

ASEMIC

The Art of Writing

Peter Schwenger



University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis | London

Parts of chapter 2 were originally published as "Enigmatic Epistolality: Twombly's Letter of Resignation," *Mosaic: an interdisciplinary critical journal* 50, no. 3 (2017): 73–89.

Copyright 2019 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by the University of Minnesota Press

111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290
Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

The University of Minnesota is an equal-opportunity educator and employer.

26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Schwenger, Peter, author.

Title: Asemic : the art of writing / Peter Schwenger.

Description: Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2019006711 (print) | ISBN 978-1-5179-0696-2 (hc) | ISBN 978-1-5179-0697-9 (pb)

Subjects: LCSH: Visualization.

Classification: LCC BF367 .S39 2019 (print) | DDC 153.3/2—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019006711>

for the artists

Blank

All artworks are writing, not just those that are obviously such; they are hieroglyphs for which the code has been lost, a loss that plays into their content.

Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

Blank

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	
What Asemic Writing Is, and Why	1
CHAPTER 2	
Three Asemic Ancestors	19
<i>Henri Michaux, Roland Barthes, and Cy Twombly</i>	
CHAPTER 3	
Traces	61
CHAPTER 4	
Three for Today	101
<i>Michael Jacobson, Rosaire Appel, and Christopher Skinner</i>	
CHAPTER 5	
Reading Asemic	137
Online Resources for Asemic Writing	151
Acknowledgments	153
Notes	155
Bibliography	161
Index	171

Blank

chapter 1

WHAT ASEMIC WRITING IS, AND WHY

Asemic writing existed long before there was a name for it. It was given that name by two visual poets, Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich, who adopted a term that had already been used, on occasion, to describe certain aspects of language. *Asemic* appears (in French as well as in translation) in Roland Barthes's *The Rustle of Language* and in Jacques Derrida's *Dissemination*. Barthes applies the term to a word produced by a typographical mistake—for instance, *offiver* instead of *officer* (323). The result is a “pure signifier” that, free of any preordained signification, is released into “efflorescence.” Derrida describes the “supplementary mark of the blank” between words as “asemic spacing” (258); it makes signification possible, without in itself signifying. Gaze and Leftwich, however, seem to have gravitated to this word quite independently, for reasons that Leftwich explains in a letter to Gaze written on January 27, 1998:

A *seme* is a unit of meaning, or the smallest unit of meaning (also known as a *sememe*, analogous with phoneme). An asemic text, then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning. As such, the asemic text would seem to be an ideal, an impossibility, but possibly worth pursuing for just that reason.
(Asemic Writing 3)

When the linguistic term *seme* (derived from the Greek *sema*, “sign”) is preceded by the privative *a-*, the normal meaning of what follows is negated or neutralized (compare *moral* and *amoral*). In the case of *asemic* it is meaning itself, or rather the sign’s capacity to convey meaning, that is eliminated. So asemic writing is writing that does not attempt to communicate any message other than its own nature as writing. It is, in the words of Michael Jacobson,

“a shadow, impression, and abstraction of conventional writing” (“On Asemic Writing”). This distinguishes it from nonsense or gobbledegook or whatever may be produced by those emblematic monkeys whaling away at typewriters. In all of those cases we have before our eyes, if not a coherent message, at least a coherent sign system. We can recognize the letters on the page as signs that we are familiar with, even if they are not employed to form known words for communicative purposes. Asemic writing removes even this minimal reassurance. The signs before our eyes don’t belong to any familiar system. At the same time, they put themselves forward in the form of a sign system, recognizable as marks disposed on a page according to certain conventions. Those marks often hint at systems that are more comprehensible, such as Chinese characters, Islamic calligraphy, or Paleolithic pictographs. At its simplest, asemic writing is, according to Gaze, “anything which looks like writing, but in which the person viewing can’t read any words” (*Asemic Movement 1*). By this definition terrible handwriting would qualify, and indeed Gaze would go along with this. Even if it is not intended as a piece of asemic writing, an illegible scrawl may produce an asemic effect in viewers, replacing the expected message with an unexpected focus on the material configurations of the markings on the page.¹ Faced with signs that encourage us to read them at the same time that they systematically frustrate our reading, we may find ourselves replicating what psychiatry calls asemia—a condition in which the patient is unable to use or understand communicative symbols.

Gaze and Leftwich coined the term *asemic* because, suddenly, there was a need for it. Near the end of the 1990s, hundreds of artists began to produce asemic writing, self-publishing and influencing each other through the Internet. What emerged from these alliances was not a general consensus, an artistic practice governed by conventions that might be as constraining as those that govern writing itself. Rather, uncoupled from its communicative function, asemic writing exploded into an exuberant variety. Merely paging through the illustrations in this book will give you some idea of that variety, and this can be supplemented by the torrent of images now on the web. The delirium of styles that is asemic writing is perhaps best captured by James Joyce in seven break-neck pages of *Finnegans Wake* cataloging the cacophonies of antique manuscripts, such as “those indignant whiplooplashes; those so prudently bolted or blocked rounds; the touching reminiscence of an incompletet trail or dropped

final; a round thousand whirligig glorioles, prefaced by (alas!) now illegible airy plume flights" (119). And yet: "it is not a miseffectual whyacinthinous riot of blots and blurs and bars and balls and hoops and wriggles and juxtaposed jottings linked by spurts of speed: it only looks as like it as damn it" (118). Asemic writing may look "miseffectual" because illegible; but it has effects that are different from those of conventional communicative writing. It is the aim of this book to explore that difference.

The timing of this liberatory movement is significant, for it comes at a point of crisis for writing, understood as material and handwritten. Writing today is almost invariably done by keyboarding rather than by an instrument moving across a blank paper surface. That familiar act was always perhaps more strange than we took the time to realize; and now it has once again become alien to many. The decline of cursive writing in the West is a fact. New national teaching standards adopted by forty-six U.S. states require proficiency in computer keyboarding by the fourth grade; however, cursive writing ability is not mentioned and is no longer a requirement. Even when teachers take up the option to teach cursive, a generation for whom keyboarding has become second nature is unlikely to adopt it. One index of the state of things is the SAT, the standardized test that thousands of U.S. high school seniors take every year. In 2005 the administering board for the test mandated a handwritten essay; a check in 2007 showed that 85 percent of high school students printed their essays (Breens). My bank manager says that most of her younger clients print their signatures on mortgage and loan applications, and that this is now acceptable.

The decline of cursive was brought into prominence for many during the 2013 trial of George Zimmerman for the shooting of Trayvon Martin. Witness Rachel Jeantel, a black nineteen-year-old friend of Martin, was asked to read aloud a letter that she had dictated to a friend, in which she described to Martin's parents what she heard while on the phone with him. When she said she could not read the letter, the defense attorney asked her, "Are you able to read at all?" "Some but not all," she responded. "I don't read cursive." This "cringe-worthy moment" added another controversy to the already controversial trial, as Jeantel was subjected to a trial of her own.² How could a high school student be so illiterate? But of course an inability to read cursive is not the same thing as illiteracy—this is to blur the very distinction that Jeantel herself had

made. Moreover, Jeantel was hardly an exception among those in her age group. For them, cursive writing is already in effect asemic.

Of course there is pushback, arising out of concern that we are raising a generation of handwriting illiterates. If we can no longer read handwriting, critics object, how will students be able to read historical documents like the Declaration of Independence?—to which it is not unfair to ask when you last read the Declaration of Independence in any form, let alone in its eighteenth-century script. More disturbing would be the inability to make out the writing of one's grandparents, in love letters or letters from the front. An inability to write cursive can also be a disadvantage in less obvious areas, like cake decorating. Beyond the purely practical, arguments are often made that the physicality of cursive letter formation creates an intimate bond between the writer and the words written; that cursive requires a greater attentiveness and therefore retention; and that it develops areas of the brain that would otherwise lie fallow (Konnikova). For such reasons, bills to make training in cursive a mandatory part of the school curriculum have been approved in North Carolina, California, Massachusetts, and Georgia. The physical skills of writing by hand may be disappearing, but they do not go gently, no matter how widespread other forms of writing may become. Indeed, for Roland Barthes such "other forms" do not really qualify as writing:

What constitutes writing, ultimately, is not the sign (analytic abstraction), but, much more paradoxically, *the cursivity of the discontinuous* (what is repeated is necessarily discontinuous). Make a loop: you produce a sign; but shift it forward, your hand still resting there on the receptive surface; you generate a writing: writing is the hand which bears down and advances or hangs back, *always in the same direction*. ("Réquichot" 219)

The forward impetus in writing that Barthes emphasizes here reflects a progressive unfolding of the writer's thought; it also produces and defines that thought. Now, however, familiar forms of thought are thrown into question as the material forms of writing that embodied them are abandoned. To think through the broader consequences of this change is the task taken on by the self-described "communicologist" Vilém Flusser.

Flusser's consideration of writing—and not just cursive writing—is most fully carried out in his book *Does Writing Have a Future?* The answer to the question that his title poses is no: writing does not have a future. For Flusser, a self-confessed writing addict, this is not a cause for rejoicing. "There are people," he says, "and I count myself among them, who believe that they could not live without writing" (3). To be sure, "writing will persist, like a useless appendix" (122), because it is an ingrained habit. However, it is no longer an essential component of the future. Rather, the future is a matter of moving "into the universe of technical images," to use the title of a companion book by Flusser. He is not alone in identifying this pivotal moment. André Leroi-Gourhan asserts that "writing is probably doomed to disappear rapidly" and that this is a new "liberation" (404). Brian Rotman similarly asserts that "the *regime* of the alphabet . . . appears to be drawing to a close" (4). So, according to Flusser, writing has now begun to take on a certain strangeness: "This is the way lines of letters look in their final stage: . . . torn rags of lines with gaping holes in between" (*Does Writing Have a Future?* 136). Such strangeness, he says, emerges whenever media that are being left behind are stripped of their covering of habit.

As it always happens with phenomena covered by habit and more than habit, writing becomes almost mysterious, if we discover it by deliberate consideration. If we draw off the cover of habit and more than habit, which renders writing an obvious gesture, taken at face value, it becomes a gesture of such complexity that it defies description. ("Gesture of Writing" 2)

To the degree that we have been immersed in cursive, it has been largely invisible to us by dint of its familiarity. We didn't really see writing, for with a few exceptions (calligraphy or really bad handwriting) we tended not to look at it but to look *through* it. It was rendered translucent, if not transparent, by the urge that propels any viewer of writing beyond the graphic fact to the concept that it is supposed to convey. Writing is considered a "transcription" of something else; and that something else is always more important than the writing itself, which serves as a mere secretary to an executive meaning. Only now, as we leave cursive behind, are we beginning to question what it was all along.

This is a textbook case of Marshall McLuhan's notion that "we look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future" (73–74). Flusser's value is not that he prophesies the supplanting of books by computers, as others have done, but that he analyzes so perceptively the consequences of both the old and the new media. For Flusser, the shift away from writing has, most importantly, consequences for *thought*, for the ways in which we are programmed to think and what counts as thought.

The thought that precedes writing, Flusser observes, is very different from what it becomes on the page. The writing process begins when thoughts "begin to take a very nebulous shape within me" ("Gesture of Writing" 10). To write means to translate this nebulous and open-ended *shape* into a fixed *line*: "Writing is about setting ideas in lines, for unwritten ideas, left to their own devices, run in circles" (*Does Writing Have a Future?* 6). Only in a linear formulation is thought recognized as such; what precedes those lettered lines has generally been called by other, less prestigious names: rumination, free association, musing, reverie, and so forth. Now, contends Flusser, all of this is about to change with media—film, TV, computer screens—that are defined not by line but by surface.

The fact that writing is set out in lines has carried with it an implicit epistemology: "Lines represent the world by projecting it as a series of successions, in the form of a process. Western thought is 'historical' in the sense that it conceives the world in lines, therefore as process" ("Line and Surface" 21).³ That process is additive: the reader of a text follows a series of parts that culminate in a synthesis. A surface medium like painting reverses that process: the synthesis is present at first sight, and then the viewer traces analytically the various parts of the painting. Up until now, the textual notion of thought has been predominant:

For us, thinking was, and still is, a process that moves forward, that frees itself from images, from representations, that criticizes them, thereby becoming increasingly conceptual. We have the alphabet to thank for this understanding of thought and this understanding of thought to thank for the alphabet. (*Does Writing Have a Future?* 144–45)

Now, Flusser suggests, "it may be that what is happening at present is the attempt to incorporate linear thought into surface thought" ("Line and Surface"

29); an example would be film, with its narrative line incorporated into a series of moving images. But surface media can embody not only narrative lines but also concepts, the very concepts that have traditionally been the end product of a linear sequence:

In the future, the situation may become thus: Imaginal thought will be a translation from concept into image, and conceptual thought a translation from image to concept. . . . First there will be an image of something, then there will be an explanation of that image, and then there will be an image of that explanation. ("Line and Surface" 30)

This rather abstract futurology is exemplified in asemic writing. Traditional writing is already an image, even if we tend not to recognize it as such. To see it as marks on a surface, it is necessary to detach it from meaning. This is done by baffling any attempt to read the writing, that is, to follow its lines in the conventional way. Asemic writing replaces the familiar signs of the alphabet with its own enigmatic signs. Yet most asemic writing preserves the linear organization of conventional writing. The result is a kind of cognitive dissonance: writing is evoked at the same time that we are estranged from it. This strategy does not provide an "explanation" but rather something that *calls* for explanation—that is, a stimulus to thought. A bit further on in "Line and Surface" Flusser puts it like this:

Imaginal thought is becoming capable of thinking about concepts. It can transform a concept into its "object," and can therefore become a meta-thought of conceptual thinking. . . . Now, imaginal thought can begin thinking about concepts in the form of surface models. (30)

Asemic writing is an example of such surface models: it implicitly asks us to conceptualize what we are seeing—not reading. It frees us from the structuration of lines of thought, even as we see before us those very lines of thought. The markings we see represent thought processes but are without content. Severed from "instrumentality," as Barthes would call it, they owe allegiance to nothing other than their own contours and the abstract idea of writing that they evoke. Images, which before were something to be superseded by concepts in the accepted linear-verbal mode, now offer themselves for a very different purpose. Through imagination, Flusser claims, we are now able to objectify

concepts and thus free ourselves from them (“Line and Surface” 32). Foremost among such concepts must be the written materiality that has both expressed and defined the very idea of a “concept.” This, then, is an important aspect of the current phenomenon of asemic writing.

The link between Flusser’s ideas and asemic writing (which was not yet called that in his lifetime) is confirmed by his long relationship with Mira Schendel, an artist who shared many of his concerns and incorporated them into her work (Figure 1.1). Not all of that work is, strictly speaking, asemic, but in various ways it repeatedly questions our acceptance of textual modes of thinking. Schendel and Flusser met in São Paulo, Brazil, to which both had immigrated during the rise of Fascism in Europe. It was a stormy relationship, largely due to Schendel’s demanding intensity. Nevertheless, Flusser was very fond of her personally, respected the great artist in her, and valued their ongoing conversations. In a memoir about her, he writes:

Our dialogues affected Mira’s work (as they did mine, I hasten to add). And Mira’s work was the topic of the dialogue. That was the productive thing about our relationship: for Mira, I am a genuine critic: I influence her work. And she presents me with genuine issues that need to be thought and worked through. (“Mira Schendel” n.p.)

Schendel’s work often uses letters, as well as other signs, that float free of any linear arrangement. In the same memoir, Flusser describes one such work, given to him by the artist:

A sheet that hangs freely in space, suspended from the ceiling. It consists of two transparent sheets of acrylic about one and a half meters square, fastened together. Between the two sheets, very thin pieces of rice paper have been mounted in such a way that they overlap one another in places. The papers have been marked with black signs. Other signs have been inscribed on the four sides (the two inside, and two outside) of the acrylic sheets. Since it is all perfectly transparent, the observer is looking at a text through which he can see the room. And because the sheet swings easily with any air movement, the observer sees a text that changes constantly in space. . . . The text consists of at least four different kinds of signs: letters of type, letters of Latin script,

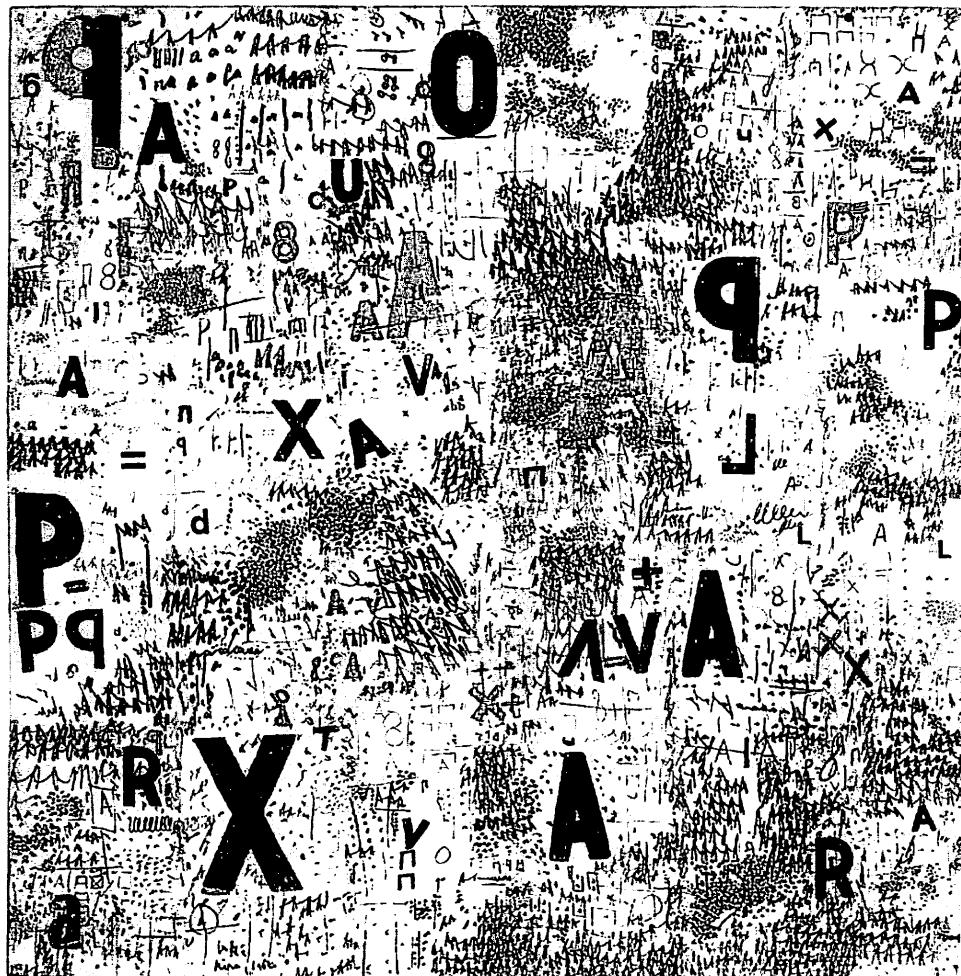


FIGURE 1.1. Mira Schendel (1919–1988; Brazil, born Switzerland), *Graphic Object*, 1967. Graphite, transfer type, and oil on paper between transparent acrylic sheets with transfer type. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Promised gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros through the Latin American and Caribbean Fund in honor of Luis Pérez-Orama. Copyright 2018 Estate of Mira Schendel. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

numbers and elements of calligraphic writing. [Many of these] yield words and sentences in various languages, giving the impression that one has somehow formed these words and sentences oneself. Others yield images of scenes, such as that of a swarm of bees consisting of “a,” or an army of “b’s” on the march. Still others yield geometric formations (spirals, for example). But all of these shapes call one another into question, because many can see through them and so reject them. The overall impression is one of a completely meaningless text, yet one that can be deciphered at any point if one focuses attention on just that point.

This is the asemic effect, suspending the observer in a productive tension. And what is produced, Flusser would assert, is conceptual: “We have before us an attempt to present thought constructions (‘concepts’) to us as images, to make them imaginable” (“Mira Schendel” n.p.).⁴

The fact that typefaces, recognizable letters of the alphabet, and even whole words are to be found in the piece Flusser describes (as well as many other works by Schendel) raises a reasonable question. If, conceptually, asemic writing marks a moment of rupture, then why don’t these artists choose to address print over handwriting? It is, after all, print that has dominated our culture for so many hundreds of years. Asemic artists have in fact addressed the familiar forms of print media: the Argentinian artist Mirtha Dermisache repeatedly made asemic versions of the daily newspaper, maintaining the layout, but substituting illegible characters (Figure 1.2). She also produced asemic versions of postcards, newsletters, short stories, and books: her first book, written in 1967, was five hundred pages long and contained not a single word. Such works illuminate the ways in which writing is tamed and contained by its socially accepted formats, a continuing preoccupation with Dermisache: “All my works,” she said, “create some tension between the communication formats offering a stable framework and the act of writing, which provides the unstable dimension” (“Artist’s Statement”). Other artists have designed asemic typefaces, and we will be examining the work of Xu Bing and Christopher Skinner as examples. But asemic art is usually based in handwriting, just as concrete poetry is based in print. One reason for this may be that while print is if anything produced more than before, handwriting, as we have seen, is in its last days. Distanced by disuse, handwriting becomes strange; it offers itself as a new subject for exploration, precisely because it has rather suddenly become old.



FIGURE 1.2. Mirtha Dermisache (1940–2012, Argentina), *Diario N° 1 Año 1, 1972/1995*. Offset print on paper, 47.5 × 36.6 cm (closed). Courtesy Archivo Mirtha Dermisache, Buenos Aires, 2018.

Another reason for asemic artists to be drawn to handwriting is because it is *drawn*. “What is the difference between writing the alphabet and drawing it?” asks the cartoonist Lynda Barry (36). No difference, Paul Klee would reply; writing and drawing, he said, are fundamentally the same (103). Fundamentally, yes—but distinctions can be made, and Tim Ingold lists four:

First, writing is a *notation*; drawing is not. Secondly, drawing is an *art*; writing is not. Thirdly, writing is a *technology*; drawing is not. Fourthly, writing is *linear*; drawing is not. None of these distinctions, as it turns out, is entirely trustworthy. . . . Writing is still drawing. But it is the special case of drawing in which *what is drawn comprises the elements of a notation*. (120–22)

It is worth noting that the presence of “the elements of a notation” does not require that these elements communicate anything whatsoever. The Voynich manuscript is a case in point: it has defied any attempt to retrieve from it an esoteric knowledge; yet it is recognizably a version of writing, albeit a cryptic one.

At a young age, children make no distinction between writing and drawing: a child will “write” you a chimney on top of her picture of a house, and will announce that she will “draw” her name (Dyson 372). Even before they are able to write their names, children will depict the look of a writing they cannot yet read. “Educators,” says Tim Gaze, “talk about children going through distinct stages of ‘mock letters,’ ‘pseudowriting’ and so on, when they’re learning to write. Many of us made asemic writing before we were able to write words” (*Asemic Movement 1*). Asemic works, then, may return us to our first childhood encounters with writing.

In an essay titled “All Writing Is Drawing,” the cartoonist and child psychologist Serge Tisseron argues that the equivalence asserted by Klee originates in a single graphic gesture found in a child’s earliest scribbles. As the child draws, the hand enacts a movement away from the axis of the body, a movement of loss. Looping back, though, the line lassos a section of space. This act of possession is confirmed as the eye registers the trace on the page—though the looping motion is performed too quickly for a conscious checking of the results, which comes at a later, more self-conscious stage. So “painting and writ-

ing,” Barthes said, “will have started with the same gesture, one which was neither figurative nor semantic but simply rhythmic” (Leeman 35). The result of this rhythmic process is the typical circularity of a child’s early scribbling. In *Tent Posts* Henri Michaux addresses such a child: “It pleased you to turn and to make things turn, and then repeat; without thought or study you dashed off spiraling lines that spawned endless whirlwinds: at an age to repeat, you took advantage of it right away, tirelessly circling, picking up again, again, starting over” (117). This repeated motion Tisseron relates to another famous repetition, that of the *fort-da* game played by Sigmund Freud’s grandson. As with that game, the aim of the graphic trace is to control the threat of loss, or rather to lasso something that, while writing is going on, still remains to be found. There is always the possibility that the blank page, which may be viewed as a site of infinite potential, may yet swallow up all the words we pour into it.

“Leaping into the void,” says Mary Jacobus, “the mark both creates space and defines it” (80); and this is part of a fascination with the graphic that begins in childhood and may be continued by adult writers and artists. Yet many a mark is returned to the void during writing’s ongoing revisions. In computer-generated text words disappear without a trace of the process that brought them into being. But when it is a hand that writes, the writing process is tumultuously evident in crossings-out, scrawled insertions, arrows, and (when all else fails) doodles. The chaos of the first draft, as genetic critics recognize, has its own eloquence, telling us something about the writer’s thought processes and psychology. This is so even when no word can be made out clearly, perhaps especially then. An illegible manuscript demands that one go beyond verbal information to the subtler messages conveyed by the way the marks on the page are drawn—matters of spacing, linear configurations, and overall texture.

For such reasons, the graphism of asemic writing can be linked to graphology. While graphology has generally been considered a somewhat dubious discipline, Walter Benjamin, for one, took it seriously. He was not only a theoretician but also a talented practitioner who was paid for his work and gave lessons. In two essays he took pains to detach graphology from its facile characterological aspects. Instead he viewed handwriting as a set of “hieroglyphs,” which is to say that he viewed writing as *image*. To the claim of one graphologist, Ludwig Klages, that “writing is determined by gesture,” Benjamin points out that “this

theory can be extended: gesture in its turn is determined by the inner image” (132), one that is fundamentally linked to the body. “Language has a body and the body has a language,” Benjamin writes; “graphology is concerned with the bodily aspect of the language of handwriting and with the expressive aspect of the body of handwriting” (133).⁵ It is perhaps only when language is drawn that the expressive sense of a body can fully emerge. While printed language can use various strategies to achieve expressive ends, what is expressed is something other than the body. In this sense, according to Brian Rotman, when language is spoken it says more than it does when it’s written:

We listen, it seems, not to speech sounds as such, not, that is, as isolatable sonic entities, but to the movements of the body causing them; we focus on what happens between the sounds, to the dynamics of their preparatory phrases, pauses, holds, accelerations, fallings away, and completions—the very features of gestures we attend [to] when we are perceiving them. (23)

In contrast to this gestural dimension of the voice,

alphabetic writing . . . splits the voice, selecting from the stream of speech (what it defines as) words to notate, jettisons all trace of their tone, and sets up its own neurological apparatus to handle the writing and reading of the resulting letter notations. (29)

So when it becomes writing, Rotman asserts, language loses the expressive aspect of the body. Certain prosodic strategies of literature—such as rhythm, verbal echoes, and the sculptural shape of sentences—work to restore the gestural component of speech, and with it an affect beyond articulation. But this affect can be produced instantaneously when the line on the page is itself an expressive gesture.

In sum, asemic writing has the potential to restore elements that are obliterated in the technology of the alphabet; and it can do this more effectively and eloquently than is the case with computer technology. For Flusser’s assertion that electronic media are impelling a fundamental shift toward “technical images” can be met with a counterargument: that alphabetic communication is not only more pervasive than ever but also more standardized; and this is due

precisely to the dominance of electronic media. Matthew Fuller and Andrew Goffey argue that “the policing of language that has historically been accomplished by specific norms of rationality and the institutions in which they are staged and advanced, is today accomplished more and more frequently by specific technological apparati” (149–50). Commenting on this sentence, Rita Raley lays out some of the characteristics of the new normal:

Character limits are a primary technique for the algorithmic management of language, limits from text field controls to messaging prodding the user to shape her language in accordance with presets, externally imposed constraints that operate according to logics of bureaucratic rationality. The elements of style now: more than a seemingly arbitrary number of characters would be unnecessary, excessive, unruly; and typographic symbols such as colons, semicolons, and dashes are decorative embellishments hindering the smooth functioning of plain text. The policing of form extends to design—optimal line lengths, article containers, templates, all “specific norms of rationality” enforcing consensus about linguistic and communicative standards, proper forms of expression that function under the alibi of “readability.” (n.p.)

The result is a global linguistic machine that offers templates not only for words but also for thought; that values information over affect; and that reinforces the long history of the alphabet’s dominance over Western thinking (De Looze).

To all this, asemic writing offers an implicit resistance. Moreover, it frequently expresses its aims under the same banner as that which it resists—a global language. Michael Jacobson, one of the leading spokespersons for asemic writing, lists among his goals “the creation of a transnational global post-literate writing culture” (Medsker). The Finnish artist Satu Kaikkonen amplifies:

Asemic art . . . represents a kind of language that’s universal and lodged deep within our unconscious minds. Regardless of language identity, each human’s initial attempts to create written language look very similar and, often, quite asemic. In this way, asemic art can serve as a sort of common language—albeit an abstract, post-literate one—that we can use to understand one another regardless of background or nationality. For all its limping-functionality, semantic language all too often divides

and asymmetrically empowers while asemic texts can't help but put people of all literacy-levels and identities on equal footing. (Kaikkonen and Melton)

Mirtha Dermisache puts it succinctly: of her work she says, “Anyone can read it as well as anyone” (Durgin). This comment, and Kaikkonen’s “equal footing” may give a mistaken impression of unanimity—another version of the flattening out characteristic of that other global language, computer code. Asemic readers are equal, though, only in their freedom from prescribed modes of reading. They are free to meet the extraordinary variety of asemic writing with an equal variety of responses. Alongside his goal of a universal global language, Jacobson hopes for “a personal asemic language for everyone” (Medsker). That would mean, for both asemic writers and asemic readers, something exactly contrary to the unanimity of the “global”: a new and beneficial Babel.

This tension between the personal and the global makes many asemic practitioners hesitate to see themselves as part of a “movement.” Certainly there is a flood of asemic writing—it might even be described as a tsunami—to be found on the Internet and, increasingly, on the walls of art galleries. The term *asemic* has become widespread and is now being applied to work in film, sound art, dance, and even architecture. There is even a manifesto for “Asemic International,” written by the Russian asemic artist Ekaterina Samigulina, that uses a familiar rhetoric (“Asemic workers of all countries, unite!”) to encourage the use of asemic writing for political purposes. Such an agenda, and indeed the very idea of a codifying manifesto for asemic writing, has been generally opposed by its practitioners. Of course one can have a movement without having a manifesto, and the question then becomes how one defines a “movement.” In 2015–16, the online journal SCRIPTjr.nl published a series in which twelve of the most prominent asemic artists were asked to respond to four specific questions about asemic writing; one of these questions asked whether asemic writing could be described as a movement. The responses were mixed. Christopher Skinner’s answer is typical:

There is certainly a “community” of asemic artists out there, many of which are collaborating and promoting new works in a variety of formats. A movement would suggest that there is some underlying aim,

collective values and organized identity. My experience has been quite the opposite; many people doing their own thing, pleased that there are others with similar tastes and approaches, affording them the confidence to publish and promote their work together and solo.

Tim Gaze, in his response, is more at ease with asemic writing being called a movement. Indeed, he says, “I’m partly responsible, having published 3 issues of an e-zine titled *asemic movement*.” He then goes on to comment, “The movement is not just about examples of asemic writing; it also has potential to ask us to rethink some fundamental questions such as: *What is writing?* and *What is reading?*” It is those fundamental questions that have impelled this study.

Within the title of this introductory chapter, then, there can be found a shorter title with a larger scope: “What Writing Is, and Why.” This book will not fully answer that larger question—how could it?—but it will repeatedly engage with the question through the suggestive power of asemic art. What Flusser asserted of Mira Schendel’s work is true of work by every asemic artist: that it is “an attempt to present thought constructions to us as images, to make them imaginable.” This is not to say that asemic writing is the mere illustration of certain preexistent concepts. Rather, it is a provocation to thought; and the thinking it encourages is not that of a system or science. It is open-ended, based in wonder and in wondering. It has something to say about an abstract notion we call “writing”; but it reminds us that such a notion can exist only through a multitude of writings, each with its own individual expressivity. Consequently, the depiction of writing by asemic artists is endlessly varied. In forms of great beauty or power or strangeness, their works address themselves to the mind through the eye. The asemic, as its name indicates, may be without meaning; but it is not without significance.

Blank

chapter 2

THREE ASEMIC ANCESTORS

Henri Michaux, Roland Barthes, and Cy Twombly

Henri Michaux: Line and Sign

Doubly gifted, Henri Michaux not only produced a remarkable body of work in literature and art but also aimed in both fields to push beyond their governing conventions toward something that he often described in terms of a space within, or beyond. While he began with words, he soon found himself straining against their limits: “those sticky hangers-on” (*ces collants partenaires*) he called them in 1951 (*Mouvements* “Postface”). This distrust was unabated throughout his life. In 1984, the year of his death, he published *Par des traits*, a book of drawings that concluded with an essay tellingly titled “Of Languages and Writing: Why the Urge to Turn from Them.”¹ There he rails against what we would now call the globalization of language:

A business enterprise now, language, unbeknownst to anybody, takes the place of murmurs, laments (faint or clear), calls. Commanding, commandeering.

Destined to become an ADMINISTRATION into which every conscience must enter.

Master of the situation, language will answer every need (!). Like tyrannies.

The handcuffs of words are on for good. (n.p.)

Michaux had given his resistant response to this in 1972:

Born, raised, educated in an environment and culture uniquely given over to the “verbal.”* I paint to decondition myself. (*Emergences* 9)

The asterisk takes us to an afterthought with Flusserian resonances: “and before the era of the invasion of images.” Images, then, are not the answer to the dominance of words; more invasive than ever, they must be fought against, gone beyond. *Emergences/Resurgences* is a retrospective and a record of that struggle, one in which words are seen as a certain kind of image, albeit a restrictive one.

Untrained as an artist, Michaux one day feels the urge to draw. He begins with a single line, a “sleepwalking line,” which he does not so much inscribe as follow:

Line not yet having made its choice, not yet ready to have the point explained.

Without preference, without accentuation, without entirely giving in to what attracts it.

... Watchful, wandering line. (*Emergences* 11)

Much later, in 1954, Michaux wrote “Aventures de lignes” as a preface for a book on Klee. In it he speaks of lines that “go for a walk.—The first that one has seen like this, in the West, walking” (114; my translation). This is of course a recasting of Klee’s own sentence: “A line goes out for a walk, so to speak, aimlessly, for the sake of the walk” (*Notebooks* 105). Such a wandering line implicitly resists Flusser’s association of linearity with writing.

It was seeing Klee’s work in 1925 that led Michaux to overcome his distaste for painting, which he had viewed up to then as the unnecessary duplication of an “abominable reality” (“Quelques renseignements”). Klee was the first painter to take him by surprise, followed by Max Ernst and Giorgio de Chirico. The first two especially may have influenced Michaux’s initial efforts at asemic writing. Occasional works by Klee, such as his 1924 *Collection of Signs*, have an asemic element;² and Ernst was to produce major asemic works (*Maximiliana* and *Festin*) in the 1970s. However, it was probably Michaux’s own impatience with the limits of words that led him to produce *Narration* in 1927 (Figure 2.1). A classic of early asemic, this work is usually reproduced only in part, with just the last five lines shown. It is indeed the fact that these are arranged as horizontal lines that makes them recognizable as a species of writing. This is so despite a very different use of lines in the individual signs—which at the start of this section are neither individual nor sign-like. Lacking the clarity that would

be needed to make up a legible sign, clusters of fine nervous lines sprawl into space and intrude upon each other. As they continue, they start to become less multiple, made up of a single line rather than a cluster of them. Finally, at the bottom of the page, the line breaks into separate units that resemble another work that Michaux did at the same time, titled *Alphabet* (Figure 2.2). This account of course ignores another progression, the one that precedes the section usually focused on. The markings in the top three-quarters of the page are less clearly reminiscent of asemic writing, and so tend to be ignored. Yet they form a progression of their own. They end with a similar approximation to handwriting; but they begin, at the top of the page, with shapes that bear no resemblance to writing, floating in a white space unstabilized by any ground. These vague forms might be equivalent to Flusser's notion of what precedes actual signs on the page: the stage at which thoughts "begin to take a very nebulous shape within me" ("Gesture of Writing" 10). For writing to take place, though, that beginning must be clarified, ordered linearly, and finally translated into signs that carry with them a will of their own: whole histories of use, of connotation, of grammatical strictures. This is the unwieldy material with which the writer must work. Writers can sometimes strike fire from obdurate words; but that is a power of words themselves, and is far removed from the very different power of the space within, or the *dedans*, as Michaux referred to it. *Narration* might then be seen as an attempt to articulate, in the form of a subversive writing system, everything that writing excludes in the process of coming to pass.³

After lines, Michaux tells us, he began to make signs—indeed we have seen that progression on the single page of *Narration*. Yet signs did not allow him to make any progress toward his real goal, which was to give expression to that space within, its strangeness and its truth: "I would gladly make signs, but a sign is also a stop sign," he says (*Emergences* 11)—presumably because it signifies, and terminates in its signification. So when Michaux turned to signs his aim, as stated in *Par des traits*, was to *insignifier*—a coinage that means both to "not-signify" and to "un-signify." This is not a simple negative; the word fuses signification with resistance to it. Michaux desires something more from signs than their assigned meanings: "A continuum. A murmur without end, like life itself" (*Emergences* 11). In an essay published in 1957, he identified this continuum with life in its truest aspect, beyond the categories that language, among other things, imposes on it: "I wanted to draw the moments that, end to end,



NARRATION

Henri Michaux

FIGURE 2.1. Henri Michaux, *Narration*, 1927. Indian ink on paper. Copyright Estate of Henri Michaux / SODRAC. Private collection.

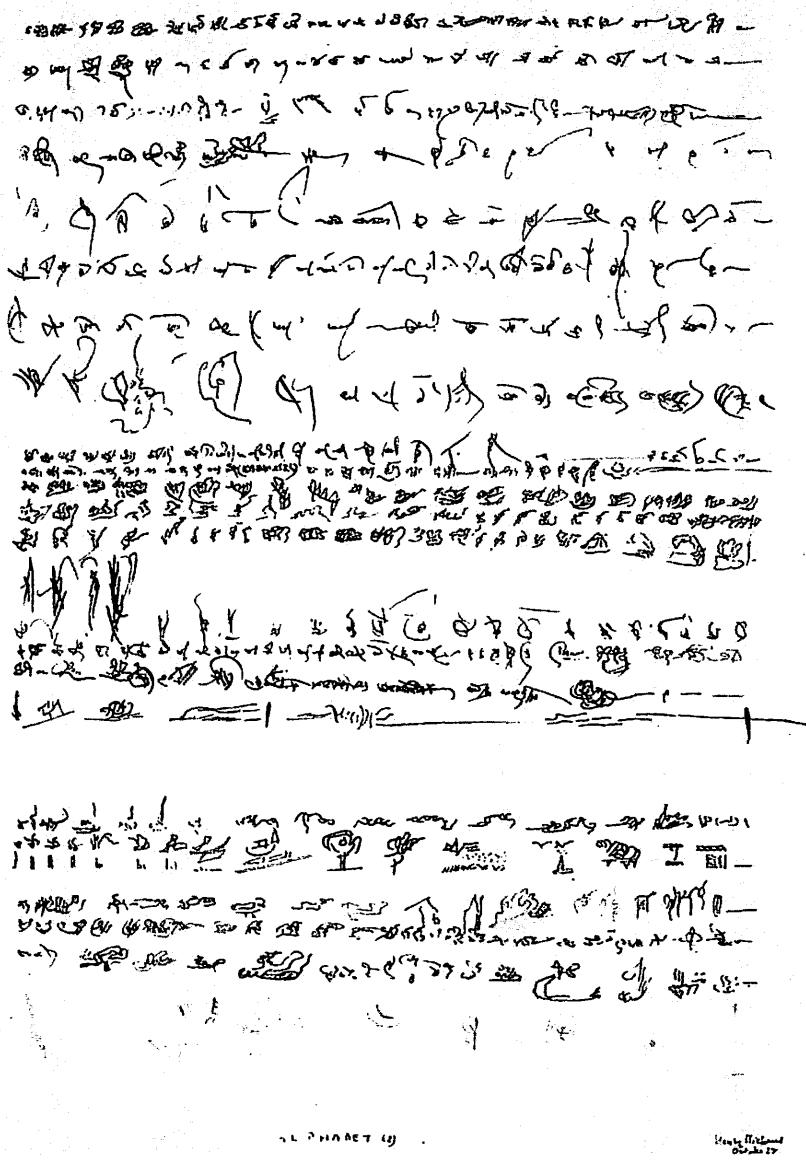


FIGURE 2.2. Henri Michaux, *Alphabet*, 1927. Indian ink on paper. Copyright Estate of Henri Michaux / SODRAC. Private collection.

make up life, to make visible the interior sentence, the sentence without words, the cord that unrolls itself indefinitely, sinuously, and deep within accompanies everything that presents itself, outside as well as inside" ("Dessiner" 197; my translation). The desire for a "sentence without words" led him to an asemic practice that emphasized both continuity and constant change—that is to say, movement.

"I am among those who love movement," Michaux wrote, "the movement that breaks up inertia, that tangles lines, that shakes up alignments, ridding me of construction" (*Emergences* 44). As he continued his experimentation with signs, then, a sense of movement was increasingly manifested in the forms on the page. Expressing neither thoughts nor the letters that claim to convey them, these forms were meant to convey a certain interior *tempo*. That all beings have such a tempo, habitual and native to them, had been confirmed for Michaux in 1956 by a terrifying acceleration in his own tempo during his experiments with mescaline. Before this, though, in the 1951 *Mouvements*, he was already attempting to convey this sense of a movement that is not external but essential.

Mouvements is a book of markings (Figure 2.3), markings that themselves are generated by movements of the hand and accidents of ink. Michaux allowed these to come into being in accordance with unplanned impulses. A long poem at the center of the book describes, in a tumult of imagery, the shapes that resulted from this process: lasso, seaweed, grapnel, electrified larva, crazy stick, and many more surreal images. These category words recognizably apply to specific shapes on the page—which is not surprising, since the words arose from the shapes. However, Michaux habitually refuses, rages against, the categorizing tendencies of language; this refusal generates the excessive, continually shifting imagery of his poem, as well as the shapes on the page. To call them "shapes" is indeed to freeze the element of movement that brought them into being, and that they are meant to express. Rather than shapes, Michaux calls them gestures:

(pre-gestures that one feels, but cannot identify
gestures in oneself, much grander than the visible and practical
gesture to follow) (translation by Bernard Bador and Clayton Eshleman)

The physical gestures depicted on the page merely reflect movements that have preceded them, which are not only movements of the hand but also interior movements. In a brief essay titled “Signes,” Michaux writes:

I have to speak now about my signs. . . . I made thousands of them two years ago [for *Mouvements*]. But were these really signs? They were gestures, interior gestures [*gestes intérieurs*] for which we have no limbs, but only a desire for limbs, ways of stretching [*tensions*], ways of reaching [*élan*], and all of them executed by lively ligaments, never thick, never weighted down with flesh or closed in by skin. (*Oeuvres* 431; translation by Carrie Noland)

Using the language of the body to express something other than the body, Michaux here distinguishes marks on the page that can be read as stable signs from marks that reflect in their form “interior gestures.” These are not a matter of signifiable meaning but of emotion; for emotion impels gesture as its deepest unconscious source. Speaking of gesture, Flusser admits that one of the difficulties with this term is that it covers “a very broad and ill-defined region ranging from sensation through emotion and feeling to include ideas” (“Gesture and Sentimentality” 4). It is notable that emotion occupies a central position on this continuum. Our responses to sensation or perception have an emotional component, which also accompanies the first vague forms of our ideas: “Thinking has its beginning in visuo-kinetic images,” Brian Rotman asserts (22). Such kinetic images are related to emotion, which after all is a word with a kinetic component: it is etymologically connected (through the Latin *ex-movere*) to the idea of a movement outward, indicated in Michaux’s passage by the stretching and reaching movements that express a certain primal desire.

