of New Zealand biscuit manufactory, the Christchurch-based firm, Maynell Foods Limited, holds the Guinness Book of Records title for the world’s largest biscuit. On 2 April 1996, their flagship product, the “Cookie Time” chocolate chip cookie, was reincarnated with thirteen tons of ingredients (including over a million chocolate chips), spread 2.5cm thick over a total diameter of 24.9 meters or 75 feet. After five hours of baking in a specially designed oven, the first piece exhibiting the characteristically rough trademark of mom’s home-baking was fed to their walking logo, the Cookie Muncher (SEE FIGURE 29). This furry, rotund, red monster with bulging eyes sports a rainbow-colored circular saw blade for a navel/stomach that looks suspiciously like Macintosh Computers’ apple logo without the bite/byte out of it. In eating the product, we too become cookie munchers/monsters, identifying with this comic caricature of sweetness and unbridled alimentary lust.



FIGURE 29
Cookie Time Monster

But the oversized product, once eaten, is no more and without typographic identifiers on a hard biscuit substrate, how do we know we are eating this particular brand as opposed to a generic instance of home-baking? The manufacturer has searched for more permanent advertising solutions, ones which can take advantage of the aesthetic power of signage to create whole symbolic worlds which have nothing to do with simple biological necessity and everything to do with product identification and corporate advertising; like the world record enterprise, these solutions come from the domain of “Big Things.” The Cookie Time bakery building, for instance, is now identified with its own product, painted with innumerable chocolate chip cookies (SEE FIGURE 30). The Griffins Wellington manufacturing plant proudly proclaims its wares in technicolor abstractions. Today, large-scale food signage has captured the consumer’s edible marketplace, replacing satisfying foodstuffs with the visual paradoxes and puns of virtual reality.



FIGURE 30
*Cookie Time manufacturing plant,
Christchurch, New Zealand 1999.*

Dessert

Large-scale food signage occupies a significant place in the landscape of New Zealand popular culture. As advertising billboard, it charms, distracts and sells; as roadside marker, it enables simple or complex locating behavior; as outdoor sculptural installation, it functions as tourist commodity, identifying place with the sustainable objects of primary production. Radically oversized, non-edible representations of edible foodstuffs create a virtual landscape of timeless, unsatisfied desire. The actual foodstuff is replaced by its image or simulacrum, converting simple biological necessity into a complex system of representation.

Before the Highway Beautification Act of 1965 which homogenized and pasteurized the exuberant idiosyncracies of American advertisers, “the roadside [was] a visually vibrant shopping spree. . . the highway habitat grew quickly into a delirious realm that offered consumption as a potent form of entertainment. . . Experiencing roadside food signs is a visual treat. Tempting buildings encrusted with neon-encrusted confections are every bit as esthetically delicious as the food is gratifying.”²⁹ Fortunately, New Zealand is still a country of large open spaces, few concentrated settlements and a small population base; we have had, as yet, no need of such legislation to combat the excrescences of visual clutter. Yet, it does not mean we suffer a paucity of consumable culture. “Big Things” are one of the most popular and visually riveting forms of highway signage. Take, for example, the lowly *Actinida chinensis*. A tourist passing through the North Island town of Te Puke (that’s pronounced ‘te pookie’) is confronted by a massive four-story replica of a kiwifruit which marks the heart of the horticultural industry (SEE FIGURE 31). Contrary to standard kiwifruit/Zespri advertising practice, this one is significantly label-less, sliced in half and mounted on its side. When visiting Ohakune, the gateway to the North Island



FIGURE 31
Te Puke, “Town Icons,”
New Zealand Post philatelic series 1999.

ski fields, the eye is assaulted by a grossly oversized, free-standing carrot separated from a sign (if you hadn't guessed it already) proclaiming the town to be the carrot capital of New Zealand (SEE FIGURE 32). Both Rakaia and Gore in the South Island sport the ever-ubiquitous leaping trout, implying the plenitude of mountain rivers and streams (SEE FIGURE 33), while Kaikoura, whale-watching capital of New Zealand, lures hungry stomachs into "The Suntrap Restaurant" with a larger-than-life lobster poised almost menacingly over the entranceway (SEE FIGURE 34). Needless to say, there are many more simulacra populating the visual landscape.

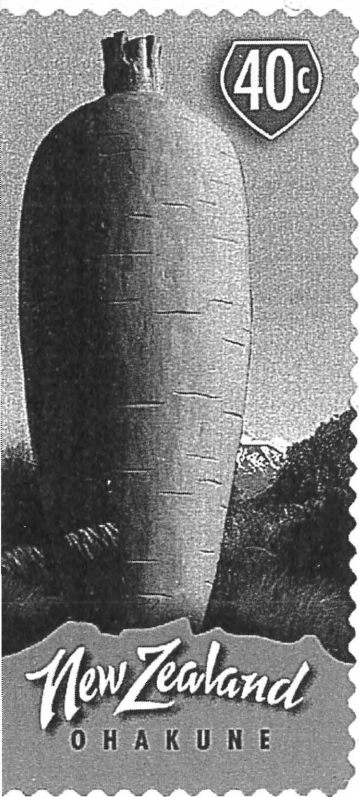


FIGURE 32
Ohakune, "Town Icons,"
New Zealand Post philatelic series 1999.

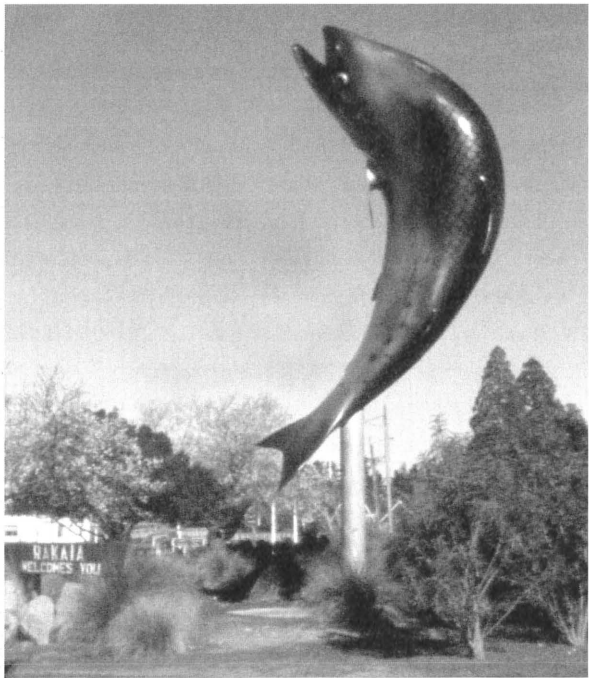


FIGURE 33
The big trout, Rakaia, New Zealand 1999.

In each instance, the identity of the town is commodified, associated simply, monstrously, yet effectively, with an object of alimentary significance. Unlike the supermarket, however, where life-size foodstuffs can be and often are redundantly labeled, these outdoor larger-than-life food sculptures of the roadside supermarket lack such typographic identifiers. As a result, a space between object and signifier opens up and they come to mean something else, different and more – something perhaps as ephemeral as the Caterpillar's smoke-rings. Bigger than reality, vying for recognition and the tourist dollar, these ridiculously disproportionate yet endearing sculptures encourage visitors to stop and partake of the local fare. By purchasing a piece of the town, whether large or small, if only in a photograph or postcard or stamp, tourists participate in celebrating and ensuring the survival of the unique corporate identity. Moreover, they become, at least for a little while, another cultural ambassador charged with disseminating their newly acquired knowledge as mediated



FIGURE 34
*The big lobster, The Suntrap Restaurant,
Kaikoura, New Zealand 1999.*

through these icons to the rest of the world. And yet, as David Yanciw remarks, "It is funny, even though communities erect these big things, they sometimes seem embarrassed by their presence. I am always surprised at some communities with 'Big Things' that do not include pictures of them in their own tourist brochures. The irony is that the pictures they do include make their communities look just like any other. What is sometimes unique about their community is their 'Big Thing.'"³⁰ Ohakune has taken its identity so seriously that it holds an annual carrot festival complete with parade and floats to celebrate the opening of the ski season. And recently, in an unprecedented instance of inter-community rivalry, a truckload of carrots was mysteriously dumped in the public toilets of Taihape, gumboot capital of the world, purportedly by a disgruntled vegetarian. Police are awaiting a retaliatory gumboot assault.

James Fraser speculates that our society may be quickly approaching a state of wordlessness. Examining billboards as his prime candidate – though Big Things could equally pertain – he points to the increasing silencing of visual typographic language, where product representation and brand repetition are alone sufficient to generate the associative processes required by modern advertising strategists. "Are we moving too quickly to read? Or are these boards examples of the ultimate billboard where there is only an object and a trade name? Are these boards actually contributing to the lessening of tension by giving us a brief reprieve from the lyrics on our radios? Is their verbal silence heightening the strength of the image by acting as a counterpoint to the daily babble and wordiness of the other media, our neighbors, and our associates?"³¹ As if in confirmation of this, large-scale outdoor sculptural installations mirroring, miming and refashioning the objects of everyday life have spawned a whole cult of virtual galleries which document another manifestation of internet community along the touristic information highway. The Australian 'Big Things' movement is alive and well and living at the University of Newcastle <http://www2.eis.net.au/~acarr/bigthings/index.html>. In North

America, David Yanciw's 150 strong examples of "Big Things. The Monuments of Canada" <http://members.xoom.com/yanciw/> and Martin Ince's over 300 examples of "World's Largest Roadside Attractions" <http://www.infomagic.com/~martince/index.htm/> reinvent the scale of actual representations, lift them out of their spatial and temporal contexts and repackage them as exotic specimens in the pop cult landscape. Disconnected from their originating referent, these virtual representations have a symbolology all their own. Cultural codes based on aesthetic, marketing and advertising principles are consumed while reading and digesting the message; and those principles are defined by the aesthetics of a desire which remains unfulfilled and unsatisfied.³² Mary Douglas's observations on both the subordination of food's nourishing function to the decorative aspect and the relationship of object to viewer/interpreter are apposite: "food has come away from its context of the shared meal and stands in the context of the art gallery, as stuff to be set beside notable sculpture and painting. Separated from its normal context and away from the dietician's concern with ingestion, nourishment and excretion, it conveys a sense of surprise, even a hint of obscenity. If sex were the subject matter of the exhibition, the effect would be the same."³³



and Coffee Liquers

In 1999, biscuits again took center-stage when Griffins decided to mark the turning of the century in their own unique way. The Millennium Biscuit Search was a national competition open to anyone to design the ultimate “New Zealand” biscuit. Out of 25,000 entries, three finalists were selected and nationwide voting commenced via a telephone hotline. A chocolate-covered Anzac biscuit won hands-down over the more predictable Kiwifruit-flavored mallowpuff (the biscuit equivalent of the Pavlova meringue dessert), and a suite of Kiwiana icons which included a fernleaf, a gumboot, and a rugby ball. The winning biscuit was baked at midnight on December 1999, and the designer’s name now features on all packaging. At first glance, the Anzac biscuit, a plain, unlettered, soft oatmeal cookie, seemed an unlikely candidate. Yet, for New Zealanders, it obviously not only embraced the defining moment of the country’s identity, when the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps faced the enemy at Gallipoli almost a century before, but embodied that identity in an icon of a favorite ritual. “Such was the veneration of Gallipoli that commercial exploitation of the world’s first acronym was forbidden by law. However, officialdom was powerless to prevent one national institution that honours the events of 1915: the wholesome Anzac biscuit.”³⁴ In an example of delicious irony, edible typography baked on a substrate is supplanted by a free-floating textual acronym, whose significance in the bitter theater of war is now effaced by the sweet chocolate coating of consumer desire.

The seventeenth century scholar, scientist and master of the essay form, Sir Francis Bacon, once talked about the art of studying in an alimentary way: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."³⁵ Later on, Sir William Congreve wrote a dramatic exchange about the hazards of books, reading and a paper diet, and in his epitaph, the printer Benjamin Franklin cast a glance at his fate at the jaws of worms. Food and knowledge exist in a dynamic relationship. Our language is riddled with their metaphors, our culinary landscape marked with their typologies, our culture populated by their images. From life-size foodstuffs to large-scale installations, the rage to identify and label has been equally and oppositely written over by the shifting sands of cultural representation. If the medium is the message, then the millennium provides ample food for thought –

you are what you eat.

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South of the Border Down Mexico Way



For hundreds of miles on I-95 in each direction, from a spot just south of where North and South Carolina meet, travelers

110 foot "Pedro" sign, South of the Border has provided an amusing, larger-than-life rest stop for over 30 years. Using South

in space and, to this end, how visual communication reflects the power structure found in the larger culture. For hundre

30 miles or so by billboards of Pedro reminding them of their imminent approach. Designated by its landmark 110 foot "I

a point of departure, this article explores how the myth of "Mexican-ness" is perpetuated through word and image in

on I-95 in each direction, from a spot just south of where North and South Carolina meet, travelers are prompted ever

sign, South of the Border has provided an amusing, larger-than-life rest stop for over 30 years. Using South of the Border

and, to this end, how visual communication reflects the power structure found in the larger culture. For hundreds of mile

My thoughts ever stray

South of the border

South of the border ...

down Mexico way

Down Mexico way

That's where I fell

spot just south of where North and stars above came

miles or so by billboards of Pedro

ted by its landmark 110 foot "Pedro"

And now as I wonder

arger-than-life rest stop for over 30

My thoughts ever

, this article explores how the myth

age in space and, to this end, how South of the border

South of the border¹

nd in the larger culture.

down Mexico way

Down Mexico way

That's where I fell in love when the

stars above came out to play

And now as I wonder

I am reminded of this old Frank Sinatra song when I think of South of the Border, an American roadside landmark on Interstate 95. On my first drive north from Florida I was amused by billboard after billboard (every 30 or so miles along a 65 mph highway) with Pedro reminding travelers of their imminent approach with such cunning exclamations as . . .

Everything Old is New Again!
Never a Dull Moment!
English Spoken Here! (Sorta!)
Pedro's Weather Report!
Chili Today/Hot Tamale
Mexico Shops ~ Direct Imports
Pedro's Law: Bring Cash!
Sommtheeng Deferent!²

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“Where was this place?” I asked as we drove up I-95. I was intrigued by the system – yellow billboards, black type set in Hobo or Cooper Black – each one featuring this “Pedro,” a faceless Mexican in his sombrero, asleep by the side of the road. Of course I wanted to stop, how could I not? “What a play on words!” I thought – to create a perceptual link between what is perhaps the most “Southern” culture in the United States and Mexico. So several times that summer I visited South of the Border, just south of the North and South Carolina state line, and as I became more familiar with the place I found it more resonant than before, and intriguing as a sociological study. Edward T. Hall wrote in *The Silent Language* “Culture hides much more than it reveals, and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants.”³ I have chosen to explore South of the Border for the “Words in Space” issue, because it functions as a uniquely American landmark, a purveyor of “Mexican-ness,” and as a creator of values which are evident in the words and images in space and have a relationship to what is occurring in the larger culture.



