Materia Prima, text-*as*-image

Sheena Calvert, The University of the Arts, and The University of Westminster.

Abstract

It is with the materiality of language, or *Materia Prima*, that this article concerns itself, reflecting upon the 'surface' of text, as an image in its own right. The oral or spoken/auditory/acoustic qualities of language have long been held to be aesthetically central to literature and poetry, not material words. The philosopher Richard Shusterman describes this phenomenon as a lack of attention to those instances when the 'visible is visible', this phrase relying upon a distinction between two meanings of the word 'visible'. The first suggests being 'able to be seen', while the second suggests the 'conspicuous' or 'strikingly manifest' aspect(s) of the seen (or passive and active modes of the visible). The printed surface of language, where the 'visible is visible', has traditionally been viewed as irrelevant in philosophical accounts of language, from Plato to Wittgenstein, where, frequently, language is broken down only into 'the sound aspect' and 'the meaning aspect'. However, this article will argue that the knowledge that artists, designers, typographers and illustrators bring is that the material word is a crucial partner in the production of meaning. This article engages with those practitioners whose work interfaces with these concerns, both directly and indirectly.
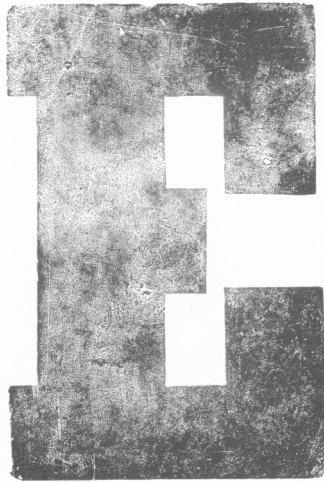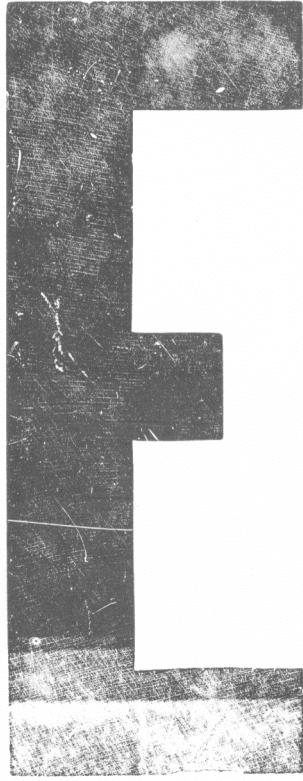
Introduction

This article takes as its point of departure that written, printed, drawn or spoken text that refers to itself, or considers its own materiality, constituting a 'crisis' in language, since it breaks the conventional link between language and meaning. By convention, language is supposed to 'point', away from itself, and towards another concept, reality or object. In referring only to itself, matters become complicated, since when the 'surface' of language is emphasized, and not language's function, the usual distinctions between discourse and

figure (Lyotard 2011), text and image, collapse in a vortex of self-referentiality. We are entered into a paradoxical space, where initially it is not clear what language *is* under these conditions. It seems to have no role, and, moreover, upsets notions of transparency in communication, since it points towards itself, and nothing else, with the full opacity constituting a 'scandalous' form of materiality, which disrupts the conformity of textual relations (Lyotard 2011). However, after reflection, we see that with the relative slowness of the figural (image), the persistence of the plasticity of form in text (discourse) brings us to a stop, creating another space of reflection, somewhere between the figural and the discursive. As Lyotard remarks, 'Once again it [plasticity] will slow down the eye, and judgment, forcing the mind to take position in front of the sensory' (2011: 212).

I propose to call this kind of self-referring, figural/plastic language *Materia Prima* or *Prima Materia*, the Latin term for 'primary matter' or 'first source'. It is used here to suggest language that has no function other than to be an image of itself, or to refer to its own 'surfaces', possessing an almost alchemical quality, comprising formless, undifferentiated base material(s), which nonetheless possesses enormous creative and analytic potential. In other words, this *Prima Materia* is pure, undifferentiated energy, but before it becomes language, it is plastic material that has a different kind of meaning, and which closes the space between image and text, or the discursive and figural. Lyotard proposes that we need to pay attention to this visual surface, in order to fully understand language, through 'the understanding of the graphic form in and of itself, and thus the patient probing of the plastic meaning it carries' (2011: 211).

Within this paper, I plan to demonstrate that artists, typographers, illustrators and many writers have long understood that *Materia Prima* holds the key to understanding language. They openly play with the material of language, uninhibited by its conventional role within communication, and yet they still deliver meaning. This meaning is located at the level of language's inherent visuality, surface or text-as-image, not in an external reality to which language refers. When language is freed from the requirement to represent something other than itself, it speaks from a position of immanent reflection, not an extrinsic one (internal, not external), since the object-ness of language is foregrounded: its materiality. This in turn unlocks different semantic attributes of language. While materiality does not provide all of the knowledge of language, it complements that provided by conceptual accounts.

By consciously or unconsciously working with material language in this way, creative practitioners supplement, amplify or correct the work of text-based philosophers of language, by drawing attention to those qualities of language that cannot be spoken or written about from within the discursive form. In other words, these creative investigations enact, rather than describe, those questions of language that remain at the root of western philosophical discourse(s), and demonstrate aspects of language's role in producing meaning and knowledge. In questioning where meaning resides or breaks down, how logic works, or where language collapses into image, philosophy of language is 'performed' within such works, and philosophy is enriched. Examples to be discussed within this article include those from poets, typographers, artists and writers, whose work specifically foregrounds material language.