Unsurprisingly, the gestural signs in *Mouvements* are strongly evocative of dance. Before his travels in Asia, Michaux had witnessed dance performances with a stony indifference; the dances that he encountered in Asia, however, were a revelation: “The corset fell,” as he puts it (“Danse” 697). Not that he considered himself a dancer, but he saw in dance a powerful expression of what he was striving to attain in other media. Dance embodied his lifelong attempt—intense and at times desperate—to free himself from restrictive conventions in order to break through into a realm beyond them:

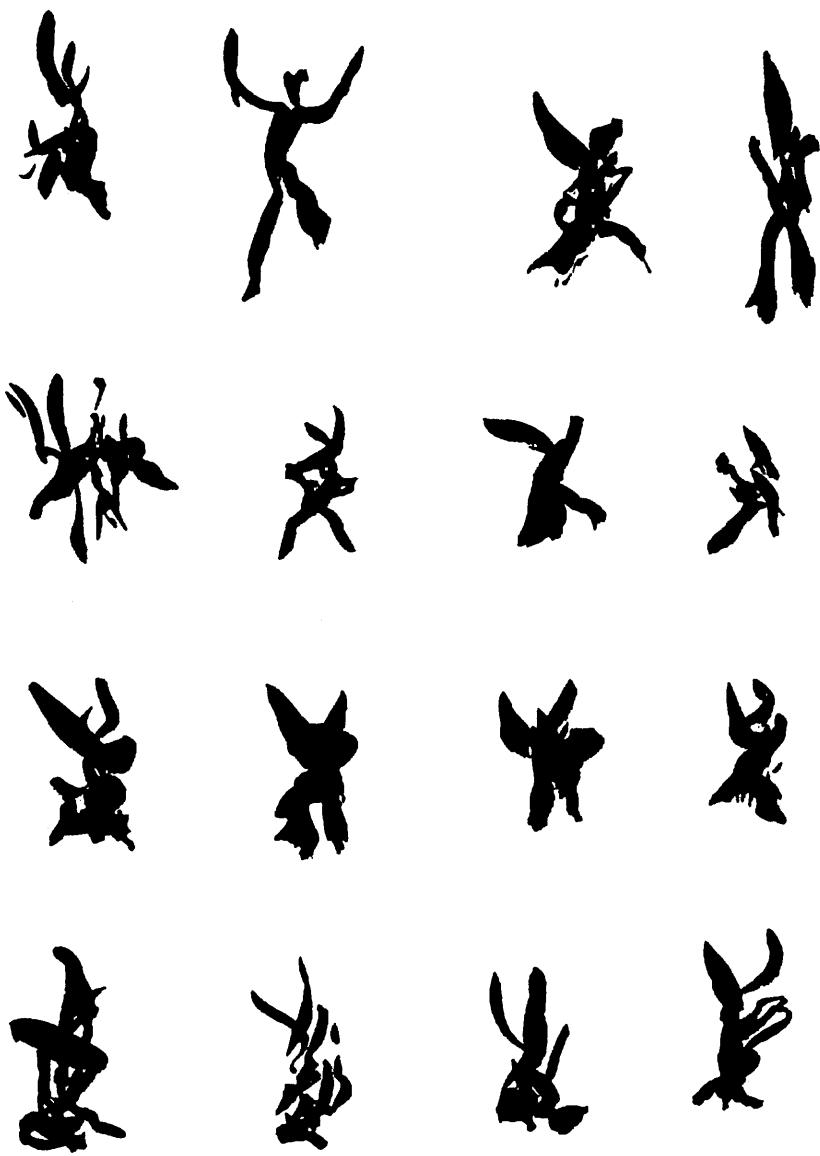


FIGURE 2.3. Henri Michaux, from *Mouvements*, 1951/1982. Copyright Éditions Gallimard.

In many dances, the body performs figures of liberation. This weighty object destined to fall back heavily at every moment wants only to soar, to liberate itself. It is in fact to the dancing body that one returns in order to know what it means to be free. ("Danse" 698; my translation)

Dance is made up of visuo-kinetic images, to use Rotman's terminology. These not only communicate through various kinds of motions (including at times complete immobility) but also convey experiences that are essentially emotional. Thus the question often asked by an audience member bewildered by contemporary dance, "What does it mean?" is the wrong question, for the answer has already been conveyed directly to the brain and even the body of the viewer, bypassing the rational centers.⁴ In a sense, then, dance is asemic. Viewing dance as asemic allows us to see in it a resolution of Michaux's desire to find a continuum that would take him beyond signs that are "stop signs." Certainly dance can be viewed as a sequence of signs, and even as a continually unrolling sentence: Mallarmé called dance a "corporal writing" (*une écriture corporelle*; 107). If there are affinities, though, there are also significant differences. Marie-Aude Pacreau comments as follows on the calligraphy of *Mouvements* and the choreography of dance:

There is in these two arts—dance and calligraphic poetry—a similar defiance of form, a similar desire to attack it in order to expand it to infinity. But where dance immediately disintegrates before the spectator, writing inscribes itself in duration, even if there can be no two readings of "Mouvements" that are the same. . . . Dance collapses the distance between life and art more easily than writing, for the body resists the "stickiness" of words that Michaux deplored (*contre la colle*). The body doesn't aspire to fix itself in a form: it is a succession of ways of being. In the sign of a movement, signified and signifier join. (quoted in Parish, *Henri Michaux* 301; my translation)

This may hold if one is considering dance movements as signs; but the reverse of this—signs for dance movements—is much more problematic, as evidenced by the difficulty of creating systems of notation adequate to the dance, systems whose signs at times evoke asemic pages.⁵ Upon discovering a copy of *Mouvements*, the Canadian choreographer Marie Chouinard was inspired to

treat it almost like a book of dance notations; and she created a major work by the same name. Her dancers, dressed in black, perform on a white floor against a white screen on which are projected Michaux's drawings; at moments the dancers' bodies form lines equivalent to the lines of those drawings before their movements continue (numerous clips from this work can be found online).

However much Michaux wanted to depict an interior movement preceding the sign, that depiction could be accomplished only through a species of sign. In work published years later he asks, "Who could, wholly, escape from signs?" (*Grasp* n.p.)—signs that he also describes as "my first and foremost quest" (*Emergences* 76). His work, then, exhibits a tension, a straining against the limits of signs while at the same time revealing their nature. The markings in *Mouvements* may reach into space, may evoke movement both exterior and interior. Yet many of the book's pages are laid out in a regular grid, with signs isolated from one another in space. This arrangement is reminiscent of illustrations found in Chinese writing manuals or studies of Paleolithic pictographs; Michaux's library included examples of both. He had also used a grid to lay out his 1944 series of "alphabets." Such an arrangement evokes conventional signs and the matrix by which they are disciplined and ordered; at the same time the signs pull in a completely contrary direction through their vitality, unpredictability, and sense of motion. The tension is deliberate: "What is a resemblance without a dissemblance?" Michaux asks (*Grasp* n.p.). This applies, of course, to asemic writing as a whole.

In his 1979 book *Saisir*, translated by Richard Sieburth as *Grasp*, Michaux gives us perhaps his most insightful thoughts on the significance of this sort of tension. He starts by describing the project he had in mind before he made the first marks: to make a kind of bestiary. During the process of doing this, certain animals elude him, and others turn up more and more frequently, with insects coming to dominate. What is being represented on the page, though, is at odds with a certain perverse resistance in the artist. It is this tension that becomes the real subject of his artistry, and of the words that accompany it. One word in particular sums it up: *saisir*, translated as "grasp." For Michaux, this becomes a profoundly ambiguous word:

My various efforts to maintain a grasp, to seize on things, soon aggravated my oppositional bent and the more I was determined to draw an animal the more I would refuse it. My desire to "render" these animals

worked at cross-purposes with a whole series of refusals—refusal of representation, refusal to make them resemble, refusal to submit myself to resemblance in general, refusal to see myself as alike. . . . Without knowing it, without even noticing it for a long time, I was returning back to the primordial split of “yes” vs. “no,” of acceptance vs. the horror of acceptance. (n.p.)

This split or tension becomes more interesting than Michaux's original aim of depicting animals or insects, as he takes his cues from what emerges on the page:

Images at once displayed, negated and erased.

Weren't they more complete this way, more satisfying?

That's how it felt to me.

My proposed nomenclature was falling by the wayside, into oblivion.

Wanting as I did to grasp these insects, grasping had become the main thing, grasping being something that does not come naturally to me (a late acquisition), grasping having as its contrary “contemplation,” disinclination, an attitude of reserve.

In the end, GRASPING was nothing more than a dynamic, an abstract kind of grasp, or tending toward that. (n.p.)

This abstract quality reflects a fascination, never to be fully resolved, with the very process of sign making.

Signs *are* graspings: not that they can actually seize that which they claim to stand in for, but, rather, they are graspings *at*. They will never attain the goal toward which they strive, which is something ineluctably other than signs. Yet signs are our only tools for expressing something that at least points to that other. If Michaux is clear about his distrust of signs—a distrust that sometimes erupts into sheer rage—he also values what they can do, even if that is not everything:

Signs, not for being complete
but for being faithful to the transitory
not for conjugating
but for regaining the gift of tongues
one's own at least, for, if not oneself, who will speak it?

That is how Michaux put it in *Mouvements* (n.p.). In *Grasp* he now exclaims, “To seize a situation via signs, amazing! What a transformation!” After a few pages of signs, he continues:

Nothing expresses a situation more soberly, more astonishingly, more magically than a few signs assembled together, even if the situation be completely ordinary and familiar and then turn fantastic, outlandish—and be reconsidered. (n.p.)

It is by leading one to this reconsidering that signs can have value—if they are signs that are themselves reconsidered, remade, beyond the standard and consequently imprisoning signs that close us in.

Michaux’s attitude toward signs is emotional, a combination of rage and desperation as he tries to get past the conventional expectations of the page to something that he himself does not yet know. More than an emotional attitude, though, it is a philosophical one. Michaux is not so much focused on bringing an artistic project to completion as he is on what happens to him during the process of sign making. A large part of what he writes consists of descriptions of his creative process, one that is truly experimental, since he is willing to follow not just a single line but the whole process as it takes him into unknown territory. As with Schendel and her dialogue with Flusser, we have here another instance of the artist as an unsystematized (but for that very reason subtler) version of the philosopher. Near the end of *Grasp*, Michaux sums up what he is taking away from the process that began with the plan for a bestiary and now has become a study of what it means to grasp something, anything:

To grasp while abstracting yourself ever more, to grasp the tendency, the accent, the pace, the space. To grasp the underlying. (n.p.)

What began in particulars has ended in abstractions, a trajectory that is surely at the core of philosophy. The abstractions in this case include the thinker, who watches himself move beyond his “personality” and into a process that is in a sense inhuman: what Michaux here calls “the underlying” (*ce qui sous-tend*). That process is described as an abstract mental movement, with no particular content: “the tendency, the accent, the pace, the space.” And yet Michaux as-

pires to “grasp” this movement—by which he does not mean to “understand.” He makes this plain in a simple equivalence: “Grasp: translate.”

This is immediately after he has asked “Who could, wholly, escape from signs?” It is through signs, then, that Michaux attempts to translate “the underlying,” that which is beyond our usual perceptions, and our usual words. These are themselves translations, inadequate ones, though they are not generally recognized as such. Yet, Michaux asserts, “everything is translation at every level, in every direction.” This is *already* the case. It is the artist’s task, then, to make this evident; to resist the inadequacy of our accepted translations of reality; and to strive for new translations, “ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds” (Wallace Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West”). This is also the philosopher’s task: “I am convinced,” says Vilém Flusser, “that the problem of translation is the central epistemological problem” (“Gesture of Writing” 11). Asemic signs, precisely because they defy translation, allow us to let go of conventional words and to grasp, or to grasp at, something that would otherwise elude us. They fulfill Michaux’s aim “to make visible the interior sentence, the sentence without words, the cord that unrolls itself infinitely, sinuously, and deep within accompanies everything that presents itself, outside as well as inside” (“Dessiner”).

Roland Barthes and *Contre-écriture*

The span of Roland Barthes’s life (1915–1980) was contained within that of Henri Michaux (1899–1984); both lived in Paris and moved in its intellectual and artistic circles. Yet there is no evidence that they ever met. Certainly Barthes knew of Michaux’s work: in a 1980 interview he called him one of his *ainés*, or elders (“Lectures de l’enfance” 1249); and as early as 1944 Barthes had included Michaux among his favorite poets (Calvet 55). Michaux’s greatest influence on Barthes, though, may have been on his art.

A “Sunday painter,” Barthes called himself, but his painting was hardly confined to Sundays. His workplace was not complete, he said, unless it included a place to write, a place to play the piano, and a place to paint (“Almost Obsessive Relation” 180). So whether in Paris or in the country, his workplaces were laid out exactly the same—which, he once joked, showed that he was good structuralist. At his death in 1980 more than five hundred of his works were willed to

Romeric Sulger-Buel, to whom many of them were inscribed. Sulger-Buel later donated much of that collection to the Centre Pompidou. The works have been featured in a number of exhibits, some during Barthes's lifetime, some posthumously. Barthes never did an oil painting, preferring lighter, more spontaneous media: gouache, crayon, pen and ink. Like Michaux, Barthes believed in letting the work evolve almost of its own accord, in compliance with its materiality: ink blots, unconscious squiggles, a method akin to that of gesture painting or doodling. Whether it is the method or Michaux that accounts for it, the graphic works of the two men often look quite similar. Indeed, at times Barthes seems to be directly imitating his predecessor: an untitled drawing of March 19, 1972 (Figure 2.4), is clearly indebted to Michaux's 1951 *Mouvements* (Figure 2.3). Most significant for the present study is the fact that both Barthes and Michaux executed works that represent writing.

In 1976 a selection of Barthes's *contre-écritures*, as he called them, was published in a special issue of the journal *Luna-Park* titled "Graphies" (Dachy) (Figure 2.5). His work appeared alongside that of artists now recognized as significant figures in the development of asemic writing, such as Christian Dotrement, Mirtha Dermisache, and Brion Gysin. His author's note read, in its entirety: "If my graphisms are illegible, it is precisely in order to say No to commentary." Barthes's hostility, I would suggest, is not based in the fact that commentary opens his personal work to the critiques of others. Rather, it is a response to commentary's fundamental nature. For commentary endlessly extends language; it is in the service of an impossible quest to extract the last, the final, drop of meaning. Barthes had learned instead to bypass meaning in order to unlock the power of the illegible. He had learned this from Michaux, but also from others.

In his essay about the abstract series of ten letters that were the final works of the painter Bernard Réquichot, Barthes refers to "a special semiography (already practiced by Klee, Ernst, Michaux, and Picasso): illegible writing" ("Réquichot" 220). And the month before he died Barthes wrote his "Note sur un album de photographies de Lucien Clergue," in which he refers to "recent painters of Trace, Michaux, Masson, Twombly." Trace, he explains, is "an intermediate sign, or unfulfilled, or overfulfilled [suraccompli], a transitory clue about who-knows-what" (1204; my translation). These descriptions could readily apply to asemic writing, especially given the painters he cites, who all produced



FIGURE 2.4. Untitled drawing by Roland Barthes, 1972.

me faire) — mais pas au jeu

FIGURE 2.5. Roland Barthes, *Contre-écriture*.

work of that type. Another significant influence was Mirtha Dermisache (Figure 2.6), who might have been to Barthes something like what Mira Schendel was to Flusser, had they lived in the same city. On March 28, 1971, Barthes wrote to Dermisache what can only be described as a fan letter:

Mr. Hugo Santiago was kind enough to show me your graphics notebook. Let me just tell you how impressed I am, not only for the highly artistic quality of your strokes (which is not irrelevant) but also, and especially, for the extreme intelligence of the theoretical problems related to writing that your work entails. You have managed to produce a certain number of shapes, neither figurative nor abstract, that could be defined as illegible writing—leading to suggest to its readers, not messages nor even the contingent forms of expression, but the idea, the essence of writing. Nothing is more difficult to produce than an essence, i.e., a shape that refers to its own definition. Haven't Japanese artists devoted a lifetime to learn how to draw a circle that does not refer to anything but the idea of the circle itself? Your work is akin to that requirement. I fervently wish that you may continue and publish it. Please receive my best wishes for success, particularly in your work, and my most cordial feelings. (Letter)

Upon receiving this letter, Dermisache—who had never heard of Barthes—went out and bought a copy of *Writing Degree Zero*. After reading it, she was inspired to write a book of her own that, like her other books, contained not a single word (Durgin). Barthes's practice of illegible writing, then, connects to a number of studies he made of others who practiced it, studies that make us aware of the role played in writing by the material, graphic element.

For Barthes, writing was a sensual act. There is a certain “pleasure of the text” in the physicality with which words emerge from under the hand; and consequently in the pen that is held in the hand and supplies the flow of ink.⁶ In a 1973 interview, Barthes confessed:

I have an almost obsessive relation to writing instruments. I often switch from one pen to another just for the pleasure of it. I try out new ones. I have far too many pens—I don't know what to do with all of them! And yet, as soon as I see a new one, I start craving it. I cannot keep myself from buying them.

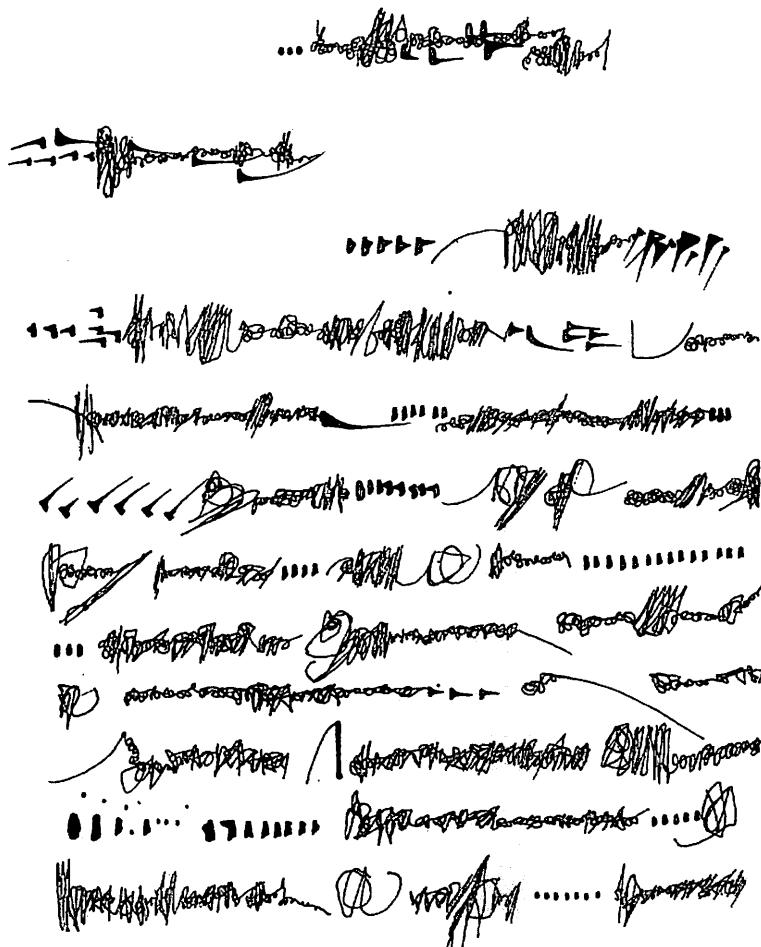


FIGURE 2.6. Mirtha Dermisache (1940–2012, Argentina), *Carta*, 1970. Courtesy Archivo Mirtha Dermisache, Buenos Aires, 2018.

When felt-tipped pens first appeared in the stores, I bought a lot of them. (The fact that they were originally from Japan was not, I admit, displeasing to me.) Since then I've gotten tired of them, because the point flattens out too quickly. I've also used pen nibs—not the "Sergeant-Major," which is too dry, but softer nibs, like the "J." In short, I've tried everything . . . except Bics, with which I feel absolutely no affinity. I would even say, a bit nastily, that there is a "Bic style," which is really just for churning out copy, writing that merely transcribes thought. ("Almost Obsessive Relation" 178)

But wait—is it not the purpose of writing to transcribe thought? So it is generally assumed; and if it is generally assumed, it comes to be accepted without question. This is the nature of *myth* as Barthes had defined it nearly twenty years earlier. In the same interview Barthes says:

Putting things on the most material level, I would even say the most minimal level possible . . . is an anti-mythological action: it contributes to the overturning of that old myth which continues to present language as the instrument of thought, inwardness, passion, or whatever, and consequently presents writing as a simple instrumental practice. (177)

This resistant view of writing appears as well in "Variations sur l'écriture," which Barthes had written that same year but which was not published during his lifetime. It opens with his clarification that the term *écriture* is not to be taken in its usual sense. "Today . . . it is to the manual sense of the word that I would like to come, it is 'scription' (the muscular act of writing, of tracing letters) that interests me" (1535; translation by Neil Badmington). That interest held to the last year of Barthes's life, when similar preoccupations emerge at one point in his lecture courses titled "The Preparation of the Novel." Barthes is here interested in the speed of writing, and whether that is related to an author's "style." The evidence indicates, for instance, that

Proust wrote very quickly by hand, and the whole of his oeuvre owes much to that muscular facility. Proust was aware (letter to Robert Dreyfus, 1888) that he wrote at a *gallop*. The "gallop" presupposes a kind of asymptotic rapprochement of the manual (the muscles) and the mental (the affective): the hand seems plugged directly into the mental. (265)

This speedy writing is contrasted to slow writing and its reasons (e.g., excessive superego, a need to inscribe words deeply). These speculations encourage Barthes to risk a definition of the work as a “*kinetic relationship between the head and the hand*” (265).⁷ In this relationship the head does not automatically have priority: it may be dictated to by the hand quite as readily as the other way around. Yet the hand, the pen, the paper, “muscular facility,” and the sense of the writer’s body⁸—these have been rendered all but invisible in considerations of a writer’s work.

Another neglected element of writing is color:

To be examined: coloured writings—the few of them that exist. Colour is impulse; we are afraid to sign our messages with it; that is why we write black [*nous écrivons noir*]; we only allow ourselves well-ordered, flatly emblematic exceptions: blue for distinction, red for correction.

Any change of colour [*toute saute de couleur*] is particularly incongruous: can you imagine yellow, pink, or even grey missives? (“Variations” 1562–63; Badmington’s translation)

Apparently Barthes had no trouble imagining this—his own inks were downright voluptuous:

Thursday, March 9 [1978], fine afternoon, I go out to buy some colors (Sennelier inks) → bottles of pigment: following my taste for the names (golden yellow, sky blue, brilliant green, purple, sun yellow, cartham pink—a rather intense pink), I buy sixteen bottles. (*The Neutral 48*; translation modified)

Beyond his personal predilections, Barthes imagines “books in red-brown, in forest green, in Indian blue”; and he goes on to wonder whether this change in color would also change the meaning of the words (“Variations” 1563; Badmington’s translation). This introduction of color into writing brings it closer to painting.

Indeed, Barthes contests the notion that painting and writing are fundamentally different: “Nothing separates writing (which we believe communicates) from painting (which we believe expresses): both consist of the same tissue” (“Réquichot” 220–21). So in *Empire of Signs* he reproduces a Japanese ink drawing with a two-sentence caption:

Where does the writing begin?

Where does the painting begin? (21)

The point is not to arrive at an answer but to throw into question our usual distinctions. Barthes wants to fuse these distinctions into a single word—*graphism*—which he applies to his own asemic writing. André Masson's ideograms, among other artistic productions, exemplify this fusion for Barthes:

Masson's work during this period demonstrates that the identity of written and painted features is not contingent, marginal, baroque . . . but somehow persisted in, obsessive, including both the origin and the perpetual present of any *drawn line*: which is that of an undifferentiated "graphism." ("Masson" 154)

These visual and muscular aspects of writing are generally obscured by the primacy of writing's communicative function. We see the message, we see what the writing means, but we do not see the writing. Consequently Barthes can assert, with no sense of paradox, "*for writing to be manifest in its truth* (and not in its instrumentality), *it must be illegible*" ("Masson" 155). In this way the graphic element is allowed to reclaim its primacy.

And yet any such illegible writing carries with it the shadow of the legible. This is the point of a passage to be found in *All Except You*, Barthes's book on Saul Steinberg. That book, like others by Barthes, is composed of a number of fragmented observations, each with its own heading. Here is what he says under the heading of "Illegible":

As with many other objects, Steinberg submits handwriting to a principle of *similitude*: he produces similitudes of writing. However, writing is not an object like others: its substance is, if not transparent, purely instrumental, or at least always significant: writing cannot exist without carrying a meaning: either it directly refers to a message, or it refers indirectly to a psychological disposition: it is an object that imperatively *signifies*, more than the spoken word which sometimes, by cries rhythms and vocalizations, simply *expresses*. In scrupulously imitating this object without allowing it a shadow of utility, Steinberg makes of meaning a "vicious" machine (which fundamentally it perhaps always is); meaning becomes at the same time a furious urge (you want at all costs to deci-

pher) and a deception without closure (there is nothing to decipher: you know this, but you persist). (22)

Even in the heart of the illegible, then, there is a perverse persistence, a compulsion to find meaning. Let me now yield briefly to that compulsion.

Barthes's asemic works defy decoding. Yet if they do not signify, these signs may nevertheless be significant. Barthes often treated these evocations of handwriting just as one would treat conventionally written notes. Romaric Sulger-Buel speaks of "these *contre-lettres*, slid under my door, or given during our encounters at Rue Servandoni, at Florence, or while traveling" (personal communication, November 6, 2011; my translation). Not to get too earnest about all this, I must first stress that they are playful. They are also affectionate, amorous even: addressed to his lover, they may be a way of overcoming the problem expressed in his book *A Lover's Discourse*: "Love has of course a complicity with my language (which maintains it) but it cannot be *lodged* in my writing" (98). And so it is conveyed in these asemic notes that say nothing and everything.

Something more is at stake here, connected with Barthes's sense of himself as a homosexual within a system that defines him above all through language. Language, he says, is "the controlled exchange on which the semantic process and collective life are based" (*Roland Barthes* 63). Harold Beaver, in his fine essay "Homosexual Signs," asserts that consequently "the fundamental ethical problem is this: to recognize signs wherever they are, not to mistake them for natural phenomena, and to proclaim rather than conceal them" (100). Barthes's asemic writing is such a proclaiming. As early as *Mythologies*, Barthes wrote: "Language is never anything but a system of forms, and the meaning is a form" (133). So a resistance to meaning itself is called for—to meaning's claims to be natural, and consequently to be the rock-solid foundation on which our collective lives are built. The kind of resistance that Barthes advocates is not readily identifiable as political action, transgression, subversion, or revolution. "What is difficult," he writes, "is not to liberate sexuality according to a more or less libertarian project but to release it from meaning, including from transgression as meaning" (*Roland Barthes* 133).

The way toward this release seems to be modeled, for Barthes, on Zen practice. He had been introduced to Zen by reading Alan Watts's book on the subject, and through two trips to Japan. Barthes's book *Empire of Signs* celebrates

Japan—or rather, as he admits, a “symbolic system” called by that name, and which he has had a hand in defining. It is defined above all by its exemption from meaning. “The West moistens everything with meaning,” Barthes complained; his trips to Japan offered him a way out. This was not only because “the murmuring mass of an unknown language constitutes a delicious protection” to the visitor (9). Beyond this aural asemic, Barthes sees the delivery from meaning everywhere in this culture, in its most disparate aspects: in literature (“the haiku’s task is to achieve exemption from meaning”; 81); in the Bunraku puppet show (“here again we come to that exemption from meaning”; 62); in the ceremonial bow (which “glorifies . . . not meaning but the inscription of meaning”; 68). So the signs of this Barthesian version of Japan do not signify anything other than themselves; there is no possibility that through them any meaning will be fulfilled. Instead, these signs make possible something more valuable, which Barthes calls *the interstice*. The lacy appearance of tempura is described as “*the interstice without specific edges, or again: the empty sign*” (26). And presented with ikebana, the art of flower arranging, “you can move your body into the interstice of its branches, into the space of its stature, not in order to *read* it (to read its symbolism) but to follow the trajectory of the hand which has written it: a true writing” (45). His ignorance of the Japanese language allows Barthes to inhabit the truth of writing: “I live in the interstice” (9).

The lure of a communicative fulfillment, then, is not so much resisted as completely ignored in this construction of Japan. Here we find no “desperate filling-in of any nullity which might reveal the emptiness of language” (70), as happens in the West. There, writing is seen as the “transcription” of articulated language (“Masson” 155), though it is evidently different from it; and language in its turn is viewed as the custodian of meaning. But if that is the case, language cannot itself be the meaning that it purportedly conveys. Meaning must be something different from either writing or language. And until we have separated writing, language, and meaning from each other we have little hope of understanding the nature of any one of them. It is Barthes’s aim in this book to make us understand that separation, a separation that has already been accomplished in his Japan, with no fuss whatsoever. In contrast, the West adopts the most remarkable contortions to preserve the sense of fulfillment to be found in meaning. Emptiness itself is made to become meaningful: the paramount example being silence, which becomes “the sign of language’s fulfillment” (71).

If neither language nor silence delivers us from the claims of meaning, what other options do we have? Barthes writes:

It is not a question of halting language on a heavy, full, profound, mystical silence, or even on an emptiness of the soul which would be open to divine communication (Zen knows no God); what is posited must develop neither in discourse nor in the end of discourse; what is posited is *matte*, and all that one can do with it is to scrutinize it. (*Empire* 74)

Matte is a curious term, perhaps akin to *le neutre*, the topic of Barthes's seminar of 1977–78. He uses the term again a few pages further on in a dense passage invoking Zen satori as

“awakening to the fact,” apprehension of the thing as event and not as substance, attaining to that anterior shore of language, contiguous to the . . . *matteness* of the adventure (what happens to language, rather than to the subject). (78)

This passage occurs in a discussion of the Japanese haiku, the origin and anchoring point of these abstruse ruminations. Let me try to unpack the points being made here. I will begin with what the haiku is *not*. It is not substance, and it is not subject. Barthes is here implicitly criticizing a notion of the subject that attributes substance to it: not material substance, of course, but a conceptual substance—that is, a meaning that can be attributed to the subject and that sums it up. In the West this is reflected in phrases like “the meaning of my life” or “the kind of person I am.” Such phrases promise a fulfillment, and moreover one that can be expressed in language. What is ignored, and is central to Zen practice, is an awareness of emptiness—and in particular, for Barthes, an awareness of the emptiness of language. Referencing Zen again, Barthes writes, “Writing is, after all, in its way, a *satori*: . . . it creates *an emptiness of language*. And it is also an emptiness of language which constitutes writing” (*Empire* 4). So without the gloss of meaning (in more than one sense of *gloss*) we are left with a *matte* surface, neutral and factual, which is the “retrospective, reconstituted” result of a certain use of language. That use differs from the usual attempt to communicate a meaning, or even an emotion that is the property of an individual subject. Neither of these obtains in the haiku: Barthes scathingly

dismisses attempts to read its objects as symbolic. Rather, an object in a haiku is presented only as itself; and the haiku's language is also presented only as itself. Now, what is this "itself"? The defining characteristic of this "selfhood" in both cases is not a fulfillment but an opening into emptiness. The haiku evokes the "anterior shore of language"—anterior to our understanding of language as a tool of our understanding, a means to communicate a meaning that is owned beforehand by the writer.

In many respects what Barthes asserts of haiku is also true of those modest "doodles," as he once called them, that make up his asemic works; and it is also true of the art he admired and wrote about. Of Réquichot's last letters, Barthes says, "All this super-writing, a meaningless scribbling, opens out on oblivion" ("Réquichot" 221). It is "super-writing" because it is writing in its essence, no longer upstaged by the claims of meaning. Through these works we can see writing for what it always was: a kind of scribbling. Nor is that word intended to denigrate. Asemic writing gives us something that normal writing too easily ignores. It evokes the physicality of the hand that creates the line, or that follows it blindly, as Derrida has asserted in *Memoirs of the Blind*. Akin to drawing, these works open to an oblivion, an emptiness, that is the ultimate and unknowable source of our writing, our words, and our concepts: the whiteness of the blank page is its material equivalent. Out of this nothing comes something, and we seize upon it and call it our own. But let us not blind ourselves to the emptiness that interpenetrates that something, whatever it may be.

Barthes, who founded his career on the analysis of signs, grew increasingly aware of the hollowness of their claims to meaning. If we follow his lead we will want to strip signs—all signs, and not just homosexual ones—of their claims to be natural, to define, and even to pass themselves off as thought itself. We will want to do this, and we will fail—just as we fail to resist the lure of significance in Steinberg's illegible writing. And that is not so bad. The Zen state of satori, which frees one from meaning and from self, is attainable only in flashes. But an awareness of what lies beyond our familiar structures of meaning may keep us from having our life scripts written according to an already existent system of signs. Meaning and nonmeaning combine in writing's system, as well as everything that follows from it. Remembering this, being aware of it not just as a theory but in our very bloodstream, is going to make our lives much more—in many senses of this word—queer.

Cy Twombly: Writing with the Left Hand

If we are going to consider Cy Twombly as an asemic painter, in any sense, the first thing we must face is the very prominent role played in his work by legible letters. An extreme example is *Virgil* (Plate 1). Superficially, it consists only of the name on a white ground. It is a name, however, that carries with it a freight of cultural associations: “By writing *Virgil* on his canvas, it’s as if Twombly were condensing in his handwriting the very immensity of the Virgilian world, all the references of which this name is the repository” (Barthes, “Wisdom of Art” 180). Mary Jacobus, in her treatment of this painting, has unfolded a multitude of such references. These are not merely intellectual footnotes, but carry with them complex emotions: melancholy, tranquility, a sense of transience but also of transcendence. For Twombly, living in Rome and immersed in Mediterranean culture, Virgil’s name alone can evoke all this.

Yet this is not a painting of Virgil’s name alone—if indeed such a thing is even possible. For a name to exist it must always be embodied in a certain materiality, whether of sound if it is spoken or of graphism if it is written. And the graphic form that it takes here is significant. Had Twombly used Roman square capitals, the effect of this work would be very different: elegant, monumental, stable, culturally prestigious. Here the spindly capital letters are uneven, as is the ground on which they are set. They reveal not the letters “alone,” but also the idiosyncrasies of the hand that has drawn them. Unstable, they lean forward; there is a sense of motion to the right, or perhaps of yearning. An ambiguous background of beige-gray, coming to the fore like a sandstorm, blurs the outlines of the letters. They are semi-obliterated to various degrees, with the *L* of *VIRGIL* at the right being the least affected, and the initial *V* half erased. Yet an erasure is not an absence, though it may become the sign of an absence. So “the vapor wrought by erasers” (Fioretos 8) takes on the characteristics of an atmosphere, the same “cloudy atmosphere of off-white and gray,” as Jacobus describes it (174), that serves as background for the inscribed letters. But atmosphere is more than that: Barthes refers to “the indeterminate and inexhaustible total of reasons, pulsions, and indolences which surround the action with an atmosphere” (“Cy Twombly” 160). The action here is the writing of Virgil’s name; and atmosphere is the antithesis of that inscription, an antithesis out of which the name emerges and to which it returns. Atmosphere

is in itself a nameless thing, but to the degree that it can be represented at all, it is represented in Twombly's work by whiteness.

Whiteness was from the start recognized as an important aspect of what Twombly was doing. After Twombly had moved to Italy, the poet Emilio Villa wrote a poem about him that began "Cy is / white talent" (35).⁹ At about the same time (1957), Twombly wrote about his use of whiteness in the Italian magazine *L'esperienza moderna*:

The reality of whiteness may exist in the duality of sensation (as the multiple anxiety of desire and fear).

Whiteness can be the classic state of the intellect, or a neo-romantic area of remembrance—or as the symbolic whiteness of Mallarmé.

The exact implication may never be analyzed, but in that it persists as the landscape of my actions, it must imply more than selection. (quoted in Varnedoe 27)

Fifty years later, in an interview by Nicholas Serota, Twombly somewhat incoherently linked whiteness to the page before it is marked: "I like white. . . . It's not closed. And I think psychologically it's like there's no beginning or end. Then the painting doesn't have a centre—it comes in one side and goes out the other. And so white is that . . . And I'm also a draughtsman so writing in white is almost impossible. Write in grey, in red or anything else. So it's the piece of paper; and you can write in it or do what you want. Bruise it or . . ." (52). The sensations that accompany one's first approach to a blank page or canvas lurk behind a cryptic sentence in the Italian article: "The reality of whiteness may exist in the duality of sensation (as the multiple anxiety of desire and fear)." This combination of desire and fear is precisely the emotion that one can feel before the demands of an empty creative space.

Immediately after his comments on whiteness in the Serota interview, Twombly says, "That was for a long time. Then came all the colour." Color, though, is not necessarily the opposite of whiteness in Twombly's work. For one thing, his whiteness is not flat but vital, pulsing with implications of depth and, yes, color. In 1962 Gillo Dorfles observed that the vast whitenesses of Twombly's canvases "have the power of colour and matter and are actually the 'fullest' part of the picture" (65).¹⁰

We would seem to have strayed quite a bit from the question of the asemic

aspects of Twombly's work. Yet the power of that work arises to a large degree from the relationship between what is never a mere backdrop and the signs inscribed upon it, whether these are legible words or illegible scrawls or something between. "Something between" might in fact describe the effect of asemic writing, which holds out the promise of the legible and at the same moment denies it. Twombly does something similar. Even when his markings produce a recognizable word, one is aware that this legibility is tenuous, provisional, and liable at any moment to dissolve into illegibility, or whiteness. If this is true of the capital letters of *Virgil*, it is even more true of Twombly's cursive. He adopted various techniques to resist a writing that fell all too easily into the sureness and control of a lifetime's training. While in the army, he made himself draw in the dark; and from about 1957, according to Robert Pincus-Witten, "fearing slickness, he drew as if with his left hand. To avoid striking the surface straight-on, he drew in oblique and contorted angles, punitively disciplining his linear seductiveness" (59). Barthes takes the simile of left-handedness further, identifying Twombly's marking practice as "gauche." This is partly because of the deliberately clumsy element in his inscriptions, but most of all because of an attitude that is opposed to the whole notion of writing "right" for purposes of clarity and communication. The "gauche" or the "lefty," Barthes says, "is a kind of blind man: he doesn't quite see the direction, the bearing of his gestures; only his hand guides him, or that hand's desire, not its instrumental aptitude" ("Cy Twombly" 163).¹¹ The result is a precarious inscriptive practice, emerging out of a sea of white that makes these scrawled signs seem poignantly fragile. For Villa, in his poem about Twombly, it is

not a field with words
not a field without words,
not a field with or without,
but that only which is touched

in the sharp white net,
.... on a field of ineffable manifestations. (35)

At about this same time the critic and curator Palma Bucarelli wrote a note for Twombly's exhibition at the Galleria del Cavallino in Venice, which read in part:

On the remote trail of a memory that seeks at the back of the mind, at the limits of consciousness, vague feelings imprinted, in time, who knows when, in the sediment of sensations, the sign sharpens, stiffens, passes hesitantly, reaches the edge, continues beyond in invisible space the fleeting conversation.

... Poor, tenuous signs count for nothing, you can lay on a coat of whitewash, the voices fade now truly dead, the surface is white, everything is ready to begin again. (44)

These signs need not be writing, whether actual or allusive. *The Age of Alexander*, for instance, includes among its various signs geometrical shapes, scribbles, fragmented phrases (“sempre,” “why,” “sad flight”), doodled airplanes and submarines, numbers, small rectangles, and the date: “1959 into 1960,” the New Year’s holiday during which the painting was done, but also referencing the birth of Twombly’s son Alessandro in December. This “journal canvas,” as Jacobus calls it (38), measures nearly ten feet by sixteen feet. The signs that cover it, though, are on such a small scale that they are scarcely visible on a reproduction of the whole painting; they are mere fleeting episodes on a resonant ground of white.

Putting to one side other aspects of Twombly’s practice, such as the “stain”—which Jacobus maintains “is also a textual residue” (175), without going into detail about this assertion—we will turn now to a more recognizably asemic work by Twombly, the series of thirty-eight drawings titled *Letter of Resignation*. The set is dated 1967, but numbers XVI, XIX, and XXI were begun in 1959, the same year that he executed a related series, *Poems to the Sea*. They are all done in the same format: a roughly ten-by-ten-inch square, not the more common rectangular format for letters. The “resignation” is presumably triggered by a frustration and anger that vents itself physically, in the violent, agitated movement of the pencil on the page. The emotion is beyond words, and so then is the writing. The marks on the page no longer make up a controlled and articulate communication, but revert to their primal form as drawing.

The *Letter of Resignation*, and the emotions that accompany it, may have their origin in the hostile reception given to Twombly’s series *Nine Discourses on Commodus* when it was exhibited in 1964 at the Leo Castelli Gallery in New

York. The most scathing review was Donald Judd's dismissal: "Twombly has not shown for some time, and this adds to the fiasco. In these paintings there are a couple of swirls of red paint mixed with a little yellow and white and placed high on a medium-gray surface. There are a few drips and splatters and an occasional pencil line: There isn't anything to the paintings" (38). Reviews like this one were traumatic enough for Twombly that they led him to take an almost complete break from painting for a year—which might be seen as a resignation, though only a temporary one: if the *Letter of Resignation* reflects his feelings, it reverses that resignation even as it performs it. This is not an angry farewell but a defiant *return* to art.

The initial drawing of the series (Figure 2.7) begins with a thin ruled line at the top, and then nothing—only a few minuscule flecks, as if the pencil had been dropped to the page and then immediately lifted. Near the bottom is a bold, perhaps desperate, scrawl that leaves the page entirely. It then reenters below moving in the opposite direction, if one can judge by the trailing stroke that concludes at the left by reversing and crossing the line. The first part of the scrawl is violently crossed out in one unbroken repeated horizontal scribble; such cancellations will be found again on nearly every sheet. The negative space here is at least as eloquent as the line that intrudes upon it.

In an interview with David Sylvester, Twombly has this to say about the nature of line: "The line is the feeling, from a soft thing, a dreamy thing, to something hard, something arid, something lonely, something ending, something beginning. It's like I'm experiencing something frightening, I'm experiencing the thing and I have to be at that state because I'm also going" (179). It is the line itself that goes through the various metamorphoses described here; Twombly follows it ("I'm also going"), not without trepidation. If "the line is the feeling," then the abstract squiggles on the pages of the *Letter of Resignation* series may be read as the emotional impetus that in a more conventional series of drafts would find its expression as words. Indeed, the very fact that one writes multiple drafts betrays the fact that the words come after the feeling. The writer tries to fit words ever more closely to the feeling, to its shape and quality; and at the same time, like the material line of a drawing, the words are going their own way, and taking the writer with them. John Berger, who was both an art critic and a novelist, said this of the writer:

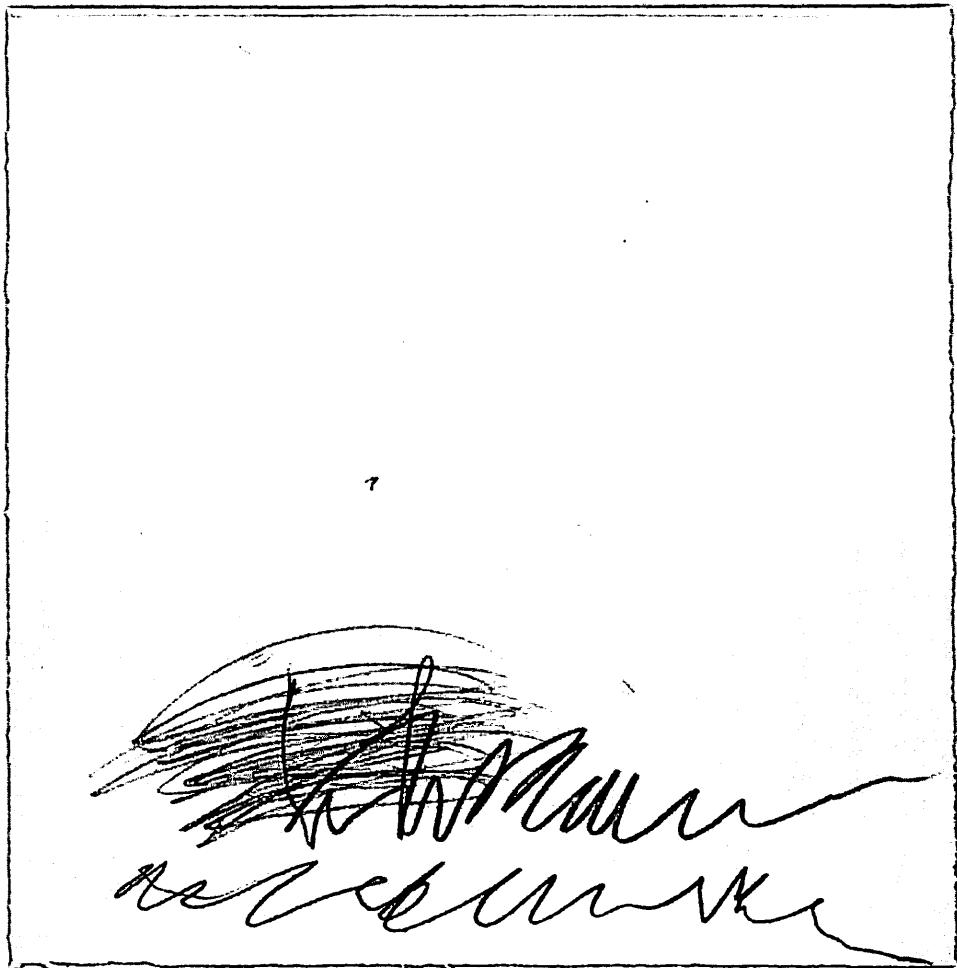


FIGURE 2.7. Cy Twombly, *Letter of Resignation I*, 1967. Copyright Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong.