In the early 1950s,

the United States was in the midst of a period of tremendous economic growth. Advertising and television, capitalizing on this, invented a commodified version of the “American Dream,” consisting of the (white) nuclear family with all its ecoutrements: a house in suburbia equipped with modern appliances, automobile ownership and the annual family pilgrimage to the mountains or the beach. This American boom time spawned an increased emergence of motels and attractions to provide entertainment along the way or at one’s destination. Beginning in the 1950s, when President Eisenhower initiated the construction of the interstate highway system to link the country together at higher speeds than ever before and promote the auto industry, South of the Border has provided an amusing, larger-than-life extended rest stop for those making their way north (to escape the heat of the south, or to return home) and south (to the beaches of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida). Seemingly in the middle of nowhere, South of the Border’s presence, with its 110 foot “Pedro” sign is so large in scale and that one does not even have to stop in order to get a taste of what it is selling.⁴ In today’s rush to get somewhere, most people don’t stop. But those who do are in for a real treat – experiencing sensory inundation equivalent to the Disney experience – on a much more surreal and less pristine level – and there is no admission fee.

There was no larger sense of place, beyond farmland before local highways and the interstate arrived where Pedro stands today. Existing fundamentally as a response to the American automobile culture, and to the construction of the highway, South of the Border functions as a larger-than-life roadside stand – as a consumer commodity. The play on words sets the tone as humorous and playful. Yet, this alone is not enough to lure the consumer/ tourist off the road – one must create a fantasy, and this fantasy is one of the exoticness of Mexico. Playing into the American desire to collect, to buy, to have, as with a religious pilgrimage, a souvenir to confirm one’s visit, to the self and to others, has

become a necessity – the search supplants the real experience. To have a souvenir of one’s travels is to have a reminder of the Other.⁵ SOB provides this, with wide aisled superstores such as the The Mexico Shop and The Wild West Store with their thousands of items to purchase. Serapes and sombreros, fireworks, stocks of pens and pencils, playing cards, keychains, ashtrays, snowglobes – everything imaginable, everything kitsch – emblazoned with images of Pedro – have been created for the consumer as tourist, fulfilling the adage that Americans will shop anywhere and buy anything. Here, there is something for everyone. To paraphrase Ada Louise Huxtable, author of *The Unreal America*, it is

this union of culture and consumerism that is a uniquely American phenomenon.⁶

In order to understand SOB, one has to have familiarity with the codes. In this instance, it is not those codes that one understands from living in or traveling within a country so diverse as Mexico, but rather those one learns from American popular culture and representations of Mexicans in books, stories or on the large and small screens. Postwar prosperity, and particularly an increase in mass media, created a fascination with Mexico. The exotic was played out with images of Ricky Ricardo, mambo music, the mariachi and Carmen Miranda, who became standards for how we would perceive Latinos for generations to come. These seemingly innocuous and entertaining representations supported a narrow, and somewhat comforting, belief system. They served to remind us of our rapid economic development and increasingly complex culture, through comparison with a seemingly simpler and more homogeneous society. This creates a sense of security in an often

chaotic,

changing

America.

It is the representations of Mexican-ness as seen at SOB and similar landmarks, and their use of visible language that interests me because they play a role in creating our culture as they define what it means to be Mexican/Latino. When such (vernacular) codes become repeated in culture, their power increases. Over time, these codes are rendered invisible and it is this subsequent invisibility that gives them power.



ABOVE (from left to right):
Pedro Landmark
110 foot Pedro effigy at night
(SOB postcard)

Amigo Pedro #1
at the Food Court

Amigo Pedro #2
Our American Friend

Amigo Pedro #3
at the Public Restroom

The many [re]presentations of Pedro, as both an icon and symbol, as a larger-than-life, comical caricature, symbolize our relationship to Mexico and to Mexicans. He is portrayed as a mustacheed peasant wearing a floppy sombrero, serape and sandals and grabbing his full belly or in dress characteristic of the central region of Jalisco, origins of the charrería (Mexican rodeo) and tequila. **“An American touring landmark,”** it is in the charrero costume that we first see Pedro represented. As **“the largest and tallest free standing sign east of Las Vegas, Pedro’s 110 foot effigy welcomes you from miles away to South of the Border.”** His dominance is evident through his size and his stance, with bowed legs apart, one can literally drive a truck between them.

He is physically stable with legs wider than shoulders, firmly planted on the ground, and therefore strong. This strength is compounded by the signification of a brightly colored costume and a mustache which communicates his strength signifying “macho.” Pedro’s face and hands are literally white, absent of color in contrast to the vibrant orange and yellow hues of his clothing. In contrast to other representations of Pedro, this skincolor is



not representative of a person of color, of the large Mexican mestizo (mix of Spanish and Indian) population. This whiteness is unmistakable to the visitor. By negating his color, a richer heritage which his dress and name aim to signify is negated. He is adorned with an ornamented sombrero – what becomes the defining icon, index and symbol of “Mexican-ness” –

it is a symbol of the charrero, similar to the cowboy in the United States.

Today a performance art, the charrería has its origins in the colonial period and formal dress still consists of a black suit, guns with ammunition belts and a wide hat. In Mexico, the charrero

were instrumental in fighting for Mexican independence and have come to symbolize the post-colonial independent state. There are mixed messages here, as Pedro and the mythical charrero are often confused with the mariachi (a musician belonging to a Mexican street band) and whose myths are played out in Mexican restaurants nightly. His sombrero, ornamented with pom poms imply vanity in their decoration and playfulness in their color and arrangement. As a metasign, this 110-foot representation of Pedro signifies tradition, honor and romance.

By far the most prolific representations of Pedro are those I will refer to as nuestro amigo Pedro (our friend Pedro). In these 30 foot high concrete forms, his physicality is dominant. He is smiling, and his chubby face, body and hands, which clutch his belly in an active, perhaps laughing mode – are indexical of his fullness and generosity and he becomes a substitute for all that is Mexican. This is most evident in the locating of Pedro in front of the food court, where he invites us in for traditional Mexican food: burritos, tacos and then the familiar chili dogs and hamburgers. He is situated at other important locations throughout the site: namely the public restrooms and the fireworks store. We see him often and become familiar with him during our visit.

**Nuestro amigo Pedro is
the “common man,”
from the peasant class –
his clothing belies his
simplicity, his skin color
(fleshy brown) belies
his status.**

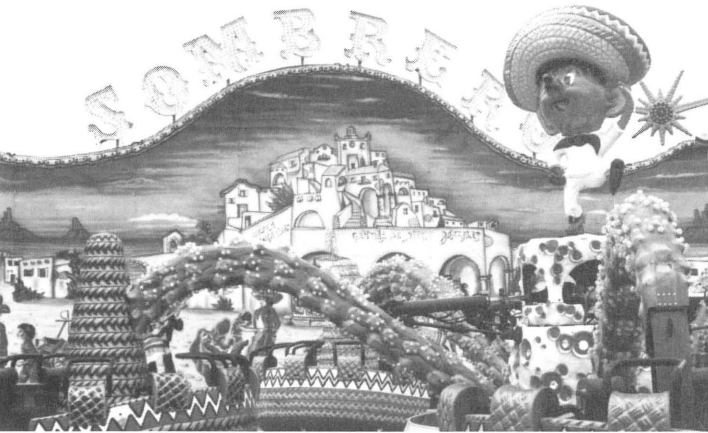


Wearing a serape over simple white clothing, sandals and a sombrero, he is most defamiliarizing when stationed in front of the fireworks store, wrapped in a serape of the United States' flag with stars on the rim of his sombrero. This Pedro's skin is much lighter than the others, so white that he seems to be caucasian. I note this because it stands in contrast to the other

representations and it is this Pedro that symbolizes a direct relationship to the United States. The other two effigies look to the side, while this Pedro looks up. Has he just arrived over the border to partake in the American dream?

We welcome the food, we welcome the products, but we don't welcome the people with open arms.

Given the current politics surrounding immigrant issues and often un- or under employment of Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans, this read is ambiguous and confusing. Is he showing that he loves America? Is part of America?



ABOVE (from left to right):
SOB Sombrero Ride
July 1998

Speedy Gonzalez
©A Looney Toons Cartoon
Warner Brothers

The gigantic, colorful sombrero forms of the Sombrero Ride are SOB's equivalent to Disney's magic teacup ride – referencing the transition into a surreal fantasyland with Speedy Gonzalez, or what may be his identical cousin, as our guide. Dressed in simple peasant garb with his large sombrero and neckerchief, this playful, dancing mouse is a personification of the Mexican – of the Mexican who is happy, carefree and entertaining. Brown-skinned, one would imagine him to be a field hand on a Sunday, with his clean, and very white, shirt and pants. The mouse is, of

course a rodent, a pest. He is small and quick. Made friendly and familiar by Disney's most renown character, Mickey and Warner Brother's Speedy Gonzalez. Yet to call a person a mouse signifies his or her timidity and as a verb it means **"to search or move stealthily or slowly or to toy with roughly."**⁷ This mouse, acting out for the audience, is a substitute for the Mexican on display. Against a backdrop of the town square – ironically outside of the town, perspectively incorrect and based on some kind of medieval castle model – which is lively even though isolated in a desert town, the sombreros turn and carry the visitor in the same swirling pattern of the dancers in the background. The visual presentation of the "Sombrero" signage supports a semi-traditional interpretation. The baseline of the word follows the sombrero outline and signifies playfulness. Use of an ornate typeface, a deviation from the soft, rounded forms of Cooper Black or a fat face typeface is reminiscent of old westerns (television and film) – of saloon typography. Thus, the form provides visual clues as to the setting of the town and to a specific time period, when the American west was perhaps still a part of Mexico, before the west was won.



**The formal qualities signify
the link between two cultures,
a mutual heritage.**

The use of language is critical to framing of South of the Border as a uniquely American landmark, created for the tourist consumer, with no direct linkage to the real thing. No one will ever imagine it to be the real Mexico because there is little to no Spanish visible or spoken here. On billboards approaching, one reads **"English Spoken Here! (Sorta!)"** and **"Somtheeng Deferent!"** The first referring perhaps to the local southern accent or vernacular and the latter an obvious and derogatory reference to stereotypical Latino accents, a la Cheech and Chong, Speedy Gonzalez or Ricky Ricardo.



The hundreds of billboards dotting the landscape provide us with an introduction to this unique place. Set in the typefaces Hobo or Cooper Black, they are reminiscent of carnivals and sideshows with its round terminals, uneven stroke weight and overall bulbous quality. One would not describe either as a typeface which could ever lend elegance, a sense of history or tradition to any word it renders visible. There is no mistaking its playful and postmodern syntax.

Already elaborate, letterforms are embellished with pattern and color, thus creating a dominance of syntax over semantic value, marking each character in order to render it defamiliarizing. Several examples demonstrate how form is altered to achieve

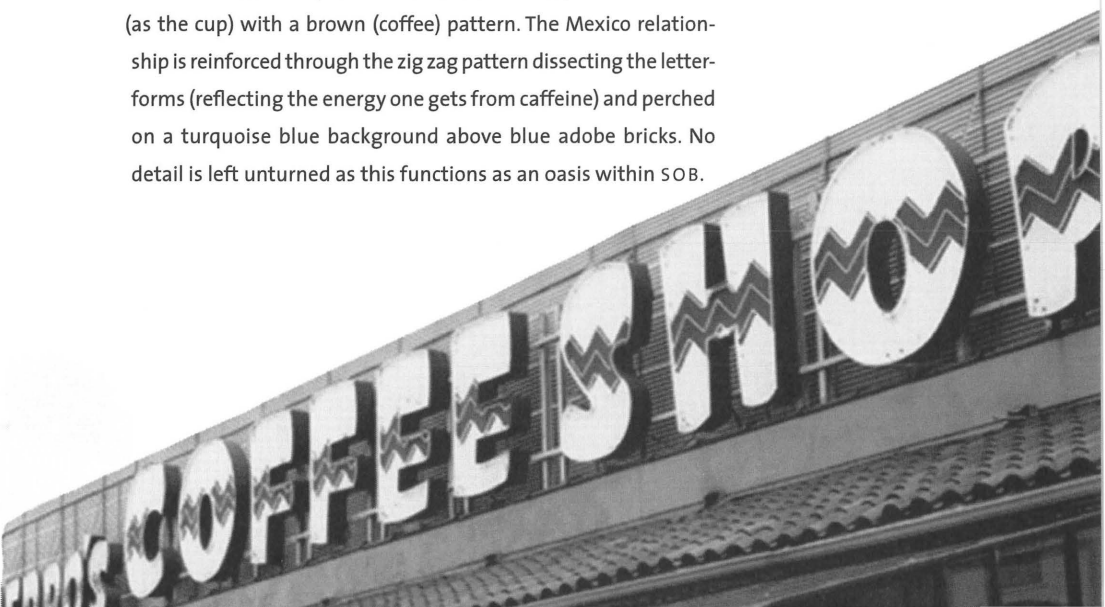
“Mexican-ness.”

In Pedro’s Coffee Shop the letter is treated as a cup of coffee, white (as the cup) with a brown (coffee) pattern. The Mexico relationship is reinforced through the zig zag pattern dissecting the letterforms (reflecting the energy one gets from caffeine) and perched on a turquoise blue background above blue adobe bricks. No detail is left unturned as this functions as an oasis within SOB.

ABOVE (from left to right):
80 Miles (from the South)
I-95 Billboard, July 1998

92 Miles (from the South)
I-95 Billboard, July

BELOW
SOB Pedro's Coffee Shop
White letters with brown pattern
on turquoise blue ground



Other signage reveals the “Mexican-ness” of food such as the chili dog, taco and burrito. The first two embellished with a linear pattern in orange and yellow, reminiscent of 70’s drag racing typography and evoking speed or fast food. Multiple symbols such as these code the message and create a complex and self-reinforcing system of its own.



ABOVE
SOB Pedro's Pantry
Handpainted Store Sign

BELOW
SOB Food Court
Chili Dog and Tacos – orange
type on yellow ground

There is a visual language evident in the choice of fat face type-faces and selected formal characteristics used to communicate what is Mexican. Letterforms are constructed with uneven stroke weights and round terminals, some are hand-lettered or derived from saloon typography and many words are set on uneven or curved base-lines. The oft-repeated zig zag pattern is abstracted from one of many patterns found in traditional Latin American, but not particularly Mexican, textiles. This visual language signifies playfulness, tradition and a lack of sophistication.

It sets up our perception of the Mexican.



