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Word Muscles

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Word Muscles

BFA Thesis

College of Art

Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts

Washington University in St. Louis

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Abstract

Through video performance, I question whether the tangible expressive significance of written language is not just in the record of it, but in the experience of writing as well. The ability to contract and relax is a property of the muscles in bodies as well as in language. In response to this idea of the contractile nature of the body, I link writing to dancing by pairing the record of one with the process of the other. In doing so, I set up a parallel between the malleable nature of the body – which allows for the proximity between graceful and awkward movements in the dance – and the mutability of letter forms in language.

My work investigates the materials and sites that pertain to human activities of communication and expression, focusing specifically on the gestural aspects of analogue technologies. The interaction of the animate human form with analogue tools of communication yields simultaneously graceful and cumbersome results; a paradox and uncomfortable proximity that I see as being inherent in the system of language itself. The pleasure in the difficulty of language is present in the excessive motions our bodies execute in trying to articulate a relationship to something beyond us in the world. Largely installation based, my work posits these generally overlooked motions as essential forms knowledge and creative expression.



Figure 1. Jimena Gracia, *I learned that if I read a word for long enough I start to imagine myself dancing in and out of the letter loops*, 2015 (installation view). Screen print and monoprint on Bristol; digital video

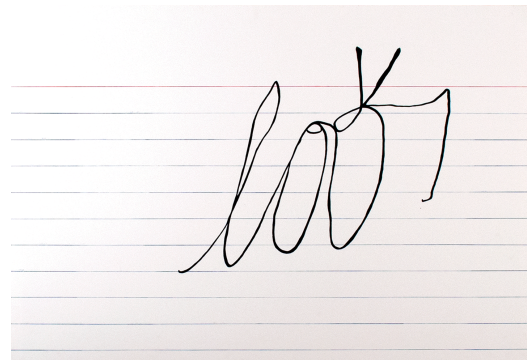


Figure 2. Jimena Gracia, *I learned that if I read a word for long enough I start to imagine myself dancing in and out of the letter loops*, 2015 (detail). Screen print and monoprint on Bristol; 24 X 40

In my work, I use handwriting as one of the most visibly evident examples of the mutability of language. Written language has a determined set of signs and is accompanied by a particular way of making these signs (Drucker 12). I am interested in moments where the mark deviates from the standard symbol,

disrupting the functional purpose of writing. Such marks reveal something beyond their semantic role: they contain evidence of nuanced expression as well as traces of the writing subject's muscular actions.

In the installation-based work, *I learned that if I read a word for long enough I start to imagine myself dancing in and out of the letter loops*, I use an index card as the surface on which I present handwritten text. In Werner Herzog's documentary film *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, it is posited that the cave itself shapes the form of the cave painters' pictorial language. Similarly, I use the cave as the setting of a video performance in the installation in order to make associative changes to the meaning of the performance. The cave is an allusion to the cave paintings in Herzog's film as early examples of human communication and the origins of language. The index card within the installation changes the meaning of the writing in a similar way: a familiar artifact within the realm of education and libraries, the notecard invokes authoritative systems of the categorization and dissemination of knowledge and information. By embedding these sites with what is generally considered nonchalant gesture, I aim to address the limits of hierarchical systems of organization, challenging the boundaries of intellectual reasoning.

The writing that I present in on the index card of this installation both begs for and resists meaning. There is a frustration in the viewer's encounter with the writing due to what is written and how it is written. The enlarged mark is an invitation for the viewer to spend time in and among the spaces between the lines as well as along the expressive nuances of the lines themselves. The mark

oscillates between alphabetic and pictographic allusions: the o's look like eyes, the second o continues into what might be interpreted as a k, but also like an extended hand. By using writing that alludes to a pictograph, I invoke notions of the alphabet as essentially image, which generally is considered more complicated to decode than text (Drucker 14).

