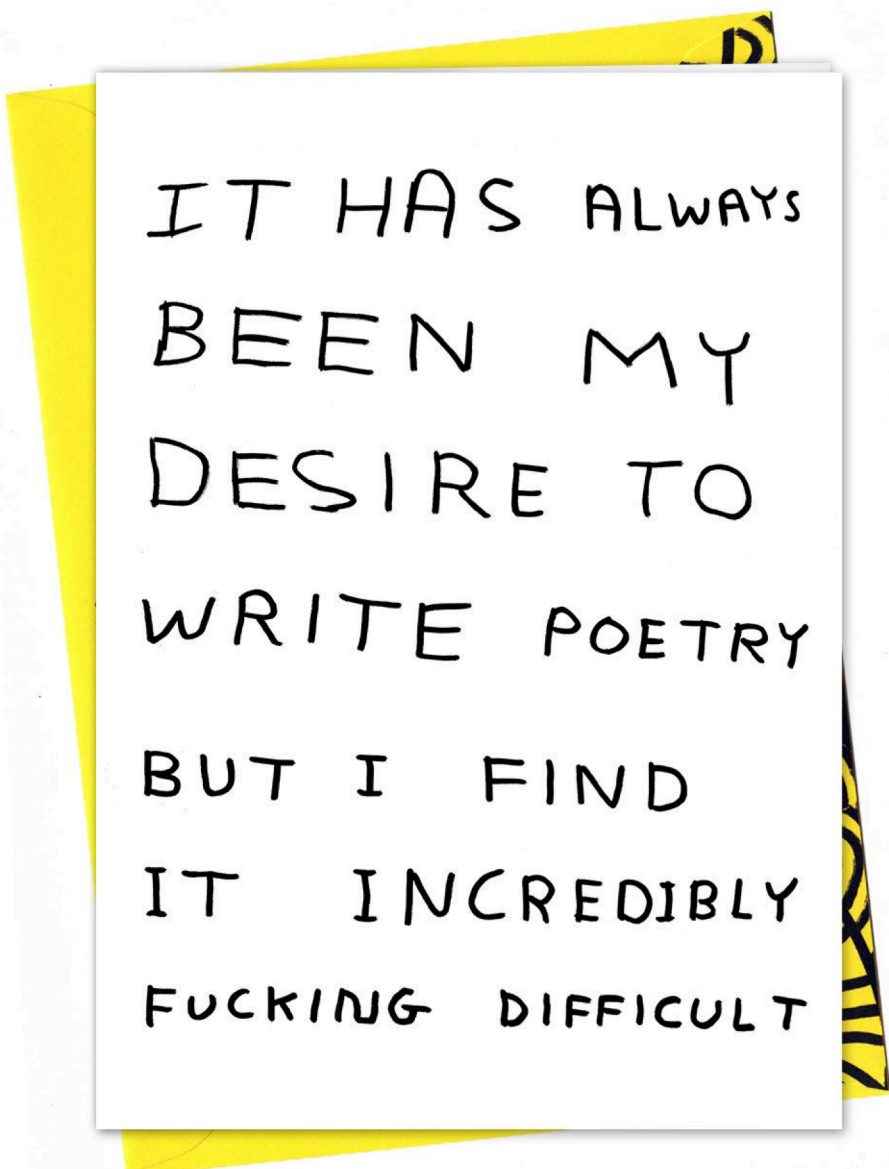


On the act, authority and in betweeness of writing in art



IT HAS ALWAYS  
BEEN MY  
DESIRE TO  
WRITE POETRY  
BUT I FIND  
IT INCREDIBLY  
FUCKING DIFFICULT

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David Shrigley, Untitled, 2014.

## Note to the reader

This essay is an attempt at finding my way through the very broad subject of writing in art. I have decided to construct it in the same way I think and develop my ideas. That is to say by walking. The text will therefore follow a meandering structure, reproducing my physical and mental journey through the Broad Museum in Los Angeles.