It is only recently that Latin culture has become ultra-hip in America – perhaps due to Ricky Martin or Salma Hayek, but most surely because of the influence of Gidget, the Taco Bell Chihuahua, who, in under 10 pounds is perhaps the most powerful symbol of Mexico and Latin America. Admittedly, what could be funnier, or more hip, than a smooth talking urban(e) dog? Yo quiero Taco Bell. The advertising campaign (1998–99) created by TBWA Chiat/Day has made Taco Bell one of the best known fast food restaurant chains in the United States. Visions of revolution inspired by a history most American youth can only guess at –

perpetuate the myth of the Latin American renegade spirit.

A triumph over adversity.

The subordinate becoming the dominant.

I point this out because in looking at the popularity and influence of Taco Bell ads, one finds similarities with design at South of the Border.



ABOVE (from left to right):
Taco Bell Sign, Route 301, Starke, Florida

Gidget, the Taco Bell Chihuahua
source: www.tacobell.com August 1999

SOB is an example of how, “every cultural pattern and every single act of social behavior involves communication in either an explicit or implicit sense.”⁸ An analysis of SOB does not depend on the sequential ordering of codes. Rather, it is dependent on the relationship of parts to each other and to the whole.

It provides a foundation for studying how Mexicans, and Latin Americans, are represented in American culture, how meaning is assigned and reinforced.

And this language we find at SOB has become standard, a part of the American vernacular. It is a constructed identity used to signify “Mexico” and does not take into consideration the rich and diverse culture that exists at the real south of the border and beyond. Its equivalent is perhaps to represent every American as a cowboy (specifically male because in almost every case, the representation of the Mexican is male – only rare instances portray females). All visual communication reflects the power structure found in the larger culture and South of the Border and related material culture signify outdated stereotypes. The



ABOVE (from left to right):
Burrito Brothers Taco Company
Environmental Signage
Gainesville, Florida

Mi Tierra
Matchbook Cover
San Antonio, Texas (1999)

Las Margaritas: Authentic Mexican Food
Environmental Signage
Gainesville, Florida

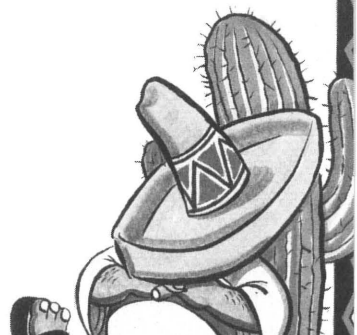
real South of the Border is closer to Roberto Rodriguez's 1993 film *MARIACHI* about a musician mistaken for a drug lord in a dusty Mexican small town.

Mexican sociologist Alberto Ruy-Sanchez writes **“One interesting aspect of cultural relations today is how developed countries like the United States continue making specific demands on countries like Mexico. This demand implies conforming to their idea of what constitutes the Other country.**

As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, multiethnic and multicultural – and increasingly less definable as one specific and linear culture – more and more Americans want to believe in a Mexico of one rigidly defined culture, instead of a complex plurality.

... For their own purposes they would rather see a primitive list of core values. What they want the Other to be, and in this case, the ideal other is *le bon sauvage*. Increasingly, more and more Americans interested in Mexico want it to have the very unity of being and the solid identity they feel themselves are permanently losing.”⁹ Whether or not one agrees with Ruy-Sanchez, our commodification of Mexican culture is exploitation of the Other’s” identity. It is this metalanguage, this myth system, one in which we do not decode the signs – except at a cursory “level – and are not involved in the process, that makes it utterly powerful precisely because it seems so natural.

In the end, we have commodified our ideologies.



Maria Rogal is faculty at the University of Florida where she teaches graphic design. She spent her formative years traveling internationally and has lived in Laos, Peru and Liberia. Before beginning her career in graphic design, she studied political science and history and worked in the international development field. Rogal is particularly interested in the study of history, theory and the intersection of design and culture. For fun, she collects ephemera and takes photos on the road.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Frank Sinatra (South of the Border, recorded 1953)
“South of the Border” transcribed from the song as sung by Frank Sinatra:

*South of the border
Down Mexico way
That's where I fell in love when the stars above came out to play
And now as I wonder
My thoughts ever stray South of the border . . . down Mexico way*

*She was a picture in old Spanish lace
Just for a tender while I kissed the smile upon her face
'cause it was fiesta and we were so gay
South of the border . . . Mexico way*

*Then she sighed as she whispered mañana
Never dreaming that we were parting
And I lied as I whispered mañana
'cause our tomorrow never came*

*South of the border . . . I jumped back one day
There in a veil of white by the candlelight she knelt to pray
Mission bells told me that I mustn't stay
South of the border . . . Mexico way*

*The mission bells told me, ding dong, that I must not stay
Stay south of the border . . . down Mexico way
Ay Ay Ay Ay . . . Ay Ay Ay Ay . . .*

2 BILLBOARDS

Everything old is new again!
Never a Dull Moment!
Jest half an hour!
English Spoken Here! (Sorta!)
Fort Pedro/Fireworks Capital of the U.S.
Etymologically Correct!
Pedro's Weather Report!
Chili Today/Hot Tamale Mexico Shops~ Direct Imports
Pedro's Law: Bring Cash!
Sommtheeng Deefereent!
Howdy, Pardner!
Top Banana!
Just Say YO!

- 3 Hall, Edward T. 1959. *The Silent Language*. Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications.
- 4 <http://www.roadsideamerica.com/news/971026SCDIL.html>, July 26, 1999.
As a roadside attraction, SOB with its 110 foot Pedro and plenitude of Sombbrero signage implies the fantastic and the exotic. However, the image purveyed – one of good, clean fun – does not represent the complexities evident in the culture from which it appropriates – Mexican or Latin American. Its origins seem quite simple. According to Roadside America, an online guide to roadside attractions, “Alan Schafer [SOB’s founder] began his rise to roadside immortality in 1950 with a simple beer stand. When building supplies began being delivered to “Schafer Project: South of the [North Carolina] Border,” a neon light went on in his head.
- 5 Ammidown, Margot. “Edens, Underworlds and Shrines: Florida’s Small Tourist Attractions.” *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*. Florida Theme Issue #23, 1998. Miami: The Wolfsonian Institution, Florida International University, 243. “As society became more secularized, travel was still propelled by the desire to be transported, perhaps more physically than spiritually, from the mundane to a state of wonder. ... a relatively mundane activity such as a family road trip might inspire associations with a pilgrimage – especially if the destination is paradise.” Today, paradise is not an end result but a rest stop along the way.
- 6 Huxtable, Ada Louise. *The Unreal America: Architecture and Illusion*. NY: The New Press, 95.
- 7 *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, Tenth Edition. Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 761.
- 8 Hawkes, Terrace. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Methuen, 125.
- 9 Ruy-Sanchez, Alberto. “Approaches to the Problem of Mexican Identity.” Robert L. Earle and John D. Wirth, editors. *Identities in North America: The Search for Community*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 44.

PARALLEL TEXTS

SOUTH OF THE BORDER HEESTORY

In 1950, Pedro, hitchhiking down us 301, on his way back to Mexico got lost. Arriving at a place called Hamer, s c almost starving, he stopped at a farm, scrounged some bread and cheese and went back to the road to catch a ride. A hungry Yankee saw him, hit the brakes and offered him \$5 for the sandwich. Pedro immediately decided that at \$5 for a nickels worth of cheese and a slice of bread, this was the place for him!

So Pedro bought a wheel of cheese, 3 loaves of bread, borrowed a tobacco crate, and set up business by the road. Sadly, no one stopped.

Desperate, Pedro grabbed a board off an old barn and wrote on it: Sanweech \$5. The Yankees still kept whizzing by. A day later, the bread getting stale, Pedro changed the sign: Sanweech \$1. Six or eight people stopped. Pedro was in business. Soon, he changed the sign again: Sanweech 50¢. Business boomed! Pedro sent for hees brother Pancho. They added another crate, and wrote two more signs, reading Sanweech 10¢. They were mobbed!

In the Mad Rush, Pancho was run over by a New York Cab Driver who had no insurance. Pedro decided Queek, he better get off the road.

Off the road, not so many Yankees pulled in to buy the Sanweech. So, Pedro put up more signs, and more, and more. An' Pedro leev happily ever seence! Hope you are the same.

<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/news/9710265CDIL.html>, July 26, 1999.

BILLBOARDS

For years, SOB has been criticized for apparent insensitivity when it came to portrayal of Mexicans in its advertising. In 1993, the Mexican Embassy complained about the billboards in a letter to Schafer. Schafer fired off a reply that suggested the embassy consider the \$1.5 million in merchandise he imports from Mexico each year.

<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/news/9710265CDIL.html>, July 26, 1999.

According to an article in the Raleigh News and Observer, 83-year old SOB owner Alan Schafer said "We have to communicate with the present generation – these baby boomers do not have a sense of humor." The billboards, which increase in density as one approaches Dillon, will continue to be the focus of SOB's \$40M advertising budget. They get 8 million people a year to pull off and gas up, buy fireworks or "dirty old man" gifts, or ear steak in a building shaped like a sombrero.

<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/news/9710265CDIL.html>, July 26, 1999.

ILLUSTRATIONS

All photographs of South of the Border taken on location by the author in July 1998 unless otherwise noted.

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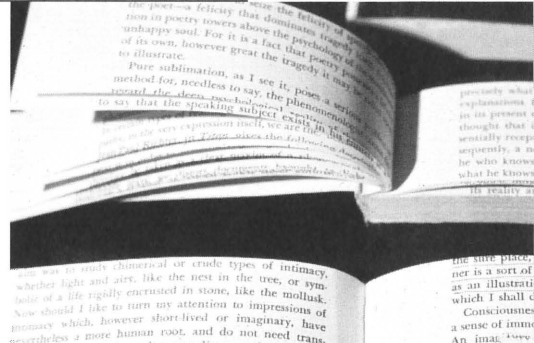


Word Space / Book Space **Experiments in**



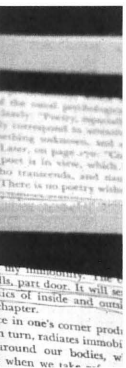
The ideas for this book were developed at Yale while I was teaching a course entitled *Visual Language*. In an attempt to explore the relationship between design (form) and language, I conducted a series of experiments with letters, their meaning, and how they can affect their perception. This book is the result of seven experiments and explorations.

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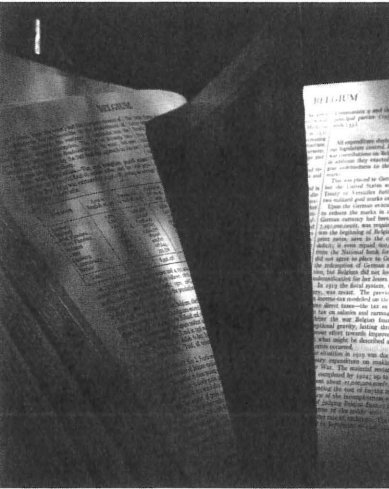
Poetic Space: Transformation

This paper began to develop during my graduate years working toward the completion of my MFA thesis *Poetics: Toward an Understanding of Words and Space*. I combine my interests in words (meaning) and developed a series of two- and three- dimensional which explored the relationship between words and reality and the manner in which their environment meaning. This paper discusses these ideas as revealed elements. Further, it discusses the potential use of such the education of graphic designers.



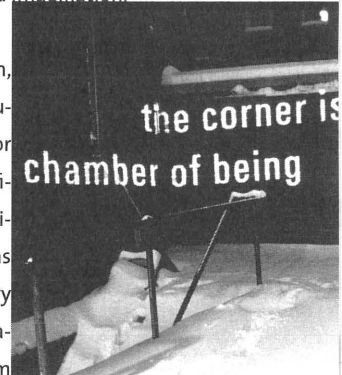
The space we love is unwilling to remain permanently enclosed. It deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times and on different planes of dream and memory.

GASTON BACHELARD¹

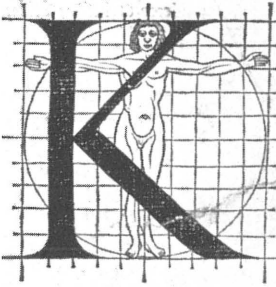


The space I have loved since the beginning of my conscious memory – the space that refuses to remain enclosed, is **book space**, or perhaps more specifically **word space**: a space that contains the possibilities, depth and richness of stories, poetry and history: “Inside books there is perfect space and it is that space which allows the reader to escape from the problems of gravity.”² It was in that land, surrounded by words, letters, paper and binding, that I spent much of my childhood (and on into adulthood for that matter). I had an early obsession with books and words, with the book as object, and with the actual appearance of words on the page. Even as a child I had a sense of there being something extraordinary about those abstract symbols which could, when compiled in a particular order, create meaning, evoke emotion, trigger the mind’s memory and imagination.

Words and letters carry the portent of possibility, expression, openness of language and articulation of thought. And when situated in unusual places, or when used in sculpture or as texture or material, words and letters carry with them an allure that is difficult to articulate but has charged the work of artists and artisans since the Roman empire. From the monumental letterforms of the Trajan column to the illuminations of the ninth century *Book of Kells*; from the divine proportions of Renaissance alphabets to the frills and furbelows of Victorian typography; from dada, cubism and fluxus, to more recent works by such artists as Ian Hamilton Finlay, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer (to name just a few), words and letters have been used to suggest authority, faith, progress and failure, ambiguity, poetry, formal geometry and inherent beauty, irony and humor.



A roundabout path brought me from the role of reader, critic, editor and even consumer of words, to now maker, designer, composer and arranger of visual language. I am a graphic designer and a design professor whose primary interest is in words and letters, as functional narrative tools, but also as pure material. Anyone who works in the world of letterforms and typography must consider how words exist in space. Even in customary two-dimensional arrangements, letters, in order to become legible, require space: letter space, word space, leading between lines. Margins and line breaks are necessary spaces for creating order, breathing room and visual comfort. The surface of a single page is spatial in that it is composed. It almost goes without saying:



words exist in space.

What is interesting to consider, however, is *how* particular spaces effect words. Most of us think of letters, words, texts as existing primarily in a two-dimensional realm, a realm to which we as readers bring our own inner space: personal context and interpretation. What began to interest me, however, was the consideration of what external space, or more simply “environment,” whether existing or manufactured, does to the meaning and interpretation of words. Words unleashed from their traditional habit-bound existence in linear two-dimensionality, can contain more than just the semantic coding of their mutually agreed-upon and contextualized definitions.

Words and letters can be called upon to reflect and respond to their environments, while simultaneously an environment can be altered by the introduction of words and letters.



