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The Negative Alphabet - Shapes between letters

In 2010, the Negative Alphabet was devised by an advertising agency as a brainstorming tool for new logos and cartoon mascots. After the Language Saturation Shift of the 2030's, when the traditional alphabet could no longer support the density of meaning packed into each word, these symbols were adopted to allow for a greater range of nuance to be presented within and alongside our positive sentences. (Brian McMullen, 2004: 190)

The Future Dictionary of America
Wisconsin: McSweeney's Books and Barsuk Records
2004
ERRATUM


Renée Holleman
ERRATUM


Renée Holleman
HLLREN003

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Fine Art.

Faculty of Humanities
University of Cape Town
2008

This work has not been submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature:  
Date: 20/11/08
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INTRODUCTION

"Heidegger's thought about art, like Hegel's, is tied to a thought about modernity which he describes as a sort of fall into what one can only call blinding lucidity – a flat availability of objects to our view, our calculation, and our research, as if we were frozen into a sort of permanent midday, the world freed of its burden of shadow. It names this modernity 'the age of the world of picture' and glosses it in terms of the reign of the 'Ge-stell' usually rendered as 'frame'. It is a feature of this flat availability of things that among the things that are available are, hanging "on the wall like a rifle or a hat" works of art. And because those pictures hang there in just that way, they offer us no access to the fact that our world too has come to hang before us like a picture – but it is also the case that if we come to understand what a picture is we might come again to understand what a world is."

(Stephen Mellville, 1998: 412)

This image of an unremitting modernity is a prescient one. I begin with this lengthy quotation of Stephen Melville's as it identifies a complex of issues that I feel are still remarkably pertinent to the way in which we experience the world today. The world as picture is a world we know well, a world seen in and out of time, time and again in an endless stream of images. This is the everyday. The challenge that Melville posits is as much a question of perspective as perception: How do we see what we see, and how do we see ourselves seeing.

Frederic Jameson claimed as the defining feature of all postmodernisms 'A new kind of flatness, or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the literal sense'. (Jameson in Joslin, 2005: 293) In a visual culture governed by the eminently readable, I am interested in those instances where visibility and legibility become contingent, where the surface of the everyday wears thin at the edges, and where in the absence of sufficient information an interpretive or imaginative gap opens up. My production is based around a concern with the mediatory nature of images; what they reveal and conceal, and within that, the idea of the void, or rather the void within. This concern is accompanied by a profound uncertainty as to the self-sufficiency of the image on the one hand, and a deep desire to engage with and activate the viewer on another. The result is a somewhat solipsistic body of work, both abstract and performative that insinuates itself into the structure of the exhibition space only to evacuate it at the same time.
I begin my thesis by looking at the relationship between culture and optionality. Following Žižek’s analysis of ‘postmodern society in terms of a ‘universalised reflexivity’, I look at how today’s global culture is broadly defined as optional in the sense that social practices are no longer determined by tradition or nature, but are largely considered a matter of choice. While this is the result of a complex of issues, it is principally defined as a feature of a liberal social economy. The question I address here is whether, in a ‘permissive’ society, the having of choices is necessarily empowering and fulfilling, or whether it does not, in fact, undermine the individual’s ability to choose and reshape his/her identity because of the excessive amount of freedom it allows.

In the second chapter I focus on the residual anxiety that arises out of a cultural constructivism that sees human experience as located entirely within culture. Drawing on Catherine Belsey’s critique of the constructivist position, I outline a psychoanalytic reading of culture in relation to the Lacanian ‘real’ as a limit experience. I argue that despite the fact that we are, as speaking beings defined by the symbolic order that is language, and that it is here, and only here that our identities are formed and we find meaning, there exists still something that is not reducible to what we say exists. Locating the ‘real’ as a void, or silenced exteriority within, my discussion touches on desire and the construction of meaning, the uncertain status of ‘reality’, and leads to a re-evaluation of the role of anxiety in our everyday lives.

I then move on to look at the void in art, and why it is important to locate in contemporary practice. My intention here is to trace the a shift in the visibility of the void from modernism into postmodern. Focusing on the inherent iconoclasm of modern art and its persistent presencing of absence, I return to Žižek, whose Lacanian based psychoanalytical framework of culture establishes a critical tension between the ‘art Object’ and the ‘sacred Place’ that it occupies. What is important here is the temporal factor of this interaction, the ‘taking place of the Place’, which I link to eventhood and performativity.

In the last chapter of the first section, I develop this idea of the image as an event in relation to opacity and visibility. Using a case study of religious iconography I again pick up on the presencing of absence through iconoclastic action and, in discussing the relationship between images and the claim to truth, establish a connection to contemporary practices of viewing. In closing I refer to Jacques Rancière for whom spectatorship is an emancipatory, transformative act rather than a gesture of passive contemplation.

The first section of my paper thus establishes a complex of ideas relating to the void, opacity, visibility and the event. In the second section I apply these to an investigation of lan-
guage, narrative, indeterminacy and the fragment, beginning with a discussion of Samuel Beckett's writing as a point of departure from which to examine the disjuncture between narrative, meaning and the construction of language. Key ideas here are the problem of redemptive narratives, the happening of nothing ('nothing happens') and the stuttering of language (Deleuze) which manifests in a 'syntax of weakness'. The latter is identified as a strategy, a language of opacity, which emphasis visibility as an event, and which I associate with the work of Pierre Huyghe, Trisha Donnelly, Ryan Gander, Fiona Banner, and Martin Creed.

In the following two chapters I focus on the fragment, first defining and consolidating it within a literary framework (although not exclusively), and then discussing it in relation to artistic practice. My emphasis lies on the strategies implicit to Dada which conceretly addressed the opacity of language in visual practice for the first time. I end with a brief discussion of indeterminacy in the work of John Cage, his emphasis on silence and the void, and his incorporation of the everyday as a central feature of his compositions.

Section three features a survey of the work of the artists I mention above, in which I attempt to outline how the ideas, concerns and questions that I explore in the preceding text find expression in a contemporary context. Section four, 'Erratum' is an exposition on my own work.
1.1 EITHER/OR - OPTIONALITY AND ENDLESS CULTURE

One of the defining features of living in a globalised society is having choices. While people have undoubtedly always had choices, the quantity and quality of options available today is decidedly different. According to risk society theory, people no longer make decisions according to tradition or nature, some pre-accepted code, script or symbolic order, but rather experience socialisation as a matter of choice. Practices that once seemed self-evident are now exposed to a 'universalised reflexivity' and have become things to be considered and decided upon. (Žižek, 1999: sp) Neither nature, nor culture in the form of traditions and customs is taken for granted, and people have become increasingly aware of how they are represented to themselves; that their identity and lifestyle are constructs. The having of options as enshrined within the principles that define democratic liberalism also means that I have the freedom and the right to choose my personal identity, my sexual preference, my community and my creed, and it is these choices that confirm my individuality and the system that enables them.

Optionality is also a feature of the extent to which we live in a mediated environment. The media which we are surrounded by bring experiences to us in a way that is undoubtedly fascinating, thrilling and informative, but also manically intrusive and utterly absurd in the way that they create a sense of instantaneous availability and render all experience optional as a result. The effect is a flattening of the field of experience, and a corresponding loss of depth. This infinite variety of experiences eventually becomes a relentless and tedious monotony resulting in boredom, indifference and estrangement brought on by the sheer overload and pace at which they are administered. Thomas de Zengotita maintains that the effect of optionality is a 'whatever' society. He suggests further that optionality stands at the opposite end of the scale to reality, which is defined by 'accident and necessity'. (De Zengotita, 2005: 14) Writing in 1984, prior to the advent of internet connectivity, J.F. Lyotard predicted that the instantaneous process of information acquisition through technology would result in the disappearance of the 'temporal continuum' through which experience was transmitted from one generation to the next, (Lyotard, 1989: 21) and therefore our understanding of the relation of events to history.

Yet the array of choices that are realistically available to an individual within a liberal

1 Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and others in Žižek (1999: sp) Risk society is a term used to describe a society that is organised in response to risk, and increasingly preoccupied with the future.

2 Thomas De Zengotita's book Mediated: How the Media Shape Your World (2005) is somewhat commercially pitched, but contains some original thinking about the effects of mass culture, significantly the theorisation of the 'flattered self'.
social economy depends largely on where exactly on the global economic scale they find themselves. There are countless millions for whom there are very few options with regards to even the most basic decisions. In discussing optionality I do not in any way intend to lessen the significance of having choices that are empowering and fulfilling, but rather to question the validity of choice as an end in itself, as well as the assumption that having options is in fact always empowering. What is assumed is that I am equipped to make an effective choice, that I’m up to it, so to speak, and that I don’t feel confused, overwhelmed or oppressed by the array of choices and the concomitant and implicit obligation that I should take advantage of them to be empowered and fulfilled.

Keeping this problem in mind, I want to return to Žižek’s concept of a ‘universalised reflexivity’. In a postmodern society the reflexivity engendered by the breakdown of the symbolic order (patriarchal traditions, stereotypical gender roles, religious moral code) often seems to result in guilt and anxiety instead of sense of (rightful) pleasure in the ability to create and manipulate the new and various roles and identities that arise for a subject. Why should this be? Shouldn’t I be happy, given the option, freedom and right to configure my life according to my preferences? Locating this question in a psychoanalytic framework, Žižek suggests that in a ‘permissive society’, where order is no longer maintained through ‘hierarchy, repression and strict regulation’ it can no longer be subverted through a ‘liberating act of transgression’ (Žižek, 1999: sp). In a repressive society, the symbolic authority dictates that ‘you can do your duty because you must’, while in a permissive society this injunction is turned around such that ‘you must do your duty because you can’, such that it is a pleasure to do one’s duty and a duty to enjoy oneself. (Žižek, 1999: sp) The individual is therefore ultimately and solely responsible for their fulfillment and compelled to be happy because they can be. It is in this sense that reflexivity (an awareness of the extent to which our roles and identities are constructed) undermines the postmodern subject’s ability to choose and reshape his/her identity.

As South Africans I maintain that we are (mercifully perhaps) grounded by a high degree of accident and necessity. It’s important to note here that the extent/saturation of mediation as I discuss it here is a global phenomenon, but is experienced in qualitatively different ways within more and less affluent societies.

By example, Žižek suggests the following exemplary situation: a repressive parent will say to their child, ‘You are going to visit Granny for tea, and you will behave nicely even if you don’t want to’, while the permissive parent will say, ‘Although Granny would like to see you for tea, you only have to go if you really want to.’ In the first example the child may hate having tea with granny, but has the libidinal pleasure of pretending that they do, thereby subverting the repressive injunction. In the second example the permissive parent represents the super ego. The super ego functions by appearing to give the child a choice, while not only implicitly denying them that choice, but also ordering them to smile while they do it, which is to say, ‘You must visit your Granny and you must enjoy it’.

Žižek crucially points out that the proper subject of psychoanalysis is what happens with the withdrawal of the symbolic order and the loss of a liberating act of transgression.

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5 Žižek crucially points out that the proper subject of psychoanalysis is what happens with the withdrawal of the symbolic order and the loss of a liberating act of transgression.
What appears as a 'hedonistic' and permissive society is in fact infused with concealed rules and regulations which are intended to serve the common good but in reality allow very little freedom of choice (you may smoke but not in public places). To not respect these rules is to invite recrimination and guilt, because how can you not want to support something that is implicitly intended to benefit society as a whole? Permissiveness is therefore a 'pseudo-liberation', and in response to the prospect of an 'excessive freedom', the result of endless optionality, the individual feels a sense of explicit anxiety. (Žižek, 1999: sp)

1.2 ANXIETY, CULTURE AND THE REAL

In the context of a broader discussion on the extent of and limits to culture, I am particularly interested in this question of anxiety. Catherine Belsey identifies anxiety as a residual or latent effect of the tension between a cultural constructivism that locates human experience as entirely within culture, and a concern about the seeming limitless-ness of this constructedness. Drawing on Belsey's argument I outline in the following section a psychoanalytic reading of culture with regards to the Lacanian 'real'6 as a limit experience and possible outside to cultural constructedness. What, in this case is meant by culture, and how is it different to nature, what does it mean to us?

