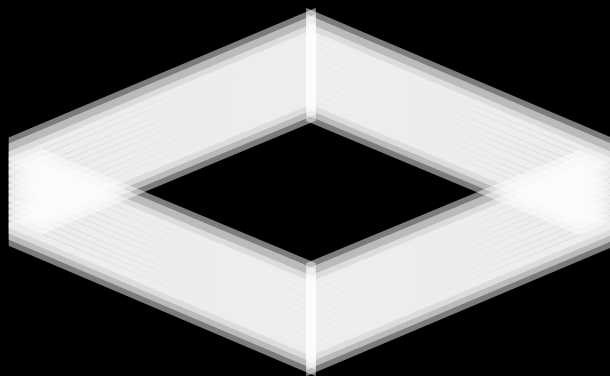
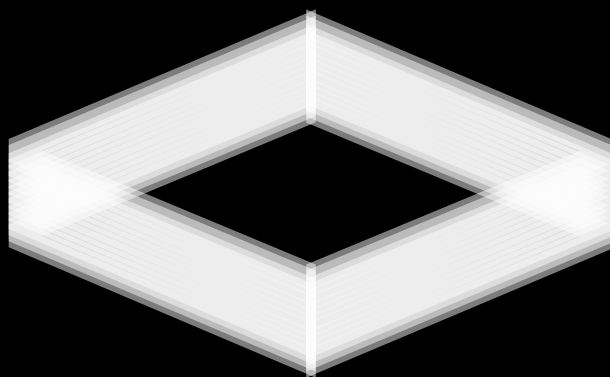


joseph f. keppler



**FALL COLLECTION
FROM SEATTLE**



**E·RATIO ISSUE 16
New York City 2013**



for
Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino



FALL COLLECTION FROM SEATTLE

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E·RATIO ISSUE 16 NEW YORK CITY

E·ratio

FALL COLLECTION FROM SEATTLE

with visuals including graphics on the apocryphal prayer by St. Francis of Assisi

joseph f. keppler

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P r e f a c e

During the beautiful, late summer in Seattle, a few artists met to consider why and how art and art criticism were quite pluralistic but generally barren, vainglorious, and preferential. They started to talk and sometimes write about the art in the city around them, expressing their individual reactions to it and exploring beginning a critical group to write a multivalent art criticism. Later during the fall, several artists unfortunately had to move their studios or their residences and were unable to meet regularly. The artists relied awhile on email exchanges until these messages too tapered off due to the work involved with moving.

My writings began as a contribution to this group; then gradually they became a way for me to think through my own confusion regarding early 21st century art and art criticism in Seattle. Thus though the original group stopped talking together much, I continued to write in an effort to understand what I was seeing or reading, or more accurately what I was not seeing or reading. Meanwhile, friends asked me to review a new book by Ezra Mark, to give a talk in Vancouver, and to read at a book launch, and I agreed to do all three. Eventually these endeavors along with visuals became this spring's *FALL COLLECTION FROM SEATTLE*, my contribution to *E·ratio*, Issue 16.

joseph f. kepler,
Seattle 2013

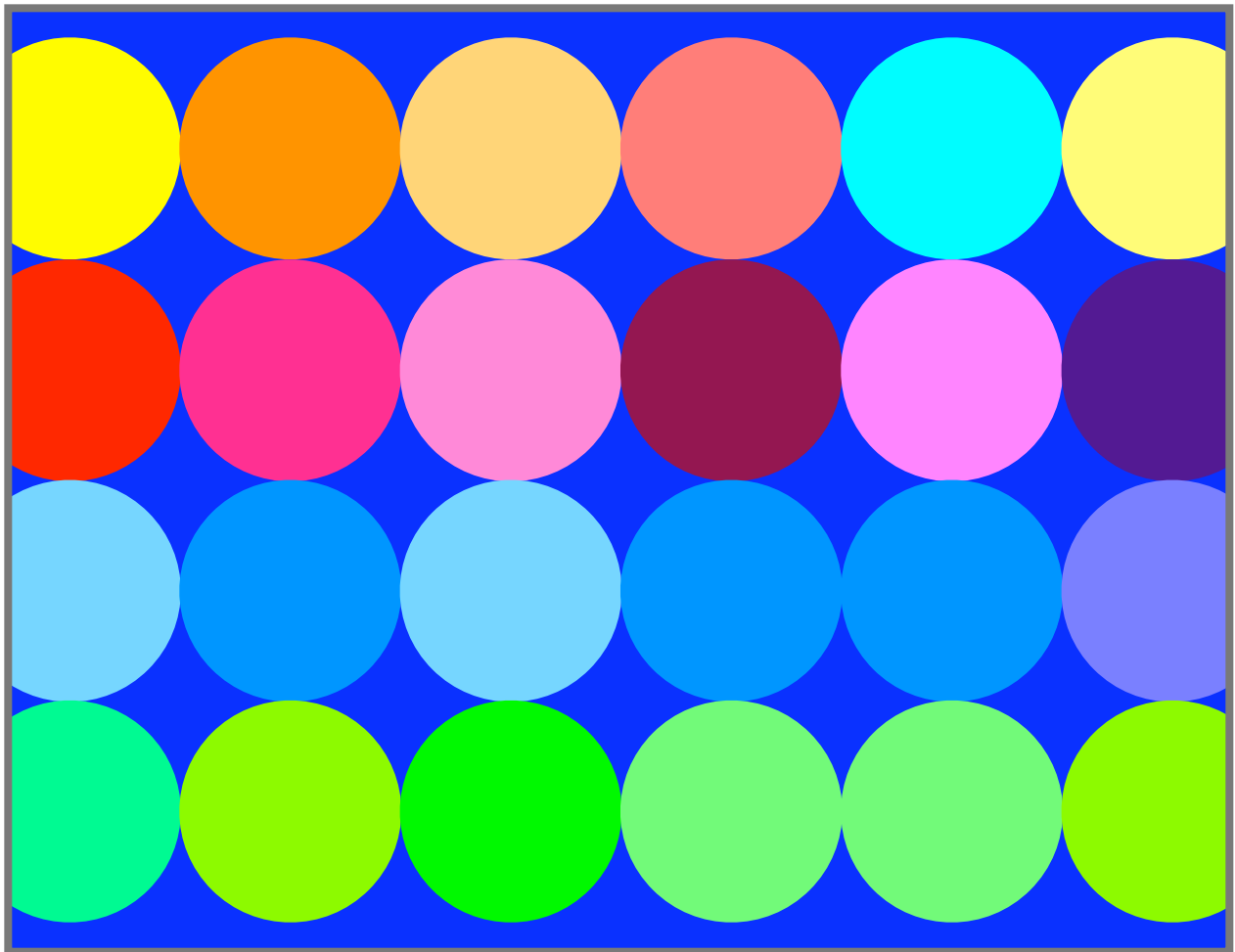
WHITE, LOW-CUT, COTTON BLOUSE TUCKED INTO TIGHT, DARK BLUE, PENCIL SKIRT
CRISP, ORANGE, BUTTON-DOWN SHIRT TUCKED INTO FADED, THREADBARE JEANS

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

ART WALK, SEATTLE, SEPTEMBER 6, 2012

What is in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet.—William Shakespeare

What is in a name like art walk? A rose is a rose is a rose is a name, and art walk by any other name would not twin art and walking, and would not imply the two belong together like Romeo and Juliet. Perhaps these monthly evening promenades among Seattle galleries would be fashionable on high-definition television if the name, art walk, were talent parade or genius chase. Whatever, the real,



public, pedestrian activity during an art walk remains the same. After a double espresso at the Zeitgeist to see the kunst hung on its big brick wall, I turn into the James Harris Gallery, a remodeled, refined storefront. Because he always seems super self-confident and aloof, I like to compare his sophisticated publicity with the art he sells.

This month Harris is pleased to announce *Blue or Both*, an exhibition of new paintings, which explore “a language of abstraction that is, above all, conversational” and individually “represent a collision of ideas that often culminate into the illusionistic space of ethereal landscapes...” The artist “presents us with intriguing new realms that are both enterable and static, an anomaly of spatial navigation in painting that is as innovative as it is assured.”¹

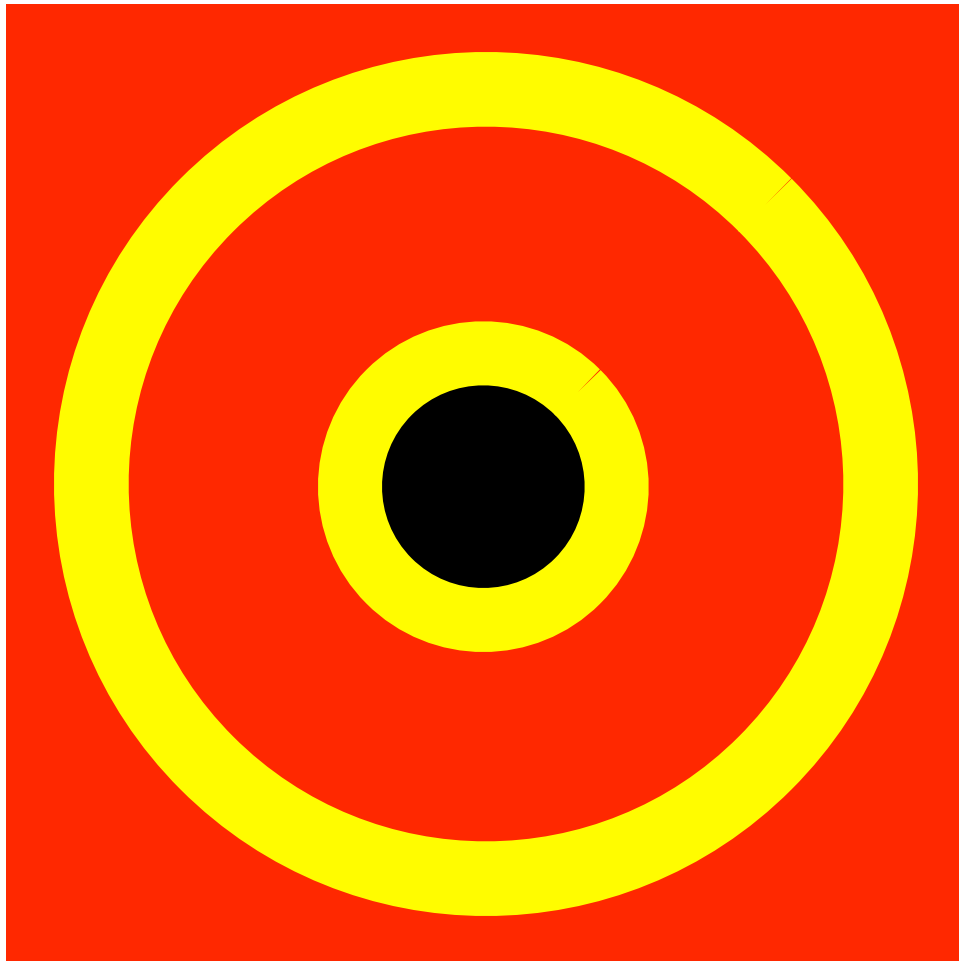
Hmm, *new realms that are both enterable and static* sounds like installation art or an art about perspective, but *an anomaly of spatial navigation in painting* suggests this installation is puzzling pigment on stretched canvas. Not knowing, I want to learn if the anomaly is more in the prose than in the paintings so I continue to read and to look and to think about the relationship between reading and looking. The painter is from Los Angeles with education from Yale University, Slade School of Art, and Otis College of Art and Design. The title for the largest and most expensive painting—“A Bird is not an Ornithologist”—lacks the flighty charm of Barnett Newman’s pithy line, “Aesthetics is to artists as ornithology is to birds.” This painting and several smaller works employ abstract-expressionist-brushwork strategies. If these are, “above all, conversational,” then the conversation lacks living, thinking people and seems to me occult, between the dead and the gullible, like fortune telling or reading tea leaves, which rely on conviction about deciphered symbols or patterns from beyond. Art publicity, like astrology, works the imagination. The gallery prose includes: “These paintings are softer and flatter than his previous works, with a liquidity emerging in the form of emotionally-activated drips and splatters, and sheer veils of light and color blending like glass...” It is really disappointing that these paintings’ *new realms*, their *anomaly of spatial navigation*, are only like glass. This publicity packs its fragile panes inside sentences that not so much lead me to think about the artist’s work as art as present a case for its stylish progressiveness. Prose and art fall to pieces together.

If everyone assumes that art exists without agreeing on any definitiveness; in other words, if it is an axiom, *art is*; then *is this art?* is a good question to start a convincing epistemology about any particular work. Many philosophers answer similar foundational questions about the good, beautiful, or sublime, but these forms or categories are no longer as topical as art. Artists, critics, and publicists decide either to trust the axiom alone or to deal cogently with the foundational question, *is this art?* If they answer, *no, it is not art*, or more glibly, *everything is art so this is art*, then to discuss the work as specific art is misleading. If the answer is, *yes, it is art*, then *what is it?* is a good, second question to consider; and a third is, *why or how is it?* Reviewing mostly all work as art only markets it and reduces art criticism to advertising. This, some may find disturbing, others pluralistic.

Harris is also pleased to announce *Industry Standard*, an exhibition in his smaller back room by someone “working in the genres of still life photography and sculpture” who explores “what arises when one collapses different sectors of production by using a combination of techniques, materials, and aesthetics gleaned from diverse fields.” The “multi-layered compositions” use product and design to give that “look of pervasive commercial imagery.” The sculptures “build off of and augment his photography, like sticking a straw in a coconut.” The sticking-a-straw-in-a-coconut simile, borrowed from *Vita Coco*’s coconut-water advertisements, makes the sculptural addenda seem

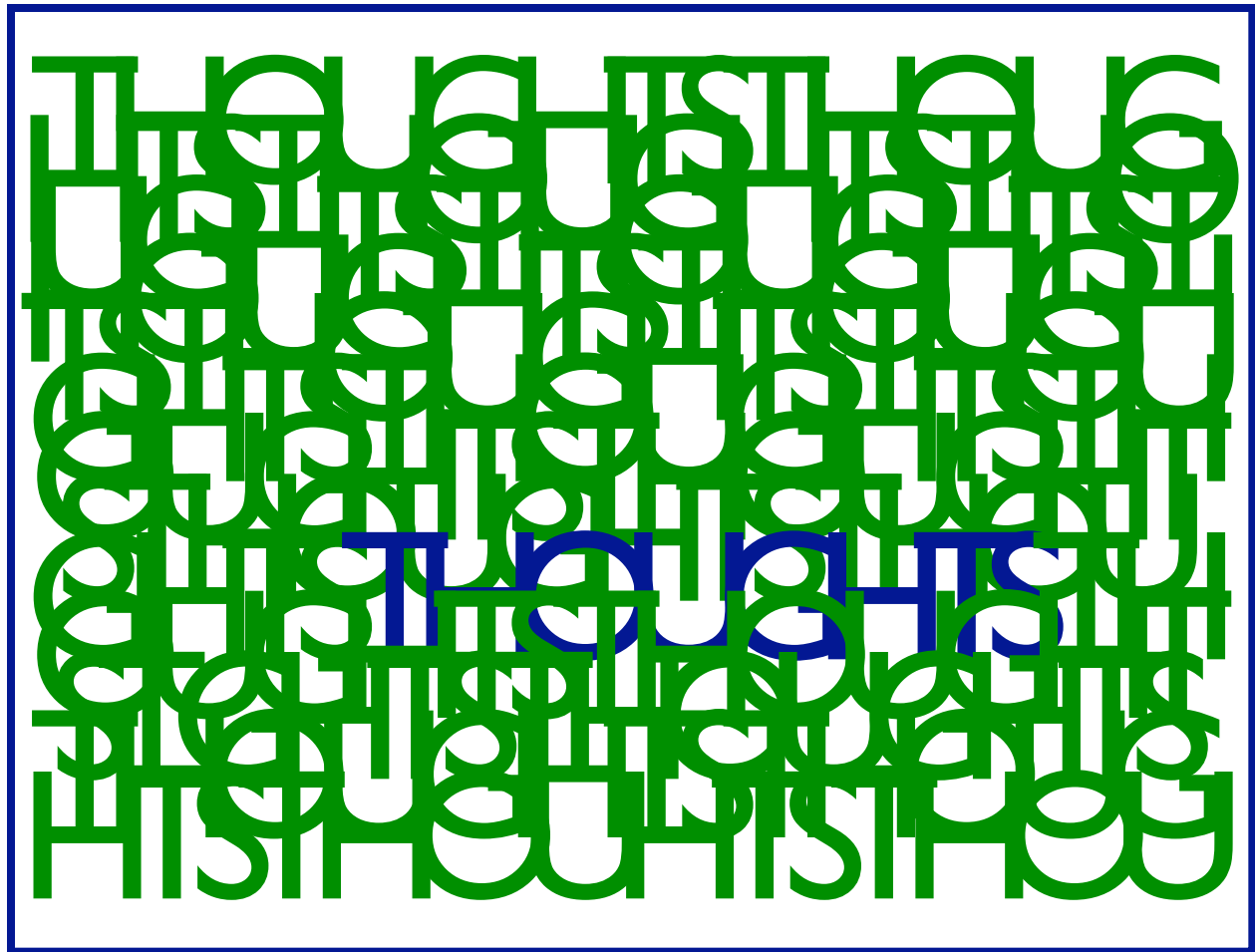
enticing refreshment. *Sculptures* is the word Harris substitutes for *plants* to insinuate that the small succulents and cacti sitting on the floor and delicately placed on the framed photographs are art. Arguably, the vegetation is planted here to rescue these photographs. What begins in gallery prose as an interesting, interdisciplinary, art-making project floors me in the end with its utter bathos. Harris provides positive spin for his artists through his fanfare. He does well here, I think, in terms of sales.

On to Foster White Gallery and a group show, *Media Matters*. This gallery, a former fire station, always seems to overwhelm whatever art is in it, and this month is no different. The gallery is neither white nor a cube; it is a remarkably spacious and comes with an upper level. It retains its revamped look the way an old church still looks like an old church though used for contemporary poetry readings or child daycare. Not social or electronic media, the media in *Media Matters* refer to the materials eight artists use to make their work. For example, one glues and shapes wooden pencils into ovoid forms and another molds synthetic materials that seem to light up from within their resin encasements. In this talented show, materials take form but for surprise, not significance. Do skillfully executed media make this work art? *Is this art?* Truthfully, *no, it isn't art*. It is expertise with object making. Art, if more than a service commodity in a service economy, differs from being artistic with materials. It helps me, at least, to think about relationships between art, skill, reason, and purpose to discover what art is in particular.



A sculptor, who according to *Seattle Magazine*, “cuts to the core of desire in spectacular wood carvings,”² is at the Greg Kucera Gallery. His wood sculptures are ambivalent about craft: the artist exacts limbs, tools, or running shoes from wooden beams while leaving other parts unfinished. This work is much less exciting than the wood sculptures by Georg Baselitz shown years ago at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Also on exhibit at Kucera’s are photographs called ambrotypes. These celebrate and in a way insult Seattle artists by lining them up as local stars and photographically turning them into antique frontier Victorians. Ambrotypes make some well-executed memorabilia for the gallery, which also sells prints from deceased artists like Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein.

Not quite ready to give up, I wander into the Tashiro Kaplan Building to visit other galleries, and I see more art that cuts to the core, or is as innovative as it is assured, or is spectacular. This art walk could go on forever as the dead do—the dead who remain here in name only. What is in a name like art walk? Mostly nothing as real as a rose, I think, and everything thought to be real that can deceive.



¹ Quotations are from jamesharrisgallery.com/kroll and jamesharrisgallery.com/hashemi. The artists, Alexander Kroll and Sol Hashemi, also have illustrations of their work on this site.