He doesn't see language with the readability and clarity of something printed out. He sees it, rather as a terrain full of illegibilities, hidden paths, impasses, surprises, and obscurities. . . . Its obscurities, its lost senses, its self-effacement come about for many reasons—because of the way words modify each other, write themselves over each other, cancel one another out, because the unsaid always counts for as much, or more, than the said, and because language can never cover what it signifies. (45).

No Western artist, he goes on to say, expresses this as well as Twombly; and he expresses it entirely through what Barthes, borrowing a term from paleography, calls the *ductus*: "The hand conducts the line or the stroke, from top to bottom, from left to right, turning, bearing down, breaking off, etc. . . . In TW's work the *ductus* prevails; not its rule, but its play, its whims, its explorations, its indolences. In short, it is a writing of which only the leaning, the cursivity remains" ("Cy Twombly" 164).

So in the second sheet of the series (Figure 2.8), divided into three sections, we find a writing, as yet tentative, largely composed of wavelike peaks. These overlap in a kind of contrapuntal effect, perhaps expressing Berger's observations on "the way words modify each other, write themselves over each other." Over these lightly inscribed waves is scribbled, in the top section, a different sort of *ductus*: darker, tighter, more rounded. In the second section the lines are canceled with a vigorous horizontal scribble. Finally we get only two short strokes, devoid of either cursivity or decisive cancellation. Each of the lines reflects its own emotional state: "different strokes for different folks," or for different aspects of the same writer, as they emerge during the writing process. Sheet XXV (Figure 2.9) might almost be described using that eighteenth-century phrase "a fine hand": elegantly artistic, it is reminiscent of some of Saul Steinberg's pseudodocuments. Aside from the tight mark and scribble near the bottom of the page, it evokes the forms of words and the overall shape of a letter. Closely related to it is sheet XXXVI (Figure 2.10), where the writing now covers the whole page. The hand is propelled by a forward intensity that, given the cue of the series title, might be anger or indignation. At times the upward strokes shoot forward, and there is a certain unevenness that could be ascribed to agitation. The next in the series, sheet XXXVII (Figure 2.11), though it

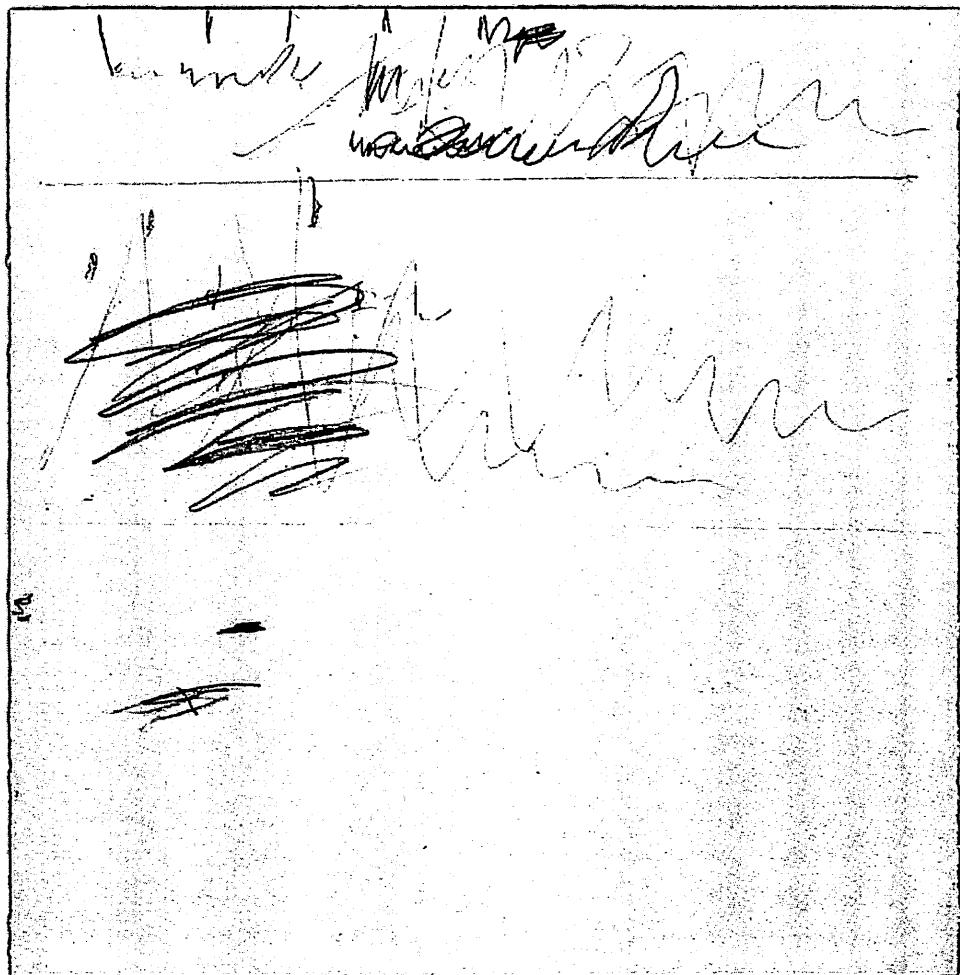


FIGURE 2.8. Cy Twombly, *Letter of Resignation II*, 1967. Copyright Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong.

FIGURE 2.9. Cy Twombly, *Letter of Resignation XXV*, 1967. Copyright Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong.



Mr. Ivan Koenig Garrison
Dear friend my dear eyes
I hope you will be well
We got back to New York
but not having had
our "rest" we have been
out this week working
on my book on
the prophet. Went to the
National Library to copy
of his paintings. I am
very much pleased with your
letter and will send you
one in a few days.

FIGURE 2.10. Cy Twombly, Letter of Resignation XXXVI, 1967. Copyright Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. John
Gutfreund, You are well
known to us as a sister
and brother in our business
and I hope we may have
many more in our future
years together and I hope
you will always be well in your
old age. You deserve to be
happy after you have worked in
such a hard way to get to the
bottom of your work. You are
now in your 80's and you have
had a long life. You have
been a good man and a good
friend to many people.
I am sending my best regards
to you and your wife.

FIGURE 2.11. Cy Twombly, Letter of Resignation XXXVII, 1967. Copyright Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong.

might be described in the same way, has a very different feel to it: the writer now seems a bit crazy. The scale of the abstracted words shifts often, and the lines upon which they rest become broken and unclear, one dropping higgledy-piggledy into the other. The difference between the two sheets is a good example of the way that a different *ductus* will evoke a different state of mind.

The dominant *ductus* in the *Letter of Resignation* series, though, is the cancellation scribble, as in sheet VIII (Figure 2.12). It appears repeatedly, and could be said to sum up the emotional trajectory of the whole. For what is a letter of resignation if not a complete rejection of what has come before? And if we are reading the pages as a series of drafts, then what the writer repeatedly discovers is that the words he has begun to set down are inadequate to the intense emotion he feels. The cancellation scribble is not inadequate: it is vigorous, even violent, and it is never just a single line that strikes out but a line that repeats itself compulsively, doubles back upon itself, and does all this in one frenzied burst.¹² Another way to cancel is by using white paint. This may be applied in a layer thin enough that it almost merges with the white of the page—which in fact is what it attempts to restore. The original writing may sometimes show through, giving a blurred effect. More often, the paint is applied in a thick impasto, with large blotches of the sort we see on sheet XXV (Figure 2.9). The violence with which the paint is applied—by the hand, not the brush—has an emotional signification, with the movement of the hand echoing the vigorous horizontals of the cancellation scribble. Indeed, sometimes Twombly uses both, scribbling fiercely across the still-wet paint.

In Twombly's series the depiction, within his square format, of a letter's familiar proportions—rectangular, disciplined by its margins—reinforces and justifies the title. This occurs, however, only at intervals—as it does in sheet XXV, for instance. The incoherent scrawls with which the series begins gradually become broken into word units, though still not coherent words. The writing is not dated, except for the single “March 18 1959” floating midway in sheet XXXIV. And the series begins abruptly, with no salutation. To whom, then, might this letter of resignation be addressed? There are multiple possibilities, no doubt interconnected: the New York art scene; the dominant currents of art at the time; and more broadly than any of these, the *other*—the unspecified and unknown They who will view one's work. For no matter how much one works for oneself, following one's own instincts and those of the line, the very fact that

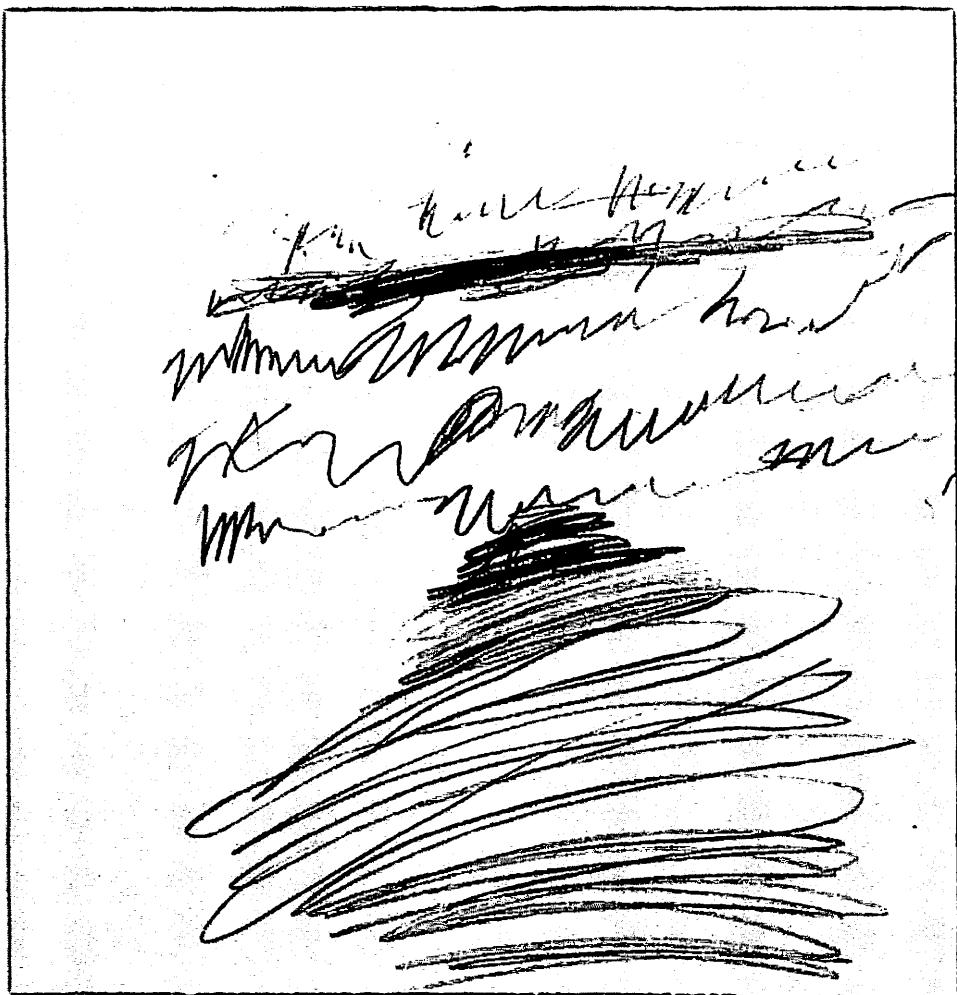


FIGURE 2.12. Cy Twombly, *Letter of Resignation VIII*, 1967. Copyright Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy of David Zwirner, New York/London/Hong Kong.

the art is incorporated in materials means that it is meant to be seen (or read, or heard). That of course makes the artist vulnerable to the expectations, prejudices, and judgments of that undefined viewer; and this too may be prompting Twombly's resignation.

At the same time that he was creating this work, Twombly was beginning the series of large untitled works that have become known as the "blackboard" paintings (Figure 2.13). A superficial view can explain why a number of American critics at the time attached this label to the work: on a dark-gray ground Twombly has drawn large looping forms with a white oil crayon, reminiscent of chalk. Unlike a blackboard, though, the gray of Twombly's background is layered and textured: he painted it with broad sweeps of a large brush, allowing the paint to drip in some places, rubbing it thin in others. Over this surface he drew long, unbroken rhythmic lines in "lasso loops," then partially erased these or obscured them with paint before applying more loops so that the painting becomes a palimpsest. The lines seem to emerge from a background that, as with the white canvases, has the look of a resonant atmosphere. The relation of that atmosphere to what is inscribed upon it, however, is very different in the blackboard paintings. The lines are no longer Bucarelli's "poor, tenuous signs" barely holding their own against the whiteness; they emerge out of an atmosphere that they partially create, as fainter lines (overpainted or partially erased) are superseded by stronger ones. The plural "lines" is technically accurate, but the effect is of one unbroken line. Its implied expansion gives new significance to Twombly's comment on the line as "something ending, something beginning. It's like I'm experiencing something frightening, I'm experiencing the thing and I have to be at that state because I'm also going" (Sylvester 179). For all its beauty, there is indeed something frightening about this line. We are facing a kind of inscriptive sublime, more powerful for the large scale of the paintings. This is not merely a minimalist exercise but a vision of writing as well, as is evident in some of the later blackboard paintings in which the lines take shapes that are evocative of letters (Figure 2.14).

This is not how critics at the time generally read these paintings. In a 1968 exhibition catalog, Robert Pincus-Witten wrote that "handwriting has become for Twombly the means of beginning again, of erasing the Baroque culmination of the painting of the early 1960s. . . . Put bluntly, it has been drowned in a schoolmaster's blackboard. It has been reduced to rudimentary exercises" (56).

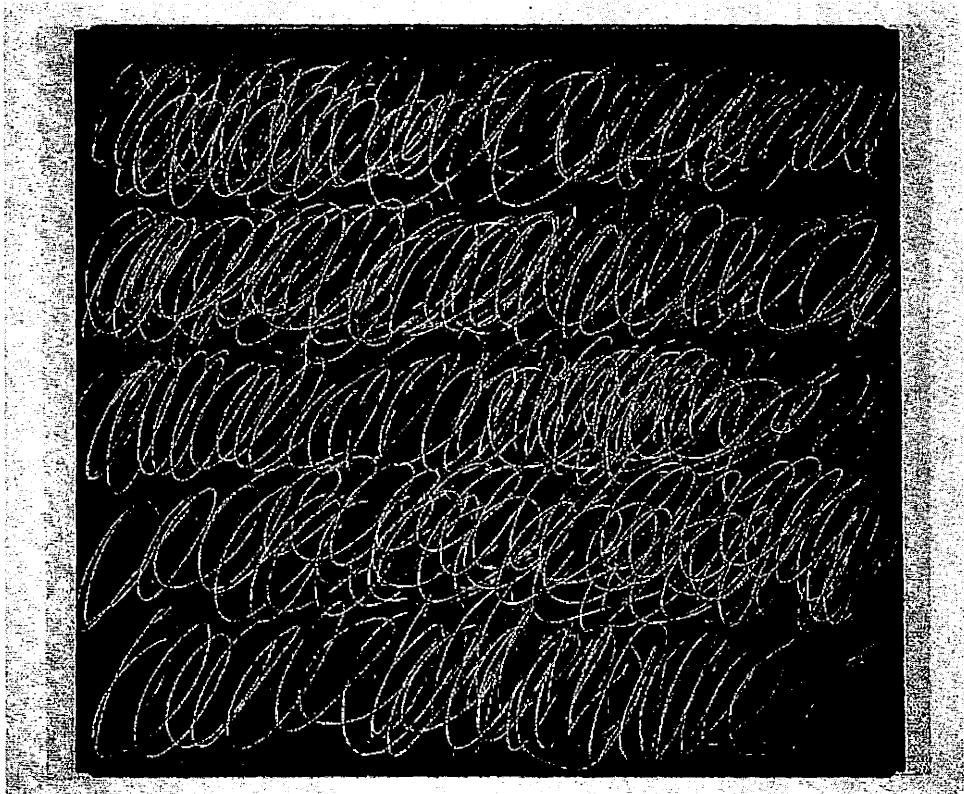


FIGURE 2.13. Cy Twombly, *Untitled*, 1967. Copyright Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Archives Nicola Del Roscio.

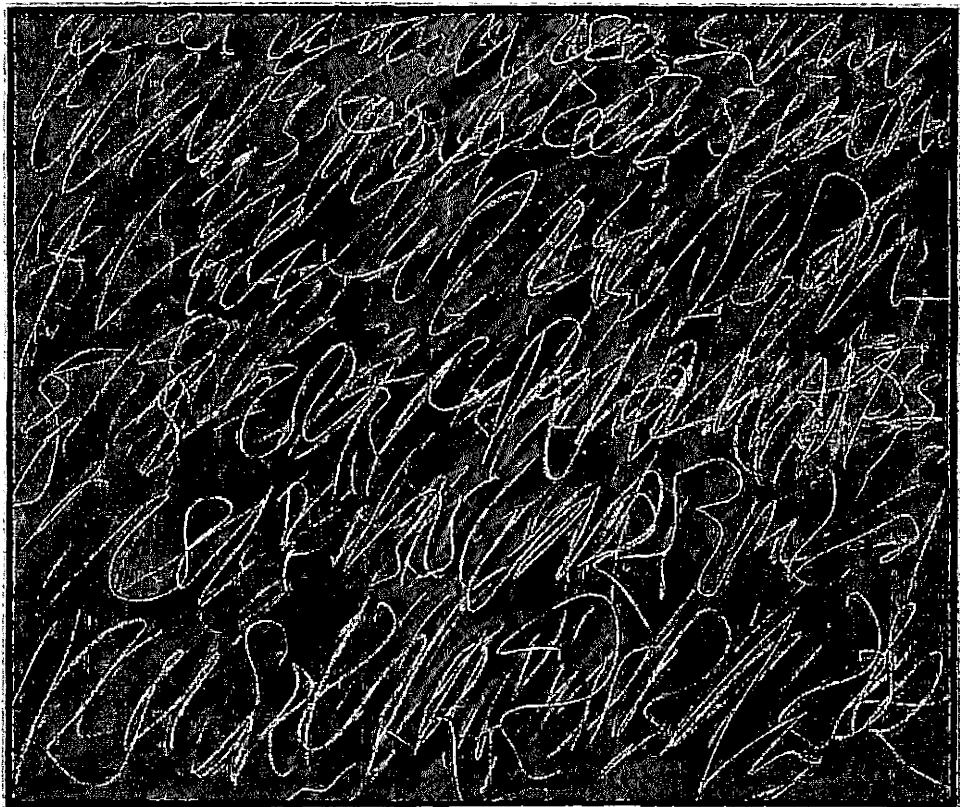


FIGURE 2.14. Cy Twombly, *Untitled (New York City)*, 1970. Photograph by Robert McKeever. Copyright Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, London.

Those exercises were of a particular kind, the Palmer method of penmanship, commonly practiced in American schools during the 1950s. To encourage a rounded, rhythmic script, the students were instructed to use their entire arms to make series of linked circles; Twombly was taught by this method. Many of the blackboard paintings do indeed evoke such linked circles—though another source for them, it has been pointed out, is Leonardo's technique for depicting tumultuous water, which Twombly admired.¹³ The critics, however, aware of the 1964 debacle, preferred to underscore the blackboard as a site of schooling and indeed of punishment: for Pincus-Witten it was as if Twombly were writing, over and over again, “I will not whisper in class anymore” (56). Kirk Varnedoe, in an essay for the 1994 retrospective of Twombly's work at New York's Museum of Modern Art, described the “colorless lines” of these paintings, “whose steady, progressive rise and fall insists on their attachment to the drier constraints of writing, will, and culture” (Varnedoe 43). Arthur C. Danto later recalled arguing, in his review of that same 1994 retrospective, that the blackboard paintings were “the errant pupil's atonement” after his admonishment by Judd (213). Apparently he had not changed his mind in 2011 when he wrote this reminiscence. Yet Twombly had already painted three related “blackboard” canvases in the mid-1950s, of which only one, *Panorama*, survives today; so far from being schooled by Judd, he was returning to an earlier concern of his own with an abstract quasi-writing, both in the blackboard paintings and in the *Letter of Resignation*. There is nothing submissive about these lines, which vibrate with power and, in many of the canvases, loom over the viewer. Allusions to blackboards and to Palmer exercises may play a part in these paintings, but the gestural force of the artist's hand continually overrides Palmer's stated goal of making his pupils into “writing machines”: the left hand's revenge upon the right.

For Twombly, says Pincus-Witten, painting is “a special category of calligraphy” (56)—so special, however, that it may lose all resemblance to writing, moving into blotches, stains, drips, and scribbles. I have discussed here a necessarily limited selection from the rich body of Twombly's work, chosen for what it may suggest about the nature of writing and of mark making in general. Yet this apparently limited approach informs even work by the artist that may seem at first to be far removed from asemic concerns. This is so, as well, with

Michaux and with Barthes. A certain asemic *attitude* leads to explorations with rich and surprising results, even when these are not immediately recognizable as asemic writing strictly speaking—if indeed it makes sense to be “strictly speaking” of a movement so richly varied in its origins, its options, and its current unfolding.

chapter 3

TRACES

Eco-Asemics: The Handwriting of the Natural World

Asemic writing is not only produced by artists. According to Gaze, “You could say that nature, since time began, has been manifesting asemic writing. It just needs a human to see the writing, & recognize it” (Jacobson, “Without Words”). It is this writing by nature that De Villo Sloan has christened *eco-asmatics*: “a term used to describe asemic writing found in asemic-suggestive shapes in the natural environment.”

Sloan’s defining example is a piece of found art submitted to his blog by Nancy Bell Scott (Figure 3.1). The slice of birch bark is positioned “left-justified, right-ragged” to evoke the shape of a poem. The lines of the bark then become the broken lines of the poem’s words. In 1924 Man Ray created his *Poem* along similar principles (Figure 3.2). Both works comment on the fact that, as Vilém Flusser has said, “Writing is about setting ideas in lines” (*Does Writing Have a Future?* 6). Scott’s work adds to Man Ray’s clean lines an antiquarian texture that, according to Sloan, is “due to a color resembling parchment and characteristic cracking.” Coincidentally, an asemic work by the Spanish artist Casilda García Archilla (Figure 3.3) almost seems like a drawn rendering of Scott’s birch bark.¹ A series of left-justified lines are at first relatively straight; but their slight waver becomes increasing tangled and inter-netted, creating a cracked-looking texture along the ragged right edge of the piece. Both Archilla’s and Ray’s works comment on the linear nature of writing, though their lines have very different qualities. Scott’s work does less but goes further: it goes beyond commenting on the artifice that governs the material poem to throw into question the relation of nature to that artifice. Of course Scott has adjusted nature to reflect a familiar human artifact through her selection and positioning of the bark. But in other cases no such intervention is necessary. Such is the case with a type of rock known as “graphic granite” (Figure 3.4); it might equally well

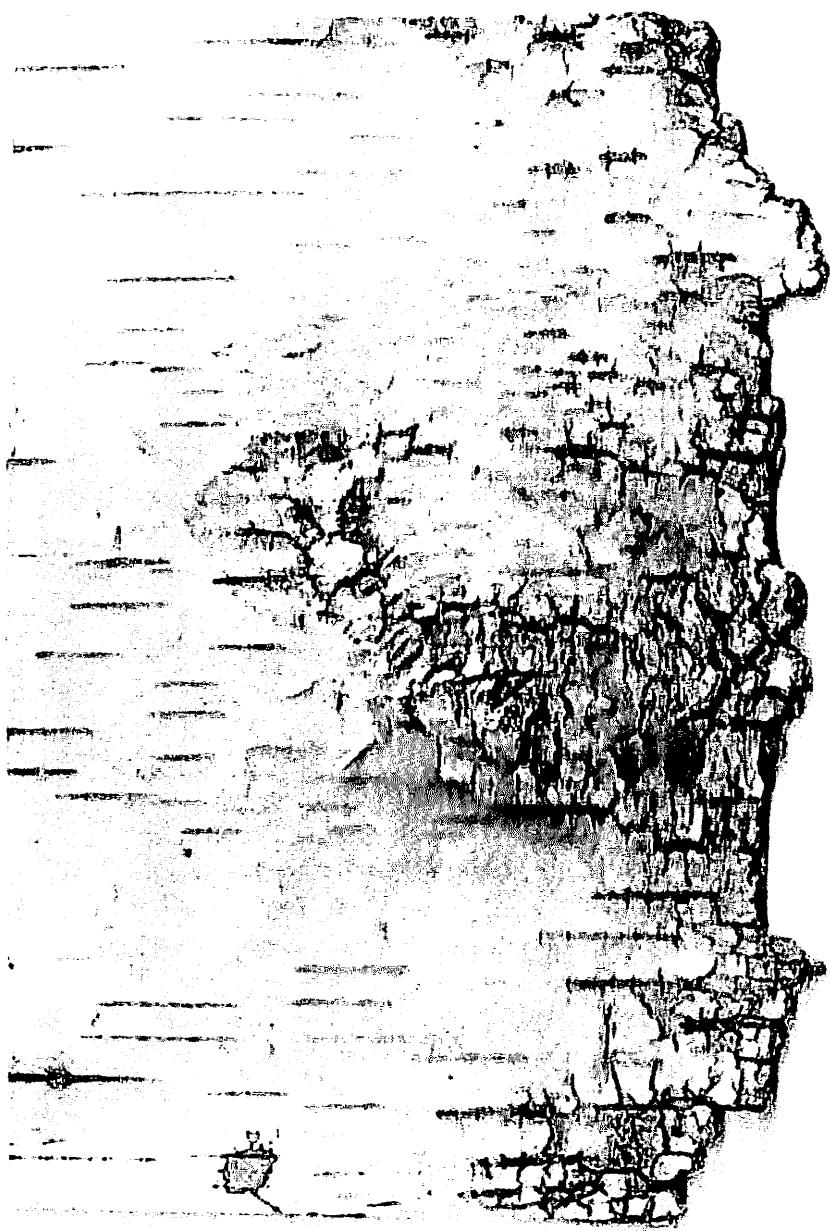


FIGURE 3.1. Nancy Bell Scott, untitled eco-asemic work, 2012. Photograph by Nancy Bell Scott.

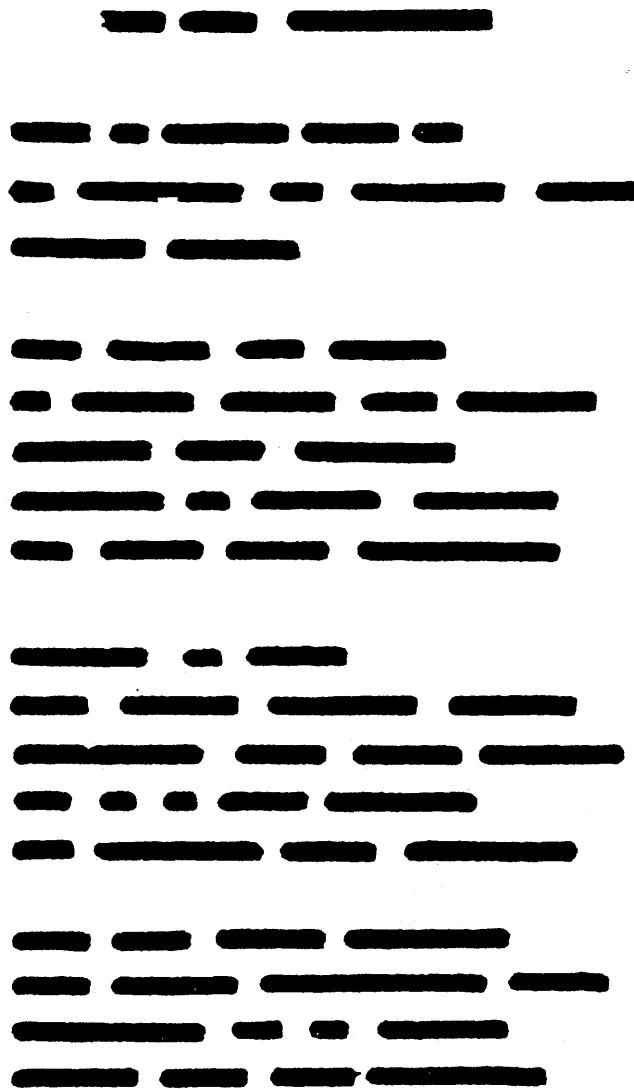


FIGURE 3.2. Man Ray, *Poem*, 1924. Copyright Man Ray Trust / SODRAC.

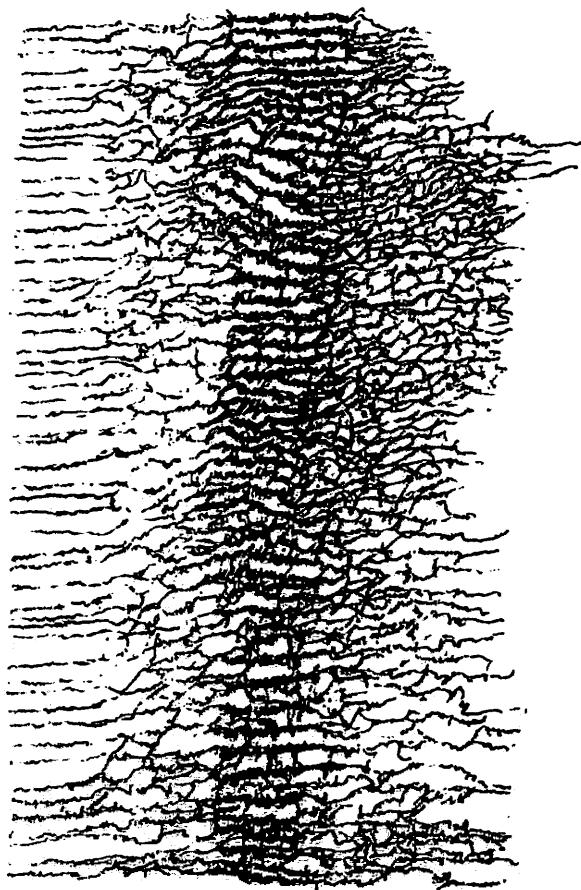


FIGURE 3.3. Casilda García Archilla, Drawing No. 4 from *Una conversación con Ana Hatherly*, 2005. Pen on tracing paper.

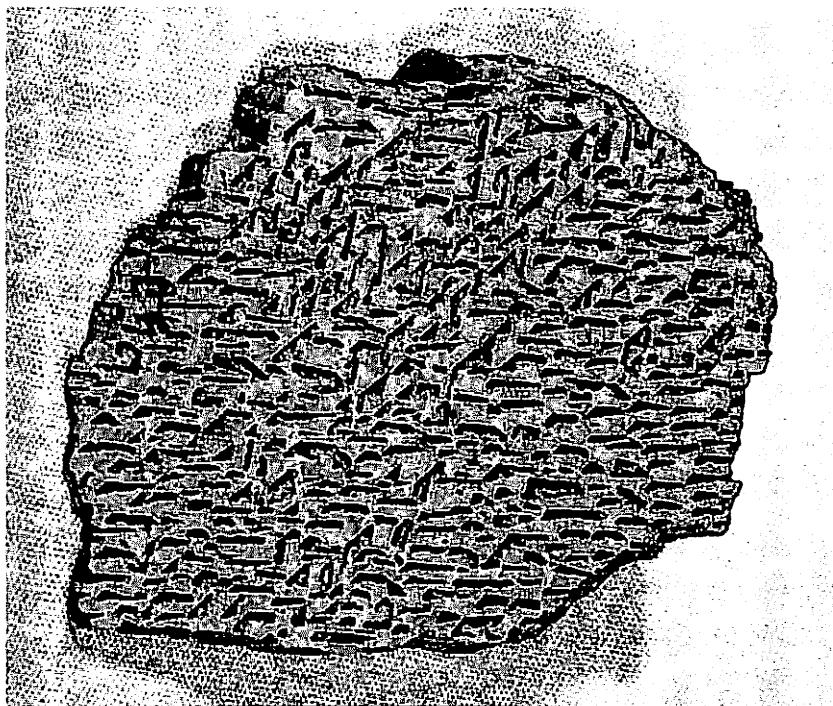


FIGURE 3.4. Photograph of graphic granite (NMNH 111123–1767) by Ken Larsen. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.

be an example of archaic cuneiform. Is the similarity to writing in these cases merely a matter of selection and projection? Or are we being invited to revisit, after all these years, the notion of a “Book of Nature,” albeit in a new version?

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault describes the Book of Nature in ways that depart from the common notion of a text in the natural world that may actually be read for its message; nature’s signs and characters are thus brought closer to asemic writing. In the medieval and early modern periods, Foucault asserts, nature was to be “read” only in the sense of recognizing it as a text. It is this recognition of the dynamics of signs, rather than any specific signified content, that reveals to those with eyes to see a divine immanence. For grammarians in the sixteenth century, “language is not what it is because it has a meaning,” Foucault writes; “its representative content . . . has no role to

play here. Words group syllables together, and syllables letters, because there are virtues placed in individual letters that draw them towards each other or keep them apart, exactly as the marks found in nature also repel or attract one another" (35). This is a description of writing that locates its essence in the rhythms and gestural relations of *marking*. It is precisely this vision of writing that asemics wants to convey. The meaning of words is subtracted so that we may better understand another sort of meaning, that of writing in itself, beyond any particular content that is conveyed. Let us linger, though, on the passive construction "is conveyed." There is a specific person behind that construction: someone, the one doing the writing, wants to convey something. That is what impels the writer to write. If we remove that "something" as well as a human author, what is left to impel writing? What brings it into existence? And is that existence, now without the purpose that content provides, still what we could call writing? In short, an ahuman writing with meaning subtracted raises the whole question of intentionality.

A notorious article by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, published by *Critical Inquiry* in 1982, takes on the question of writing's intentionality in terms that are particularly relevant to eco-asemics. At one point the authors suggest a thought experiment to determine whether there can be such a thing as "intentionless meanings":

Suppose that you're walking along a beach and you come upon a curious sequence of squiggles in the sand. You step back a few paces and notice that they spell out the following words:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years. (727)

Well and good. Perhaps we have here the traces of a particularly literate beachcomber. But when a wave washes over this stanza and leaves in its wake the poem's *second* stanza, one either has to find an agent with an intention (like the ghost of Wordsworth or a pantheistic force in the sea) or has to admit that, unlikely as it seems, these are accidental marks. In the second case, where the

marks are accidental, Knapp and Michaels go on to ask, will they still seem to be words? They answer with no hesitation: "Clearly not. They will merely seem to *resemble* words. . . . To deprive them of an author is to convert them into accidental likenesses of language. They are not, after all, an example of intentionless meaning; as soon as they become intentionless they become meaningless as well" (728). However, to rebut this argument it is necessary only to look again at the marks in the sand. Even as we repeat to ourselves that these are merely accidental marks, it is impossible not to read them; and to read them is to recognize them as words, and indeed as Wordsworth. Knowing that the writer is *not* Wordsworth because there is no writer makes no difference: the marks, these particular marks, insist on being words. For the author is always a latecomer to language. Consequently, authorial intention is, if not superfluous, then superadded to linguistic strata that have long since been deposited in accordance with social, historical, and conventionalizing forces. Such forces have an intentionality of their own that subtends whatever intentions the author may try to introduce. Words speak to each other before they speak to a reader. When Knapp and Michaels assert of those accidental markings in the sand that they will no longer be words but "will merely seem to *resemble* words," they ignore the fact that all words are resemblances. It's not that they resemble in the least whatever it is that they signify. They resemble *each other*: other markings in similar configurations that are reproducible for agreed-upon purposes. It is only such a resemblance that makes words readable at all, and makes it appear that meaning is inherent in them.²

Now from this to asemic writing is not such a big step as it might seem, since to resemble words is the whole mandate of asemic writing. In this practice, both intention and meaning take on new aspects. Intention is no longer the desire to convey a verbal message through the instrumentality of writing. The artist intends to make something that evokes writing, and often will consciously reference a particular type of writing, such as Chinese characters, cuneiform, or Islamic calligraphy. And while asemic writing eliminates meaning in that it does not convey a verbal message, the evocation of writing is meaningful on another plane. It conveys something about the nature of writing that is generally obliterated by the verbal message. To call it "something" is about as close as we can get to it, although that word should really be plural.

To look at the varieties of writing liberated from its job of conveying messages implicitly raises all the questions I have raised so far, and more; and these are meaningful. Moreover, even the configurations of the scripted lines convey a meaning, a gestural equivalent of a psychological disposition at the time.³ A psychological state either shapes the writing, as handwriting analysts have long affirmed, or it is produced by the effect of the shapes, as in abstract art.

With these references to psychology and art, though, we are assuming a human presence. How much of what I am asserting will carry over into the eco-asemic? Let's look at some writing in the sand that is markedly different from an accidental replication of Wordsworth. First is a piece titled *Beach Language* by the New York artist Rosaire Appel (Figure 3.5). Appel has photographed chance configurations of debris on a beach; with no intention to do so, these evoke Chinese characters. Jim Leftwich has made a trenchant protest to this kind of practice:

We can read things that are not written. We can be frustrated in our attempts to read things that are not written. But we gain nothing and learn nothing by choosing to call things that are not written asemic writing.

We look at the sand on a beach, or the bark on a tree, or the ripples in a stream, and we can if we wish say that we are reading what we are looking at, or that we are unable to read what we are looking at, even though in some ways it reminds us of writing, but it does not become writing if we take a photograph of it, it only becomes a photograph, and it does not become writing if we make a rubbing or an imprint, it only becomes a rubbing or an imprint. (n.p.)

Still, it is hard to imagine what an “only-photograph” would look like; it is always going to be a “photograph-of.” And what is photographed is focused upon not just in a literal sense; the image is an invitation to look attentively, to see what might not otherwise have been seen, and to see it otherwise. But let's collect some more examples to put in the scale.

Another inscription on the sand has been produced by a crawling creature whose intentions are not known to us (Figure 3.6). Titled “Trace,” it is part of *Gibber*, a large-scale project by the Canadian artist and poet angela rawlings. Her artist's statement for *Gibber* begins like this:

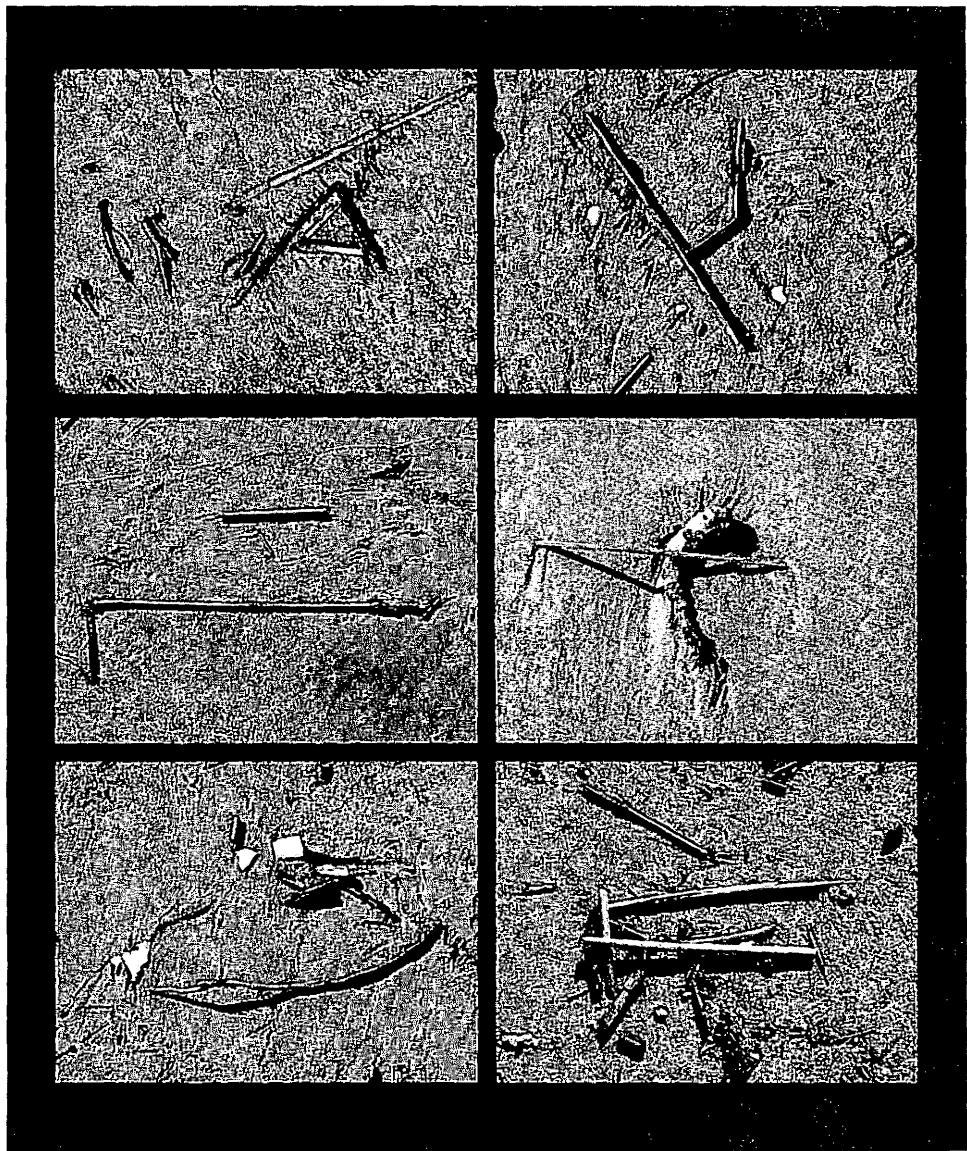


FIGURE 3.5. Rosaire Appel, *Beach Language*, 2011. Photographs.

How do we define “writing”? Does it need to be an act composed by a human entity? Does it need to occur with a certain kind of material, on a certain material, within a certain time frame?

Historically, biotic and abiotic entities have influenced grapheme construction. My interest in asemic writing is born of an asemic reading practice, where I situate myself amongst biotic and abiotic entities to see if I can touch that ages-old enthusiasm to interconnect with an environment by recognizing the linguistic within its body.