In the past half century the extensive cultural critique that has grown out of semiotic theory (deconstruction, feminism, postcolonial theory) has radically redefined the relationship between culture and what was considered to be human nature. Where previously culture was seen as an extension of human nature and thereby resistant to any challenge or alteration considered contrary to what was 'natural', culture has since overthrown the limitations of nature and has been established not only as a field in its own right, but as constituent of human nature itself. On the one hand culture allows for criticism and difference, acknowledges the diversity of ethnic, religious and social practices, how we define our identities and materialize our bodies, and this is all a good thing. On the other hand if taken to account for our entire sense of being in the world, then criticism is ultimately relativised.

In other words, from a cultural constructivist point of view, everything is reducible to culture - everything that we are able to know is culturally relative and cultural representations structure human activity and consciousness of the world because one can never perceive anything other than what one can perceive. Culture then, is all-embracing and

6 In my own writing I follow Lacan's scripting of the 'real' in lower case, although other writers variously use a capital 'R'. From this point on it will also appear simply as the real, rather than the 'real'.
limitless, and reality is what we make of it. This kind of thinking which can be identified with theorists like Stanley Fish and Judith Butler leaves me with a distinct sense of unease and a feeling that something is missing. The distinction, writes Belsey, is that while we know that 'what we know is entirely culturally relative', from a constructivist position 'what exists becomes reducible to what we say exists.' (Belsey, 2005: 4) What is missing then, is precisely the sense that something is missing.

Culture as it is defined within a psychoanalytic framework is the symbolic order that we inhabit as speaking beings. According to Lacan, the meaning by which we constitute our sense of reality is always derived from something outside of us, and since we are born into a pre-existent language and we learn to mean from people, this irreducible Otherness (the big Other) is the symbolic realm in which our sense of self and subjectivity takes shape. Culture, then is where I, as a subject find meaning through language, because culture is, practically speaking, everything. It consists of a society's entire range of signifying practices, myths, rituals, entertainment, sports, arts, technologies, laws, beliefs and values. It is all we know and there is no place for human beings outside of it.

The crucial distinction that Lacan makes is that in gaining access to a social reality, the human organism is forever separated from a 'sense of continuity' with its surroundings, as language will always divide the subject from what he terms 'the real'. 'The real' as Lacan defines it 'is that which does not depend on my idea of it' (Fink in Belsey: 49). What this means is that while the real exists, it can't be brought into the symbolic order — it is there, but not there-for-a subject. In short, the 'real' is not the world picture that culture presents to us. Rather it is culture's difference, a silent or silenced exteriority which is also internal — a void within. It cannot be specified, symbolized, delimited or known, even though it can be named. It is implacably there; it exists purely as difference and has no meaning, it exceeds representation and brings language to an impasse. (Belsey, 14)

How then, does this void of the unknowable, unsayable real configure within the experience of the subject? It may arise in the sense of awe that comes from peering into the inconceivable depths of the night sky, or the curious and unfathomable sensation, as Jacques Derrida describes it, of seeing oneself seen by a cat. (Derrida, 1999: 374) Undoubtedly it is present in death, where it is felt as an absence in the symbolic order — impossible to imagine but ever present. Yet the real is beyond experience and outside of language. Where the signifier seems to evoke an intention or truth behind what is said, there is no way of accessing this place behind words. The signifier as such, acts as a veil over the (nothing, nowhere, absent) unknown.
In his seminar on the gaze, (Seminar XI) Lacan invokes the classical Greek story of the competition between the two artists Zeuxis and Parrhasios to see who could paint a more realistic picture. On being unveiled, Zeuxis’ picture was so lifelike that birds flew down and tried to eat the grapes he had painted, and it was certain that he had won the competition. But when it came to Parrhasios’s turn to lift the veil from his painting, it was revealed that he had painted a veil so convincing that Zeuxis had been fooled as easily as the birds. (Lacan, 1981: 103) Thus the signifier, whether in the form of image, word, scientific equation or mathematical notation, veils whatever might exist ‘beyond’ it.

The psychoanalytic subject, of course, longs to look beyond this veil, but what it seeks there is not so much the real, nor its sense of continuity with the world, or that part of itself that has been lost to the symbolic order. What it looks for instead is the object that causes this desire, an identifiable something that will fill the gap created by the loss of the real. It is this object, which Lacan terms ‘the Thing’ (and later ‘object a’) that motivates the subject and around which desire (as the drive) moves. The Thing then is constructed retroactively to occupy the space of ‘pure’ loss that is left by the erasure of the real, and in marking the place where the real was, constitutes itself as filling the emptiness that resides there for the speaking being. (Belsey, 2005: 47)

What does this emptiness mean for meaning? The meaning that we inevitably seek as human beings, arises not out of some inherent truth, but rather from this latency within the signified. Furthermore, in following a post-structuralist delineation of the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, Lacan emphasises that the meaning that we attain through language is separated from that which it pertains to, which goes to say that there is little to affirm that the meaning we ascribe to things has any truth outside of this designation. Since what we know always exists at the level of the symbolic, there is nothing to say that we can ever really be entirely sure of it. What this points to, in other words, is a kind of ‘structural uncertainty’ which upholds the possibility of a limit to our knowledge and certainty about ourselves and how we are constructed within culture, and prompts us to question what is real and what is perhaps a culturally constructed illusion. This is, I feel, an important question to be asking (and to keep on asking) despite the fact that it is the same question humankind has been asking of philosophy as far back as Plato. In a postmodern society, what is real has been somewhat complicated by the extent to which media technologies condition our experience of the world. It can be hard to tell the difference between fact and fiction these days, to discern any difference between ‘basic reality’ and ‘pure simulacrum.’ (Baudrillard, 2001: 173).
What criteria do we use to establish, as Jean Baudrillard contentiously argues, that the gulf war did in fact take place?

David Cronenberg's *eXistenZ* (1999), by example, explores the fine line between the two. The film follows the adventures of the two lead characters (Allegra Geller and Ted Pikul) who are physically plugged into a computer game through a 'bio-port'. The game turns out to be amazingly just like reality except that it is structured and scripted. The players can only move onto the next scenario or next level of the reality game if they know the right phrase or action. At the beginning of the game, the ability to discern reality from virtual reality is easy enough, (for both the audience and the characters) but by the final scene when one of the players inexplicably produces a gun and kills the game designer, the players no longer have any way of making the critical distinction; no way of knowing whether or not they are still in the game. Cronenberg's film problematizes the distinction between fiction and reality, and while films like this and numerous others may be cleverly self-referential postmodern meta-fiction, they are also perhaps symptomatic of an increasing uncertainty about our ability to distinguish fiction from fact. Is this pang of uneasiness merely a pointless, nostalgic desire to return to simplistic foundational narratives where the difference between appearance and reality was easy to differentiate, or is it indicative of something else? Belsey suggests, and I would concur, that the anxiety that we feel at the 'excessive freedom' offered by a seemingly endless array of options, at a limitless culture where we are always 'in the game', seems to indicate an unresolved tension over our identity as subjects within culture. Anxiety, in this event, is a good thing to hold on to.

Thus where De Zengotita defines the opposite of real as not fake or illusionary or fictional, but optional, a psychoanalytical approach to cultural theory suggests that this is, however, a sense of optionality, and that there may exist something outside of those options simply because we don’t know what it is.
1.3 NOTHING VENTURED, NOTHING GAINED. ON LOCATING THE VOID IN CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

“It seems outrageous to many people that there are so many blanks in Modern Art. So many blank canvasses, so many white squares, so many black ones, so many paintings of nothing. One artist in the history of art making a white square is not so annoying for many people. They draw the line though, at more than one doing it. Repetition in art is bad enough, they think. Artists should be original and always think up new things. But repeating nothingness is considered beyond the pale.” (Collings, 1999: 143)

The persistent desire to represent nothingness, is, aside from possibly being somewhat aggravating, still very much a feature of contemporary art, but despite the various modalities that individual artist's work involves, there seems to be a distinct difference in tone and visibility between the kind of void that you could throw yourself into and the kind of void signalled by a crumpled up paper ball. The modernists, it seems, felt a lot more positive about the negative, but being at opposite ends of the expressive scale its possibly not entirely appropriate to cite the difference in approach between Yves Klein and Martin Creed as entirely representative of this shift. But it is this shift, a shift in the visibility of the void that I am interested in, and which the following chapter aims to map out. The disintegration of the visual field that marked the early Modernist flight from representation was defined to some extent by the fact that artists were responding to a clearly identifiable representational regime which determined what they were, in principle, negating. Jacques Ranciere writes of the shift between a classical regime of representation in which things were determined by a stable set of relations between making, seeing, doing and judging, and an aesthetic regime (which is still in effect in the present) in which the field of representation is flattened out and everything becomes generally available and equally representable. (Rancière, 2007 (b): 120-121)

The aesthetic regime — and therefore modern art (Rancière is dismissive of the term modernity) is the permanent critique of representation. The shift from the one to the other was realised concurrently and in relation to the rationalisation and subjectivisation of vision that occurred at the turn of the nineteenth century and is consistent with the perpetual reinvention of the conditions of perceptual experience that is typical of the logic of a spectacularising capitalist modernity. With the further atomisation of the visual field through the accelerative effects of mass media technologies, the nothing of the void is defined in an increasingly complex relationship to the represented and its much abused referent, reality.
The representation of the unrepresentable has, of course, a much longer history in the form of Christian religious iconography, against which modern art reacted (to some degree) in its effort to escape the tyranny of mimesis and presence, and to re-define the essence of the work of art. When Malevich first exhibited *Black Square* in 1915 as part of the *Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10* it was placed diagonally across the corner of the room in which it was hung, higher than the rest of his work on show, and in direct reference to the placement of Christian religious icons in Russian homes. The new Suprematism was intended as the new Russian icon, and the 0.10 of the exhibition title related to the extreme nothingness of the *Black Square* and to Malevich's advance from nothing to infinity.

In the manifesto Malevich handed out at the opening, he wrote 'I have transformed myself in the zero of forms and gone beyond zero.' (Collings, 163) In this sense religious iconography forms a distinct part of Modernism's spiritual heritage, and more directly one of the sources of its implicit (and sometimes explicit) iconoclasm. The other spiritual tradition to influence the modernist dematerialisation of the art object came in the form of eastern philosophy, and primarily Zen Buddhism. Identified as having a defining impact on the work of Claude Monet, whose *Impression: Sunrise* (1873) drew stylistically on Japanese Ukiyo-e woodcuts (Baas, 2005: 20) it was deeply appreciated by Wassily Kandinsky, whose *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1911) formed the theoretical basis of the modernist destructive impulse: 'all things material possess a spiritual, psychic and characteristic dimension that, however, only becomes apparent when its material is destroyed, or at least the familiar intact form is eradicated' (Kandinsky in Zbikowski, 2002: 430)
Since the beginning of the twentieth century images have been manipulated and manhandled, burnt and destroyed. Caroline Jones writes, ‘(a)rtistic rejections, subtractions, negations, cancellations, censorings, occlusions, encryptions, and denials are the everyday destructions that constitute the production of modernist art objects’ (Jones, 2002: 412) and form the basis of modernism’s representational critique. It was particular to the logic of Modernism to make the viewer aware of these processes, and how they were materialised specifically within the art object, despite their imbrication within a broader cultural field - Hence the typical Modernist maxims 'art for art's sake' and 'truth to medium'. (Lucio Fontana's slashed canvasses are an almost literal transcription of this process.) By internalising iconoclasm Modernist art intended to cancel conventional representation of the object, and hence the need for mediation, putting the artwork outside of any form of mediation.9 Destructive art campaigns then, have been largely responsible for the dematerialisation of the art object (Zbikowski, 428) beginning with Duchamps readymades, and in particular his *Ready made Malheureuse* (1919), (a geometry book which he gave instructions to be destroyed by hanging on a balcony in the wind) and including Man Ray's *Object to be Destroyed* (1923), Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953) and Yves Klein's *Le Vide* (1958).