² <http://www.seattlemag.com/gallery/dan-webbs-chiseled-features>

SHORT YELLOW SILK BILLOWY DRESS OVER BRIGHT RED HOSIERY, BLACK-HEELS
YELLOW-~~&~~WHITE STRIPED SHIRT TUCKED INTO BLACK JEANS, RED MOCCASINS

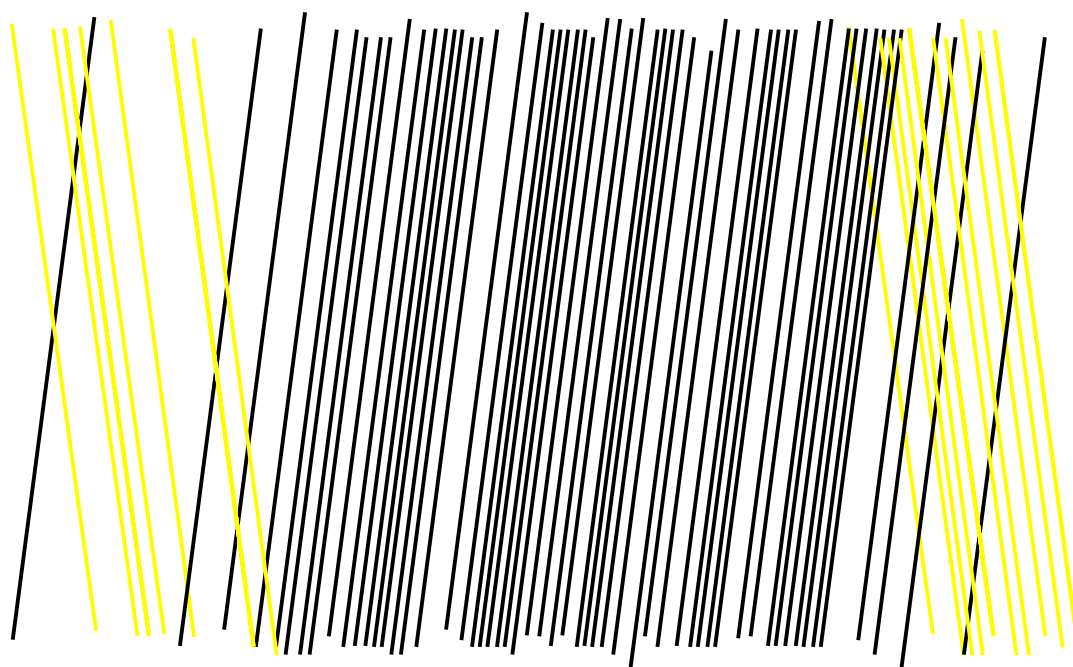
WHAT'S IN A MIND? *RETENTION* by EZRA MARK

Ezra Mark: Retention (Winston, Oregon: nine muses books, 2012) 29 pp., saddle-stapled, with cover and end paper photographs, \$7.50.

Contemporary literature is for me about metaphysical work—how writers think and discover, how they convert simple and complex experiences into poetic style, and how that somehow becomes new, significant instruction. So lately, I'm usually not asked to write about recent books, but in this case I'm pleased to review Ezra Mark's latest work, *Retention*, which interrupts America's relentlessly politicized and quantified psychology with cinematic thinking and oneiric memory. Mark questions what he thinks and remembers. His style fits his subject: episodic, prosaic, and interrogative. It also fits him too, for he is quiet, innovative, and conscientious.

Retention comes after *Intention* in Ezra Mark's literary progression. No, that's not right. Cross out progression. Progression is not correct. *Retention* comes on naturally, out of nothing the way each day does, all by itself, despite all other days preceding it in the vast, unchangeable past. Today is no progression from yesterday. Unlike any day though and more like anyone during any particular day, *Retention* goes on, stops, retraces itself, moves ahead, doubles back, goes sideways, and then comes up in poignant recapitulation before turning in for another adventure. *Retention* then is both a new book that has no history and is another book from an author whose history is arranged, rearranged, negated, and continued in its pages.

Ezra Mark is a different, difficult, committed poet living in Seattle, though I know he would grimace at my calling him a poet. Stretching the pronunciation, he would simply reply, "*Poet?*" Yet I think that with his unconventional poetics he outclasses many academic and avant-garde contemporaries.



There is a reason why he is certainly not well known or particularly acknowledged for his careful, idiosyncratic work. He and I both live in Seattle, a North American city without any great public life for writers or visual artists; yet where many compete for careers in the arts or in the institutions that support teaching or funding the arts. Our city fits right in a broader, lackluster, North American culture where the arts are conveniently categorized, mostly segregated from each other, and definitely disconnected from any decisive consequence in the city or state. Most contemporaries apply to the government and institutions for grants, awards, and positions and are satisfied with that. Mark turns his back to all this recognition and pursues his work on his own with help from friends like his intrepid publisher, margareta waterman.

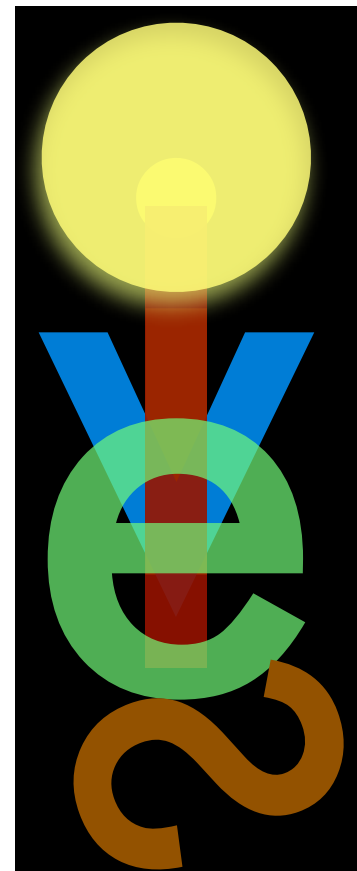
Retention is Mark's frustrating quest for memory as well as his making his quest for memory a true memory for this time. His spare, elegant prose is deeply influenced by cinema and contemporary French writing. He circles around his paragraphs, borrows quotations, repeats individual lines, and purposely settles little for he portrays an examined life, one as open to how his human flesh experiences touch, scent, changing light, and atmospheric vagaries as it is closed to an ambitious, successful career. *Retention* is his poetic arrangement about being himself and about writing.

Writing, if it is anything at all, explains what it is to be thoughtful; and writing, pure writing, rather than functional writing for journalism, say, or publicity, has a majestic purpose: to think for oneself despite others. This is *Retention's* poetic work. Making his book, Marks seems to be neither making it up nor making it real. Instead, he seems intent upon reflection, and reflecting upon his reflections. He is situating himself as someone withdrawn, perhaps even missing, from present terms, things, and ideas. In other words, he is no journalist, no professor, no genius. He seems to know that he does not know what he is about; furthermore, it is not authority he seeks, it is the course his meandering thoughts take: "Go out and seek the horizon. Walk toward it, I think, into the cool loom of twilight. The rain has passed and it is damp, the streetlights hung with little globes. I step back from the window. The continual pacing around the room flattens out into a line, where I walk, shadowed" (p. 9).

A horizon is relative to a position in time and space, and Mark's positions elevate this book from irredeemable solipsism. It is not that *Retention* circulates memories and thoughts throughout the text, just as many people do all the time without particularly contemplating them, but that *Retention* discovers general truths about this particularly empirical, seemingly endlessly reproducible, but all the while evanescent, zeitgeist. Not all is all it seems, and never was. Shadows from light being effectively or figuratively blocked follow his reflections on memory as he concentrates to distinguish the flux from the fluid, or, contra Yeats, the dance from the dancer:

How we stake such thoughts on words, only to open the book later and find that the light has shifted, and one's relation to things—or things, in relation to oneself, a self so constructed—have changed. The subtle motions of particle and wave have altered the shoreline. Each time a little is lost. A memory is revealed not to be that of the thing itself, but of a memory of a photograph, or something one has read. Document. Object. Subject. Accident (p. 15).

Recognition and reality as knowable or unknowable are not so much scribed or explained as approached and accepted. In *Retention* they move together through the text like melodies or themes repeating and

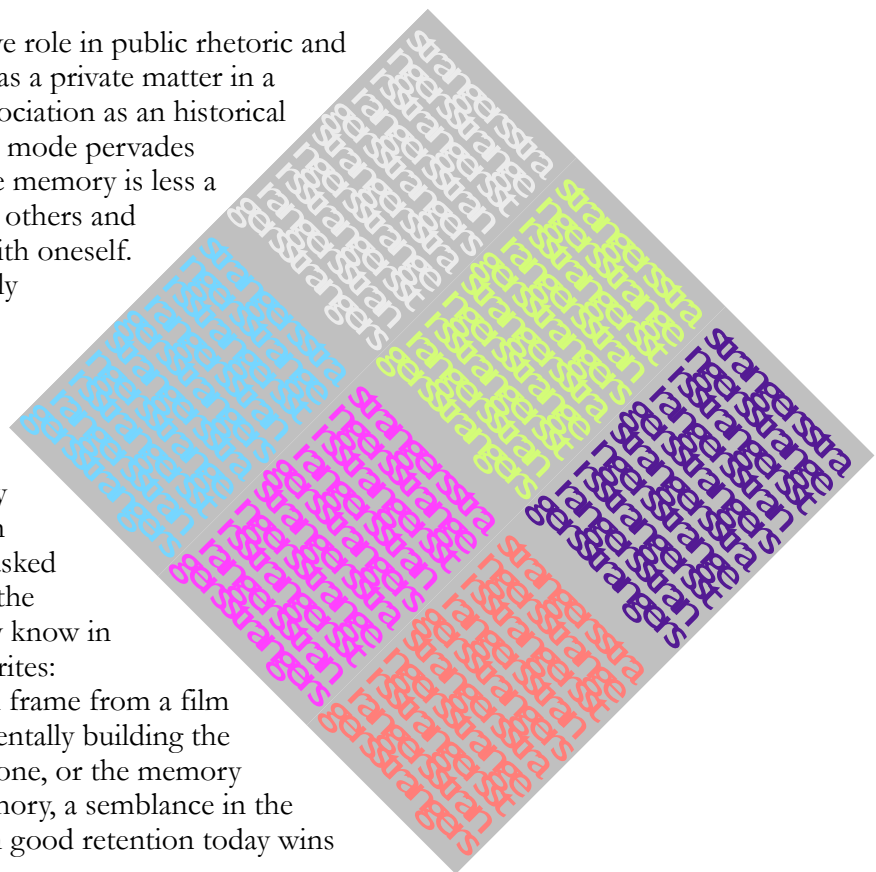


developing, altering and reversing, adding and subtracting feelings and thoughts. *Retention* is a listening-in while Mark is listening to the music accompanying the films and writers he is remembering. In fact, I want to argue that Mark's poetic prose makes film into literature. Cinema, of course, often adapts literature to give a (how I like this simple word) movie: some narration, plot, and characters. Mark unconsciously seems to be adapting movies for literature. He is updating and switching Pier Paolo Pasolini's "cinema of poetry" into "poetry of cinema."

He begins *Retention*: "It is good to say it aloud: 'Nothing has happened.' Once again: 'Nothing has happened.' Does that help?" As with any poetic or visual art, nothing is exactly what happens, even in the movies. One sits and watches, but nothing happens as it really happens when one is outside in real action. A car accident happens on the streets but not on film. A long kiss happens between living people; on film it is pictured for vicarious pleasure. Nothing happens as viewers imagine. Film itself mechanically and quickly rolls frame to frame. To say anything aloud on film is also impossible. Cinema's sounds are recorded and played back and not spoken as people actually converse. Furthermore, there is no sound track or musical score in everyday life.

As Mark is seeing, hearing, thinking, and remembering, the reader is peering in and overhearing. Yet it is not like attending a concert or cinematheque where everyone in the audience hears the same music or sees the same 24-frames-per-second. Mark's prose-film is different. It is in print, not in moving photography with sound. It is intimate and isolated, for singular readers. It abets common isolationism in a business civilization, which has properly accredited individuals who are mostly indifferent to those without the right make-up, a culture with varied deliverers for varied audiences, all supposedly equally interchangeable. By its film poetics, *Retention* challenges this North American individual separateness as it rolls to The End. Nevertheless, it significantly offers only solitude to make a difference in culture, which is not how cinema made a difference last century with its stars, film crews, stagehands, scriptwriters, movie theaters, etc.

Memory, shedding its formative role in public rhetoric and fluttering its ephemeral wings as a private matter in a psychological logic, offers dissociation as an historical social effect, and this alienated mode pervades North American culture where memory is less a shared communication among others and more a personal connection with oneself. Memory now no longer broadly belongs to epistemology or to learning anything at all but is instead a more isolated function, an ability of specific recall. Socrates once entertained his interlocutors by showing them how anyone can solve a geometric problem if asked the right questions to prompt the memory about what all already know in geometry. In contrast, Mark writes: "Sometimes a picture, or a still frame from a film scene, comes to mind. Incrementally building the 'false' memory from the 'real' one, or the memory from itself, memory from memory, a semblance in the folding" (p. 18). A person with good retention today wins



praise for having a photographic memory or great recall, someone who rarely troubles over names or events from the past. One way psychologists evaluate this memory function is by bringing several things to someone's notice and then after a few minutes asking him or her to recall them.

Education today neglects memory but drills in programs. Compared to what memory was in the Classical and Christian past, present recollection is pitifully personal. Then memory was more like being oneself among others like oneself, being one living person capable of discerning human truths and natural laws. In essence, memory then had a richness empowering the individual human soul. Still earlier, memory was a Greek goddess, *Mnemosyne*, the mother of the Muses. Now memory is like private property. Harsh personal memories now precede pathological psychology in the etiology for Post-Traumatic Stress, for example, or Dissociative Identity Disorders (PTSD, DID). So far downstream from ancient worlds with but shriveled, diseased notions for memory, *Retention* continues in this new world its various divagations: "*Her ink-stained fingers... Something is thought, becomes thought?—And in the moment of reaching for a pen, is immediately lost. Sat there, lingering in the aftermath. Before she even speaks*" (p. 22).

Tekhne, or technique, is the mother Muse now, and she loves Mark. Her amorous affair shows in such intricate passages as: "I think as I walk, the corner turned, a page left behind, and then another corner, the center turning in on itself and it suggests the form of a labyrinth, a series of bent crosses, axes crossing and interrupting each other, and the pen turns and loops upon itself creating loops of time, loops of white that inscribe themselves within the black, flowing line" (p. 9). It is as if page-motion and ink were film endowed with mind or were water that could consider the ripples the wind is causing on its surface, could delight in the light shimmering momentarily on its curling waves, and could in fact feel where it was curving and rushing forth and where it will be no more. Mark concludes this paragraph as simply as a freshwater stream enters the sea: "And so. In the beginning is my end" (p. 9).

But *Retention* doesn't end there. Mark continues: "Start anywhere, I think. Start anytime" (p. 9). Elsewhere he repeats:

Open the book at random; any page will do. To begin.

Start anywhere, start anytime (p. 18).

Mark seems to be beginning and to continue only to begin again. He entertains certainty in *Retention* by setting the word off by itself (p. 10), not to define it as a dictionary would, but to call attention to the letters c-e-r-t-a-i-n-t-y set on the page denoting certainty; and so the concept, certainty, appears as if from cracking a combination and opening a safe. Mark lets letters be r-e-a-s-o-n for reason. He evokes an objective, linguistic philosophy of mind. He considers how certainty is certain, not memory. Words, not just brains, make thinking possible; then thinking differentiates ideas like certainty from letters like c-e-r-t-a-i-n-t-y. Incidentally, he has a thoughtful background in visual poetry. Yet as memory over time has seeped from human capacity, so too has reason. No longer an incisive human capability exercised through exhaustive dialogues or rigorous arguments, thinking has become an individualized skill, a singular function in one's own consciousness—thus *Retention's* dispersive, digressive, repetitive, film-like form and its emphasis on actuality; in this instance forming letters with ink and wondering abstractedly about their meaning's reality.

Mark's writing parallels the differences between remembering and thinking, once intimate but now divided like two long nerves, traversing different anatomy. Even writing, or especially writing, cannot make remembering and thinking what together they once were. He remembers:

I remember her clearly, a certain figure among the others and a singular gesture: her hand pushing a strand of hair back behind her ear. Silvery laughter rippled across the surface of the pool. Then stillness; the sounds of steps on the gravel path had faded away. And then,

something like a breeze on my arm. The shimmering afterimage of the flowers floated above the surface of the water, and there was a faint sort of sighing in the leaves above. I thought of a voice, and of the noise at the threshold of the night's silence, and I thought to write it down, to put it all down. But I knew that I would forget before I was halfway home. There was a sweetness in the air, 'there is a lightness between us,' she had said, and I recalled my friend's words from the day before: 'Remember how close the words "precious" and "precarious" are' (p. 12).

Responding at times methodically, he dyes a memory different colors while recalling it and then like a diagnostician inspects his own consciousness: "I scan the surface, and my gaze recalls a scene, an extended tracking shot of water and weeds and ruin, and then I think, or rather a memory is summoned up: that of a woman's eyes. They are blue because my memory tells me so; green, because of the light at that moment; grey, because the image that I recall seems to be from a film. 'The memory of an image of a thing versus the memory of the thing itself—and *memory* as a thing itself'" (p. 14). His is a studied, volitional reverie turning over images, sounds, ideas, films, and authors as his time, place, and consciousness change. It seems reverie exists without anyone being right about it or absorbed in it: "Reverie—without subject, or the word 'subjective'" (p. 18). Elsewhere, "Reverie. Not to be confused with writing" (p. 17).

While most talking in America today seems a friendly ghost on camera or with a microphone or in a recording, Mark presents a simple telephone call as an occasion to think about specificity and listening: "My friend had called and mentioned this movie, which we had seen and discussed many times before. The second part of the film takes place three years earlier. Contrary to convention, the first, contemporary part is shot in black and white; the earlier sequence follows in color. 'But isn't that how things can seem in retrospect?' he asked. 'Colors more pronounced, even distorted by time?' I had drifted off a bit, and my friend brought me back with a statement that was posed almost as if it were a question: 'The garden, the way you write of it—you set it down in black and white. You should visit soon—the dahlias are in bloom. And they are beautiful'" (p. 27). Mark answers a question I often pose to myself when conversing with someone: *Is our speaking a habit, or a thinking?* Listening can be tiresome until, like Mark by his friend, a listener is brought back into attention to continue talking and thinking together in conversation. Without their listening at all, celebrity ghosts get all the attention, but mostly their speaking is noise, is limits, and is American media.

In Federico Fellini's *La Strada*, the Fool, played by Richard Basehart, faces a sad, childlike Gelsomina, played by Fellini's wife, Giulietta Masina. Gelsomina has been bought by the cruel strongman, Zampanò, played by Anthony Quinn, to be his simple-minded helper. Gelsomina is worried about Zampanò, who is in jail, and she tells the Fool that she is useless and means nothing to anyone. The Fool picks up a pebble and tells her that everything is good for something, even this stone. When she asks him what good is it, he says how should he know, but it is not useless. It must have a purpose, for if it were useless, then everything would be useless, even the shining stars. Fellini's teleological approach to Gelsomina, a stone, and everything else, even the stars so distant in the cosmos, is vividly contrasted by some lines in *Retention*:

I straightened a small pile of books, put my pen in its tray, arranged an ashtray, pack of cigarettes, and lighter in a row to the side, and took a stone from my pocket and placed it in the center of the blotter. It was a small, slate-grey oval without any irregularities in form. The single lamp that provided me with light to work by lent it a crisp shadow, magnifying its outline and transferring it to the surface below. I toyed with the stone, rocking it back and forth; I let my thoughts center on it and roll outward in a series of waves, as if I had thrown the stone into a garden's reflecting pool. I placed it at the back of the table, at the base of a framed postcard, next to a stone from the beach and a ball of clay, dug from a riverbed and inscribed in faintly penciled lines with the Greek word *kairos* (p.12).

Fellini's stone exists with universal purposefulness. Mark's stone exists with individual *kairos* or opportunity. One script is Italian. One script is American.

If *Retention* were made into a film, it would need someone who reveres Jean-Luc Goddard, whose *Histoire(s) du cinéma* is, for Mark's poetics, ideal. Yet, though *Retention* has a girl, it doesn't have a gun. Better would be someone who knows well Mark's beloved, classic Yasujiro Ozu, from whom one, long, unhurried shot through some tawny, barely furnished interior, nostalgically lit by a low-afternoon sun, might subtly convey Mark's persevering mental intensity when the camera finally turns and finds the author there lining out lines of text. Best might be someone who knows Michelangelo Antonioni's or Andrei Tarkovsky's techniques for they are also mirrored in *Retention*.

Yes, I think *Retention* would make a good film with the right director, composer, and crew. It would make a compact, cerebral cinema, one that would provocatively fit the handheld screens ubiquitous in contemporary life. A cinematic version for *Retention* might raise alarm enough to convey that even personal memory is no longer necessary because all is online or on a storage device with countless films, photographs, and recordings. Remembering one's own name may become redundant. Memory now faces being completely erased with little concern for the effects from that erasure. Memory and forgetfulness come and go for now, but those who drink deeply from Lethe, the river forgetfulness, forget they are in hell. *Retention* with a double-down bet on postmodern irony might make of its prose a memorable film about memory's endgame. Perhaps just as classic films are now scaled down for smaller screens, his small film will eventually be scaled up for public replay on a big screen at a future multiplex for those who cannot remember what human memory ever was. Yet they, even if viewing it in some suburban Hades, will retain the divine vestigial touch on all nature.