One particularly linguistic example of such an enthusiasm is Henry David Thoreau’s reading, in *Walden*, of the sand bank he passes on his daily walk. In the spring it has leaflike patterns inscribed by the melting snows; and these prompt a detailed meditation on the correspondence between the leaf as found in nature and its verbal equivalent:

The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally*, whether in the globe or animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat (*λειψω*, *labor*, *lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; *λοβος*, *globus*, lobe, globe; also *lap*, *flap*, and many other words); *externally* a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. (306)

After an expansive meditation along these lines, Thoreau asks, “What Champollion will decipher this hieroglyphic for us, that we may turn over a new leaf at last?” (308).

Such an enthusiasm has its dangers, as it may lead to an act of projection: looking for the linguistic within nature, you will naturally find what you are looking for. Knowing this, Rawlings is wary of what she calls “my constant impulse to construct meaning.” She finds it necessary to negotiate an ethical position for herself:

Asserting that landscapes are passive texts waiting to be actively engaged by readers is ethically perilous. If we hover for a moment, though, with the notion that an environment can be interpreted (read), then the implication is that the environment itself is comprised of (or, better yet, actively composing) meaning (possibly as a written text). In this case,

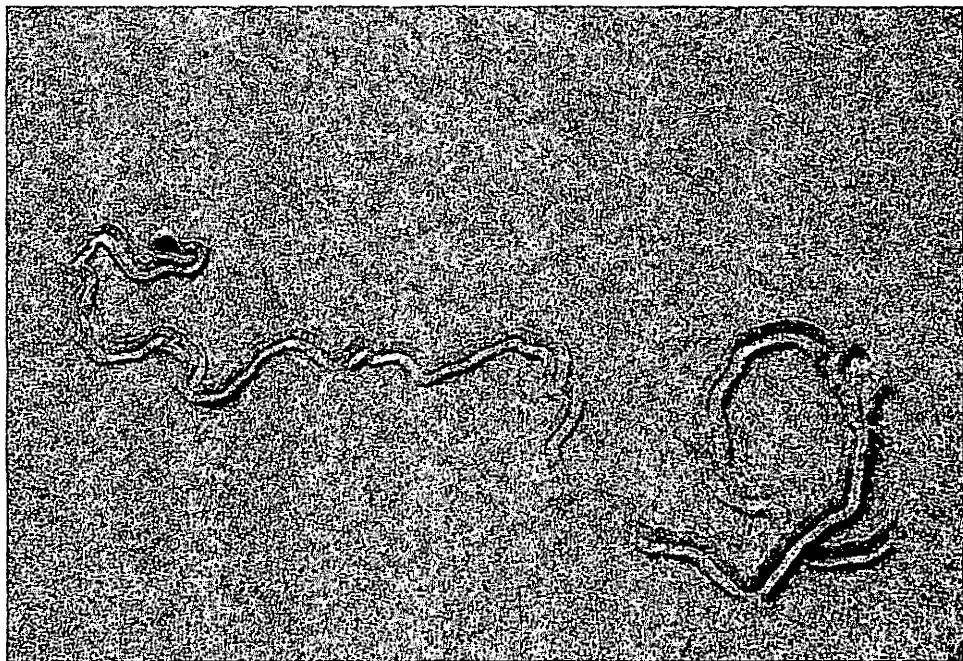


FIGURE 3.6. angela rawlings, "Trace," from *Gibber*, 2012.

then, casting a landscape as writing suggests that its ideogrammatic formation offers readers an asemic access to the text.

An asemic access opens us to seeing signs in the natural world while it simultaneously closes the possibility of decoding those signs to satisfy our human meaning-making impulse. This dual movement—promise and frustration—is fundamental to asemic writing. But the promise of the eco-asemic is not confined to specific messages; it answers an age-old yearning to return to a once and future language that transcends the human.

We can anticipate a time, according to rawlings, when “a world of signifiers explodes the dominant human language used to name and to know them.” Her close attention to natural signifiers as she photographed the beach’s various markings gave her some sense of how this might come about. As time went by, she found that

distinct forms linked with other forms. And I felt certain that, if I studied these forms long enough, their construction could very well exhibit a syntax through repetition and remix of forms that I might be able to decode. By immersion within asemic environmental texts, I also increased the possibility that I would view new forms that could be used to birth further reading practices, writing practices, and ultimately ways of understanding or communicating (whether amongst human beings or via interspecies communication).

Roger Caillois, in his essay “The Ultimate Bibliophilia,” feels a certain guilt about the way a book collector’s desire for a beautiful object supplants the book’s function as a repository of ideas. He desires then, “for the sake of innocent bibliophilia,” an asemic book whose characters evoke those of nature:

I wish there were a meaningless set of type, whose characters would convey no message, like the whorls of shells, the patterns on butterfly wings, or effigies within stones, like all the abandoned literature enshrouded in the history of the planet and slowly accumulating in its archives. (62)

One possible fulfillment of Caillois’s wish is a book by the Spanish artist and typographer Pepe Gimeno (Plate 2). Titled *Hushed Writing*, its pages evoke sign systems that are familiar, such as Chinese characters, hieroglyphics, and Braille, as well as others that are alien and nonetheless authoritative: Gimeno assembled them entirely out of materials found on the beach.⁴

The verso of this wish for a book type resembling natural objects is the discovery of an alphabet in nature, as expressed by Alejo Carpentier: “A day will come when men will discover an alphabet in the eyes of chalcedonies, in the markings of the moth, and will learn in astonishment that every spotted snail has always been a poem” (211–12).

These are yearnings for a prelapsarian state, a return to language’s origins, before it became separated out from nature to become a human artifice. Cangjie, the legendary inventor of Chinese characters, is said to have been inspired by the tracks left by animals and birds; according to other versions he modeled his characters on the markings of a turtle’s shell. The first written source to mention Cangjie is the *Huainanzi* from the Warring States period

(475–221 BC). It reads: “When Cangjie created the characters, millet fell from the heavens and ghosts wailed in the night, and as human wisdom increased, the virtue of the human kind diminished” (Mikkolainen).⁵ So at the origin of writing, even if it is modeled on natural markings, it becomes alienated from the natural world. Maurice Blanchot, in his essay “The Absence of the Book,” tries to put himself in the place of “the first person who ever wrote, who cut into stone and wood under ancient skies”:

What he left behind him was not something more, something added to other things; it was not even something less—a subtraction of matter, a hollow in the relation to the relief. Then what was it? A hole in the universe: nothing that was visible, nothing that was invisible. (471)

The peculiarity of writing, before we become habituated to it, has to do with meaning: a meaning that cannot be securely located in the physical world (“nothing that was visible”) even though the physical world is its necessary precondition (“nothing that was invisible”). Stone and wood are made to manifest something that is not stone or wood. This sense of strangeness is lost when writing separates itself from the natural world to become a familiar tool for the use of humans. When it is translated back into the forms of nature, that tool is “broken”—to speak in Heideggerian terms—and so reveals something of its original strangeness.

Such a retranslation is the aim of Cui Fei, a Chinese artist working in the United States. She uses two titles repeatedly, with numbered variations in different media: *Manuscript of Nature* and *Tracing the Origin*. *Manuscript of Nature V* (Figure 3.7) is made up of dried tendrils of vines pinned to a wall in the linear pattern of a Chinese page, and evokes the so-called wild cursive style of calligraphy (Figure 3.8). For another work, *Tracing the Origin XVI*, the artist has replicated the tendril pieces in wire, adding another layer of artifice to the natural objects that evoke writing’s artifice. However, the script remains unreadable, alien. It may even be actively alienating—as in one piece by Cui Fei constructed of thorns pasted on a page and titled *Read by Touch* (Figure 3.9). A related work is *Written Weed*, a book by the Dutch artist Marian Bijlenga. Its pages display a “writing” composed of leaves, sticks, seeds, and grasses arranged on the page and photographed (Figure 3.10). The resulting signs are

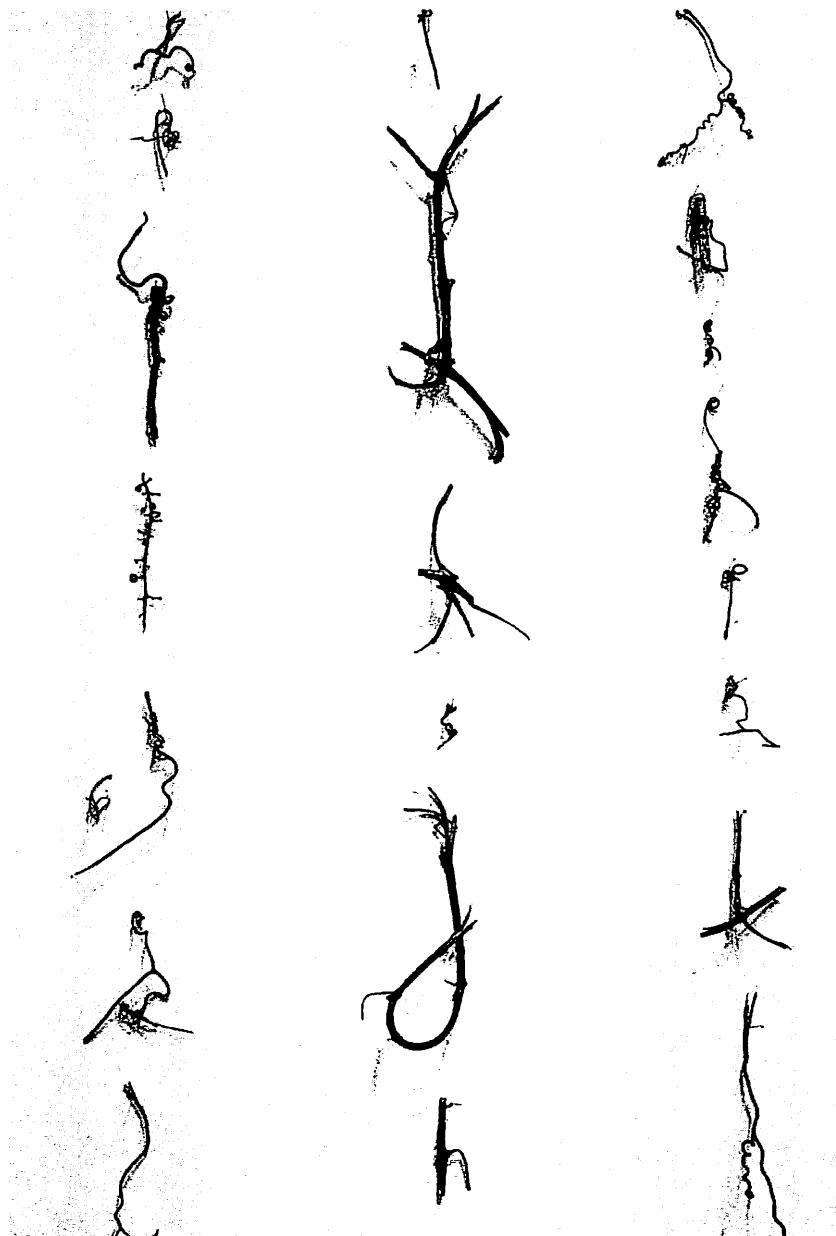


FIGURE 3.7. Cui Fei, *Manuscript of Nature V*, 2002–present (detail). Installation, tendrils; dimensions variable. Photograph by Cui Fei.

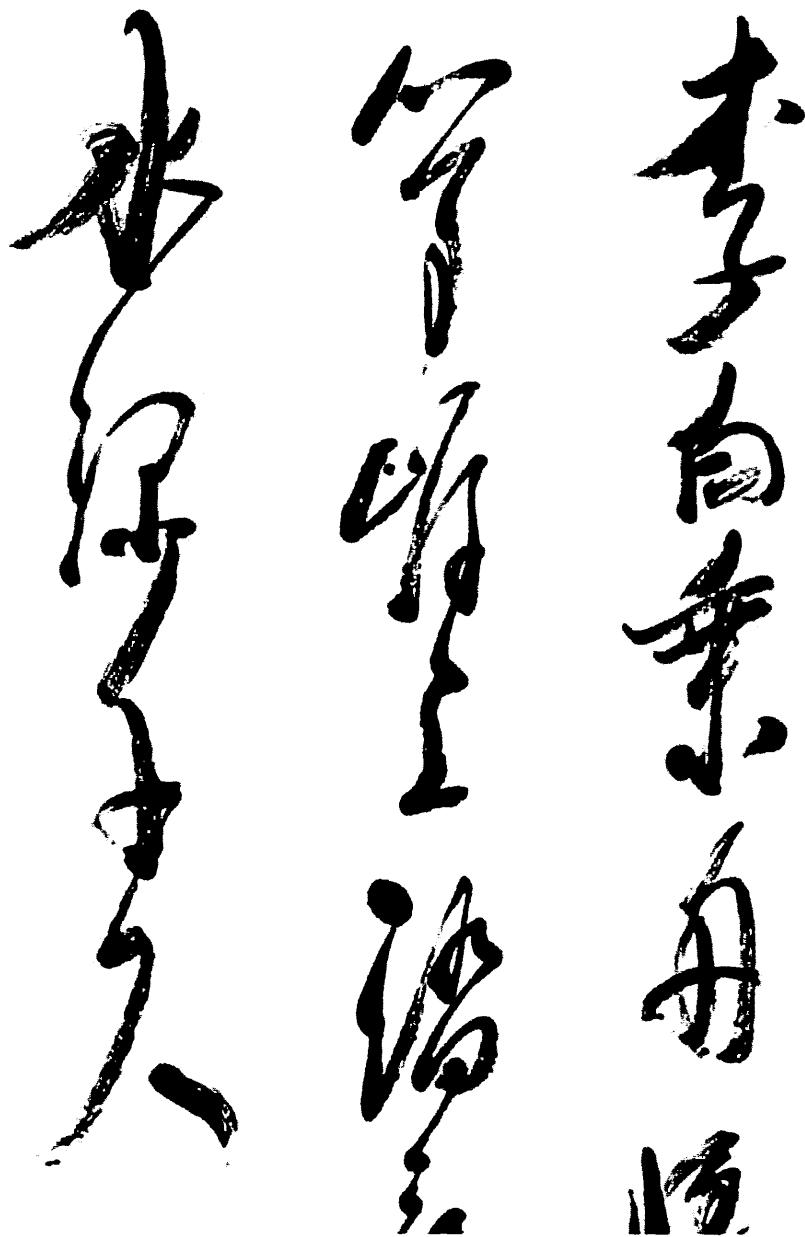


FIGURE 3.8. Wild cursive. From the collection of Cameron J. Campbell. Courtesy of Daniel von Brighoff.

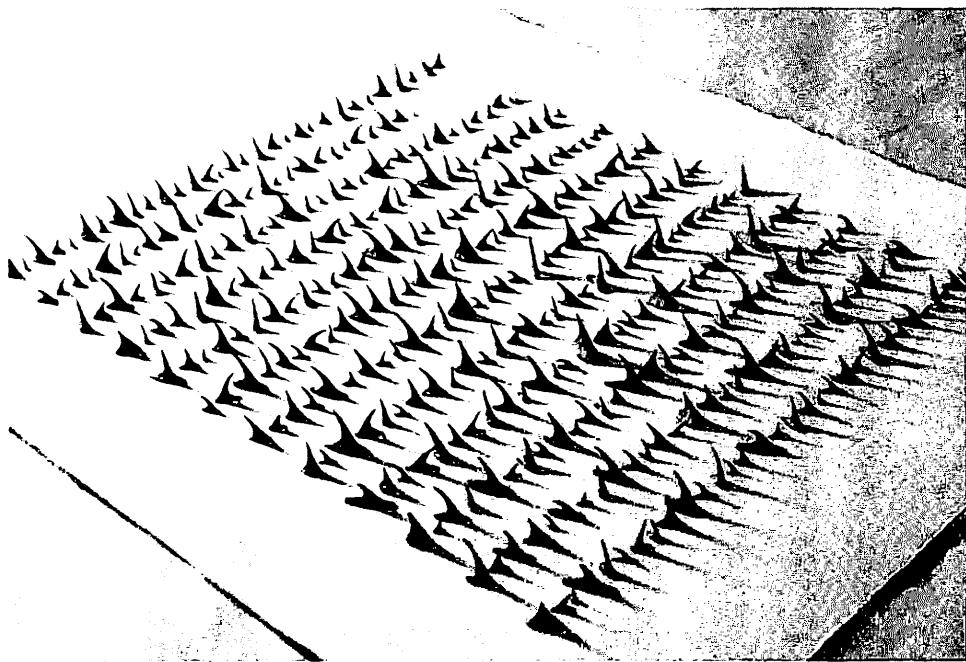


FIGURE 3.9. Cui Fei, *Read by Touch*, 2005–6. Thorns on rice paper. Each page 9 1/4 × 10 3/4 inches; total 11 pages. Photograph by Zheng Lianjie.

sometimes purely asemic; at other times they are clearly modeled on existing writing systems, including Chinese. Casilda García Archilla, whose drawing appears at the start of this chapter, has created a *Vegetal Alphabet* (Figure 3.11) whose variegated signs are all taken from the same natural source: the “reticule” of fibers, as she calls it, that holds the seeds of the platan or plane tree. Small pieces of this, arranged in columns, create an effect rather like that of Michaux’s alphabets, or the orderly disposition of the scholarly linguistic illustrations that inspired him.

When Cui Fei refers to “tracing the origin,” the word *tracing* refers simultaneously to tracking something down and to the act of reduplicating. When angela rawlings titles her photograph “Trace,” that single word may have even more implications, prompting us to view a simple squiggle as the summation of many problems associated with writing. First there is writing as the trace of

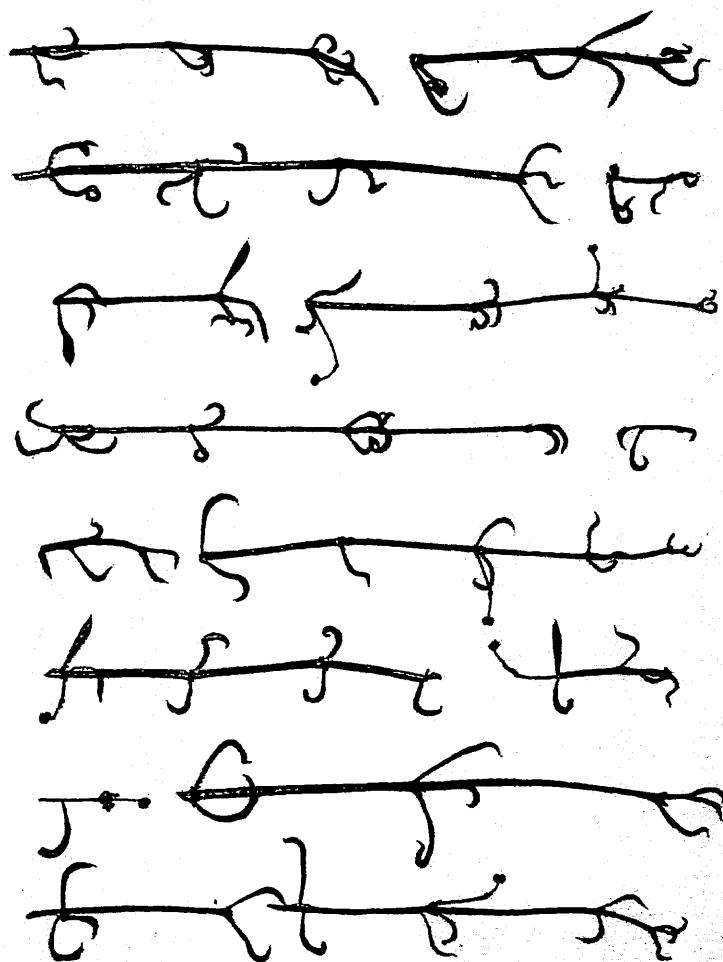


FIGURE 3.10. Marian Bijlenga, page from the book *Written Weed*, #21, 2004. Catchweed on paper.
Photograph by Marian Bijlenga.

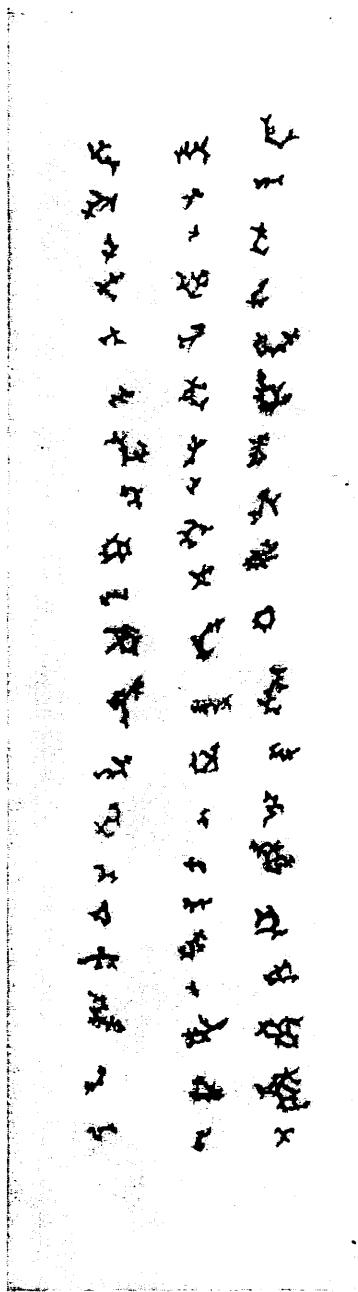


FIGURE 3.11. Casilda García Archilla, *Vegetal Alphabet: The Signs II*, 2012. Vegetal fragments on rice paper, 26 x 8.4 cm.

PLATE 2. Pepe Gimeno, Husked Writing, 2003. 140 x 100 cm. Copyright Pepe Gimeno.

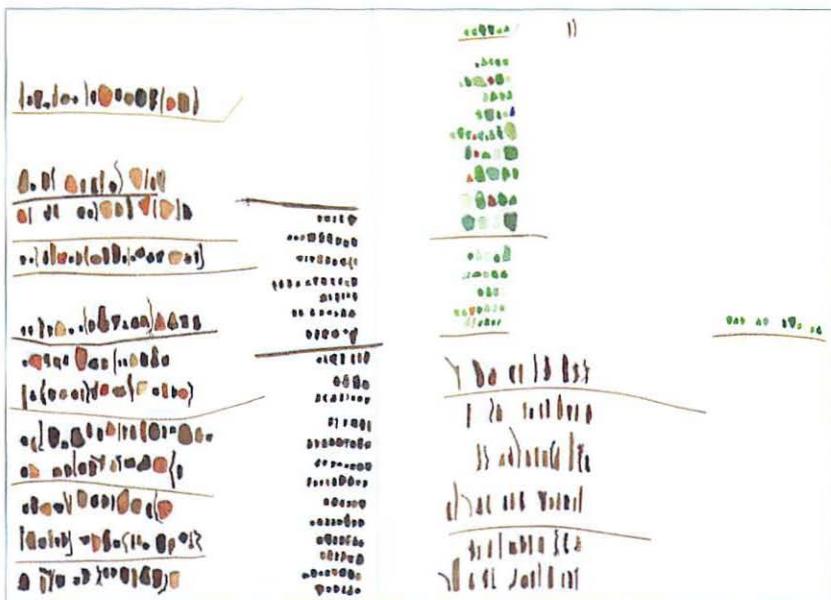
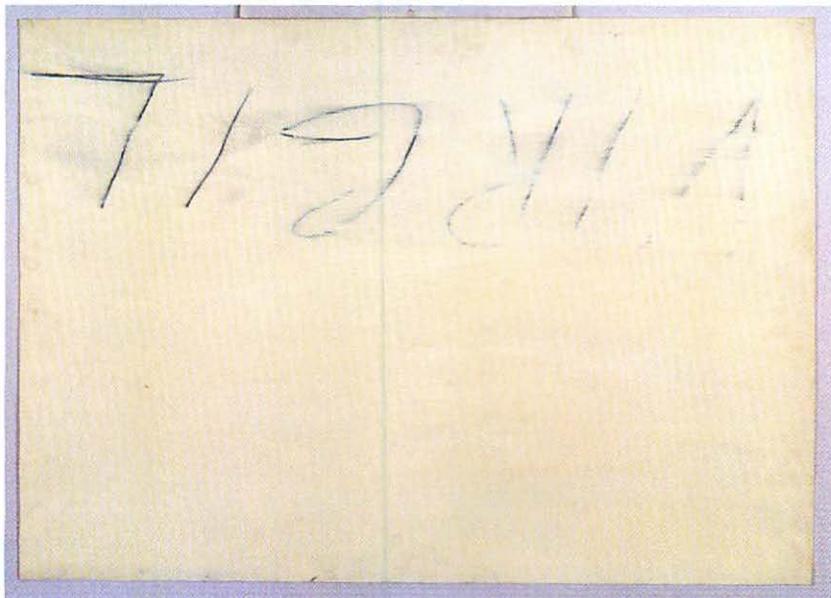
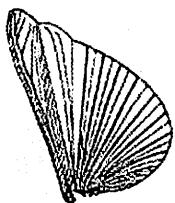


PLATE 1. Cy Twombly, Virgil 1973. Copyright Cy Twombly Foundation. Courtesy Cy Twombly Foundation.





卷之三

ପ୍ରତିଷ୍ଠାନଙ୍କ



五

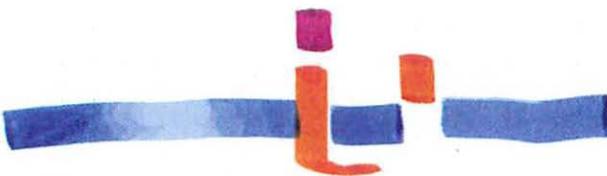


PLATE 3. Max Ernst, *65 Maximiliana, ou l'exercice illégal de l'astronomie*, 1964 (detail). Copyright Estate of Max Ernst / SODRAC / MoMA, NY. Gift of David S. Orentreich, MD / Art Resource, NY.



PLATE 4. Andy Bleck, from *Abstract Comics: The Anthology*, ed. Andrei Molotiu (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009).

.... adds – make a mark and add another.



Many of these are adds, but some are extensions. Cursive writing precedes by extension.

Printing is additive. One mark then another.



Both set up rhythms with gaps and connections, straights and curves. What happens in the gap determines the next, both forward and backward, past and present.



The mark is made now but now passes and the next mark influences what went before it.

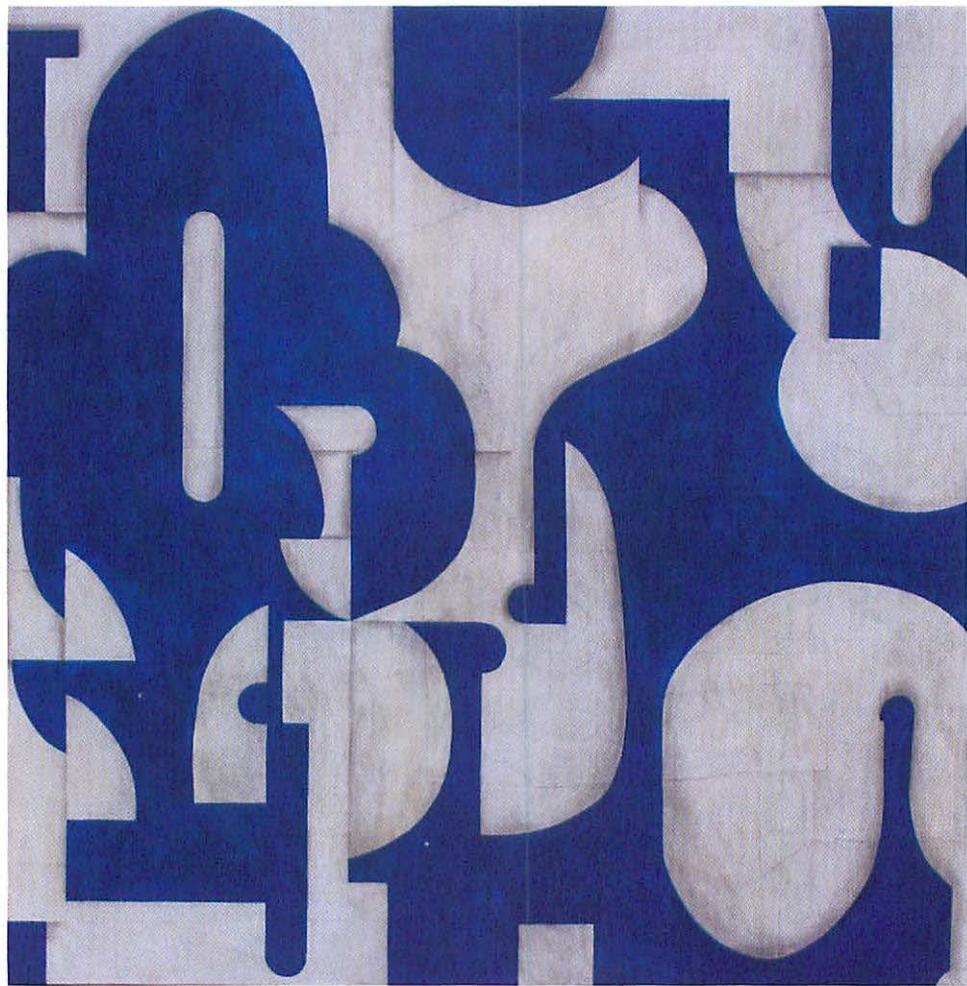


PLATE 6. Cecil Touchon, *Post Dogmatist Painting #756*, 2015. Acrylic on paper over canvas, 48 x 48 inches.
Copyright 2018 Cecil Touchon.



PLATE 7. Jeremy Balius, asemic typewriter, 2013.

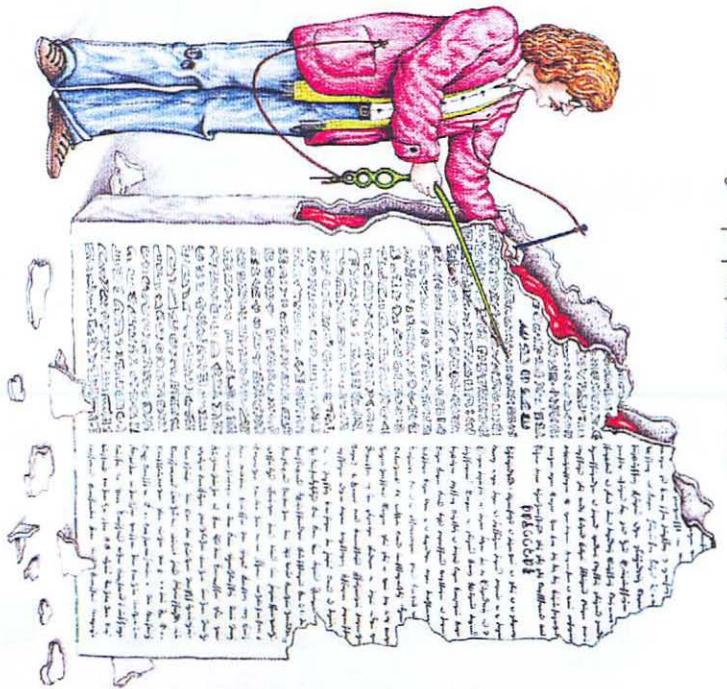


PLATE 8. From Luigi Serafini, *Codex Seraphinianus* (New York: Rizzoli, 2013).

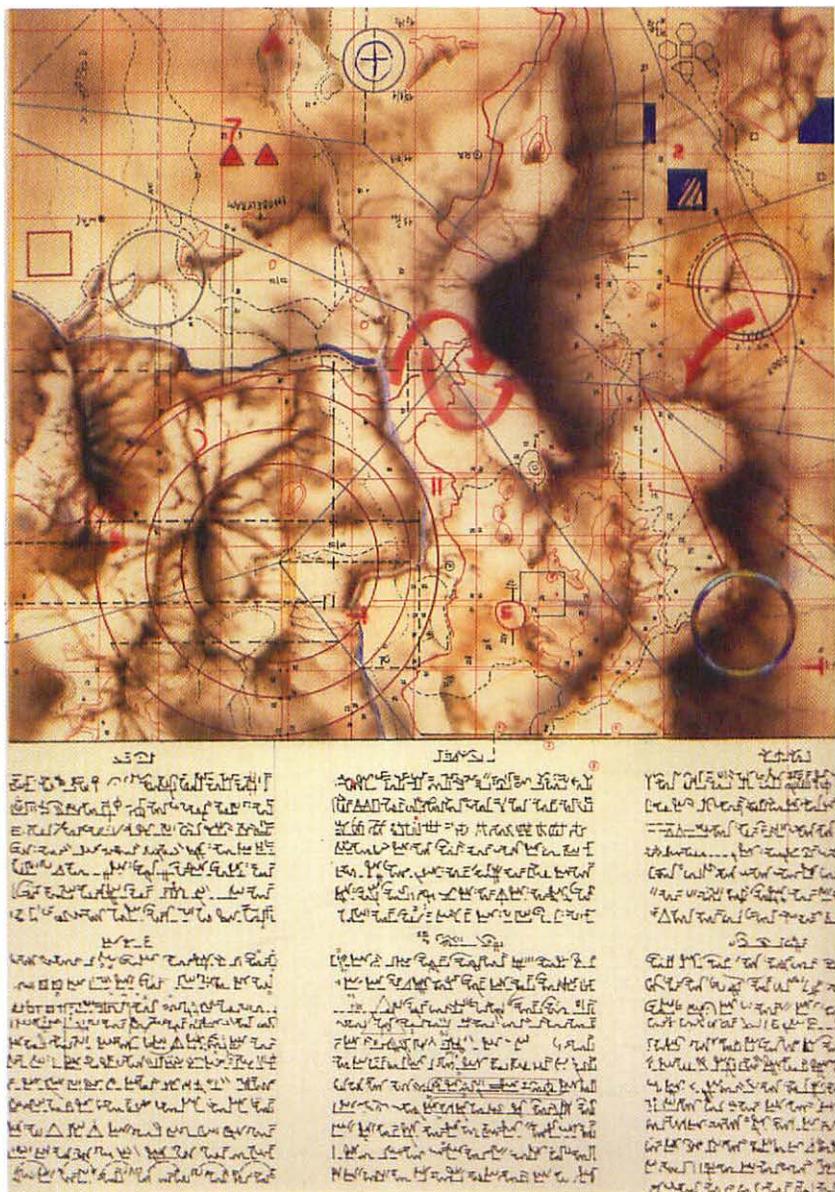


PLATE 9. From Timothy Ely, *The Flight into Egypt*, 1995.

an event that preceded it: a thought, which then took upon itself an intention. If writing can convey something about that event, this is due only to a conventionalized practice that has assigned meaning to marks: writing as a retracing of its innumerable predecessors. The title also evokes Derrida's well-known concept, where "trace" is not a matter of physical marking but the trace, in any one word, of every other word in the language system within which it finds its place. It is only through an invisible dynamics of comparison that a word can be defined; and this is true of every other word in the language system, which is thus left without an ultimate ground. Another way of saying this might be that the meaning of a word is dependent on everything it does not mean. Thus asemic writing—which removes language's claim to a meaning that is present, that is a presence—can remind us of the paradoxical nature of language; and this can be manifested by nature. It's worth noting that in her translator's preface to Derrida's *Of Grammatology* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has this to say about his use of "trace": "The reader must remind himself of at least the track, even the spoor, contained within the French word" (xvii). We may then recall the animal tracks that Cangjie "read" as signs that could be used for human purposes. Or more recent tracks. At the opening of his unfinished novel *The Pale King*, David Foster Wallace describes traces left in the overturned dung of a pasture in terms that evoke sunbaked Sumerian tablets of aligned characters:

The pasture's crows standing at angles, turning up patties to get at the worms underneath, the shapes of the worms incised in the overturned dung and baked by the sun all day until hardened, there to stay, tiny vacant lines in rows and inset curls that do not close because head never quite touches tail. Read these. (6)

Similar "rows and inset curls" are found beneath the bark of old logs, as documented in a six-part video titled *Asemic Writing in the Woods*. These incisions in the wood, like the track in the sand photographed by rawlings, are traces of a wormlike creature creating something that looks like writing. The video shows not only that writing but also the artist retracing it, following its traces with a pen (Figure 3.12). It is as if the artist is learning to write from an already written Book of Nature; or that she is literally highlighting the calligraphic traits to be found in nature.



FIGURE 3.12. Screen shot from *Asemic Writing in the Woods* (2011) by E. Samigulina/Tae Ateh and Karen Karnak/Yuli Ilyschanka.

“Read these,” urges Wallace. But how is that to be done? If it is done on nature’s terms, can it still be called reading?—which, as Blanchot depicts it, is something profoundly alien to the natural world. If it is done on our terms, will we not be *reading into* a text that was never intended to be interpreted in those terms? Ultimately are these traces really inviting us to read them? One answer is provided by Bruno Latour, who writes:

To be accounted for, objects have to enter into accounts. If no trace is produced, they offer no information to the observer and will have no visible effect on other agents. They remain silent and are no longer actors: they remain, literally, unaccountable. . . . This is why specific tricks have to be invented to *make them talk*, that is, to offer descriptions of themselves, to produce *scripts* of what they are making others—humans or non-humans—do. (79)

Eco-asemics is this kind of trick; it goes hunting in the natural world for scripts that are literal versions of what Latour intends as metaphor. And if it finds what

it is looking for, that doesn't mean that it is forcing upon nature a human agenda. When an eco-asemic artist tricks the natural world into giving an account of itself, that account is given in signs that cannot be translated by a human reader. It's as if natural objects inscribe themselves in a foreign language. In offering the promise of communication they are demanding that we pay attention to them, that we admit the possibility of sentience in what we usually pass over as insensate. Yet at the same time these objects, through their asemic illegibility, remind us of their otherness, their difference from our human subjectivity. If conventional writing demands that objects translate themselves into our terms, eco-asemics reverses that, demanding that we come to terms with a language that is to some degree familiar *as a language*—but it is not our language.

Eco-asemic art, then, is not using language, that valuable tool of the colonizing impulse, to translate the natural world into human terms. Rather, it reminds us that natural objects may have a voice of their own. It reminds us of this in terms we can understand, those of communicative writing—except that this writing refuses to communicate, refuses to be translated into *our* understanding of nature. Whenever we find it in nature we lose it at the same time: we are left incoherent, illiterate before these cryptic signs. At the same time we are made aware of the ways in which a familiar literacy can mask the strangeness of natural objects. Unmasking language through eco-asemics allows us to at least glimpse the possibility of reading the natural world in terms other than our own.

The Chinese Connection

Henri Michaux opens his *Ideograms in China* by evoking Chinese characters as they might appear to a Westerner's eye:

Cracks, claw marks: the very beginnings appear to have been suddenly checked: arrested.

Without form, figure, or body, without contour, symmetry, or center, without evoking any known property whatsoever.

Without any apparent rule of simplification, unification, generalization.

Neither stripped nor refined, lacking sobriety.

Each seems, at first sight, as if scattered.⁶

To this description he immediately appends a note asserting a completely opposite view:

What, as apparent scribble, was once compared to the tracks of insects or the erratic footprints of birds upon sand still conveys, unchanged, perfectly legible, comprehensible, and efficacious, the Chinese language, the oldest living language in the world.

The assertion of perfect legibility is a curious one to be made by someone who, to be sure, studied Chinese—but never got very far with it.⁷ As we will see later, Michaux's idea of what it means to be “legible” is not exactly what we might suppose, nor what the Chinese might suppose. In this respect he can be numbered among a long series of Westerners who—usually with little or no knowledge of the language—have speculated on the legibility of Chinese writing in terms reflecting their own concerns.

Leibniz considered Chinese writing so legible that he nominated it as the most likely source of a universal language: “Those who know the Chinese character,” he wrote, “are right to believe that it will become a universal character, whose written form would be understood by all the world” (290). As someone who had learned the rudiments of Chinese from a Jesuit (Chang 3), Leibniz would count himself among “those who know.” What he knew, or thought he knew, was that Chinese writing was based on a pictorial symbolism, and this would allow it to communicate more effectively.⁸ Descartes, Francis Bacon, and Athanasius Kircher had much the same idea. It eventually took its most famous form in Ernest Fenollosa’s essay “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry.”

An art historian and a wide-ranging philosopher, Fenollosa taught at the Tokyo Imperial University in the late nineteenth century, when Japan was modernizing; at that time he had become familiar with the Chinese culture and language. After his death, his widow gave his essay on Chinese characters to Ezra Pound, as someone whose concerns were attuned to Fenollosa’s. Pound edited it in accordance with his own concerns, and in that form it had a major influence on modernist poetry. For Fenollosa,

Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary symbols. It is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature. In the

algebraic figure and in the spoken word there is no natural connection between thing and sign: all depends upon sheer convention. But the Chinese method follows natural suggestion.

His example is the Chinese characters for “man sees horse”:

人見馬

First stands the man on his two legs. Second his eye moves through space: a bold figure represented by running legs under an eye, a modified picture of an eye, a modified picture of running legs, but unforgettable once you have seen it. Third stands the horse on his four legs. (45)

This is to read Chinese characters as *pictograms*: that is, as signs whose interpretation is based on visual resemblance to their referents. Yet only about 1 percent of Chinese characters are pictographic (DeFrancis, *Visible Speech* 100).

Scholars today understand Chinese characters to be more aptly classed as *logograms*. A logogram is a sign that stands for a whole word or concept; it can be contrasted to a *phonogram*, which is a sign that stands for a speech sound. Alphabets and syllabaries are made up of phonograms; many Egyptian hieroglyphs (though not all) are logograms. The top keys of a standard keyboard include a series of logograms: \$, #, %, &. The psychologist Uta Frith has suggested that the first stage in a child’s language acquisition is logographic: children recognize a limited number of family names or commercial signs by their overall visual shape; only later do they see the letters separately as elements that can be combined in different ways (306). Asemic writing, because it defies systematic decoding, is closer to logograms than to phonograms; perhaps this characteristic has something to do with the recurrent assertion that asemic works evoke a preliterate experience from childhood.

Missing from this list of classifications—pictogram, logogram, phonogram—is the term that is most commonly applied, or misapplied, to Chinese characters: *ideogram*. Technically this term applies to any graphic symbol standing for a concept; it is not linked to any particular language, and so is readable transnationally. The Chinese artist Xu Bing, best known for his massive asemic installation *Book from the Sky*, has also created *Book from the Ground*, which narrates a stick figure’s day entirely through internationally recognized ideograms combined with pictographic signs such as emoticons. This may be an

ironic realization of the desire for a “universal language,” which Chinese was, for many, supposed to fulfill.

An even more fundamental desire, though, underlies the history of the ways that Chinese writing was understood, or misunderstood; and that is a desire for difference. Chinese writing seemed to offer an alternative to the alphabetic system and the limits that it imposed on thought. Viewing Chinese characters as ideographic, Derrida suggests, allowed one to conceive of “a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism” (*Of Grammatology* 90). So the very concept of Chinese writing, he says, functioned as “a sort of European hallucination” (80). As with a hallucination, it didn’t matter all that much that the ways in which thinkers conceived Chinese were illusory; they still had real effects on thought. Fenollosa’s ideas about Chinese writing have long been disproven; yet his essay, in Pound’s hands, became a powerful instrument for change. It contributed substantially to what Christopher Bush has described as “modernism’s attempts to grasp and transform, through the language of the other, the otherness of its own language” (xxx). Such a deliberate estrangement from overfamiliar forms of language is also an underlying aim of asemic art. For these artists, the right way to characterize the Chinese language is less important than the wrong way, any way that will encourage them to push past the limits of alphabetism into an asemic alternative.