The persistent presencing of an absence that typifies modernist art can be viewed from the broader perspective of culture in the sense that all art can to said to be an allusion to the void in that it constructs something out of nothing, thereby enclosing an absence. Lacan argues that making beautiful things satisfies to the extent that it does, 'not by

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9 Although as Jones ironically adds, non-representational art, and she includes conceptual art as the ultimate abstraction, very often needed mediation for it to be understood. Barnett Newman, for example, had to post a suggestion that viewers stand no more than one metre away from his canvasses so as to get the full effect of a saturated peripheral vision. (Jones, 2002: 414)
representing the real or avoiding the drive, but instead by pointing to the lost real, while at the same time fencing off the possibility that we might come too close to the Thing.' (Belsey, 2005: 72) Made objects offer satisfaction when the signifier encloses an absence and at the same time offers pleasure.

But Modernism is marked by the fact that negation and the foregrounding of absence is imperative to the artwork - in its constituency and identity outside of mass culture. To what extent and in what manner has the emphasis on absence changed with the increasing commodification of cultural enterprise, and beyond this commodification, the movement towards the culturalisation of the economy itself. In a tertiary economy (otherwise known as the service industry, in which intangible goods are exchanged) culture has shifted from being an arena exempt from the market, to being its central component, and includes things like tourism, retail, entertainment, the hospitality industry, through to legal consultancy and real estate. The imbrication of art and economy has seen the dissolution of the avant-garde logic of provocation, the ability to shock the establishment, since increasingly the cultural economy is able to tolerate shock and provocation, and in fact requires these tactics to market and perpetuate itself. In light of this Žižek argues that locating the void is in fact one of the crucial tasks of art today.10

The process of sublimation - in which the 'central Void, the empty ('sacred') place of the Thing', exempt from the circulation of the everyday economy, and filled up by the positive object which is thereby elevated 'to the dignity of the Thing', (Žižek, 2000: 27), seems to be increasingly under threat. What is threatened is not the empty Place or the positive element that fills it in, but the very gap between them. If the problem of traditional (pre-modern) art was how to fill in the sublime Void of the Thing (the pure Place) with an adequately beautiful object, ie. how to succeed in elevating an ordinary object to the dignity of a Thing, the problem of modern art is, Žižek argues, largely the opposite. It is also a much more desperate. Since one can no longer count on the 'Void of the (Sacred) Place' being there, open to being filled by human artifacts, the task that confronts artists today is how to sustain the Place, how to ensure that 'this Place itself will take place'. (Žižek: 27) The problem, in other words, is no longer that of 'horror

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10 It's crucial to note, before I continue, that Žižek's formulation of the real is very different to Lacan's in that he insists on the real as the void as an absence, and nothing more than a retroactively constructed psychic presentation. Whereas the real, for Lacan, is there but not there-for-a-subject, in Žižek the real is not there at all. While my position in this text is a more traditionally Lacanian one, for the purposes of my discussion here, the relationship between the void as 'sacred place' and the object that fills it in, thereby attaining the status of 'the Thing' remains unchanged.

11 Žižek draws on Lacan's definition of sublimation which in turn draws directly on Freud. It is through this formulation that Žižek conflates sublimation with the sublime.
vacui', an extreme anxiety at the prospect of having to fill in the Void, but instead it is that of creating the Void in the first place.

In this way the co-dependence between an 'empty, unoccupied place' and a 'rapidly moving elusive object, an occupant without a place', is crucial. (Žižek: 27) Because the two correlate identically, like opposite sides of a Mobius strip, it is paradoxically only an element that is totally out of its place that can sustain the void of an empty place. As soon as this element finds its place, there is no longer any 'pure Place' distinguishable from the elements which fill it out. By this formulation, Žižek reasons that it is increasingly necessary to fill the sacred space with an excremental object, with a piece of trash that can never be 'up to its task'. (Žižek, 26) (And conversely, that everything that claims the right to this place, must by definition be excremental.)

This relationship finds its clearest explanation in the Hegelian dialectic, 'The spirit is bone'. At first reading, this phrase in non-nonsensical, there seems to be no allusive correspondence between the two, because the spirit in its absolute 'self-relating negativity' is the total opposite to bone, 'inert and dead'. However it is the very incongruity, the naming of something by which it is definitively not, that affirms the spirit in essence — that it can only be approached through a negative formulation. This is then similar to what happens in art when we experience faeces in the sacred Place and ask 'Is this art?!' It is the experience of the radical incongruity between the object and the Place it occupies that makes us acutely aware of the specificity of this Place. (Žižek, 30). For this reason, claims Žižek, a beautiful object is increasingly less able to sustain the Place of art — the Void of the Thing.

In this regard the Modernist break with representational strategies becomes more clearly understandable as an awareness, or taking into account of the tension between the art Object and the Place it occupies. In other words, that what makes a work of art a work of art is not simply its material properties, but the place it occupies — 'the sacred Place of the Void of the Thing.' (Žižek, 32) Malevich and Duchamp can be seen to represent the two extremes in terms of this taking into account; Malevich in the purely formal marking of the gap which separates the object from its Place - Black Square (1915), and Duchamp in the display of a common everyday object as a readymade artwork on the other - Bicycle Wheel (1913).

This process of ensuring that the Place of the void 'takes place', locates it in time, and makes of it an event. While locating the void is crucial to contemporary practice in general, I am principally interested in those instances in which the evocation of the void
is a thematic concern, and in which the presencing of an absence becomes a means to question how we experience the event of the image and the place of art as uncertain, possibly incomplete. This is then a practice of the performativity of the image in that a performative image is one that draws attention to itself as an event.

1.4 HOW TO LOOK AT IMAGES - EVENT AND OPACITY

'To see the unseen is an essential skill to be developed at the close of the twentieth century.'

(Bill Viola in Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House)

'We live in a society that has no adequate images anymore and, if we do not find adequate images and an adequate language for our civilisation with which to express them, we will die out like the dinosaurs...'

(Werner Hertzog)

At the beginning of this paper I suggest that one of the biggest challenges facing us today is a question of reflexivity in the practice of viewing - how do we see and how do we see ourselves seeing - a discussion that revolves around the idea of how we 'picture' the world, and hence what we understand about images. Although this is a potentially engulfing terrain, my aspirations are limited to talking about images in terms of their opacity, in other words, that they conceal as much as they reveal, embody or depict.

When speaking about material culture it is important to recognise that ours is no longer an object based one, but takes form as a set of images that is openly and freely available across the globe, encompassing any time, place, history, material or style. Yet the underlying value of the image is not one of appearance, but rather of use, ie. it is not about the image's aesthetic appeal, but rather about what it gives access to. Where contradictions arise at the level of appearance, it is because images are an expression of an arrangement of informational, economic and political conditions that underly our basic experience of the visible. When we experience their visible expression as unrelated and incongruous it is because we are not able to see the deeper patterns and relationships that lie beneath the surface.

With the progressive densification of mass media, the truth or falsity of the messages that are embodied therein can no longer be easily differentiated, and neither is it possible to establish their authenticity through traditional logical means. What is needed is
the capacity to skillfully analyse the 'perceptual physiological' language of the image, 'an event and not an object' that lives, changes and grows. (Viola, 2002: 243)

In the following chapter I return to the issue of iconoclasm and the play between presence and absence as it relates to the 'physiological language' of the image. My discussion focuses on religious iconography as a case study of sorts in which I explore the nature of the image in relation to its potential claim to truth. Although this discussion is rooted in the old religious debates, it has a surprising relevance to the way in which we understand the 'world as picture' today.

THE CLAIM TO TRUTH - A CASE STUDY ON PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

'La vérité est image mais il n'y a pas d'image de la vérité' 12

Marie-Jose Mondzain

In this case study I'll be looking at the problematic way in which images have been, and still are, considered to function as intermediaries to an absolute truth. I will do this by discussing the inherent ambivalences contained in this idea, focusing particularly on the desire to disrupt the image as a result of the belief in an absolute truth. But firstly, what is meant by 'image' requires some explanation. Image is taken to encompass, quite broadly, any picture, symbol, artwork, sign or inscription that acts, as Bruno Latour suggests, as a mediation to access something else. (Latour, 2002: 14) Following an anthropological definition of the image, Hans Belting makes a critical distinction between the image and the material in which it is manifested, by way of analogy to a funeral photograph, where it is in place of a missing body that the image is installed. The image as such requires an 'artificial body' so as to occupy the place that has been left vacant by the deceased. In this sense the body is a medium, rather than just a material, since it is through embodiment that images acquire any form of visibility, such that 'a lost body is exchanged against the virtual body of the image.' (Belting in Westermann: 45) In this way we perceive that an image is always that which becomes visible through the transformation of an absent presence, and thus while an image may reside in a work of art, it does not in fact coincide with it. Iconoclasm in particular highlights and interrogates this duality.

The dialectical tension at the base of iconoclastic action lies in a yearning for the origin of an definitive distinction between truth and falsity, between a pure world emptied of human-made intermediaries, and a sullied world filled with captivating but inevitably

12 Which translates as 'Truth is image, but there is no image of truth.'
human-made mediators. It follows then that access to the absolute hinges on a critical ambivalence. On the one hand is the desire for a world free of any mediation, as though a world without images would enable a closer, clearer, purer access to god, nature, truth, science. On the other hand is the lament that images are a necessary evil; if only one could do without them, but unfortunately this isn’t possible as they are the only way of accessing god, nature, truth, science. (Latour: 14) In his Republic, Plato outlines a similarly familiar set of principles concerning the role that the artist plays in revealing, or rather failing to reveal truth as ‘Idea’. According to Plato’s Theory of Forms, knowledge is only possible if there are absolute and changeless objects of knowledge. These are ideal realities and exemplars that provide standards of judgment, such as Justice, Holiness, Beauty and Equality itself. Sensible objects are ‘called after’ the corresponding Form because they ‘participate in’ that Form. Sensible objects never purely possess one single property without some semblance of it’s opposite. Forms themselves never admit their opposites, being purely what they are, while sensible objects rely on them to provide any order or regularity they have. (Maurer, 2000: 426) Sensible objects, and especially therefore things that are made by human hands as mediators cannot provide access to any absolute value because they fail to embody it within themselves.

The issue of a mediator or lack of one is of course determined within a Christian epistemological framework by the second commandment which infamously states, ‘You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters below.’ Platonic thinking corresponds with the Christian tradition in two different ways. The first is in a passionate concern with the mediator, in its ability or failure to represent aspects of the divine (God’s goodness, Jesus’s suffering, The Virgin Mary’s grace), and transmit them to the believers and worshipers. Within an iconic, imagistic tradition, this can be seen as a preoccupation with materiality or as Hans Belting argues, the ‘medium’. It’s important to note that this is crucial to both iconophiles and iconoclasts alike, and it is out of the mutual but opposing rejection and affirmation of materiality that the iconoclastic gesture arises. The second can be found in a very different set of terms that developed in the Neo-Platonic movement in the form of via negativa or the negative way13, which centers on a negation of material-

13 The fundamental tenets of via negativa (otherwise know as negative or apophatic theology) are that God is entirely other, independent, complete, and cannot be described in any way or grasped by the human intellect. When the mind confronts the divine reality it becomes blank, seized up; it enters a cloud of unknowing. With nothing tangible to refer to, no available knowledge from which to proceed, the only thing to do is go on faith, and hence the only way to approach God is from within. Which goes to say that to know God, to reach truth requires not just the suspension of knowledge, but the crossing out of knowledge, which is why the via negativa advocates being in doubt as the path to realisation. As God cannot be expressed in form or word, representation in this tradition usually takes the form of abstraction.
ity which is qualitatively different to the negation that resolves itself in the iconoclastic gesture; in destruction and defacement.