Retention is certainly not historical, epic, blockbuster material like *The Iliad* or *The Aeneid*. It is personal, and significant in other ways. It is Mark's recognition, and it requires the reader to desire to be as poetic as this Seattle writer. After all everyone living shares this time, now, however different are everyone's circumstances, and of course everyone living dies eventually. Poetry presents life's temporal condition directly and personally. In contrast, all biography and autobiography can do is contribute to ideological individualizing, which only ever becomes an afterlife about the one who no longer is what is written about as if she or he could ever have been those words anyway. Learning history from books, the History Channel, or as students in classrooms differs from learning history from Homeric poetic gatherings. History now is more narrative statecraft to be instilled than memories to be shared. In one sense, *Retention* is modern like these other prosaic genres. Mark's dreams and inscriptions are like personal merchandise in this itemized zeitgeist. Yet in another deeper sense, *Retention* is contemporary poiesis, and that's why it is so worth the effort to study it thoughtfully. Mark is remaking personal culture from modernity's remains, from the ignorant deadening in everyday life. He wrests new aesthetics from the, oh, so agreeable, surrounding necropolis. Diminished memory and thinking inform organized, individual lives, which are now more bourgeois and shameless than ever, though that does not mean it has to be so, and poiesis points away from narcissism and from self-loathing. Epic is not necessary. Poiesis is.

Perhaps it is telling that there are few who remember Homer's Helen, who launched a thousand ships, or his Achilles, who pouted and fought horrific battles, but many who know their states that launch perpetual war and disable thousands and hundred thousands. The Classical and Christian past, as it was, is neither present here nor in a sense there anymore. Flux takes all but for poiesis: art that makes culture appear. Mark writes this: "The film opens with a man, suitcase in hand, walking down a road, approaching the camera. There is a voice-over that speaks of history [*histoire*], and memory, and the mysteries of prayer and fire" (p. 27). Mark knows his *Retention* cannot be a group memory, that film is more Homeric in Godard's hands than in a writer's. He bets that by using cinematic techniques in writing he might yet recover and recycle history's post-literate discards.

Well, I wish I were more confident. Memory and reason, which no longer originate education or gather people into civilized groups, run their course and now trickle into a talent for facts, figures, and controls. Mainly a pretense, they serve the present to promote itself as the best time in history because it has sciences. *Retention* exists in this particular culture now. Its context is North America. It updates American transcendentalism, which continues as transience, for instead of overplaying nature, Mark emphasizes evanescence, as any cinematic technique must. Time is the new nature. He finds temporality everywhere: everything appears only to disappear. He ends his writing by evoking time's permanent, transient reality for being and then being not:

The night sky a page so overwritten with time that what we see as stars is the page beneath,
revealed through the torn and storied page of ever-becoming night.

Violet-black now, in the near darkness. A pale strip of light at the horizon.

Fugitive colors. Fugitive sleep (p. 29).

The stakes on the table cannot be much higher. Memory and reason are intriguingly intertwined strands like human DNA lifting human flesh up over instinctually programmed animal life and methodically programmed, pharmaceutical, electronic, or machine tasks, which are the scientific solutions for everything physical and social. Time goes on and endows media and minds with less and less memory and reason. Programs replace uncertainties for observer and observed, and leave everyone technologically dangling from separate circumstances rather than being lifted up, living together in a great civilization. Doubting himself and yet having to attend to his own historical life, Mark keeps transience in mind, and with *Retention* he adds to his extraordinary but unacknowledged significance as a “*poet?*” working quietly in Seattle. He continues to compose and oppose and like Orpheus is shook by the awesome effects of a seemingly insignificant act—*looking back*.



[*WHAT IS IN A MIND?* is published with permission in print in Seattle's *RAVEN CHRONICLES* and online in New York City's *E RATIO*.]

*The
Complete
Works
of
Women
&
Men*

*countless
in complete
volumes*

Children

V-CUT-TO-NAVEL NECKLINE, BAREBACK, SILVER SILK DRESS, BLACK HOSIERY & HEELS
WHITE SILK MOSTLY UNBUTTONED SHIRT, BLACK TUXEDO, BAREFOOT IN FLIP FLOPS

STRUCTURALISM, POST-STRUCTURALISM, BRIEFLY REVISITED

ART WALK, SEATTLE, OCTOBER 4, 2012

We are such stuff/As dreams are made on, and our little life/Is rounded with a sleep. —William Shakespeare

Today my thinking differs from a month ago. Some sort of critical flâneur is the pose I took around the Seattle galleries in September, but now it seems to me a ridiculous persona, too much like someone pretending to be an adjudicating art journalist when there are no publications and perhaps no art worth taking seriously here. However opinionated, and adored, or reviled, these writer personae, I think, no longer offer much significance. Today is October 4th, the feast day of St. Francis of Assisi, and I want to try a new style—deeper, contemplative, more spiritual, and perhaps impoverished in a good way, like a secular Franciscan approach to art and writing about art.



The Zeitgeist is where I again begin, have a double espresso, and talk to this month's chosen artist. She has a bright show hung across the beautiful brick wall: scarabs in glass slabs, which she has painstakingly carved and brilliantly colored from the back. From each glass plate's front a big beetle appears like a luminous Egyptian trophy. She is exuberant, greeting friends like me and many others who have come to her opening. Then I stop by the Davidson Galleries, where, like the Ancien Régime, prints and works on paper lord it over bourgeois painters and peasant sculptors, who are hand-picked to exhibit there too. Then on I go to the James Harris Gallery, where pompous publicity, as usual, swings its searchlights wildly over art, and where I can't resist, upon exiting,

a good, cathartic smirk; and then on to the Foster/White Galleries where, among other exuberant artworks, there are canvasses filled with alphabetic design that seem to have missed learning much from Concrete Poetry.

It is finally at the Greg Kucera Gallery where I begin to think more deeply about art and how it has wholly possessed me, body and soul. No, it is not that I find the work exhibited at Kucera's seductive: One artist from Los Angeles touches on identity politics by drawing and painting Hispanic day workers; the other layers acrylic paint into colorful lengths or planes or squares, and her results are like shaped taffy, or melted, stirred, and then hardened Crayolas. These are artists doing what is expected of them, making something unique for someone to possess for a price. They are dutiful, skillful, and thoughtful. What these diligent artists make is everywhere I look. It is in the art delivery system month after month, gallery after gallery. Galleries and museums publicly deliver this work with the message that what they are delivering is art. The work fills the spaces in the city where art is supposed to be. It is often incomprehensible yet somehow important filler like many ingredients listed on food labels. This visual art constantly replenishes Seattle's snack racks. Like Cheetos and nonstop television or radio, fillers are what swell the belly, the mind, and the art world.



No, it is not this pluralistic art at Kucera's. It just happens to be the gallery where, when I was talking with different artists and curators, I realized that making art as well as thinking and having conversations about art are what entice me to love art as both sculptor and writer. Drawing, painting, sculpture, and poetry may themselves be thoughtless, speechless traces of human activity, but not the artists or audience. So I find it imperative, for me in particular, to discover why I am mostly critical about the art but love and practice art here. My plan is to learn why and to explain my thinking better in two articles. This one deals with the October 4th art walk. It focuses on how systemically contracted and conventional are many contemporary artists and audiences in Seattle. The other article dates from October 12th when a close friend in Vancouver asked me to give a talk to a group of computer artists. The talk is about art, language, and ethics. Both articles together I hope express why art and art philosophy divide and conquer my life, and make it good.



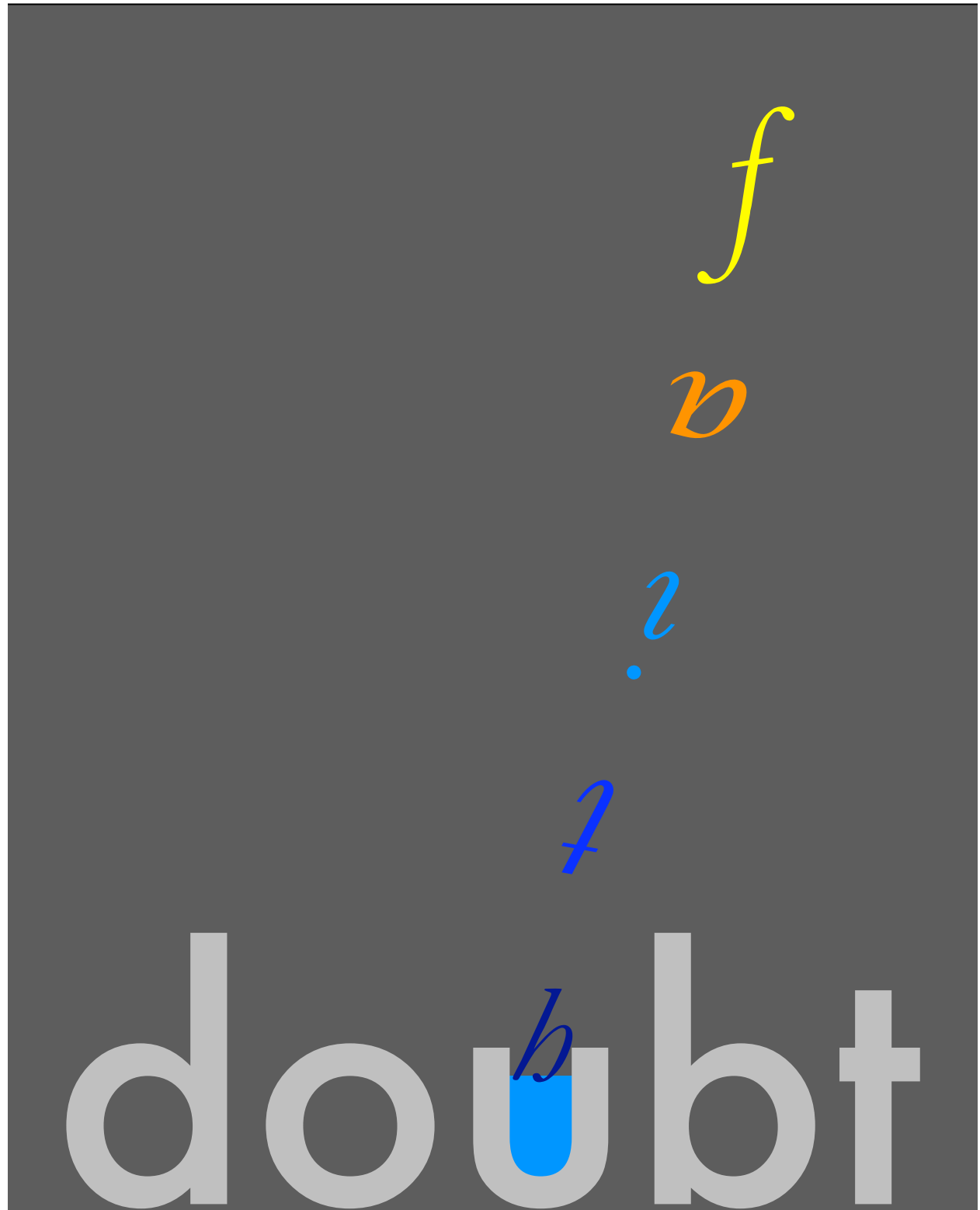
The October's art walk through Seattle's galleries makes me think about the concept, contract, which has a long, rich, intellectual, and economic significance throughout United States history, beginning with 17th-century, Puritans' perception of a divine covenant between the Almighty and them, continuing with the broad perception of the Constitution as an inviolable understanding between the U.S. government and its citizens, and so on down to commonplace documents that at least two parties sign exchanging property or certifying some agreement. Contracts are binding civil instruments. Contracts are a social structure that ensures and ensnares. They represent a guarantee and an obligation. Pervasive and expected, contracts are normative in the USA.

Structuralism, much simplified of course, studies social structures through binaries like the raw and the cooked, the signifier and signified, male and female, or white and black. Thus it can neatly discern those in society with and without contracts: employed and unemployed, housed and homeless, native and alien, resident and migrant, documented and undocumented. Structuralism can seem at times like a Western version of the Taoist Yin-and-Yang theory. Used crudely like a butcher's cleaver, structuralism chops into aesthetic practice to separate the represented artists from the unrepresented. To be represented is to have a contract, to have a contract is to be desired, to be desired is to be exhibited, to be exhibited is to be a model, and to be a model is to have a chance. To be unrepresented is to have no contract or anything like what a contract brings: recognition, support, publicity. . . . Many artists do not question contractual history. Without much thinking, some wholeheartedly desire to enter into arrangements with galleries, with arts or educational or publishing institutions, or with grants organizations, for there are few other options for artists.

Contractual security has aesthetic effects. It usually takes years to become cognizant of what other parties think of and want from art, but once this educational, professional, and practical training is accomplished the person is pointed to as an artist and is at times advertised as a special one for critical or business purposes. She or he has earned credentials, proof from the schools, reviews, and shows. This process begets uncertain consequences as if art were a properly tested ideal or a precious über-commodity, forever true and collectable, made by a demigod, guaranteed by experts.

To demonstrate one's being an artist requires making art that is considered art by those who know art. Success gets contracts and vice versa. Naturally in America, entrepreneurial artists want to grow and maybe have their latest work placed in the galleries and museums that resemble corporations. These art institutions define art for American society whose values the institutions uphold by the work they choose as the best. Perhaps there's nothing wrong with that if the society is just, but whenever was any society just? When a society values economics over art, institutions and artists routinely adjust. It is explained that galleries and museums show altogether better art than artists can show on their own, and that galleries are great for artists, bestowing reflected glory on their reputations and pitching them and their work to select clientele. Art's defining meritocracy in effect excludes artists themselves and demonstrates the powerful institutional theory for art developed by Arthur Danto and George Dickie. Though this theory delivers divine rights to art institutions, there are at least 10 side effects from this theory's contemporary prominence throughout the art world.

One is rarely openly discussed, but often displayed, and it presumes institutional superiority rests with employees who have curatorial or procurement positions and therefore can happily judge art forever. They speak down to and face little resistance from artists or critics who can only quibble with those in art institutions who have assured infallibility. Artists and unacceptable thinkers are in inferior positions. This meritocracy, a royal guild, has no real opposition.



Two, like any bureaucracy, personnel in art organizations vie for promotions, or to extend or protect their specialty's turf, all for the better of course. Some win, some lose, but the institutional meritocracy always seems to keep growing, beneficially or malignantly, along with their art. Few ask if art is growing because artists are being treated like seasonal crops farmed industrially.

Three, the aesthetic judgments, which art museums and major galleries express, are inevitably conventional because these institutions need finances. The choices for shows are often marketed either as being as spectacular as any newsworthy mansion or yacht, or as being the best the past or present offers. Even if revolutionary in purpose, the art once on exhibition gilds the wealthy for it makes the institutions and collecting class appear revolutionary. The pretense is inane, and the future is predictable: institutional choices will be in line with what financial contributors want.

Four, the public responsibility for art takes place in a broader competitive, opportunistic culture; and since this culture favors economics and statistics to keep score and stay on track, art organizations now make sure artists' diversity as much as possible satisfactorily complements collective, statistical goals. Art consideration is a cherry pie to be divided fairly by the powerful bakers.

Five, institutions market art like royalty flaunting class distinction. Art is another glamorous social accessory for people to have and show. Be a prince! Be a princess! Contribute! Join! Support! Lately some museums lend their public palaces to fashionable DJs for dancing or sophisticated parties in order to entice more right-kind-of-people to feel right at home. Institutional boosterism for the arts pervades American culture without any real effect in public life.

Six, because museums and galleries privilege relationships with collectors and art schools, they all trust one another so that even when collectors amass a mess or graduates are still infantile, the inane clutter magically becomes art in prestigious institutional settings. Some shows that art museums and galleries present seem like episodes from the reality-television show, *Hoarders*. Because art institutions define art, they collect art collectors and potential art stars with impunity.

Seven, collectors influence, if not in some cases, control art institutions and so wield enormous power to define their holdings as art. This neatly epitomizes the capitalist, art-world order: wealth equals power, and brains too! The institutional theory countenances strategically savvy collectors to define art with art institutions in their pockets.

Eight, art is a secure investment because the institution says so. In a contractual society artists to be successful sell their art while the institutions appreciate it and uphold its value. Auctions keep track, and prices always seem to rise; yet when prices do drop, it's usually attributed to hard times, not bad art, which for a collector or institution is the frightening taboo. They cannot make mistakes. By their own account art only sells cheap from the three big D's—Death, Divorce, and Debt.



Nine, a specialized discourse from art institutions replaces art criticism with publicity for its distinctive, redemptive work. The public is presented art like abdomens glistening from regularly working out: art as methodically pure and beautiful and transcendent as it can possibly be; art as perfect, a social and mental advantage readily available for the masses if only they would understand, believe, and support the organization. Through lectures and workshops, institutions spread the idea that staff and selected artists know how to make great art history now. Dale Carnegie classes backed by art institutions work with proven results!

Ten, as far as I know in Seattle, no one can mitigate the effects from institutional boosters and conformists to offer a realistic critique and cultural alternative. There are no artists or critical thinkers in decisive staff roles in art institutions here. The institutional taste in art is assumed right and completely trustworthy. Ironically, even when a civilization hits historic lows, the art being presented and discussed by the institutions is still assumed to be above the general culture, not part of it. The public trust is as good as guaranteed until it becomes all too clear that even fabled grand institutions like major banks and real estate firms, elite universities, and democratic governments can in effect quite possibly become philosophically, morally, and financially bankrupt. Then it might seem all too clear to everyone that art institutions are no different.

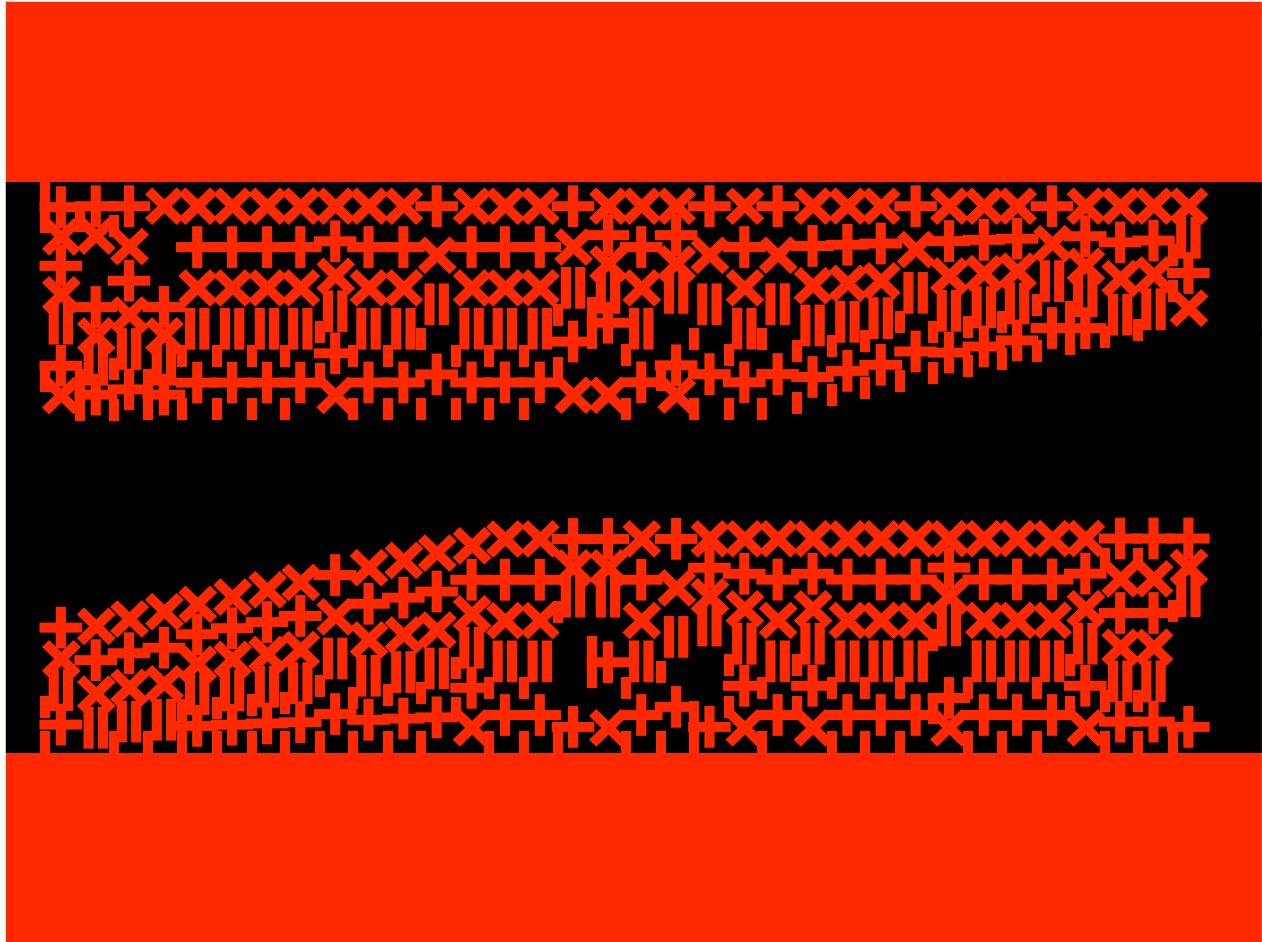
Thus, this generally accepted, institutional theory granting absolutism to art institutions, even in a collapsing culture, makes for a bad faith in art. Administrators, curators, collectors, educators, and owners take care of selecting, securing, buying and selling what they accept as art. The artists who make it apply for acceptance. Artists are delegated to make art for others to judge in conventional, functional, financial ways. This bad faith gets worse for it's obvious many artists desire this arrangement as they would rather have enhanced status and earnings without any critical or decisive role than have nothing. As selected producers for a society whose more cherished (salaried) activity is to channel art into prestige, profits, and numbers, their art seems less a case of making the artist wise and more a case of making the artist a living. Art criticism is beside the point in this Dark Age when marketing and art-firm endorsements are all that work for defenseless artists.