Christian Dotremont provides a fascinating example of wrong-way reading. A Belgian poet who was associated with the surrealists in Paris in the early 1940s, he went on to form, with the Danish poet Asger Jorn, the CoBrA group, whose name was derived from the three cities from which its members came: Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. He is best known for his *Logogrammes*: ink drawings, often on large sheets of paper, that evoke writing of various kinds while spinning off from the linear constraints of writing in expressive forms.⁹ Of the “various kinds” of writing, one was preeminent: “My language is a kind of Chinese,” Dotremont writes. He tells the story of how he arrived at this conclusion in his essay “Signification and Sinification,” written twelve years before he began producing his first logograms in 1962. The essay begins with a sinuous sentence fragment:

Le train auquel nous assignons d’être mongol, qui nous assigne devant la Mongolie, qui cesse d’être moyen de locomotion pour devenir palais

de la rencontre et de la découverte, curieux couloir qui donne sur lui-même, serpent.

[The train which we think to be Mongolian, which puts us in Mongolia, which ceases being means of transport to become a palace of meeting and discovery, curious corridor opening on itself, snake.]¹⁰

This description of a train, the so-called Mongolian train that began its run with a leg between Paris and Brussels, was supposed to form part of a longer piece; but it found another destiny, not unrelated to Mongolia:

I took the sheet with the sentence still laid down [Figure 3.13] and turned it over from recto to verso and then from left to right, and thus [Figure 3.14] I started reading “my sentence” vertically, in all transparency.

I realized that without knowing it because I traced it horizontally in the first place, I had written an extremely mysterious sentence. Chinese characters dominated, Mongolian perhaps, Arabic also . . .

Perhaps the closest equivalent to the script Dotremont produced is the “wild cursive” style of Chinese writing (Figure 3.8). But to classify it in this way is to ignore what for its creator was the most important point: “Suddenly,” he says, “I was facing the beyond of my own writing.” In this beyond, the distinction between comprehensible and incomprehensible writing is (like the physical page) turned upside down and around. Linguistically, Dotremont does not understand Chinese. When looking at a page of Chinese characters he nevertheless asserts that he does understand them, in the same way that he understands “a page of Miro’s writing, a word of Arp.” In contrast, when looking at conventional texts he claims not to understand them at all: “I only see small abstract spots. I don’t even manage to decipher like Vinci the wall of certain newspapers and posters.” He is alluding here to Leonardo da Vinci’s assertion that if a painter wants to find inspiration for landscapes, grotesque faces, battle scenes, and so on, all of these can be seen in the stains on old walls (201), or rather in the imagination that reads these markings. The “wall” of print is not so fruitful. Dry and abstract, it is, Dotremont says, “like a city map: the bushes, trees, objects, and myself have disappeared.” Yet even when a sentence

Le hasi aspect en
thy way, qui es
work la "Burghie"
& ch' moyen le
Jevonj palis &
& le disavowk /
qui done au
Stryder-Zak

FIGURE 3.13. Signification. Christian Dotremont's handwriting. Copyright Guy Dotremont.

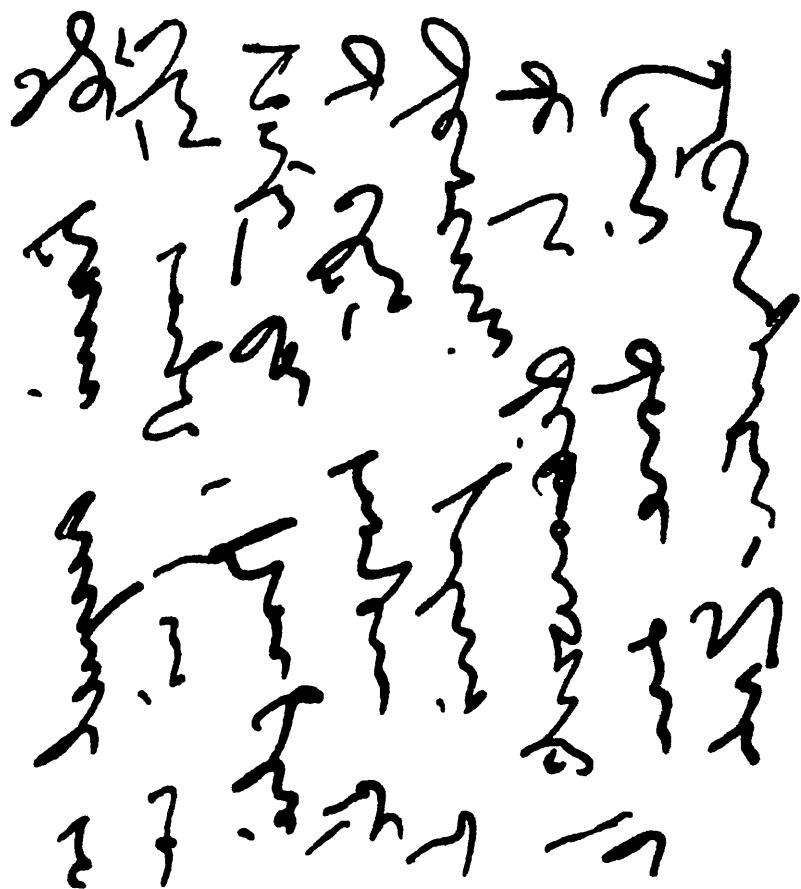


FIGURE 3.14. Sinification. The same handwriting reversed and turned. Copyright Guy Dotremont.

is handwritten, like the one about the “Mongolian train,” it requires a process of defamiliarization if the author is to see the true nature of his own writing. It must, in effect, be translated into Chinese—which in a certain sense it always was. Reading through the rest of the “Mongolian train” manuscript, then other manuscripts of his, Dotremont now saw them in a new light: “I realized that I always wrote Chinese.” Chinese here is in fact the same thing as writing, writing freed from the tyranny of reference: “I break the wall of legibility,” he wrote, “so that one can *see writing*” (*Grand Hôtel* 132; my translation).

Michaux arrives at a similar understanding of the Chinese character, although by another route: a historical sequence, recounted in his *Ideograms in China*. Originally written in 1971 as a prefatory essay for Léon Tchang’s *La Calligraphie chinoise*, it was then being published separately in 1975. This impressionistic account of the development of Chinese writing was based not only on Tchang’s book but also on Michaux’s own long-standing interest: he studied Chinese; he owned a copy of Léon Wieger’s *Caractères chinois* (Noland 150); and in *A Barbarian in Asia* he footnotes George Owen’s *The Evolution of Chinese Writing* (123). Pound considered translating Michaux’s essay as a complement to his edition of Fenollosa’s, but abandoned the project because of failing health. Like Fenollosa, Michaux considers Chinese characters to be a reflection of nature, though by the end of his essay what he means by “nature” is very different from what Fenollosa meant, or what he himself meant at the beginning. The essay, and the history it outlines, is structured like an ascending spiral. It opens with the notion of written characters that imitate nature; it moves progressively away from the natural to the abstract; and it concludes with a vision of Chinese characters as natural at a higher level, now free from the constraints of resemblance.

After Michaux’s opening evocation of the incoherence of Chinese to the untutored eye, he begins his history with its earliest script, from the end of the first millennium BC: the “seal script,” a name given to it in reference to its use for official inscriptions. This was a time, he says, “when the signs still spoke, or nearly; when, already allusive, they revealed—rather than simple things or bodies or materials—groups, ensembles, situations.” This distinction between things and situations puts Michaux closer to Fenollosa, whose idea of Chinese writing is often read as simply pictorial. Yet immediately after the “man sees horse” example, Fenollosa corrects this misapprehension:

It might be thought that a picture is naturally the picture of a *thing*, and therefore the root ideas of Chinese are what grammar calls nouns.

But examination shows that a large number of the primitive Chinese characters, even the so-called radicals, are shorthand pictures of actions or processes. . . . A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points of actions. (45–46)

And actions, Fenollosa goes on to assert, can take place only through objects: verb and noun, actions and things, are one; and they are represented as such in Chinese.

But this period of clarity in the language, Michaux says, was succeeded by one in which “what won out was the pleasure of remaining concealed. . . . One could now readily abstract from the original reality, from the concrete and its closely related signs.” At this point Michaux casts an elegiac backward glance at the primitive script, in terms that recall Blanchot’s imagining of what it was like for the first person who ever wrote: “Gone, now, were those archaic characters that had stirred the heart. And those signs, so palpable, that had overwhelmed their own creators and amazed their very first readers.” Yet the life behind the abstractions can be recovered through scholarship, through dictionaries, inventories, and etymologies; and all this can serve as an inspiration to one who practices what the West would call calligraphy.¹¹ This does not entail, however, returning to what Michaux calls “the charm of resemblance.” The aim of Chinese writing today is “no longer to imitate, but signify nature. By strokes, darts, dashes.” Abstraction has now become not a betrayal of nature but a liberatory detachment. It offers a way into nature viewed not as material objects but as a kind of force field:

The sign in China, today, which is no longer in any way mimetic, has the grace of its own impatience. It has drawn from nature its flight, its diversity, its inimitable way of knowing how to bend, rebound, redress itself.

Like nature, the Chinese language does not draw any conclusions of its own, but lets itself be read. Its meager syntax leaves room for guess-work, for creativity, leaves space for poetry. Out of the multiple issues the idea.

This concluding statement has applications beyond Chinese writing. In his *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* Freud uses the example of Chinese to explain how the language of dreams—which he has earlier compared to a pictographic script—can be read by the analyst despite its “meager syntax.” Chinese has practically no grammar, he asserts: “Thus the language consists, one might say, solely of the raw material, just as our thought-language is resolved by the dream-work into its raw material and any expression of relations is omitted” (231). Yet Chinese “lets itself be read” according to context. Indeed, the fact that its grammatical relations are not specified but implied results in a richness, a resonance, that translation into Western languages finds difficult to capture.

So, for Michaux, Chinese has developed to the point that it is no longer a matter of evoking, through signs, the lineaments of the external world. Rather, the lines on the page—strokes, darts, dashes—now express “interior gestures” that are not merely personal but also can be seen as informing nature as a whole. Chinese characters, especially when produced by the pen or the brush, have an *élan* that can express forces beyond their referents. All this of course says more about Michaux’s own practice of writing and of reading than it does about the Chinese. Indeed, Michaux’s account of the development of Chinese writing is similar to an account of his own development given in *Saisir*, translated by Richard Sieburth as *Grasp*. As discussed in chapter 2, he begins with the desire to create a bestiary, but soon becomes obsessed with insects. Sieburth describes what happens next:

As the drawings evolve from their insect stage into vaguely anthropomorphic fragments (heads, legs, torsos, severed arms), they waver between figuration and disfiguration, aggregation and disaggregation, leap into a series of balletic ideograms, then, toward the end of the book, finally mutate into lines of runes or filigree strands of some still undeciphered language. (*Stroke by Stroke* n.p.)

In this book, then, Michaux records his progression from pictorial signs to spontaneous asemic lines, whose contours evoke an “undeciphered language” reminiscent of Chinese. Yet despite his study of Chinese characters, Michaux never aimed to imitate them. Rather, Chinese writing encouraged him in his own evolution toward creating forms freed from reference or resemblance.

What the West desires from Chinese, then, can range from universal legi-

bility to a liberating illegibility, an interpretive range that is facilitated by ignorance of the language. If the term *asemic* applies to any writing that one can't read, Chinese will be asemic to most, and can be responded to accordingly. What happens, though, when Chinese artists themselves produce asemic work? We have already seen one example in Cui Fei, who is preoccupied with the relation of Chinese writing to nature. Xu Bing and Wenda Gu, in contrast, are preoccupied with Chinese culture. Both artists have created massive installations of Chinese characters that defy attempts to read them, even while these are presented through meticulously traditional methods.

Wenda Gu's first solo exhibition, in 1986, showed enormous Chinese characters that appeared to be archaic seal script but were fakes, made by omitting or adding certain strokes or by fusing elements not ordinarily brought together. These signs often hovered ominously over a diminished landscape executed in the traditional medium of ink drawing (Figure 3.15). Unable to read the characters, the authorities suspected that they concealed a subversive message and shut the exhibit down. The students at the art college protested this move and threatened to bring the works out into the street. Finally the exhibition was reopened, but only professionals were allowed to view it. The authorities were not entirely wrong in their interpretation of this work: Gu has agreed with the suggestion that his pseudocharacters might be taken as rebellious gestures against the uses made of language during the Maoist era (Cateforis 146). Yet his work then and now is not merely counterpropaganda. In the 1980s, along with learning seal script and practicing traditional ink painting, he was reading Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell on the nature of language; and all of this came together in his fake seal script. Genuine seal script, of course, was just as indecipherable to most Chinese as the fake version. For Westerners too, seal script was indecipherable—but not in the same way. So Gu was playing what he calls a “double game”: Chinese viewers would see in seal script “the mythos of a lost history,” while non-Chinese would accept it as the product of an “exotic” culture (Leung and Kaplan 90). “For me,” Gu said in a 2011 interview, “language represents a culture, just as writing does.” That his characters are unreadable reflects the fact that “our knowledge is limited by our written language. . . . There are many unknowns [and] these are like unreadable characters, meaningless characters.” Yet these characters, he asserted, can represent new possibilities for “imagination beyond the limitation of the language.”



FIGURE 3.15. Wenda Gu, *Pseudo-Characters Series: Contemplation of the World*, 1984 (detail). Ink on paper, 247.3 x 182.9 cm. Copyright Wenda Gu Studio. Collection of Zhen Guo.

Unreadable writing is an important component in Gu's series of installations titled *The United Nations Project*; human hair is another. The writing in fact is made up of hair—which one might see as an unexpected response to Brian Rotman's call to bring the body back into language. In each national site the material for the work is provided by that country's barbershops; and the form taken by the work reflects the cultural history of that locale. The title of Gu's *China Monument: Temple of Heaven*, for instance (Figure 3.16), evokes one of the holiest religious sites in China, first built in 1420 AD during the Ming dynasty. The furnishings in the middle of the installation are in the Ming style, but with a difference: in the seat of each of the chairs is a screen showing images of the sky—a “heaven video” as Gu calls it. The space is enclosed, but not confined, by semitransparent curtains upon which are sewn letters made of hair: fake seal script combined with various other pseudolanguages (English, Hindi, Arabic, and synthesized English–Chinese). In this case the hair does not come from China alone, but has been collected from hundreds of barbershops around the world. There is here an implied call for global unity based on a shared humanity, a call that must nevertheless be integrated with the specificity of the cultural references. The letters of hair express a similar tension between the natural and the cultural. Recognizable as certain types of writing, they defy attempts to read them in any orthodox way. For Gu, this inability to understand is paradoxically the first step toward understanding: “The miswritten language,” he says, “symbolizes ‘misunderstanding’ as the essence of our knowledge concerning the universe and material world.” To realize this is to accept a commonality that underlies the differences between languages and cultures. Such a realization is encouraged by the meditative setting: the restrained traditional furnishings, the (distinctly nontraditional) video images of a tranquil sky, and background music played on the bronze bells of the *bianzhong*, an ancient Chinese musical instrument. As well, the sheer scale of the work, combined with the strangeness of the surrounding script, creates a feeling of sublimity. All this contributes to Gu's stated aim: to open possibilities for the imagination that go beyond differences of language and culture.

An effect of sublimity is also produced by Xu Bing's massive installation *Tianshu, or Book from the Sky* (Figure 3.17), undoubtedly the best-known work of asemic art. Upon entering the installation, the viewer is surrounded by writing. It covers the enormous looping scrolls suspended above, the oversize panels



FIGURE 3.16. Wenda Gu, *United Nations—China Monument: Temple of Heaven*, 1997–98. Commissioned by the Asia Society, New York. Photograph by Min Jiang. Copyright Wenda Gu Studio.

to the sides, and the sea of open books on the floor. Indeed, the reiterated curves of the open volumes have a hypnotic wavelike effect. The books are exquisite examples of classic bookmaking. Bound in blue, the traditional color for books of the Imperial House, they have been printed using hand-carved wooden movable type. The typeface, which Xu Bing selected after extensive research, is in a style commonly used in the late Ming dynasty.¹² The pages are laid out in the recognizable formats of encyclopedic works: tables of contents, titles, subheadings, quotations, annotations, glossaries, and a consistent numbering system. Overall, the installation might be taken as a monumental celebration of Chinese print culture, an interpretation that would come more easily to people who cannot read Chinese. For any attempt to read the open volumes results in a profoundly unsettling frustration. The books are filled with

asemic characters designed by Xu Bing in perfect conformity with the principles that govern existing characters, but they defy any attempt to read them. They were created using new combinations of the five basic strokes of Chinese writing, or standard semantic elements combined with meaningless ones. In this way four thousand new characters were created; Xu Bing chose this number because it is a common estimate of the number of characters known by the average literate person. Moreover, as Lydia Liu has pointed out, “the majority of Xu Bing’s *Tianshu* characters range between fifteen and twenty-two strokes. The character with the least number of strokes contains three strokes and the character with the most has more than thirty-seven. This is consistent with the pattern we observe across the existing data in the Chinese writing system. The extraordinary closeness that his characters bear to conventional written characters can thus be mathematically accounted for” (73). Xu Bing spent four years carving these characters into wood blocks to make the movable type. At one point, having discovered that his characters were three millimeters too big for the format, he redid two thousand of them. The books were printed at a factory specializing in high-quality reproductions of antique books.

The contrast between the meticulous accuracy of the books and the disconcerting illegibility of their contents creates the effect that Xu Bing set out to achieve. The work, he tells us, arose out of a profound weariness with culture itself. During the liberated period after the Cultural Revolution ended, he says,

I read so much and participated in so many cultural activities that my mind was in a state of chaos. My psyche had been clogged with all sorts of random things. I felt uncomfortable, like a person suffering from starvation who had just gorged himself. It was at that point that I considered creating a book that would clean out these feelings. (“Artist’s View” 99)

That the artist chose to express his critique through a book was almost inevitable; for, as Maurice Blanchot has asserted, “Culture is linked to the book. The book as repository and receptacle of knowledge is identified with knowledge” (471). So the four volumes that, in multiple copies, make up the single overwhelming *Book from the Sky* bristle with all the apparatuses of a scholarly work, recognizable as such despite their illegibility. The encyclopedic ambition of the work is reflected in its original title, which may be translated as *Mirror to*

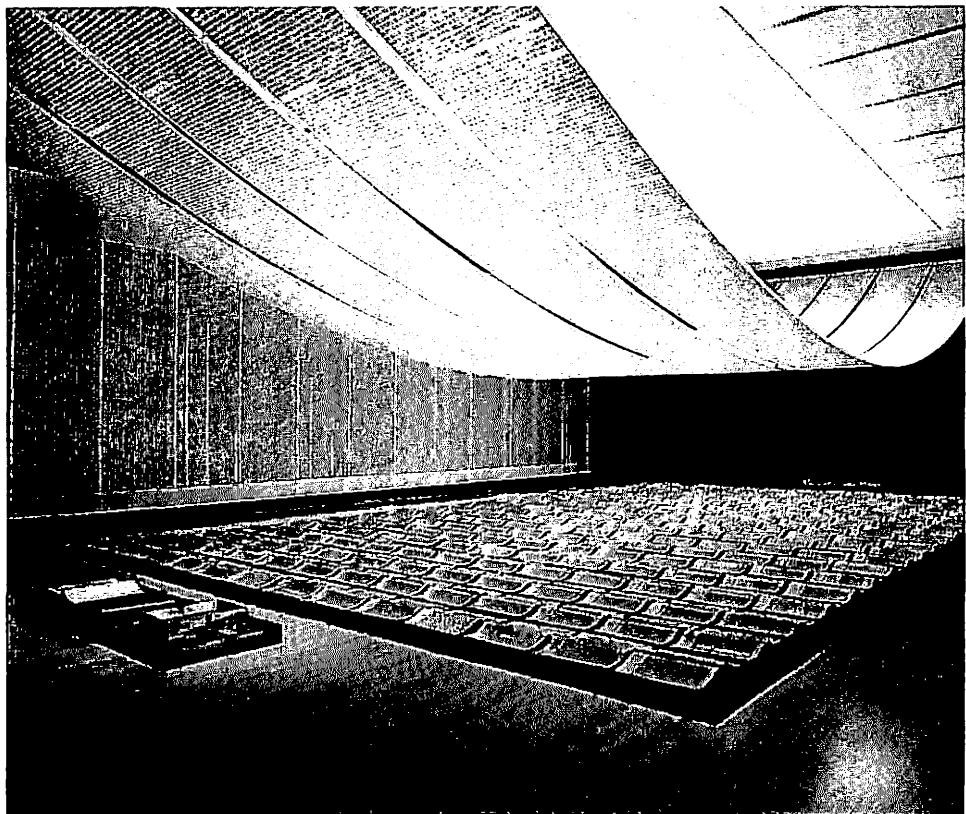


FIGURE 3.17. Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, 1987–91. Mixed-media installation: hand-printed books and scrolls printed from blocks inscribed with “false” Chinese characters. Installation view at Crossings/Traversées, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1998. Copyright Xu Bing Studio.

Analyze the World: The Century's Final Volume. The first part of this title echoes that of certain encyclopedic works from remote periods of Chinese history (Liu 67); the second part refers to the dates of the work's creation, 1987–91. The artist discarded this title in favor of the one by which the work is now known, *Tianshu*. The final title was provided by a viewer who did not intend it as a compliment: in colloquial Chinese, *tianshu* means "writing that makes no sense." However, in a book from the sky, or from heaven, this absence of sense could also be linked to the glossolalia (or in this case, glyptolalia) of religious revelations. As Roger T. Ames has pointed out, in certain Daoist scriptures, *tianshu* is the first of eight kinds of esoteric writing: "a style of complex writing that in prizes the mysterious and concealing what is most real, befuddles the eyes" (37). The title, then, is as undecidable as the work itself, which generates many meanings because it is itself without a meaning. Xu Bing comments: "People have so many perspectives on *Book from the Sky* because the work itself is empty. The work does not present any clear message" ("Artist's View" 99). Given the asemic nature of the work, a useful gloss on the artist's statement would be Roland Barthes's awareness of the relation between writing and emptiness, an awareness fostered by his travels in the East. To return to a passage quoted earlier: "Writing is, after all, in its way, a *satori*," Barthes says. "It creates an emptiness of language. And it is also an emptiness of language which constitutes writing" (*Empire* 4). This is supported by the very fact that Xu Bing was able to create a shadow vocabulary of the same number of characters known by literate readers. He was able to do this because the five basic kinds of strokes that make up any Chinese character, however complex it may be, are themselves without meaning: they are asemic. They take on meaning only when arranged in certain configurations, which then become familiar cultural entities. John Cayley's comments are pertinent here:

Characters are the graphic atoms of Chinese writing, of the Chinese system of inscription, by which I mean that if you have anything "less" than a character what you have is not an atom of language but a mere sub-atomic assemblage of graphic marks. . . . [Xu Bing] was fortunate in the "atomic structure" of his language in that it has *many* atoms, a large set of distinct atomic elements with elaborate and accessible internal structures. Thus, it was relatively easy for him to create new *unreadable* atoms, consonant with the existing atomic system. (29)

The elaborate internal structures of Chinese characters are material and graphic, consisting of strokes deployed within a roughly square space. Cayley goes on to compare the atomic and subatomic nature of Chinese writing to the relatively impoverished graphics of Western writing: “The ‘atoms’ of our predominant system of inscription, which is alphabetic, are relatively few in number and, graphically, they are composed from a relatively small number of marks and differences” (29).

In a subsequent work, Xu Bing fused these characteristics of Chinese and Western writing systems. His *Square Word Calligraphy* of 1994 (Figure 3.18) seems at first glance to be made up of Chinese characters. If one takes the time to look more closely, the “characters” reveal themselves as English words whose letters have been arranged in a squared format, with some serving as “internal structures” and all of them rendered through the traditional strokes of Chinese calligraphy. Thus what at first may appear illegible and “exotic” to a Western viewer suddenly comes into focus as familiar. In contrast, Chinese viewers would expect to be able to read these characters, but find that they cannot. The *Square Word Calligraphy* installation takes the form of a fully equipped classroom, complete with desks, two manuals beautifully printed in Square Word Calligraphy, inkstones, brushes, and an instructional video. Visitors who are willing to take the time will experience a thorough and meticulous training in classical Chinese calligraphy, emphasizing such things as correct posture, method of holding the brush, the order in which the strokes are to be made, and the quality to be aimed for in each one. At the same time, the students will always be aware that what they are learning is something that they supposedly already knew, English words. Those words have become defamiliarized through a spatial reorganization like the one to which Dotremont subjected his sentence about the Mongolian train. To change the physical shape of words from the linearity of English to the squared format of Chinese is to disrupt patterns of thought that have been inculcated to the point that they seem natural. As with Dotremont, this may lead to the realization that one has always written Chinese—that is, that marks, however elegant they may be, are themselves without meaning and become writing only through the kind of cultural shaping that is represented by the classroom.

Xu Bing’s calligraphy classroom enacts in microcosm many of the dynamics that characterize the West’s relation to Chinese writing. The artist hopes



FIGURE 3.18. Xu Bing, textbook and red line tracing book from *An Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy*, 2000. Text and tracing books, brushes, ink. Copyright Xu Bing Studio.

that Square Word Calligraphy will spread throughout the globe, and to this end he is creating a computer program that will convert any word entered in the Western alphabet into Square Word Calligraphy (Erickson 70). This does not make Chinese a universal language, but it does fuse it with the currently dominant language. And if Square Word Calligraphy becomes widespread, familiarity with it will make Chinese less exotic to Western eyes. In his instruction manual, Xu Bing promises that learning to make these characters “will help us rediscover things that have been forgotten and now seem strange to us. For actually, these things have always belonged to us” (quoted in Erickson 70). Foremost among these things must be the beauty of Chinese calligraphy—which, despite Michaux’s strictures against other, conventionalized versions of calligraphy, exemplifies in its strokes the pure expressive energy that he valued above either the verbal or the pictorial. The recurrent overemphasis on Chinese characters that have a pictorial element perhaps has to do with the awareness that Chinese words are written in a spatial rather than a linear format. This suggests to poets like Pound the possibility of breaking free from the constraints of an all-too-familiar language. But it also suggests a breaking apart: because Chinese characters, from a Western viewpoint, can so easily be seen as markings floating free from any recognizable meaning, they have become inspirations for asemic art. Revelations and revisions such as these, however, are not confined to the West. The Chinese themselves can be brought to view their writing as something other, something alien. This happens when artists from within their own culture baffle and stimulate them through work that rewrites the very idea of writing.

chapter 4

THREE FOR TODAY

*Michael Jacobson, Rosaire Appel,
and Christopher Skinner*

Michael Jacobson: Action and Noise

Creator of some of the most noteworthy work in contemporary asemic, Michael Jacobson is also a tireless promoter of other artists in the genre. His Post-Aemic Press publishes asemic writing “and beyond”; he curated the first large-scale exhibition of asemic art in the United States;¹ and his website The New Post-Literate serves as a constantly changing gallery of asemic work across a wide spectrum. He sees himself as the counterpart of Tim Gaze, trailblazer and publisher of *Aemic* magazine—though he takes a rather different line: “Tim is the calm Buddhist sage of the movement. I am the crazed-astronaut-monk exploring internal-space and cyberspace with the most heavily distorted writing I can muster” (*Works* 142).² In 2013 Gaze and Jacobson worked together to produce *An Anthology of Aemic Handwriting*.

It was Gaze who introduced Jacobson to the term *asemic*, and the movement it signified. This gave a home and a new name to what Jacobson had already been doing for years, only he called it “alien” writing.³ His practice had been inspired by a chance encounter with Max Ernst’s *Maximiliana or the Illegal Practice of Astronomy*, which includes many pages of what we now designate as asemic characters (Plate 3). This book, Jacobson says, was “the biggest early influence on my asemic writing,” and it remains “the single work I return to most” (116, 147). Lettrism, Mirtha Dermisache, and the Voynich manuscript were other influences. “Around this time,” he says, “I also became interested in the history of writing, especially the more visual forms of writing like hieroglyphs and, to be more specific, the generously beautiful Rongorongo script” (142). Rongorongo is in fact itself asemic, though not intentionally so. A writing system that seems to have evolved spontaneously and remains undeciphered

to this day, it is Easter Island's *other* mystery, besides the enormous brooding heads for which the island is famous. Carved into irregular wooden tablets, the writing is laid out in bands; this may reflect less permanent versions inscribed between the flutings of banana leaves (Fischer 386). The glyphs consist of stylized human or animal shapes and geometrical ones.

The asemic script of Jacobson's first novella, *The Giant's Fence* (Figure 4.1), resembles Rongorongo in a number of ways. Foremost is the fact that the writing is laid out in bands, unvarying in their width and their ruler-sharp evenness. Only at rare intervals does the text break open to form boxes or circles, circles that enclose a center marked with a small circle around a dot. This circular configuration might allude to the primitive Finnish labyrinths known as *Jatulintarha*, whose name Jacobson adopted as the original title of his manuscript. In English, this translates as *The Giant's Yard*; Jacobson has preferred *Fence*, as a better fit for his even, dense bands of writing. As unvarying as those bands is the thickness of the lines that form the characters: these are not fluctuating, breathing lines like those in Chinese calligraphy. What do fluctuate, in a seemingly inexhaustible variety, are the characters themselves. There are no evident repetitions, as there would be for a script capable of being decoded. Nor are there breaks between word units or even between individual characters, which often nestle into each other, protruding or receding. A single drawn line is often shared by one or more characters; it's difficult to tell, in fact, when a line has actually ended, as opposed to having branched off or changed direction. All this produces an effect of rich tumultuousness.

At the same time, there is something like the pictorial element of Rongorongo: "something like" because it is hardly ever explicit. Every so often a recognizable image will appear on the page, but for the most part images are only hinted at. Perhaps a dot or a circle will suggest an eye, a bent line will suggest a leg, or the script will seem to form a fish, a house, a target. These moments may be accounted for by the Rorschach effect, and thus would have their source in the viewer's imagination; but they may also be the residue of the artist's imagination. Jacobson says that *The Giant's Fence* is written in a "trans-symbolic" script, a term that becomes clearer when he describes his creative process:

When I begin an asemic text, I will either do some automatic writing or snatch a shape from the surrounding environment. I start simply and



FIGURE 4.1. Michael Jacobson, page from *The Giant's Fence*, 2005.

develop complexity. Usually the signs begin as recognizable symbols that, through subsequent generations, become abstract designs whose origin eventually becomes obscure even to myself, the creator of the piece. (125)

This indicates that a certain pictorial element is present from the beginning, but then becomes folded into and subsumed by the chirographic element, which has its own impulsion. “I’m particularly interested,” Jacobson says, “in exploring the moment when a simple line on a page begins to have meaning” (124–25). The meaning he is referring to is not semantic but gestural, as he goes on to explain: “It’s very hard to write a gesture completely devoid of meaning or to write a gesture that’s completely filled with meaning” (125). The drawn line extends itself between these alternatives; it develops in the way that Klee and Michaux recognized, with a certain will of its own. The script of *The Giant’s Fence*, then, hovers between two determinants: the kind of linear associations that produce doodles, and the will of an artist conscious of his influences and his intentions. The first determinant accounts for the copious variety of the characters; the second accounts for the consistency that identifies them as belonging to the same graphic family.

That family is related to urban graffiti, which according to Jacobson is the other major influence on *The Giant’s Fence*, besides Rongorongo. Especially when the line closes upon itself, it produces the overlapping chunky units that are commonly found in graffiti. On city walls such units are not always letters, even stylized letters; there is an asemic graffiti that connects to Jacobson’s asemic novella. *The Giant’s Fence* is thus drawn simultaneously from contemporary and primitive cultures, while creating a distinctive idiom of its own.

Action Figures, Jacobson’s second asemic novella (Figure 4.2), does something similar: it is “a collection of street hieroglyphs,” he says, and “probably my most gentle and accessible text” (125). That is because the signs here are recognizable figures, and so are more easily read as representing narrative actions. “Action figures” was of course the name given to jointed plastic figures marketed to boys, in order to avoid calling them “dolls.” The prototype was G.I. Joe, which appeared in 1964 and was followed by numerous heroes and superheroes. Jacobson has hijacked the term to describe the rhythmic variety of postures by figures that are equally varied. Only their blocky “feet” remain

relatively constant; hands are extended at intervals; but the upper part of the body might be anything. The figures progress across an even friezelike band, an expansion of the bands that contain the writing of *The Giant's Fence*. There is a sense of movement, but it does not arise from the *élan* of the strokes that form the figures, as it does in Michaux's *Mouvements*. The linear idiom here is jerky, crooked: its shifts of direction create blocky outlines with an excessive number of corners and projections. Following the publication of *Action Figures*, Jacobson put on hold a projected third book of asemic hieroglyphs because "the style reminded me too much of Keith Haring's work" (120)—and indeed we can see a tendency in that direction here, with both artists indebted to the stylizations of graffiti. Jacobson, however, adds the hieroglyphic element—that is, the sense that all this is meant to be a version of writing. It is very much a pictorial writing because of the gestural energy of the characters as well as a few quite explicit images: a figure being drawn up by rays into a flying saucer (92); an American flag on a television set, and next to it, a figure clearly in the process of hanging itself, noose draped around its neck (107). For the most part, though, the energy of these action figures arises, as in *The Giant's Fence*, from Jacobson's astonishingly fertile linear imagination. Again, despite the stylistic coherence there seems to be no repetition in the figures. This heads off any possibility of a code to be deciphered, like that in the Sherlock Holmes story "The Adventure of the Dancing Men." These dancing men, women, animals, and god-knows-what speak only to each other, if that. We are allowed to watch, to wonder, and to read whatever narrative comes to us as a result.

Unlike in a conventional narrative, though, there is no "sense of an ending," as Frank Kermode has called it: the feeling, even before the last page, that things are drawing inevitably to a close. *Action Figures* just stops. This is different from *The Giant's Fence*, which is framed by a formal graphic configuration, both at its beginning and at its end. In fact, it is the same configuration: two concentric circles of asemic writing surrounding the small circle with a dot in its center, and supported by symmetrical wings of asemic writing that extend on either side and evoke a base. This configuration from the opening of *The Giant's Fence* appears again at its close, upside down and reversed. Yet these framing devices seem entirely arbitrary: there is no sense, in the text that precedes the end, of an acceleration or a change in the writing. Judging from this example, Paul Valéry's often-quoted (or rather, paraphrased) dictum that a

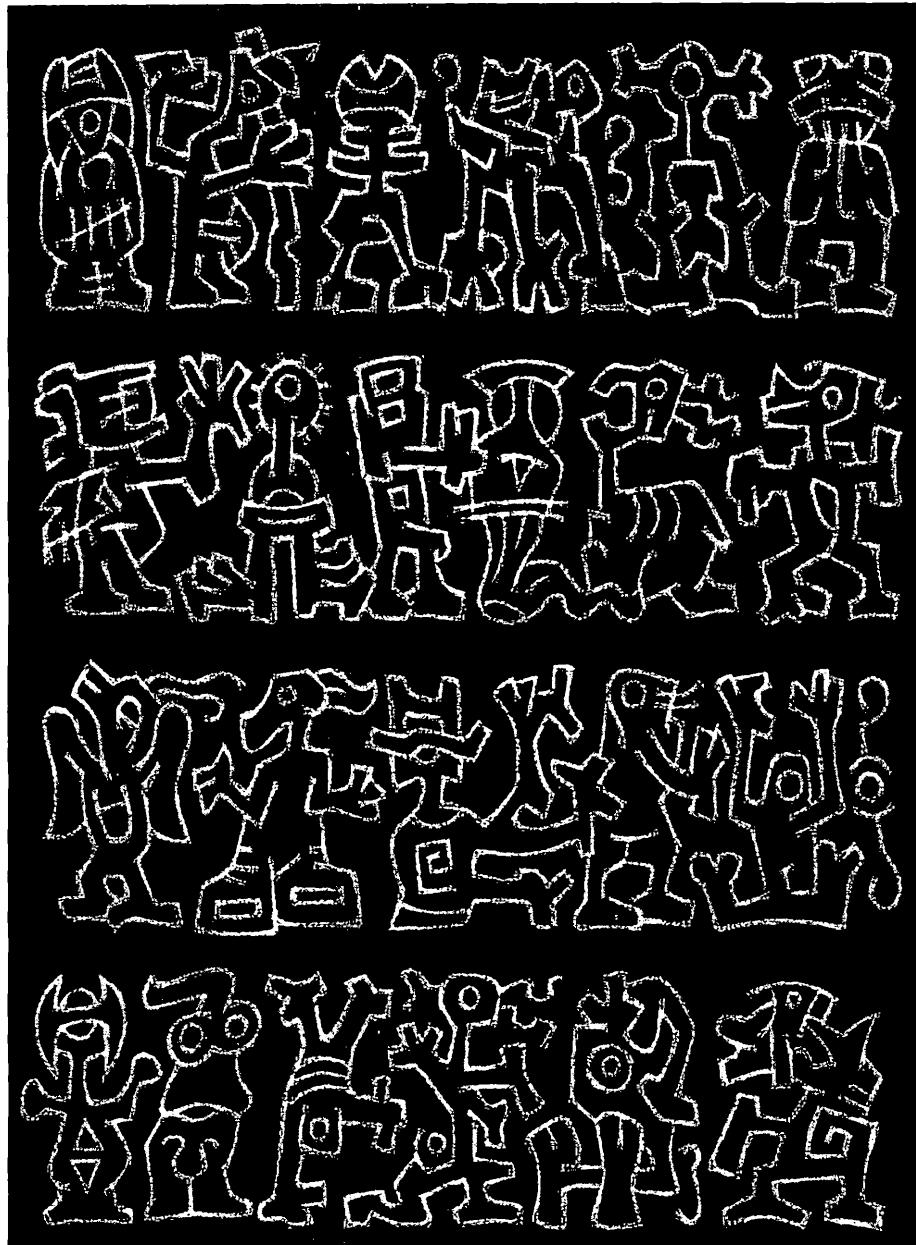


FIGURE 4.2. Michael Jacobson, page from *Action Figures*, 2011.

work is never finished, only abandoned, seems to apply particularly to asemic writing. Despite what I have called the narrative elements that can appear in asemic works, we are unlikely to find in them anything like a narrative *shape*. Of course we cannot actually see the shape of a narrative: it is a mental construction, a translation of the message-bearing words of the text, which have accumulated line by line, into a spatial configuration. Moreover, it is a spatial configuration the significance of which is difficult to sum up, even though it is apprehended. The aftereffect of a whole novel, then, may have the force of a single gesture. In this regard all the articulate words of a text lead us in the end to something that cannot be articulated, a shape like that of an asemic character, enigmatic but charged with significance.

Jacobson produces action of another sort in his animations of asemic writing. This is not a matter of making figures dance, or indeed of figures at all. Rather, a work like *Mynd Eraser* uses something more closely related to conventional handwriting, but the lines on the page twitch and contort in rapid-fire looped sequences. The work exists in two versions. The first version, posted on Jacobson's online gallery The New Post-Literate, is described as an "Asemic Kinetic gif blog novel (blovel)" in nine chapters, each chapter consisting of five to seven gif frames. It opens with bold angular lines of flickering asemic writing. In the third frame, though, Jacobson introduces a strobe effect, with the black lines not only twitching but alternately changing to an acid green. In the fourth frame, flickering black lines on white change to white lines on black. These techniques fully justify the warning at the head of the work: **MAY CAUSE SEIZURES**. Certainly in some sense the mind of the viewer is erased, emptied of anything but this frantic scribbling. However, an adjoining note indicates that *mynd* is not just a spelling affectation but the Icelandic word for picture, image, or film. As *Mynd Eraser* progresses, the configurations and colorings become increasingly rich—without, however, letting up for a moment on the rhythmic intensity. This is not writing that will lie down peacefully in lines; it aggressively jumps about on the page, jumps out at its viewers, assaults them. Asemic writing, Jacobson has said, "captures the techno-anxiety & information overload of post-literate culture better than traditional forms of literary expression" (118). This does not apply to *The Giant's Fence* or *Action Figures*, but it is certainly true of a work like *Mynd Eraser*.

The second version of *Mynd Eraser*, found on YouTube, is described as the

“full novella with spoken word.” It is certainly fuller—thirteen chapters rather than nine—but it is hardly accurate to refer to the “spoken word,” since there are no words but rather a guttural sort of chanting, at times reaching up into high-pitched squeals, modulating later into electronically produced sounds. This kind of sound track is not necessarily something superadded to asemic writing, but is already, perhaps, implied by it. In 1998 Jim Leftwich, in a letter to Tim Gaze, wrote:

i have been attempting to read some of my asemic works aloud, it's surprising what occurs, a sort of mutated letteral growl and hiss, recognizable letter sounds which segue in and out of asemic vocalizations, i have no interest at all in performance, but i may get around to making a tape at some point, but i need a little more practice before i'll be willing to do that, it's interesting, though, that i'm finding the asemic texts to be something other than silence, they lack signification, which is probably their strongest allure, but i think they are not lacking in sound. (*Asemic Writing 3*)

Jacobson is, then, attempting to give a sonic body to what is already implied in his asemic writing. As that writing is here a visually aggressive one, it is paired with a sound track of harrowing noise, or rather noise music. That term is of course an oxymoron: as Paul Hegarty has noted, when noise is put to use by composers it can no longer be fully noise (“Residue,” quoted in Priest 132). Despite a historical allusiveness that ranges from throat singing to electronica, though, most auditors will categorize these sounds as noise: they assault us, and are intended to. They correspond to the visual assault made upon the viewer by the aggressive twitch and flicker of the asemic writing.

This pairing of asemic writing with noise is not an isolated case. “Asemic writing relates to noise music in a way similar to the beat writers’ fascination with jazz,” says Jacobson; “many asemic writers listen to noise music and even create it themselves” (140). The most obvious parallel between the two is that in their respective media both are generally considered to be without meaning. Noise in fact is often described as that which blocks a meaning that would otherwise be audible: “the interference that breaks up a telephone call, the scratch on a musical recording, the hiss of the mechanical apparatus that allows for playback of an audio recording” (Forrest, n.p.). This is not, however,

how asemic writing operates; it is not blocking an already existent meaning that is struggling to get out. Nor, if we push it a little further, is it really how noise operates. As early as 1929, the composer Henry Cowell, in an essay titled “The Joys of Noise,” pointed out that noise is an inescapable component of music: when the sound of a violin, for instance, is analyzed it is found to consist not exclusively of periodic (that is, musical) vibrations but also of accompanying vibrations that are irregular. These are part of the tonal experience of the instrument. When vintage recordings were remastered using the new CD technology, as they were in the case of the great tango masters, all noise was eliminated. The result was the removal, along with hisses and scratches, of the depth and emotional resonance of the originals. “It is noise that binds the signal,” says Aden Evens; “noise is the reservoir of sense, the depth in which sounds connect to each other, the difference whose modulation is signal” (15). Music, then, is modulated noise. Asemic writing functions like noise to the degree that it forgoes the signal function of writing. But it functions like noise *music* in that it frames and draws attention to what would normally be ignored or avoided, the matrix that makes writing possible at all.

Asemic writing reminds us that writing is material, that it depends on a materiality that is meaningless in itself. It is assigned meaning (which is not material) by convention and habit; and it does this by graphic configurations alone. Those configurations can be shifted, as Xu Bing shifted the components that make up Chinese characters. In the case of *Mynd Eraser* we watch the configurations shift before our eyes, taking on a disconcerting life of their own. They act out a speeded-up, almost cartoony version of what writing systems do. Instead of lying docile on the page, content to pass on the writer’s thoughts, writing actively shapes those thoughts. That shaping is often enough a misshaping, which proceeds according to writing’s material exigencies and the patterns that have evolved with the language. In contrast to the vague images that characterize a writer’s preliminary thinking, and in contrast to the vagueness of a reader’s associative response, writing is definite, literally incisive. It began as incisions on clay tablets, and it retains that sharpness in the black-on-white grapheme. As Flusser describes it, that sharpness is all too prone to violence:

Let etymology bear witness once again. The English *to write* (that in fact means “scratch,” as does the Latin “scribere”) reminds us that *scratching*

and *tearing* come from the same stem. The scratching stylus is an incisor, and one who writes inscriptions is an incising tiger; he tears images to pieces. Inscriptions are the torn pieces, the cadavers of images; they are images that fell victim to the murderous incisor teeth of writing. (*Does Writing Have a Future?* 14)

So, concealed by habit, there is a certain terror in any text. Jacobson's animation pulls away the veil of habit to show us something like Flusser's vision of text. The *mynd* that is a film of writing in action assaults the *mind*, erases its sense of autonomy, and reveals a power in writing that we may have suspected but never really saw.