Words and letters possess an inherent aura: at once clear and ambiguous; persuasive and poetic. They contain the ability to instruct clearly or suggest poetically. They contain potential and flexibility, and because of their use throughout history as purveyors of “truth,” they contain power and authority in a way that few images do. Their aura can be made especially evident when words are produced materially in three dimensions, built out of unusual materials or placed in unusual locations. By transferring text from the two-dimensional surface to multi-dimensional space, a new context can be created allowing readers or viewers to read, see and experience **word : environment : material : meaning** simultaneously. The viewer’s attention is brought to a more heightened awareness and is drawn toward a holistic experience that goes from merely looking,

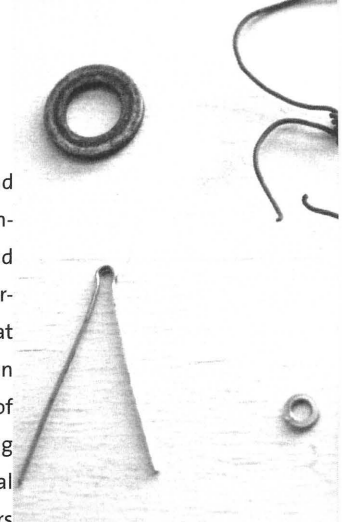
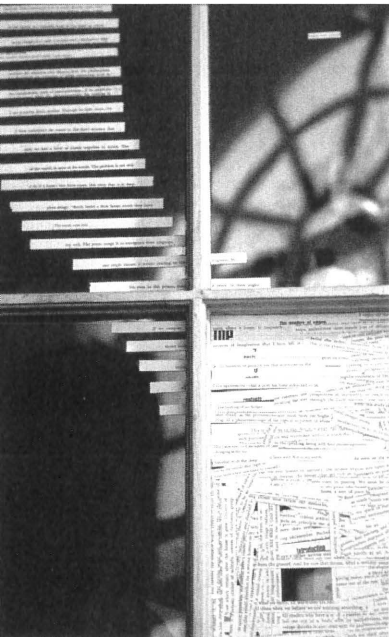
to seeing,

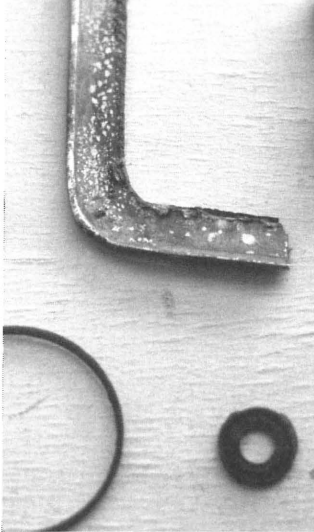
feeling

and sensing

all at once.

An essential aspect of this experience is the involvement of the viewer’s self or body in the process. Take for example Barbara Kruger’s extraordinary 1997 word-earthwork built into the landscape of the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh. Massive eighty-foot tall letters spell out “Picture This” on the grounds of an open-air amphitheater and park, and can only be viewed in its entirety from the air. A large audience can be seated in the ‘c’ to view films. Visitors can park their cars in the ‘t’, or clamber on the boulders that fill the final ‘s.’³ While the immense scale contributes to the sensation achieved by this extraordinary piece, so do the different materials which make up each letter. But it is the combined impact of scale, material and message, replete with irony and cultural associations, that conjoin to become the crux of the work. The words, with all their complex semantic and physical properties or “signs,” are further enriched by their ability to literally and conceptually contain hundreds of people.





In the past several years, my investigations into the manner in which words can occupy and affect various spaces, and vice versa, have resulted in experiments of my own doing as well as projects I have assigned to students in my design classes. In the following pages I will describe several of these experiments, considering aspects of book space, imaginative space and three-dimensional space. In each case I will address how the particular characteristics and parameters of the experiment influence the way in which the final piece communicates.

The experiments I have conducted and the projects I have assigned serve to explore various aspects of our conceptual, emotional and imaginative response to words and letters and to the manner in which they exist. These projects create the opportunity to reconsider the power of the written and viewed message, and they ask us to enter a deeper level of poetic imagination that can occur when removing text from its habitual role as invisible purveyor of unencumbered meaning. By considering the role of letters and words materially, spatially and conceptually, a heightened awareness of making and affecting meaning becomes possible. In the words of the designer Bethany Johns:

“questioning the authority of a visual/verbal situation with seemingly intractable concrete traits and redirecting its interpretation is the root of it all. Transforming the banal into the poetic is the basis of creating a sign or symbol, which lets a designer, through brevity and veracity,

leash the instinctive meaning(s),

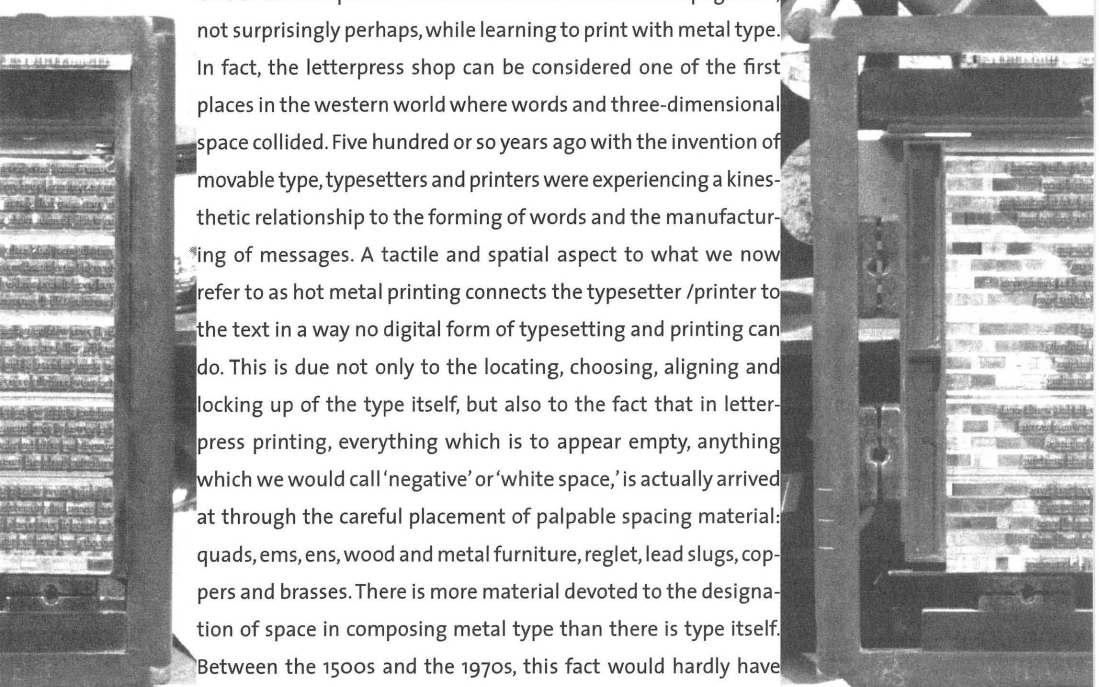
(re)direct the associations,

and allow the viewer an emotional response.”⁴

Unassisted I have set the type and turned the press and accomplished the binding. Such as it is, the book is 'my very own.'

L. FRANK BAUM⁵


EXAMPLE 1: Letterpress Printing



One of the first places I became aware of words off the page was, not surprisingly perhaps, while learning to print with metal type. In fact, the letterpress shop can be considered one of the first places in the western world where words and three-dimensional space collided. Five hundred or so years ago with the invention of movable type, typesetters and printers were experiencing a kinesthetic relationship to the forming of words and the manufacturing of messages. A tactile and spatial aspect to what we now refer to as hot metal printing connects the typesetter /printer to the text in a way no digital form of typesetting and printing can do. This is due not only to the locating, choosing, aligning and locking up of the type itself, but also to the fact that in letterpress printing, everything which is to appear empty, anything which we would call 'negative' or 'white space,' is actually arrived at through the careful placement of palpable spacing material: quads, ems, ens, wood and metal furniture, reglet, lead slugs, coppers and brasses. There is more material devoted to the designation of space in composing metal type than there is type itself. Between the 1500s and the 1970s, this fact would hardly have seemed worth noting. But now, in a time when typographers and type designers are learning their trade on computers, when empty space is an intangible given of digital media, the physical elucidation of space, combined with the tactile experience of handling the sorts, can be a useful and even intellectual exercise in connecting meaning to form and process. Here is an exquisite thought:

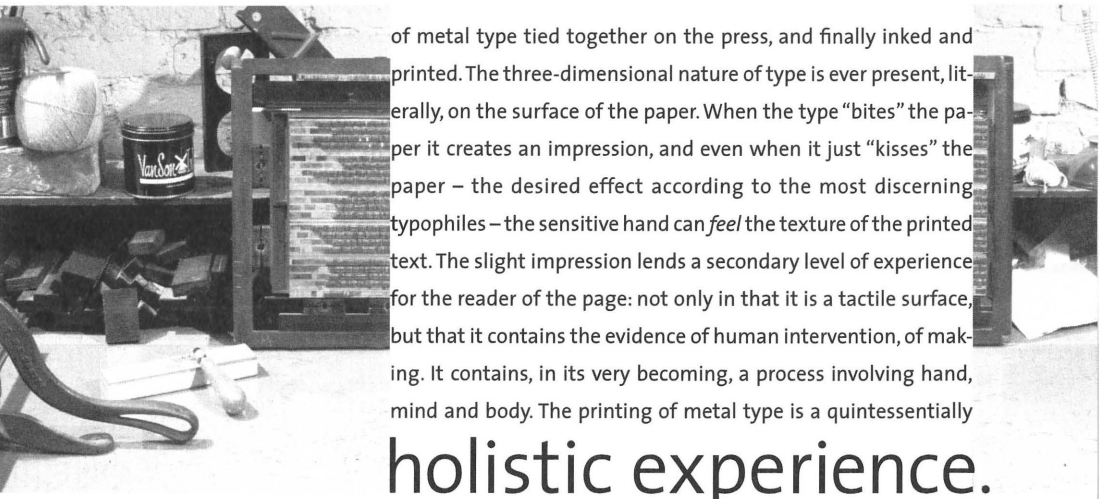
in letterpress printing, to create the open space of repose necessary to a readable composition, you must first fill it with matter.

The physical relationship of words to space is fully lived in setting metal type. Words begin as separate letters and are brought together carefully to become text. Their stability is tenuous until they are locked up in the chase or onto the bed of the press. They can tip over, they can get crushed (lead is soft), they make your hands dirty – even toxic! They try your patience and your dexterity. Metal type can be small and seemingly delicate, but it has a satisfying heft when held in your hand. And a single mistake, usually noticed only after printing a proof, requires the dismantling of the whole lock-up.



The process of setting the type, inking and printing, requires a partnership between mind and body. The fingers learn the feel of the type, searching out the 'nick' to be sure the words are in their correct orientation in the composing stick. Turning the crank of an old vandercook proof press, the standard in most schools' letterpress shops (for those fortunate enough to still have such a shop), forces the printer to be exquisitely aware of her position in relation to the press, and of her timing as she grabs the paper off the tympan and slips another piece of paper under the grabbers, and prepares to print again. Every minute detail of making up the type must be attended to for the process to work correctly. The intricacies of letter spacing, the process of justification or centering, each being difficult in its own way, and the tightening of the quoins as the type is locked into the chase, becomes a part of the text itself. These multiple processes become an experiential part of the whole, giving the moment and the making poetic resonance.

If the printer also happens to be printing a text or textural composition of her own creation, or a text which is meaningful to her in some way, then her involvement in the entire experience will be that much fuller, that much more complete. A writer who prints her own words experiences a series of transpositions, moving from imaginative space to physical space: words are first thought, then transposed into writing, then transposed again into a block




of metal type tied together on the press, and finally inked and printed. The three-dimensional nature of type is ever present, literally, on the surface of the paper. When the type “bites” the paper it creates an impression, and even when it just “kisses” the paper – the desired effect according to the most discerning typophiles – the sensitive hand can *feel* the texture of the printed text. The slight impression lends a secondary level of experience for the reader of the page: not only in that it is a tactile surface, but that it contains the evidence of human intervention, of making. It contains, in its very becoming, a process involving hand, mind and body. The printing of metal type is a quintessentially

holistic experience.

Making, the creative combination of hand and brain, can be described as a three-dimensional poetic act. Successful making, like a successful poem, is the concentration of an idea realizing its purest form. Whether cooking, or designing, painting or setting type, in the act of making the maker’s body is thrown into the process, and becomes part of the idea. The string of decisions that get made, and the tangential thinking, even daydreaming, which can occur during the physical involvement of the body, become both part of the work itself and can be substantially informed by the process. This sort of thinking differs from the thinking which occurs when staring at a computer screen or doodling on paper. It has a visceral reality and allows the body to use its intuitive and sensory powers. If you trust in the body, the brain will follow along and make good of the work as it is being made and even after it is made. Our hands know so much; they can touch and negotiate material and things and space in a way that is impossible to articulate. Think of the sensitivity involved in modeling clay or cutting wood or making paper or even kneading bread.

Your hands,
in complete partnership
with your mind,
feels the right thing to do.



I do not think of art as consolation. I think of it as creation. I think of it as energetic space that begets energetic space. Works of art do not reproduce themselves, they re-create themselves and have at the same time sufficient permanent power to create rooms for us, the dispossessed. In other words, art makes it possible to live in energetic space.

J E A N E T T E W I N T E R S O N ⁶

EXAMPLE 2: Tristram Shandy

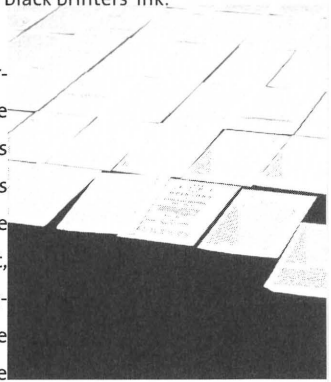
I have spent much of my life in the energetic space of books, in the huge, extraordinary, open and transporting space of books. But I have always been struck by the incongruity between the rigid, relatively inflexible structure of the book, and the infinite distances and spaces the pages can contain. Like most avid readers and collectors of books, I feel comfort in the presence of the tidy, familiar packages of paper and board, ink and glue, book smell and paper feel. The standard book is a consistent form: one page follows another, the pages are (usually) numbered, indexed, ordered. They are meant to be read sequentially and are arranged with the intention of delivering the text with the utmost clarity. In the traditional form, a book's essence and purpose emanate from its ordered words, from the culturally agreed upon meaning derived from the sequential reading of the grammar and syntax of first letters, then words, then phrases, sentences, paragraphs and so on. The book space is well defined, clearly, but also perhaps *confined*. Hundreds of years of design tradition is not to be scoffed at, and yet I found myself questioning my own complacency and acceptance of this form and wondered at the possibility of challenging the codex structure as a means of investigating the word/space relationship.

While considering this incongruity, I came across my cherished 1940 facsimile edition of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* and realized that this was the perfect book with which to experiment.



When *Tristram Shandy* was published in 1759, its reception ran the gamut from guarded amusement to astonishment to complete ridicule. A book whose very existence questioned the historical position of the 'novel' or the 'text,' *Tristram Shandy* was truly radical. It appeared just as the novel itself was becoming a legitimate form of writing and in doing so managed to throw a wrench into the burgeoning literary genre. In this novel Laurence Sterne turned chronological story-telling on its head, left off chapters mid-paragraph only to pick them up again hundreds of pages later, left blank pages where he felt like, filled pages with Greek and Latin, tongue-in-cheek footnotes, squiggles and dashes, and even had one page covered entirely with black printers' ink.