Bad faith, like bad ideas, has consequences. Seattle's unrealized greatness may be largely due to agencies and functionaries, but it is also true that many artists accept hopeless roles for themselves and for their art. Seattle artists compete for a little celebrity status as special achievers in a local picturesque culture. Their art routinely fills Seattle's art delivery system. Compared to Chicago, say, or Philadelphia, Seattle lacks street culture for artists and students because its artists and institutions give it none. Cornish College of the Arts, the art departments and galleries in the city's universities, the Frye Art Museum, and the Seattle Art Museum, all lack street appeal. There are no institutions here that offer young minds a vibrant city experience like that which fill the areas around the Art Institute and Loyola University in Chicago or the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Seattle's institutions are provincial, and the artists lack independent critical spirit. What a difference it would make if the Seattle Art Museum offered a school for the arts in downtown Seattle instead of their promotional lecture series.

Unlike music or glass art, which are important locally and globally, contemporary Seattle visual art wants to walk on its own into broader global competition, but it must be carried. It is not known on its own other than turning looking interesting into cash or merit for local promoters. No matter where it's shown or how far it travels, it seems like a local business arrangement going on the road. Some art gets to faraway Russia and China as well as Europe and South America, but the art's claim to global status is the artist's competitive craft or forceful personality, not new challenging aesthetics. Yet that their art is acceptable to others in faraway institutions means much to these artists.



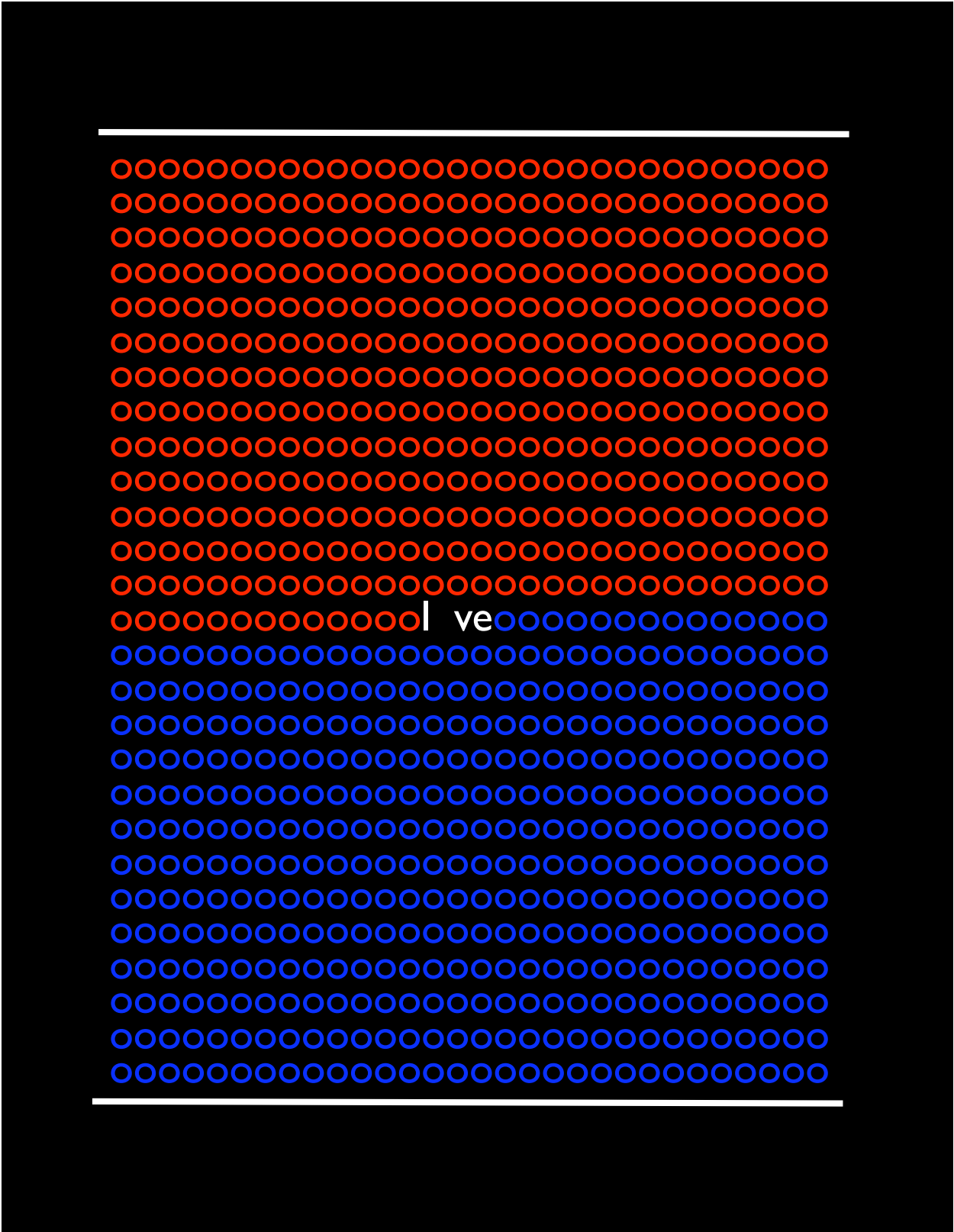
Travel has traditionally been a way to study art. For artists to make better art, they would travel to practice art elsewhere. Historians note that North American artists would study and often stay in Europe. Travel today can be easy and short, changing how artists relate to native roots, history, and others. Once an artist decides on a particular place for making art, then further travel is best done round trip. With several studios and residences, artists can become wealthy, global commuters. Some Seattle artists leave for good to live and compete in New York, Los Angeles, or Europe because Seattle's status as an arts center for them is a sad joke. Their civic engagement is measured mostly by sales. Other artists stay to themselves here hardly even acknowledging poets or musicians as artists. Some take to blogs or writing art-publicity reviews. Sometimes it seems they travel not to challenge themselves but only to relax like tourists and take in a museum or two. They mostly all take themselves to be exceptional, and their thinking, what thinking there is, stays the same. Thus new art ideas rarely develop here but come here from elsewhere as if overheard. Months or years after NYC or LA a different look appears as if suddenly original here. Engagement with art criticism is scarce; engagement in art careerism is endemic. Furthermore people move all the time for all different reasons. Immigration is a general human condition now. Anywhere can seem a better place. So artist travel seems less purposefully for art study, and any residence is rarely considered permanently good enough, which is too bad for young cities like Seattle without much historic or cultural significance.



Though personal commitment to travel for art study is less apparent today, commitment to be artists is *de rigueur*, so some artists without representation form their own art organizations to distinguish themselves from the totally unrepresented. A simple, post-structuralist critique chops through this Seattle visual arts scene to separate these do-it-yourself, ambitious Romantics from the commercially dead Illiterates. Revising the social contract, DIY artists join together to become collective galleries or collaborative teams or alternative spaces. As signed members in collectives, whether non-profit or not, these artists construct scenes, statements, and brand identities, which their art exhibitions then demonstrate. The statements and group identities usually make a distinction that makes no difference. The art demonstrates the social construction for the artist function: someone who makes stuff to show and promote. As Foucault and Barthes point out in regards to authors, the artist function doesn't die with the death of the artist. He or she still makes art and shows it like the established, profitable, art business down the street.

Successful artists have modest careers here, and that's pleasing to them and certainly gratifying for their schools, which prepare them for the art world after graduation but fail them in so many other ways. Criticality, dialectics, a sense for a just or ethical art are quite dead in Seattle artists. Enthusiastic promotion for art abounds while sports take the cake and leave the crumbs. American discourse is vectorial, didactic, and comes from a leader, anchor, teacher, vocalist, blogger, etc. Talk is directed outward, downward, and not for mutual understanding like a conversation. It is one-way

either direction. The road up and the road down are the same, as Heraclitus notes, and that is the case here. Cultural functionaries and artists repeat the same lessons. Political and artistic philosophy hardly exists, only lecture or workshop opportunities. Money, fame, and fun count. There's so little going on dialectically and publicly that artist and institutional commentary is often hilarious.



Artists are the new colonies. They are told what is successful and how to attain it, and most just try to do it by conforming to what they're taught. In any society, education can go wrong, and wrong education, however expert and expensive, exploits others. Artists are taught art and their place. Their public capacity to have, express, and exchange ideas about art is underdeveloped and perhaps purposely so. A vital public role for artists threatens the status quo. Ideas about institutional change in a democracy are controlled with news, surveys, statistics, and no security forces. An artist or any individual can say whatever he or she likes here in Seattle, but it is of little concern to those who make and have their established arrangements. People who teach and support artists have big roles. They colonize minds for American-style success and take no criticism. Artists conform and join in.

Besides coffee, Seattle generally has great computer expertise, but that expertise seems to make things actually worse for art. Facebook and comment threads replace actual thoughtful talking, listening, and writing. There are many wonderful coffeehouses here, and they are often all filled with individuals online. Sometimes a few textbooks or novels lie about the laptops. Rem Koolhaas's architectural masterpiece, the downtown Seattle Public Library has floors filled with computers and people using them all the time. This library serves as a makeshift day shelter as well as a computer resource for those who backpack their belongings to and from their night shelters. The SPL is. I think, a beautifully humane, great modern library even though its book collection in certain areas can be so disappointingly shallow. Furthermore, websites are like gold here: if you don't have one, you are homeless living on a cold park bench in the rain. Institutions rely heavily on websites, which supposedly answer every conceivable question about their work in an easy, friendly, knowing style.

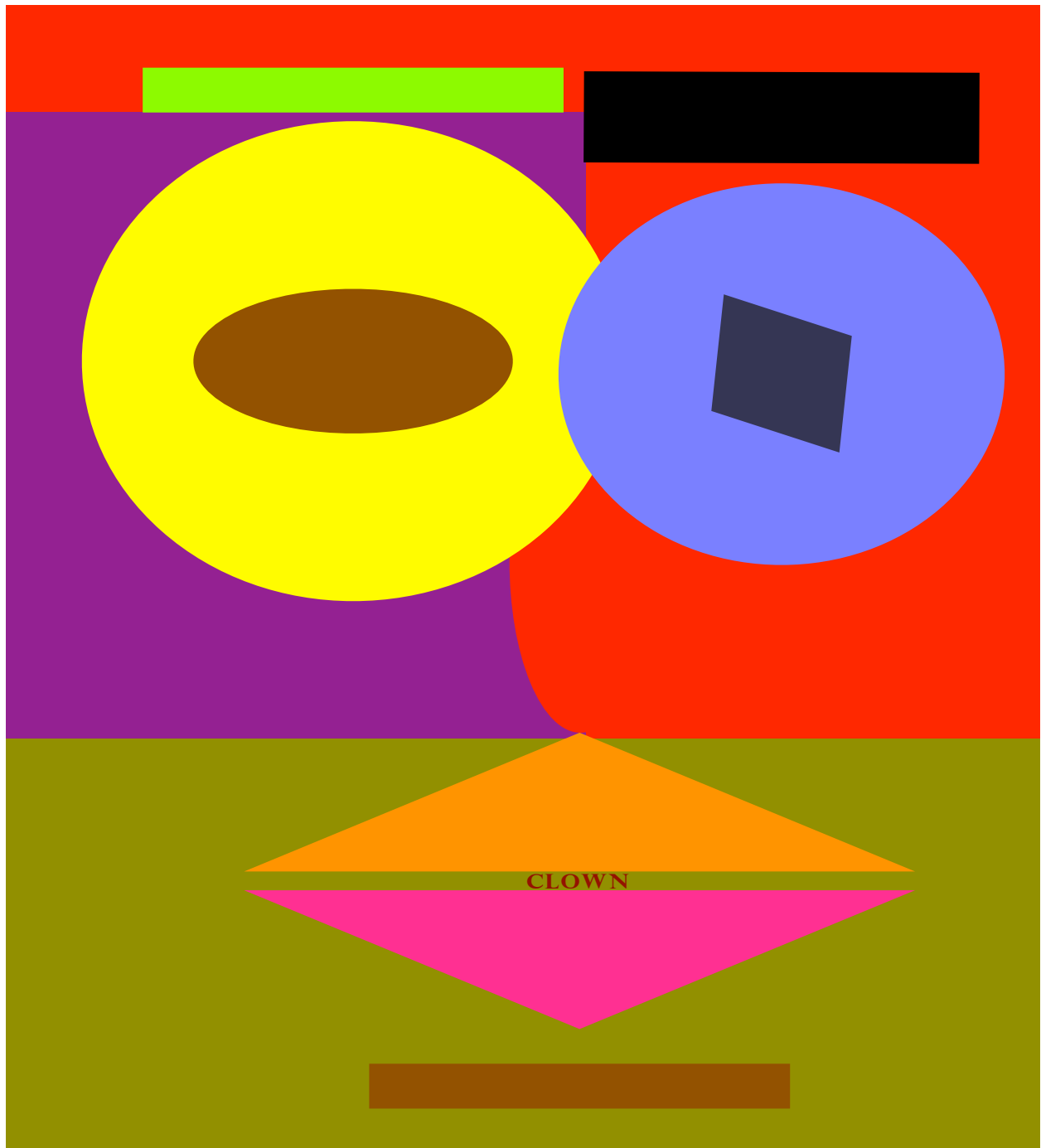
Conversation and heavy reading seem scarce here. Few people I know actually trust themselves as artists and friends to talk about critical art issues, though scheduled events called *Conversations* have chosen guests address various topics and answer questions. Art talk here seems more about making money and friends. Perhaps many Seattle artists can no longer talk meaningfully about art, only promote and network with each other to express likes or dislikes. Speed, information, and role-playing are what seem to count, and the meme, *tl;dr*, fits this attitude nicely: *too long; didn't read*.

...tl;dr...tl;dr...tl;dr...

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...rp;t...rp;t...rp;t...

Criticism is shut out, society is background, and artists serve, and often are, the only audience they have. They sometimes pretend to have authority because of their DIY-organizations. It is an illusion. Justice as a personal virtue in artists means conformist opinions; social philosophy means nothing. Discussion seems useless and unnecessary because what is certain has already been disseminated, top-down and down-top. Thus the effects of contractual binaries and collective subjects persist deeply and absolutely in Seattle to the detriment of art and the city, and that is at least partly why I find so little art to congratulate here. Represented or unrepresented, Seattle art is an unexamined consequence from artists without dialectical force but only sociological support, and only for some who are somehow gifted by being broiled and served rather than left unwashed and raw.



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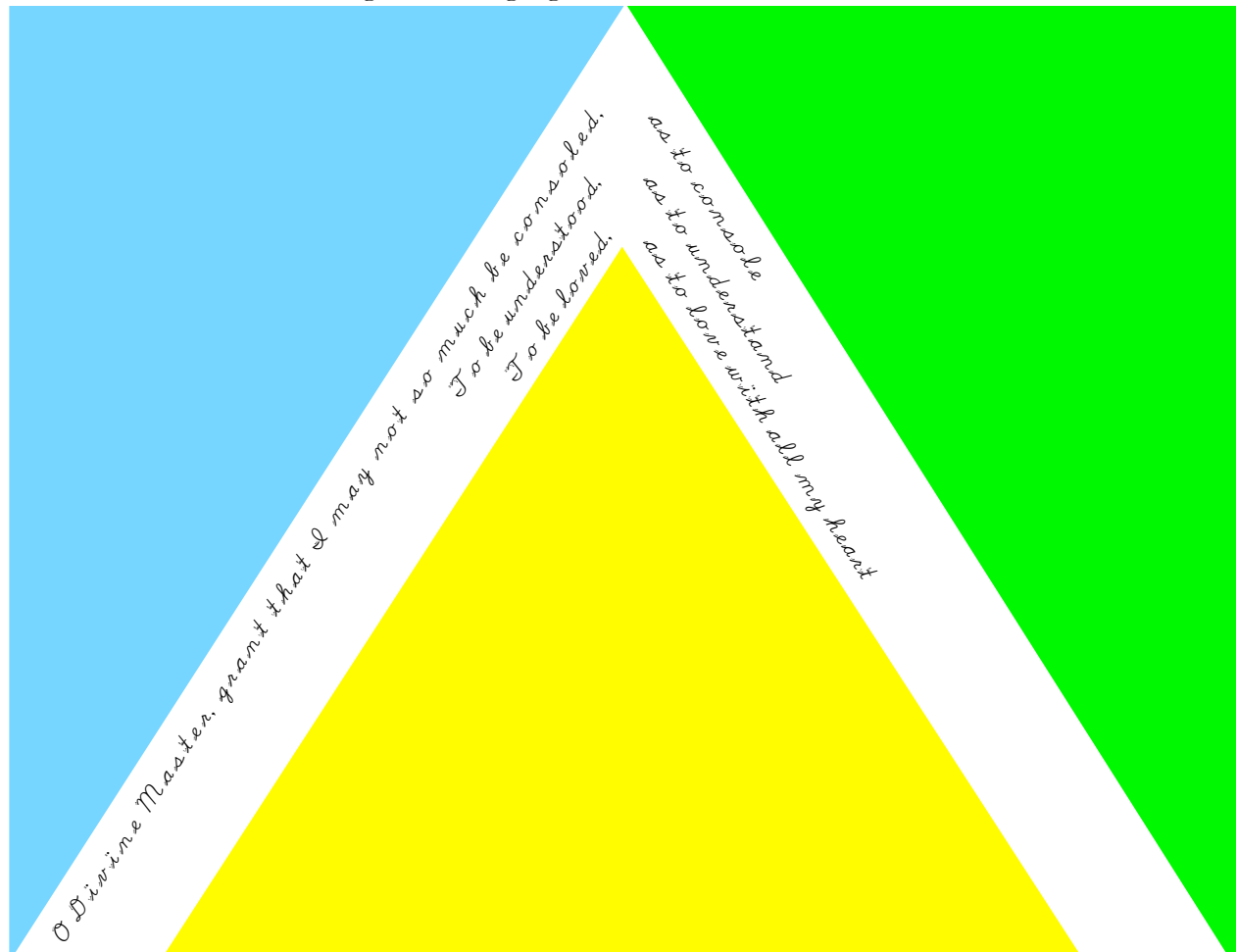
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FLIMSY WHITE NEGLIGEE DRESS, LOOSE STRAPS, BLACK LINGERIE & PINK CONVERSE
BABY BLUE HUGO BOSS SUIT, ORANGE-STRIPED SHIRT, BLUEBERRY TIE, RED HIGH HEELS

A TALK TO THE X-GROUP, VANCOUVER, OCTOBER 12, 2012

Introduction

First of all, I want to thank Jim Andrews, one of my dearest friends, for inviting me to speak tonight about the strained relationship between visual art and thoughtful language. What I want to propose tonight will, I hope, after discussing how language structures ourselves and reality, finally affirm that art is ethics, yes, ethics, especially for us, as artists. Knowing that this is not a common thread running through any material already covering our world with media tapestries, I want to introduce different material, a modern trivium, for addressing visual art and art criticism and for developing an ethics necessary for art construction in an increasingly programmed art world. This sounds crazy, and it is, but unlike some obscure Columbus who has no inkling of what peopled reality is already there where he is headed, I am convinced that there actually is reason for a new artistic anthropology: this American hemisphere already all around us and in us and is us without us able to be much otherwise. We're already here in the new world, and we have problems. We have to start somewhere, and I want to begin with language.