The crystal goblet: In/visible text

But first, a historical remark from the field of typography, which is still relevant to this argument, and which will ground these observations in typographic tradition. In her 1955 essay 'The crystal goblet: Why printing should be invisible', the print historian Beatrice Warde argues that text should seek an essential transparency in deference to the content, without drawing attention to itself, either formally or functionally. Her metaphor is the crystal goblet:

> Imagine that you have before you a flagon of wine. You have two goblets before you. One is of solid gold, wrought in the most exquisite patterns. The other is of crystal-clear glass, thin as a bubble, and as transparent. Pour and drink; and according to your choice of goblet, I shall know whether or not you are a connoisseur of wine. For if you have no feelings about wine one way or the other, you will want the sensation of drinking out of a vessel that may have cost thousands of pounds; but if you are a member of that vanishing tribe, the amateurs of fine vintages, you will choose the crystal, because everything about it is calculated to reveal rather than hide the beautiful thing which it was meant to contain…. you will find that almost all the virtues of the perfect wine-glass have a parallel in typography… The most important thing about printing is that it conveys thought, ideas, images, from one mind to other minds. This statement is what you might call the front door of the science of typography. Type well

used is invisible as type, just as the perfect talking voice is the unnoticed

vehicle for the transmission of words, ideas. (Warde 1955)

While Warde is talking about a very specific form of typography suitable for reading and

book design, her comments reflect a significant, broader and long-lasting prejudice in

typographic circles: that type should be an invisible vehicle for content.

Indirectly challenging Warde's ideas about the priority of content over 'visible'

typography, philosopher Richard Shusterman, in his book *Surface and Depth* (2002),

points out that the 'surface' of text (along with both windows and pixels) is frequently

invisible, often having no more than a residual impact on our conscious apprehension:

> We do not usually notice the surface of our glass windows because we are
>
> looking through them; nor do we notice the particular color and size of the
>
> pixels on our computer screen as we look at them to grasp the images they
>
> constitute. (2002: 159)

This antipathy towards the surface of text is entrenched and encoded in the language of

aesthetics. Traditionally, for aesthetic conservatives such as Monroe Beardsley, language

is broken down only into the sound aspect and the meaning aspect. The physicality of

language, other than that which is audible (privileging the oral), is suppressed. In his

book *Aesthetics*, in the chapter 'Typography and poetry', Beardsley compares the

relationship between the 'visual appearance of poetry and its meaning' (1959: 259) to

that of sounds and meaning in poetry. Referring to examples such as E. E. Cummings,

Dylan Thomas's shaped poems and 'The Tale of a Mouse' from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, he asks, 'Can these arrangements of type be regarded as presentational equivalents to the sense, and cohering with it, or does the relation remain accidental and curious?' (Beardsley 1959: 259), indicating that he does not see the centrality of the presentational form of text in poetry. He further contemplates the role of materiality on language when he asks, 'What happens to a poem when it is printed in italics, or small caps, in a large size, or in a special type face such as Gothic, Caslon Old Face, or Garamond?' (Beardsley 1959: 259).

Finally, Beardsley points out that there is a dependence on the written word for certain puns to work. For example, the distinction between 'will' the adjective and 'Will' the name depends upon the convention of capitalization, and this difference is expressed less successfully, if at all, in spoken language. Thus, while Beardsley acknowledges that the written form of language has some significance, he relegates these comments to a single paragraph in a 600-page book on aesthetics.
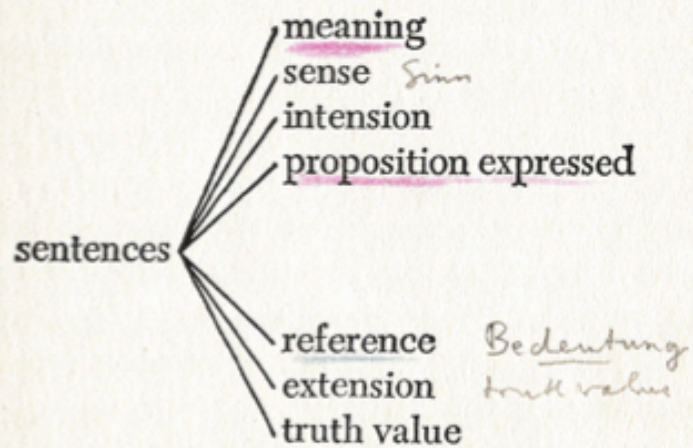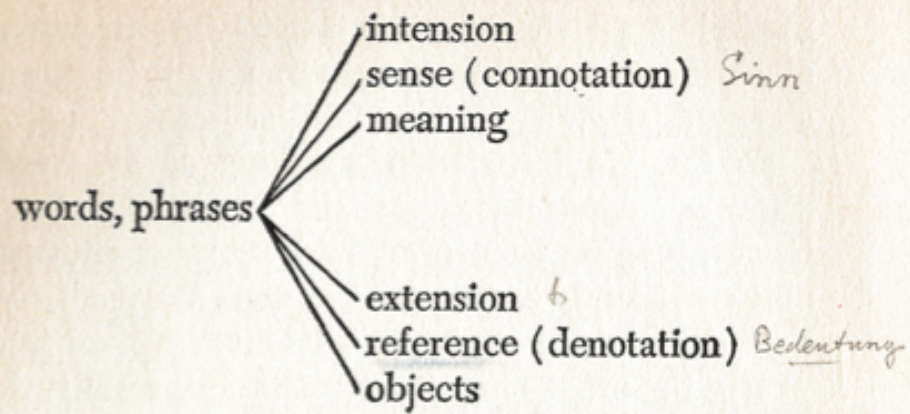
However, irrespective of whether the goblet is clear crystal or gaudy wrought metal, the goblet itself is what the artists and writers referred to in this article are concerned with: language itself, in all its myriad forms. Or, to put it another way, and to quote Giorgio Agamben, 'To bring the word to a stop is to pull it out of the flux of meaning, to exhibit it as such' (2002: 317). Artists and designers, typographers, poets and illustrators frequently embrace language's materiality, and many have directly engaged material language in their work, as an explicit theme, 'stopping' it, from within the flux. Arthur Danto posed the problem that this kind of work addresses, in a remark about cinema that can easily be reinterpreted with respect to language:
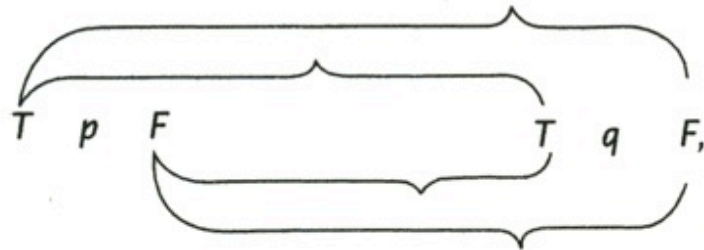
> We do not become aware of [language/time] in ordinary [reading] because
> too much takes place in [language] for [language] itself to become the
> object of consciousness'. The sign can signify anything except that it is in
> the process of signifying. (1997: 67)