The narrative itself performs a parody on the rigidity of then current storytelling practices. The title character tells much of the tale of his own life from within his mother's womb. It takes ages for him to be born (about 300 pages) and then what begins as autobiography races down the path of sheer tangentiality. Some have called this novel the greatest of all shaggy-dog tales. In fact, *Tristram Shandy* was a thinly veiled treatise attacking the dogmatic, overly rational and heavy-handed philosophies of what we now refer to as The Enlightenment. Sterne was protesting the tendency of the time to seek rational and scientific objectivity in a world where Sterne knew full well none (or very little) existed.⁷

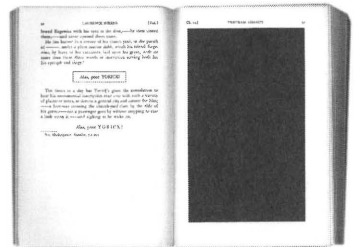
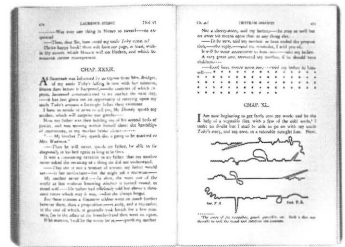


“By showing the reader that truth is found only in the natural vitality of the irrational, Sterne exposes the linearity of the highly edited providential engine as false and unrealizable. And ultimately, Sterne concludes, the very method of rationalization to support an untenable regime of reason is encouraging man's inability to cope successfully with the chaos of nature. In an

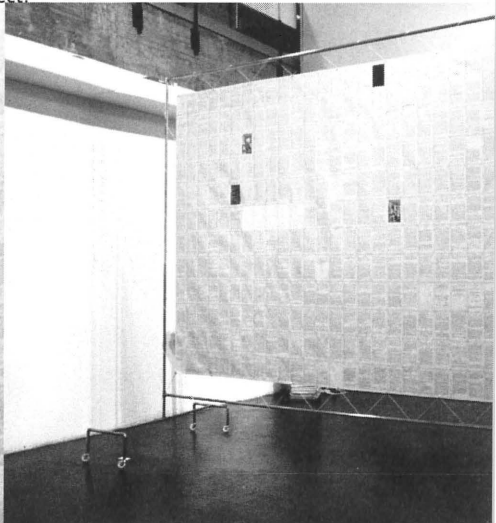
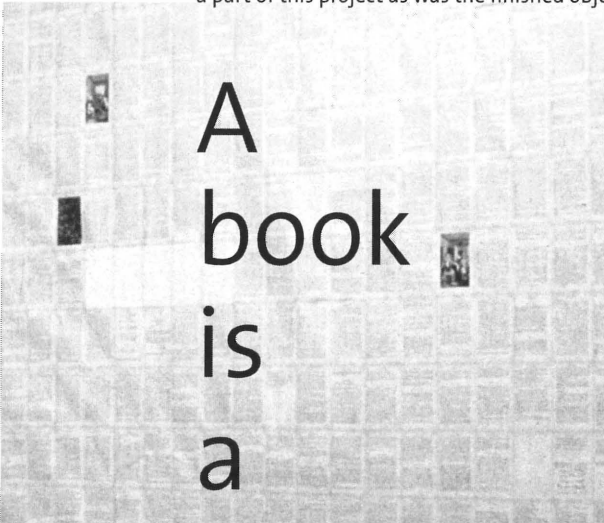
optimistic world, the institutionalization of knowledge provides a way to pin down a final authority, a final definition. In Sterne's pessimistic world, the universe cannot be regulated or controlled, there is no final authority."⁸

[*Tristram Shandy*] questions the authority of logic, reason, time and order, and I decided to use it to question the authority of the book form.

I began by taking my copy of *Tristram Shandy* and slicing off the spine. Suddenly a comprehensible, familiar and rather daunting looking book had become a stack of 647 slightly yellowed pages which, if dropped by mistake, would have rearranged themselves out of recognition. This one simple act caused what had been a book to become something other. One slice rendered bookness null and void. That small gesture was act one of my 'performance.' Act two lasted far longer and entailed the process of laying the 'book' out page by page onto the floor in consecutive order (with all the odd numbered pages facing up and the even pages facing down). I read each page as I placed it in position, and then taped the whole thing together into what looked at this stage to be a giant rug or alternative floor covering. I placed the pages in 12 horizontal rows with 27 pages in each row creating a squarish rectangle. The process took up 5 rolls of scotch tape (152 yards; 456 feet; 5,472 inches), and approximately 48 hours. I then reinforced the four edges of this now 10' x 9' sheet with book binder's linen tape and punched holes around the edge through which I hammered silver-colored grommets. Meanwhile, I built a large free-standing rack on wheels to which I finally laced up my 'book' like a sail, or a vertical trampoline, using letterpress typesetter's tying-up string. The result was a remarkable sensation. A book which was originally 4.5" x 7" and 647 pages thick had become tall, lean and far less intimidating even as it stood almost twelve feet high. The piece is now both an object to be viewed and a text to be read.



It is a space divider, a mobile piece of furniture and a personal performance piece. The event which was the making was as much a part of this project as was the finished object.



A
book
is
a
mighty
object;

one we have been taught to believe in.

It is a structure whose very essence contains something akin to truth. But looking at this particular book in this particular format, the weight and the power seem diminished. It is friendlier, more open and flexible. It is huge, and yet feels smaller than in its original format. The words hang in space ready and willing to be approached from any position. Chronology and continuity remain to some extent – a qualification, some would suggest, required for “bookness” – but its form now allows the reader to become the author of the book’s time- and space-based reading experience. It is no longer necessary to enter the book at page one. It is freed and in motion if the reader wishes it to be so.

Whatever the affectivity that colors a given space, whether sad or ponderous, once it is poetically expressed, the sadness is diminished, the ponderousness lightened. Poetic space, because it expresses, assumes values of expansion. When a poet tells me “he knows a type of sadness that smells of pineapple,” I myself feel less sad, I feel gently sad. In this activity of poetic spatiality that goes from deep intimacy to infinite extent, united in an identical expansion, one feels grandeur rising up.

G A S T O N B A C H E L A R D ⁹

EXAMPLE 3: Garden Space

When Bachelard speaks of “poetic space,” he often refers to imagined or psychological or language-based space. I was interested in pursuing some of my investigations about words in *actual* space while continuing to challenge the traditional format of text and book space. In this project, I was determined to achieve several things: to affect a space using words and vice versa, to spend time outdoors and to create a text space which could literally contain me. I found a small unoccupied walled-in garden, and after obtaining permission to work there, began to consider what to do with it. Just at that time I was reading Jan Tschichold’s *The Form of the Book* and came across these words:

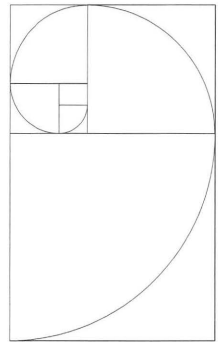
“In a pathological pursuit of things different, the reasonable proportions of paper size, like so many other qualities, have been banished by some to the disadvantage of the solitary and defenseless reader. There was a time when deviations from the truly beautiful page proportions 2:3, 1: $\sqrt{3}$, and the Golden Section were rare.”¹⁰

With this statement Tschichold reveals a real fear of disorder and subjective form making. Like the rationalists Lawrence Sterne was poking fun at, Tschichold suggests that without the guide posts of mathematical and scientific law, we would all – “defenseless reader” included – be lost in a sea of muddled communications.

Like a siren’s call for deviation, Tschichold’s words were a challenge. They prompted me not so much to attempt to refute the tenets of classical (and modernist) traditions to which he clung, but rather to begin a new exploration of the ways in which words live in spaces. Thus I began my

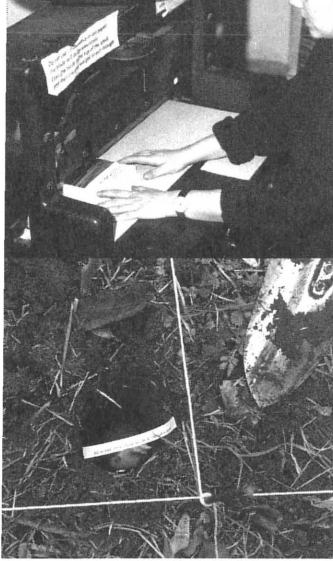
“pursuit of things different.”

The golden section, mathematically defined as the ratio 1:1.618, is a formula many book designers use when determining size and proportion of the page. Derived from a mathematical equation that mimics nature’s own innate rhythms and structures, these proportions have been used by architects and designers for centuries.



I decided to caption my entire project by removing this well-known form of the golden section from its usual location – in books and diagrams – and taking it out into my garden. I delineated the rectangles and squares with bamboo plant stakes and string. It was very big: 30 x 50 feet. I then described the resulting ‘golden spiral,’ by planting tulip bulbs six inches apart all along the curve, while keeping in mind Nabokov’s words from his autobiography *Speak Memory*: “The spiral is the spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious, it has been set free.” In my garden the spiral became a symbol of my desire to chip away at some of the imposed limitations surrounding words and texts – it was a visual manifestation of openness, infinite growth and loosening of restraint.

...was to
whether high
bolic of a life
Now should
intimacy whi
nevertheless a
position. They
f positive min
The point of



This project unfolded over time and involved various component parts and ideas. Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, which I had been reading almost compulsively since the beginning of these explorations, had informed much of my thinking. But even as I sought to challenge and question the book form and the authority of the book, I found I was clinging to this book like a fetishized talisman, a key to understanding that I was afraid to put down. In a very deliberate and forceful act of liberation, one autumn day I took my beloved, dog-eared copy of *The Poetics of Space* and, to the horror of my friends and colleagues, placed it ceremoniously onto the bed of our antique paper guillotine, and sliced it into ten or fifteen horizontal chunks. (It is very interesting to note how uncomfortable it makes people to see a book being chopped into pieces – even an inexpensive and readily available paperback.) The small, still-bound pieces of the book became symbolic remnants of a tradition I was getting ready to challenge. As I planted the tulip bulbs in the spiral, I ceremoniously placed with each bulb strips of the book I had so recently been devoted to, and by so doing was able to relegate what I had learned from it to the useful position of remembered information, while burying the physicality that the 'book' object itself represented.

... the poet – a felicity that dominates tragedy
... in poetry towers above the psychology of the
... happy soul. For it is a fact that poetry possesses
... its own, however great the tragedy it may be
... illustrate
Pure sublimation, as I see it, poses a serious
... method for, needless to say, the phenomenological
... and the deep psychological world, as what
... that the speaking subject exists in his culture
... expression itself, we are the
... From this the following character

... what opens the plane of the social production
... explanation. But the poet states clearly: "Poetry, especially
... in its present endeavors, (can) only correspond to something
... thought that is enamored of something unknown, and c
... sensibly receptive to becoming." Later, on page 170: "Can
... a new definition of a poet is in view, which
... he who knows, that is to say, who transcends, and stan
... what he knows." Lastly, (p. 10): "There is no poetry with
... its reality and in its virtue

... mechanical or crude types of intimacy,
... like the nest in the tree, or sym
... entrusted in stone, like the mollusk.
... turn my attention to impressions of
... ever short lived or imaginary, have
... man root, and do not need trans
... selves to a direct psychology, even
... them for so much idle musing.
... e of my reflections is the following:

... the sure place, the place next to my immobility. The t
... ner is a sort of half-box, part walls, part door. It will ser
... as an illustration for the dialectics of inside and outsi
... which I shall discuss in a later chapter.
Consciousness of being at peace in one's corner produ
... a sense of immobility, and this, in turn, radiates immobi
... An imag^{ary} room rises up around our bodies, w
... think that the well ^{is} hidden when we take refuge
... corner. Already, the shadowy walls, a piece of furn
... constitutes a barrier. Hangings are a roof. But all of

My garden, like much of the east coast that winter, was victim to an extraordinary quantity of snow. Beneath many inches of snow my golden rectangle/spiral lay dormant but significantly present. Like an invitation, or a blank sheet of paper, each new layer of snow compelled a new action. I began to place particular words on the snow and allowed weather to take its course. I planned on spray painting words directly onto the snow, but first decided to make 'sketches' by printing the words onto large sheets of paper and placing them on the ground so I could consider their placement and meaning. Having just done this, a storm arrived and covered the "posters" completely with snow before I had a chance to remove them. I photographed them as the snow began piling up and anxiously awaited the melting of the snow to photograph that process as well. Questioning the relationship of the space of the book to the space of the garden, and the way in which both can embrace a reader I wrote the following texts:

READ THE BOOK / FEEL THE PAGE / SEE THE TEXT / KNOW THE WORDS / HEAR THE VOICE / CLOSE THE EYES / TOUCH THE SPINE / SENSE THE SQUARE / ENTER THE SPACE / WATCH THE LINES /

ENTER THE BOOK / SENSE THE PAGE / TOUCH THE TEXT / CLOSE THE WORDS / READ THE VOICE / WATCH THE EYES / HEAR THE SPINE / FEEL THE SQUARE / SEE THE SPACE / KNOW THE LINES

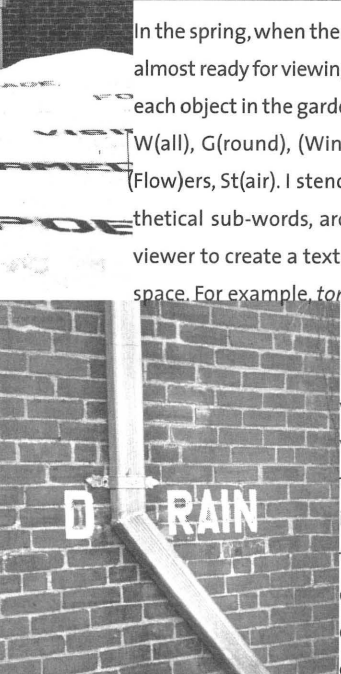
A large black arrow painted on the snow directed the viewer from one set of words to the next. Peeking up above the snow were a few inches of the bamboo stakes that marked the golden section, reminding the viewer of its presence beneath. It snowed yards after that, blocking all doors and gates to the garden so I had to wait for a thaw. After a few warmish weeks, the entrances were freed up and a fresh new layer of snow fell, covering the gray ice that old snow – even lots of it – tends to become. Like a fresh page waiting for a new treatment, the ground was perfect. I continued the project by painting the following text on the snow:



The letters were twelve inches high and were painted in black and red on the snow. The immediate effect was that the fine top layer of snow blew away slowly during the first day, leaving a clear but residual layer of paint. I photographed all through the first day and the next. Day one was windy, curling the paint up and dispersing bits of it over the ground. The night was warm, causing the words to melt away a bit, the paint to sink and settle, to move downward toward the earth. Day two was cold and gray. And then, of course, as it had done so often before, it snowed. Another page closing over the words, awaiting the next layer. I continued this procedure until spring when, as the final thaw set in for good, layers of treatments began to appear, like a strange archaeological palimpsest. Words in motion – slow entropic motion – affected the space, the spiral, the prospect of the blossoms in the future. Bits of the “posters” had flown about the garden like random signifiers attaching meaning wherever they landed.