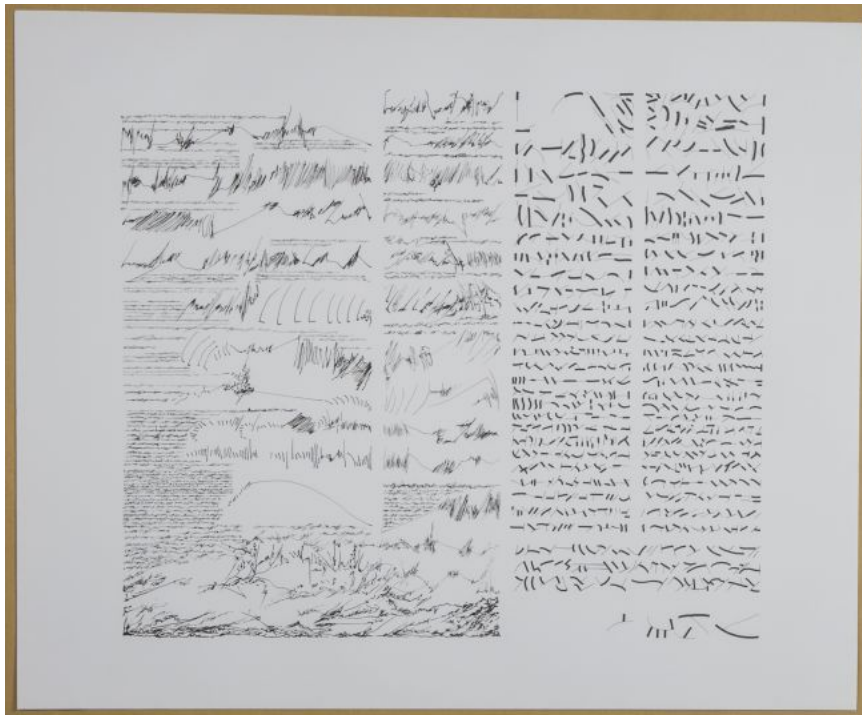


Figure 3. Mirtha Dermisache, *Lectura Pública 3*, 2006. Ink and graphite on paper.

Mirtha Dermisache is another such artist whose work aims at a frustration within writing. Within Dermisache's work there is a tension between the stability afforded by the communication formats she employs and the "unstable dimension" provided by the act of writing she executes (Durgin). The work is very much so characterized by movement. In alluding to the way of a thing (written language) without referring to anything else, the reader and viewer is forced to focus on how she makes meaning of a text generally. There is a frustration

inherent in encountering marks that pass as signifiers signifying nothing other than seeming to be a word.



Figure 4. Jimena Gracia, *Dig*, 2015 (still). Digital video. 3 minutes, 6 seconds.

I am drawn to the moments in handwriting where the mark deviates from the standard symbol. I am attracted to these moments as incidental and intentional; the incidental being the automatic muscular reflexes out of the writing subject's unconsciousness and the intentional being the moments of flair that that are consciously, and then habitually, present in individuals' writing. I wonder whether these idiosyncrasies in transcription, which in their mixture of motility and self-expression disrupts the functional purpose of writing, originate new meaning for the writing subject? Does this affective *mélange* of intentional and incidental mark making achieve gestural meaning, which Merleau-Ponty sees as imminent in speech (208)? In my work, I emphasize that the properties of writing that frustrate understanding are also what give written text affect and emotion.

In my work I think about how the physicality and expressiveness of writing is present not just in the record, but the act of writing itself. *Dig* is a video that contemplates the mystery and desire for meaning in the experience of written language. It focuses on the discrete movements of the hand and fingers in the act of writing without providing any record of the produced signifiers. The title is a reference to the act of inscription. *Dig* is also a reflection on the potential motives for digging a hole, suggesting that writing is both a process of revealing and concealing. The pencil becomes a shovel. The title of the video thus also creates a shift in scale that is disorienting. On the one hand, it suggests that the digging is miniscule; mere miniscule scratches of a vast, infinite surface. On the other hand, it serves to provoke an association of writing as laborious and quite physical.



Figure 5. Dara Friedman, *Government Cut Freestyle*, 1998 (still). 16mm film transferred to DVD; no sound; 9 minutes, 20 seconds.

In *Government Cut Freestyle*, Dara Friedman explores the physicality (of movement) as well as the interruptions of physicality. *Government Cut Freestyle*

is a video loop of young kids jumping off of a bridge into the sea. Throughout most of the video Friedman focuses on bodies sifting through air. For the most part, we do not see them enter the water. This repeated shot establishes an expectation within the viewer, which Friedman then breaks in certain moments. Fluidity is invoked in the suspended motion of the video; satisfaction is achieved in its subsequent interruptions. I relate these interruptions to the moments within writing when legibility is disrupted by an illegible mark. Both works suggest the pleasure of physical deviation.



Figure 6. Jimena Gracia, *I learned that if I read a word for long enough I start to imagine myself dancing in and out of the letter loops*, 2015 (installation view). Screen print and monoprint on Bristol; digital video

The unexpected deviations of a body in motion that Friedman entralls us with are also present in the video performance component of *I learned that if I read a word for long enough I start to imagine myself dancing in and out of the letter loops*. The video performance cited above relies mostly on the performer's

propensity to mess up. The banality of vernacular dancing encounters the spectacle of art through the performer's lack of professional dancing experience.

I value dance as a perfect intersection of physical and creative labor. There are moments in the dance when a movement that starts to achieve fluidity suddenly disintegrates or falls apart. There is an uncomfortable proximity between fluidity and awkwardness, as there is in handwriting. I attribute these moments to the musculature of the body. These mumbles and pauses in the dance are the equivalent to interruptions within the structure of language itself.

I consider the ruptures in language, or visible speech, to be present in the difficulty of illegible handwriting. The work presents a new approach to handwriting – a dance performance that demonstrate that the record of written letters is not enough – it's a movement that made the word that enralls the viewer's mind. As such, I suggest the interruptions within communication (that are inherent in language as well as the body) are also sources of affectivity and understanding.

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