Beatrice Warde takes as a given that invisibility is a positive attribute of text, while Richard Shusterman locates this phenomenon within the traditional literary and philosophical antipathy towards writing, in favour of the 'authenticity' of speech. He argues that our 'aesthetic blindness to surface, a failure to see the importance of the visual face of literature' (Shusterman 2002: 159) is rooted in Platonic and Hegelian traditions of indifference to the visual aspects of written language, which favour accounts of language's oral properties, or 'spiritual' dimensions: its metaphysics. Oral or auditory qualities of language have long been held to be aesthetically central to literature (most evident in poetry, which requires an orator, to reveal its musical qualities), while the visual is largely regarded as aesthetically and semantically irrelevant. Shusterman describes this phenomenon as a lack of attention to those instances when the 'visible is visible' (2002: 159). This seeming tautology relies upon a distinction between two meanings of the word 'visible': the first suggesting able to be seen, the second suggesting the conspicuous or strikingly manifest aspect(s) of the seen, or intentional visibility, versus its passive form. He further argues that the consistent neglect of the visuality of printed words in literature, and aesthetics, extends to philosophy, where the 'visible' is largely viewed as irrelevant in philosophical reflection on language, especially in the

analytic tradition, exemplified by Frege and Wittgenstein. Descriptions of where meaning

takes place in language make no space for the visuality of language, and suppress its

sensual surface(s).

Figure 2: *Sinn* ('sense', or 'meaning') and *Bedeutung* (translated as 'reference', or

'denotation') are distinguished within Gottlob Frege's 1892 paper "Über Sinn und

Bedeutung" ("On Sense and Reference"). Here, the reader has annotated the printed text,

to make the distinction clear, bringing a level of visuality/materiality to the idea.

words, phrases
- intension
- sense (connotation) *Sinn*
- meaning
- extension *b*
- reference (denotation) *Bedeutung*
- objects

sentences
- meaning
- sense *Sinn*
- intension
- proposition expressed
- reference *Bedeutung*
- extension *truth value*
- truth value

$$T \quad p \quad F \qquad\qquad T \quad q \quad F,$$

"It is the peculiar mark of logical propositions that one can recognize that they are true from the symbols alone, and this fact contains in itself the whole philosophy of logic."

L. Wittgenstein: *Tractatus-Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.113.

Most philosophies of language take place within classical textual models, which in turn suppress vital dimensions of the very phenomena under examination. The concern is that many philosophers of language largely ignore the materiality of language as a valid source of knowledge *about* language, when trying to account for it within philosophical discourse. There are, of course, significant exceptions, such as Derrida, who argued in *Writing and Difference* that 'language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique' (1976: xviii). To counter the privileged position of the speech (parole) or the phone, from