Rosaire Appel: Comics and Notations

In all my work I am exploring the between of reading/looking/listening. My subject is, basically, visual language. Using a combination of abstract comics and asemic writing, I develop sequences that suggest rather than nail down situations, locations, and moods. (*Sample Book*)

So states Rosaire Appel, the most versatile and exploratory of today's asemic artists, who constantly tries out new methods and experiments with new materials. We have already encountered her *Beach Language*—photographs of chance configurations of sticks and debris that evoke Chinese characters. Another example of her unusual vision is the short video *Liquid Calligraphy*, which is posted on YouTube. The introduction reads, "A piece of the Hudson River tries to pass as asemic writing." What follows are sinuous shifting lines that do almost seem like a script, liberated from fixity. What they really are is the high-contrast reflection of a piling in moving water, turned ninety degrees and accompanied by noise music reminiscent of river traffic. Appel uses a wide range of artistic methods: xerography, digital art, video, photography, rubbings, freehand drawing, aleatory practices, erasure (of everything but the punctuation marks), and canceling out (producing something like Man Ray's *Poem*; Figure 3.2). Consequently, she cannot really be pinned down or classified. But we can take up the cue that she gives us in her comments above about her foregrounding of "abstract comics and asemic writing" in order to consider the relationship between these two modes, not just in Appel's work but generally.

Like asemic writing, abstract comics existed before they were given that name. Andrei Molotiu (himself an asemic artist) consolidated the genre in 2009 with his important book *Abstract Comics: The Anthology*. For that book, he not only collected existing examples but also commissioned new ones; and his blog *Abstract Comics* has kept the momentum going. In the introduction to his anthology, Molotiu explains what *abstract* means when it is applied to comics:

While in painting the term applies to the lack of represented objects in favor of an emphasis on form, we can say that in comics it additionally applies to the lack of a narrative excuse to string panels together, in favor of an increased emphasis on the formal elements of comics that, even in the absence of a (verbal) story, can create a feeling of sequential drive, the sheer rhythm of narrative or the rise and fall of a story arc. (n.p.)

It is not enough to eliminate the speech balloons, then; for many comics are wordless, acting out their stories by a kind of pantomime, as in Jim Woodring's *Frank*, for instance. Abstract comics may evoke narrative forces, but they are never mere illustrations of a story. The sense of sequence, motion, and development that is intrinsic to ordinary comics arranged in panels is freed, in abstract comics, from the task of conveying a narratively determined meaning. In their own way, then, abstract comics are asemic.

One example may make this clearer: a piece by Andy Bleck that is included in Molotiu's anthology (Plate 4). Not nearly as abstract as many are, it executes a play on the panel format—a common tactic in abstract comics. Here the panels are morphed into cartoony organic shapes joined by ligaments and supported at the bottom by rudimentary feet. Within the panels there is a sequence where figures become progressively more like script, indeed like asemic script. In the top left panel, a humanoid figure—it could be a relative of Jacobson's action figures—reacts to a more abstract one, which then seems to attack and absorb it. At the end we have a configuration reminiscent of Arabic calligraphy, which is also comparable to certain works by Dotremont (Figure 5.3).

Abstract comics abandon the story line, but it took some time before Appel did so. She had studied drawing and painting in the late 1960s at the newly formed New York Studio School, but then turned to writing. Two of her novels were published by FC2 in the early 1990s: *Mabel in Her Twenties* and *transiT*

were influenced by writers like Gertrude Stein and Alain Robbe-Grillet. The aim of both novels was, in Appel's words, "to keep a quality of unexpectedness, to create a verbal object that could be re-read/re-encountered without being used up" (personal communication, November 30, 2017). In pursuit of this goal she moved from verbal to visual narratives. Eventually, inspired by the contact sheets for photographs that she was making at that time, she added frames and segments within these works. The relation of this practice to comic-book art was brought home to her through a 2006 exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York, *Masters of American Comics*:

There was tremendous energy in those framed black and white pages—I wanted to turn them upside down to see them abstractly without reading either the figures or the words. I like the look of comics. I like how the gap between frames can be slight as a sigh or deep as a black hole. But once words appear, I'm pulled away from looking. This push/pull energy between words and images, this conflict between looking and reading, interests me. Issues of language, both visual and verbal, are and have been the foundation of my practice. ("Interview")

Appel does not always include asemic writing in her abstract comics, but when she does the affinity between the two modes is clear, even when nothing else is. As an example, take a page from her book *You Have the Right to Remain Silent*, subtitled *An Unclaimed Nightmare* (Figure 4.3). Its use of panels links it to comic books to some degree, but the overall effect is more akin to certain practices in traditional Japanese books: "limited color, simplified line, sequential development of some kind of narrative" ("Interview"). An exhibit of such books at the New York Public Library helped to point her toward the comic-book format—all the more because the exhibit was held at the same time as *Masters of American Comics*. The asemic writing on this page is evocative of Japanese characters, though these are not consistently aligned in the usual vertical format: the top panel places them within bulbous shapes that might remind a viewer of speech balloons. Another such shape, in the middle panel, contains a purely visual delineation, even though its position above a shadowy group of figures would in a conventional comic imply their speech. A shadowy figure in the bottom panel might be extending a dark cloak. The fact that some of the shapes here evoke human figures does not mean that we have

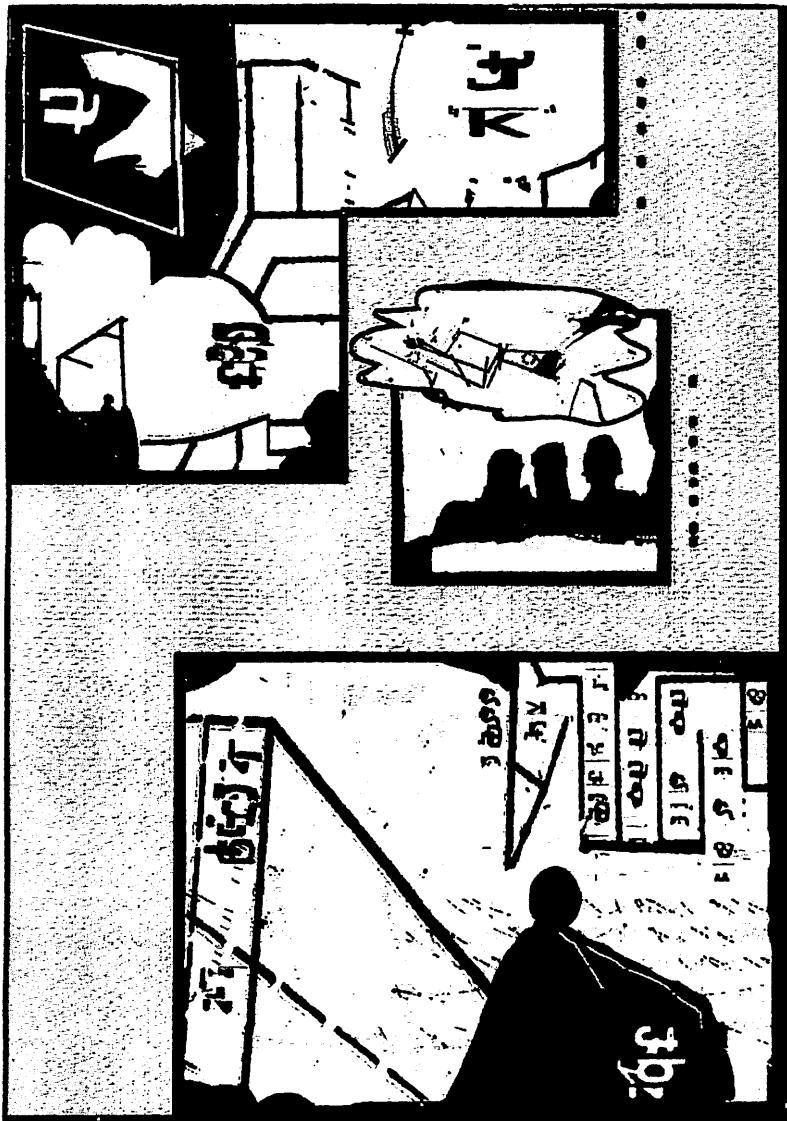


FIGURE 4.3. Rosaire Appel, page from *You Have the Right to Remain Silent*, 2012.

left the territory of abstract comics; for according to Molotiu, the genre can include “those comics that contain some representational elements, as long as those elements do not cohere into a narrative or even into a unified narrative space” (*Abstract Comics* “Introduction”). In any case the shapes are indefinite, and my readings of them are speculative, made within a territory of “between.” As opposed to what Appel calls “functional stories,” her versions, she writes, “emerge and dissolve back into themselves, leaving energy traces in the margins” (*Untranslated 5*).

In the short essay “Chairs and Pigeons,” Appel expresses this dynamic of emerging and dissolving through the image of a cloud. She extends to the indeterminate forms of asemic writing the common tendency to assign recognizable shapes to indeterminate cloud forms:

What of the marks on these pages? Looks like language—but doesn’t smell or taste like it. . . . Are these pre-words? Post-words? They are un-words, they resist wording. Their language is non-historical: with every reading you start from zero.

Still, these are not private, incomunicable, unsignifiable, non-suggestive, indecipherable gestures. Visual linguistics are a shared trait. You see a chair in a cloud, I see a chair. We communicate. Yet it doesn’t mean there’s a chair in the cloud. You see a chair, I see a pigeon, still there’s nothing to argue over. A cloud is still a cloud, its form is ordinarily wordless. (9)

Asemic writing in this view is opposed to the categorizing tendency of words, to the drive for precision, for the *mot juste*. Asemic scripts are generative, expansive. That doesn’t mean, though, that they are completely unmoored from any governing principles whatsoever: a cloud is still a cloud, and whatever thought processes take place in its viewer begin with the cloud’s shape, however momentary that may be. So it is with the marks on the page, whether these are the “unwords” of asemic writing or what Molotiu calls the “formal elements” of abstract comics. In both cases, whatever is generated in the viewer’s mind arises out of a material configuration that simultaneously anchors the response and elicits it.

A comic-book narrative may be driven by words, but it is always supported by a visual language; and some of the components of comic-book language

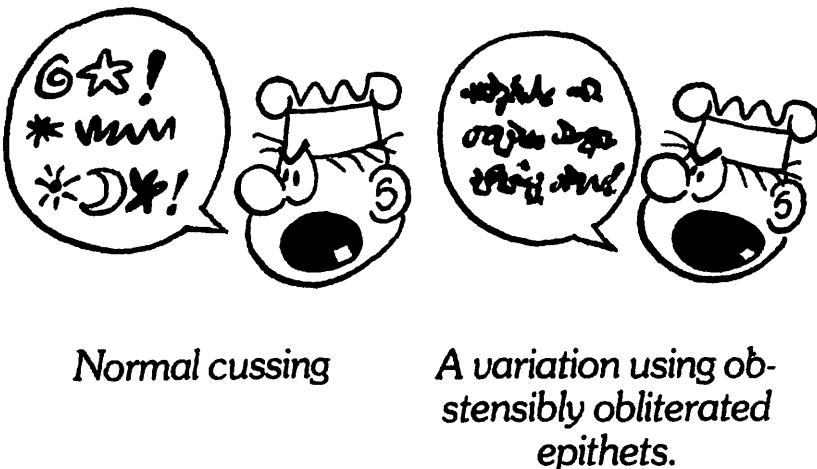


FIGURE 4.4. Cussing. From Mort Walker, *The Lexicon of Comicana*, 1980. Copyright 1980 Comicana, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

have striking affinities with asemic writing. In 1980 Mort Walker, the creator of *Beetle Bailey*, *Hi and Lois*, and numerous other comic strips, published a guide to cartooning conventions titled *The Lexicon of Comicana*. On the opening page he reminds us that “there are many types of writing besides the modern alphabet system”; and he presents the visual conventions of comic book art as a symbology. Familiar techniques are categorized, illustrated, and assigned whimsical names. The category of emanata, for instance, includes a variety of signs emanating from a character’s internal state, such as plewds—droplets of sweat produced by tension—or the disorienting, spiraling squeans and spurls of drunkenness. An especially rich category is maladicta: cursing or, as Walker puts it, cussing. Within it we find jars (spirals), quimps (planets), nittles (stars), and grawlixes (scribbles). In an example taken from Walker’s book (Figure 4.4), the left-hand cussing is made up of recognizable jars, quimps, and nittles; the right-hand cussing is entirely made up of grawlixes. Unsurprisingly, one comic-book critic, Marc van Elburg, has juxtaposed these markings with those of Michaux’s *Narration* (Figure 2.1). Both grawlixes and emanata can be

described in much the same way that Michaux described his asemic writing: as visible gestures on the page that reflect the “pre-gestures” of interior emotions. Fundamentally, though, the visual language of comics is less a matter of incidental conventions like grawlixes than of a certain syntax of composition: the placement and size of figures; the play of black areas and of lines; shifts in perspective; changes in panel size and configuration.⁴ When such elements are freed from the demands of narrative representation, they manifest a power that is all their own. Abstract comics allow artists to investigate this power in all its varieties through the combination of compositional elements.

For an exploratory artist like Rosaire Appel, it is natural to ask what effects will result from various combinations. One book of hers in particular does this: the 2016 *adds*. “Make a mark and add another” it begins; and this deceptively simple procedure is used to produce characters, configurations, patterns, and rhythms. Appel’s marks are made with felt-tip pens, all with the same broad nib, but with a full range of bright colors. “I make a series of orange marks across the pages, then add a red mark to each, then a green then the blue. It’s like a game. It’s a way to grow things” (personal communication, November 30, 2017). On some pages the individual marks used in the composition are presented separately, in a small cartouche; this emphasizes their status as elemental units. This book is then a theoretical investigation of “formal elements”—of the properties of marks when they are combined with other marks in various ways. The first page of *adds* (Plate 5) begins with writing, but the next page moves on to drawing:

As in writing, so in drawing: the kinds of marks—how they move,
where they go—familiar or strange, connected or separate—create
something to be read.

But it happens so fast you don’t notice: seeing happens before reading.

Appel has designed *adds* to make us *notice* what is happening when marks are made on a page. Her aim is akin to Jennifer Bartlett’s in *Rhapsody* or that of Josef Albers in *Homage to the Square*, though of course on a much more intimate scale: all these artists are exploring, in a systematic way, the possibilities of the media in which they work. At intervals Appel’s marked pages become reminiscent of asemic writing, but only as a subset of her investigation of mark-

ing in its broad sense. When she says, “My subject is, basically, visual language,” Appel really does mean to approach visual art as a language: “something to be read,” and something that—as Klee and Kandinsky stress—can be generated out of a certain syntax of line, shape, and color.

The notion of “visual language” can also be applied to systems of notation, a term that includes writing but is not confined to it. When thinking through the ways in which drawing is different from writing, Tim Ingold states that writing is a notation; drawing is not. Yet he admits that writing is a special case of drawing, “in which what is drawn comprises the elements of a notation” (122). Of course, drawing can be used to *represent* a notation while itself not being one; and this is the project of asemic writing. However, asemic can be extended beyond writing to other forms of notation.

Musical notation will be the first instance that comes to mind, and all the more readily as contemporary composers searching for more open forms—“ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds,” as Wallace Stevens has it—have created visual scores far removed from the orderly arrangement of notes on ruled lines. A landmark collection of these innovative scores is John Cage’s 1969 *Notations*, which in 2012 inspired Appel’s asemic music score *A Collection of See Songs*. During her time at the New York Studio School, Appel had heard talks by Cage and by Morton Feldman, who was the school’s director. When she later saw Cage’s book, it opened to her a new territory, a new way to conceive of marks and their effects. There are not all that many notes in Appel’s notation: on most of the 182 pages of *See Songs*, it is the five lines of the musical staff that are released from their stiff horizontality to curve and meander like ribbons (Figure 4.5). One can see a relation here to Flusser’s critique of the linearity of writing, and the way it affects our habits of conceiving time—musical time as well as historical. Improbably, this score has been translated into audible music by some of its readers: “A couple of people,” Appel says, “have spontaneously started singing a page as they looked at the book, and a music group in London actually made a recording from a few pages, using voices not instruments” (personal communication, November 30, 2017). The point of *See Songs*, however, is not to hear sounds physically but to listen. The difference, as Jean-Luc Nancy has pointed out, is that listening is active and creative, as opposed to the passive recognition of sounds that have already been assigned a meaning. “Perhaps we never *listen* to anything but the non-coded, what is not yet framed

in a system of signifying references,” he says; “and we never *hear* [entend] anything but the already encoded, which we decode” (36). Nancy’s point applies to asemic practices, which present something like a system of signifying references only so that we may be forced to go beyond it. And, since we are now considering music, his point applies as well to the element of noise music in Michael Jacobson’s work. Appel’s work is less noisy than Jacobson’s, but also invites us to listen to the “non-coded.” Recall that her work, as she says, is concerned with “the betweenness of reading/looking/listening.” These are not to be separated from each other, but make up a complex hybrid, as indicated by the slash marks. Listening is not to be confined to musically notated work like *See Songs*. For Appel, all of these activities partake of the same dynamic: a creative and active pursuit of something beyond or “between” the marks on the page. This is not something that is already there, but something that materializes through an attentive process that we can call, sometimes, listening. In an essay referencing Appel, Gerald L. Bruns invites us to “imagine an artwork undergoing, not a process of formation, but one of *materialization*—which is, one could argue, what happens when artworks cease to be intentional (and therefore recognizable) objects” (239).

Yet, as Appel states in “Chairs and Pigeons,” the fact that her markings dissolve, in the reader’s mind, into something beyond themselves does not mean that the form of those marks is irrelevant; *adds* is precisely about how differences in marks can produce different effects in one who encounters them. So Appel has explored other forms of notation to find out what differences might emerge. *Morpheme Pages*, in which “Chairs and Pigeons” appears, owes something to linguistics, as the book’s title indicates. In it, asemic signs are represented separately as in a primer; they may then be refound and recognized in the context of a facing page full of such signs. In Appel’s *Math Minus Math* actual mathematical signs are used for their visual value rather than their numerical ones, rearranged to form force fields that in their complexity evoke an arcane knowledge (Figure 4.6). These are stitched through with tiny verbal fragments that in the originals guided the numerical processes, such as “First we shall define,” “by the dotted line,” “therefore.” But as well there are more disconcerting axioms, such as “A gesture that’s absurd in system A, may be profound in system B, commonplace in system C, an inspiration in system D . . .”

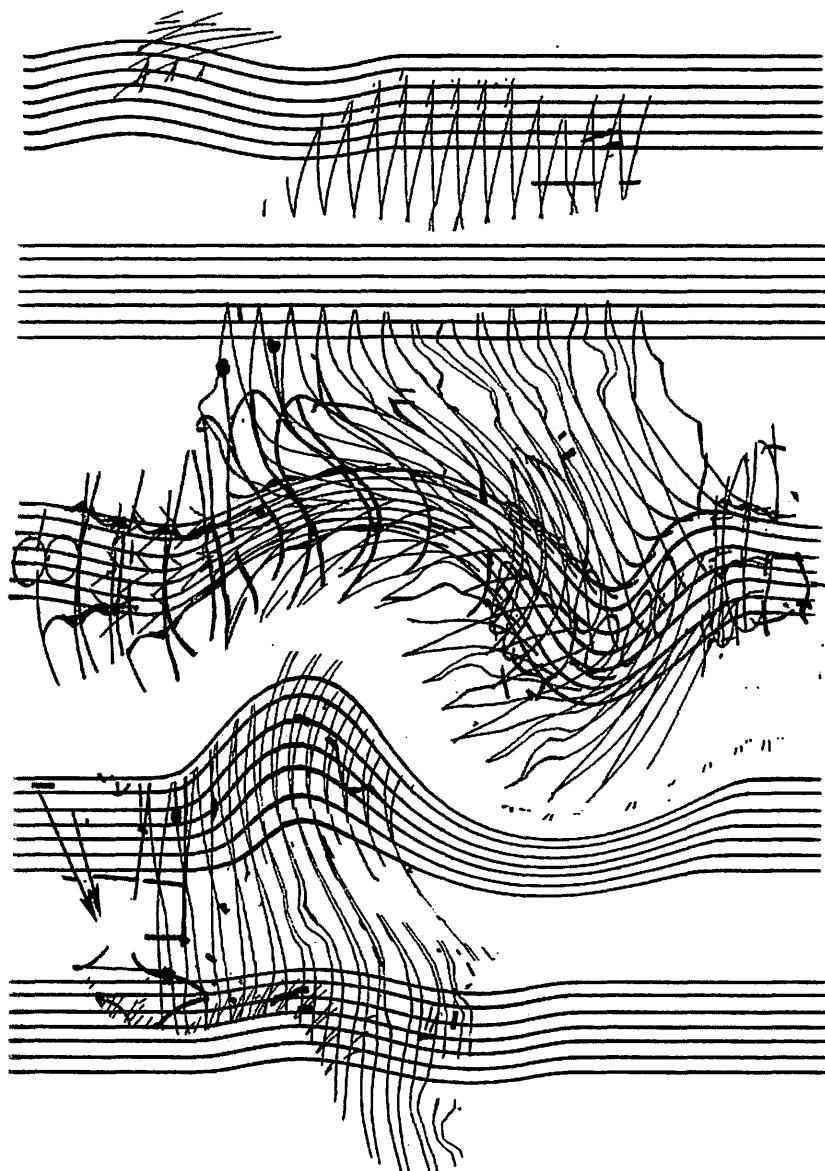


FIGURE 4.5. Rosaire Appel, page from *A Collection of See Songs*, 2012.

These are sentences taken from Appel's journals, displaced to a new context: this sentence, in fact, is about displacement and its effects. Another extract transferred to this book gives us further insight into Appel's intentions:

We like things to add up.
 We like to add.
 We think this makes sense
 And it keeps the mind out of
 trouble. (6)

Actually, to "add up" is not the same thing as to "add." Appel's own *adds* demonstrates an open-ended exploratory process that cannot really be said to "add up" in the sense of arriving at a final summation. So we have the sly dig "We think this makes sense" and its accompanying inference, that Appel's purpose here is precisely to get the mind into trouble.

Math Minus Math is very much about the mind and its relation to markings. This is evident in its two epigraphs:

When you look at this book, everything you see, i.e., everything you visually experience, is your construction: the thickness of the spine, the white color and rectangular shape of the pages, the black color and curved shape of the letters. . . .

David D. Hoffman, *Visual Intelligence*

I'm proposing that this whole system works by a set of reflexes—that thought is a very subtle set of reflexes which is potentially unlimited; you can add more and more and you can modify your reflexes.

David Bohm, *Thought as a System*

The first epigraph emphasizes the constructed nature of our experience, the habitual patterns by which we perceive; the second opens the possibility that these patterns can be modified, by adding. What is added here is a new and disconcerting use of the mathematical markings that are usually read as equivalents of concepts, concepts that are more important than the markings by which they are conveyed. "Math solutions" says Appel, "are praised for deep internal beauty, while their purely visual aspect usually slides by unnoticed"

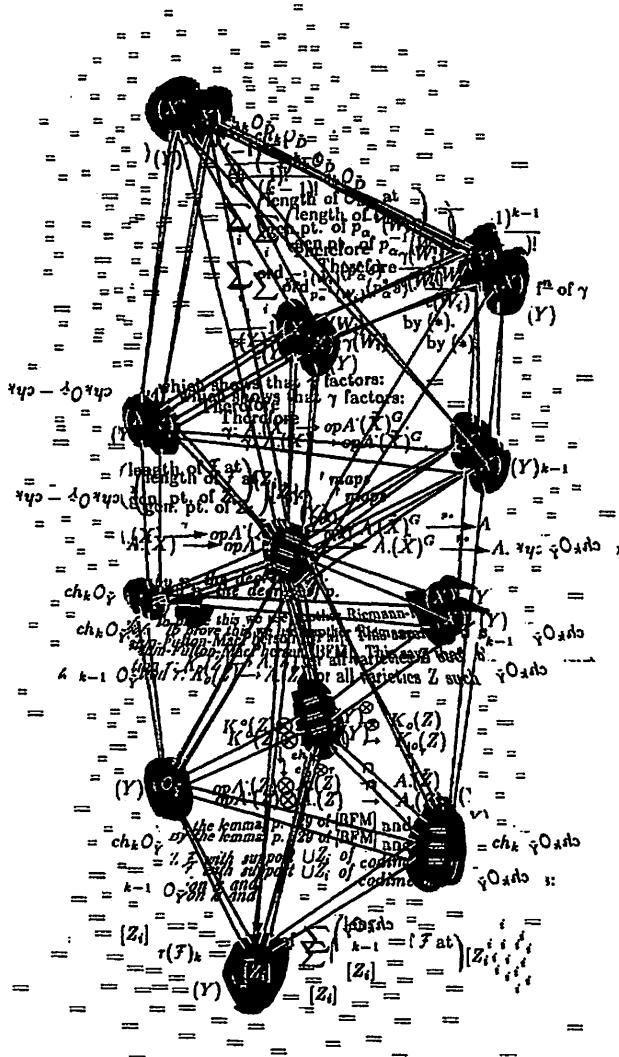
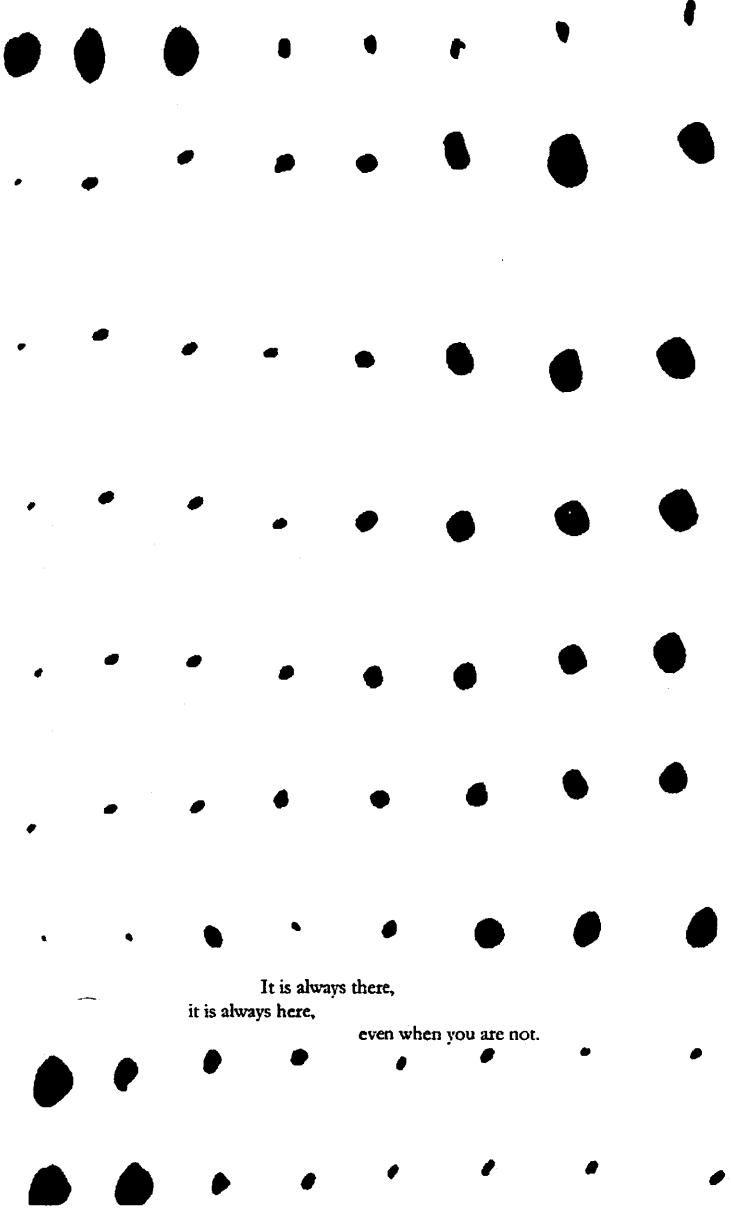


FIGURE 4.6. Rosaire Appel, page from *Math Minus Math*, 2009.

(personal communication, December 9, 2017). Certainly there is a beauty to mathematical markings, which is underscored by the ways that Appel treats them. But she also implies that the very notion of number depends on systems of marking. So, in striking contrast to the complex composition of most of the pages in the book, one of the pages (Figure 4.7) consists only of dots in lines and the cryptic statement “It is always there, it is always here, even when you are not.” It is tempting to focus immediately on that statement as providing the key to this page: we only need to decide what “it” is. But we may get further by first looking at the aligned dots in the context of mathematics. They evoke the physical basis of counting, the use of objects like pebbles: despite differences and irregularities, these lines of dots are equivalent to each other. The very fact that the dots are set in lines rather than in a heap makes it possible to count them, to add and to subtract. But counting, we should note, is not enumeration. Enumeration means the assignment of a number, that is, a conventional sign with an agreed-upon significance. Here, number is stripped of that significance just as asemic words are; and we are directed to read for a visual rather than a numerical value. We are also reminded how much of numerical value, of mathematics as a whole, depends on marks read according to convention; and this applies to more than mathematics. Signifying practices of many kinds define what we see (as worth noticing), how we see it (as the quotation from Hoffman indicates), and how we think about what we see (or perhaps simply how we think). Yet there is always something that extends beyond what can be added up or read or understood according to the logic of any signifying system: “It is always there . . .”

Appel’s treatments of notation, no matter in what form, do what Flusser asked us to do when looking at writing: to strip the marks before us of their habitual significance so that they appear before us as strange—and often strangely beautiful. They become abstract—that is to say, nonrepresentational—and this is so even when what is meant to be represented is itself an abstraction, as in the case of numbers. Abstract comics do something similar: if we accept Walker’s symbology, ordinary comics have an abstract element, so that here too Appel’s versions are abstractions of an abstraction. Finally, this sort of layering is true of asemic writing as a whole, no matter to what representational system its techniques may be applied.



It is always there,
it is always here,
even when you are not.

FIGURE 4.7. Rosaire Appel, page from *Math Minus Math*, 2009.

Christopher Skinner: Asemic Typography

"Asemic writing did not evolve from handwriting, it emerged from typewriting, and more specifically from typing on a keyboard for a computer screen" (n.p.). This statement by Jim Leftwich seems at first downright perverse. It contradicts one of the main theses of this book so far: that asemic writing is a reaction to the dominance of keyboarding, a return to the emotive and artistic qualities of freehand writing and an adventurous extension of them. Of course, asemic writing's awareness of signs as material markings grew out of a comparable awareness displayed by concrete poetry using its favorite tool, the typewriter. According to Leftwich, though, in the late 1990s visual poetry moved on to another technology: "Many of us were using the computer to make similar works. Among other things, we were breaking up the letter into its component parts. From a letteral practice of experimental poetry it was only a very small step to move to a letteral and gestural practice of quasi-calligraphic mark-making" (personal communication, November 20, 2017). Let's linger on the idea of "breaking up the letter into its component parts," which is perhaps the most evident link between asemic writing and typography.

A good example of that link is the work of Cecil Touchon, a Texan artist who moved to Cuernevaca for a number of years. During that time, his *Fusion Series* of collage paintings, a "visual diary" begun long before, was given a new impetus by a common practice of Mexican billboard companies: if there is no new customer when the rental of a billboard runs out, workers shuffle the panels of the existing ad to make its message illegible. This turns the billboard into a gigantic collage. Touchon began to cut up lettering from Mexican wrestling posters and other advertisements salvaged from the streets. Rearranged into abstract compositions, these became the basis for paintings, paintings that deliberately reference their material origins: shading is often used to produce a *trompe l'oeil* effect, evoking thin strata of layered paper (Plate 6). "I see these works of mine," Touchon says, "as liberating the forms of language from the practical utility of being carriers of some commercially driven corporate message, allowing them to exist purely for their own sake as shapes, curves, rhythms and colors" ("Artist Statement"). Yet, elegantly abstract though they are, the forms are still recognizably typographic. As Dan Waber has written of Touchon's work:

The shapes that emerge are without question letteral, though they are operating in a space where it is impossible to read them in a literal way. These pieces are looking at the material of language as a thing that can be cut apart and re-arranged, and while they cannot be read, the part of our vision that is involved in reading is actively engaged in the process of viewing them. ("30 by Cecil Touchon")

If this describes the effect of Touchon's typographically based collage painting, it also describes the effect of asemic writing. It is unsurprising, then, that Touchon has become a significant asemic artist.

One of his "Asemic Palimpsest Poems" from 2011 (Figure 4.8) provides an example. In this work there is still an element of collage: a page is formed from the juxtaposition of two half pages, taken from a book of poetry. The seam between them takes on unexpected significance as the lettering of the words is abruptly cut, leaving shapes that were once stanzas. These shapes are dynamically balanced in relation to each other and to the negative space, a paper space. The laid paper, colored beautifully with age, relates to the asemic element as both a foil and a furtherance. Touchon has generated asemic writing by overwriting the original printing with dense jags and occasional extensions up or down; this gives the look of a script but also, palimpsestically, retains a sense of the type underneath.

The "type underneath" is retained in a curious piece by John Nyman (Figure 4.9), except that here it is seen only in the mind of the beholder. At first glance this page looks like asemic writing; then familiar patterns kick in and we see what is actually not there. Nyman has reprinted an extensive selection (142 pages) of Jacques Lacan's *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis* in the English translation of 1977; but he has reprinted it in a computer-generated font of his own devising, which not only breaks up letters into their component parts but also leaves out about half of those parts. He has christened this font Manque. This, he tells us, "references Lacan's famous *manque-à-être*, a neologism that is derived from the French word for 'to miss' or 'to lack' but is rendered in English as 'want-to-be' by Lacan himself." What we want to be here, and not only here, is what is familiar and recognizable. So we are eager to fill in what is missing—which is also what we miss, in the same way we miss somebody who is gone. This is a dynamic that comes into play when we are

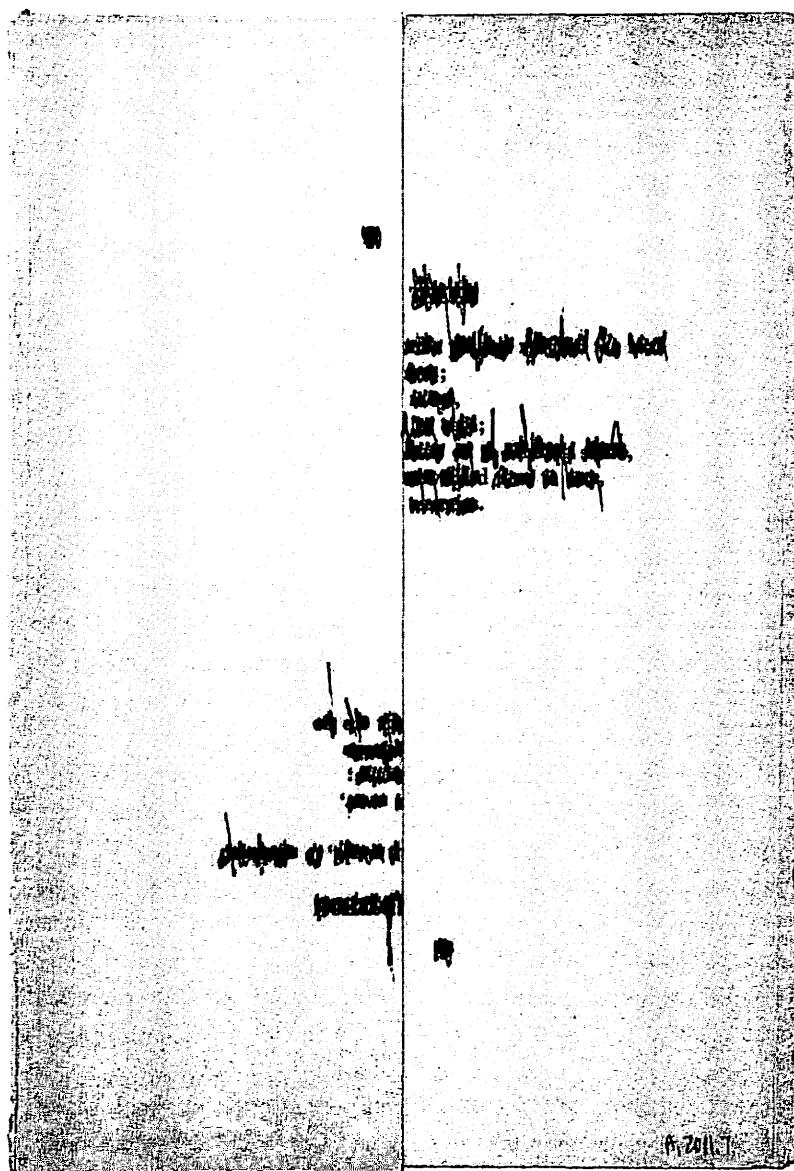


FIGURE 4.8. Cecil Touchon, A.2011.07. Asemic poetry on antique book page. Copyright 2018 Cecil Touchon.

faced with even the most distorted asemic writing, and is part of its allure. Type especially, even in its asemic versions, has a reassuring and stable authority to it—more so than freehand writing, which is all too subject to the vagaries of personality. “Something printed,” says Flusser, “is a typical thing, and not a distinctive, incomparable, unique thing. In the presence of print, it becomes evident that the occupation worthy of human beings is typifying, the manipulation of signs, the ‘making of meaning’” (*Does Writing Have a Future?* 51). So when type is broken up in a way that should result in an asemic effect, “the part of our vision that is involved in reading” is quick to put it together again. In Nyman’s piece a selection of the *Four Fundamental Concepts* tries to pass itself off as asemic writing—and it fails not because of its weakness but because of its authority.

These examples give us a sense of the terrain that is being navigated when someone based in typographic design begins to expand into asemic writing, especially when the two modes are conjoined to occupy the same space on a page. This kind of conjunction is a common practice of Christopher Skinner, a professional graphic designer who among other accomplishments has produced what he calls an “asemic novel” in four parts. The tetralogy is titled *Four Fools*, which is also what its first volume is called. Besides its applicability to the volumes of the tetralogy, the title alludes to an old tale from India. In that tale, the emperor Akbar asks his minister to find him four fools and bring them to court. When the minister shows up with only two, Akbar asks where the other two are. The minister politely informs him that one fool is the emperor, who made such a request; and the other fool is himself, who dutifully fulfilled it. In conversation, though, Skinner enumerates the four fools as follows: “The idea of publishing a book that could not be read required an author, a publisher, a reader, and possibly an academic” (that would be me). The second volume is titled *Pabulum*, which, says Skinner, “is a word to describe bland intellectual matter, and is a satisfying word to say out loud. I liked the idea of this word as the title of a book of stimulating visual signals that is different to every reader.” *Underovary*, the title of the third volume, is a word that Skinner made up. For him, it “conjures up a hidden and intimate vitality.” The last volume is titled *An Isochronous Apologue*. “An apologue,” Skinner explains, “is a type of moral fable. The word appears to be little used today, which was appealing in itself,

THE DÉ AND ANALYSIS

Observe what I am directing you towards—towards the symmetry of that structure that makes me, after the awakening shock, able to understand myself, apparently, only in a relationship with my representation, which, apparently, makes of me only a representation. A form of isolated reflection—in my case, however, it is not only representation but also a representation of self.

Is that all? Freud has told us often enough that he would have to go back to the function of consciousness, but he never did. Perhaps we shall see better what is at issue, by apprehending what is there that constitutes the emergence of the represented reality, namely the phenomenon, that is, the way itself that constitutes awakening.

To make things quite clear, let us return to the dream—which is also made up entirely of dreams—that I left you time to look up in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. You will remember the infantile state father who went to rest in the room next to the one in which his dead child lay—leaving the child in the care, we are told, of another old man—who is awoken by something. By what? It is not only the reality, the shock, the awakening, a voice made to recall him to the real, but this expression, in his dream, the quasi-reality of what is happening, the very reality of a disturbed candle setting light to the bed in which his child lies.

Such a example hardly seems to confirm Freud's thesis in the *Transmutation*—that the dream is the replication of a desire.

What we see emerging here, again for the first time, in the *Transmutation*, is a function of the dream of a apparently necessary kind—in this case, the dream satisfies only the need to produce sleep. What, then, does Freud mean by pleasure, in this point, this particular dream, knowing that it is in itself full confirmation of his thesis regarding dreams?

If the function of the dream is to produce sleep, if the dream, after all, only comes to rest in the reality that causes it, can we say that it might correspond to this reality without emerging

dés que son quelle a à ce moment. Ce n'est, le temps suspendu le destin lui-même que de l'empêcher. Il est au stade où il n'est pas — ce qui importe que cela passe, à Dieu le plaisir qu'il voulait faire. Puisque tout, dans qu'il n'est pas — un, deux, trois ou quatre, tous ce sera plus tard.'

but it seemed appropriate for my needs: there are elements within the book that suggest that themes are being discussed or debated but without any solid narrative. I used the word *isochronous* to suggest that the book did not belong to any particular time" (personal communication, July 5, 2018).

I have been referring to the tetralogy's four "volumes," a term that is perhaps too ponderously Victorian for these small books, which average around forty pages. Yet there are great riches in these little rooms: a wide variety of typefaces and asemic scripts, along with continual surprises in the layouts. For the fullest appreciation of the books, one should really read them with the sections of Skinner's blog *Lestaret* in which he details the sequence of decisions and adjustments that resulted in the original *Four Fools* typeface, as well as the many that followed.⁵ Here we learn that, like many other asemic artists, Skinner had been filling notebooks with asemic writing before he knew that there was a term for it, let alone anything like a movement. When he decided to design an asemic typeface, he turned to his notebooks for the base material (Figure 4.10), and then set to work on his computer, using Adobe Illustrator among other tools. The typeface (Figure 4.11) retains and even exaggerates the forward slant of the original writing; and the variations in line width give the print a somewhat calligraphic effect. Still, the differences are significant: "Chirographic and typographic developments," says Skinner, "are related but separate. . . . I am interested in the juxtaposition of the two and how each can work together and 'play off' each other" (personal communication, November 28, 2017). This is the guiding principle of the first book he created (Figure 4.12). Its pages mix asemic script and type, but there are other contrasts as well: dense blocks of writing play against empty space used as a design element; bold hand-rendered characters may fill most or all of a page, while elsewhere the writing approaches micrographia; and the lines of writing may be set horizontally or vertically, or attached to another text at an angle. This last technique suggests annotation or commentary, with the angling being derived from Islamic manuscripts that Skinner has in his collection. He also has a number of Chinese calligraphic workbooks, which have encouraged him to create the oversize characters that he sometimes inserts. Generally, he says, "'foreign' type has played a huge role in my journey into asemic writing" (personal communication, November 28, 2017).