Trivium

The trivium you may remember is the Latin word for the crossroads where three roads or *vias*—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—meet. The trivium is about language and language users. Briefly stated, grammar is a learned art for putting sounds, marks and phenomena together to form meaningful perceptions so that a philosophical, linguistic relationship with oneself, others, and the world can be had. Logic or dialectic is a science for conceiving reality with words and forming knowledge. For example, if it is true that a new reality is programming, then it follows that there are programs and programmers. Rhetoric is a poetic art for purposely gathering perceptions and expressions as truths and for persuading right, advantageous thought and action. It communicates through ethos, logos, and pathos. In other words rhetoric means conveying worthiness and giving truthful reasoning to others who are considering and reacting to it. Rhetoric is thought to have five components: invention, arrangement or disposition, style, memory, and delivery, though the first two, invention and disposition, have historically sometimes been shifted to logic's purview leaving rhetoric to be considered more spin than substance.

At any rate the three *vias* arrive where social, intellectual, and emotional needs are satisfied, and it is to art and criticism that I think a modern trivium needs application. The trivium is largely forgotten today because pedagogy employs methodologies based on tests and emphasizes specialized learning rather than educating a student to speak, listen, think, interpret, communicate, practice, and perform. These abilities are now presumed less important than learning an earning. A practical, pedagogical methodology for comprehending oneself and others, the traditional trivium is obviously out of place in today's rigorous laboratory and technological settings. It must be picked up again, I think, by artists. Contemporary education places responsibility for human subjective agency on the individual and deals with preparing people to be functional elements in society. Artists on the other hand can make art and better society if motivated to do so.

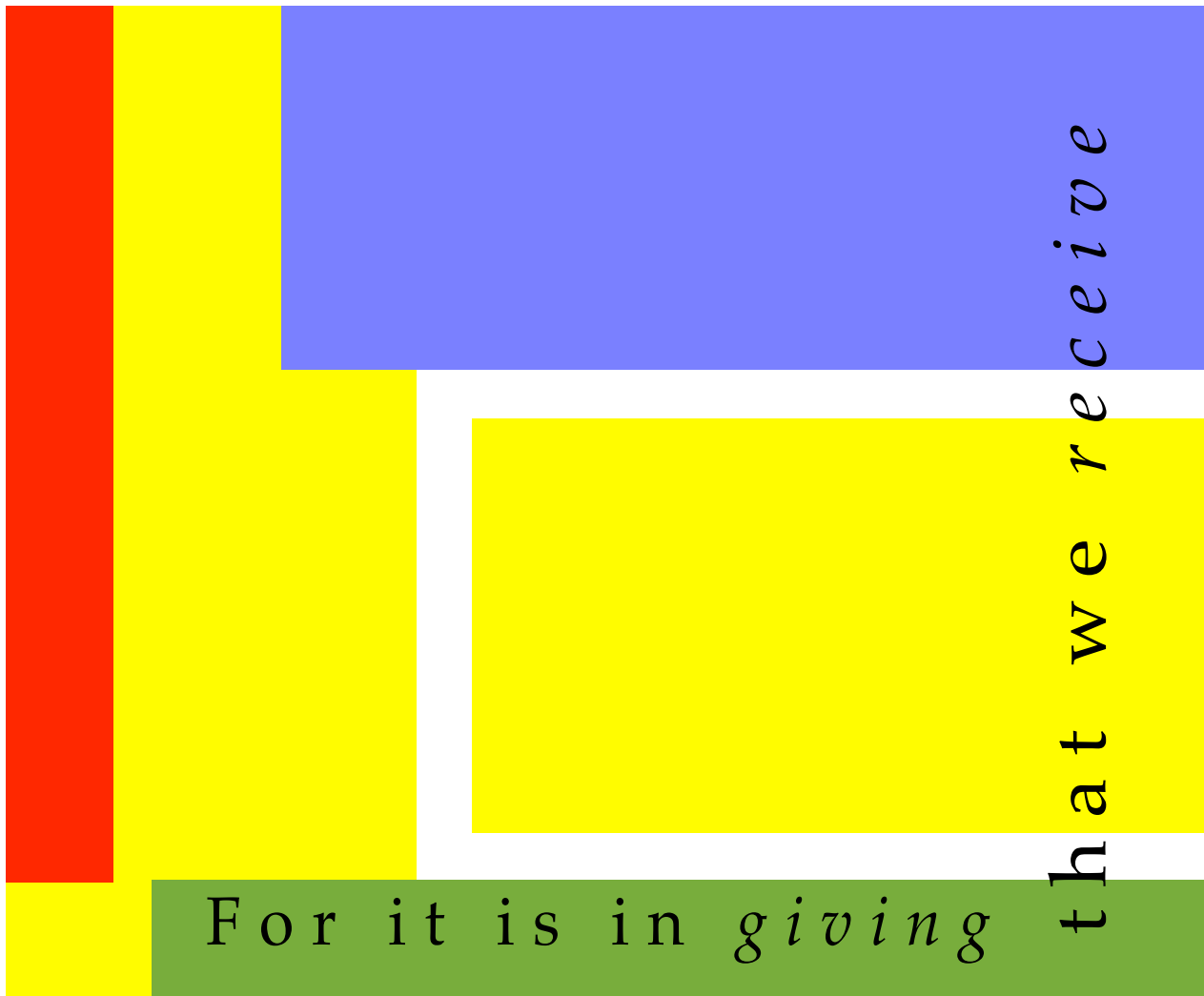
As science and technology transform navigation, health, construction . . . , the human condition has been altered with speed, longevity, mechanics Technological effects are seemingly everywhere but inside language itself. Nouns are still nouns. Verbs are still verbs and so on. Though the computer has, of course, transformed communication and social habits, language remains symbolic, analogical, and representational. Language expresses understanding both about the world and about those who are expressing the understanding, including the media. In North America, the battles for money and power between logocentrism and technocentrism have mostly all favored technology but without total victory. Generally people look to poets and artists not to lead but to be interesting. People turn their crucial attention to their economic and political rulers' beliefs, and today rulers believe in science, technology, progress, and growth. Most people follow along.

What I propose is to make poets and artists more critical and vital to more people through using a modern trivium, one that retains the classic skills in grammar, logic, and rhetoric but that adds technology as a fourth road, another necessary *via* for getting to and from, and joining in with, the

other three roads. This modern trivium exemplifies the power to think independently and write eloquently rather than to think functionally and behave. Thinking effectively with art and language, artists can help remake society rather than be academic or ornamental stars for society. In other words, art is to have at least as much effect for public minds as for elite concerns. Art then is not a specialty for connoisseurs, but a foundation for civilization. Here I turn to Marshall McLuhan.

Marshall McLuhan

Compared to methodical, continental thinkers like Jürgen Habermas in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* or Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things*, both of whom develop the historical course of using language for an organized, instrumental knowledge with dialectical and detrimental consequences, Marshall McLuhan is more a philosophical stylist and technological anthropologist developing how technology and language and thinking all interact. His is a 20th Century, North American philosophy; and though his probative writings may be disrespected today, like those from an Old Testament prophet or pre-Socratic philosopher, this North American sage demonstrates that technology correlates with the trivium throughout history, and especially now when programmed, functional consciousness is fast becoming the only acceptable consciousness.



McLuhan points out in his public provocations that our eyes and ears, for example, are greatly enhanced by technological instruments. In a 1969 *Playboy* interview, for example, he says that the electronic media are the radio, movies, telephone, computers, and TV, which all extend the human senses as did more traditional inventions like the wheel, which extends the feet, or the alphabet, which extends the eyes, but the electronic media extend the entire nervous system. In effect he declares the media condition is the modern tribal condition [www.mcluhanmedia.com and other sites]. Famous for *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, *Understanding Media*, and *The Medium is the Massage*, he also considers in his lesser known Cambridge dissertation, *The Classical Trivium: The Place of Thomas Nashe in the Learning of His Time* [Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 2006], how different philosophies of pedagogy and communication have misconceived the trivium, with twisted, wounded minds and social antagonisms for centuries the result. He has grand scope and detailed knowledge. His deep literary scholarship [See, for instance, his short articles, “Joyce, Mallarmé, and the Press” or “Edgar Poe’s Tradition” in *The Interior Landscape: The Literary Criticism of Marshall McLuhan 1943-1962*, edited by Eugene McNamara. (New York & Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1969)] examines what language does according to its medium. Understanding how the trivium affects thinking, speaking, and writing, and analyzing their oral, written, printed, and electronic media, his probes approach current technology with superb élan. From what is interpretable through observation and language use, he composes exhilarating thoughts. Yet technologies do not require words, only programs and machines to extend the central nervous system or the senses. So, is wordless thinking human thinking?

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ROMAN SCULPTURES POPULAR SNAPSHOTS SOCRATIC CINEMA
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In McLuhan’s literary and media studies, the trivium is key foreground or background material, and with great esteem for him I think now is not too late to offer a modern trivium to study our new techno-verbal reality with open-minded, critical, artistic capacity. McLuhan clarifies the postmodern condition and explains how texts, truths, composition, criticism, and art differ from age to age, from generation to generation. His probes usher in the later flamboyant thinking styles from Jean Baudrillard, Slavoj Žižek, and others. So it is with McLuhan’s literary, cultural, and media understanding that I want to sketch a modern trivium to apply to art for contemporary language users who may also be artists.

The Modern Trivium

Adding technology to the trivium honors classical as well as contemporary language use. The modern trivium has faith in both. For instance, many McLuhan books take liberties to expand layout, typography, and illustrations to reshape how and what simple declarative sentences mean. He demonstrates his arguments about print and other media in provocative, unusual texts. His printed words can appear playfully entertaining or scholastically exhaustive, and his adding to them provocative illustration creates visual drama enhancing his presciently electric grammar, logic, and

rhetoric. The three vias light up with smart, modern, visual, and linguistic presentation. Today with the internet much more is possible for text and images. In essence, by coupling accelerating technological innovations with the classical trivium, the modern trivium encourages contemporary artists to make new art and art criticism, to interpret with authority what is observable, and to address society profoundly. The modern trivium operates like an algorithm; that is, it can multiply critical possibilities for distinctive ways to make and consider art. With this contemplative and practical methodology, always open to others' reflections and revisions, it becomes clearer that the human mind, deeply structured according to grammatical forms, and also deeply structured according to technological participation, or more simply said, by both language and mathematics, may yet flourish in art, art criticism, and ultimately, love. So let's get to what I consider my examples for the modern trivium in action.

Considering the Modern Trivium: The Mallarmé Project on the Internet
[Mallarme Project.pdf](#)

Language & Visual Accompaniment

What exactly is my point in privileging McLuhan and new language technologies as a complement to classic human understanding? As a writer and sculptor, what do I mean by the modern trivium? Let's first turn to my *Mallarmé Project* for some basic examples and then to some sculptures.

The Mallarmé Project's purpose is to probe a Seattle gallery's series of art texts and exhibited art works. My essay uses text and visual poetry to do this. Unlike stand-alone concrete poetry, the visuals introduce new language events within the essay context to stimulate different perceptions, conceptions, analogies, and abstractions. Unlike diagrams or photographs, which accompany text to explain or illustrate it, and unlike advertisements, which accompany text to promote or sell, and further, unlike art reproductions, which are then discussed by art historians or theorists, my visuals stand independent from the text. The accompaniment extends the trivium to include visual poetry that does not normally travel on any of the three vias because visual accompaniment is rarely perceived as a vessel for language, but more often like a lifeboat for when the language is sinking. While images seem overwhelming today, language's matter seems confined to sounds or marks.

Pierre Bourdieu, Kenneth Goldsmith & Vanessa Place

This imbalance is a trivium problem. In contemporary popularity, images proliferate and dominate the hierarchical order between pictures and words. When analysis, captions, or anecdotal messages cohere to images, words cannot keep up with illustrations, which prevail as modernity's lingua franca. Bright, colorful, or horrible, chaotic images, often dressed with nothing on but a few shreds of juxtaposed voice or brand name, are communicated profusely and rapidly in today's media. In *On Television*, Pierre Bourdieu writes, "the French term for the caption is *legend*, and often they should be read as just that, as legends that can show anything at all.... Sometimes I want to go back over *every*

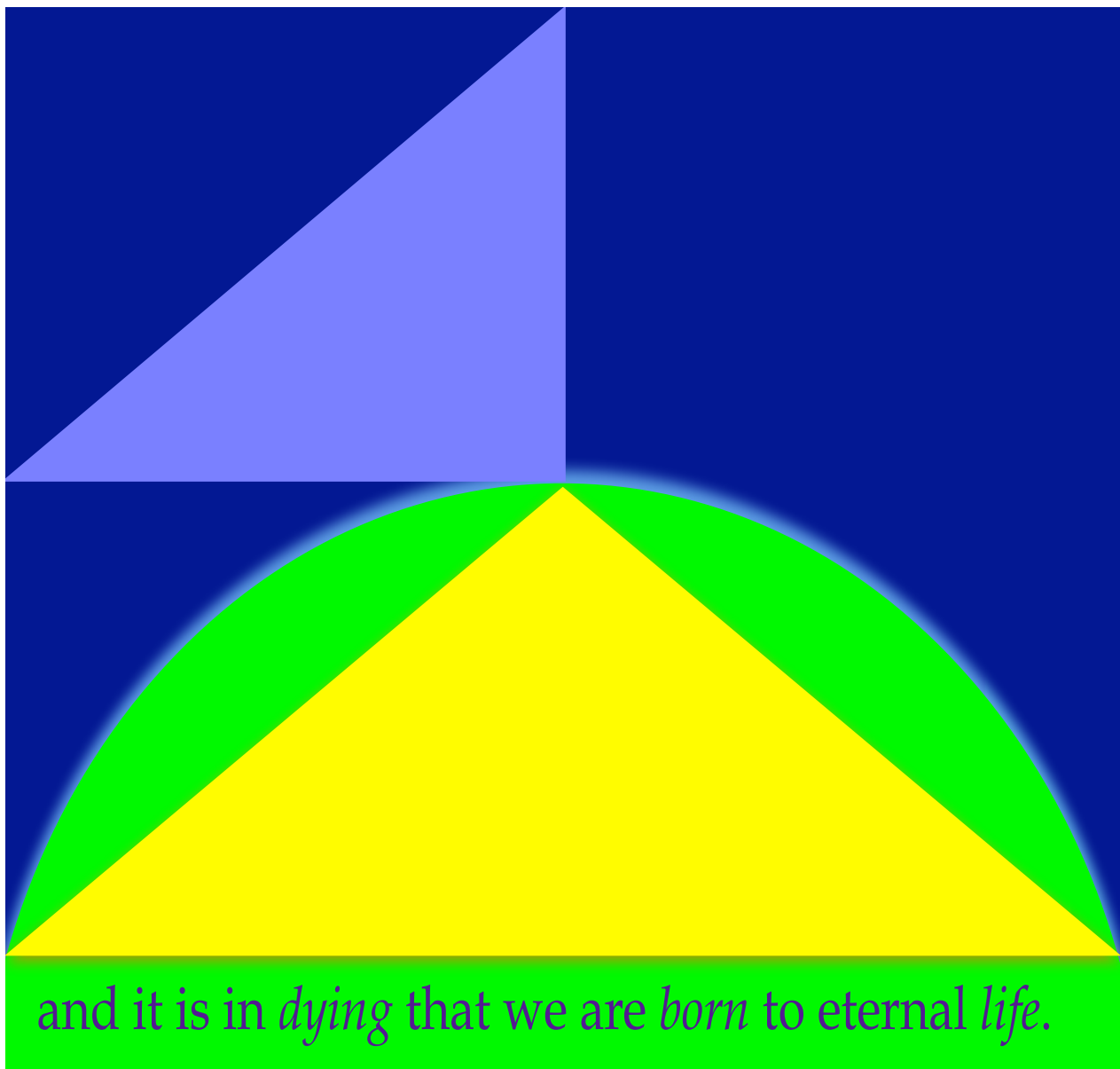
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word the television newspeople use, often without thinking and with no idea of the difficulty and the seriousness of the subjects they are talking about or the responsibilities they assume by talking about them in front of the thousands of people who watch the news without understanding what they see and without understanding that they don't understand." [Pierre Bourdieu: *On Television*, translated by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson. (New York: The New Press, 1998, p. 20)]

He makes his point emphatically, but so too do Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, and others who exclude original contexts altogether and actually proceed to write out repetitive traffic, weather, or court reports as their self-consciously uncreative writings. Their reiterative poetic stance is known as conceptual writing, but conceptual writing is a misnomer, for their praxis stops at a perceptual level before reaching a conceptual experience with language. It is really perceptual writing. It perceives jargon as one perceives a concrete wall. Without distinguishing words as only part of what has already been communicated, perceptual repetitive writings produce archival text patterns.



Perceptual writers offer repetition, and whereas their texts are dumbfounded by language, Bourdieu trusts that better critical commentary can imbue images with truth. He fears pictorial surplus overpowers the present by making people witness others' productions without knowing how the truth is disguised and produced with linguistic collusion. Bourdieu differs from Goldsmith and Place in that for him media language still has more than façade importance and could actually work for, say, justice. Their basically French and American cultural differences diverge further for one seeks to hold French media more accountable for how they use language while the other mimics media blather as the mirror of American nature.

It is hard for me to imagine, though, the efficacy for resistance from either Bourdieu or the perceptual writers. Both offer but limited insights while media power slaughters criminals and victims alike. Why I consider their work ineffectual is their limited feeling for how verbal and visual art come together with technology. To concentrate on sketchy legends or verbal data as the provocation for public ignorance, they separate language from its context, whether that context is French media or American weather, traffic, and courtroom drama. If their purpose is to transform what is going on with present experience, it seems to me that this is a mistake. It makes their work more resolute but diagnostically mistaken about the encounter most people have with their daily media or with the justice system when facing reports, charges, or testimonies.

Sight and sound, images and words, exist in context together. What I understand is that language and visual arts are combined elements of how we understand ourselves and others. Either words or visuals can lead in any particular case, but it is the case that both are present to any body. The modern trivium acknowledges our technologically driven human affairs, and this is why independent visuals accompany my internet work.

The Visual Electronic Essay

Not on television news or in theatrical courtrooms, my *Mallarmé Project* explores the modern trivium experience and probes its subject in an electronic essay. Its visual accompaniment distinguishes itself from the grammatical, logical, and rhetorical text and yet participates in communicating my work. Because visual art is normally segregated from language, when it appears with text it intimidates and yet complements understanding. Because visual art disturbs peacefully, it creates a subtle dialectic contending with the words, other images, and any ideology or spin.

Historically, leaders' images after proliferating on coins in classical times multiply in print as nation states are built. Pictures of goods appear and appeal when print and electronic media expand and capitalism takes charge. Now though ads and junk news on websites may be ignored, text and visuals work almost imperceptibly mutually together to influence thinking. They compose the page as much as punctuation or orthography. Faces are facts on Facebook. Viewers see both text and visuals as if in joint custody for attention. In a way it is as if my essay includes many faux advertisements like

postcard islands within the encircling textual sea. Throughout the essay, floating visuals without captions or attributions play in their textual context to undercut the thought that either words or images alone can ever be exhaustively authoritative. Without text but surrounded by text, visuals are embedded in normal print like cells in bodies. They do not ask to be read or studied only to be there. When noticed, they act like interfering commentary on the text, which is only an image too. Sight, when silently reading, comprehends peripheral, visual, and textual fields all the time. Either words or images can be the center of attention, but for artists both must be. *The Mallarmé Project* plays with this new modern trivium to include bright visuals and electronic text in its overall rhetoric. The critic function joins the artist function to make both new.

Hyperlinks

Also in the essay is the commonplace hyperlink, which displays the reference to another site and is of course programmed to navigate to that location when clicked. Hyperlinks powerfully illustrate language's naming function. They colorfully, logically demonstrate the signifier/signified relationship in language. The grammar, a common address, is intensified by giving the coded language linking power to its signified reference. Talk about hot media. Here grammar and logic synchronize with technology on the internet. Art historians and theorists have a great tool to refer immediately to their illustrated examples when they want to argue about specifics, but they print books and catalogs instead. Not only could art theory and history benefit from the internet, but also any educator in any field can use the hyperlink as an instant blackboard or slide projector. *The Mallarmé Project* mostly uses hyperlinks as supporting evidence, a readers-see-for-yourself documentation about the subject artists.