In the spring, when the tulips were coming up and the garden was almost ready for viewing, it occurred to me that within the name of each object in the garden there existed a secondary word: Tu(lips), W(all), G(round), (W)indow, L(edge), S(tone), D(rain) G(utters), (Fl)owers, St(air). I stenciled these words, along with their parenthetical sub-words, around the walls of the garden allowing a viewer to create a text or poem as he or she moved through the space. For example, *tone round all air utters rain flow wind.*



Finally, I placed plant markers at the base of each tulip inscribed with Nabokov's words about the spiral (as quoted above). As the viewer walked the length of the spiral, moving physically through the space and bending over to read the words (an action which, incidentally, caused the reader to come into closer contact with the ground and observe the scene more intently), the text would connect her actions to the form of the place, the material, the environment and the overall experience. The various components of this garden, both visible and remembered, combined to create a poetic space that sensitized the awareness of any visitor.

How often we need to be assured of what we know in the old ways of knowing – how seldom we can afford to venture beyond the pale into that chromatic fantasy where, as Rilke said (in 1908!), ‘begins the revision of categories, where something past comes again, as though out of the future; something formerly accomplished as something to be completed.’

ROLAND BARTHES¹²

EXAMPLE 4: Italo Calvino

Re-reading a good book, something I often do, both reassures the existence of the past and welcomes the newness of the future.

For rereading revises understanding. Time passes between readings, and the reader changes as contexts change. Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, is a novel that addresses such aspects of reading, and considers other related issues as writing, authorship and narrative authority. Written in 1979 and heavily influenced by the works of Barthes, Foucault and Borges, *If on a winter’s night* was the inspiration and starting point for my next experiment. Calvino’s novel is a hypertext puzzle whose make-up contains the beginning of ten disparate novels, linked through the machinations of two “readers” who are seeking (among other things) the conclusions of the stories. One of the most striking moments in the book occurs in the last chapter when a number of readers sitting in a library begin a discussion about their reading habits. Each has a different opinion, but one reader states:

“Every new book I read comes to be a part of that overall and unitary book that is the sum of my readings. This does not come about without some effort. To compose that general book, each individual book must be transformed, enter into a relationship with the books I have read previously, become their corollary or development or confutation or gloss or reference text. For years I have been coming to this library, and I explore it volume by volume, shelf by shelf, but I could demonstrate to you that I have done nothing but continue the reading of a single book.”¹³

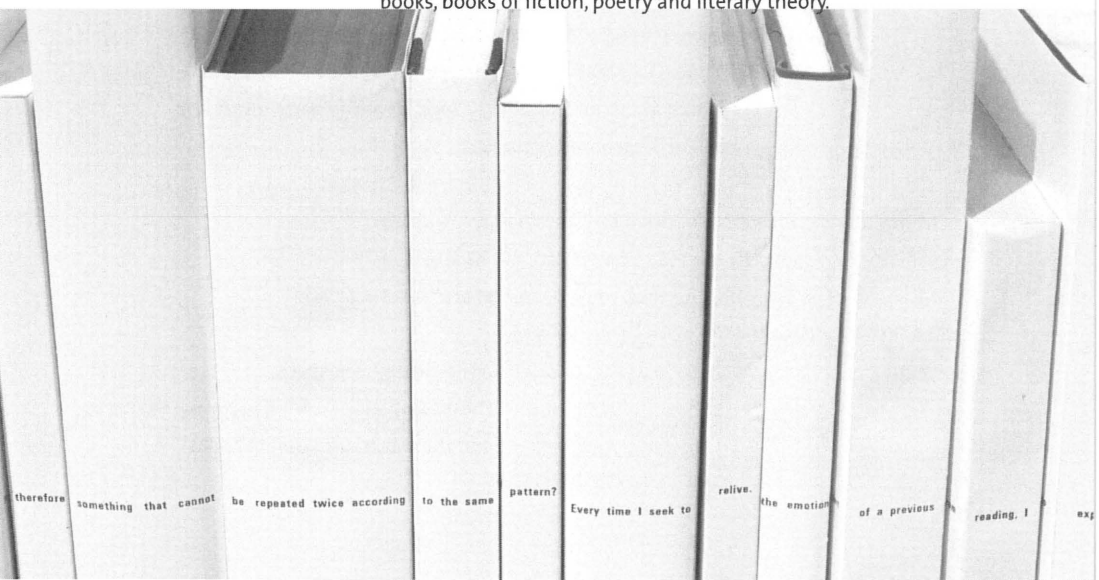
These words struck a chord and from this point I turned to the books I had on my own shelves – books I lug around with me whenever I move whether I plan on reading them or not. The privileged books come with me always, the less privileged remain in storage, in relatives’ attics and basements. My traveling library is a record of my own journeys. Each book conjures up memories of when and where it was acquired, whether it was for pleasure or work, and where I was when I read it. Some books that come with me have never been read and carry an air of anticipation with them, while some are old friends which have been read again and again. When observing my book shelves, I notice that, like the chapter titles of *If on a winter’s night* (which when read consecutively form the start of yet another story), the titles on the books’ spines can be read across the shelf and occasionally make interesting chance phrases. For example, from where I sit right now I can read the following titles all run together: *metaphors overlay information architects about looking inside the visible lost woods blue as the lake*.

With this in mind I began to develop my next project. I wanted specifically to respond to the idea that the act of reading is in itself an act of authorship, and that context and environment affect meaning. I wanted the piece to be interactive

and address book space,
the dual open and closed nature of the book,
and the space surrounding books.

In the end I made a sculpture entitled “Her Library” using all the books I had with me at the time. I covered each book in my collection with a glossy white book jacket. The only text I applied to these jackets was a long quote from *If on a winter's night* which ran across the spines, all in one typeface and size, with several words to a spine depending on the book's thickness. When all the books were lined up on the nine-foot-long Plexiglas shelf I built, with spines facing out, viewers could read the Calvino text as they walked along the shelf. However, if the viewer were to pull a book off the shelf, she would see that Calvino's words on the spine were imbedded in a sentence which I wrote that wraps around each jacket from back to front. And if the sentences were all read consecutively, they would come together to form an essay I wrote about my relationship to books and reading.

A row of books is a peaceful and potent sight and the effect was quite compelling. Against the white wall of the gallery where they were exhibited, the shelf of books was a beautiful object in itself: starkly elegant white jackets, with small black text running horizontally across the spines all at the same height. A sliver of color from the case bindings peeked out from above the jackets here and there, and of course the books varied in height. There were about 150 books on the shelf, from classical texts to reference books, books of fiction, poetry and literary theory.



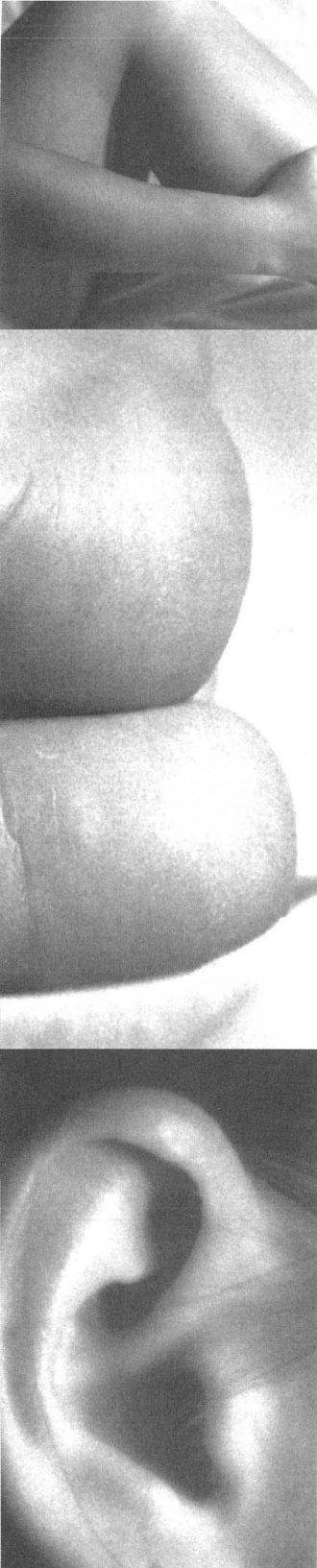
The process of making this piece was complicated, requiring me to write *around* another author's words. While maintaining the meaning he intended, I created my own new meaning. Below is a short sampling. The italic words are mine and moved around the spine from back to front, embracing, as it were, Calvino's text, which are in bold small caps:

I wonder why it is that sometimes I FEEL THE NEED TO RE-READ BOOKS, rather than start reading new ones. Does it have something to do with the fact that I need to go back to the familiar? The known? If I decide to read something THAT I HAVE ALREADY READ, then am I closing down to new experiences? Sometimes I even wonder if it wouldn't be a good idea not to read, because it could be said that reading fills the mind with nonsense. Which might be why I so often stick to the old familiars. They are like family, BUT AT EVERY REREADING I SEEM TO BE getting further from my memory of what the book was like originally. When I reread this one a few years ago, I remember thinking it was like READING A NEW BOOK FOR THE FIRST TIME. I had romanticized it completely beyond recognition in my memory. Memory's selectivity can make a lot of things feel like they are happening for the first time. IS IT I WHO invent these re-collections or can I blame the books I read and their impact on memory? The authors of these books are like people who KEEP CHANGING the story around – who have the power to confound. How am I supposed to have any sense of certainty when in the act of rereading I am constantly reinterpreting, AND SEEING NEW THINGS OF WHICH I was certain were something else only a few months or years before? Some books are committed to memory, as though carved in stone. They are books which I never re-read. They are too good, or too accurate – which makes them frightening. Sometimes I say I have read books that I haven't. I WAS NOT going to admit this here but suddenly it seems important to say. The result is that I believe it myself to the degree that I'll think that I've read a book PREVIOUSLY but when I take it from the shelf and open it I come to discover that I haven't. Is this a phenomenon about which others are AWARE ... ?¹⁴

The books contained, obviously, their authors' intended meaning, but were bound in the publisher's chosen covers, re-wrapped in my jackets which obscured the intentions of the original editors and designers, and were then surrounded by my text which essentially embraced Calvino's. These parallel layers of meaning were interacting with one another simultaneously. Visitors could navigate the collection's multiple criss-crossing layers of meaning, bringing to the experience their own individual past, context, expectations and ultimately deriving a unique meaning which, when taken together with the experiences of other visitors, would create a final layer just as integral to the piece as the other substrata.

Visitors were free to browse through the books, picking them up off the shelf as they'd do in a library or bookstore. If the books were put back on the shelf in the wrong order, so much the better! The spine text and the order of the phrasing would rearrange as a result of chance operations enacted unconsciously by the viewer, thereby altering the reading of the text, and consequently the entire piece, pointing again to the subjective nature of words. The potential meanings of such rearrangements are almost infinite, depending of course on how many times the books are shown in this way and how many viewers interact with them.

This project was a visual and physical manifestation of the idea that "every reading [of a text] is always a new act of interpretation. . . that there can be no final or complete explication of any 'text' because meaning is subject to changing context; that language is primarily a signifying system, not an expressive means; that there is an unconscious in the text that is not the author's..."¹⁵ Most importantly perhaps, the piece points to the fragility of written (seen) words and their dependence for meaning upon spatial and sequential ordering systems whose structures are nearly as fragile and mutable as thoughts themselves.



In the Classroom

Whenever I can I attempt to weave into my instruction, even in beginning level courses, projects which require use of poetic imagination, reverie, conceptual and adventurous exploration, and interpretive treatments of text, (since text, after all, is the stuff graphic designers work with on a regular basis). By combining a poetic paradigm with three-dimensional or unusual treatments of words and word space, students can practice exercising their imaginative powers, and begin to work in a simultaneous, tangential and holistic fashion. Words are the bricks and mortar of our profession, and are also the required material of poets. This observation of a fairly simple commonality is the rationale behind my notion that combining poetic thinking with a physical exploration of words as raw material, is of value to students who are attempting to understand the subtleties of human communication. In this way they can experiment with the most visceral, intense form of visual and verbal expression:

the poetic one.

Poetics, as I use the term here, is difficult to define, but let me try for the purposes of this paper. Poetics is a way, a path, a mode. It is a state of mind and it is flexibility. It is guts and heart and not knowing. It is sensitized awareness. The poetic experience can involve sound, image, text, texture and tone all at once and at varying levels in both time and space. Work which attempts to consider multiple senses at once is usually poetic. Poetics encourages the use of the space between seeing and knowing; it helps create the openness of possible interpretation. Poetics is not empirical or intellectual in nature but rather considers the instinctive level of human consciousness as it responds emotionally, sensorially, imaginatively and tangentially to a viewed place, object, idea, sensation or text. Poetics is a way of seeing and interpreting and cuts directly to the core of the conscious mind and the images that are created therein during and after the fact of seeing and feeling. And poetics, when brought forward and articulated in the classroom, can be a tool in ideation and brainstorming.

I try to present to my students the value of intuition, serendipitous discovery and poetic interpretation, not only for the sake of intellectual exercise, but for the simple virtue of feeding the soul with rich, visceral and intense experience. Artist and design educator Douglas Dowd expresses this beautifully:

“The wonder which lies at the heart of human experience provokes response. We are alert to the ineffable precisely because we cannot grasp it; if we apply metaphor to smoke, if we hurl paint at the Invisible Man, who can blame us? Shall we cease our efforts to learn what we cannot? . . . I submit that wonder is real . . . [t]he lyrical impulse – the drive to elucidate rhyme – seeks to approximate wonder in a structural form, through the manipulation of elements. Form, tonality, metaphor, sound. If the lyricist succeeds, we experience an aesthetic wholeness: as in the viewing of constellations, awareness emerges from the apparent accident of juxtaposition.”¹⁶

It is this accident of juxtaposition that is so supremely valuable in the learning experience. The lyrical impulse, the desire to seek a form for the ineffable, is akin to the relationship between words (a faulty vehicle when you really think about it) and the poetic idea. Words do their best as vehicles for the deepest thoughts. But for a word or words to achieve poetic resonance, there must be a shaping of some kind, and a conduit for the reader or viewer, as well as a context. As I have shown in my experiments, this need not always occur on the surface of a page. It can occur solely in the mind, or spatially in three dimensions, or in the form of sound or touch. The following are descriptions of studio projects and exercises which combine the poetic approach with words used visually, verbally and pragmatically, in both two-, three- (and even four-) dimensions.

