

Sheena Calvert: *Biography*

I am a philosopher, writer, designer and artist. I am also a typographer and book designer by background and this informs my practice. My current research investigates the moment where material language and philosophy interact, exploring the possibility of enacting an immanent, 'performative' form of philosophy at the level of the material text/book/artefact.

My studio, the .918 press (E8), is a fully equipped letterpress-printing workshop for the production of experimental work on the topic of 'materiallanguage'. Here, I experiment with the ways in which philosophies of language can be enacted at the level of material language, through letterpress printed works, and other creative investigations, using wood and metal type. Recent creative projects include the archival print edition and upcoming book: 'Re/Cut', and an on-going body of written and creative work entitled '[Un]disciplined Gestures'. My work has recently been exhibited at the Rag Factory, and at the Ethnographic Museum in Krakow. 'The Cruelty of the Classical Canon' (2013/14), is in the form of an iron-bound artists' book, produced specifically for the exhibition: 'The Book: Materiality and Making', (with Christine McCauley, Emma Dodson and Katherina Manolesou: Gallery West, U. of Westminster, February 4-March 7th 2014). Recent written work includes 'The Moral Economies of Language in Digital Space', for the Leonardo Electronic Almanac (MIT: 2013), along with 'Materia Prima' and 'Materia Secunda' for The Journal of Illustration (Intellect: 2013). My teaching crosses theory and practice of art/design/illustration/'other', at Camberwell College of Arts, Central St. Martins, and The Royal College of Art, London.

This most recent artwork: 'Punctuating Philosophy' (2015/16), is posed in the form of a series of process-led letterpress printed works (in progress). A set of digital prints ('Stage One') have been produced specifically for an exhibition at The Wedding Space, Berlin, April 1-12th, 2016. My thanks to Sarah Mann-O'Donnell, director of the project, for the opportunity to show the work in this beautiful space, as part of my residency during March/April of 2016.

'Punctuating Philosophy' is part of a larger body of research, entitled materiallanguage, which touches upon contemporary concerns about retaining the sensual, human attributes of language in an age of technological/social/political transformations. Faced with the dematerialization of language, the work[s] claim that material engagement with language retains a place for both the process of making—and of experience—as a form of critical thinking; about language, culture, technology, and the question of the 'human'.

Production Notes:

'PUNCTUATING PHILOSOPHY' (Stage One), 2016
520 x 297 Digital laserprints.

'PUNCTUATING PHILOSOPHY' (Stage One)

A process printwork by Sheena Calvert

The Wedding Space, Berlin,
April 1-12th, 2016

"An exclamation point looks like an index finger raised in warning; a question mark looks like a flashing light or the blink of an eye. A colon, says Karl Kraus, opens its mouth wide: woe to the writer who does not fill it with something nourishing. Visually, the semicolon looks like a drooping moustache; I am even more aware of its gamey taste. With self-satisfied peasant cunning, German quotation marks (<<> >) lick their lips."

"History has left its residue in punctuation marks, and it is history, far more than meaning or grammatical function, that looks out at us, rigidified and trembling slightly, from every mark of punctuation."

— Adorno¹

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1. 'Punctuation Marks', Theodor W. Adorno and Shierry Weber Nicholsen *The Antioch Review*, Vol. 48, No. 3, *Poetry Today* (Summer, 1990), pp. 300-305

Punctuating Philosophy: *Some Notes*

This work commences from an observation: that the full significance of punctuation marks is almost universally overlooked and under-examined in any discussions of written language, especially within philosophy, where (as Giorgio Agamben has previously pointed out), there is an entire philosophy of punctuation yet to be written (Agamben, *Potentialities*, 1999). In his essay 'Absolute Immanence', Agamben is concerned to explain the thinking behind Deleuze's text: 'Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life...' (Deleuze, 2005) It contains a nuanced series of remarks on the use of the colon and ellipsis within the title: acting as provisional thoughts en route to a 'philosophy of punctuation', which he proposes is yet to come. "Elements for a philosophy of punctuation are, with the exception of the brief indications in Adorno's essay, almost entirely lacking" (Agamben, 1999: 222).