Plato onwards, he puts forward a new science of gramme that emphasizes the unit of writing in favour of speech: a grammatology. In this way, he reinstates the significance of the trace or graphical aspects of language, in place of a conception of writing as a mere derivation of speech: an inferior form.
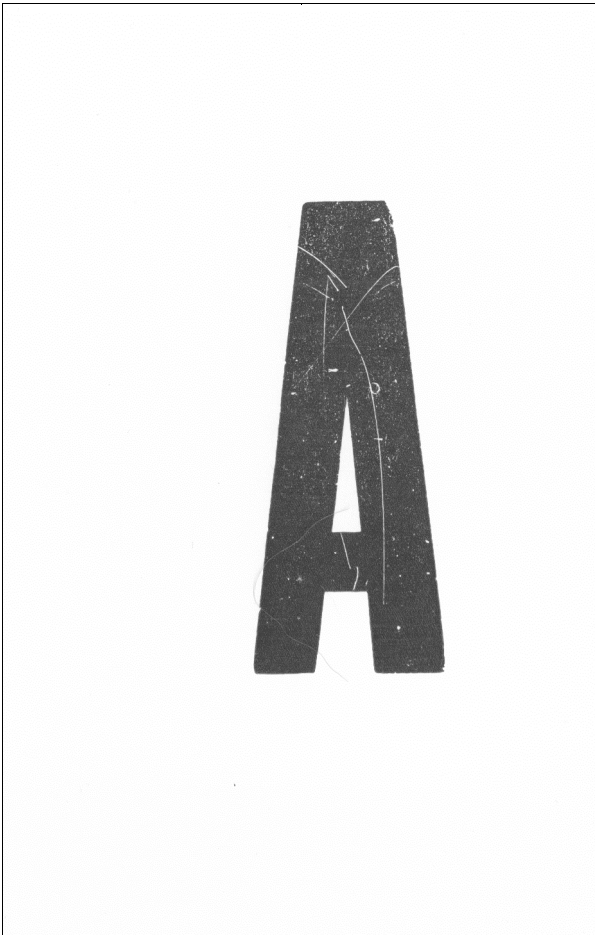
This sentence is a lie.

Figure 3: The classical form of the Liar Paradox, also known as 'The Paradox of the Cretan').

(note, please set the text in 24pt black text, to match the font used in the journal. (as below).

The form of the sentence has puzzled philosophers for thousands of years. The reason why it is so perplexing to logicians and philosophers is that the sentence refers back to itself, rendering it both true and false at the same time, and hence a paradox, since it will not settle into the binary logic of right/wrong, true/false. However, I want to suggest that rather than rejecting this as an aberration of logical rules, the fact that the Liar Paradox (also known as The Paradox of the Cretan) refers back to language *as such* tells us something about language through experience, not explanation. Paradoxes introduce questions of time (and/or timings) in language as being multiple, simultaneous, enfolded. They expose the tendency towards the viral/infinite proliferation of paradoxes – known as the 'liar's revenge', which radically undermine attempts to locate stable meaning, in a

fixed sentence, or statement, where we can move through the units of language, swiftly, and without being drawn to the figural qualities of the text. A sentence that claims of itself that it is false, or beyond truth and falsity, will frequently return the initial problem in an infinite circularity (Beall 2008). The materiality of language *is* the cause of the paradox. By reflecting back on itself, in an infinite regress, the paradox resists all attempts to resolve it, and insistently returns us to the surface of language itself.
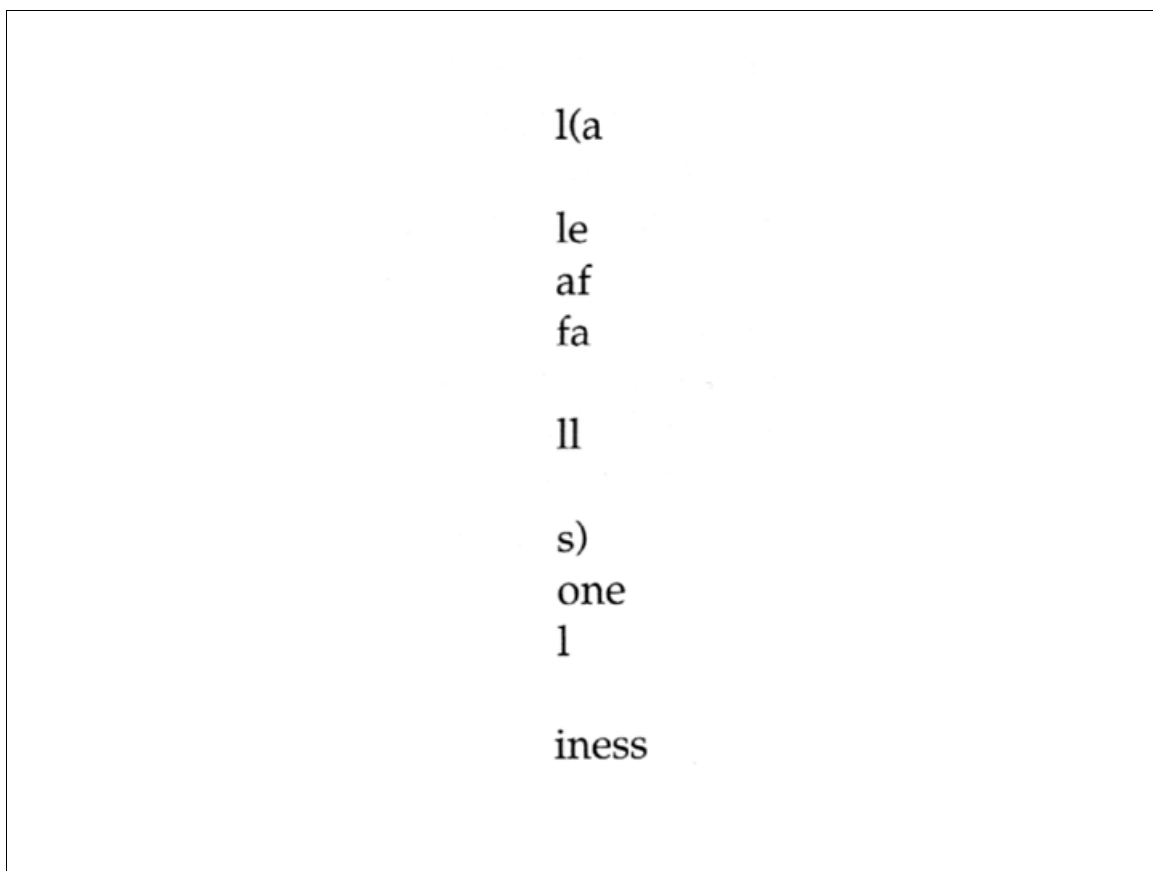