Let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses and sparrows, whatever comes along the street, until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole. That perhaps is your task – to find the relation between things that seem incompatible, yet have a mysterious affinity.

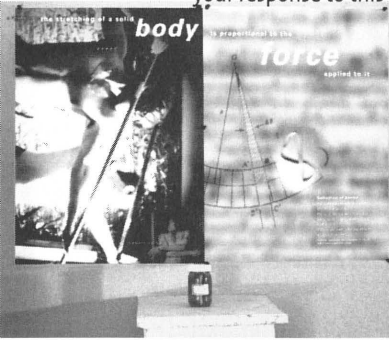
VIRGINIA WOOLF¹⁷

EXAMPLE 5: Interpretation and Imagination

Graphic design, more than any other discipline, requires its practitioners to maintain a collection of opposing traits. Designers must be flexible and firm, creative and structured, artistic and professional, directors and directed, all at the same time. We are called upon to interpret clients wishes, comprehend a designated audience, find appropriate styles for whatever the message, and in addition be handy enough to make sketches, dummies, comps and finished products. We must be broadly talented and are most useful when we have skills in a number of areas: *history* (both cultural and social – to aid us in understanding human problems and finding solutions), *literature*, (because we are wordsmiths, users of visual and verbal language), *diplomacy* (for client relations), *psychology* (for determining audience reaction) and *art* (because it is through fundamentals of the fine-art process that we become observers and makers).

In an elective course entitled *Interpretation and Imagination*, students were given the opportunity to work without fictional clients or pragmatic design problems. Instead they focused their energy entirely on the process of deep analysis, interpretation and (re)presentation, using the space of their imaginations to live and experience more fully than practical applications of these processes often allow. In this class I asked the students to practice their analytical and imaginative skills which would be required in their future professions.

For the main assignment, each student was asked to choose an object out of a box. These were banal everyday objects I had gathered together from around my house: a rubber band, a shard of glass, a whistle, a piece of twine, a small chain, to name a few. The students were asked to articulate in written and oral form, the material and physical properties of their objects, and any metaphorical, symbolic or associative thoughts which came to mind. They were asked to begin with a disciplined and scientific approach: what were the object's physical properties? What was it made of? How did it work? How do you interact with it? The responses to and results of this level of questioning were diagrammed coherently. Then they were asked to move into association: what did it make you think of? What is your gut response to it? What are some literal associations? Metaphorical? What is the essence of your object? They were then asked to develop a "story" in response to their intense study, a story being broadly defined as "what do you want a viewer to know about you and your response to this object?"



Finally, they were required to distill the most important aspect of their explorations into a new interpretive piece. The rubber band ended up in a specimen jar on a museum pedestal with a poster behind it showing how the human body stretches and bends and moves via the flexing and unflexing of muscle. The shard of glass resulted in a massive three-dimensional glass window box containing the burnt remnants of a text about the student's broken family. The twine ended up inspiring a very long scroll/book with a narrative written by the student and juxtaposed, in a visual ballet of typography, with a Wallace Stevens poem about time. Banal everyday objects, through careful study, controlled process and deliberate development, triggered poetic response and resulted in successful, rich and provocative work.

Poets help us to discover within ourselves such joy in looking that sometimes, in the presence of a perfectly familiar object, we experience an extension of our intimate space.

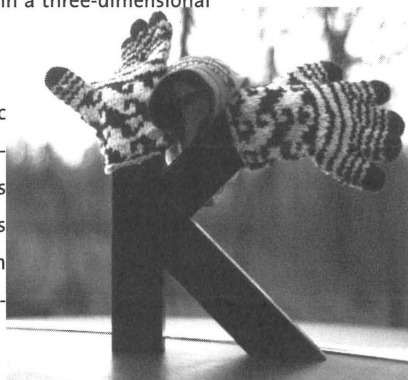
GASTON BACHELARD¹⁸

EXAMPLE 6: Three-dimensional Letterforms

Not long ago I taught a course in Environmental Graphic Design. This specialty of the graphic design field is defined as the planning, design and specifying of graphic elements in the built and natural environment. The word “environmental” refers to built spaces and places. The job of the environmental graphic designer is to shape messages that must appear in a three-dimensional context.¹⁹

I opted to teach this course from both a pragmatic and a poetic stance. Students need to learn about practical issues of designing in the environment, and must learn to deal with such limits as, for example, those placed on text that appears in public places as dictated by the Americans with Disabilities Act. They must learn about wayfinding, and signage and fabrication of various three-dimensional graphic elements.

Thinking that I was giving a very practical and pragmatic assignment, I asked the students to create a letterform in three dimensions, at least eighteen inches high and five inches deep. The issue at hand was legibility of three-dimensional typography. They were to photograph their letter forms in various environments focusing on material contrasts, lighting, point of view, legibility and practical use.

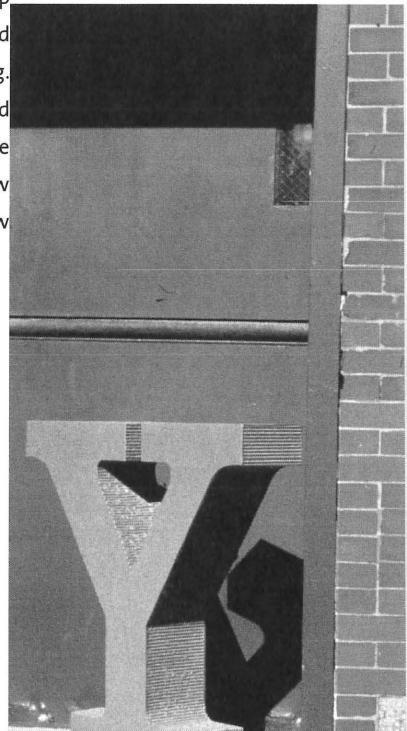


At the final slide presentations, I was surprised and delighted to find that the students, almost to a person, had animated or personified their letterforms to some degree, giving them character, posture and personality. In some cases it was unconscious and in other cases it was planned and orchestrated. One student took her letter out to dinner, arousing much comment. Another student strapped his letter into the seat belt of his car and drove it to the park, photographing it on the slide and the swing set, and putting gloves on it when it got cold. Yet another made a lowercase 'CT' ligature and photographed it creeping around town, lurking at street corners and intersections looking every bit like Sam Spade hot on the trail of some perpetrator. There was a drunk 'A' on a park bench and a suicidal 'G' that fell out of a window. A giant hollow 'Z' made of sharp and fine chicken wire was lethal to the hand but when suspended from the ceiling became almost invisible except for the lovely ethereal shadow it threw onto the wall. The letterforms, standing unattached in surroundings unused to containing freestanding large scale letters, drew attention to the place, while the place was in turn transformed by the potent symbol of a very big three-dimensional word not yet realized.



One student who took the course almost three years ago, phoned just the other day to relay a dream she'd just had. It went something like this: "I walked down to a small babbling brook. There, standing in the water, were several 'm's. Round, satisfied, three-dimensional letterforms, wading, as it were, up to their 'knees.' And the brook was making a pleasing, satisfactory sound. It was a low hum, like a sound one might make when thinking aloud. Spelled out, it would look something like this: 'mmmmmmmm.' Pure poetry. A satisfied river and a wading 'm.'

My students had unexpectedly imbued their letters with narrative quality and poetic intensity. Primary to this action is the fact that they created these letterforms by hand, and with great difficulty in some cases. These graphic design students learned to use power tools, weld, mold, curve wood, etc. These were not drawings or laser prints pinned to a wall. These were objects whose making involved the body, the self. And in that making, the students developed an attachment to the letters directly relative to the time spent, the physical investment expended and the tangential streams of thought which had time to develop in the time it took to make. While the letters spell nothing and contain no verbal messages, they embody the effort of making. Making slows us down, and in so doing allows for thought and consciousness to develop. The creation and end results of these letterforms took a poetic turn I had not anticipated, but now makes me eager to experiment with this project again to see how other students will respond.



I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness – in a landscape selected at random – is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind that ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern – to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal.

V L A D I M I R N A B O K O V ²⁰

EXAMPLE 7 : An Event in the Planning

My final description is of a project still in the planning stages. Since arriving in Providence, Rhode Island, and moving into my office high up in the RISD Design Center, I have felt a strong compulsion to float something down the Providence River. It lies there invitingly seven stories below my office, and is visible from hundreds of other offices all along its banks. The question of what to float was easy: it had to be words or letters. But how? A graduate student with similar interests in poetic experience and words as material suggested we try ice.²¹ This then is the current plan.

When I look out of my office window and when there is time to pause and reflect, I consider many things at once. The moment of viewing involves a semi-conscious understanding of numerous simultaneous events and thoughts:

I see the water, hear the muffled traffic,
feel the distance from the ground, notice a student's yellow sweater
as he skims by on a skateboard.

And while seeing these details I consider where the river flows. The essence of a river lies not so much in its origin or destination but more in the infinity of tangents and potential connections it represents. A river reminds us of the beauty in the ineffable, liminal space between two points, where beginnings and endings are less important than what happens in between. Suddenly it is this ambiguous quality of the *in between* on which I am focused.

My thoughts are with rivers and undefined spaces, my eyes are focused on the scene, and my imagination latches onto possibilities of transforming the landscape. I think of words because words are empty and full and waiting for context. Because words can describe rivers but aren't usually described *by* them. Gigantic ice-words would melt as they go, leaving the ephemeral nature of their semantic meanings behind. As they bump into bridges and debris, are witnessed by office workers and passersby, perhaps even stop traffic, they would adopt new meanings. And they would finally become mere memory as they dissolve, and become simply words which floated down a river and disappeared. They would embody notions of poetic reverie like great rafts of meaning whose only indelible quality is found in the way the idea of them plays in the imagination and memory: the experience of seeing words floating down a river where they oughtn't be.

What birds plunge through is not the intimate space
in which you see all forms intensified.

(Out in the Open you would be denied
your self, would disappear into that vastness.)

Space reaches from us and construes the world:
to know a tree, in its true element,
throw inner space around it, from that pure
abundance in you. Surround it with restraint.
It has no limits. Not until it is held
in your renouncing is it truly there.

RAINER MARIA RILKE²²

While these projects and exercises address a multitude of ideas
about words and space, what links them is that they all perform
an act of poetic and imaginative **transformation**.
They all celebrate the potential materiality of words and ideas
producing a symbiotic relationship in which one elevates and
enhances the other. These projects and their end results don't
purport to communicate better or more clearly than traditional
printed texts or explanatory descriptions. But in the act of explo-
ration, my students and I, and with luck those who view these
works, experience the conjunction of thought,

reverie,
tangible making,
reading,
writing,
building

and imagining.

Every word uttered, written or thought signals the possibility of incalculable interpretations. The spaces we occupy contain immeasurable distances between past, present and future memory and being. And when we bring material words to the spaces of our conscious minds, we explode barriers, dismantle understanding and begin to see anew. Antoine de St. Exupéry, the well known author of the classic children's book *The Little Prince* was preoccupied with both language and space and expressed his thoughts poetically:

What is distance? I know that nothing which truly concerns man is calculable, weighable, measurable. True distance is not the concern of the eye; it is granted only to the spirit. Its value is the value of language, for it is language which binds things together.²³

We have been playing with incalculable, immeasurable possibility, using language as our medium and hoping to discover new ways in which language can live in space: both actual and imagined.

Lucinda Hitchcock is an assistant professor of graphic design at Rhode Island School of Design. She received an MA degree in English literature from Columbia University and an MFA in graphic design from Yale University. In addition to her academic activities, Lucinda maintains a small studio designing books and printed matter for various clients including Beacon Press and David Godine, Publishers.

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Image on page 190 left was created by Michelle Moyal, Art Institute of Boston, and image on right by Colin Klück, Rhode Island School of Design.

Image on page 191 was created by Shari Tow, Rhode Island School of Design.

S

P
W

Reflections on

WORDS IN

Reflecting on the context of orality, secondary orality and visible language its
and visible la
return to orality that technology now makes possible, changing words in space
changing wor
time (spoken language). The impact this shift will have on objects needing in
have on objec
exhibits, learning materials on the computer and the nature of learning to r
the nature of
examples, will cause a re-examination of human cognitive capacities and
cognitive ca
difference in listener/reader/viewer control of time is posed as an important
is posed as a
between auditory and visible language. A comparison, beginning with visib
beginning w
with auditory and acoustic suggestions, is attempted to better understand the
to better unde
communication options as available embedded media expands and changes.
media expans

ords
n

Space

This paper explores the
age itself, this paper explores the
(typography) into words in
space (typography) into words in
ons for use, museum
eding intructions for use, museum
mention only a few
ing to read, to mention only a few
ences. A substantial
ies and preferences. A substantial
minatory difference
portant discriminatory difference
uage and developed
visible language and developed
sting nature of these
nd the contrasting nature of these
d changes.

Reflecting on
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The origin of this journal was in the dissociation with which linguists approached verbal and visible language. Linguistic interest was solely in language as spoken; language's visible counterpart was nothing more than a transcription of the auditory existence of words. The former founder and editor, Merald Wroldstad, believed that visible language had attributes and dimensions that distinguished it from spoken language. Other scholars – Jack Goody, Walter Ong, Umberto Eco, Ivan Illich, Elizabeth Eisenstein and others – have pursued this idea. The pairing of reading and writing – listening and speaking – are commonplace in the curriculum, whether K-12 or in the context of intensive language study at the university.

text

Text, too, has had its champions – Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and George Steiner. Since Gutenberg, text has been privileged despite the platitude that regards a picture as worth a thousand words

Text remains culturally prevalent:

there are far more writers and potential writers, given the educational predilection to use language for explanation and expression, than there are designers or individuals adept at synthesizing information visually. The computer and digital applications have put words and images easily in conjunction with each other, but the tradition of telling and incidentally showing, to underscore the information or for redundancy rather than to explore the information from another viewpoint or to give more detail, has limited the exploration of and understanding of how to construct effective communication with words and images.

Walter Ong coined the phrase secondary orality, referring to speech that is written to be delivered orally. Drawing on an oral history, now greatly diminished as a primary orality, examples of secondary orality include: presidential speech writing, television news reading and the oral delivery of academic papers, to mention a few. Here writing supports a kind of reading out loud or at least provides a structure that can be enlivened by inserting impromptu remarks.

Writing underpins an oral delivery
and an aural reception.

orality

Into this situation of constrained visualization and secondary orality now comes orality itself as a digital phenomena. I can write this text in Simple Text and hear it read to me in any of a selection of voices – from male to female, from more to less human, from melodious to strange. Thus far my computer has nothing significant to report to me that I or someone else has not “written” – the computer is not yet intelligent. Its oral skills remain secondary. It is the “reader” of my “writing.” Likewise, automobiles and appliances talk to us (whether we like it or not).

Words in space – typography (instructions, signs, warnings, etc.) become words in time (words as spoken).