Religious iconoclasm found new impetus in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, culminating in radical and violent episodes of church cleansing throughout Europe. Driven by a range of complaints against the Catholic church the reformers most fundamental allegation was that images contradicted the old testament dictate against idolatry. At the centre of the debate was an uncertainty over whether all icons, all instances of iconophilia were to be considered idolatrous, or whether images could be argued to have redeeming qualities. Of the numerous icons and effigies that were attacked and destroyed during this period, crucifixes it seems were particularly singled out, because they displayed, most closely, the disparity between the idolatrous worship of an image and an experience of the true God. (Koerner, 168) What seemed crucial in the process of defacement was the public demonstration of the constructedness and materiality of the object (that it is made by human beings and that it is made of wood or stone) and the implication that those who chose to believe in such a thing were unable to see correctly. Exposure of the icon as object, an exposure which turned the icon into an object of knowledge, was intended to show that behind the appearance dwelled nothing more than the material out of which the icon was fashioned and hence that the believer's faith and trust was misplaced.
Thus, explains Joseph Koerner, when the reformer lifts up the broken crucifix, and declaims "Its wood! Can you see that its only wood?" it is indeed wood that he believes he holds. If, in aiming to drive the point home, he further hacks and burns away at the surface, it is still with a piece of wood in mind. While the ferocity and intensity of his actions seem, from an objective point of view, to surpass the humble matter at hand, it is because he believes that it is the wood that has profound meaning to someone else, some foolish idolator, and hence to strike at the wood is to strike at the deception that has been attached to the wood. (Koerner, 182) In striking the icon, in revealing its materiality, the iconoclast therefore believes that they expose the truth of the deception which is that God is absent, and does not reside within the wood.

Yet religious icons are very often already broken within themselves. The dead Christ figure, for example, as the perfect image of God, is 'desecrated, crucified and pierced'. Similarly, the art historian Louis Marin argues that Christian religious paintings do not try to show anything, do not reveal any truths, but rather through numerous little inventions try to obscure the vision, and thereby force the viewer to not see what is in front of him or her. (Latour, 2002: 33) What they aim to do, in other words, is to direct the viewers attention away from the image, and not towards a 'prototype', (an original authentic other) but rather towards another image, thereby forcing the faithful to shift their gaze and their attention from one image to the next. In this sense the iconoclastic bid to reveal the absence of God is undermined, since the religious icon, in its brokenness, is not concerned with presenting real presence, and instead reveals nothing more than the presentation of an absence.14

Central to a correct 'reading' of religious icons; to an understanding of the language that they utilise, is their opacity, which holds that the image of truth does not reside within the body or medium of representation. The relevance to contemporary practices of viewing lies in the emphasis on movement and flow - a way of seeing that does not isolate images, but understands their importance to lie in what they enable rather than what they represent. According to Rancière, emancipation starts when we realize that looking is an also an action, and that interpreting the world is already a means of transforming and reconfiguring it. (Rancière, 2007 (a): 277) By this logic, spectatorship is not a passive act, but rather the normal situation in which we teach and learn, and to understand this is to understand something implicit about images.

14 The same argument applies to the disavowal of the representational qualities of scientific imagery, in that a scientific image is not able to figuratively depict anything as it has no direct mimetic power and it is invariably meaningless in isolation. It 'proves nothing, shows nothing, has no referent', and is therefore equally incomplete because it is 'part of a set of instructions intended to reach another image further on down the line.' (Latour, 2002: 34)
'(K)nowing that words are only words and spectacles only spectacles, may help us better understand how words, stories and performances can help us change something in the world we live in.' (Rancière: 280)

Furthermore, this process of ‘bringing out the opaqueness of signs, opposing the suggestions of transparency implied by mass-media images’ (Lüticken, 2007: 303), is crucial to a contemporary re-evaluation of representational critique. In his article ‘Black Bloc, White Penguin …’ Lüticken discusses Bernadette Corporation’s film Get Rid of Yourself (2003) and Pierre Huyghe’s A Journey That Wasn’t (2005) as exemplary of recent attempts to interrogate the uncertain status of representation in modernity - modernity being the permanent critique of representation. The film documents the activities of the “black bloc” an anarchist ad-hoc collection of militant groups whose members maintain anonymity when appearing at demonstrations by dressing entirely in black, and covering their faces with black handkerchiefs. At one point in the film Malevich’s Black Square flashes onto screen, suggesting that the movements visual politics/poetics, their ‘ominous presence as absence’, introduces a ‘radical element of negation into the spectacle of protest’. (Lüticken: 302) In A Journey That Wasn’t, Huyghe’s concern with enigmatic, coded communication15 ‘not meant for human address’ is explored through an expedition to the South Pole to install a flashing light on an unidentified island in the hope of attracting a lone, mysterious white penguin. As part of a larger work (L’Expedition scintillante. A Musical (2002)) based on Edgar Allan Poe’s 1838 novel, The Narrative of Arthur Gorden Pym of Nantucket the piece oscillates between a contemporary emphasis on representation as an event, and the use of deliberately anachronistic elements to construct an abstract fable.

What I have attempted to outline here is how an awareness of the animating absent presence of images enables an interpretation of the image as an event, and that this is significant to how we understand the way in which we see and how we see ourselves seeing. Amidst the onslaught of images that is the every day, our ability to analyse and decode is critical.

15 In Huyghe’s installation Atari Light 1999/2001 he used a computer dubbed Hal (a reference to 2001: A Space Odyssey, 1968) to control the activation of several works including the transparency of the doors.
2. STRATEGIES: THE OPACITY OF LANGUAGE OR THE LANGUAGE OF OPACITY

... Words, after speech, reach
into silence. Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still
Moves perpetually in its stillness.

(T.S. Eliot, Burnt Norton)

How to begin from the middle, which is further than it should be, but still too far behind? My thoughts at this point of writing find much solace in the prose of Samuel Beckett, for whom the end was merely a game, and the beginning a source of endless delay. In response to the incessant demand for the making available of objects through the process of rationalisation to meaningful discourse, a process of ‘bringing to light’ that conflates the meaningful and the visible, I have tried, in my own production, to locate points of singularity that resist, on some level, giving in to this demand for an easily accessible, meaningful content. Instead I have focused on the gaps in the narrative, the inconsequential, the fragmentary and the in-between with the intention of revealing aporias and alternative readings that open up into imaginative spaces.

There is an explicit irony in this task, and perhaps it is ultimately a futile one, since the surfeit of meaning against which I deliberate and withhold, is inevitable on the one hand, and liable to dissolve into a meaningless glut of meaning on the other. But it is not the loss of visibility and meaning that I’m trying to achieve, but rather it is a desire to foreground the conditions through which it takes shape — an effort to still the motion without arresting it entirely. In the following section I take Samuel Beckett’s writing as a point of departure to discuss the disjuncture between narrative, meaning and the construction of language in terms of the resistance that his language offers, and how it opens up the possibility of an internalised exteriority or void.

2.1. NEITHER FROM NOR TOWARDS: NARRATIVE, LANGUAGE AND INDETERMINACY

In Waiting for Godot (as in many of Beckett’s other dramas), arrested motion becomes the subject of the action in which nobody comes, nobody goes and nothing happens. Bound in a perpetual interim the characters of the play engage in absurdly repetitive and unceasing dialogue that has no narrative progression and amounts to very little of
substance or meaning, but not entirely nothing. In this sense, the nothing that happens has a palpable texture that differentiates it from an embrace of an empty meaninglessness which would paradoxically render it as a positive affirmation - a celebration of the meaninglessness of existence. In his thorough negation of the world and denial of the solace of a positive recuperation into a meaningful narrative, a 'narrative of redemption', Beckett offers the possibility of another world that might be different by virtue of what it is not. This refusal is thus a potentially redemptive one in its own right, a kind of 'redemption from redemption' (Critchley, 1997: 32), but only very barely, in that it opens a space to imagine differently.\footnote{For this reason, the imagination is a central concept in Beckett's work in his struggle to 'let being into literature'. (Beckett in Murphy, 1994: 235) and to reform the relationship between language and reality. In Unwording the World Carla Locatelli argues that 'Beckett's unwording probes into issues of the cultural encoding of meaning, not only to denounce the conventions of literary discourse, but to reveal the epistemological function of linguistic representation, and the intrinsic hermeneutical quality of our being.' She summarises further, that 'Beckett's writing constitutes a movement from representation to the representation of representations' and in so doing questions the structure of our interpretation of reality. (Locatelli in Murphy, 236) In this regard Beckett is similar to Borges...}

It follows that of the many redemptive narratives that saturate our everyday lives, whether scientific, religious, technological or socio-political or any of a multitude of permutations of these, the field of art production is by no means less prone to the claim of redemption than any other.\footnote{Even within the broad field of creative production that is art, there are variously scripted and established sustaining narratives into which artwork is too often easily co-opted.} Indeed it is the hermeneutic surplus afforded anything which is placed within the category of art that assures that however liminal or transgressive it is, it will invariably be recuperated. As I discuss earlier, this is by no means coincidental or arbitrary, since the excremental, the 'not art', is crucial to maintaining the space in which art happens at all. The effect is such that the designation of something as not art is an equivalent gesture to claiming that it is. In the same way, in a culture of optionality to choose to believe in the meaninglessness of existence would be equivalent to choosing its inverse or anything else for that matter - its just another option. Its clear that there is no real possibility of opting out entirely, as the attribution of meaning is inescapable.\footnote{Unless you are going to commit suicide (which Zizek advocates) and/or not make art, both of which solve the problem, but neither of which engages the debate nor offers any possibility of pleasure, because it is surely in pleasure that we find the greatest redemption - we can make things.} As a writer Beckett was concerned with the inescapable signification that accompanies words and how to express meaninglessness with words that necessarily convey meaning - how to produce what he called a "literature of the unword?" (Finney, 1994: sp) 'His fictions' writes Finney, 'are the progressive record of his fight to subdue language so that the silence of the Real might make its presence felt.'
With this in mind I want to return to the idea of 'nothing happens'. While nothing undoubtedly happens at the level of the action, in the formation of narrative and the construction of meaning there is definitively something happening at the level of the text, in the use of language. In Beckett's prose it is the radical indeterminacy of the language - the non-sequiturs, inconsistencies, negations and 'contradictory sayings and unsayings' - a kind of stuttering, in other words, that makes it unrecuperable into the body of language as a whole. By example, Beckett ends *Worstward Ho* with the following series of complex negatives; 'Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. Say the best worst. With leasening words say least best worse', giving a sense of his effort to redefine language according to a 'poetic logic' that undermines the significatory capacity if the words he uses to construct his text. (Murphy, 1994: 237)

For Deleuze, stuttering or stammering is a way of describing the 'poetic understanding of language', a way of seeing language as more than a means for a speaker to convey a message. (Deleuze, 1994: 25) When language begins to stutter, when it 'quivers in its limbs', it becomes almost physical, overwhelms the language system (langue) and thereby encounters within itself its own negation. (Deleuze, 24) In a language that trips and falters through its own stammerings and vibrations, words and silence co-implicate each other. Silence is not necessarily the opposite of words, but appears when words move beyond the descriptive.

'It is when the language system overstrains itself that it begins to stutter, to murmur, or to mumble; then the entire language reaches the limit that sketches the outside and confronts silence. When the language system is so much strained, language suffers a pressure that delivers it to silence.' (Deleuze, 28)

A stuttering language thus evokes the silence within, 'a silence or silenced exteriority which is also internal' - a sense of the 'real' within the symbolic. The void is thus approached not through a simple negation of meaning, but through 'the form, the pattern' of language, and arguably only through language.19

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19 There is a similarity of sorts between language and how it indicates something beyond it, and the relationship between truth and words as expressed in Zen teaching which is that the two are incompatible with one another. No words are able to capture truth. Thus the essence of a Zen koan is to elude the logical thought processes embodied by language through language, thus paradoxically commenting on its own ineffectiveness. Koans are often self referential and intended to bewilder. "(W)hen one is in a bewildered state, one's mind begins to operate non- logically to some extent. Only by operating outside of logic can one make the leap to enlightenment." (Hofstader, 2000: 251) For example: Zen master Joshu and another monk were standing together in the monastery and a dog wandered by. The monk asked Joshu,
The reason for what may seem to be an undue emphasis on Beckett's text revolves around my interest in the idea of his language as a 'syntax of weakness' - a syntax that situates the work both within and without a meaningful narrative structure, and which foregrounds the opacity of language; or rather the use of opacity as a language. While my focus here has been on the written/spoken word, I am interested in instances where an interrogation of the relationship between a signifier and signified becomes performative, allowing the visible to become an event. In my own work this is something that I strive towards, and which I have located in the strategies of artists like Pierre Huyghe (above), Trisha Donnelly, Ryan Gander and Fiona Banner, and to a lesser extent Martin Creed all of whose work I discuss later.