I will consider here writing as a physical act within the artwork as well as a mediator in the art institution. The idea is to gather 'thoughts' seemingly instinctive but actually organised such as Pascal's *Pensées*. Each 'thought' relates to an artwork encountered (or imagined) in the museum. The structure of this paper is both physical - following the exhibition's curation - and personal - shaped by my memories and own reactions. Walking in the steps of the wandering thinker Jane Rendell, the text puts the emphasis on the rhythm and location (Broad Museum - Los Angeles) as much as the content.

You will find that some footnotes are inserted in the text. Their purpose is to add personal references to the essay, as if added while I read it or write it. Usually not considered worth being published, these notes aim at voicing the reader's reaction and going against the 'knowledgeable' character of the text; allowing the writer to be performative. This structure echoes Georges Perec's stepping in and out from his thought process, constantly interrupted by a different voice of his, adding a memory, taste, context to the work. Indeed, this paper is an on-going process with multiple identities, where 'I' is an author, a reader, a visitor within an exhibition, a student and a singular human being with spontaneous preferences as well as serious convictions.

Investigating the theme of writing in art appeared to me as a necessary to approach my prejudices and fear of using words in artworks, therefore understanding the weight of language in art institutions and investigating the different ways written form penetrates art (vice versa). I am still on this quest and I invite you to join me. By walking together in this fantasised exhibition, we will look at the themes of writing as part of the work, as well as writing around the work and step in the in betweenness of writing while taking into account the reader and writer's roles all along the text.

## The act of writing

Writing is physical. It has long been enclosed in the box of reason. Pushed into the sphere of science and methodology.

But writing is a physical act. From eye to hand to surface.

The arm shakes sometimes. The fingers stop, cramping in pain. The side of the palm becomes flat and smooth after robbing thousands circular movements against the paper.

Writing is physical.

There is an idea of marking space, time and ourselves in the process of writing. Like the need I have to tattoo a date on my body - situating myself within myself, presenting myself outside of myself.

I feel like it is important today to consider writing as engraving. It is a reminder of the first attempt of humans to remember and tell their stories.

I recall myself carving signs on school desks with a compass point. As an unconscious yet necessary act: to leave a mark. The deeper the better. The deeper the better. I now reproduce the same act onto the metallic surface I am shaping. I feel proud and scared like I used to. Proud to leave a trace of me on this impersonal material. Scared because I know I am acting upon something that doesn't belong to me.

I sometimes want to write a word on the person sitting next to me on the train. I imagine myself holding an ink pen and carve his hand. "Can you feel what I am saying?" As if the pain or the strength would make it more understandable. I know it's wrong but still, writing has to be physical. I have decided to visit the Broad today, and, as usual in Los Angeles' subway, I feel the itchy material of the backrest on my skin and examine people's tattoos, reading them like a book, imagining what I could add to their body story.

The way we write bodies and write on bodies has always fascinated me. Looking at the word 'STRAIGHT' tattooed on this guy queuing in front of me, I think about the artist Santiago

Sierra who paid four prostitutes 12,000 pesetas (about 67 dollars) - the price of a shot of heroine - to tattoo a black line on their back, in front of an audience. I ask myself if this person in the queue wears it like a consequence of his own choices, the price to pay in a prejudiced society. Like most of Sierra's work, *160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People* is a very powerful action to denounce human exploitation. I wonder why it hit me harder than his *10 inch line shaved on the heads of two junkies*. He is still raising the same issues about ratio of power, body and addiction but the act of carving one's skin with an indelible signage for the other to see makes me shiver.

Tattooing appears here as an act of submission and weakness under a foreign power. And marking as a way to divide people into groups. Here, it is separating the 'victims' from the 'voyeur'. The voyeur (the audience) understands this separation by reading the sign (the black line on their skin) and witnessing the action.