In a world ever more loaded with labels, warnings, sales messages, navigational assistance and exhortations to join, contribute or condemn, where is the silence with which we pursue our own thought? Objects that speak, particularly if controlled by hand held computing devices or that respond based on an infra-red signal can provide for silence. Objects with visible language messages are more aggressive and intrude more completely in visual space. If visible language messages were holographic or otherwise invisible for the viewer unless they are in a position of need (and here I mean position in a literal sense – position in space), then there would be a comparable accommodation to silence in the visual realm. Invisibility or inaudibility – silence – may become a desired state. If so, the auditory now has a technical advantage over the visual.

For example, some years ago I visited the Cleveland Museum of Art on its closed day with Merald Wrolstad. As we wandered through the exhibits, we saw a workman installing an auditory warning system to keep visitors away from the art. If the visitor approached too closely, a woman’s voice said:

“Please step back, do not touch the art.”

I asked the workman why they were using a woman's voice (which, in my opinion, lacked authority). He replied that they had carefully tested various voices and found that the best response was to a mature woman's voice, rather like a firm, but gentle, mother admonishing a child to do the right thing. No ropes or barriers prevented the visitor from approaching the art. There was silence until someone crossed the invisible line.

And this, curiously enough, brings us to the idea of freedom and how we manage information access, intake and use in a time of tyranny relating to an excess of information regardless of whether auditory or visual. Tolerance for visual or auditory intrusion may differ from person to person. Mobile phones and various forms of mobile music and news are everywhere apparent. Boombboxes have given way to earphones. Annoyance with the projection of individual musical taste into the public realm has largely disappeared, replaced by annoyance with the broadcast of half a private conversation via mobile phones in public spaces. It is possible to be visually selective in what is seen in the environment, but

auditory information is invasive.

Another interesting comparison is the experience of a museum exhibit. One is often in conflict about whether to view and then read labels or other information, or whether to read and then view. Alternating reading and viewing is not always a satisfactory experience. Knowing that museum goers may lack background information, some exhibits are now supported by an auditory guide. Use of this guide overlays spoken text (and sometimes inspirational or cultural music) on the viewing activity. But the viewer gives up much freedom as they view in a prescribed sequence the exhibition materials with only the option to pause the taped narration, if they choose to view longer.

multichannel communications

Multimedia approaches to communication will become more commonplace as bandwidth expands. And it will not be an ensemble of text and images as in print, because they both compete for the same human processing system – vision – yet they require different cognitive strategies, linear sequential or holistic. It will be orality and images that get combined as two distinct sensory channels can be used in a complementary fashion, thereby increasing the amount of information received.

But the tradition of telling and showing needs to be opened for examination and experimentation. When do we show and when do we tell.

Is this different based on the context? the recipient's preferred channel? the use of the information? the claims on attention?

Making a comparison of language as spoken and as read is instructive.

LANGUAGE AS SPOKEN

close listening
qualities of voice
qualities of delivery
easy or natural
one dimensional
trapped in time

LANGUAGE AS READ

close reading
qualities of typography
qualities of delivery
learned
two- or three-dimensional
control over time (skim, select)

Taking each of these pairs in turn: close attention is possible with either channel; qualitative differences (authoritative, casual, dramatic, etc.) can be carefully developed for either; qualities of delivery (speed, clarity, contrast, interactivity, etc.) can be controlled for either. The last three entries, however, are where the differences lie: while speech for most people is easy and naturally acquired, reading is a learned skill; while speech occurs in a one-dimensional, linear space, reading occurs in a two- or three-dimensional space that allows more processing choice; and finally, speech traps the listener in time, while reading allows the reader to control time through selective searching, skimming or indepth reading. This control factor is not unrelated to auditory dimensional limitations.

the verbal and the visual of language

What follows is a comparison, beginning from language as read, followed by a presentation of its auditory counterpart, rendered necessarily in visible language but in a screened back presentation.

The comparison addresses the future of visible language as technology facilitates an increasing application of auditory language.

(Incidentally, other sensory systems that might come into play are also noted. While we have five senses, sight, sound, taste, touch and smell, only the first two are extensively used for specific communication.)

Letting the comparisons resonate without further description, the attempt is to make comparable, although not in a one-to-one correspondence, the visible and auditory presentation of information. Some liberty is taken with the acoustic space as a complement to visible language materiality. For example, the American poet, Vachel Lindsay (1879–1931), made notes in some of his poems concerning the addition of other sounds, such as “tamborines to the foreground,” in a sense like stage directions or an accompaniment. John Cage (1912–1992), an American composer and writer, adept at both aural and visible language, developed scores that included a range of sensory information. It is in the spirit of Lindsay and Cage that the following comparisons are presented. It is hoped that the reader/viewer will exercise some imagination while examining what follows.

The first series of images (FIGURES 1.1-1.3) are concerned with identity on buildings. The nature of the letterforms, the technique and the materials that render them are important differences.

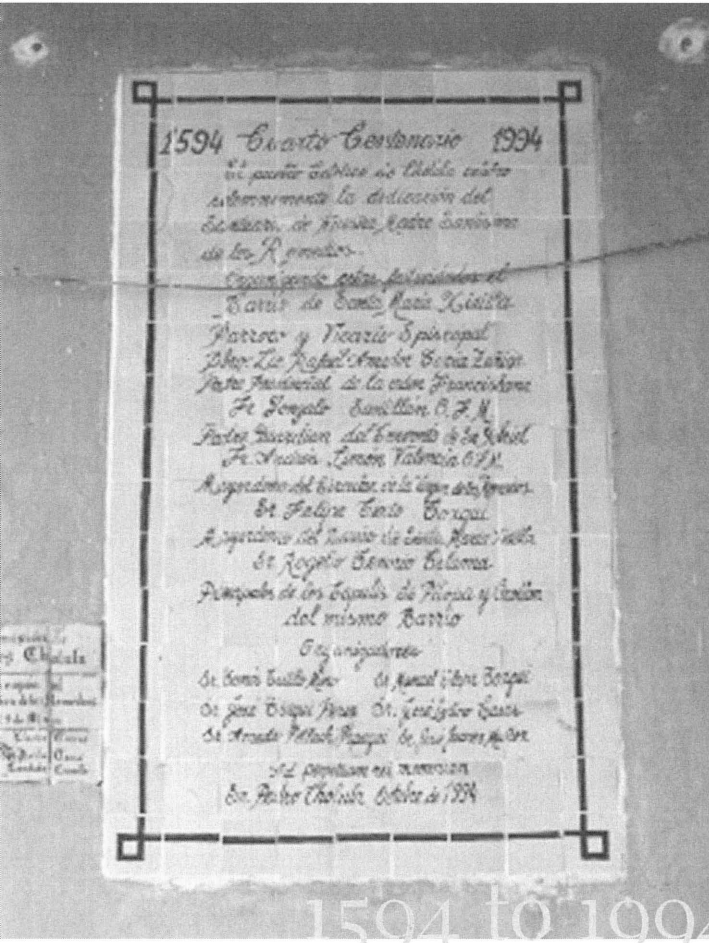
The second set of images (FIGURES 2.1-2.2) are on moving surfaces that also announce identity whether corporate or personal.

The third set of images (FIGURES 3.1-3.2) are concerned with labels and navigation, the system of which is subject to cultural inflection at the least.

The fourth set of images (FIGURES 4.1-4.3) are commercial signs, designed to get attention, create desire and make a sale.

The last set of images (FIGURES 5.1-5.4) are art – mysterious, evocative and carefully mounted in a serene space.

FIGURE 1.1
 Handwritten tiles identify
 history and commemoration on
 a church in Puebla, Mexico.



1594 to 1994 —
 Cuarto Centenario

El Pueblo Católico De Cholula
 celebre solemnemente la dedicación del
 Santuario de Nuestra Madre
 Santísima de los Remedios. . .

WHISPERED

café restaurant de l'ogenblik



FIGURE 1.2
Calligraphy on glass identifies a restaurant
in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

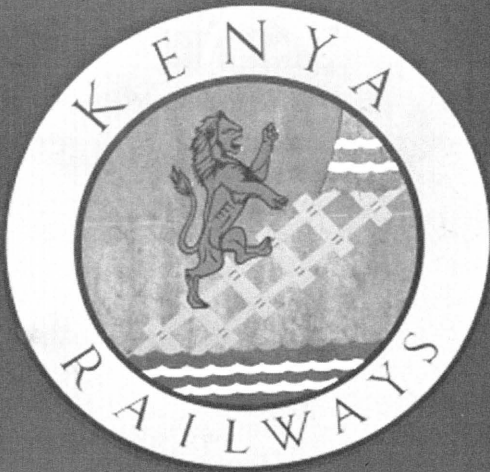
SLOWLY IN RHYTHM TO A MODERATE WALK,
EACH CHARACTER IS SAID BY A DIFFERENT VOICE,
REPEATED TWICE,
ENDING WITH THE WORD
STATED BY ALL VOICES IN UNISON

OCTAVIO — OCTAVIO



FIGURE 1.3
*Graffiti on a formal building
in Buenos Aires, Argentina.*

FIGURE 2.1
*The emblem for the Kenya Railway
System, Nairobi, Kenya.*



WHEN IMMOBILE, A STRONG MALE VOICE SIMPLY SAYS

Kenya Railways

WHEN MOVING SOME KIND OF AIR CATCHER OR CLACKER
RESPONDS RHYTHMICALLY TO THE TRAIN'S SPEED

MUCH SURROUNDING CITY NOISE,
HORNS, LAUGHTER, SIRENS, ETC. —
SPOKEN QUICKLY BY MALE VOICES
AND REPEATED AT RANDOM



FIGURE 2.2
Graffiti on New York City subway cars.

FIGURE 3.1
Street label in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

G A S T H U I S M O L E N

S T E E G

C E N T R U M



STATED SIMPLY WITH A PAUSE BETWEEN EACH WORD



FIGURE 3.2
Street label in Paris, France.

WITH A FAMOUS FEW CHORDS
ON THE PIANO AS BACKGROUND,
A MALE VOICE SAYS

Rue Beethoven

WHISPERED AS THE VENDOR WALKS
AND THE COFFEE AROMA EXPANDS

coffee-busters – the new columbian coffee culture in europe



FIGURE 4.1
Corporate street vendors selling
coffee in Portobello Road, London.

FIGURE 4.2

*Icons and words in neon below a glass floor entry panel
in a Brussels arcade announce a shop selling fine pens.*



LES PLUMES — PENS

SPOKEN WITH CAREFUL ENUNCIATION
IN RAPIDFIRE SEQUENCE WITH A
DISTINCT PAUSE BETWEEN CONTINUOUS
BACKGROUND SOUND OF WRITING
ON COARSE PAPER

FLAMBOYANT, RICH DECLAMATION,
STARTING LOUD AND GETTING SOFTER
WITH ALTERNATING CATTLE AND CHICKEN SOUNDS

Best Out West Enriched Flour

Tomahawk Feeds
For Livestock and Poultry

Sheridan Flour
Mills Incorporated

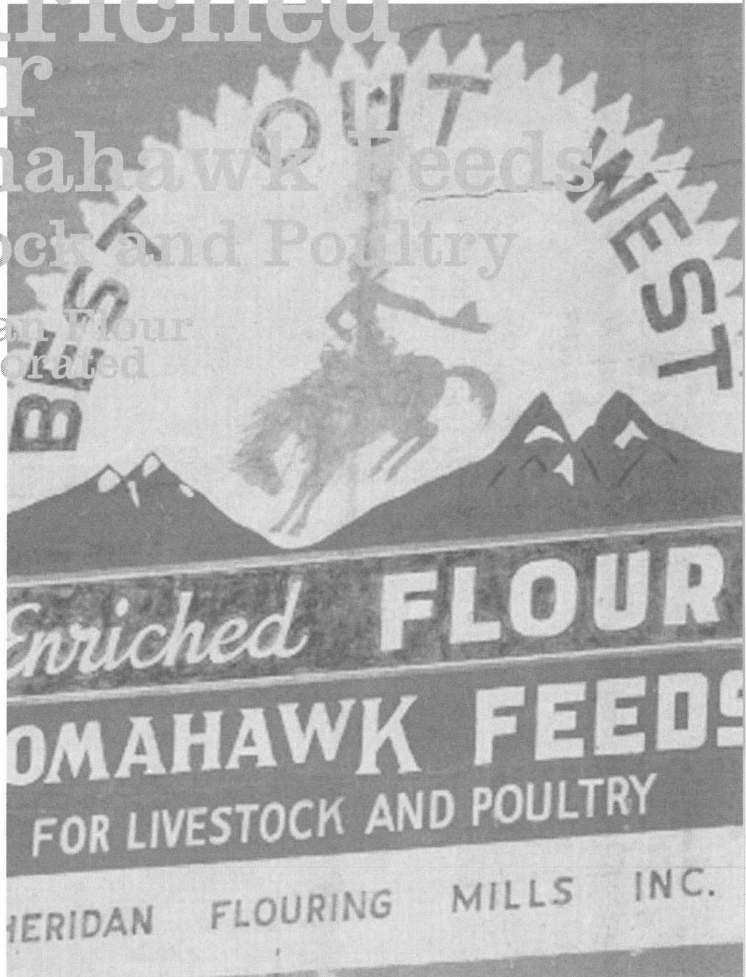


FIGURE 4.3
*A very large painted sign on
a mill in Sheridan, Wyoming.*

AS THE HUMAN SPEECH GETS SOFTER,
THE ANIMAL SOUNDS GET LOUDER
BUT NEVER OVERPOWER THE VOICE.

Crimea

CRIMEA

Madagascar

MADAGASCAR

TIERRA DEL FUEGO

tierra del fuego

PATAGONIA

patagonia

STATED BY FOUR
COMPLEMENTARY VOICES
IN ORDER AND THEN
OVERLAYING EACH
OTHER IN A RANDOM
SEQUENCE AS THOUGH
THEY ARE FOUR
NOTES IN A CHORD

FIGURE 5.1-5.4
*Neon words in an environmental
installation, Tierra del Fuego,
Rafael Ferrer,
Museum of Contemporary Art,
Chicago, 1972.*

conclusion

Continuously present in radio, film and television (all media that capture the user in time), orality and its visible language counterpart emerge again as competitors with the possibility of communication choices that require renewed examination of their particular advantages. Some questions that need to be asked are: what are the differences in memory quality in relation to auditory or visible messages; can images take on a more specific message transfer role and when should they be accompanied by auditory or visible language information; what are the possible relationships between images and language-based information and to what degree are these relationships common or accepted.

A new chapter is opening in the relationship between oral and visible language in terms of communication goals. Technological developments encourage us to question the formerly stable relationship of these apparent twins. The patterns of what is said and what is shown and the development of communications that pair sensory channels will break with tradition as we better understand the advantages and limitations of these two.

Words in space – oral and visible.

Words in time – oral and visible.

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