2.2 THE FRAGMENTARY AND THE INCOMPLETE OR WHAT EXACTLY IS A FRAGMENT?

'...in a way, the fragment combines completion and incompletion within itself; or one may say, in an even more complex manner, it both completes and incompletes the dialectic of completion and incompletion.'

(Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy in Critchley, in The Literary Absolute)

The disruption of the cohesive narrative of the text through the fragmentary and inconclusive, as a way of challenging and displacing meaning has the effect of opening it up in such a way that it becomes necessarily incomplete.

Peter Bishop suggests that the encounter can be imagined in a number of different ways. In the one hand these instances can be envisaged geologically - the word 'frag-

"Does a dog have Buddha-nature, or not?" Has a dog Buddha-nature?
Joshu replied "Mu" This is the most serious question of all.
If you say yes or no, You lose your own Buddha-nature.

The answer to the first koan is a simple one. Only by not asking such questions can one know the answer to them. Joshu unasks the question. The second koan is a response to the first by Mamon, a 13th C monk who compiled 48 Koans following each with a commentary and a small 'poem'. This collection is known as The Mummunkan or 'Gateless Gate'. The answer is a little more illusive.

In his essay 'Dailing Tiber', Bishop looks specifically at the fragmentary as a moment when one text surfaces in, or crosses over into another. These are interesting, he explains, not because they provide another way of reading a text, but because they offer a 'valuable and provocative' way of engaging with bodies of ideas, thereby allowing a way of 'interfacing between knowledges', or modes of reflection, rather than attempting to construct 'integrated syntheses.' The essay 'Dailing Tiber' appears as a reworked version of a talk given at the Centre For Psychoanalytic Studies, University of Kent, England in 1994. A revised extract of this talk published
ment' is both a noun and an adjective; the fragment can literally fragment the coherence of the text. 'Fragment' also suggests fragility, delicacy and brittleness, an awareness of a place of weakness within the text, like a fault of fracture line in the surface of the visible, that reveals a possible hidden depth. On the other hand they can be imagined as intersections, as 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern moments' (Bishop, 1994: sp) when one story crosses over into another. In such instances one is confronted with a possible divergence from the path of the narrative, in the form an entirely different story or alternative world. Finally, these moments can be imagined as rubbings, as when one text rubs against another, simultaneously polishing and erasing, highlighting some fragment, whilst at the same time obscuring the terrain from whence it comes.

But what exactly is a fragment, and in what way does incompleteness reach beyond the text? The literary genre of the fragment can be prominently traced to the Jena German Romantics, but extends back to Enlightenment and mid eighteenth century German literature and ultimately antiquity. Its influences can be seen in the writing of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Benjamin, and most notably in deconstructive practice. It was significantly in German Romanticism, however, that it was first taken up strategically as a practice of the fragment, and developed fully for the first time in Friedrich Schlegel's Kritische Fragmente (1797). For Schlegel the fragment was a means of encompassing the brokenness of literature into a systematic and intentional fragmentariness. Utilised positively, what the fragment opened up, what it enabled, was a discontinuous field of literature - for by its very nature, a fragment cannot exist in isolation, whether presented as part of a series of fragments, or existing as a single element that alludes to a larger unwritten body of text. Thus, while fragments are inherently self sufficient, isolated and self referential, they are always referring to something outside of themselves. Because they are never finished, because they are perpetually in a state of what Deleuze and Guattari would call 'becoming', they embody, in their incompleteness, an infiniteness that resides within.

It would seem that the fragment, in its capacity to fracture the unitary rationale of the system, sits in opposition to any systemic philosophical thought per se. But in its incorporation of both singularity and plurality, the fragment instead suggests a philosophical system in its own right. The fragmentary, writes Critchley is 'where the systematic take on an individual form, expressed in a singularity that is irreducible to unity' - it is 'at once both systematic and anti-systematic'. (Critchley, 1997: 128) In such a way the


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fragment constitutes an essential ambiguity within the system, oscillating perpetually between the relative and the absolute.

In the writing of Jorge Luis Borges, the fragmentary text, as simulacrum, is raised to an acutely refined level of systematic complexity, acting as a mirror into the abyss of the infinite linguistic. Identified both in terms of its metaphysical underpinnings as well as its deconstructive bent, Borges' writings celebrate endless textuality and the endless deferral of meaning. Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote explores the curious effects of the text as mirror, and the 'subtle transformative power of translation'. (Boulter, 2001: 362) The text that Menard produces, is the Quixote, or more precisely it is fragments of the Quixote, which are exactly as Cervantes wrote them, only ever so slightly different. He gives the example,

... truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.

Borges writes, 'This catalog of attributes, written in the seventeenth century, and written by the "ingenious layman" Miguel de Cervantes, is mere rhetorical praise of history.' Having cited the identical sentence, he continues, 'History, the mother of truth! - the idea is staggering. Menard, a contemporary of William James, defines history not as delving into reality but as the very fount of reality.' (Borges, 1998: 94) In his analysis of this fragment of each of the texts, Borges clearly pokes fun at the idea that a reading of a text alters with time through the ideas that are produced in the interval between. Jonathan Stuart Boulter suggests that in its tautology, the fragment also undermines the ontology of a progressive order of things. As a mirror, a simulacrum, Menard's Quixote reflects both forwards and backwards in time, creating changes in both the original and the source. (Boulter, 364) However, because the simulacrum is located in time it can never directly coincide with its original source, and falls into a typically binary, and therefore metaphysical understanding of the world. As a site of becoming the simulacrum resists the logic of beginning and end, arche and telos, but because of its temporality inscribes the very binary metaphysical logic that the text will resist.’ (Boulter, 365)

In bringing the story to a close, Borges writes, 'I have reflected that it is legitimate to see the "final" Quixote as a kind of palimpsest, in which the traces - faint but not undecipherable - of our friend's "previous" text must shine through. Unfortunately only a second Pierre Menard, reversing the labours of the first, would be able to exhume

### 2.3 WORDS OTHERWISE. LANGUAGE AGAIN. THE FRAGMENTARY AND THE ABSURD.

Borges and Beckett share, in their employment of a systematically fragmentary approach to narrative and language, the distinction of inaugurating in literature a specifically postmodern sensibility. Yet they were certainly not the only writers pushing the boundaries of language at the time, and Beckett in particular was strongly identified with the Theatre of the Absurd, where language, in the form of dialogue, was typified by a kind of formal evasiveness, often employing apparently nonsensical utterances and clichés that failed to amount to true communication. Harold Pinter, for example was famous for his ‘Pinter pause’, where the essential content of the dialogue is replaced by ellipsis or dashes. The following exchange between the characters Aston and Davies in *The Caretaker* is typical:

ASTON. More or less exactly what you ... 
DAVIES. That’s it ... that’s what I’m getting at is ... I mean, what sort of jobs ... (Pause.) 
ASTON. Well, there’s things like the stairs ... and the ... the bells ... 
DAVIES. But it’d be a matter ... wouldn’t it ... it’d be a matter of a broom ... isn’t it?

(Wikipedia, *Theatre of the Absurd*: sp)

As a means of demonstrating the limits of language, while also questioning and parodying scientific determinism and the knowability of truth, many Absurdist dramatic narratives employed emptiness, absence and nothingness as central features.

Yet much of the impetus for this kind of approach to language arose out of the ethos and objectives of Dada. It is worth taking a slightly closer look at some of their strategies since it was in Dada that visual art first significantly addressed the opacity of language. Located in an utter disdain for institutions, both social and artistic, Dada instigated a multidimensional practice employing chaos, irrationality and chance operations to represent a world turned upside down and reeling in the aftermath of the First World War. Words, as representative of an exhausted rhetoric of rational, ethical values, came under intense scrutiny, and were ‘deliberately impoverished’ so as to rob language of its metaphoric range, ‘autonomising it and emphasising opacity over transparency’.
(Morley, 2003: 59) Focusing specifically on the printed word, Tristan Tzara invented a way of writing poetry by cutting up newspaper articles into fragments, selecting words, phrases, or pieces of words randomly, and then pasting them together. He described the process in the fifth of his *Seven Dada Manifestos* (1916-20):

To make a dadaist poem.
Take a newspaper.
Take a pair of scissors.
Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.
Cut out the article.
Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.
Shake it gently.
The take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.
Copy conscientiously.
The poem will be like you.
And here you are a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.

(Bernstein, 1999: sp)

Francis Picabia, equally radical in his approach to language, specifically targeted the bond between objects and the words that named them, and developed a number of strategies for prising them apart. In his painting *Prenez garde à la peinture* (*Pay attention to painting*), (1919) a peculiar amalgamation of mechanical parts is accompanied by a variety of words that appear to function as labels or legends, but instead of consolidating the image, amount to nothing much more than a series of non sequiturs and seemingly contextually meaningless phrases (Morley, 62). Pre-empting structuralist linguistics by a number of decades, Picabia’s combination of enigmatic fragments and unrelated words and phrases, decisively undermined the traditional relationship between word and image, thereby deliberately frustrating the viewers faith in language’s ability to anchor the image’s meaning.
Less nihilistic than both Tzara and Picabia, but similarly concerned with bringing the visual and the literary together, Marcel Duchamp is well known for his use of linguistic tropes and word play (puns, allusions, anagrams, cryptograms), to more indifferent, and definitively irreverent deconstructive ends. The mustachioed Mona Lisa LHOOQ (1919) is notoriously exemplary, but Duchamp's attention to the textual over the visual, in system as much as appearance, developed into a complex of strategies addressing notions of originality, authenticity and opticality. In Playing off Duchampian Deferral and Derrida's "differance", Yishan Lam analyses Duchamp's Boîte-en-valise (1935-41) in terms of the concept of differance, drawing particularly on Derrida's Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences, (1966). Boîte-en-valise is a 'traveling museum' consisting of 69 works by Duchamp that include Fountain, Large Glass, Broyeuse de chocolat, Why Not Sneeze Rose Sélavy, Tu m', Paris Air, Pliant de voyage, 3 Stoppages Estalon, Bride, Comb, and various others reproduced in miniature.

As remade readymades, these objects upset the concept of the readymade as unmediated commercial object. Rather, they seem to be representative of a complicated Duchampian exercise in open endedness and the play of meaning and ideas. By examining the reconstructed miniatures in the Boîte in terms of Derrida's concept of differance, we can understand the readymade in light of its place in a modifiable series of comments. (Lam, 2005: sp) The concept of difference as it is outlined by Saussure, determines how the value of the sign is derived from the fact that it is different from adjacent and all
other signs. In Boîte Duchamp highlights how the value of an artwork is also derived from the fact that it is 'different from adjacent and all other artworks'. In other words, to acquire meaning, the readymade, each time it is remade, must differ from its predecessors. (Lam, 2005: sp) Reveling in a systematic, indeterminate freeplay of interpretation, Duchamp questions which is the original, authentic artwork and where its meaning lies.

2.4 THE SPACES IN BETWEEN AND THE EVERYDAY

In this last chapter I want to briefly look at how John Cage took the attitude of Dada towards language, and, fusing it with an understanding of Zen Buddhism, developed a creative system based on indeterminacy as its central motif. Principally intent on disrupting the way in which language orders and compartmentalises experience, Cage embraced chance to attack the hold of reason and logic over the mind, producing works that provoked and confused his audience through seemingly nonsensical strategies. Rather than creating new works, he instead incorporated found material, the readymade content of the ordinary sounds of things, and through a broadly multidisciplinary approach, sought to undermine assumptions about the relationship between art and everyday experience. His work, as a result, is defined by an emphasis on 'silence over sound, the void over form, and non-sense over meaning' (Morley, 2003: 118).

Cage's *Water Music* (1952) was one of his first performance pieces. It involved, apart from playing the piano, the operation of a radio, various different kinds of bird-whistles being blown, the shuffling a deck of cards and dealing them over the piano strings as well as the shaking and pouring of water. The score, printed of ten sheets of paper, was mounted on the wall as a large poster.