*160 cm Line Tattooed on 4 People*, Santiago Sierra (2000)

Entering the second room in the first floor of the museum, I shivered too, face to face with Catherine Opie's *Self-portrait/Pervert*. I have always been attracted by Opie's work but this very piece of art has a particular impact on me. I end up staring at it for long minutes. I



wonder if it is the pain she had to endure to make such a beautiful picture or the fact that she wrote 'pervert' on her own chest that puts me in such dreadful fascination. I think of her movements, almost like a ritual: cutting her skin in front of a mirror, painfully donning this SM mask and silently sitting in front of the camera, waiting for the timer to start and the flash to trigger. Even though I am aware that she must have asked for a professional artist to carve her skin and another professional to take the picture, I keep on believing that she did it by herself. And my thought is: does it alter this idea of submission and separation that one experienced when looking at Sierra's work?



*Self-Portrait/Pervert*, Catherine Opie (1993)

Let's suppose Catherine Opie cut the word 'Pervert' on her chest herself, the sense of intrusion is even stronger. She had to look at her own skin as a blank surface and consider her own hand as a regular tool. In this situation, the act seems even more submissive, divorcing the body from the mind.

The word 'pervert' seems like a label pinned down on her skin. Becoming her. As if she got called by this term so many times that she accepted it. And wore it proudly, enriching each letter with embellishments. It is concerning to notice that one is so used to reading people that one feels like writing on his body is necessary to raise awareness. Opie had to suffer both mentally and physically to finally assume being the word that society put on her. This mixed feeling is perfectly represented by the way the word 'Pervert' is written: both delicately ornamented and bleeding in pain.

I would like to ask the 'STRAIGHT' tattooed guy what he thinks about this picture.

*"Books are only metaphors of the body. But in time of crisis, paper is no longer enough for the law, and it writes itself again on the bodies themselves"*<sup>1</sup>

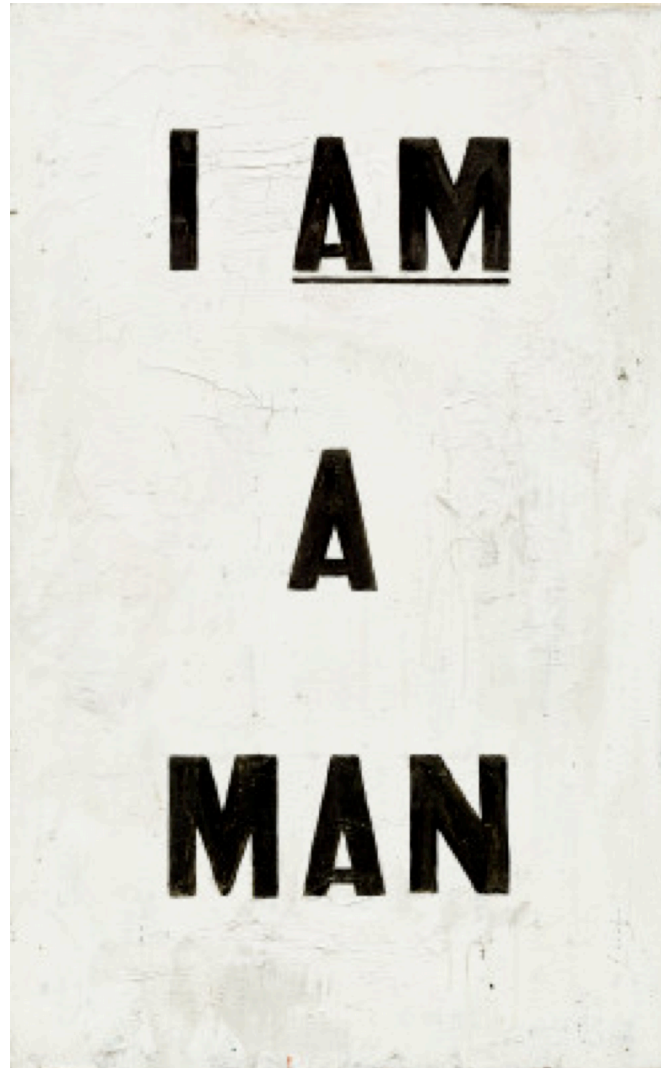
Bodies become books for everyone to read, articulated by universal language - some sort of copy that makes the norm legible.