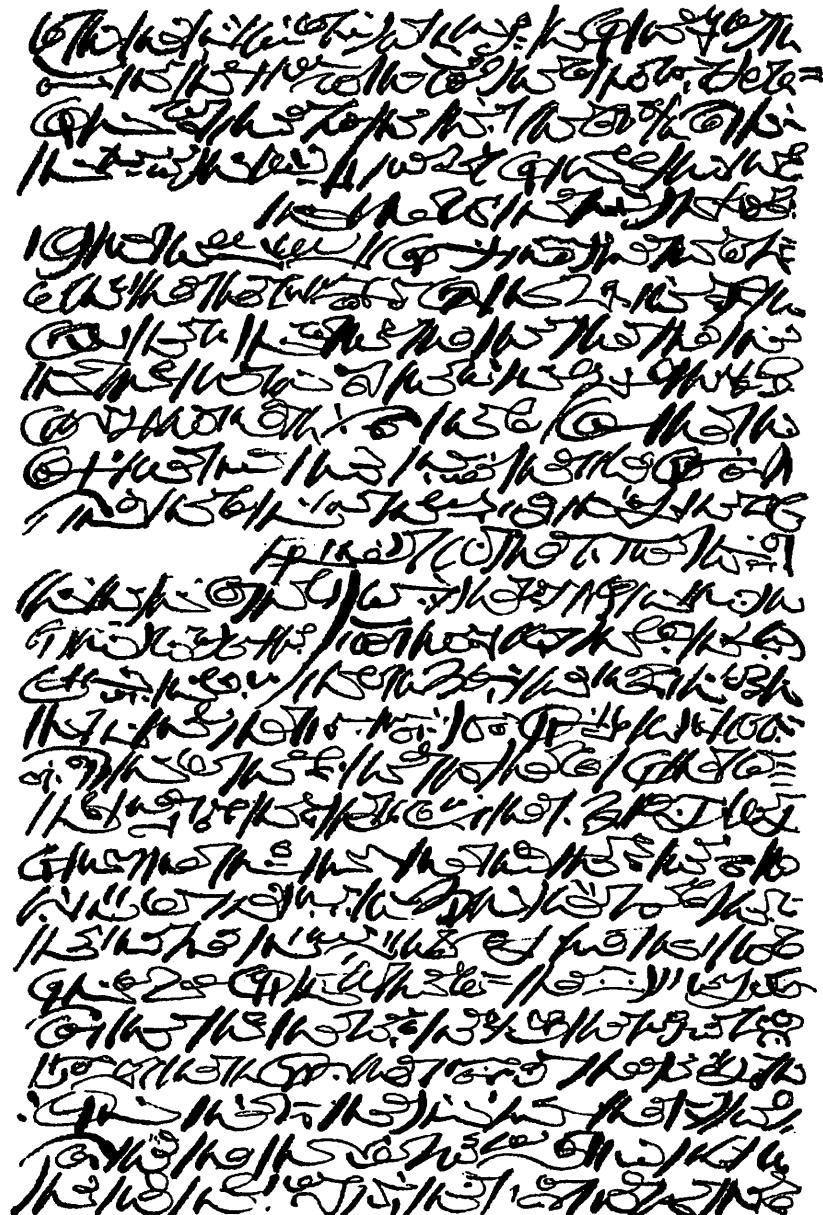


FIGURE 4-10. Skinner's original asemic script.

FIGURE 4.11. Skinner's script translated to typeface.

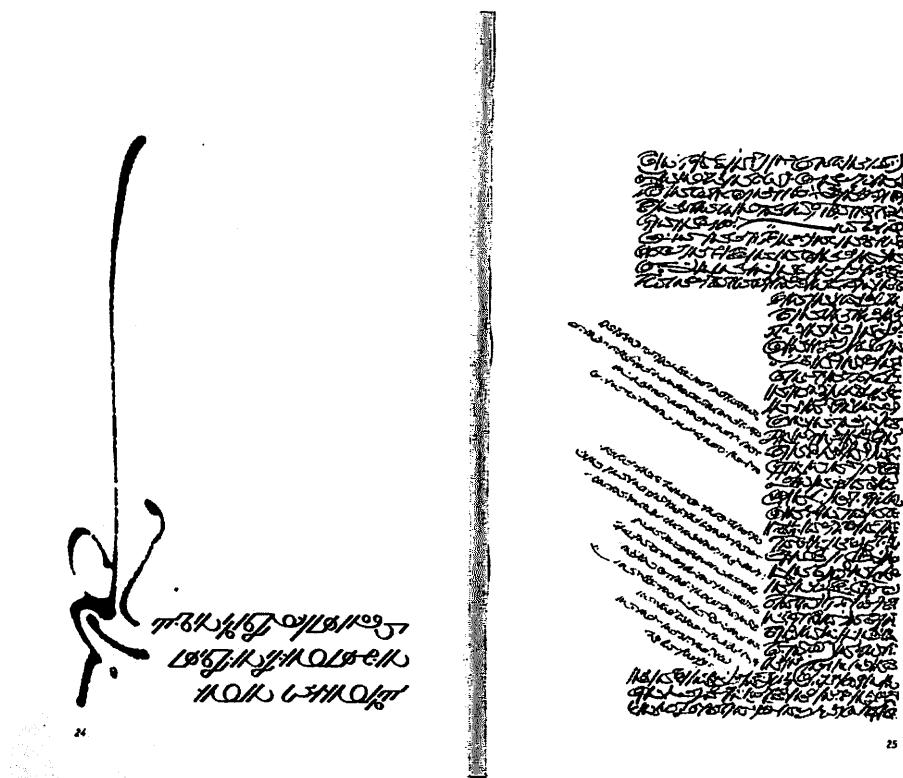


FIGURE 4.12. Christopher Skinner, page from *Four Fools*, 2011.

In the second book of the tetralogy, Skinner retains the concern with the differences between calligraphic and typographic asemic, but extends the number of asemic typefaces. On the last page, beneath a hand-drawn glyph on a trompe l’oeil peeling label, is a list of five “words” in different asemic typefaces (Figure 4.13); all of these have been used earlier in the book, along with others (I count at least six more). In his blog, Skinner states that his inspirations for such typefaces include “old punched tickets” (the second one down on this page), “Arabic structures,” and vintage typewriter letters—this last based on a 1920 document. Each of these has its own texture—in the sense that it produces an overall visual difference, and so *feels* different.



ପବୁଲମ

କବିତା

ପବୁଲମ

ଶର୍ମିଳା

ପବୁଲମ

FIGURE 4.13. Christopher Skinner, page from *Pabulum*, 2012.

I am using “texture” here as an artistic term. However, it is also used by literary critics—promiscuously and impressionistically, and no wonder given the vague ways it is defined. Here is one such definition, from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*:

Texture, the concrete, physical elements of prose or poetry that are separate from the structure or argument of the work. Such elements include metaphor, imagery, metre, and rhyme.

In short, texture is everything that makes a work literary as opposed to argumentative or informative. But none of these elements are “concrete.” Properly speaking, the only “concrete, physical elements of prose or poetry” are the marks on the page. These form letters that are woven together in patterns that recur and yet are continually varied: the word *texture*, like the word *text*, has its root in the Latin word *texere*, meaning to weave. There is no reason, though, why the letters that produce the page’s material texture need to be those of the familiar alphabet. Rosaire Appel’s *As It Were* is subtitled *17 Asemic Stories*. Each of the stories is written in a different asemic script, and the sense is given that each story has its own mood or tone, communicated by its texture. In much the same way, literary critics might claim that the tone of a work is the result of “texture,” though what they are alluding to is not as tangible as the asemic version.

A desire “to focus on the flow and texture of a script” informed the first stages of Skinner’s third volume. Accordingly, *Underovary* pulls back from the wide variety of asemic scripts to concentrate largely on two. The first is a typeface that looks somewhat like lettering that might be found in a medieval illuminated manuscript (Figure 4.14), an association that is reinforced by the layout of certain pages. Its design—the development of which is scrupulously documented on the Lestaret blog—does indeed have a sense of flow, arising from the ligatures between many of the characters, though Skinner later translates its curves into an angled geometric version. An even greater flow is found in the second script, which is essentially a wavy line with a few upright marks and small circles inserted at intervals. It looks like the most rudimentary way to signal writing on a page. The fact that it is a wavy line allows Skinner to alternate, in a sort of thoughtful play, between the lines that signal “writing” and the same lines used as curving elements of drawings or decorations such as an oval frame. Thus

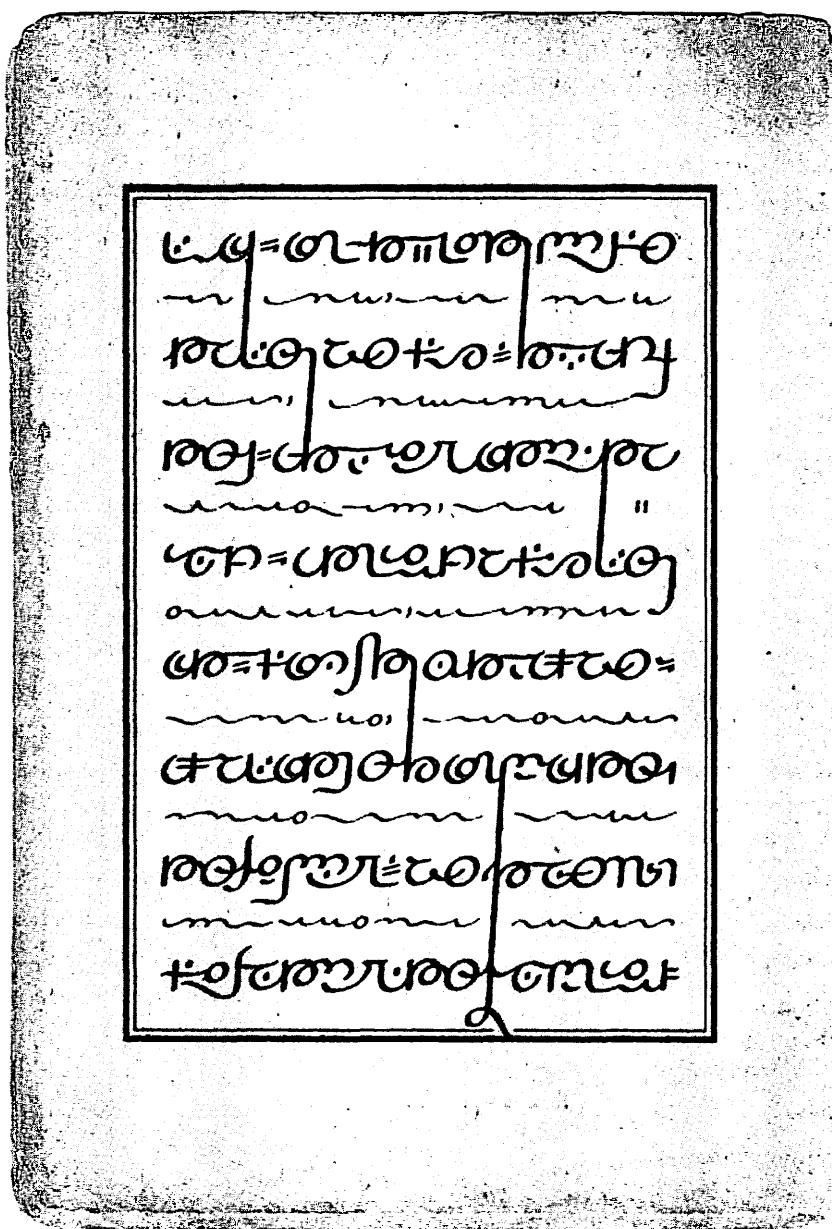


FIGURE 4.14. Christopher Skinner, study for *Underovary*, 2013.

the experimental mind-set that directed the development of the first typeface is carried over into the finished book, inviting the viewer to consider the consequences and effects of the book's different versions of writing.

Between the completion of the third volume of his tetralogy and the start of the final one, Skinner collaborated with Tim Gaze in a limited-edition chapbook of *Écritures* by Raymond Queneau, founder of the OuLiPo group. This was originally a small notebook in which Queneau recorded a variety of asemic scripts, akin to the "pictograms" that formed part of his *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres*. These influenced the final volume of the *Four Fools* tetralogy, which consists almost entirely of handwritten scripts. However, these exhibit the same scrupulous attention to design detail that characterizes the typographic work. Indeed, the distinction—at times opposition—between handwritten and typographic asemic becomes difficult to maintain. The apparently handwritten characters in Appel's *You Have the Right to Remain Silent*, for instance (Figure 4.3), turn out to have been produced by a computer font that she has designed and has used in other work. Leftwich's contention that asemic writing emerged from typewriting, then, does not pertain only to a historical development; asemic writing continues to emerge from typewriting today through the medium of the computer keyboard. So when Jeremy Balius creates his asemic typewriter (Plate 7), it seems at first like a joke: a play between mechanical and messy ways of producing writing, in which both are being mocked. But type and asemic writing are not so distinct from each other as some might think, and this is not merely a matter of what tools are being used. The scrupulous care with which Skinner creates his typography (nothing could be further from the "messy") is shared by many asemic artists. Xu Bing's painstakingly hand-carved asemics, for instance, are all the more disconcerting because they appear within exquisite specimens of traditional book art. Yet the strangeness of these unreadable pages cannot be separated from their beauty. In works that no longer deliver a message, eloquence has been replaced by elegance.

chapter 5

READING ASEMIC

It is wonderful how a handwriting which is illegible can be read,
oh yes it can.

Gertrude Stein, *The Geographical History of America*

Most asemic works are done on a single piece of paper; and within that circumscribed space they are capable of complex implications about the nature of writing. However, Jacobson, Appel, and Skinner have all produced sizable books that they call novels, or novellas. With the assignment of a familiar genre to an asemic work comes a familiar expectation: that what is before our eyes is not only about writing but about reading as well, that these are pages that are meant to be read. This is reinforced by the sheer quantity of the pages that make up the book. The record for this must be held by Mirtha Dermisache with her two-volume, 500-page book. Second place probably goes to Rosaire Appel's *As It Were*, at 223 pages. As has already been mentioned, each of the book's seventeen stories is written in a different asemic script; the longest runs to 28 pages. Something more is going on here, then, besides the contrast in "textures" that I argued for earlier; for that could be done with single pages, or at least with fewer. We are tacitly being encouraged to turn those 28 pages one by one, and to linger on the "story"—that is, to read it. But how? How are we to read an asemic script, which we have already defined as a writing that is illegible, unreadable? Yet any writing, legible or not, carries with it the expectation that it is intended to be read. Some viewers may recognize their own expectations ironically, as a commentary on the human addiction to verbalizing; Barthes would probably fall into this category. For others their expectations act as a lure, prolonging an initial attention to the point that it becomes a fascinated desire to elucidate a cryptic text. These are opposite attitudes toward the same thing: the sense, or hope, that behind an asemic text lies a text of

recognizable words, with a coherent meaning. This basic notion leads to two common ways of reading asemic: decoding, where each sign is considered to be equivalent to a single letter; and translating, where complete words must be given equivalents.

The most sustained attempts to decode an asemic script have been devoted to the *Codex Seraphinianus*, perpetrated by Luigi Serafini in 1981. Its form is recognizably that of an encyclopedia arranged systematically on logical principles, rather than the arbitrary order of the alphabet. After sections on various surreal flora and fauna, the *Codex* illustrates a genus that consists basically of pairs of legs; these support not bodies but various surprising terminations such as umbrellas, balls of yarn, and striped pods that, when ripe, produce tigers. There are sections depicting the improbable races, civilizations, and customs of countries shown on a map of the world, a world whose continents and islands seem to have the ability to rearrange themselves at will; there are sections on food, clothing, cryptic rituals, and fantastical architecture. Perhaps the strangest section is the one on language, where the materiality of the letter is taken to the extreme. Forming themselves out of various elements, words flame, drip, and sprout. No longer confined to the plane of the page, they rise above it with the help of gas-filled balloons or are dropped onto it by tiny parachutes. They are literally fished from the mouth or dribbled from it onto a white bib. And under a microscope, the curves of the letters become those of a highway or a stream, populated accordingly, or filled with teeming Dantesque figures (Figure 5.1).

Along with its bizarre illustrations, the *Codex* has page after page of asemic text, with headings and subheadings, diagrams and graphs, explanatory captions and section headings. The very format of this text holds out the promise that the illustrations will be elucidated—a promise that is systematically frustrated, as one illustration in particular indicates. At the beginning of the section on language, we are shown a sort of Rosetta stone; but the text that is paired with that of the *Codex* is only another indecipherable script (Plate 8).

This has not stopped the fans of Serafini's book from trying to crack the code. For many years, elaborate strategies of analysis proliferated on the web, along with claims of an imminent breakthrough. Personally, I couldn't see the point. In "Cryptotexts," a special section of the online journal SCRIPTjr.nl, I was pitted against a worthy antagonist, Kane X. Faucher, who has a deep and

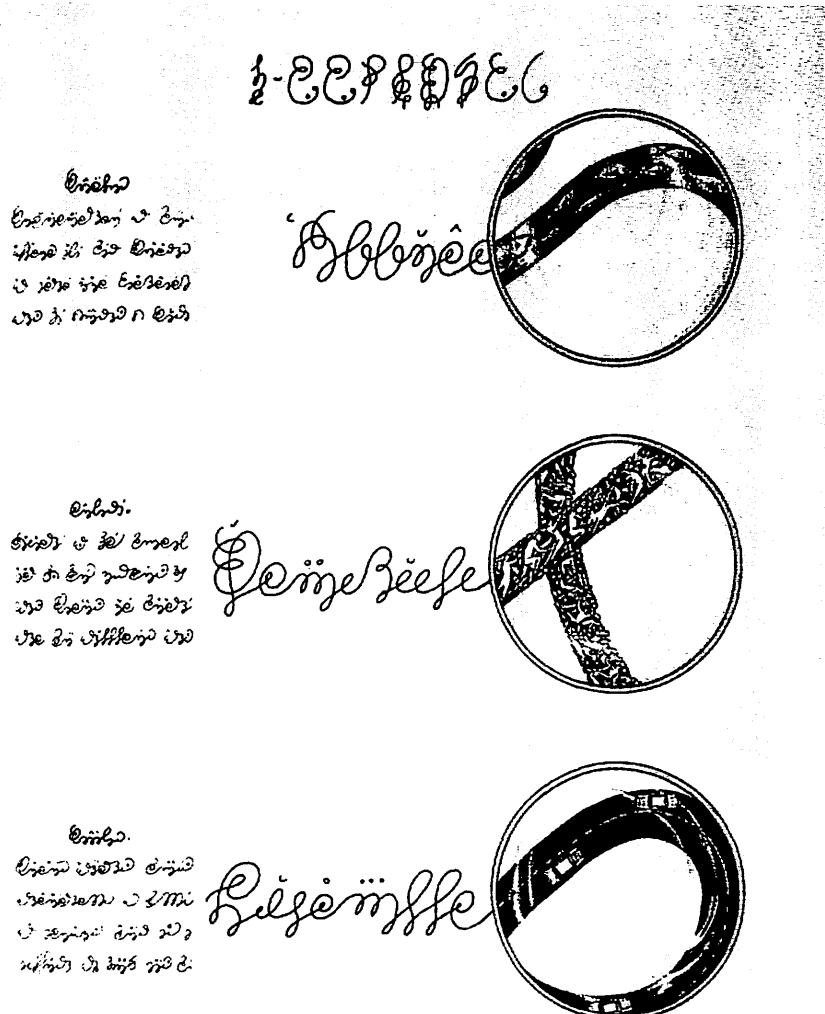


FIGURE 5.1. From Luigi Serafini, *Codex Seraphinianus* (New York: Rizzoli, 2013).

rich appreciation of the *Codex* and its avatars, but at the time was still determined to decode its script. In response I invited Faucher to consider what would be gained if he were to succeed:

Considerably less weird than the illustrations and our speculations on them, the text would doubtless “explain,” in proper encyclopedic fashion, what is now already explained by the illustrations—or, far more interestingly, what now resists explanation. What we would get from a decoded *Codex* would be nothing more than the pleasure of “getting it”—that is, cracking a code. If you are a cryptographer, that pleasure will top all others. But, I would suggest, there is also a pleasure in not getting it. As long as the *Codex* is not pinned down—not by Faucher, but also not by me—it offers itself as an endless source of speculation about its nature vis-à-vis more orthodox encyclopedias, more familiar worlds. (Schwenger, “*Codex*”)

Faucher had always been aware of the possibility that the text of the *Codex* was not a code, and now he is sure of it. What tipped the balance was Serafini himself. Tucked into the 2006 reissue of the *Codex* by Rizzoli was a slim pamphlet titled “Decodex.” It described the period in 1976 when Serafini obsessively created his book, and specifically the point at which he realized that he needed to accompany the illustrations with a text:

Do you remember how, when we were children, we’d leaf through picture books and, pretending we could read before the children older than us, fantasize about the images we saw there? Who knows, I thought to myself, perhaps unintelligible and alien writing could make us all free to once again experience those hazy childhood sensations. At the time, the quest for a new alphabet seemed to me to be the most urgent thing that had to be done. Actually, I had to invent one that suited my hand. So I began by scribbling lines that twisted and curved in curlicues and arabesques. And from that tangle of ink I slowly distilled a calligraphy complete with upper and lower case letters, punctuation and accents. It was a script that contained the dream of many other types of script.¹

The ultimate dream, of course, is that this apparently authoritative text is capable of being decoded.

The *Codex* lures its readers with the promise of an esoteric knowledge; and in the world of asemic art it is not the only work that uses such a strategy. Another text that lures the reader in this way has recently been unearthed from the Gerhard Richter Archives in Dresden. It is Richter's *Comic Strip*, created in 1962 when he was thirty years old, and not published until 2014. The book begins with a few legible (though crossed-out) words in German: "Vor fern entfernter Zeit lebten Männer, die . . ." (In long distant times there lived men, who . . .). But after these words the scrawled writing degenerates further, or rather metamorphoses into an asemic script that prevails throughout the following pages. From this opening reference to primitive times the book moves to an apocalyptic end, cataloging on the way numerous versions of the individual's relation to the collective—the individual in question being an armless figure in a broad-brimmed hat, so abstract that it is rendered with a stamp. Beyond this broad outline, the book remains as cryptic as its script. Yet that script fills a large portion of the pages; and, like the script of the *Codex Seraphinianus*, it seems to promise an explication of the cartoony images. Captions, diagrams, arrows, and seals (created by inking coins) add to the authority of the written word. In one extreme case (Figure 5.2), a large ideogram is annotated in detail, right down to individual ink splatters.²

Richter's source for the idea of pseudowriting was undoubtedly Saul Steinberg, whose influence on *Comic Strip* is evident in certain pictorial reminiscences as well as in shared techniques. Both artists at times literally print by hand: inking palms or thumbs, which, when applied to the page, can evoke clouds or textured ground. Both artists have created pseudodocuments validated by official-looking seals. These documents are covered with illegible writing—in Steinberg's case, that should be "writings," since he enjoyed evoking various styles of print or individualized signatures without ever lapsing into legibility. He once described himself as "a writer who draws" (Bair, xiv), which suggests one reason Roland Barthes, another writer who drew, found him fascinating. The young Gerd Richter (as he called himself at the time) would go on to create art with a very different look—such as paintings based on photographs—but he carried forward from this early work a tendency to transform familiar media into something strange.

Another body of work, that produced by Timothy Ely, shares with the *Codex Seraphinianus* the lure of an arcane knowledge and its simultaneous

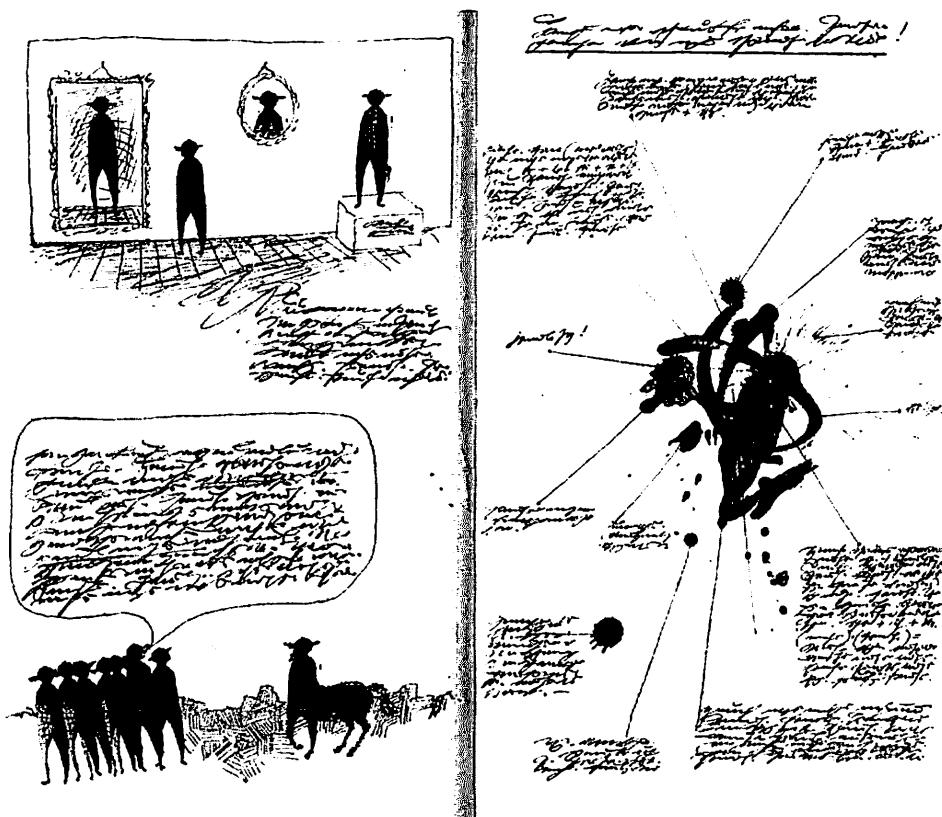


FIGURE 5.2. From Gerd Richter, *Comic Strip*, 1962. Copyright 2018 Gerhard Richter (04042018).

bafflement through an asemic text. Ely calls his writing by a different name, though: *cribriform*, which is “an adjective I’ve turned into a noun,” he says, “to name my drawing that looks like language, meaning perforated like a sieve—a perfect descriptor for language” (“Artist’s Statement”). His scripts are incorporated into the richly illustrated pages of his single-copy handmade books, which use maps, diagrams, alchemical symbols, and tables to evoke an arcane knowledge (Plate 9). These elements lure the viewer in much the same way as does the encyclopedic format of the *Codex Seraphinianus*. Ely’s dreamlike layering, though, is dramatically different from the promise of a logical order made in Serafini’s book, a promise that seems to extend to the apparently systematic writing. In Ely’s work writing has a quality that is more diffuse, and more suggestive, as he indicates:

Language doesn’t have to be verbal or visual. It can be a sensation, it can be in the form of signals. My marks depart from meaning but they’re not meaningless. They just have a different internal matrix. They don’t necessarily correspond to a sound or a picture. Sometimes the marks are assigned to an emotional color or to a musical note. They are navigational. There is certainly a lot of background noise in these marks—they’re crucial to the books. (“Access” n.p.)

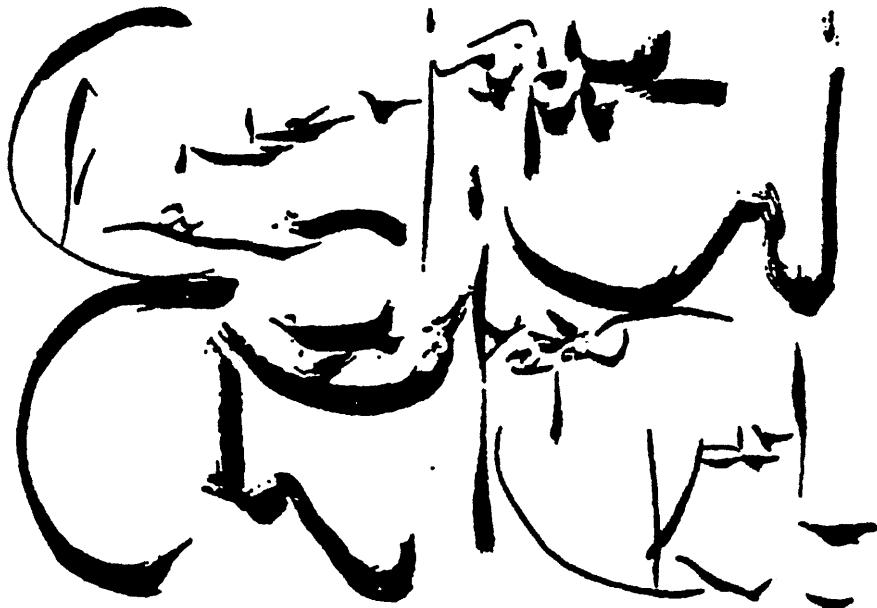
Because the cribriform markings are dissolved into the overall effect of the layered illustrations, they have not provoked the decoding frenzy that Serafini’s script has. Yet they are “navigational” for the viewer, and also for the artist during the creative process: “I do feel,” says Ely, “that when I am drawing it, making it, that the marks themselves correspond to the ideas that I am currently dazzled with” (“Access” n.p.).

This kind of correspondence has affinities with the linguistic concept of the *logogram*, which we have already encountered in the context of the Chinese written character. In asemic circles, though, that word must immediately evoke the work of Christian Dotremont. In 1962 he began producing what he called *Logogrammes*, a misleading title, actually. His ink drawings, often on large sheets of paper, evoke the signs drawn by his countryman Henri Michaux.³ But unlike Michaux’s ideograms, Dotremont’s drawings are made up of letters—that is, phonograms. These letters are highly distorted, to the point that the viewer can retrieve very few. Yet each of Dotremont’s logograms seems to offer a key to

translation in the form of a minuscule inscription in ordinary writing. An example is “Chanter jusqu’au cri / Crier jusqu’au chant” (To sing until I cry out / To cry out until I sing) (Figure 5.3). What seems to be a title is actually the text of the logogram. Large sweeping strokes evoke the *Cs* of *cri* and *chant*. They are positioned in accordance with the grammatical reversals of the sentence; and the quality of the strokes is consistent with differences in the associative force of the words, with *chant* more delicately drawn than the thicker, blacker lines of *cri*. Two vertical lines with short strokes above them in the middle of the page may allude to the repeated *j* of *jusqu’au*; at the top right of the page a similar line with a stroke above it evokes the *i* of *cri*, shooting straight up out of a large lowercase *r*. It is tempting to say, then, that the artistic work is based on the text written beneath—except that Dotremont has explicitly contradicted this:

Logograms are first-draft manuscripts: the text, not pre-established, is drawn with extreme spontaneity, regardless of ordinary proportions and regularity . . . and thus regardless of legibility; yet the text is redrawn afterwards under the logogram, in very small and readable letters, handwritten, calligraphic. (Lupu-Onet 37)

The small rather ordinary handwriting hardly counts as “calligraphic”; but for Dotremont it is closer to calligraphy than is the work above it: he strongly resisted the suggestion that a logogram was the abstract calligraphy of an already established text; quite the reverse. Dotremont, who began as a poet, continued to be one, demanding of words that they go beyond their limited expressive capacities by means of a graphic eloquence. The words themselves determine the inscriptive line, a line that does not merely conform to standard practice but reflects the bodily emotions of the writer at the moment. There is no consistency in Dotremont’s rendering of letters (Pelard 3), and thus no possibility of a systematic decoding; nor is the text that has been redrawn in small letters exactly a “translation”—especially since the emotional force of the poem as expressed by its graphic form is exactly that which resists translation. Dotremont takes the power that lies within the written word beyond its prescribed forms, turning it into a superwriting, a delirium of writing. His logograms underscore their defiance of translation by the very gesture—that neat but inadequate handwriting—that seems to promise it.



Chanter jusqu'au cri
Crier jusqu'au chant

1972, Paris

FIGURE 5.3. Christian Dotremont, *Chanter jusqu'au cri / Crier jusqu'au chant*, 1972. Copyright Guy Dotremont.

Yet even when we know this, it is difficult not to refer to that handwriting as if it were the caption or title of the work. It's the same impulse that makes it almost impossible to resist looking, within the first few seconds, at the title of an artwork on a gallery wall; and that apparently makes it necessary for every such work to have a title, even if it consists only of the word *Untitled*. We depend on words, a dependence described as an addiction or a viral disease by writers as disparate as William S. Burroughs and J. Hillis Miller (Schwenger, "Language"). To read asemic writing means to resist the pull of words, the voices in the head that continually translate into words what we experience. It involves paying close attention to the emotional effect of the marks before our eyes. This is not easy to do, because the simulacrum of the written page presented to us by an asemic work calls out all of our usual reading habits. In reading a conventional text we proceed swiftly to concepts, reading past the signs on the page, grabbing whole bundles of words without really seeing them, with our mind either anticipating or remembering other moments in the text or in our culture, and in any case not focusing on what is literally before our eyes. Rosaire Appel is addressing the need to focus when she recommends that readers of Jacobson's *The Giant's Fence* should retrace his asemic characters on a separate piece of paper ("Reading & Looking"). This exercise will recall something that has been lost in an age of print, the role of the writer's hand and indeed the whole body, which was for Barthes and Michaux an essential generative force in a writer's style. The main purpose of the exercise, though, is probably to slow the reader down, to break the habitual pace of reading. Once this is done, it can then be replaced by another sort of retracing, that of the eye. It will be seen that the various asemic characters have their own contours; and that those contours have an eloquence of their own. Wassily Kandinsky famously argued that abstract elements of painting such as color, line, and form can be combined as are the elements of a language. The potentially infinite combinations of these elements communicate psychological shadings—perhaps more so than those aroused by explicit depictions: "The contact between the acute angle of a triangle and a circle," Kandinsky asserted, "has no less effect than that of God's finger touching Adam's in Michelangelo" (759). Because of asemic writing's abstract nature, then, the marks on the page may move one along a line that is not just material but also psychological. The sequences of characters in asemic writing are as varied as any alphabetic sequence; but they do not stand in for

spoken words, nor for the concepts behind words. They convey, or at least are capable of conveying, subtle movements of the psyche—rather than information about the external world, or even the external world's idea of an internal world. Michaux called these movements gestures, *interior* gestures. They both precede and follow conventional writing.

Before writing even begins, Flusser reminds us, it is preceded by “nebulous shapes” that only later are fitted to words and laid out in lines (“Gesture of Writing” 10). So writing always involves reading; for anybody who is writing is also reading those vague shapes in the mind that Flusser speaks of, translating them into another medium, continually revising in an attempt to achieve a more adequate translation. Writing is not stenography, taking dictation from our profound and articulate thoughts, for those thoughts come into existence only through the act of writing: “The hand's drawing gesture,” Tisseron states, “is an essential movement by which thought learns how to think itself through” (36). Writing, then, translates into words something that is different from words; and as in any act of translation, some things are lost in the process, while other things may be gained. What is gained is clarity, logic, and “meaning.” What is lost is what precedes thought, thought that is commonly recognized as such only if it can be verbalized. This pre-thought may be related to certain embryonic tendencies of the mind that Nathalie Sarraute, in 1939, called *tropisms*. She appropriated this word from the scientific term for the slow and subtle movements of plants. Sarraute's tropisms are also subtle, but they are not slow:

These movements, of which we are hardly cognizant, slip through us on the frontiers of our consciousness in the form of undefinable, extremely rapid sensations. They hide behind our gestures, beneath the words we speak, the feelings we manifest, are aware of experiencing, and able to define. . . . While we are performing them, no words express them, not even those of the interior monologue. (*Tropisms* “Foreword”)

Rosaire Appel makes a similar point when she asks, in “Chairs and Pigeons,” “What of the great *unworded*? Blips of sensation, fragments of thought, vague experiences, unclaimed entities, and also unspecific combinations whose sum does not reflect known parts?” (8). Such things, though they are beyond words,

nevertheless underlie words. I have argued elsewhere that associative movements always accompany our conscious reading of a literary text, of the information that text presents us with; for information alone is never enough to account for the emotional effect of a text (“Obbligato”). The distinctive quality of a reader’s emotional experience emerges from a supplement to the words on the page, a supplement that is both brought to the page by the reader and called out by the page. Though evoked by words, it is not itself verbal. Rather, as Michaux asserts, it is gestural: shapings and tendencies, visual and kinetic. Asemic writing conveys something of that elusive nonverbal element; and it does so, paradoxically, by foregrounding the materiality of words. Through abstract linear gestures on the page, it evokes interior ones—mental movements and shapes, tendencies and qualities. The weaving together of these produces a texture, the texture of something that precedes thought and language. Asemic writing, so resolutely noncommunicative, can nevertheless communicate this mental texture to us, even if it does so in a language beyond words.

It might be well to test this theoretical idea of what happens during the reading of asemic texts against the reports of real readers. In the absence of a laboratory, a survey, and a statistical analysis, our best sources (our only sources) for such reports are the online comments of readers. Here is one reader’s reaction to *The Giant’s Fence*:

As a literary traditionalist in many ways, I must confess that I had a high level of skepticism when opening *The Giant’s Fence*. . . . Once I could let down my critical guard, I was allowed to experience the aesthetics of what Jacobson describes as “half formed symbol streams.” . . .

. . . The images began to adopt semantic meaning and gain symbolism. I found a primitive language emerging from what the symbols began to form for me. Perhaps, this is simply the exercise of the brain to find the familiar in the unfamiliar. It was a fascinating new experience.
(Fouquet)

Another reader, no less of a traditionalist, found that the experience of reading Jacobson’s book felt oddly familiar: for her, it recalled

the mysterious excitement I felt at maybe four or five years old, looking at books and starting to understand that those marks under the picture RELATED to the pictures, told the story that went with them.

The anticipatory feeling that all those stories and information and thoughts were all just WAITING out there to be taken in hand and head. Ingested.

Reading *The Giant's Fence* evokes a similar childlike excitement. A visceral feeling that the story is just beyond grasp, but with focus and imagination, a meaning may emerge. Or may not. Either way, you keep looking. Ingesting. (Kring)

Quimby Melton, editor of *SCRIPTjr.nl* (and thus not a traditionalist), writes: "Reading *The Giant's Fence* is a liberating process of infantilization wherein literate readers allow themselves to get lost once more in a world of uncommunicative signs."⁴ Such comments recall Serafini's statement that his asemic script related to feelings that accompanied his earliest childhood encounters with books; and that it might be capable of restoring those feelings.

Not everyone will experience Jacobson's text, or any other asemic text, in these ways. Not everyone will have the patience to slow down the pace of reading until it matches that of the hand, as Appel recommends; or to allow the implications of the shapes on the page to evoke corresponding emotional gestures in the mind. The asemic script will then remain unread, unreadable, at least by that particular viewer. What will remain, though, is the artistic power of this strange calligraphy. Asemic traces on the surface of a page have their own eloquence; there is no need to probe further than inclination or imagination may encourage us to do. Asemic writing is an invitation, not an imposition.

It is among other things an invitation to *play*—at a high level, the level of art. Jacques Derrida's concept of play might also be applicable. His own style of writing, though hardly asemic, resists a stable meaning in favor of play, with puns, allusions, and etymologies combining to make the surface of his prose shimmer with elusive suggestions. In *Positions* Derrida declares:

It is necessary in such a space, and guided by such a question, that writing literally means nothing. Not that it is absurd in the way that absurdity has always been in solidarity with metaphysical meaning. It simply tempts itself, tenders itself, attempts to keep itself at the point of the exhaustion of meaning. To risk meaning nothing is to start to play. (14)

That play is in one sense the interminable play of differences, which is brought to the fore in asemic writing such as Xu Bing's. But it is also a kind of play that

is different from the one that Derrida is speaking of, and that takes place at a boundary between exterior signs and interior concepts. When the exterior signs are unmoored from their assigned significations, concepts too become free to play at the edges of meaning. Barely apprehended, they flicker as sheer emotive gestures, psychic movements that were always there, no doubt, beyond what words would normally admit. Readers of asemic texts may experience a recognition, then, a re-cognition, perhaps even a rewiring. They *may* experience this. Or not. For when a new understanding makes its appearance through the work of artists, there is always the chance that it will be read as Derrida asserts, not mistakenly, that his own work might be read: “under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity” (“Structure, Sign” 293).

I began this book, and will end it, by quoting Jim Leftwich, the artist and thinker who, along with countless other asemic practitioners, has given us so many unreadable words. Yet, perversely, he maintains that reading is inevitable: it merely changes its way of being—if, that is, we are capable of changing with it.

There is no such thing as asemic writing.

In fact, there is no such thing as asemic anything.

Everything is readable, i.e., can be and will be given meaning.

The asemic is an unattainable ideal.

In striving toward it, many mutations of writing and drawing
(and other practices: photography, to name but one)

will come into being.

This is the value of the asemic. (June 10, 2011)

ONLINE RESOURCES FOR ASEMIC WRITING

Asemic Front, <https://asemicfront.wordpress.com>

Asemic Movement (Tim Gaze's free journal of asemic writing),
<https://issuu.com/eexxiitt/docs>

"Asemic Writing," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asemic_writing

Asemic Writing for Mail Artists,
<http://iuoma-network.ning.com/group/asemicwritingformailartists>

Asemic Writing Google+ Group,
<https://plus.google.com/u/0/communities/113710419939034641766>

Differx, <http://differx.tumblr.com>

The New Post-Literate: A Gallery of Asemic Writing,
<http://thenewpostliterate.blogspot.com>

Post-Asemic Press, <http://postasemicpress.blogspot.it>

The Post-Literate (R)Evolution, <http://post-literate.tumblr.com>

Slowforward, <https://slowforward.net/tag/asemic>

THATplanet (Michael Jacobson's online gallery), <http://thatplanet.blogspot.com>

Utsanga, <https://www.utsanga.it>

Facebook groups: Arte Asemica, Aswrig, Asemic Writing: The New Post-Literate

Blank

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the fourth book of mine that Doug Armato has seen through publication. He is one of the most intellectually curious people I know, and his enthusiasm has buoyed me during the necessarily tedious tasks of getting a book together. For all those years, I thank him. This year, I also have Gabriel Levin to thank for his help, especially in the involved process of obtaining permissions for the artwork. Judy Selhorst's copyediting once again gave me the pleasure of watching my prose emerge in a cleaner, clearer version.

In writing this book, I have as always benefited from the generosity of others. Romaric Sulger-Buel sent me a rare copy of the catalog for an exhibition of Roland Barthes's paintings in Rio de Janeiro. The Vilém Flusser Archive at the Universität der Künste, Berlin, sent me copies of Flusser's unpublished English translations "The Gesture of Writing" and "Gesture and Sentimentality." Nancy Ann Roth provided an early look at her translation of the first chapter of Flusser's *Gesten: Versuch einer Phänomenologie*, now translated in its entirety for the University of Minnesota Press as *Gestures*. Jeremy Greenway, my research assistant for two years, gave me the great benefit of his astuteness, curiosity, and diligence. Thanks to Kate Stanley and Royden Kadyschuk for the David Foster Wallace quotation; to Susan Holtz for graphic granite; to Alvin Comiter for photographing the *Codex Seraphinianus*; and to Edward T. W. Haig of Nagoya University for his responses to the eco-asemics chapter. Paul Malone of the German department at the University of Waterloo was a fellow traveler in the study of Richter's *Comic Strip*. Nina Parish, Gerald Bruns, and the *Cambridge Literary Review* helped me obtain pertinent work, and Shelley Meisner at the Lunenburg County Community College imported countless peculiar books for me, making it possible for me to continue my research while living in a cabin in the Nova Scotia woods. Craig Saper and Jed Rasula were ideal readers of the manuscript; I thank them for their time and their thoughtful comments.

I have been given the most by the artists, to whom this book is dedicated—all of them, but especially Rosaire Appel, Casilda García Archilla, Tim Gaze, Marco Giovenale, Michael Jacobson, Christopher Skinner, and Cecil Touchon.

Finally, and always, my gratitude to Steven Bruhm for all the usual reasons.

NOTES

1. What Asemic Writing Is, and Why

1. Throughout this book, the word *illegible* will refer, as here, to marks that are unreadable because their configuration does not clearly conform to standard writing practices. Words, of course, may be illegible because they are erased, canceled, overprinted, or otherwise obliterated. This is the sense that governs Craig Dworkin's fine study *Reading the Illegible*, a book that is not unconnected to this one. Asemic writing, however, is perfectly clear in a material sense, even though it is not at all clear semantically.

2. *New York Daily News*, June 27, 2013.

3. Compare Jacques Derrida's assessment of the effects of linearity on writing and thought in *Of Grammatology* (85–87).

4. For a fuller treatment of the relationship between Schendel and Flusser, see Nancy Ann Roth, "Mira Schendel's Gesture."