Discursive figures

The numerous artists, typographers, designers, writers and illustrators who have worked both in collaboration and alone demonstrate the role of materiality in language as a partner in the production of meaning, by exhibiting language 'as such'. They fully engage

with John Dewey's remark, 'All language, whatever its medium, involves *what* is said, and *how* it is said, or substance and form' (1980: 106). Dewey's comment reinforces the significance of medium, or the formal qualities of language, as an intimate partner in the production of meaning. The subject matter of language (what it refers to) is different from language itself (its matter, or material). But the latter affects or modifies the former. What follows are some examples of specific textual works that reinsert the materiality of text, as their partner in meaning.

Figure 4: e. e. cummings: 'L'(a', 1958

```
l(a

le
af
fa

ll

s)
one
l

iness
```

Looking at the E. E. Cummings' poem 'L'(a', it is clear that the visual presentation of language has a deeply supportive, if not primary, role in establishing meaning, and goes beyond neutral aesthetic/typographic choices. At the most basic level, the shape of the poem creates distinct pauses when you read it out loud. This clearly contributes to the overall sense and experience of the poem, which is composed of only four words. The minimal punctuation (a single set of parentheses) becomes visually emphasized within the composition, and the irregular spacing and hard left alignment reinforce the overall austerity, while the breaking of words in several places creates an exaggeratedly vertical, constrained shape, suggestive of the theme of isolation, and at the same time, the falling of leaves. The 'l' becomes an isolated figure, and references the singularity of the number '1'. The choice of a serif rather than sans serif typeface affects the tone of the poem, by softening and 'humanizing' the visible language, making it more personal. This subtlety is lost in the spoken rendition, and shows how visual attributes in a poem amplify meaning, in addition to sound and ideas. Johanna Drucker astutely remarked:

> [what enables a poem to work successfully?] Attention to visual properties
> – and their capacity to inflect, shape, manipulate, semantic value. All
> written poems are visual. But only some take advantage of that fact to
> explore the ways visuality and meaning work together. Others prefer for
> visual forms to fade into the background and play a lesser role.
> Conservative and traditional poets often think this way – and love the fine
> press tradition for its majestic presentation of their work while pretending
> the visual does not matter. Take those same poets' work and render it in

Hobo or Candy Cane type and see how they scream at the need for visual

conventions to be observed. They don't see the paradox. But cummings

was scoring his work, using space and placement to create rhythms and

semantic impact – those punning spellings and visual games help produce

surprise. He was very playful, after all. –J. Drucker, interview, conducted

by Tayah Barrs, via email, October, 2010

For Kurt Schwitters, words 'are no longer exclusively "means of Communication"', they

are not 'an instrument of thinking', but they are 'behaviour'. In his collages, Schwitters

explored the limits of form in text, by breaking the relationship between text and

meaning, between language and external reality (between language and designation or

reference):

It was recognized that the word creates or constitutes its own plasticity or

reality and this process found its parallel in modern non-objective

painting. Just as words can be a material in their own right, concrete

painting refers to itself. (Higgins 1973: 76)

Higgins further explains how these principles operate in the work of Schwitters

and Marinetti:

The picture plane which is covered with words, letters and numbers

becomes the constitutive element of such texts. The position of the word-

material on the plane, the distance of the texts from each other and the
compactness of the texture–in the linguistic and optical sense–transform
the text into an optical appearance, an additional dimension to the phonetic
and semantic articulation of the text. (Higgins 1973: 76)

According to Higgins, the Romantics were forerunners in this distancing of 'the word
from its purely representative functions' (1973: 75). Bruce Haywood writes that 'For
Novalis', 'the poetic in the world was the only genuine reality' (Haywood 1959: 2). The
romantic view of language uses the rhetoric of restitution of meaning:

 Novalis held that language was the primal act of all human creativity…
The notion pivots on the principle that thinking and speaking, thought and
language are inseparable. Wordsworth insisted that our expressions must
be 'a constituent part and power or function of the thought,' and not the
mere outward clothing of it. Since it is both the organ of thought and the
medium of poetry, only language can bring the two severed worlds back
together again. (Higgins 1973: 75)

In contrast to the Romantics' project of reconciling the two worlds of language and
thought, typographers such as H. N. Werkman once again attempted to *break* the link
between language and meaning, working with printed letterforms, directly, in the press,
as paint. Primarily, his work says much about the role and nature of language, and about
our innate, or conditioned, disposition to view text as a carrier of ideas, rather than as a

medium in its own right. It reveals aspects of language not normally 'visible', including its essential materiality, the role of time and space in the production of meaning, and particular aspects of the 'logic' and limits of language. It asks: Where does meaning in language lie. And when meaning/conferral of such is not the primary goal, it poses the problem: What is left? It is these relations that become the primary narrative when language resists the obligation to designate external objects/ideas. In other words, where language becomes an image of itself, 'language *as* such' is revealed and the narrative, the story being told, is of *language* itself.