I feel shamefully fulfilled when I carve words on the sculptures I create. I know I am exerting a form of totalitarian and egocentric power over the material<sup>a</sup> but I feel like I am powerfully linked to it at the same time through the pen I hold or the tool I use. Sometimes I even bleed, solemnly swearing a blood oath to the object I create.

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<sup>a</sup> Is anyone else worried about hurting a material? Maggie Nelson talks about how Gertrude Stein in *Tender Buttons* is 'worried about hurt colours'. *"Enthusiastically hurting a clouded yellow bud saucer"* could it be applied to objects too?

I walk out from a room where printing texts are stick to a frame. I have always found it hard to feel anything when looking at printed works. Words are for me too fragile to be repeated and violently pressed by machineries. I find myself searching for the trace of human activity. 'There must be a finger print somewhere' I repeat in silence.



*Untitled (I Am a Man), Glenn Lingon (1991)*

'I am a man' says Glenn Lingon's painting. This statement brings me back to my individuality. At first glance, it looks like a print until one notices the canvas's rough texture and the uneven 'N'. Each letter is trying to escape, each word is unstable. Even if it is written in capital letters and painted black on white as if it was a strict statement, the sentence eventually resonates like a febrile breath, almost asking for a question mark at the end.

The artist usually uses historical facts to create his artworks. For *Untitled (I am a Man)*, he reproduced the printed signs carried by marchers in Memphis in 1968. These 1,300 African American sanitation workers protested low wages and unsafe working conditions after two of their co-workers died because of faulty equipment.<sup>b</sup>

When he realised it in 1991, Lingon used handmade stencils as well as two different paints with different drying times: oil and enamel. The aim was to recreate a crackled surface, purposely making the work fragile. The imperfect finish and the constant threat of deterioration emphasize the work's ephemerality as well as the text's embodiment as an object subject to the vicissitudes of time and history.

Turning away from the fast pace, brainless repetition of the print, Glenn Lingon produces an original and precious artwork. He uses a quotation but willingly and discretely alters it. He doesn't merely create a replica; it is a different entity, highlighting the perpetual movement of freedom within time as well as its need to be preserved and protected.

Glenn Lingon is a poet writing history within and using the set rules of law. Like classical writers had to put sentences together while respecting measures, formats and rhymes. I think: 'This is poetry'.

'If the overwhelming presence of words is making them sometimes lose impact then I should at least try to give power to how are written', I say to myself when shyly considering the idea of being a writer.

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<sup>b</sup> "They took up the slogan 'I Am a Man' as a variant of Ralph Ellison's 'I Am an Invisible Man' (1952). By deleting the word 'invisible', the Memphis strikers asserted their presence, making themselves visible and standing from their rights."<sup>5</sup>

The Oxford English Dictionary define 'writing' as: *"the penning or forming of letters or words, the using of written characters for purpose of records, transmission of ideas etc"*

However, if we consider Andre Breton's definition of writing as *"modes of motivated inscription not so bound to the tasks of visualizing speech or forming legible characters, but instead directed towards conveying the restless energy of the body via some normally handled tools"*, the distinction between writing and drawing breaks down. And, more generally, between writing and art making.

However, in the essay *Writing in Place of Speaking*, Jane Rendell notices an insightful boundary between these two actions. She separates them based on what constitutes 'work', especially a 'new' body of work.<sup>c</sup> *"It appears that the use of words by 'artists' and 'writers' has been positioned differently in relation to definitions of work and newness"*.<sup>8</sup> This sentence is veridical. Making a new body of work composed of writing is, for an artist, a constant research, using and reusing the same words. However, it would sound terribly strange if an author was presenting a piece made of unoriginal texts.<sup>d</sup> It is therefore important to understand the relation some visual artists have with words.

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<sup>c</sup> It is when Jane Rendell was commissioned a piece by Sharon Kivland that she realised it. She sent texts she had already written but felt like they 'fitted the brief'. And Kivland replied *"Sorry, Jane – I commissioned a new piece of work specifically for this project."* How is it even possible to draw a line between new and old work?