When active sites die, their blue hyperlinks unfortunately become functionally dead appearing in name only. These hot references turn frigid. Thus in an effort for links to gain everlasting referential life rather than behaving like a dead language, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, for example, has a site explaining how to cite the SEP, plato.stanford.edu, because the entire encyclopedia as it exists with fixed and revised articles is purposely archived every three months.

Virtually Searching for Art

The Mallarmé Project, using the internet's rapid, voluminous search capacity, considers many lesser-known artists and writers. Anyone with a presence on the internet can be googled, and often images of the person, his or her work, and pertinent data as well as text about the person and work appear for study. Internet resources are extraordinary, and to digest any subject is to savor fine thinking over multiple courses. Some art sites are more promotional than thoughtful, but this only necessitates more criticality. At times internet research becomes obsessive, and in my case can lead to internet paralysis when I don't seem to move away from the computer for days or weeks or according to my wife months at a time. Yet the diligence pays off for the internet's detailed access to many people, works, and publicity brings superabundant, detailed knowledge about a subject. Internet searching

can leap, like McLuhan's probes, into whatever has presence and can be observed, studied, and interpreted on the internet. *The Mallarmé Project* is impossible without the internet's search capacity.



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Online Existence

Another technological aspect that I want briefly to call your attention to is my essay's completely online nature. *The Mallarmé Project* could exist somewhat differently in print as could my other internet project, *Correspondance (a sketchbook)* [Correspondance.pdf](#). The latter electronically and conceptually draws other artists' works, which are not normally considered reproducible through drawing—Richard Prince or Sophie Calle, for instance. Drawing is something I do to think better, and my online sketching makes new critical thoughts possible and available. These internet compositions may in parts be more striking in an art book or as prints. Yet *The Mallarmé Project* and *Correspondance (a sketchbook)* are composed for computer monitors, which communally display countless other things—home pages, wallpaper, programs, files, photographs, finances, messages, etc. Though my

choice for publication is unexceptional, it is consistent with my taking exception to the art and printed texts I examine. New criticism finds new forms to express itself. Besides criticality, my work uses the internet for self-expression, for a global-delivery system, and for a scholarly substitute to print. *The Mallarmé Project* and to some extent, *Correspondance (a sketchbook)*, develop, I hope, if only to a small degree, the online composition's potential to communicate on fresh levels about many things linguistic and visual. The internet of course is not a newspaper or a journal. A dynamic website is more like ongoing words and images being turned into a dynamic, personally purposeful force by anyone or any group with the competence to design, write, and show; i.e. anyone with skills in the modern trivium. The internet is a cornucopia for thinkers, writers, artists, and audiences. Yet independent, online, poetic essays seem to be much less numerous than blogs, and thus I continue to compose specific writings for the internet.



Audience

Now consider the global internet audience for a moment. Here is where I think new rhetorical force for the modern trivium really begins to be felt. The audience for the electronic essay is involved with probing new inventiveness in the world and in themselves. *The Mallarmé Project* on the internet brings the English essay into the 21st century. Taking it to the internet is not to reach a definite, electronic literary port like a bestseller blog but to study as well as to participate in what and how thinking is being done with this new rhetoric. Who after all reads what is composed on the internet but disparate, global natives like us, villagers dancing on the beaches before the waves of information washing up on their monitors? The internet is new land, a world art, and we are its natives.

It is premature to know how reading internet essays will help people think differently and perhaps better than they do when reading printed books or periodicals or when watching television. Certainly some people I write for have read the essay carefully, though not many. One has told me a few days after it first appeared that he had already read it closely three times, but that's rare. Ultimately it is doubtful that tired, old, reading habits want new subject matter in fresh formats. The Kindle binds traditional book pages to a single screen instead of a spine, and the global, reading—as opposed to surfing—audience is still under development. In addition I think my electronic work will never have far reaching effects for besides being about how contemporary art and writing happens to be in Seattle, which resembles many other young metropolises in not being a particularly well known art city, it lacks a category in electronic literature. The internet essay is not yet considered to be an electronic genre. *The Mallarmé Project* continues to float, though, the way careful, poetically conceived compositions usually do, but in this case at Gregory Vincent St. Thomasino's website [E ratio](#), not in a book. *The Mallarmé Project* is a dice toss for my friend, Gregory, and for me. Gregory is really the only classical poet North America has ever had, and his website like Jim's [vispo.com](#) is a model for presenting new poetics for new audiences.

By favoring consumers who desire virtual socializing and easy markets, the internet can seem to consume minds the way the Gutenberg effect once impressed them. Streets, elevators, and busses are filled with necks bent and backs hunched over pads and phones. Yet the internet also serves educational, aesthetic and philosophical purposes, and my electronic work joins in these endeavors.

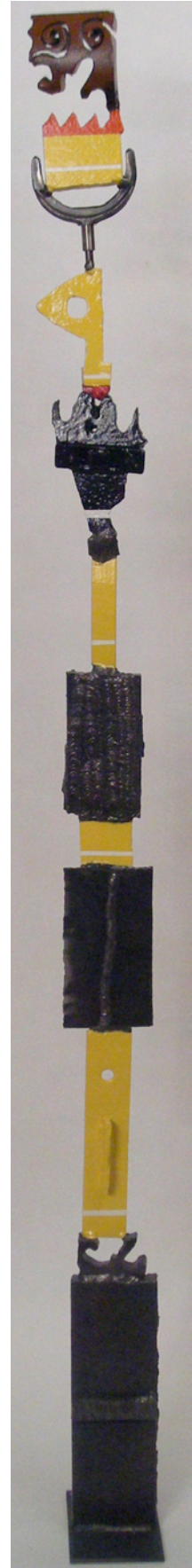


*Social or Solitary Sculptures:
To Cohere or Not to Cohere*

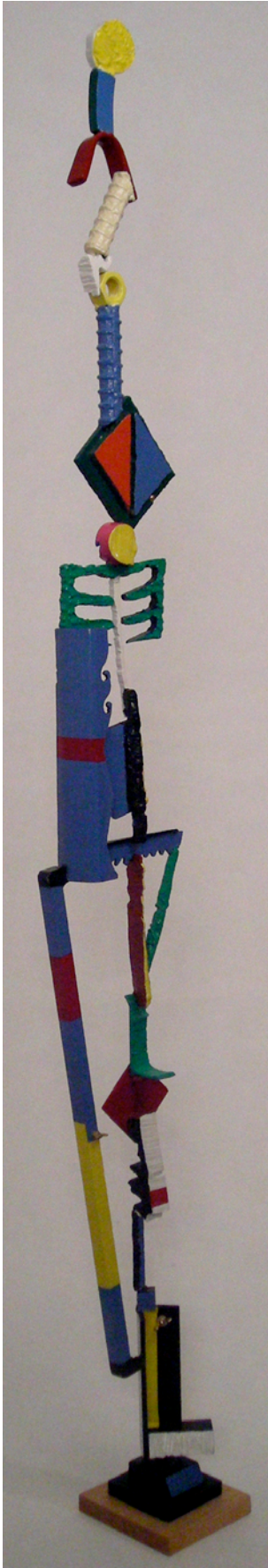
Okay, so I think the modern trivium provides new analytical material for preparing and examining text and art. But of course there are problems. There are always problems. McLuhan and many philosophers are not sculptors and do not think like sculptors. While the internet is a global art medium and the electronic background for new art and critique, sculpture is an ancient art that cannot be adequately experienced on either page or monitor. My work as a sculptor, I think, has to be faced in person to understand its sculptural existence. Furthermore, art, artists, art criticism, and audience are often separate ideas and realities. Nothing really seems to cohere to anything or anyone. Rather one sees one view or another, or accepts one role or another. (An Italian roll for me, thank you.) But without cohesion at some level construction is impossible. So I make certain choices: I refrain from reproducing my sculptures on the internet, and I try to find ways to make art, artists, criticism and audiences cohere somehow.

This is my plan for this talk: examine art with the trivium to propose a grammar, logic, and rhetoric for creative, critical, and attentive unity. So with this possibly cohesive method in mind let's turn to the images on Jim's large computer screen. These two sculptures, too big to cross the border without causing some suspense, and three small, actual sculptures are the art for my trivium experiment tonight. The images are of my tall sculptures, *Writing* (steel, 2005, 5'4"h x 4"w x 6"d), and (on the next page) *Reading* (steel on wood base, 2005, 5'10"h x 9"w x 6"d).

To ask how the trivium relates to sculpture indicates openness to a coherence for art and language that I think leads to new cultural work. One can always refuse, however, and choose another approach or no approach at all. But if grammar is in our brains, structured for, by, and with language use, and if as well grammar identifies sensory perceptions thereby enabling our intellects, then these two, skinny, tall edifices have a grammar: steel segments linked vertically, but without conventional symbol or orthography. The steel is not word-like but functions syntactically: segmentally piece by piece and mostly one above another. Their grammar forms two verticals in which the joined steel parts make a textured, colored totem for words to complement. The sculptures can be described, and they too describe. Instructively, they interact with no conversation possible. They represent themselves and their subjects. They can be read and interpreted, guessed at like any unknown, and they are made to out exist everybody here. Their essence is their existence as thoughtful art. Are they art? My understanding is open, but they are closed. They exist differently. They are fact for sight and thinking. They are not self-evident art, what is?



Words & Wordlessness



Examined long enough everything visible can in some way be considered in words. To turn morphemic the non-morphemic and grammatical the non-grammatical is what writing and reading are; and for me, partly what sculpture is, and perhaps what all art is. Even non-art can be judged and described as art. Of course this is where it also gets very dicey for judgement and expression. Yet the modern trivium I think provides some basis for reasoning about art.

By definition or more precisely by title and thus by analogy, these two sculptures' orderliness stands for writing and reading. Their titles could have been different and then they would be differently understood: for example, if named, *Praying* or *Commanding*, instead of *Writing* or *Reading*, the sculptures would be rhetorically and hermeneutically changed because understanding obviously differs concerning these words' denotations and connotations; likewise if named *Gerald*, or *Marie*, or *Stick*, or *Whatever*. Titles can be more than names or clues, and untitled art can be other than asemic though this is a common way to think about wordlessness. Other ways are to discern vertical or horizontal axes, colors, shapes, textures, joinery, positive and negative spaces, planes or volumes, etc.

Critics, curators, artists, and audiences affix meanings to art. Lacking any recognizable reading or writing, *Writing* and *Reading* offer them as present to be seen without words. The sculptures work without words, between titles and complex wordlessness. Their steely grammatical sense stands as tall as an average adult but is solid and unable to bend or move or think or talk. What they do is nothing but stand there as so much in life does. However conventional or eternal are meanings, names, science, and laws, intelligence is both social and solitary.

Are they art? Yes, I think they are. What are they? How are they art? They convey that they were made, and made upwards, and made in some order with some time and for expressive purpose. Not created, but made to appear, allowed to be present, they, like my other sculptures, offer past and present presence in the moments now when examined. Writing and reading are activities that also do this very well, so these two sculptures enable something like self-conscious writing and reading in the moments when they are examined: *What am I looking at? What can I say? What do I particularly care about when I care about art?* These questions matter for art. The sculptures stand there waiting to be questioned and to offer answers.

Sculptures exist grammatically in many tenses—past, present, future, perfect—but exist actually only in the present tense. Because our soul and body coexist, we are in time differently. We think the past, the present, the future, and we relate them to each other, but we exist now. Our thinking affects our temporality. For instance, we can exist now but not be living in the present tense. *The Mallarmé Project* discusses in more detail how contemporary it is to live with a future perfect temporality, and how some people readily accept this, and I refer you to that essay's first part if you're interested. Basically, many today, including artists and critics, use their present to give the unknown future a certain past, so the present is no longer present as presence but as function, as doing, as a period to endure before getting to some future in life. Marcus Aurelius notes that the present is the only thing of which one can be deprived, for that is the only thing which one has, and you cannot lose what you do not have. Though he may be writing about death, it seems today as if the present is not so much killed as denied in a systemic, self-imposed, deliberate way to perfect some future. Deprived, the present is just a necessary transition; a dot on a line connecting the past and future, not a whole life in the present, but a present amusing, educating, or working itself to death. My sculptures do not think or function so they can only *be* right now. *Writing* and *Reading* are never forever commuting, graduating, or retiring. They are grammatical subjects sculpted to be alive as presence as well as subjects that are written and read.

Logic & Rhetoric

Their composed grammar, with semantics and syntax in steel rather than in letters and parts of speech, stands up for thinking about logic and rhetoric. What logic is there in being steel forms with titles but without any semiotic convention for interpretation? It is the case that if writing and reading are two intellectual activities using language, and these two intellectual activities using language are inherent in some language users, then writing and reading are inherent in some language users. If reading and writing necessarily include wordless sensory activity like seeing and hearing to perceive forms and sounds, then wordless activity is also inherent in these language users. In other words intellectually active audiences read and write all the time with or without words. Thus wordless *Writing* and *Reading* are sculpted logically for that audience. The sculptures are wordless and tactile but inherently linguistic. Before objects or others are identified with words, they exist as sculpture. Sculpture is objective wordlessness better understood through the trivium as art.



Grammar and logic are visible perceptions, invisible intellect, and conceptual knowledge. Take a statement, *a is b*, or *a is not b*. The common letters represent sets. The intellect understands *is* as significant along with *a*, *b*, and *not*. Logic uses language: the same intellect sees and understands the sculptures' steel parts as *is*, *something*, and *not something*. Is something art or not art? Logic considers language and intellect when considering something as art. When perceived as object or image only



and not as concept, something cannot be art. A sculpture is an actual object, then grammatical concept, and then an intellectual logic. If it is only something, it isn't art for it has no concept itself and isn't considered to signify any. Likewise if considered art but the concept does not cohere with something, then maybe it isn't art and should be criticized, for what is predicated is not present.

Rhetoric is especially difficult for artists due to their being so close to art making and art criticism, and because rhetoric is so marginalized in education and maligned in general today. In some cases and for some time, it is the same person who assumes roles as writer, reader, thinker, sculptor, critic, painter, and audience. Furthermore, artists often think in the subjunctive mood, trying this or that thought or action in their everyday art praxis. Yet artists like everyone else have to exist in the indicative mood. If artists consider the modern trivium during and after composition, then I think they are more likely to form art and criticism for more people to conceive art with significance.

Art rhetoric for and from the official art world is just that, official persuasion. One McLuhan book is aptly titled, *Culture Is Our Business* [New York & Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1970], and in it he probes advertising and marketing as modern rhetoric. These certainly are most lucrative cultural businesses, but they are not rhetoric from artists about art. For me and for those not completely into culture as persuasive, profitable enterprise, these two sculptures stand at present in the tall windows on each side of the front door to the SAM Gallery in Seattle. Their objective is to be defined as art by audiences using their intellects. Though they are pure physical matter, their rhetoric is as if abstract stick mannequins were standing, silently thinking about the passers-by. Someday perhaps some Marcel Duchamp will hang his beret on one, thereby reclaiming it as his own hat-rack art. Their rhetoric for now is silent writing and reading as perception and conception.

*Objects & Ideas:
Pocket Sculptures*

With words, images, ideas, and objects being four different facts out and about in our world, let's examine the three pocket sculptures I brought for this talk. They are not words, and they are not

images like the images of *Writing* and *Reading* you see on Jim's computer [or on the previous pages], and they themselves, of course, are not concepts. They are small objects that express my work on a scale different from *Writing* and *Reading* and obviously different from monumental sculptures by Richard Serra or Anish Kapoor, whose works often intentionally dwarf the human, and whose scale attracts many global commentaries. Their art is not a conversation, person to person, but more a bestseller novel from an individual to a mass audience.

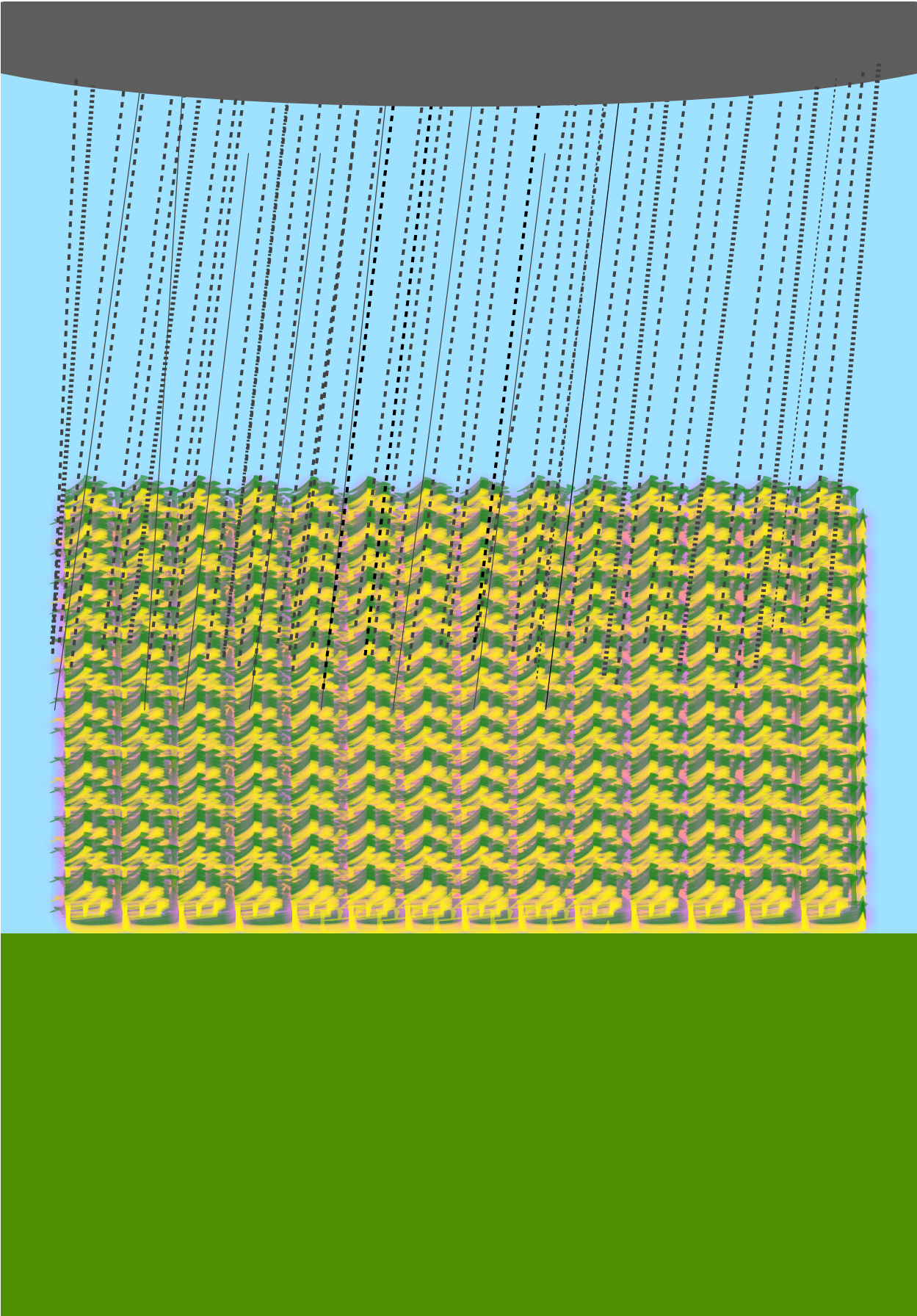
For me it is very good yet somewhat difficult in our day to have actual, whole substance in hand for examination. [Sorry that it isn't possible to have these pocket sculptures in readers' hands, for it is the experience touching, handling, and examining an actual object that I want to communicate here. There is no way for me to give you the actual sculptures to handle now, and I'm sorry to have to ask you instead to imagine the objects, if you want, from the following text.]