The essay Agamben refers to is 'Punctuation Marks', where Adorno playfully shows how punctuation closes the gap between text and image, speech and writing. He describes punctuation marks in terms of traffic signals, and codes them: "Explanation points are red, colons green, dashes call to a halt... An exclamation point looks like an index finger raised in warning; a question mark looks like a flashing light or the blink of an eye. A colon, says Karl Kraus, opens its mouth wide: woe to the writer who does not fill it with something nourishing." (Adorno, 1990). This playful (and not entirely serious) essay makes clear that while punctuation is a formal attribute of the written text, it has closer affinities with music, which possesses a non-semantic mode of expression. Adorno further explains how punctuation diligently serves the interplay of language and the reader, and "nourish the body of language.", implicitly embedding the historical at the level of minute typographic detail (Adorno, 1990).

In his book 'Being Singular Plural' (2000), Jean-Luc-Nancy consciously foregrounds a version of the book's title which removes the hyphenation between the three words; rendering them ontologically isolated, by analogy to the individual. Later, he adds the hyphens, in order to show how a new ontology based in the relations between these terms emerges via their introduction: inferring their (and our) integration, not separation. What he calls the 'withness' of these three previously isolated words, is facilitated by the addition of the hyphen which suggests both 'a mark of union and a mark of division, (a "co-essence", which is created by the non-hierarchical nature of the terms, which are exchangeable). By effacing the hyphen, each term (and us) is rendered simultaneously alone and together. "Being-with-itself", whilst also being with others, is shown to be the essential condition of Being. In the end—he argues—the hyphen itself is essence, and allows us to map out an entirely new ontological domain and (later in the book), describes the conditions for a new politics. "The hyphen is, in this sense, the most dialectical of punctuation marks, since it unites only to the degree that it distinguishes, and it distinguishes only to the degree that it unites"(Agamben, 1999: 222).

Other notable exceptions to the lack of observation of punctuations' role in philosophical thought and expression include reminders of Nietzsche's extended (and conscious) use of the ellipsis throughout his work, as a way to suggest the fragmentary, ever deferred nature of thought and experience. Offering a prime example of how the kind of thought being promoted is aided by the material dimension of language, typographic detail and/or text as image: "Nietzsche's ellipses and long dashes indicate the continuing flow of a thought that should not be expressed, leaving the reader to imagine what is omitted..." (Metzger, 2009).

A 'Philosophy of Punctuation' would require a mini-history of those individual philosophers who have paid attention to punctuation, and who have contemplated its significance for the act of thinking itself. However, this work is very much rooted in the typographic and material dimensions of the argument[s], and plans to undertake a practice-led trajectory, aiming to show how the 'image' of thought is aided and supported by the 'image' of punctuation as a non-semantic but richly descriptive notational language-in-itself. A series of experimental letterpress-printed punctuation-based typographic prints, which come together in an artist's book/folio edition, will complement these philosophical remarks (to be produced at the .918 press, London, and bound at the London Centre for the Book Arts). These will foreground the significance of punctuation to thinking; actively interrogating the philosophical ideas under consideration: an intense 'thinking-through-making' strategy in which the ideas will quite literally emerge on the bed of the press.

Stage one of the work involves a close[r] examination of the primary texts which address punctuation in philosophy, and which draw our attention to its role in determining and/or regulating thought. The exhibition at the Wedding Space, Berlin (April 1-12th, 2016), presents a series of provisional 'sketches' using pages, stripped from the original texts, and in which the key ideas are embedded. The next stage is to reset those texts, in letterpress (wood/metal), which is a highly material typographic practice and method, requiring patience and minute attention to detail. The work will inevitably transform at this stage, and become something 'other'. The intensely process-led and non-directive aspect of the work is intrinsic to my working method.

At the .918 press, E3, London, there is a large collection of punctuation available to draw from, and the collection represents an approximately 130-40-year time span. The metal and wood types which will form the basis of the visual presentation of this work, and are the typographic ingredients for a detailed material interrogation of the theoretical questions which this research project poses. It is significant that the work be produced in letterpress, since the work requires a full immersion in process, and a micro-typographic (material) investigation rather than purely formal outcomes.