<sup>d</sup> I felt like I was perpetrating a sin when I wanted to base this paragraph on Jane Rendell and cite her more than twice in a row. But who else would explain this better than her? It is accepted that artists uses someone else's words or imagery to produce an artwork but is still not accepted for a writer. I felt forced to give more explanations when her words were largely enough.





*Desire*, Ed Ruscha (1991)

When Ed Ruscha talks about his interest in words, he stresses the fact that the originality of his text based canvases rely on their size, the way they are painted. As walked around the second floor of the museum, I came across his painting 'Desire'. How gorged with meanings is the word 'desire' when it is dripping with translucent white over a yellow background?

- I smell a stripped bed soaked with ripped fruits and summer sweat -

In the end, it's not only writing that matters but the area on which is applied. A text cannot exist anywhere. Practically, there is a resistance of the surface. A well-rounded 'Love' becomes squared and pointy when carved on a bathroom's wall. The letter 'O' only appears as a painful failure at marking a nice circle.

*“Between the tool and the flesh there is thus an interaction that shows itself on the one hand by a change in the fiction (...) and, on the other, by the cry, which shrieks an inarticulable pain and constitutes the unthought part of bodily experience”<sup>9</sup>*

By writing you both change the text, the surface where it is applied and the reader’s experience.<sup>e</sup>

Michel De Certeau designates writing as *“the concrete activity that consists in constructing, on its own blank space - the page - a text that had the power over the exteriority from which it has first been isolated.”*<sup>10</sup> It seems here that the blank page could put anyone in the position of creation and power - able to exert his own selfish will. But what if writing isn’t always applied on its own *blank space*. Can anything possibly be a blank space anyways? Glenn Lingon’s work raises this question too.

Two months after I visited the Broad, the museum dedicated an entire show to Glenn Lingon. I went back, looking for more insight into this artist’s world of paint and words. Looking closer to *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, I noticed that the artist must have covered a previous painting. I enjoyed reading Gregg Bordowitz’s dramatic words *“vestiges of an underpainting are evident in glimpses of orange, red, brown, black, green and blue. Lingon had covered the abstraction with black paint before proceeding to execute the work”*<sup>11</sup>. It sounds like a proof that history is always imprinted somewhere somehow, that there is no such thing as a *blank space*.

Or maybe it is an attempt to question this idea of *blank space*. Since he covered the previous painting in thick black paint, Lingon is creating a black space, claiming black gaze and voice first to then tell an historical fact.<sup>f</sup>

I happily believe writing is more difficult than filling a blank page. It is an art of infiltrating oneself somewhere, following the shapes of the environment it is settled in. Hence considering the surface as much as the text.

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<sup>e</sup> Would you understand the word ‘love’ with a geometrical ‘O’ the same way you would if it was with a succulent O? Would the bathroom wall look more or less dirty if sprinkled with ‘love’ inscriptions?

<sup>f</sup> Am I seeing too far? Bordowitz seems to share this idea though *“Throughout his career Lingon has used blackness as a trope for both personal and collective experience”*.

Glenn Lingon's early works were painted on wooden doors, giving a bodily presence to the pieces. *"it is a matter of great importance that his entire body of work, be felt as matters of the beholding body"*<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, Lingon always refers to a sort of body. It is his own body but also the body of the writer from whom he took the quotation, the body of the man behind the story he tells and the one in front of the painting. *Untitled (I Am a Man)* is one of the most striking example. First, the canvas is portrait orientation, the word 'MAN' and 'I' are at eye level. Lingon presents *"a text that replaces human form in figurative painting"*<sup>13</sup>. There is actually no need to write on a physical body to reference to feel the presence of all these bodies included in the history of the work.

But more than the words or the dimension of the painting, the body is present simply because it recalls the signs carried by the marchers in Memphis. The artwork references directly to someone or even something that has existed, inscribing itself into history, helping the viewer to link with these voices and reflect on it, making his message last forever.