Werkman exemplifies the idea that 'freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one' (Leibling), and also that type can function independently of communicating a specific message, and that the playful in working with text is as productive as any specific intentionality, system or method. He stated that 'The subject *proclaims* itself, and is never sought', in terms of his habit of working directly on the bed of the press, and seeing what emerged. This is not language as an instrumental partner in the expression of concepts or experience, which takes a backseat, or hides in the shadows, but something closer to a musical instrument, being 'played', and which can be experienced at the point where text kisses paper, and ink sticks to the surface of wood and metal, the tones and gestures of the visual surface, resonating with sensual and visual frequencies. This is intense radical material articulation, operating at the visual surface, drawing our attention firmly towards the glass, not to the view beyond, using language as *Materia Prima*, undifferentiated form.
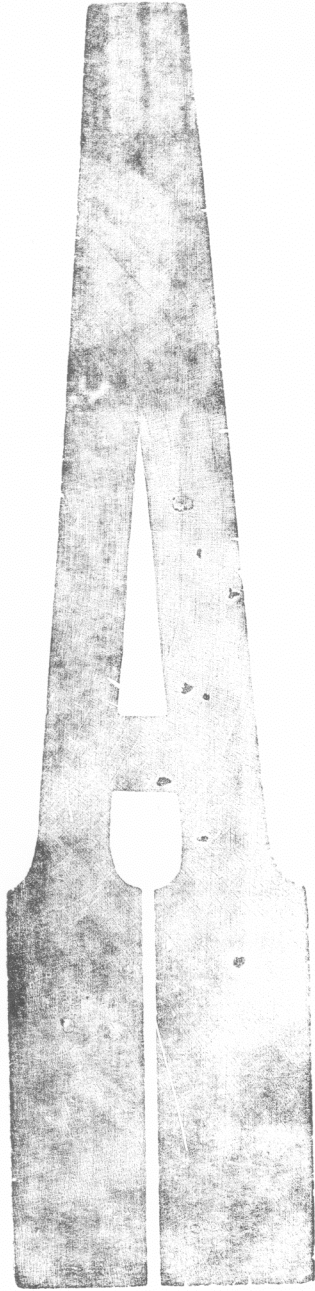
With his use of print as paint, Werkman understands that the material event of language is meaningful in and of itself, requiring no other justification. Language just 'is' in his hands. The intelligence of this work is in the stand it takes against 'transparency', and in his radical concern with matter. It also begs the profoundest of questions about 'the thin film at the limit of words and things', the metaphor through which Deleuze attempts to describe the notion of 'sense' in language, in ways that any number of written texts cannot accomplish. By attempting to break the link between printed language and meaning, Werkman is able to articulate these questions at more than just a metaphorical level, and without closing them down, allowing room for interpretation.

Reading the type

The knowledge in this printed letterform is of more than 120 years of wear and tear, resulting in numerous printings and lacerations to the surface. The social knowledge is of the forms of type used in late nineteenth-century advertising contexts, and of the changing face of industrialism. Stains, scratches and embedded layers of ink all speak to a physical object whose meaning is right at the surface, not in a metaphysical space. We can feel its weight, its heft and thickness. Its potential as an example of intense

materiality in language prefigures its functionality. This is a muscular 'R', bold and physical. It reminds us that: 'The smallest intramundane traits' as Adorno said, 'would be of relevance to the absolute' (1996: 408). He calls this the 'micrological' view, where rather than the mobile, transitory and ephemeral being merely a question of 'appearance', in contrast to the immutable, universal, transcendent content, for Adorno, in the realm of materialism (sensual, material, immanent), the non-identical in things shows up when you look at their 'matter'. Here, the idea and the reality of the non-identical become inseparably fused with material things.. In this humble 'R', we could argue that the non-identical attributes of material forms break through the shell of the universal concepts of language, and remind us that specific things, specific events and particular objects have meaning.

The book *Skinful* (Calvert 2001 comprises a set of sheets, unbound. It consists of the same word, printed repetitively, in the same position on the page. The only thing that changes on each sheet is the amount of ink applied to the letters each time, reducing almost imperceptibly over time and creating modulations of colour and texture as the inherent qualities of wood on paper become apparent as the ink lessens (wood grain, visible evidence of old 'wounds' to the letters becoming more or less visible at different points, ink coverage variance caused by the rollers that apply the ink, dust that adheres to the type). And yet, due to the fact that the ink is slowly but continually 'draining' from the letters, each print is different, revealing different aspects of the letters and of the

process. This forces the reader (and the artist) to focus on the single word 'Skinful', its meaning, its banality, its excessive, domineering presence on the bare white. And then, at some point, the skins of the letters themselves become apparent, the edges of the letters dominate and the void of the interior is revealed (its presence/absence).

This book is not meant to be read in a linear sequence, but experienced as an endurance, an 'event', a series of slices of one moment of the act of reading, extended to the extreme. And in the extension, there is the potential for a different kind of comprehension, a longer, drawn-out reflection on the meaning of the word itself, intimately related to the process of production and the economy of means employed in its production. There is finitude (the finitude of the ink that makes a 'presence' on the paper), but even when it is exhausted, the impression of the letters on the paper remains and could, theoretically, continue infinitely. In a sense, this book/word is only one moment, one thought, expended to a painful level of endurance for both producer and reader. The rigour, effort and mastery involved in the extended (it must all be done, by necessity in one period of time) printing process speaks to the conceptual purpose.