5. Eric Downing analyzes the broader implications of Benjamin's interest in graphology in his essay "Divining Benjamin."

2. Three Asemic Ancestors

1. *Par des traits* has been translated by Richard Sieburth as *Stroke by Stroke*; further citations will refer to this translation. The essay's title in French is "Des langues et des écritures: Pourquoi l'envie de s'en détourner." *Détourner* has connotations beyond a simple turning away or rejection: it is commonly translated as "hijack" or "(mis)appropriate." In this sense *détournement* became, in the 1950s, a recognized technique of the Lettrist International, led by Guy Debord. It was defined, rather vaguely, as "the integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu" ("Definitions")—which does not do justice to the subversive political purposes of its actual practice. The Lettrist International, later to become Situationism, was a faction that had broken away from Isidore Isou's original Lettrism movement. Lettrism had produced work in a number of artistic fields, including what Isou called *hypergraphics*, a fusion of writing and painting, letters and pictographs, that has clear affinities with asemic writing.

2. "Given Klee's interest in the history of writing, his signs could also be the modern equivalents of logograms or ideograms. It is left to the viewer to determine whether the signs function as letters, words, objects, or ideas" (Aichele 176).

3. This reading perhaps underemphasizes the narrative implications of Michaux's title. For two asemic novels with a strong suggestion of narrative, see Michael Jacobson's *Action*

Figures and, to a lesser degree, his *The Giant's Fence*. Also worth considering, although not exactly asemic, is Oskar Fischinger's abstraction of the narrative progression of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and Fritz von Unruh's *Ein Geschlecht*. "These scroll-like charts do not try to show just the literal movements and gestures of the actors, but rather by abstract designs try to convey the changing moods, the flow of emotion, the intensity, style, and flourish of the ideas and the experiences created by the process of the action" (Moritz 41).

4. For a study of the various theories of physical empathy in dance spectators, see Susan Leigh Foster's "Movement's Contagion."

5. Nina Parish concludes her authoritative book on Michaux with a section titled "Parallels with Dance Notation." It may be significant that several online asemic sites include pages from *Chorégraphie*, a book first published in 1700 that details a dance notation system invented by Raoul-Auger Feuillet.

6. Neil Badmington has explored this aspect of Barthes in a fascinating essay titled "The 'Inkredible' Roland Barthes," to which I am indebted for many of the points made here about Barthes's material practice.

7. Descartes touches upon the relation between head and hand during the writing process in the course of an argument about the way movements are transmitted from the body to the objects with which it is engaged. His example is what happens when one writes with a quill pen: "While I am writing, at the very moment when individual letters are traced on the paper, not only does the point of the pen move, but the slightest motion of this part cannot but be transmitted simultaneously to the whole pen. All these various motions are traced out in the air by the tip of the quill, even though I do not conceive of anything real passing from one end to the other" (41). Writing, then, is produced by motions that to some degree are invisible to the writer—who is inscribing another text at some remove from the concrete one, the mirage of a text.

8. "Technique is very largely a matter of physique," asserted Edith Sitwell (v).

9. The asemic artist Marco Giovenale counts among his influences "Emilio Villa, who was the author of a number of 'sibyls,' visual poems—not asemic ones—handwritten mostly in Latin or French. Hence my 'asemic sibyls,' which are indecipherable" ("Maintenant #65"). *Sibille asemaniche*, or *Asemic Sibyls*, is the title of a collection of related asemic works by Giovenale.

10. Here a footnote from Twombly's sculptural work may be appropriate. His *Untitled (Funerary box for a lime green python)* (New York, 1954) is an all-white piece consisting of two palm-leaf fans set upright on a box. There is a double perversity in the (non)title being immediately followed by a highly evocative title, one that emphasizes a color that is nowhere to be seen. But it is immanent in Twombly's white, which implies the full spectrum of imaginative potential.

11. Henri Michaux became just such a man when, as the result of a fall in 1957, his right hand became temporarily unusable. "Only my left self got up again" from that fall, he writes (*Darkness Moves* 244). A fortunate fall indeed, for it led to his discovery of what he calls *l'homme gauche*; he subsequently referred to his work as "left-handed exercises."

12. “When I work, I work very fast,” says Twombly, “but preparing to work can be any length of time. It can even be a year” (Serota 50).

13. See Leeman’s *Cy Twombly* (185) and Jacobus’s *Reading Cy Twombly* (97–98). In an untitled 1968 collage, Twombly includes a reproduction of Leonardo’s *Deluge Descending a Valley*.

3. Traces

1. Archilla’s drawing was inspired not by nature but by art. It is one of a series titled *Una conversación con Ana Hatherly*. The Portuguese poet and artist Ana Hatherly (1929–2015) was fascinated by writing and explored its traits through strategically deformed drawings. She published these drawings under such titles as *O escritor* and *L’Invention de l’écriture*. Archilla’s homage to her predecessor underscores the continuity of the asemic tradition.

2. The legible, if problematic, beach writing postulated by Knapp and Michaels may be contrasted to the sculpted asemic writing inscribed on the sand of South African beaches by Andrew van der Merwe. This Cape Town calligrapher brings asemic signs outdoors, and adds to their illegibility an element of transience.

3. “Writing cannot exist without carrying a meaning,” Barthes says; “either it directly refers to a message, or it refers indirectly to a psychological disposition” (*All Except You* 22; my translation). The latter option significantly opens up the meaning of “meaning.”

4. Gimeno is fascinated by the Man Ray *Poem* that I have included here as an ultimate version of the linear nature of writing. In 2015 he created a sculpture, *Carta a Man Ray*, consisting of six steel rods with thinner rods emerging from them—left justified, right ragged, and evenly spaced—that give a strong impression of text in columns. He then created a companion piece, *Carta a Man Ray 2*, in which the horizontal steel rods are replaced by sticks and other materials garnered from the beach.

5. For a fuller study, see Bottéro, “Cang Jie and the Invention of Writing.”

6. The New Directions edition of *Ideograms in China*, translated into English by Gustaf Sobin, is unpaginated. However, the book is short enough that the reader will have no difficulty in finding the passages referred to here.

7. “Accounts of Michaux’s attempt to acquire the rudiments of Chinese calligraphy stress that he was a singularly unsuccessful student” (Noland 159).

8. The notion that Chinese would be the best model for a universal language has had a surprisingly long life. In 1966 the eminent Sorbonne comparatist René Etiemble, citing Descartes and Leibniz, considered the virtues of Chinese as an “international working language” for comparative studies, before regretfully admitting that it had little chance of being accepted (29).

9. For a discussion of how the *Logogrammes* relate to translation, see chapter 5.

10. This translation is by Guido Vermeulen, who was himself an asemic artist. All of the following quotations from Dotremont’s essay are from this version, with my own occasional modifications. The translated essay, along with the French original, can be found on the GAMMM website, at <http://gamm.org/index.php/2007/07/30>.

11. In a note Michaux corrects himself: “Rather than calligraphy, the art of writing.” For in many countries calligraphy has become the antithesis of the spontaneity that is, for the Chinese, the mark of a true artist of writing: “With the exception of Arabic, calligraphy in other languages (when it exists) is no more than the expression of either some psychological order or, during great periods, of some ideal and often religious comportment. There is in all that a rigidity, a stiffness, a uniform stiffness that produces lines, not words, the standard corset of nobility, liturgy, of puritanical severity.”

12. See Xu Bing’s detailed account, in “The Making of *Book from the Sky*” (52–53), of the factors that determined his choice of the typeface design.

4. Three for Today

1. Asemic Writing: *Offline and in the Gallery*, Minnesota Center for Book Arts, March 10–May 28, 2017.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers for Jacobson in this chapter refer to his *Works & Interviews, 1999–2014*.

3. A famous case where “alien writing” literally meant writing channeled from extraterrestrial beings is that of Hélène Smith, a French medium who in the late nineteenth century claimed to be transmitting messages in Martian. Despite some remarkable resemblances to asemic scripts (e.g., certain systems devised by Christopher Skinner), these do not, strictly speaking, qualify as asemic because Smith was able to translate them into French. The psychologist Théodore Flournoy published a lengthy study of her case, titled *From India to the Planet Mars*. Examples of her Martian script can be found in the anthology *Imagining Language*, edited by Jed Rasula and Steve McCaffery—an extraordinarily rich collection that includes much material pertinent to asemic writing.

4. In his essay “Abstract Form,” Andrei Molotiu discusses compositional elements in the comic-strip art of Steve Ditko. Mark Newgarden and Paul Karasik, in an essay titled “How to Read *Nancy*,” have systematically stripped down a three-panel gag by Ernie Bushmiller to show how its composition contributes to the comic’s effectiveness. I cite their work in “Abstract Comics and the Decomposition of Horror” before going on to analyze the emotional impact of nonrepresentational sequences in three abstract comics.

5. For these sections, see the blog at <https://lestaret.wordpress.com/2010/07/19/an-asemic-font>.

5. Reading Asemic

1. This text is taken from the “Decodex,” translated by Sylvia Notini, which is included in the 2013 edition of the *Codex*. In May 2009 Serafini spoke to the Oxford Bibliophiles and made the same point. From notes taken by Enrico Prodi, who was present at the time: “The book creates a feeling of illiteracy which, in turn, encourages imagination, like children seeing a book: they cannot yet read it, but they realise that it must make sense (and that it does in fact make sense to grown-ups) and imagine what its meaning must be” (9). See also the 2015 interview with Serafini by Katerina Babkina. Jeffrey Stanley’s 2010 thesis in computer

science, the source of the Prodi quotation, indicates that even after the project of decoding the *Codex* was exploded by the author himself, his book remained a challenging test case in other ways. Stanley used the *Codex* to demonstrate “that it is possible to study a language using a computer visually, without resorting to a transcription scheme” (72), in which characters are translated into numbers.

2. Interestingly, Christopher Skinner, on page 17 of *Pabulum*, uses the same device of annotating, with labels in asemic type, the component parts of a large ideogram—right down to a small ink fleck that has the look of an accident. Skinner’s book appeared two years before the publication of *Comic Strip*.

3. Dotremont is often linked with Michaux, also a poet as well as an artist; more often the comparison stresses the differences beneath their apparent similarities. See Emmanuelle Pelard, “La Nomadisme du signe”; and Nina Parish, “Between Text and Image.” Parish relates an anecdote about the first time Michaux was taken to an exhibition of Dotremont’s work. Without looking closely, he denounced it as a shameless imitation of his own experiments with signs—until it was pointed out to him that the images arose out of actual words, which reassured him.

4. The preceding comments are all excerpted from online customer reviews of *The Giant’s Fence* on Amazon.com.

Blank

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aichele, Kathryn Porter. *Paul Klee, Poet/Painter*. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2006.
- Ames, Roger T. "Reading Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky*: A Case Study in the Making of Meaning." In *Xu Bing and Contemporary Chinese Art: Cultural and Philosophical Reflections*, edited by Hsingyuan Tsao and Roger T. Ames, 33–65. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011.
- Appel, Rosaire. *adds*. New York: Press Rappel, 2016.
- _____. *As It Were: 17 Asemic Stories*. New York: Press Rappel, 2010.
- _____. "Chairs and Pigeons." In *Morpheme Pages*. New York: Press Rappel, 2008.
- _____. *A Collection of See Songs*. New York: Press Rappel, 2012.
- _____. "Interview." Abstract Comics, November 4, 2009. <http://abstractcomics.blogspot.com>.
- _____. *Math Minus Math*. New York: Press Rappel, 2009.
- _____. "Reading & Looking." Customer review of *The Giant's Fence*, by Michael Jacobson, January 8, 2009. Amazon.com. <https://www.amazon.com>.
- _____. *Sample Book*. 2017. http://gamm.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/APPEL_SampleBook.pdf.
- _____. *Untranslated: A Catalog*. New York: Press Rappel, 2013.
- _____. *You Have the Right to Remain Silent: An Unclaimed Nightmare*. New York: Deadly Chaps, 2012.
- Babkina, Katerina. "Luigi Serafini on How and Why He Created an Encyclopedia of an Imaginary World." Bird in Flight, June 1, 2015. <https://birdinflight.com/media/luigi-serafini-on-how-and-why-he-created-an-encyclopedia-of-an-imaginary-world.html>.
- Badmington, Neil. "The 'Incredible' Roland Barthes." *Paragraph* 31, no. 1 (2008): 84–94.
- Bair, Deirdre. *Saul Steinberg: A Biography*. Toronto: Random House, 2012.
- Barry, Lynda. *Picture This: The Near-sighted Monkey Book*. Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2010.
- Barthes, Roland. "An Almost Obsessive Relation to Writing Instruments." In *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–1980*, translated by Linda Coverdale, 177–82. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- _____. "Cy Twombly: Works on Paper." In *The Responsibility of Forms*, translated by Richard Howard, 157–76. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- _____. *Empire of Signs*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.
- _____. "Lectures de l'enfance." In *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Éric Marty, 3:1247–51. Paris: Seuil, 1993.

- . Letter to Mirtha Dermisache, March 28, 1971. In *Mirtha Dermisache: Escrituras, dibujos, ediciones... lecturas*. Herlitzka + Faria, 2013. http://www.henriquefaria-ba.com/en/exhibiciones/mirtha-dermisache-escrituras-dibujos-ediciones-lecturas/acerca_de.
- . *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.
- . "Masson's Semiography." In *The Responsibility of Forms*, translated by Richard Howard, 153–56. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- . *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- . *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*. Translated by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- . "Note sur un album de photographies de Lucien Clergue" (1981). In *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Éric Marty, 3:1203–5. Paris: Seuil, 1993.
- . *The Preparation of the Novel: Lecture Courses and Seminars at the Collège de France 1978–1979 and 1979–1980*. Translated by Kate Briggs. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.
- . "Réquichot and His Body." In *The Responsibility of Forms*, translated by Richard Howard, 207–36. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- . *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010.
- . *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1986.
- . "Variations sur l'écriture." In *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Éric Marty, 2:1535–74. Paris: Seuil, 1993.
- . "The Wisdom of Art." In *The Responsibility of Forms*, translated by Richard Howard, 177–94. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Barthes, Roland, and Saul Steinberg. *All Except You*. Paris: Galerie Maeght, 1983.
- Beaver, Harold. "Homosexual Signs (In Memory of Roland Barthes)." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (Autumn 1981), 99–119.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Review of the Mendelssohns' *Der Mensch in der Handschrift*." In *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 1, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, 131–34. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Berger, John. "Post-scriptum." In *Audible Silence: Cy Twombly at Daros*, edited by Eva Keller and Regula Malin, 45. Zurich: Scalo, 2002.
- Bijlenga, Marian. *Written Weed*. Staphorst, Netherlands: Hein Elferink, 2004.
- Blanchot, Maurice. "The Absence of the Book," translated by Lydia Davis. In *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*, edited by George Quasha, 471–86. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill, 1999.
- Bottéro, Françoise. "Cang Jie and the Invention of Writing: Reflections on the Elaboration of a Legend." In *Studies in Chinese Language and Culture: Festschrift in Honor of Christoph Harbsmeier*, edited by Christoph Anderl and Halvor Bøyesen Eifring, 135–55. Oslo: Hermes Academic Publishing, 2006.
- Breens, Tom. "Cursive Writing: A Fading Skill." *Discovery News*, September 21, 2009. <http://news.discovery.com/human/cursive-writing-penmanship.html>.

- Bruns, Gerald L. "Obscurum per Obscurius." *Cambridge Literary Review* 1, no. 2 (2010): 229–40.
- Bucarelli, Palma. "Galleria del Cavallino, Venice" (1958). In *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio, 44. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002.
- Bush, Christopher. *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Cage, John. *Notations*. New York: Something Else Press, 1969.
- Caillois, Roger. "The Ultimate Bibliophilia." In *Literary Debate: Texts and Contexts*, edited by Denis Hollier and Jeffrey Mehlman, translated by Arthur Goldhammer et al., 60–65. New York: New Press, 2001.
- Calvet, Louis-Jean. *Roland Barthes: A Biography*. Translated by Sarah Wykes. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.
- Carpentier, Alejo. *The Lost Steps*. Translated by Harriet de Onís. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967.
- Cateforis, David. "An Interview with Wenda Gu." In *Wenda Gu: Art from Middle Kingdom to Biological Millennium*, edited by Mark H. C. Bessire, 143–61. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003.
- Cayley, John. "His Books." In *Tianshu: Passages in the Making of a Book*, edited by Katherine Spears, 1–37. London: Bernard Quaritch, 2009.
- Chang, Han-liang. "Hallucinating the Other: Derridean Fantasies of Chinese Script." Working paper, Center for Twentieth-Century Studies, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Fall 1988.
- Cowell, Henry. "The Joys of Noise" (1929). In *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, 22–24. New York: Continuum, 2004.
- Dachy, Marc, ed. "Graphies." Special issue, *Luna-Park*, no. 2 (1976).
- Danto, Arthur C. "Scenes from an Ideal Friendship." *Artforum International* 50, no. 3 (November 2011): 212–15.
- "Definitions." *Internationale Situationniste*, no. 1 (June 1958). Translated by Ken Knabb. Situationist International Online. Accessed May 10, 2019. <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/definitions.html>.
- DeFrancis, John. *The Chinese Language: Fact and Fantasy*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1984.
- . *Visible Speech: The Diverse Oneness of Writing Systems*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989.
- De Looze, Laurence. *The Letter and the Cosmos: How the Alphabet Has Shaped the Western View of the World*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016.
- Dermisache, Mirtha. "Artist's Statement." September 2011. Gallery P420, Bologna. <http://www.p420.it/en/artisti/dermisache-mirtha>.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- . *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

- . *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- . *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- . "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." In *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass, 278–93. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
- Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Dorfles, Gillo. "Written Images of Cy Twombly." *Metro* 6 (1962): 65–71.
- Dotremont, Christian. *Grand Hôtel des valises*. Edited by Jean-Clarence Lambert. Paris: Galilée, 1981.
- . "Signification et Sinification" (1950). Posted on GAMMM, July 30, 2007. <http://gamm.org/index.php/2007/07/30>.
- Downing, Eric. "Divining Benjamin: Reading Fate, Graphology, Gambling." *MLN* 126 (2011): S61–80.
- Durgin, Patrick. "Witness Mirtha Dermisache: Being Recognized by a Stranger." *Jacket2*, September 8, 2014. <http://jacket2.org>.
- Dworkin, Craig. *Reading the Illegible*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2003.
- Dyson, Anne Haas. "The Emergence of Visible Language: Interrelationships between Drawing and Early Writing." *Visible Language* 16, no. 4 (1982): 360–81.
- Ely, Timothy C. "Access to a Book That Won't Open." Interview by Steve Clay. In *The Flight into Egypt: Binding the Book*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995.
- . "Artist's Statement for *Black Maps* (1997)." Granary Books. <https://www.granarybooks.com/book/1149>.
- Erickson, Britta. *Words without Meaning, Meaning without Words: The Art of Xu Bing*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001.
- Ernst, Max. *Maximiliana or the Illegal Practice of Astronomy: Hommage à Dorothea Tanning*. Edited by Peter Schamoni. New York: New York Graphic Art Society, 1974. First published 1964.
- Etiemble, René. *The Crisis in Comparative Literature*. Translated by Herbert Weisinger and Georges Joyeaux. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966.
- Evens, Aden. *Sound Ideas: Music, Machines, and Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.
- Fenollosa, Ernest, and Ezra Pound. *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*. Edited by Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.
- Fioretos, Aris. *The Gray Book*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Fischer, Steven Roger. *Rongorongo, the Easter Island Script: History, Traditions, Texts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Flournoy, Théodore. *From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with*

- Imaginary Languages*. Translated by Daniel B. Vermilye. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994. First published 1899.
- Flusser, Vilém. *Does Writing Have a Future?* Translated by Nancy Ann Roth. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- . “Gesture and Sentimentality.” Translation by the author of “Geste und Gestimmtheit,” chap. 1 of *Gesten: Versuch einer Phänomenologie*. Bensheim: Bollman, 1993. Typescript, 9 pp.
- . “The Gesture of Writing.” Translation by the author of “Die Geste des Schreibens,” chap. 3 of *Gesten: Versuch einer Phänomenologie*. Bensheim: Bollman, 1993. Typescript, 18 pp.
- . *Into the Universe of Technical Images*. Translated by Nancy Ann Roth. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.
- . “Line and Surface.” In *Writings*, edited by Andreas Ströhl, translated by Erik Eisel. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.
- . “Mira Schendel.” In “Mira Schendel’s Gesture: On Art in Vilém Flusser’s Thought, with ‘Mira Schendel’ by Flusser,” by Nancy Ann Roth. *Tate Papers*, no. 21 (Spring 2014). <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications>.
- Forrest, Seth J. “‘The Apotheosis of Noise’: Asemic Writing, Sound Poetry and Noise Poetics.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, Philadelphia, January 2017.
- Foster, Susan Leigh. “Movement’s Contagion: The Kinesthetic Impact of Performance.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, edited by Tracy C. Davis, 46–59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.
- Fouquet, Kristin. “A Fascinating New Experience.” Customer review of *The Giant’s Fence*, by Michael Jacobson, January 18, 2009. Amazon.com. <https://www.amazon.com>.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, pt. II. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 15, translated by James Strachey. London: Vintage Books, 2001.
- Frith, Uta. “Beneath the Surface of Developmental Dyslexia.” In *Surface Dyslexia: Neuropsychological and Cognitive Studies of Phonological Reading*, edited by K. E. Patterson, J. C. Marshall, and M. Coltheart, 301–30. London: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1985.
- Fuller, Matthew, and Andrew Goffey. “Toward an Evil Media Studies.” In *The Spam Book: On Viruses, Porn, and Other Anomalies from the Dark Side of Digital Culture*, edited by Jussi Parikka and Tony D. Sampson, 141–59. New York: Hampton Press, 2009.
- Gaze, Tim. *Asemic Movement 1*. January 2008. <https://issuu.com/eexxiit>.
- . “Four Questions about Asemic Writing, #04: Tim Gaze.” *SCRIPTjr.nl*, July 12, 2015. <http://scriptjr.nl>.
- Giovenale, Marco. “Maintenant #65: Marco Giovenale.” Interview by SJ Fowler.

- 3:AM Magazine, June 14, 2011. <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/maintenant-65-marco-giovenale>.
- _____. *Sibile asemantiche*. Rome: La Camera Verde, 2008.
- Gu, Wenda. "Words in Art: Wenda Gu on Rewriting and Retranslating Traditional Chinese Culture." Interview. Art Radar, June 15, 2011. <http://artradarjournal.com>.
- Harman, Graham. *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*. Chicago: Open Court, 2005.
- Hatherly, Ana. *O escritor*. Lisbon: Moraes, 1975.
- _____. *L'Invention de l'écriture*. Paris: Pagine d'Arte, 2013.
- Hegarty, Paul. "Residue–Margin–Other: Noise as Ethic of Excess." 2003. <http://dotdotdotmusic.com/hegarty1.html>.
- Ingold, Tim. *Lines: A Brief History*. New York: Routledge, 2007.
- Jacobson, Michael. *Action Figures*. Morrisville, N.C.: Lulu Press, 2011.
- _____. *The Giant's Fence*. Charleston, S.C.: Barbarian Interior, 2005.
- _____. "On Asemic Writing." *Asymptote*, July 2013. <https://www.asymptotejournal.com>.
- _____. "Without Words: Talking with Tim Gaze." *Commonline Journal*, no. 8 (Winter 2008–9). <http://www.commonlinejournal.com>.
- _____. *Works & Interviews, 1999–2014*. Charleston, S.C.: Barbarian Interior, 2015.
- Jacobson, Michael, and Tim Gaze, eds. *An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting*. The Hague: Uitgeverij, 2013.
- Jacobus, Mary. *Reading Cy Twombly: Poetry in Paint*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016.
- Joyce, James. *Finnegans Wake*. New York: Penguin, 1999. First published 1939.
- Judd, Donald. "Cy Twombly." *Arts Magazine* 58, nos. 8–9 (May–June 1964): 38.
- Kaikkonen, Satu, and Quimby Melton. "Satu Kaikkonen." *SCRIPTjr.nl*, December 8, 2012. <http://scriptjr.nl/texts/asemic/satu-kaikkonen>.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, vol. 2. Edited by Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982.
- Klee, Paul. *Notebooks*, vol. 1, *The Thinking Eye*. Edited by Jürg Spiller. London: Lund Humphries, 1961.
- Knapp, Steven, and Walter Benn Michaels. "Against Theory." *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 723–42.
- Konnikova, Maria. "What's Lost as Handwriting Fades." *New York Times*, June 2, 2014.
- Kring, B. "Paper Has More Presence Than Electronic Media." Customer review of *The Giant's Fence*, by Michael Jacobson, January 16, 2009. Amazon.com. <https://www.amazon.com>.
- Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor–Network–Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Leeman, Richard. *Cy Twombly: A Monograph*. London: Thames and Hudson/Flammarion, 2005.
- Leftwich, Jim, ed. *Asemic Writing: Definitions and Contexts, 1998–2016*. Roanoke, Va.: TLPress, 2016.

- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm von. *New Essays on Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Leonardo da Vinci. *Leonardo on Painting: An Anthology of Writings by Leonardo da Vinci*. Edited by Martin Kemp. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Leroi-Gourhan, André. *Gesture and Speech*. Translated by Anna Bostock Berger. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993.
- Leung, Simon, and Janet A. Kaplan. "A Conversation with Wenda Gu, Xu Bing, and Jonathan Hay." *Art Journal* 58, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 86–99.
- Liu, Lydia H. "The Non-book, or the Play of the Sign." In *Tianshu: Passages in the Making of a Book*, edited by Katherine Spears, 65–79. London: Bernard Quaritch, 2009.
- Lupu-Onet, Raluca. "Christian Dotremont's Logograms: An Intermedial Work *avant la Lettre*." In *Intermedial Arts: Disrupting, Remembering and Transforming Media*, edited by Leena Eilitä with Liliane Louvel and Sabine Kim, 33–50. Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars, 2012.
- Mallarmé, Stéphane. "Ballets," translated by Evelyn Gould. *Performing Arts Journal* 15, no. 1 (January 1993): 106–10.
- . *Selected Letters of Stéphane Mallarmé*. Edited by Rosemary Lloyd. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- McLuhan, Marshall, and Quentin Fiore. *The Medium Is the Message: An Inventory of Effects*. Berkeley: Gingko Press, 2001. First published 1967.
- Medsker, Josh. "Talking about Asemic Writing (with Michael Jacobson)." Twenty-Four Hours Online, January 13, 2015, <http://twentyfourhoursonline.org/2015/01/13/talking-about-asemic-writing-with-michael-jacobson>.
- Melton, Quimby. "Fascinating Addition to the Cryptotext Tradition." Customer review of *The Giant's Fence*, by Michael Jacobson, May 8, 2010. Amazon.com. <https://www.amazon.com>.
- Michaux, Henri. "Aventures de lignes" (1954). In *Passages*, 113–17. Paris: Gallimard, 1963.
- . *A Barbarian in Asia*. Translated by Sylvia Beach. New York: New Directions, 1949.
- . "Danse." In *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by Raymond Bellour and Ysé Tran, 1:697–99. Paris: Gallimard, 1998.
- . *Darkness Moves: An Henri Michaux Anthology*. Translated by David Ball. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
- . "Dessiner l'écoulement du temps" (1957). In *Passages*, 197–205. Paris: Gallimard, 1963.
- . *Emergences/Resurgences*. Translated by Richard Sieburth. New York: Skira/The Drawing Centre, 2000.
- . *Ideograms in China*. Translated by Gustaf Sabin. New York: New Directions, 2002.
- . *Mouvements*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982. First published 1951.
- . "Observations" (1950). In *Passages*, 91–101. Paris: Gallimard, 1963.
- . *Oeuvres complètes*. Edited by Raymond Bellour and Ysé Tran. 2 vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1998.

- . “Quelques renseignements sur cinquante-neuf années d’existence.” In *Henri Michaux: Peinture et poésie*, by Henri-Alexis Baatsch, 170–73. Paris: Hazan, 1993.
- . *Stroke by Stroke [with Grasp]*. Translated by Richard Sieburth. Brooklyn: Archipelago, 2006.
- . *Tent Posts*. Translated by Lynn Hoggard. Copenhagen: Green Integer, 1997.
- Mikkolainen, Terhi. “Cangjie—The Inventor of the Chinese Script.” GBTimes, 2013. <https://gbtimes.com/life/cangjie-inventor-chinese-script>.
- Molotiu, Andrei, ed. *Abstract Comics: The Anthology*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009.
- . “Abstract Form: Sequential Dynamism and Iconostasis in Abstract Comics and Steve Ditko’s Amazing Spider-man.” In *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, edited by Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan, 84–100. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Moritz, William. “The Films of Oskar Fischinger.” *Film Culture*, nos. 58–60 (1974): 37–188.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Listening*. Translated by Charlotte Mandell. New York: Fordham University Press, 2007.
- Newgarden, Mark, and Paul Karasik. “How to Read Nancy.” In *The Best of Ernie Bushmiller’s Nancy*, edited by Brian Walker, 98–105. New York: Comican Books, 1988.
- Noland, Carrie. “Miming Signing: Henri Michaux and the Writing Body.” In *Migrations of Gesture*, edited by Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Hess, 133–84. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Nyman, John. “Artist’s Statement,” January 7, 2016. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis: A Selection*. <https://johnnymanwriting.wordpress.com>.
- Parish, Nina. “Between Text and Image, East and West: Henri Michaux’s Signs and Christian Dotremont’s ‘Logogrammes.’” *Revue des Littératures de l’Union Européenne/Review of Literatures of the European Union* 8 (December 2008): 67–80.
- . *Henri Michaux: Experimentation with Signs*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007.
- Pelard, Emanuelle. “Le Nomadisme du signe dans les ‘pseudographies’ de Christian Dotremont et d’Henri Michaux.” *Cygne noir: Revue d’exploration sémiotique*, no. 1 (2013).
- Pincus-Witten, Robert. “Learning to Write” (1968). In *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio, 56–60. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002.
- Priest, Eldritch. *Boring Formless Nonsense: Experimental Music and the Aesthetics of Failure*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Queneau, Raymond. *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres*. Paris: Gallimard, 1950.
- . *Écritures*. Edited by Tim Gaze and Christopher Skinner. King’s Lynn, England: Secret Books, 2015.
- Raley, Rita. “The Asemic at the End of the World.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, Philadelphia, January 2017.
- Rasula, Jed, and Steve McCaffery, eds. *Imagining Language: An Anthology*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

- rawlings, angela. "Asemic Writing." *Gibber*, 2012. <http://arawlings.is/gibber/essays/asemicwriting.pdf>.
- Richter, Gerd. *Comic Strip* (1962). Cologne: Walther König, 2014.
- Roth, Nancy Ann. "Mira Schendel's Gesture: On Art in Vilém Flusser's Thought, with 'Mira Schendel' by Flusser." *Tate Papers*, no. 21 (Spring 2014). <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications>.
- Rotman, Brian. *Becoming beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Samigulina, Ekaterina. "Asemic Writing/Asemic International: The Manifesto." Wikiversity, last edited April 2, 2016. <https://en.wikiversity.org>.
- . *Asemic Writing in the Woods*. YouTube, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com>.
- Sarraute, Nathalie. *Tropisms*. Translated by Maria Jolas. New York: George Braziller, 1963.
- Schwenger, Peter. "Abstract Comics and the Decomposition of Horror." *Horror Studies* 2, no. 2 (2011): 265–80.
- . "Codex Seraphinianus: Hallucinatory Encyclopedia." *SCRIPTjr.nl*, December 8, 2012. <http://scriptjr.nl/special-sections>.
- . "Language Will Eat Your Brain." In *Technologies of the Gothic in Literature and Culture*, edited by Justin Edwards, 179–86. London: Routledge, 2015.
- . "The Obbligato Effect." *New Literary History* 42 (2011): 115–28.
- Serafini, Luigi. *Codex Seraphinianus*. New York: Rizzoli, 2013.
- Serota, Nicholas. "History behind the Thought." Interview with Cy Twombly. In *Cycles and Seasons*, edited by Nicholas Serota, 43–53. London: Tate, 2008.
- Shklovsky, Victor. "Art as Technique." In *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, 3–24. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965.
- Sitwell, Edith. Preface to *Collected Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930.
- Skinner, Christopher. *Four Fools*. King's Lynn, England: Lestaret, 2011.
- . "Four Questions about Asemic Writing, #10: Christopher Skinner." *SCRIPTjr.nl*, October 8, 2015. <http://scriptjr.nl>.
- . *An Isochronous Apologue*. King's Lynn, England: Lestaret, 2018.
- . *Pabulum*. King's Lynn, England: Lestaret, 2012.
- . *Underovary*. King's Lynn, England: Lestaret, 2013.
- Sloan, De Villo. "Received: Eco-Aseemics from Nancy Bell Scott (USA) + Vispology from Lorraine Kwan (Canada) & Neil Gordon's TrAshemics (USA)." International Union of Mail-Artists, February 13, 2012. <http://iuoma-network.ning.com/profiles/blogs/received-eco-aseemics-more-from-nancy-bell-scott-vispology-from>.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. Translator's preface to *Of Grammatology*, by Jacques Derrida, ix–xc. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Stanley, Jeffrey. "To Read Images Not Words: Computer-Aided Analysis of the Handwriting in the Codex Seraphinianus." Master of science thesis, North Carolina State University, 2010.

- Sylvester, David. "Cy Twombly." In *Interviews with American Artists*, 173–81. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001.
- "30 by Cecil Touchon." minimalist concrete poetry. Accessed May 13, 2019. http://www.logolalia.com/minimalistconcretepoetry/archives/cat_touchon_cecil.html.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. Edited by J. Lyndon Shanley. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971.
- Tisseron, Serge. "All Writing Is Drawing: The Spatial Development of the Manuscript." *Yale French Studies* 84 (1994): 29–42.
- Touchon, Cecil. "Artist Statement." In "30 by Cecil Touchon." minimalist concrete poetry. Accessed May 13, 2019. http://www.logolalia.com/minimalistconcretepoetry/archives/cat_touchon_cecil.html.
- van Elburg, Marc. *Gravlixes and the Spiritual in Art*. December 16, 2014. https://issuu.com/ghoi4wt5yhwli8/docs/gravlixes_marcvanelburg_issuu.
- Varndoe, Kirk. *Cy Twombly: A Retrospective*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1994.
- Villa, Emilio. "Cy Twombly" (1957–60), translated by Julia C. Ballerini. In *Writings on Cy Twombly*, edited by Nicola Del Roscio, 35–45. Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2002.
- Walker, Mort. *The Lexicon of Comicana*. Lincoln, Neb.: iUniverse.com, 2000. First published 1980.
- Wallace, David Foster. *The Pale King*. New York: Back Bay Books, 2012.
- Xu Bing. "An Artist's View." In *Persistence/Transformation: Text as Image in the Art of Xu Bing*, edited by Jerome Silbergeld and Dora C. Y. Ching, 99–111. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- _____. *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2014.
- _____. "The Making of Book from the Sky," translated by Drew Hammond. In *Tianshu: Passages in the Making of a Book*, edited by Katherine Spears, 51–63. London: Bernard Quaritch, 2009.

INDEX

- abstraction, 30, 89, 122, 146, 155–56n3
alphabet, 5–6, 12, 14–15, 83–84, 98
Appel, Rosaire, 68, 110–23, 134, 136–37,
 146–47
Archilla, Casilda Garcia, 61, 76, 157n1
asemia, 2
asemic, origin of term, 1
asemic movement, 16–17
asemic writing: and abstract comics, 111;
 definition of, 1–2; as gesture, 116; and
 noise, 109; as universal language, 15–16
- Barthes, Roland, 1, 13, 31–42, 97, 157n3;
 on cursivity, 4, 49; on Twombly, 43,
 45, 49
Benjamin, Walter, 13–14
Berger, John, 47–49
Bijlenga, Marian, 73
Bing, Xu, 83, 93–100
Blanchot, Maurice, 73, 80, 89, 95
body, 27, 156n7, 156n8; and language, 14
Book of Nature, 65, 79
Bucarelli, Palma, 45, 56
- calligraphy, 5, 73, 102, 144, 158n11; *Square Word Calligraphy*, 98–100
Cangjie, 72–73, 79
children's writing and drawing, 12–13, 83,
 140, 149, 158n1
Chinese characters, 72–73, 81–84, 88–91,
 95, 97–100
Chouinard, Marie, 27
collage, 124–25
- comics, abstract, 110–11, 114, 116, 122
concrete poetry, 10, 124
Cui Fei, 73–76, 91
cursive: decline of, 3–4
- dance, 16, 25–28, 156n5
da Vinci, Leonardo, 85
decoding, 71–72, 83, 118, 138–40, 158n1
Dermisache, Mirtha, 10, 16, 34, 137
Derrida, Jacques, 1, 42, 79, 84, 149–50
Descartes, René, 82, 156n7
Dotremont, Christian, 84–88, 98, 143,
 159n3
drawing, 12; and thought, 147
ductus, 49, 54
- Ely, Timothy, 141, 143
emotion, and gesture, 25, 149
emptiness, 44; of language, 40–42, 44, 97
erasure, 43, 110, 155n1
Ernst, Max, 20, 32, 101
- Faucher, Kane X., 138–40
Fenollosa, Ernest, 82, 84, 88–89
Flusser, Vilém, 5–10, 21; on the defamil-
 iarization of writing, 5, 122; on gesture,
 25; on linearity, 61; on pre-writing, 147;
 on print, 127; on translation, 31; on the
 violence of writing, 109–10
- fort-da* game, 13
Foucault, Michel, 65–66
Freud, Sigmund, 13, 90
Frith, Uta, 83

- Gaze, Tim, 1–2, 12, 17, 61, 101
 gesture, 14, 107; interior, 24–25, 116, 147,
 149; and meaning, 104; as origin of
 writing and drawing, 12–13; writing
 determined by, 13–14
 Gimeno, Pepe, 72, 157n4
 Giovenale, Marco, 156n9
 graffiti, 104–5
 graphic granite, 61, 65
 graphism, 38
 graphology, 13–14
 haiku, 40–42,
 handwriting, 2–5; and drawing, 12; vs.
 print, 10; and Twombly, 56. *See also*
 graphology
 ideogram, 83–84, 155n2
 illegibility, 2, 13, 137, 155n1; Barthes on,
 32–34, 38–39; and Twombly, 45, 49
 image, 7, 10, 13, 17, 20, 110; inner, 14;
 visuo-kinetic, 25, 27, 155n1
 Ingold, Tim, 12, 117
 intentionality, 66–67
 Jacobson, Michael, 1, 15–16, 61, 101–10,
 118; responses to his work, 146,
 148–49
 Jacobus, Mary, 13, 43, 46
 Joyce, James, 2
 Judd, Donald, 47, 59
 Kandinsky, Wassily, 117, 146
 keyboard, 3, 83, 124
 Klee, Paul, 12, 20, 117, 155n2
 Lacan, Jacques, 125
 language, 14, 49, 67, 71–72, 81; as categorizing, 21, 24, 39, 91; Chinese, 88–90, 97; as “cribriform,” 143; emptiness of, 40–42, 97; as instrumental, 36; material, 125, 138; as *matte*, 41; and meaning, 32, 39–40, 65, 79; policing by, 15, 19; universal, 15–16, 82, 84; visual, 116–17
 Latour, Bruno, 80
 Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, 82
 left-handedness, 45, 156n1
 Leftwich, Jim, 1–2, 68, 108, 124, 136, 150
 Leroi-Gourhan, André, 5
 letters, alphabetical, 4–5, 14, 66, 83,
 124–25; by Twombly, 43
 Lettrism, 155n1
 linearity, 6–7, 20, 49, 61, 98; Twombly on,
 47
 logogram, 83–84, 143–44, 155n2
 Mallarmé, Stephane, 27, 44
 marks: Appel on, 116–22; by Ely, 143;
 as gestures, 24–25; and meaning, 7,
 98–100, 143; materiality of, 124, 134;
 and space, 13; writing as, 66–67, 79
matte, 41
 McLuhan, Marshall, 6
 meaning: in asemic writing, 17; Barthes on, 32, 38–42, 157n3; Derrida on, 147; and intention, 66–67; gestural, 68, 104; impulse towards, 70–71, 127; language and, 40, 65; and materiality, 109; seme as, 1; as trace, 79
 Michaux, Henri, 19–32; on calligraphy, 158n11; on children’s scribbling, 13; and comics, 115–16; and Dotremont, 143, 159n3; *Ideograms in China*, 81–90; influence on Barthes, 31–32; on interior gestures, 147–48; left-handedness, 156n11
 Molotiu, Andrei, 11, 114
 movement: of the hand, 12, 46, 54, 147, 156n7; interior, 30–31, 147–48; Michaux and, 24–28
 Nancy, Jean-Luc, 117
 noise, 108–9

- notation, 12, 117–18, 122; John Cage's *Notations*, 117; dance notation, 27–28; musical notation, 117
- Nyman, John, 125, 127
- phonogram, 83, 143
- pictogram, 83, 143
- Pincus-Witten, Robert, 45, 56, 59
- play, 149–50
- Pound, Ezra, 82, 88, 100
- print, 10, 14, 85, 127, 129
- Proust, Marcel, 36
- Queneau, Raymond, 136
- Raley, Rita, 15
- rawlings, angela, 68, 70–71, 76, 157n4
- Ray, Man, 61
- reading: Appel on reading/looking, 112, 118; associative, 148; authority of, 127; eco-asemic, 80–81; habitual nature of, 146; inevitability of, 150; Leftwich on, 68; of pre-writing, 147
- Richter, Gerhard, 141
- Rongorongo, 101–2
- Rotman, Brian, 5, 14, 25, 93
- Schendel, Mira, 8–10, 17, 30
- Scott, Nancy Bell, 61
- seal script, 88, 91
- serme, 1
- Serafini, Luigi, 138–40, 158–59n1
- signification, 1, 21, 150. *See also* meaning
- signs, 2, 21, 28–31, 150; Buccarelli on, 46; dance and, 27; as gestures, 21; as material markings, 124; nature's, 65, 71, 81
- Skinner, Christopher, 16–17, 124–36, 159n2
- Smith, Hélène, 158n3
- sound, 108–9
- speech, 14
- Steinberg, Saul, 32, 49, 141
- Sulger-Buel, Romaric, 32, 39
- texture, 132–34, 148
- Thoreau, Henry David, 70
- thought, 4; Flusser on, 6–7; pre-thought, 21, 147–48; as reflexes, 120; shaped by writing, 109, 147; writing as instrument of, 36
- Tisseron, Serge, 12–13, 147
- Touchon, Cecil, 124–25
- trace, 32, 79–80, 149
- translation, 31, 144, 147
- Twombly, Cy, 43–60; blackboard paintings, 56–59; *Letter of Resignation*, 46–56; Virgil, 43–45
- type (typefaces), 10, 72, 94–95, 126–27, 129–32
- typewriter, 124, 136
- Villa, Emilio, 44–45, 156n9
- Voynich manuscript, 12, 101
- Walker, Mort, 115, 122
- Wallace, David Foster, 79
- Wenda Gu, 91–93
- whiteness: of the page, 42; in Twombly, 43–45, 54, 56, 156n10
- wild cursive, 73, 85
- writing, 147; Chinese, 81–100; colored, 37; as cursivity, 4, 49; defamiliarizing of, 5; and drawing, 12, 117, 147; as emptiness, 41–42, 97; as image, 13; as incision, 109–10; as instrumental, 36, 38; and intentionality, 66–67; and linearity, 6, 61; by nature, 61, 70; origin of, 73; speed of, 36–37; and trace, 76–79. *See also* cursive; handwriting
- Xu Bing, 136, 149; *Book from the Ground*, 83; *Book from the Sky (Tianshu)*, 93–97; *Square Word Calligraphy*, 98–100
- Zen, 39, 41–42

Peter Schwenger is professor emeritus of English at Mount St. Vincent University and resident fellow of the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism at the University of Western Ontario. His books *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* and *At the Borders of Sleep: On Liminal Literature* were both published by the University of Minnesota Press.