In Cage's seminal *4'33"* (1952), consisting of three movements which were signalled by David Tudor opening and closing the piano, all that could be heard was silence, or rather the ambient noise of people's programs opening, someone coughing or shuffling their feet, the wind in the trees, rain on the roof. This was Cage's way of forcing people to attend, to take in that which otherwise falls in the margins, to hear things not usually heard. The audience, although well-prepared for an evening of contemporary music, was shocked, rather than enlightened by what Cage would later call his most important work. He maintains that an audience experiencing *4'33"* has an opportunity to listen, in an aesthetic way, to what there is to hear. (Bernstein, 1999: sp)
3. CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

Many of the strategies which I have written about above, are either implicitly or explicitly employed by the artists that I discuss on the following section.

Commonly described as “ephemeral”, “immaterial”, “ambiguous”, “barely visible” and “difficult to decode”, Trisha Donnelly’s work offers up a what Laura Hoptman defines as a “discourse (of) ... strategic obscurity” (Hoptman, 2006: 67). Her practice is widely open to interpretation and this is, in fact, one of its key features. Working with text, intermittent sound, demonstrative interludes, drawing, photographs, video and musical compositions among other things, Donnelly follows a strategy of surreptitiously divesting her materials of their presence and relocating it somewhere else. Or so I have read in numerous articles in which the authors eventually resort to rhyme and metaphor in a sort of critical catharsis. Bruce Hainley writes,

Help wanted. What the hell I think.

H.C.

Because you chime the chimes bluey.
Because you wake up with glitter in your 6JIOXa, again, and think, better than 6JIOXa.
Because you make cheese, collect buttons, lisp.
Because, decades of 6JIOXa 6JIOXa with such a tenacity, your mouth diamondizes coal.
Because even on a nightly street prowl you “tableau,” the last caryatid of the 20th century.
Because, skeptical or, rather, nonchalant about the possible knowledge of anyone’s identity,

... (Hainley, 2006: 77)
The disjunction between language, form and image is central to Donnelly’s work, and thus when one talks about a drawing, for example, what is visible is perhaps a fragment, or a word that is a fragment. The image inserted above of a sort of curved page with another inside it, is part of a larger work which consists of a series of drawings similar to the one shown, for which the title is a sound, recorded on CD, to be played only at the viewers request. The second image of a text piece which reads “The Passenger” without its vowels (The Passenger, 2004), becomes somehow a passenger, a body in transit, a secret communication in code. All of these could apply, or none. Donnelly’s photographs likewise become performative, keying into the ritualistic aspects of photography, while her performances go undocumented, save for word of mouth. In one piece, the artist, dressed as a Napoleonic courier, rode into the gallery astride a white stallion, halted, read a brief proclamation, and then left. The rest of the show made no mention of the work and as the performances go undocumented, no evidence remains other than word of mouth, which is an invariably conditional form of documentation. The result is that the work exists solely in the form of interpretation, where the viewer is denied any direct contact or sense of immediacy (Miller, 2001: sp).

In the context of artistic documentation, performance based work is almost entirely reliant on photography as a means of validation. Rather than manipulate the photo itself, Donnelly manipulates the fictions it presents— in the video piece Canadian Rain (2002) the artist is shown executing a series of deliberate gestures and then pointing to a spot.

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22 The proclamation read as follows: “If it need be termed surrender, then let it be so, for he has surrendered in word, not deed. He has said, ‘My fall will be great but it will be useful.’ The emperor has fallen and he rests his weight upon your mind and mine, and with this I am electric. I am electric.” (See Miller, J. 2002)
on the wall behind her. The sequence is then repeated. According to the accompanying text, the artist is apparently making rain in Canada. In *The Redwood and the Raven* (2004) a series of 31 black and white photographs show the dancer Frances Flannery performing a work in the forest she choreographed to a poem by Edgar Allen Poe. On exhibition however, only one image is shown at a time over a period of 31 days.

What this constant deferral and suspension ensures is that each experience of the work is slightly different, such that viewing becomes very much about the experience of viewing the work. The work thus becomes an event, a “situational phenomenon” (Hoptman, 2006: 69), that gains weight and credibility through association with other things, both in the world and outside of it. This shift of focus onto the individual experience of the ‘viewer’ is significant in that in a late capitalist, flattened, globalised world, the location of subjectivity is of primary concern. Jan Verwoert writes that in working through a ‘physical rhetoric of opaque signs or gestures,’ Donnelly challenges the dominant logic of the contemporary consumer society event as ‘quality time’ packaged in a product. ‘As they address you like omens,’ he concludes, Donnelly’s works preclude you from...
consuming experience in the event and instead make you experience the un-consumable as the event’. (Verwoert, 2005: 119)

Her work also offers a radical re-interpretation of the notion of the absolute, as the idea of an inexpressible something that can not be contained by the mere vessels that are words and images. For this reason it needs to be accompanied by a profound conviction. Yet the works interpretive range and strategic disconnectedness is also what makes it so valuable, because it stretches so far beyond a visual culture 'dominated by the eminently readable.’ (Hoptman, 2006: 69)

Ryan Gander similarly engages with issues of readability and interpretation, pivoting on the insertion of inexplicable narratives into everyday situations, objects and systems. Like Donnelly his work is extremely diverse, encompassing sculpture, intervention, installation, writing and performance, and often operates by collecting seemingly unconnected objects, actions and texts together to create narrative systems. The effect very often is to amplify the surrounding environment, to make things appear simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, and hence induce a sense of uncertainty in the viewer. Gander’s emphasis on language lies in its role as an interpretive tool, a source of added information or explication, and as such he uses it to embellish or obfuscate, detract from or draw attention to the various characters, objects and events that form the basis of his practice.
The Death of Abbé Faria (2003) is one of a series of works involving fictional characters including Abbé Faria himself, the mysterious Marie Aurore, a certain Spencer Anthony, someone named Vivi, and a book which is finished. On a number of occasions Gander has published pages from the book. All that is conclusively known about Abbé Faria is that he is dead, and everything else is gathered from bits and pieces of newspaper advertisements that Gander has placed. The work itself comprises an installation of various emptied-out-looking rooms, some of which are older works related to Gander's fictional characters. As it turns out, each character originates from a novel, with the exception of Marie Aurore, who evolved from a mysterious piece of scribbled graffiti; "Mary Aurore Sorry". Presented with a collection of fragments, personas and possible events, what becomes apparent is the lack structural cohesion, which is to say no central defining narrative. It is ultimately up to the viewer to project themselves into the space which the work leaves open and thus complete the story in their own mind. "Working with such pseudo-identities is perhaps to be seen as a reaction to the quirk in the media, and in current exhibition practice, by which every realistic photographic portrait is elevated almost uncritically into an icon for a group or society, and to art", writes Jelle Bouwhuis, 'Such a presentation can confidently be seen as a radical stand against the omnipresence of a visual culture that is increasingly devoid of any meaningful context ...' (Bouwhuis, 2003: sp) It is worth noting that although there are no images in The Death of Abbé Faria, only excerpts of texts within a minimally designed space, there is still the sense of an intriguing tale.

Like both Donnelly and Gander, Martin Creed's work encompasses a diverse output that combines statements, objects, abstract ideas and music from his band Owadda, but presented in the form of discrete pieces that have very little that obviously connects them. His work is largely characterised by a synthesis of oppositions. Certainty and uncertainty, vagueness and specificity, somethingness and nothingness, trying and failing. It is the indeterminate middle ground that Creed's pieces occupy unrelentingly. "If there is any absurdity in the work," says Creed, "it's about it being both nothing and something at the same time." (Creed in MacMillan, 2000: 42) The undoubted absurdity of a non-art, non-practice, fashioned with non-objects (Creed insists on referring to his artworks as merely 'works') seems to reside in his effort to model some kind of artistic activity out the most minimal means and mundane of decisions. His attempts to transform the smallest gestures, adding as little as possible to the work, are intended to refer the viewer back to the world that indelibly surrounds them. In Work No. 232: the whole world + the work = the whole world (2000), 'the work' in the equation is given the numerical equivalent of zero. It is only necessary so far as it makes us aware of what is
already there. More worrying than an allusion to an absent world, the absent presence that the work alludes to is its own.

This minimalness of the nothing features maximally in all of Creed’s work, and yet there isn’t anything grandiose about his endeavors. They are just some things, put together somehow, placed somewhere, easily avoided, totally banal, but once noticed, hard to forget. Creed’s is a substantial practice of the almost nothing, expanding and dilating the ordinary world simultaneously. In one of his earlier works, Creed amplified all the sounds in a London gallery through a speaker system for the duration of the exhibition such that the telephones, fax machine, doorbell and even the toilet were broadcast throughout the gallery, which remained otherwise empty. The only tangible evidence of the work fluctuated according to how busy the gallery was on any given day.

Yet the indeterminacy of Creed’s position is counterbalanced by the specificity of the system he uses to title his work. This absurd taxonomy, ‘constitute(s) an ironic edifice of communication, with several bricks thrown in, which supports and transports the solipsism of his actions’, writes Mark Prince. (Prince, 2003: 4) — The reassuring message of Work #203, Everything is going to be alright (1999), for example, offers a glimpse of genuine heartfelt communication, but which the deadpan font and format of the white neon deliberately takes back. Pursuing a kind of formal evasiveness, Creed has developed a carefully honed theatrical expression of a failure to express.

Fiona Banner, by comparison is also concerned with the failure of expression, but in taking up language directly, concentrates on the communicative potential and problematics of the word. In her written texts, film is appropriated as a source material and transcribed in detail according to what the artist remembers.
Her most epic production to date, *The Nam* (1997), is a thousand-page, two kilogramme book which lists, in unbroken narrative, the artist's recollection of various Vietnam films including *Apocalypse Now, Platoon, The Deer Hunter, Born on the Fourth of July, Full Metal Jacket and Hamburger Hill*. Despite its jokey immensity, the book aims to seriously interrogate the way in which ordinary people's emotional and rational responses are shaped by images, and especially film. By turning films into scripts, Banner seeks to expose the seductiveness of visual imagery. In *Arsewoman in Wonderland* (2001), in which the artist gives a detailed account of the action of a Tiffany Mynx porn movie of the same name, the link is made even more specific.

The extensive, uninterrupted flow of language in Banner's large text pieces, is counterbalanced by a brevity and economy of expression in her series of works dealing exclusively with punctuation. Beginning with the tiny blue neon fullstop she exhibited in 1997, she subsequently produced a range of enormously enlarged full stops, carved out of polystyrene and varying in size according to the font from which they have been excised. Courier, for example, is nearly five feet high, while is Wing just under two; one is spherical, the other ovoid. (Darwent, 1998: sp) Each, it turns out, has the same point size, but magnified reveal the curious and subtle differences and distinctions of what is generally considered a uniform and universal symbol. Functioning as both an ending and a beginning the full stop marks an in between or gap, framing the subject and meaning of an unseen narrative.

Similarly, in *Forever and Every* (2002), Banner uses a vast field of punctuation marks to describe a story from which the words have been removed. Forever demonstrates a breakdown, or crisis, in language that exposes the 'slippery inexactness' of the vocabularies we use. (Archer, 2000: sp)
THE WORK: ERRATUM

The World's a Book ... 'Tis falsely printed, though divinely penn'd, And all th' Errata will appear at th' end.

(Francis Quarles, Divine fancies: 1632)

The Oxford English Dictionary defines an erratum as 'An error in writing or printing; chiefly, an error noted in a list of corrections attached to a printed book.' (OED; sp) The first time I encountered an erratum note was while working in a bookshop a number of years ago. An envelope had arrived with a particular order of books, filled with small slips of paper on which was printed an erratum note, and I was required to insert one into the cover of each book before it went on sale. This fragment of a narrative, (it was in fact a fiction) crisp and delicate between my fingertips, completely fascinated me. It was a short phrase, perhaps ten words long, very evocative and utterly mysterious, (something like 'walked to the end of the path and shivered, the heavy green') and it had a kind of inversely proportionate sense of materiality in relation to its size and substance. The curious thrill of encountering, of holding in my hand, what amounted somehow to a small piece of another world, has stayed with me ever since. What captured my imagination then, and continues to interest me now is the way in which this lost fragment acted as a kind of mirror, disrupting both the body of the fictional narrative from which it has been excised, and the cohesive logic of the real world in which it appeared.