To See or Not To See

The first pocket sculpture I want to hand around is an old pair of eyeglasses that are thickly painted black on the lenses inside facing the wearer and white on the outside facing the world. This sculpture itself is, like R. Mutt's famous 1917 urinal, thoroughly unoriginal. It is demonstrative fact, pronoun, definite article, a *Here*, *It*, or a *This*. The object's grammar has three dimensions when in hand. It is foldable like eyeglasses. It is space arched for a nose and curved for ears. It is wearable but useless to wear as glasses. Its subject in a sentence is an imagined personal pronoun, an *I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, or *it*. Its compound predicate is *imagine wearing these*. The object exists actually and analogically, conceptually as sculptural object, literally as painted eyeglasses. Its logic also seems utterly simple in its intentional contradiction, this pair of eyeglasses is and is not a pair of eyeglasses. Rather than functioning as an aid to vision, this pair nullifies vision and presents blackness to the self and whiteness to the world. Its logic both separates art from function and combines art and contrary reality. Trying them on seems necessary; yet once its functional dissonance is experienced or intuitively understood, the object itself approaches uselessness or zero function, but it never gets there for its existence counts, at least, as one function. This is not a contemporary North American sculpture typically conceived. It is a humble, worn out, traditional object sculpted with only paint to be conceived as an artwork. The sculpture exists as art certainly not as eyeglasses. Its rhetoric is poetic: the object as metaphor. Its rhetoric is scientific: the object as experiment. The trivium takes the sculpture in your hands and gives it to your minds. Eyes cannot understand this but having, holding, and perceiving it whole can.

Doing Means Undoing

The next pocket sculpture is sheet steel: tiny, thin, partly cutout, painted black on one side and clear coated, rust color on the other. It is mounted on a heavier sliver of cut steel to give the slight work more gravity.



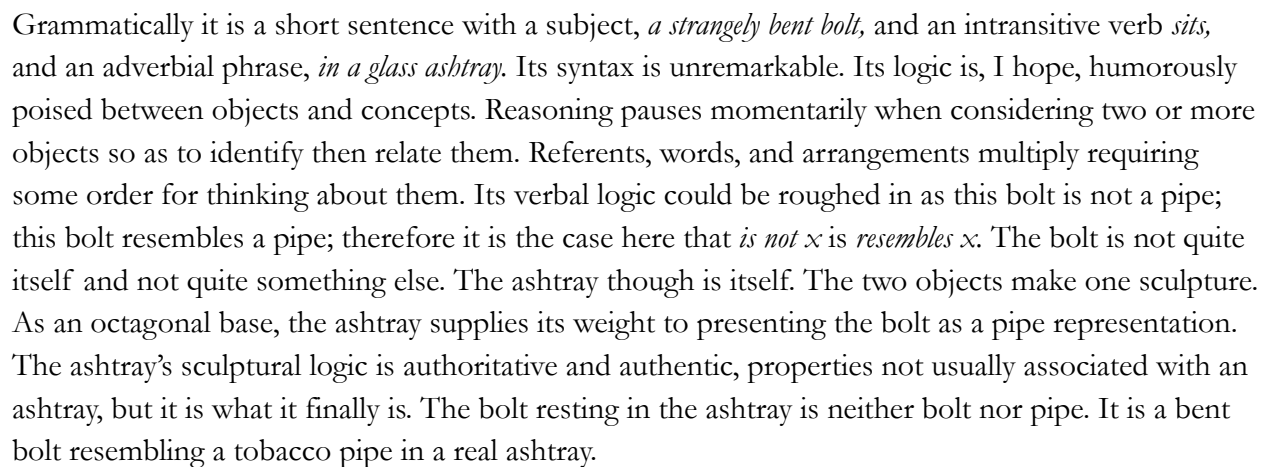
Grammar? First, subjects are pairs like paint and rust, vertical and horizontal, steel and void, recto and verso.... Second, predicates are draw, cut, weld, coat. Third, subjects and predicates form two-sided, almost two-dimensional clauses, in three dimensions. Like a complex sentence beginning on one side of a page and ending on the other side, this sculpture expresses a hand-drawn contour cut through steel with a front-and-back presence. It is a sculptural chiasmus. The empty area is as if methodically sliced through the sheet leaving positive and negative areas reversing orientations from one side to the other. This is not mounted as if a valuable scribble in steel and air. Its negligible weight, even bound by welding to a slightly heavier ground, is what a torn, half-erased, heavy cardboard rectangle might weigh. (*How much does it weigh? How old is it?* It weighs about 2.7 grams and is 9 years old. *No, I don't mean in numbers and words; I mean, what is its actual weight and age?*)

The sculpture's logic is small, delicate, and divided, but as pensive as that behind famous verbal dualities like *Being and Nothingness* or *To Be Or Not To Be*, or behind anyone or anything with and without ideas about existence. This specific object can be expressed in a syllogism: If *a and not-a can be added so a plus not-a equals not-a plus a*, in other words if something is this and is added to something not this, and that equals something not this added to this equaling this added to something not this; then logically, symmetrically, and commutatively: *a plus not-a* equaling *not-a plus a* also equals *not-a plus a* equaling *a plus not-a*. The simple transposition enters intellects for it follows that for any equality in any mind thinking: *a plus not-a* equaling *not-a plus a* equals *not-a plus a* equaling *a plus not-a* equals thinking mathematically and thereby equating logical and conceptual equalities with this simple object in hand. This is done all the time but not often thought about thoroughly though. Equal pairs equally reverse materially and mentally but change orientation. Pertinent, I think, is Protagoras's remark that man is the measure of all things, those that are that they are and those that are not that they are not. So minds, measuring pairs that something is this and something else is not this, realize equality arranges inequalities but never equals inequality. Or to say it differently, inequality arranges equalities but never equals equality.

Its rhetoric whispers: Is Aristotle's law of non-contradiction, *one cannot say of something that it is and that it is not in the same respect and at the same time*, absolutely true? Or is it contradicted by itself in saying what it says cannot be said? It seems being and not being are contradictions yet equal inequalities like seeing or not seeing, or visibility and invisibility, for example, or knowing and not knowing. The visual art is rhetoric as logical subject, as sight and non-sight, paint and not paint, unmounted and mounted, or something small and summary like *Doing Means Undoing*. The audience somehow sees thoughts which cannot be seen. With the work in your hands you may be thinking, *He isn't saying what he is saying, is he?* Or simply, *Is this rhetoric half-empty and half-full?*

This Is Not a Surrealist Painting

The last, small sculpture being passed around consists of two pieces. One is a 7-inch grey bolt bent into the shape of a curved, tobacco pipe with the threads being like a round tip for the mouth and the hexagonal head being a bowl for the tobacco. The other is a glass ashtray in which the bolt rests.



Context is another choice for the pair. Is the sculpture on a pedestal, a desk, or a table beside an armchair? Like the fair Grecian youth who can never, never kiss his unfading, happy, happy love, this fair, grey pipe will never, never smoke or smolder in its clear, glass ashtray. Because beauty is truth, truth beauty, smoking is through, through smoking. The context choice is the same as for a Grecian urn. Without original purpose, the painted urn and the contemporary sculpture are left purely for poetic consideration wherever they are found.

The sculpture's rhetoric is comedy, and the title, *This Is Not a Surrealist Painting*, refers of course to Magritte's famous work, so the bolt, which is not a pipe and not a Magritte, sits in an ashtray as my *no smoking* sculpture.



Art & Philosophy

Concluding Thoughts About the Trivium

The trivium, I think, gives artists, who are the first critics for the art they make, a methodology different from that disseminated by contemporary art institutions and journals. This thinking style contemplates art through grammar, objects, logic, concepts, rhetoric, ideas, and media. It offers no guarantees for greatness, no contract for security, and no finality for art. It helpfully considers art, artists, oneself, and others, all as subjective and objective subjects. It is personal and so can differ from artist to artist. It makes thinking work through structured dialogue with oneself as the artist and as the artwork's first critic. Essentially conversational, it organizes but does not institutionalize art thinking. Using the trivium, I hope I have shown, makes for artists a critical art about art.

Artists As Existence, Aesthetics, & Ethics

Now the final part, the artist and art as existence, aesthetics, and ethics. Art appears because artists exist. This rather basic truth, once realized by artists and others, can transform culture. It doesn't matter what the art is, it appears from an artist. It is the artist who makes the art. As James Joyce writes in *Ulysses*: "The supreme question about a work of art is out of how deep a life does it spring" (www.gutenberg.org or New York: The Modern Library, 1961, p. 185).

Art appears at once as *being art*. Yet being art also means being not art, for art is also *just being*. Art appears from artists; then from artists being among people, objects, and ideas, art appears as aesthetics and critical subject. Art being something from an artist and for others becomes ethics, and art ethics is what I want to get to quickly here. Assume art exists despite questions like *what is art?* or *is art real?* Certainly cultures in the past and present conceive art differently if at all. Yet artists' work indicates that art exists even for art to be negated as not existing at all. (Where is Parmenides when you need him?) Thinking requires being, but being, even being thought, does not require thinking: it creates it. Thus art being *art* and being *just being* is double, like us.

Okay, so art exists because people like us exist. Now assume art is aesthetics, aesthetics defined not only by the beautiful, sublime, or ridiculous, but also on its own account: *being art*. In other words since art exists, then aesthetics appears; aesthetics and art exist together as hydrogen and oxygen make water; yet neither hydrogen nor oxygen molecules appear like water at all. Art and aesthetics first appear with the artist, who is both maker and thinker.

Ethics

But ethics? Here it is right to worry, for art ethics seems today more personal or absent and certainly in many ways impossibly difficult to understand. Is art ethics a subjective philosophy about art's integrity? *Art for art's sake*, so to speak, and is art criticism simply a written deliberation about

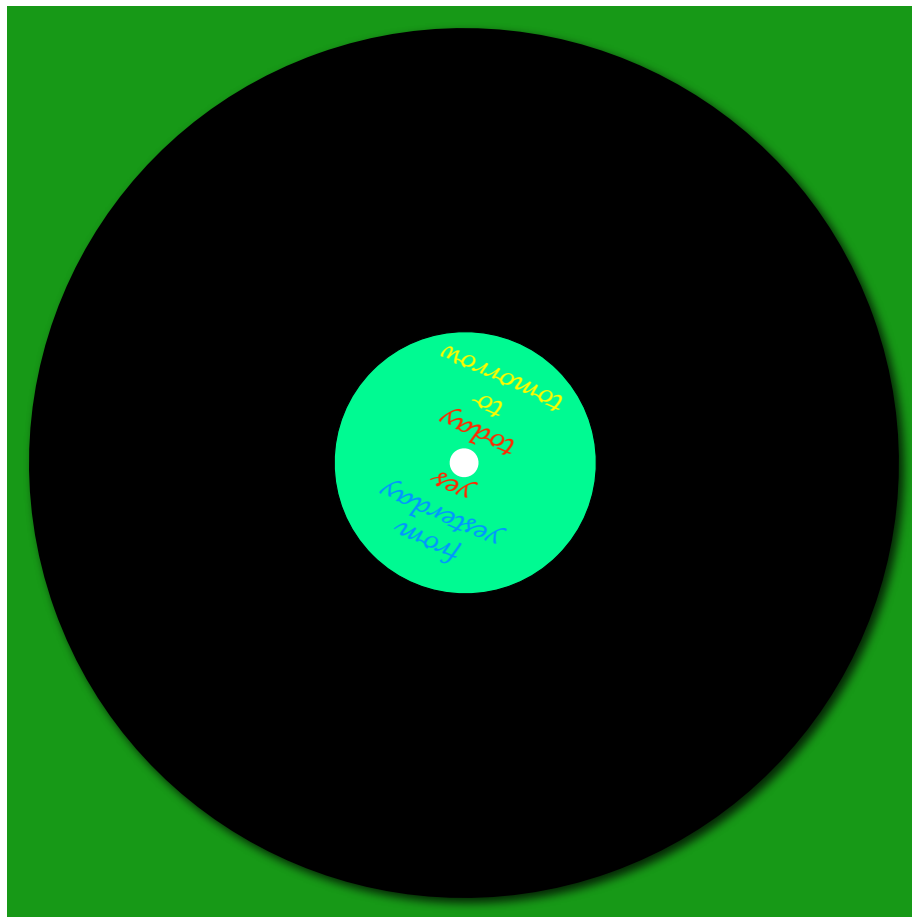
dissimilar ethics for art? Maybe, but I don't think that is the whole story. Art ethics differs from ontology and aesthetics in that as ethics it includes in art what is not art and not aesthetics. It includes life as being lived. Art ethics is beyond art as inspiration and beyond criticism as interpretation. Rather, art ethics concerns art as cultural praxis, which is a matter concerning human intention, action, and effect. Art ethics makes two, *the art and the artist*, three, *the art, the artist, and the city*. Art ethics is not based on philosophically ethical positions like deontology. Rather art ethics makes ethics art. It seeks to transform the city through art by artists taking more responsibility for the city. The questions any artist can ask about his or her artwork are more than simply asking, *am I environmentally conscientious?* or *am I political enough?* These are self-referential questions. Rather it is to question the art: *What is its ethics? What and why are its intention, action, and effect? What does it do or want to do to or for others?* Questioning the art, the artist also questions its maker and thinker.



The art, the artist, and the city all have ethical standing. Artists' praxis leads to art history and to culture. As much as lovers love loving, the intimacy between artists and their art attracts people, longevity, and long, long love. The city is where art and art criticism best converge; yet the contemporary North American city assumes that artists are secondary services, not even close to the managerial or political class but more like teachers or workers for hire upon approval. The historical responsibility for this seems shared between artists wanting official recognition and officials budgeting to give a little to them. Regardless how better or worse it is now compared with other times and places, I want to focus on three formative points about contemporary art ethics.

First, art ethics means the artwork itself *being art* has endowed principles about shared efficacy with temporal audiences. It renders attention and receives attention. Art from artists' praxis cannot be ethically neutral in any society and is not a *for* or *against* issue; art leads thought and emotion to and sometimes beyond either-or approaches. Art ethics is a here-and-now reality for people. Art exists in a permanent condition for people in a temporal condition. It offers conversations for life.

Historically, I think, art makes ethics possible and precedes philosophy. Though Plato and Socrates are among the first philosophers to deal with ethics and politics, they are conceivably the first cultural critics while Hesiod, Homer, and their poetic followers are the first philosophers. *The Republic* in a way is about the art ethics that Homer initiated and that Plato wants to modify for a better city and better Athenians.



Second, art ethics grounds artists and the public phenomenologically. Art ethics considers art as an individual and public experience and makes that experience culture. Art is an ethical occupation, and artists are ethical about art. Neglecting art ethics itself though pulls an important philosophy about art and artists out from under appearances as if art were a tablecloth being slipped away leaving all the bottles, glasses, plates, and silverware in place. Waving the cloth is then a sign of skill, nothing more than deceitful magic; conceit, not art. The ethics in this case is *to entertain* or *to be bought*. Having and showing little or no interest in art ethics is a choice for artists, but it is a choice to remain ignorant about what art fully is, and to be another image-maker hoping his or her wares will make money. It's a popular position, in a way so ethically American, for it allows artists to think they are free and working without any ideological constraints. Of course, few artists want to admit, either to themselves or publicly, to having American-style ethics; yet their art practice is basically small-business, single-proprietor, capitalism. Like Moliere's bourgeois gentleman, who is surprised to learn he has been using prose all his life, an American artist may be amazed to learn he or she has ethically always been capitalistically American. On the other hand some artists project their sex, race, identity, or particular protest as their ethics as if art is a recognized engagement able to influence and change political power without sharing in political power. To see all the stores, slogans, and selling as culture is to see all this ersatz American art ethics everywhere. Art ethics can make or break culture, and I fervently hope make it better.

Third, art ethics encompasses not just asking the state to treat artists and other social and economic groups better but questions society's very relationship with art. Who rules? Plato wants philosophers to rule, and I agree, though I think he is mistaken about who the real philosophers are. Artists should be leaders in city governments. When states rule art, most dissatisfied artists want the state to change somehow. Ethically, their art opposes something about the state or its history. On the other hand, if art rules, or at least has some role in ruling, then art ethics considers the state responsible for its people and tries to make the society into a culture with art in education, programs, social consciousness, and on the streets to change what is most emphatically political and pathological with art.

A Just City or Just a City?

In brief conclusion then, today it comes down to an ethical choice for artists: Who should rule, lawyers and businesses, or artists? With Hollywood-type, star actors perhaps being a notable exception, modern states mostly exclude artists from effecting policies but condescend to give artists affective power. Artists need to rediscover art ethics as crucial to understanding who artists are, what art is, and why it and they are so important in government. So I want to end this talk by asking: as artists and teachers, do you want to live in a just city or just a city? To answer that we need to understand the cities where we work, the social and ideological programs we live with and accept the consequences of, and the quality, beauty and significance of the artists and people who live among us. It is not so much a matter of we are here and you, everybody else, are there. It is a matter of art and art criticism shaping the city of politics into the city of art.

Now I want to close as I began, thanking Jim Andrews for our long, deep, artistic, North American friendship: Thank you, Jim.



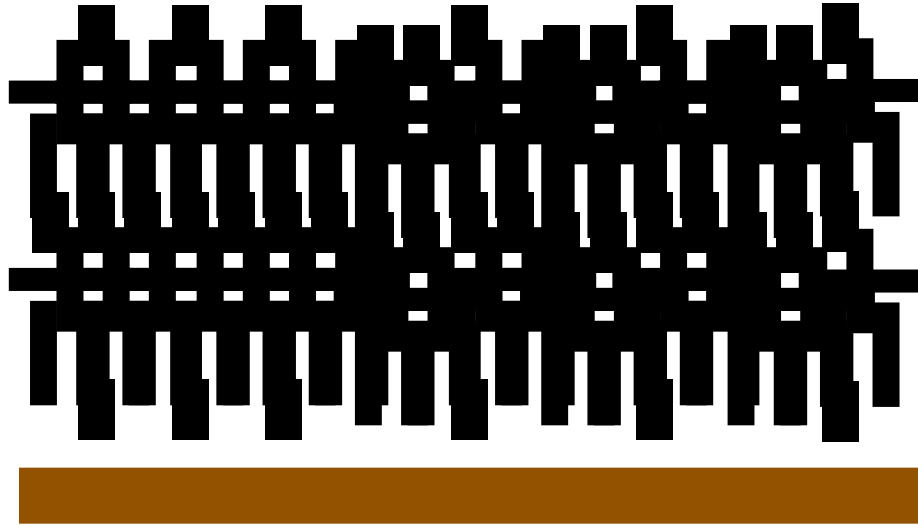
no mo ve me nt no ne

RED PULLOVER SWEATER, BLACK LEOTARDS, KNEE-HIGH BLACK LEATHER BOOTS
BLACK WIFE-BEATER T-SHIRT, BLUE & BLACK STRIPED SUIT, BLACK DRESS SHOES

POETRY READING SHOW: PAPER AS POETIC SCULPTURE
FANTAGRAPHICS BOOKSTORE, SEATTLE, NOV. 24, 2012,

Nico Vassilakis, one of the editors for *the last VISPO anthology: visual poetry 1998-2008* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2012), emailed the three Seattle contributors to ask us if we would consider joining others and do something for 5 to 10 minutes at the book's Seattle launch. Since I rarely read in public anymore, I offered to spend the time talking about visual poetry sculpture. The evening was also a bon voyage for Nico and his new bride who are embarking on a trip across South America and then a move to New York City. Full with people, books, readers, musicians, and refreshments, the house was packed. He liked my idea, and basically my presentation, with computer renditions for the actual paper sculptural poems, follows.

Seattle



THE PAGE UNBOUND

As a contrast to the visual poetry in *the last VISPO anthology*, I want to present a few visual poems that offer sculptural ideas about paper. As in most books, the pages in *the last VISPO anthology* are uniform, and therefore the visual poems appear on identical sheets. There are, of course, other ways for paper to be a medium for poetry.



poetry folds, poetry titillates, poetry cuts

Folds are one way to sculpt the page for the poem. Here is a brown page folded in half lengthwise and dedicated to the Japanese poet, Basho, and his great work, *Narrow Road to the Deep North*. The fold in the paper refers of course to the narrow road. His book title's letters—except *H*, which is like a barrier or a bridge—split on each side of the fold to indicate the two sides of the poet's path on the narrow road. Thus his narrow road is through the alphabet, the words he titles his poetic journey.