## The act of reading

For writing is a relation between the one who writes and the one who receives the text, not considering the surface where the text is written would be the same as not considering the reader at all.

As I have been doing since then.

Last night, I read a poem to my friend. It terrified me as I voiced what I have always experienced in silence. Even though I have been living with the poet's lines, hearing my own voice speaking someone else's words seemed like an intrusion/error. I came to assume it is harder to deal with the reader's experience since it is mostly not considered, almost silenced.

But this is quite a modern experience to mute the movements of reading. Have we become so aloof from our body to voice - hence making real - a text? Why do I feel like reading is now goes hand in hand with silence and solitude?

And why is that when reading historically comes from a tradition of voices and performance for the group?

In *The Death Of The Author*, Roland Barthes<sup>g</sup> investigates the hierarchical separation of the author from the reader. He notices that the author is a modern figure, created by our society who praises the individual rather than the group. *"in primitive societies, narrative is never undertaken by a person, but by a mediator, shaman or speaker, whose "performance" may be admired (...) but not his "genius".*<sup>17</sup> The mediator acts for the audience instead of its own name. That is why we have no knowledge of who wrote the stories yet we remember who used to sing them.

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<sup>g</sup> Roland Gérard Barthes was a French literary theorist, philosopher, linguist, critic, and semiotician of the 20th century. Barthes' ideas explored many fields including semiotics, anthropology and post-structuralism.

Think about the way people used to recite lines to an audience in a *salon* filled with *gens du monde*. The reader was as important, or even more, than the writer. He was the recipient of the text; he made his voice the body and mind of the other. How strange it is to think that technology completely divorced parts from one same entity: the voice and the body.<sup>h</sup>

The reader's now usual silence and stoic body posture make one believe that reading is a passive act. But is it really? I consider reading as a fully active act. And please don't tell me it is not when I finally finish a book, or stare at a painting, out of breath, realising I've been in apnoea for the last 15 seconds.<sup>i</sup>

When accepting the role of the reader (of images or text) as passive receiver, Michel de Certeau makes this association: "*the television viewer cannot write anything on the screen of his set. (...) He loses his author's rights and becomes, so it seems, a pure receiver*"<sup>19</sup> 'So it seems', indeed that might be what it seems, except without the viewer the TV wouldn't make much sense.

Again, I don't believe in reading being a lifeless act. Nor I agree with the schema of the productive writer and the submissive reader - receiving without remarking. I believe the text has a meaning through its readers. And that the reader is constantly shaping what he reads as he "*makes the text habitable like a rented apartment*"<sup>23</sup> He is silently producing his own meaning of what is written based on his memories and experiences. "*The text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, (...) but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader.*" Before adding "*the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology*"<sup>24</sup>. Maybe, according to Barthes, the reader is the *blank space*.

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<sup>h</sup> In *Telephone Book*, Avital Ronell, tells how people were completely freaked out when experiencing the telephone for the first time: hearing the sole sound of a voice coming from the apparatus, unable to identify the body emitting it.

<sup>i</sup> I like remembering this sentence of Bordowitz : "*Watching the finest cricket players induces an excitement in flow in the senses. So, too, a great painting can stimulate an experience of movement in the viewer*"<sup>18</sup>