What I have attempted to articulate in the text that precedes this section of writing on my own work, is the way in which it is fundamentally concerned with language. (Or languages; includes literature, film and art and music) Based in a psychoanalytic framework that establishes language as the symbolic structure through which we define and experience ourselves as subjects within culture, my concern is not primarily confined to the written word, but rather explores language as set of open and tenuous relationships between signifier and signified - a set of relationships that conceal as much as they reveal. The 'syntax of weakness' that I have tried to develop as a working methodology or strategy relies not on excess, as in Beckett's perpetual stream of self-involved monologue, but rather on a restrained, uncertain, evasive dialogue, that deflects the ascription of meaning and 'hinders' access - similar perhaps to the way in which Martin Creed's work constitutes 'an ironic edifice of communication' (Prince, 2003: sp).

This body of work consists of a series of disparate fragments and small gestures, where the inconsequential everyday is doubled, deflected or split apart to suggest or reveal something that is not contained in the language that describes it. My focus on the inherent absence
that animates these images and is central to the way in which they are read, is intended
to draw attention to the image as an event or performance that involves the viewer in an
active capacity. ‘We understand the artificial nature of looking through a camera,’ explains
William Kentridge, ‘but we don’t understand the unnatural activity of looking when we
are just looking, how when we look it is not simply a matter of the world coming to us, but
it is us constructing the natural world as we understand it.’ (Kentridge, 2007: 72)

As a whole, my work is characterised by an eclecticism that is perhaps typical of a post-me­
dium sensibility in the way that it incorporates installation, sculpture, photography, found
objects, drawing and sound. But this eclecticism is also significant to the way in which
I seek to manipulate the tensions and inconsistencies between language and image and
the forms they take. Drawing on an aesthetic of conceptual minimalism, the work has a
formal coolness which belies a highly romantic, possibly nostalgic desire for the unknown,
and an enduring interest in imaginative fictional spaces, and how they reflect back on our
understanding of the world in which we live. In this way it uses the language of conceptual
minimalism to subtly present a more whimsical/ humorous* and allusive subject matter.

One of the works defining features then is an extreme levity that belies the intense pro­
cess involved in working through an idea to the point at which it is able to be expressed
in its simplest and most straightforward way. In trying to refine it, both conceptually and
materially, I often run the risk of reducing it to such an extent that it seems to disappear
entirely, but (and while this is hazardous and frustrating) it is also this point that I am try­
ing to catch and hold, the point at which the work in a sense threatens to become invisible
and thereby meaningless. It is in this sense that visibility is a core theme running through
the work, both on a conceptual and material level, offering up a series of broken, evacuated
images that ultimately suggests the viewer look elsewhere.
“You can resume your flight whenever you like, “ they said to me, “ but you will arrive at another Trude, absolutely the same, detail by detail. The world is covered by the sole Trude, which does not begin, nor end. Only the name of the airport changes.”

(Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities)

On sitting down to write this, I sifted through all the experiences I’d had in waiting rooms, from Malaysia to Malawi in bus stops and banks, in various shades of bureaucracy and officialdom, with leather trim if you’re lucky, plastic and polystyrene if you’re not. Although many stood out as distinct events with recognisable individuals, they all seemed to be permeated by the same curious sensation of simultaneous motion and stasis. Waiting rooms are principally defined, it seems, by the constant movement of people doing nothing, having arrived with the sole purpose of leaving again. They are also contingent places in that despite being self contained units in their own right, they are entirely dependant for their identity and purpose on the entities to which they are attached. Crucially however, they mediate the point of access and departure, both real and imaginary.

My work, Right of Admission Reserved is necessarily situated at the entrance of the gallery and is the first work encountered on entering the exhibition. Styled in such a way that it appears to be characteristic, without being obviously specific (as waiting rooms invariably are), the work reads like something of a film set, and constitutes a pause or hiatus in the spatial flow as well as gap in the narrative cohesiveness of the exhibition, occupying and evacuating the space simultaneously. In contrast to Yves Klein’s Le Vide, 1961 which, installed in a blocked off passageway at Museum Haus Lange, Krefeld, evoked constant movement and renewal, ‘invisible energy’ and ‘mystical transformation’ (Zbikowski, 430), the dematerialisation that Right of Admission Reserved suggests is more implicit than overt.

Social anthropologist Marc Augé suggests that our lives are increasingly spent in the kind of ‘non-place’ that a waiting room represents. By this he means places that are not particularly related to their surroundings, that have no historic significance and are not concerned with the identity of the environment in which they are situated or in the people who use them. He lists supermarkets, hotels and airports, highways, computers, TV’s and ATM machines as exemplary. These environments are in some fundamental ways unintegrated with their surroundings, and as a result either destabilise or create a
false sense of narrative continuity. Instead, non-places are defined by their use value, and often require directions explaining how one is to behave and function within them. In Right of Admission Reserved the viewers reading of the work is also conditioned by the placement of signage: the ubiquitous 'No smoking' sign, a series of somewhat conflicting desk signs reading 'Reception', 'Please wait to be called' and 'Back in 5 minutes' and the cautionary 'Right of Admission Reserved' sign itself. In the background a ubiquitous radio plays softly, airing continual updates of the day's events, hour by hour.

In its emphasis on access and control, the work draws attention to the spatial dynamics of the gallery, but it is also fundamentally concerned with time. A waiting room's principal function is, after all, to contain the happening of nothing over an often indeterminate duration. Sitting, wondering, wishing away the hours, the subject is dislocated from the ordinary flow of space and time, but finds cohesion through an imaginative projection into other spaces and times. In such a way this waiting room functions as an imaginary point of departure, where waiting is offered up as an activity to be considered and attended to.

In Calvino's Invisible Cities, from whence the above quote is extracted, there are numerous cities, but I am interested in the disturbing notion of a continuous surface that the 'sole Trude' suggests, in the inverted narrative where transition and suspension become the defining features and how the destination, rather than offering up a unique and authentic encounter merely deflects the traveller back towards his journey.
DECOR ASPIRATIONAL  2007
Mixed media installation

Although a good set of ducks is relatively difficult to find these days, this somewhat kitsch, but often beautifully made interior decor accessory was once a ubiquitous addition to nice middle class homes the world over, appearing in wood on the outside of beach houses, painted ceramic in faux tuscan villas and brass over the doorways of country style kitchens. Or at least that’s how I imagine it. What sparked my interest in the flying duck motif initially, was the chance experience of seeing what I thought were three ducks fly past my window one afternoon. The event struck me as peculiar, and peculiar in its peculiarity, because why would something so familiar and clichéd have the power to make any impression at all, I wondered. It was a strangely ‘uncanny’ experience, as in the typically Freudian sense where ‘the distinction between the imaginary and reality is effaced, as when something hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality’. (Freud in Belsey: 25) Since the ducks were obviously real, my sense of unease arose from the realization that what I was experiencing as uncanny, was nature (in this sense the imaginary) made strange by culture in nature - a typical case of a simulacrum overtaking its original. What interested me further, was the idea that the effect of excessive visibility, the rendering of something as ‘cliché’ through overuse, effectively rendered it invisible.

As it appears on the walls of homes as an interior decor accessory, the three flying ducks motif is symbolic of the aspiration to capture a perfect moment in nature. Synchronous, harmonious, perfectly balanced in form and motion, it signals a moment of quiet transcendence. At the same time it is exceptionally mundane. Consisting of a positive and negative cast of a set of three ducks moulded into the wall opposite one another, such that both positive and negative appear continuous with the surface of the wall, the work re-presents the cliché in the form of an absent presence or trace. Crucial to a reading of the work is the fact that the image is a broken one - you have to walk 'between it' to see it - and it is paradoxically this very brokenness that allows the image to be seen, both literally and figuratively. In Décor Aspirational, I use this tacky symbol of perfection as a way of drawing attention to the surface of the visible.

The sense in which this work plays off aesthetic minimalism is as much in appearance as in the theatricality of the work – the way it activates the space around it. Many minimalist sculptors where interested in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, which maintained that experience was constituted by the act of perceiving. Since looking always
depends on the engagement of the body. Merleau Ponty asserted that there was no such thing as pure opticality. (Varnedoe, 2003: 104) The two identical walls in which the ducks are installed echo the architecture of the exhibition space, and are arranged in such a way to form a passageway through which it is necessary to pass to access the rest of the exhibition.

Fig 30. Decor Aspirational
Installation view
Fig 31 and 32. *Decor*
THE GIRL WHO ALWAYS LOOKED UP 2008  
Digital print on canvas

Pictures of the sky inevitably call to mind the transcendent. In this work I utilise the language of the modernist grid as a reference to the transcendent, but inscribe it with a wistful narrative phrase. In its tatty evocativeness, the work echoes the cliched banality of *Decor Aspirational*, as well as Alfred Stieglitz's *Equivalents* (1922 - 1935), a reflection of the ultimately Romantic impulse of Modernism's search for the 'objective correlative' for the subjective state in nature. My appropriative gesture here dooms this search to an endless digital repetition: the Romantic is reduced to the kitsch, at the same time as foregrounding in the gap between identically framed pieces a merely visual pattern, not a structure of interpretation.

Detail

Words like 'uh' and 'um' as they appear in everyday speech are usually considered to be a momentary hesitation, a kind of hiatus in the flow of thought that indicates uncertainty or the inability or reluctance on the part of the speaker to express themselves. However, detailed research on words such as, um, uh, like, you know, I mean, typically considered to be non-words, but otherwise known as language disfluencies, reveals that they appear in spoken English on an average of 4.4 seconds, or one every ten words. They are present in the speech of teenagers and academics alike, and are also culturally universal. Where English language speakers say um, uh or er, the French say something that sounds like euh. Hebrew speakers say ehhh, Serbs and Croats say oway, and the Turks say mmmmm. The Japanese say ero (eh-to) and ano (ah-no), the Spanish este, and Mandarin speakers neige (NEH-guh) and jiege (JEH-guh). In Dutch and German you can say uh, um, mmm. In Swedish it's eh, ah, aah, m, mm, hmm, ooh, a and oh; in Norwegian, e, eh, m and hm. Usually these non-words are automatically edited out by the listener.

Debate over the function of 'um' and 'uh' falls into three categories: firstly, that they are errors of knowledge application in performance, and hence fall outside of language, secondly, that these performance additions are errors, but are worthy of study for what they reveal about performance, and thirdly, that some performance additions are genuinely part of language. Clark and Fox Tree determined that neither 'um' nor 'uh' are accidental, but indicate, for example, a forthcoming pause; 'Uh' signals a shortish pause to come, while 'um' signals a long one. Hence, while they may convey a delay or uncertainty, they are more than just a sign of nervousness or a verbal tick. Disfluencies then, are used structurally by the speaker to convey important information in distinct ways that are implicitly understood by their audience, without them being aware of it.

Writing of his own experience in studying the arrangement and inflections of 'um' and 'uh', Saussy theorises that they are a response to the anticipated needs of the audience. In such cases 'um' has a parsing function (it introduces a longish noun clause); it may
Fig 35. Um (2007) HB pencil on wall. Dimensions variable
have a signaling function ("get ready! Long clause coming up the line!"); [or] it may be apologetic ("you know it sounds rather silly of me to be using these long words, but here goes anyway") (Saussy: sp). What these and many other analyses of disfluencies indicate is that they are not arbitrary space fillers, but have an elegant arrangement and are distributed in a very clean way. (Erard, online) Where they appear in written language, um, er and uh seem to have the function of drawing the reader's attention to the act of composition, fictitiously reproducing the process of communication. In both cases they become, in effect, an unseen structuring mechanism in the way that language is performed, and in such a way operate as minor heterotopias in the culture of language in the way that they speak about an unspokeness that is implicit to it.