A Humument by Tom Phillips challenges the role of authorship in a given text, by materially interrogating and obscuring the original. He states about the work:

I plundered, mined and undermined its text to make it yield the ghosts of other possible stories, scenes, poems, erotic incidents and surrealist catastrophes which seemed to lurk within its wall of words. As I worked on it, I replaced the text I'd stripped away with visual images of all kinds.

I began to tell and depict, among other memories, dreams and reflections,

the sad story of Bill Toge, one of love's casualties. (Phillips 2005)

A Humument collapses the space betwThe artist een text and image. The discursively/figural space that Lyotard proposes as an alternative to those traditionally separated spheres is conjoined within both manuscript pages and Phillips' work, as the author and the textual material collapse into one conjoined space.

The artist Cy Twombly's work conspicuously foregrounds the act of reading; the 'work' of language, not the meaning of words themselves. In other words, it asks you to 'hear' the hearing of the work, to 'read' the reading, and to look at the surface presentation of the drawn, marked, inscribed, heavily material language he employs. This applies as much to his work with text as with image or symbol. He constantly defers meaning in favour of focussing on material expression. Working almost three-dimensionally was a way of exploring materials and the meaning they promised, but did not reveal.

John Berger puts it in this way: 'Twombly imposes his materials on us not as something which is going to serve some purpose, but as absolute matter, manifested in its glory' (Berger 2002). Whether it is possible to make work with language that is entirely self-referential, since even the most ephemeral or distorted elements of a visual language tend to cling tenaciously to meaning, is an open question, and one that Twombly is at the centre of: Berger pointed to the inherent complexities in this when he said:

The materia prima [raw material] is what exists prior to the division

operated by meaning: an enormous paradox since nothing, in the human

order, comes to man unless it is immediately accompanied by a meaning,

the meaning which other men have given it, and so on, in an infinite

regress. The [demiurgic] power of the painter is in this, that he makes the

materials exist as matter; even if some meaning comes out of the painting,

pencil and color remain as 'things', as stubborn substances whose

obstinacy in 'being there' nothing (no subsequent meaning) can destroy.

(Berger 2002)

Conclusion

As these examples show, visual language, or text-as-image, has a similar stubborn

obstinacy to the one Berger attributes to Cy Twombly's paintings, one that refuses to

relinquish its visible, or invisible, materiality in deference to either sound or meaning as

the primary concern of language. Matter has a meaning that cannot be articulated *outside*

its sensuality, residing at the level of 'things', whether ink, shape, typeface, paper, colour

or screen, irreducible to concepts, substantially visible and 'there' in ways that cannot be

evaded/sidelined, no matter how it is sidelined within literary or philosophical discourses.

The *Materia Prima* of language *is* this fundamental, base 'materiality' that constitutes

meaning, but a meaning experienced at the sensual surfaces of language, and prior to the

division constituted by meaning that Berger describes.

Artists, typographers, illustrators and many writers intuitively understand this, and

demonstrate this understanding in their diverse, replete and multi-sensual works. Their
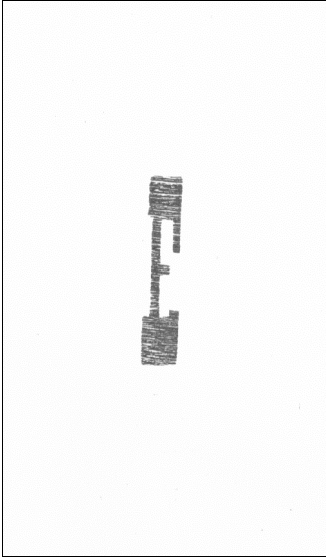
commitment to the exploration of the interface between the textual and the visual, the linguistic and the imagistic, the sensual and the conceptual, brings a richness to our experience of language, which is 'proper', as well as provocative, and deeply philosophical. For, if we look towards this exploration of *Materia Prima* for evidence of the nature of language 'in itself', we will see that language as an image of itself, text-*as*-image, yields a whole world of information, not describable within a language of designation, or in text-based discourses on the nature of language. The printed, written, drawn, scratched, material event of language is as rich and meaningful as the sound/speech event, and invites consideration of the surface(s) of language, outside any considerations of content: the material *is* the content.

Philosophy of language reaches its limit, but also its potential, where the only way to explain an idea is not to illustrate it (in the sense of something secondary to the text: accompanying it), or to describe it, but to inhabit it, to take up a space within it, fully, experientially and without prejudice, frequently every bit as much through process, not just at the level of formal outcomes. To collapse discourse and figure distinctions, and create slow readings and sensual surfaces to knowledge, drawn from the material attributes of text, image, line, gesture, tone, surface.

As I have attempted to show, typographers, writers, designers, artists and illustrators whose work considers, uses, questions and re-figures the visual, material attributes of language, have always been concerned with redefining philosophy of language, whether consciously/explicitly or not. By stepping outside the dominant textual discourses on language, their work enacts, performs and mines the richness of the material event of language, inflecting and complementing those discourses on language

and meaning, with a new energy drawn from the consideration of *Material Prima*. This is no less intellectual an activity, and is not *just* a question of aesthetics. Their detailed interrogations of the primary conditions of language implicitly close the space between writing and image, and between speech and writing, as they purposefully play within that traditional void, exploiting the space rendered irrelevant by others, from Plato onwards, sketching new and vibrant lines of inquiry, largely ignored by 'proper' literary theory and philosophy. This is the knowledge that writers, artists, designers, typographers and illustrators bring: that the material word, the *Materia Prima*, *makes* sense, and is a crucial partner in the production of meaning. Or, to slightly 'detour' the words of John Dewy, to refer not only to speech: 'All language, whatever its medium, involves *what* is [said or made], and *how* it is [said or made], or substance and form' (1980: 6).