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NUMBERED EDITION OF 25 IN FIRST REMAINDER SERIES,
POETS.PAINTERS.COMPOSERS.CRITICS.SCULPTORS.SLAVES., SEATTLE 2007

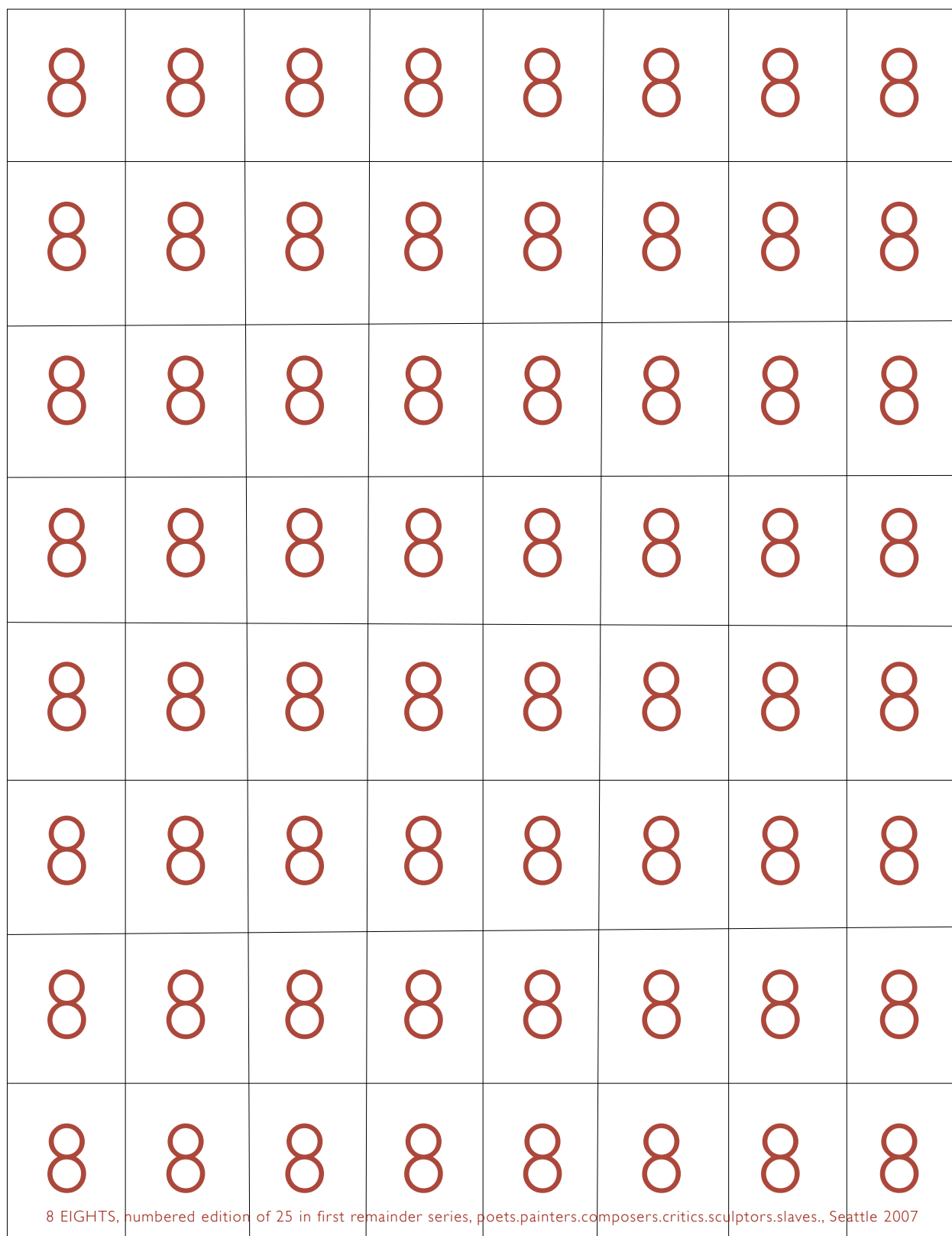
a

m

SIGHT EVENT, numbered edition of 25 in first remainder series, poets.painters.composers.critics.sculptors.slaves., Seattle 2007

This page is folded horizontally to represent a horizon line. It is titled *SIGHT EVENT* to refer to the fold and letters. The letter *a* appears above the fold and the letter *m* below it. Because the letters, *a* and *m*, can express in English either *being*, as in I *AM* WHO *AM*, or *morning* when used as the

abbreviation for the Latin, *ante meridiem*, before midday, before noon, as in 5 *a.m.*, the poem presents a sight event: the folded page and the letters, and the intellect does the rest. The fold is there, and the letters for *being* and *morning* straddle its line.



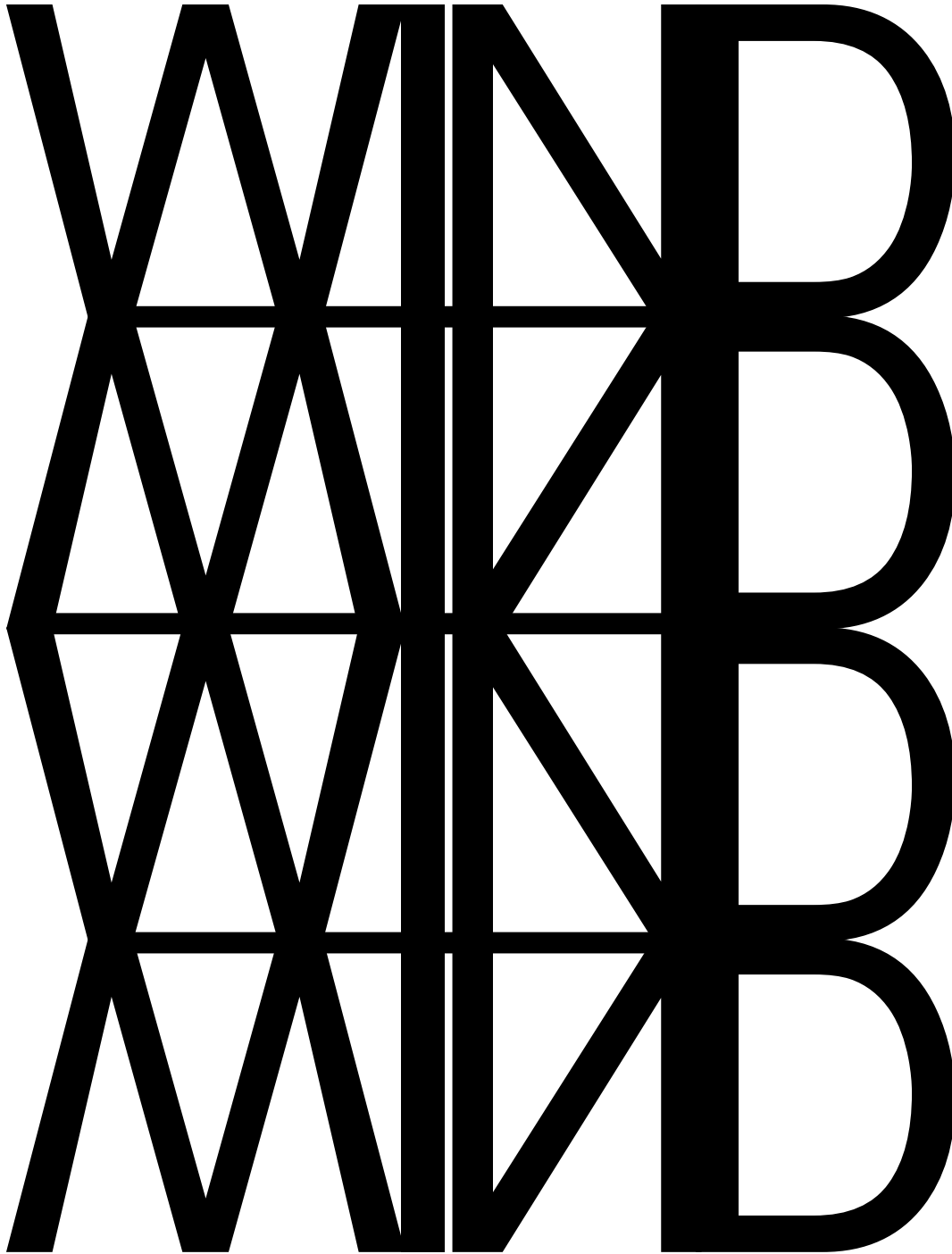
This folded poem is *8 Eights*. There are 8 rows and 8 columns filled with *Eights*, so the page is folded seven times horizontally and seven times vertically to create 64 squares. In each square a reddish 8 appears. The poem is somewhat mathematical: it uses only the symbol 8 for the number 8; yet the number seems ever expanding while the symbol remains the same. The poem is also somewhat biological because the typeface for the symbol 8 makes the number look like a cell dividing itself to become two cells. *8 Eights* keeps multiplying mathematically and biologically.

lingerie

*black lingerie on white onion skin, numbered edition of 25 in first remainder series
poets.painters.composers.critics.sculptors.slaves., seattle 2007*

Besides folding, another way to sculpt paper poetically is to use its actual material quality. For instance, tracing and onion skin paper for me is poetically like the titillating advertisements for Victoria's Secrets, the models teasing with their a-bit see-through and a-bit-not fabrics. So this is a visual poem using sheer paper's materiality to express *black lingerie on white onion skin*.

Still another way paper can be sculpted for poetry is to cut it. The cut-poem, WIND, for example, is the letters, *W*, *I*, *N*, and *D* cut out like origami several times from a folded single sheet. When the page is unfolded and attached to the ceiling, *WIND* hangs in the air.



This is a cut-poem about light; rather obvious like the *WIND*, but I still like it, the way the letters, LIGHT, being excised from the page, allow actual light to come through the poem as well as to call attention to the light reflecting on the poem.



LIGHT

There are some items curiously missing in this cut-poem, entitled on both sides, *BAG*.



This single sheet has two titles for its cutout holes. Circles of course appear on both sides. On one side they are titled *COMMUNICATION*.

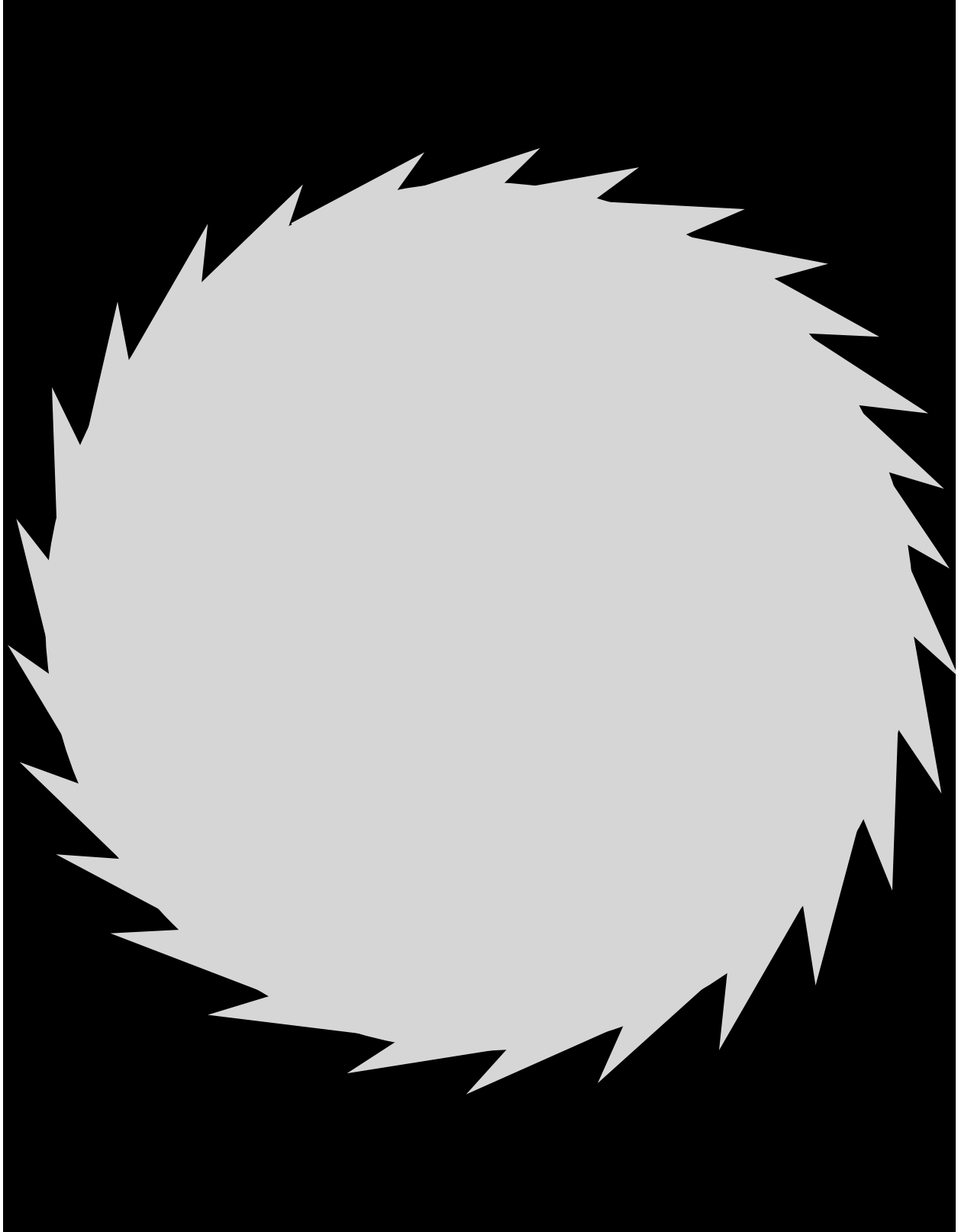
COMMUNICATION



On the other side they are titled, *INSTRUMENT LANDING*. The holes represent on the first side something like conversation. On the other they represent cables communicating functional instructions to machines.

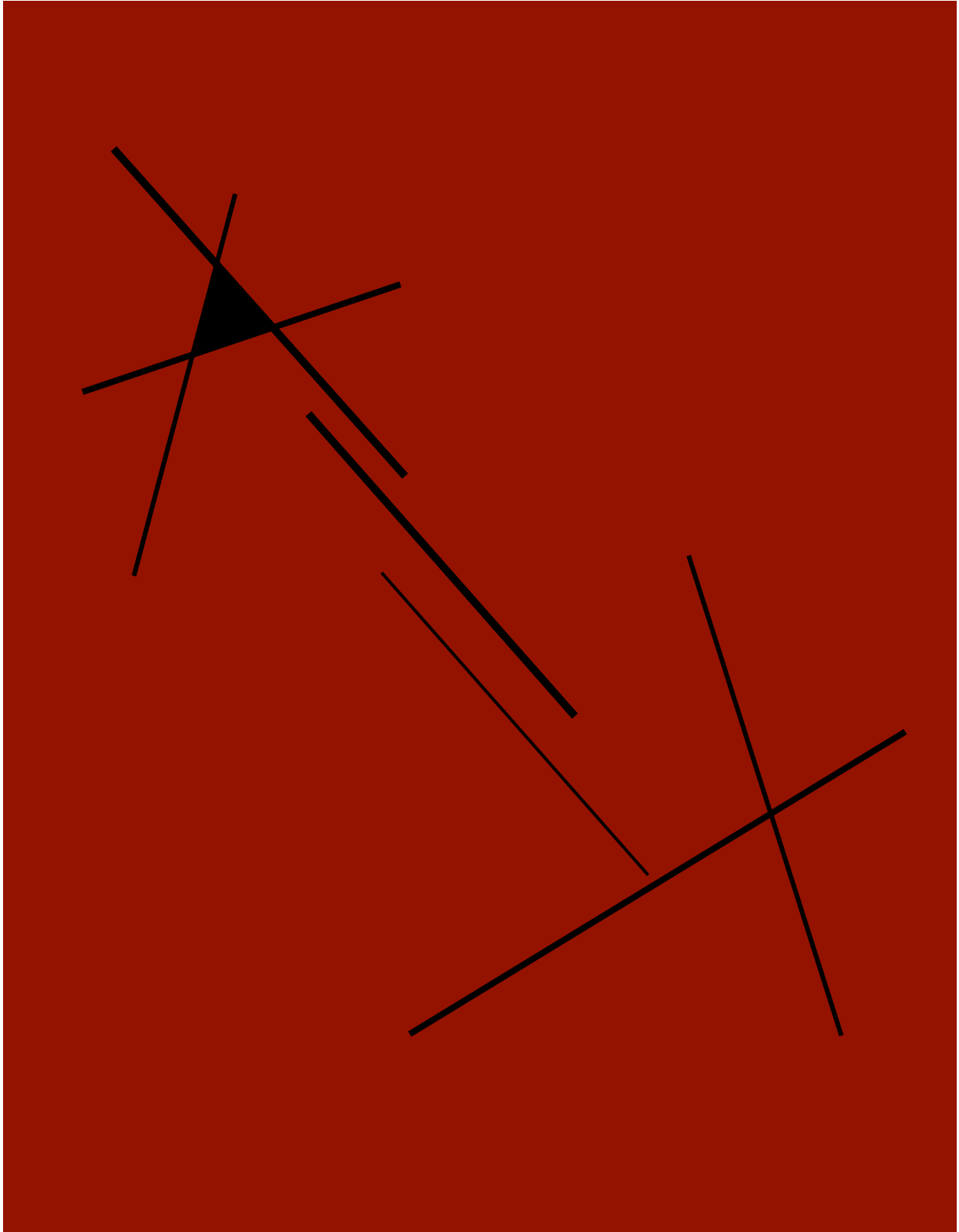
INSTRUMENT LANDING



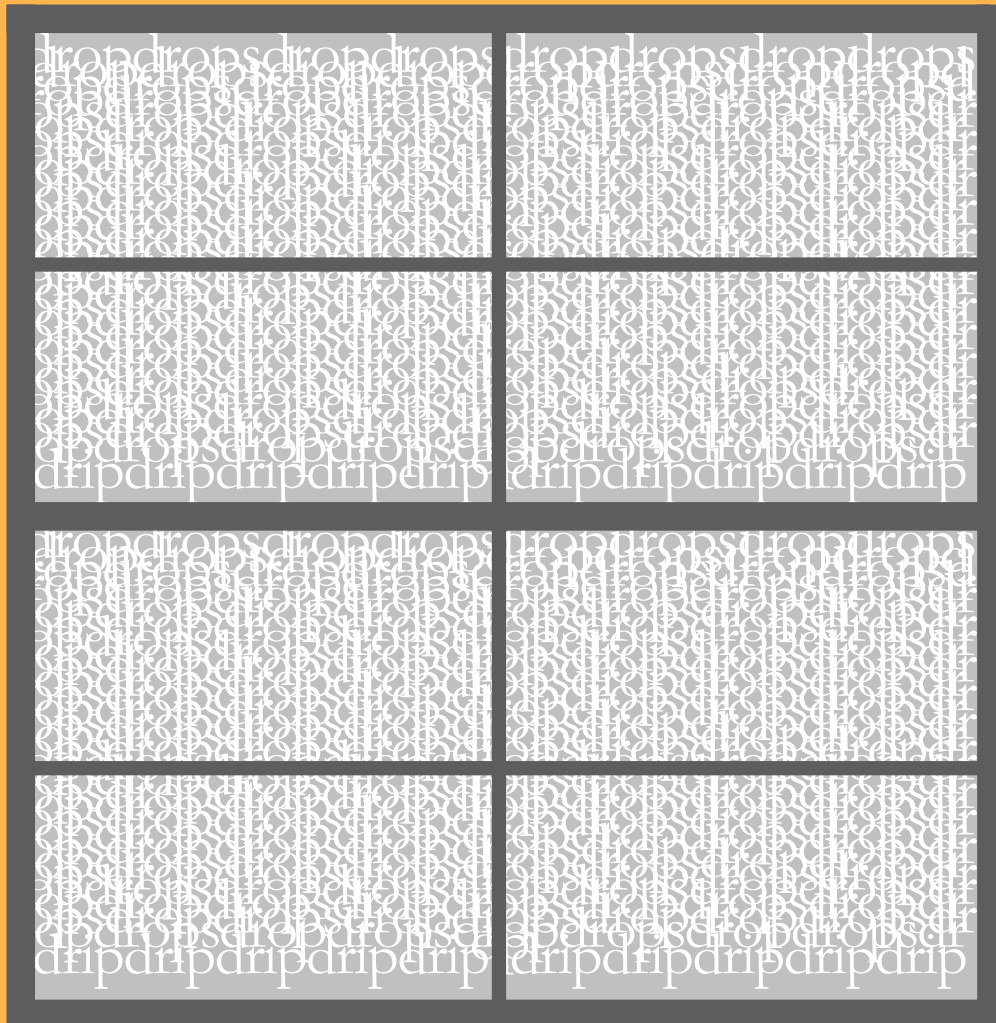


This is obviously a contour from a circular saw blade cut from paper to render its profile rather than its cutting edge.

The last cut poem that I want to show you does not involve scissors or knives but uses an ax to cut the word *AX* into the paper. As you can see, I'm not very good with an ax, missing the letters twice:



THANK YOU VERY MUCH!



FALL COLLECTION FROM SEATTLE

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E•RATIO ISSUE 16 New York City

taxis de pasa logos

E ratio



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