'Um', as the most simple and prevalent of these disfluencies, is suggestive of the fact that language, on its own, is not a sufficient mechanism for conveying information. Writ large, in pencil on the wall, Um elevates a marginal, unseen/unheard element of language/communication to the level of the monumental. The process is a laborious one, requiring hours and hours worth of careful application using an HB pencil, (itself an unseen, unremarkable generic) only to be rubbed away at the end of the exhibition. In such a way the triviality of the utterance is substantiated by the process on the one hand, while the visual monumentality of the letters - which take on an architectonic presence - is underscored by the ephemerality/temporality of erasure on the other. The work also has the effect of elevating the viewer's awareness of their own speech disfluencies in an uncomfortably self-conscious way. The unheard conversational 'um' takes on a weight and presence that disrupts the flow of speech, thereby changing the relationship between the gaps in the words and the gaps between them.
PERFECT VEHICLE (FATBOY) 2007
Chromed plastic

'anyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool'
'anyone who likes cats or dogs is a fool'

(Deleuze and Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus)

When I began making this sculpture of my cat, I was thinking of the matter-of-factness of a cat, its taken for granted 'thereness'. I also had in mind a kind of literalness that I wanted to translate into a work that was aggravatingly simple, that in its very realistic depiction of an ordinary, mundane domestic animal utilised a language that made it an uncomfortable addition to my exhibition. I wanted it, in other words, to be difficult to assimilate. I was additionally interested in the extent to which animals are very often a locus of projection onto the 'other' and into the unknown, often becoming an extension of the individual and thereby a way of narrating the self and contemplating identity.

While animals were generally not deemed suitable subject matter for modernist artists, they have seen a thematic revival in contemporary art, and are frequently used employing irony and ambiguity. (I'm thinking of Carsten Holler's baby elephant and dolphin, and Maurizio Cattelan's taxidermized suicide squirrel Bidibi.dobidiboo, 1996) Pets, however, in their potential to slide into sentimentality and kitsch (Jeff Koon's Puppy, 1992) are still problematic because they dont testify to that innate, eternal, unresolvable difference from human beings. Kept with no regard to their usefulness, pets, claims Peter Berger 'are creatures of their owner's way of life' and in accentuating and confirming aspects of this life thereby complete them. (Berger in Baker, 167) By this argument, pets have become what you might call a 'lifestyle accessory', and although I'm personally not quite so skeptical about owning one, Berger's point undoubtedly draws attention to the way in which animals are expected to offer an authentic unmediated experience with nature. Pets by contrast are overly mediated, and occupy a somewhat indeterminate zone between familiarity and otherness.

Deleuze and Guattari, whose writing on animals is one of the most significant additions to postmodern thought on the place of animals in the lives of human beings, were no fans of cats or dogs. They preferred wolves, insects, or any other form of pack or swarming animal over contemptably domesticated 'individuated animals, family pets, sentimental, Oedipal animals each with its own petty history, "my" cat, "my" dog ... These animals invite us to regress, draw us into a narcissistic contemplation'. (Deleuze and

Fig 35. Perfect Vehicle (Fat Boy) (2007) Detail
Fig 36. *Perfect Vehicle (Fat Boy)*
(2007) Composite with chrome finish. 42 x 35 x 22 cm
Guattari in Baker, 2000: 168). As subjects for critical contemplation, individual domestic animals are usually considered to be too complete, symbolising the threat of a world made meaningful by 'well formed and exhaustive interpretations.' (Baker, 169)

But in his essay *The Animal that therefore I am (more to follow)*, Jacques Derrida writes of a very different experience of his cat, one evening when climbing out of the shower naked. It is in being seen naked by his cat, in confronting what he figures as an 'absolute alterity' that Derrida claims to experience a moment of self-consciousness, shame and an awareness of the animal which in fact he is. Although he links this experience to themes of nakedness and shame in Genesis, Derrida is at pains to point out that his own domestic experience is a very specific one, contingent on the 'irreplacable singularity' of 'his' cat - that she (for his cat is a female) is not an 'allegory for all the cats on the earth, the felines that traverse myths and religions, literature and fables.' His experience is not of some culturally invested symbolism that has been ascribed to the cat. (Derrida, 1999: 374) It is in the eyes of this particular cat, writes Steve Baker, that he sees reflected his own 'I' and by extension the naked truth of the autobiographical 'I'. (Baker, 186) The seeing of being seen in the eyes of the other, is at once an awareness of the other and his own otherness, and as such affords an opportunity for more than just the projection of a self-narrative. The cat offers Derrida access to a philosophy and self-awareness that is 'embodied and intimately related to an other', (Baker, 186) and a way of thinking about being that stands in opposition to Descartes formulation 'I think therefore I am'. As an alternative, Derrida suggests, 'The animal looks at us, and we are naked before it. And thinking perhaps begins there'. (Derrida, 370)

In *Perfect Vehicle (Fat Boy)* I am looking to occupy an antagonistic space, devoid of sentimentality, that registers the mediatedness of the cat as subject matter, but in its lack of associative resonance, resists the desire to bring the animal into meaning. Similar to Anish Kapoor's *Turning the world inside out* (1995), the viewer is both attracted and reflected, present and deflected in the surface of the work, but with the crucial difference that in *Perfect Vehicle (Fat Boy)* the void is situated internally.
UNTITLED (ONE BREATH AT A TIME IS ACCEPTABLE) 2008
Clear Perspex

Based on a set of song lyrics by Ani DiFranco (Tamburitza Lingua, Revelling/Reckonings, 2005), this work reconfigures the lyric as a piece of signage, giving the somewhat bizarre, but gently affirming suggestion that it is acceptable to take only one breath at a time, thereby begging the question, is it possible to do anything otherwise? Both reassuring and problematic the suggestion draws attention to the ever present but barely perceptable, absurdly banal, action of breathing - the 'almost nothing' of our every living moment.

Cut out of clear perspex, the text is also barely perceptable and sits on the very edge of visibility, both literally and interpretively. Like the breath, the work is both there and not there - you can't see it, it dematerialises if you try and approach it head on. To read the text the viewer must move to the side, encounter the work from an oblique angle.

Fig 38. One Breath at a Time is Acceptable (2008) Clear perspex 181 x 72.5cm Detail
Fig 39. *One Breath at a Time is Acceptable* (2008) Clear perspex 181 x 72.5cm
AFTER YVES 2007
Acrylic chroma key blue paint on canvas.

Perhaps the most visually simple of my works, After Yves makes obvious reference to Yves Klein’s blue monochromes for which he famously patented his 'International Klein Blue' or IKB for short. The void that Klein evoked through these paintings, finds perhaps a contemporary equivalence in the chroma key blue screen of cinematography.

Chroma key is a film technique that uses an artificial single toned blue, green or red backdrop to create a space into which any other film footage can be placed. Although blue is historically the colour of choice because it is a complementary to flesh tones, green tends to be more versatile for digital applications, with red used only very occasionally. The process, commonly known as ‘keying’, ‘keying out’ or simply a ‘key’, allows actors and scale models to be placed in totally imaginary situations (in space ships, dangling from rope bridges over gorges, flying through the air like Superman) with the end result that it looks convincingly real in the completed film. Used most often to present the weather forecast, the technique is now so prevalent and sophisticated that it is no longer obviously apparent when scenes are shot on location or whether they are merely filmed in studio.


Fig 41. Filming the weather forecast using a chroma key blue screen. (http://www.hploc.unl.edu/nebraska/TWC98-1.html)
Fig 42. *After Yves (2007)* Acrylic chroma key blue paint on canvas. 130 x 180 cm
THE HARDER YOU LOOK, THE HARDER YOU LOOK 2008
Two images, one of which is encoded with the words 'The End'
Digital print on Hahnemuhler

This work is a continuation of my interest in doubling as an exercise in looking. The point at which the sky and sea meet on the horizon line is the point at which the finite meets the infinite. It is also a symbol of visual limitation, or at least unaided vision.

While the images appear to be identical, one of them is encoded with a text that reads, quite simply, 'The End'. This has been done using an encryption program that takes the binary code of each pixel that constitutes the image and adds a numeral (0 or 1) to the end of it. This numeral, which is the beginning of the binary code of the text or image that is being encoded has the effect of subtly changing the colour of each pixel of the image into which it is encoded. Barely perceptible, and most likely not noticeable to the human eye, depending on the amount of information that has been encoded, the image becomes a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

In the same way that the image doubles, such that the end appears to be in sight, and yet is hidden within its double, so the title doubles, mirroring the meaning of the phrase, the one within the other, interchangeably.
Fig 43. The End (The harder you look, the harder you look) (2008)
Digital print on Hahnemuhler
100 x 68 cm
Fig 44. The Last Place on Earth
(Scale 1 : ∞) 2008
Scale model incised into A
Dictionary of the English
Language by Samuel Johnson
42 x 25 x 7cm
Published in 1755, *A Dictionary of the English Language* was one of the most influential dictionaries ever to appear in the history of the English language. Although not the first dictionary to be published, Johnson’s dictionary was the first to offer a comprehensive and detailed account of the English lexicon as it was used on a daily basis. Despite criticism the dictionary’s influence was extensive. It established both a methodology for the way in which dictionaries should be put together and a structure for how entries should be presented. Johnson’s dictionary, or ‘The Dictionary’ as it became known, became a fundamental source of reference to any understanding of the English language. ‘So firmly established did it swiftly become that any request for “The Dictionary” would bring forth Johnson and none other ... One asked for The Dictionary, much as one might demand The Bible,’ writes Simon Winchester in his history of the Oxford English Dictionary. (Winchester, 2003: 32)

‘The last place on earth’ is a common phrase in English language. Generally used to indicate a place beyond the known, as in ‘That’s the last place on earth I would have thought of looking ...’, it has the curious property of being a place, which designated by language, exists properly only within language. A place without a location, it can be found both everywhere and nowhere, and in this sense draws into play the tension between the specific and the infinite linguistic as a means of mapping the world.

In *The Last Place on Earth* (Scale 1 : ∞) I have created a topographical model of ‘the last place’, a landscape located physically between the pages of *A Dictionary of the English Language*, but situated somewhere between fact and fiction, real and the imaginary.
THE WORLD, INVERTED 2008
Enamel paint on laminated wood


Quotation marks as they are typically used in written language are a means of indicating that a particular word, phrase or passage in the text has been taken from another source, and that it is not the writer's own. In spoken language, where they are performed with a slight curling of the first two fingers of the hand in imitation of the shape of the punctuation mark, this function is usually redundant. Instead, they are used interpretively or ironically to convey that the speaker recognizes that the word or concept in use cannot be taken at face value, that it has become destabilised or problematic, that it is associated with a discourse or context that they wish to call into question, but that they are going to use it anyway in the hope that the listener can contextualise the information, despite, or because of, the acknowledgement.

While this is often done with humour and is conversationally specific, placing words and images in quotation has, in a sense, become a standard mode of communication and expression in contemporary society. We are perpetually appropriating, synthesising and recontextualising the media and information that surrounds us. Self-reflexive postmodern beings, we are as defined by our awareness of this media as by our ability to manipulate it. Umberto Eco writes that 'the postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.' The postmodern attitude can be characterised as 'that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, "I love you madly," because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly."' (Eco, 1983: 30) In such a way the man is able to indicate his awareness of the cliché, but imbue it with a gentle unsophisticated charm that is both self deprecating but sincere, flatters both parties with an unspoken suggestion of a critical cultural sensibility and keeps the sentiment intact.

Quotation is not merely a question of snappy references to popular culture however, but extends to the cultural ideologies which shape ethical discourse. According to Richard Rorty we no longer have a 'liberal metaphysic' – the modern belief in natural rights, but rather a 'liberal ironism,' which he defines as a postmodern defense of those rights, without the belief that they are natural. 'These values are only presentable by putting them in quotes, ironizing them so as to recognize that they are in fact social constructions.' (De Zengotita, 2005: 36).
The work, which consists of a set of oversized chunky quotation marks in Times New Roman font (again a generic, default option), is a parody of itself in its implicit self awareness of the irony that informs its own production. Yet as a quotation of nothing it is also about trying to say what cannot be said, and thus underlying all this awareness and self-referentiality is a lack or loss which short-circuits the circularity of the critique. In the same way that in Beckett’s writing, the silence of the text can only be alluded to through speaking, here, nothing has to be said in order that we understand the allusion to an unsaid nothing.

This piece, marked by a line of red acrylic paint drawn on the floor, signifies the threshold of the exhibition, beyond which it ceases to exist. On stepping over the line, the viewer hears the sound of a door creaking open, and then closing with a rattle and a bang as they step back over it. Liminal, ephemeral, and slightly absurd, the tacky movie sound bite that is the sound of the door, underscores the profound and transgressive desire to step over into the unknown.
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