Text-as-image is a process, a method, a means of interrogating language from within, immanently, not by adding another discourse on top, in yet another meta-language or system that tries to explain it as a phenomenon. You cannot get a 'view from nowhere' when writing about language, because you have to use language to do so; your object of scrutiny is also your means of expression. Artists, typographers, illustrators and writers are concerned with 'making' language, and thus their meditations are coherent with the 'experience' of language, not simply its analysis. *This* is the knowledge that artists, typographers, illustrators and experimental writers bring: the power of letting material language speak for itself.

All of the large letters within this article are taken from original Victorian and early 20th century wood type. They have been printed letterpress, by hand, on a Vandercook, Universal 1 proofing press, at the .918 press, London, E3 (by the author). The printing process emphasizes material inflections and imperfections at the surface of the type, caused by time, wear, and the printing process itself. Each print is unique, and each letter possesses a different hi[story].

References

Adorno, T. (1996), *Negative Dialectics* (trans. E. B. Ashton), London: Routledge.

Agamben, G. (2002), 'Difference and repetition: On Guy Debord's films', in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International* Tom McDonough (ed.) Brian Holmes (trans.), Cambridge: MIT Press.

Berger, J. ([1979] 2002), 'The Wisdom of Art', in Nicola Del Roscio (ed.), *Writings on Cy Twombly*, Germany: Schirmer/Mosel.

Beall, J. C. (2008), *Revenge of the Liar: New Essays on the Paradox*, Oxford, Oxford University Press. 1-31

Beardsley, M. C. (1958), *Aesthetics*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc.

Calvert, S. (2001), *Skinful*, London/Maastricht: Artist's Bookwork.

Cummings, E. E. (1968), in George J. Firmage (ed.), *E.E. Cummings, Complete Poems: 1904–1962*, New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation. Chapter: 95 Poems, (1958), p, 672. First published in 1958, 'L'(a', *The New York Review*, 1:1, Spring, p. 5.

Danto, A. C. (1997), *After the End of Art*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Deleuze, G. (1969/1990), *Logique du sens/The Logic of Sense* (trans. M. Lester and C. Stivale), Paris/New York: Minuit/Columbia University Press.

Derrida, J. (1976), *Of Grammatology* (trans. and introduced by G. Chakravorty Spivak), Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press.

____ (1997), *Writing and Difference* (trans. A. Bass), London: Routledge.

Dewey, J. (1980), *Art as Experience*, New York: Perigree Books.

Drucker, J., interview, conducted by Tayah Barrs, via email, October, 2010 .

Frege, G. 'On Sense and Reference'. Reprinted in A. W. Moore, ed., *Meaning & Reference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; and in Peter Geach and Max Black, eds., *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980; and in M. Beaney, ed., *The Frege Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997.

Haywood, B. (1959), *Novalis, the Veil of Imagery: A Study of the Poetic Works of Friedrich Von Hardenberg, 1772–1801*, Harvard Germanic Studies, vol. 1 Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Higgins, I. (1973), *Literature and the Plastic Arts, 1880–1930: Seven Essays*, Scottish Academic Press, London, Distributed by Chatto and Windus

Kepes, G. (1995), *The Language of Vision*, London: Dover Publications.

Liebling, A. J. (1904–1963), *The New Yorker*, May 14, 1960

Lyotard, J. F. (2011), *Discours figure/Discourse, Figure* (trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon and introduction by John Mowitt), Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, copyright 1971 by Klincksieck.

Pfefferkorn, K. (1989), *Novalis: A Romantic's Theory of Language and Poetry*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Phillips, T. (2005), *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel*, London: Thames and Hudson.

Purvis, A. (2004), *H. N. Werkman*, London: Laurence King Publishing.

Shusterman, R. (2002), 'Deep theory and surface blindness: On the aesthetic visibility of print', in *Surface and Depth: Dialectics of Criticism and Culture*, New York: Cornell University Press. p.159-174

Warde, B. (1955). 'The Crystal Goblet, or Why Printing Should be Invisible.' *In The Crystal Goblet: Sixteen Essays on Typography*. Selected. and edited by Henry Jacob. Cleveland, OH and New York, NY: World Publishing Company, pp. 11-17.

Wittgenstein, L. (2001), *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,* London: Routledge.

Contributor details

Dr Sheena Calvert holds a Master's degree from Yale University, and a Ph.D. in Philosophy and Aesthetics from the Department of Humanities, Media Arts Philosophy and Practice at the University of Greenwich. Her research is concerned with rethinking the relationship between language and meaning, viewed through the lens(es) of identity, difference and paradox. As a typographer, printmaker and graphic designer by background, her research interests are an extension of her long-standing involvement with fully engaging with the materiality of text/speech, as a form of knowledge about language. She teaches critical theory and practice of art/design/illustration at Central St. Martins, the London College of Communication and the University of Westminster. Her

research workshop/studio, the .918 press, in London, E8, consists of a fully functional letterpress facility for the production of experimental printing and bookworks. The most recent work being undertaken is an extension of the paper topic *Materia Prima*, which investigates the possibility of a materially grounded philosophy of language.

Contact:

4, Victoria Place, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1RU, UK.

Sheena.calvert@btinternet.com