SAYS "I'M READING A PAPER AND WAITING THROUGH THE PASSENGER WINDOW AND THERE'S A RIGHT ANGLED CORNER THAT CORNER'S THE BEST SANDWICH SHOP IN THE WORLD WOULD YOU GO AND GET ME TWO?" THE OTHER BLOCK LOOKS IN FRONT THEN BACK. "GUMON TWO." HE'S OUT OF THE CAR. THE DISTANT ENGINES GET LOUDER HE'S IN THE PLACE SAYING. "HI" A CAR PULLS UP. SMALL CAN'T HEAR ANYTHING THROUGH THE GLASS. THREE. MAYBE FOUR GUYS PILE OUT. HE'S BACK AT THE CAR. "HERE. YOURS IS THE ONE THAT LOOKS LIKE A ROAD KILL." "ROAD KILL?" "SEE THAT CAR PULLUP?" HE DOESN'T. HE GRABS THE SANDWICH. "THANK YOU VERY MUCH OWOWW!" HE GLANCES UP SAYING "I SHOULD GOT YOU GET ME THREE OF THESE THINGS." HE TUCKS INTO THE HUGE SANDWICH AND SQUINTS ACROSS "WHAT CAR?" THE GUY POINTS ACROSS FOUR PEOPLE RUSH OUT. THEY'RE PILING INTO THE CAR. HE'S PULLING SOMETHING OUT OF HIS BACK POCKET THE OTHER GUY SHOUTS "GODDAMN IT!" HE'S OUT HOLDING THE GUN RIGHT IN FRONT. ALL BLURRY. "GODDAMNIT!" HE SWERVES "FREEZE FREEZE!" RUNNING FORWARDS. AIMING THE GUN. "FREEZE!" HE HEARS A VOICE FROM HIS CREAM. "I GOT IT!" HE PUTS THE GUN AWAY. "FREEZE!" HE HEARS THE OTHER GUY SAYING "FREEZE!" AGAIN AND THE CAR SQUEALS "HE'S HERE HOLDING THE DEAD GUN STRAIGHT IN HIS FACE. IT EXPLODES POW. POW. POW. PEEDEEOWN. ALL YOU SEE IS THEM GOING INTO THE BOOT OF THE CAR AS IT SWERVES OFF. SCREECHING RIGHT AND LEFT. POWW. SHATTERS THE BACK WINDSCREEN. FALLS OUT THEN ALL YOU CAN SEE'S THE BLACK BULLET HOLES. AND THE CAR BEHIND FIRING OUT LITTLE JAGS OF FIRE. HE'S HOLDING THE GUN HARD IN FRONT. "COMI GET IN! GET IN!" FROM INSIDE "JESUS CHRIST." THE OTHER GUY INTERRUPTS "GO GO!" REALLY YELLING. THE CARS BLARING RED. SWERVING LEFT. SKIDDING. SQUEALING ROUND THE CORNER. HARD. SLIDING SIDEWAYS TOGETHER. THE RED CAR KEEPS BASHING INTO THE WHITE ONE. THE SOUNDS BLINDING. A HUBCAP FLIES ACROSS THE TARMAC BUT DON'T KNOW WHERE IT CAME FROM. IT'S THE ONLY THING. JUST SPINNING THROUGH THE SUNLIGHT. HIS FACE IS PALE THROUGH THE WINDSCREEN. YELLING LIKE A YEAZY. YOU CAN SEE RIGHT INSIDE HIS MOUTH. "GODDAMN!" THE DRIVER. PUNCHING THROUGH THE OPEN WINDOW IS TAKING THE WHEEL. REALLY TRYING INTO IT AND THE SQUEALING BLARES IN THE TARMAC YELLING. "OK GIVE ME A FUCKIN BRAKE. I AM GOING!" THE ROAD TRENDS PAST BEHIND HIS PROFILE. THEN EVERYTHING SWERVES ROUND IN FRONT. KIND OF PANS ACROSS AND YOU SEE THEIR CAR RIGHT THERE ON ITS OWN IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD. THE BACK TIRES SLING ACROSS THE TARMAC FIRST AND A HUGE CLOUD OF EXHAUST SMOKE'S BELCHING OUT BEHIND. THERE'S ANOTHER RED CAR IN FRONT. LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE GOING TO BASH IT. THEN IT'S NOWHERE NEAR. THE REAR VIEW MIRROR'S DEAD IN THE MIDDLE. SOMEONE FROM THE BACK YELLS. PANICKING. "I CAN'T SEE THEM. WHERE DID THEY GO?" THE OTHER GUY IN THE BACK SEAT THROWS THE CAR FORWARD. THEN HE SWINGS ROUND AND YELLS "I DON'T FUCKING BELIEVE THIS!" EVERYTHING SHAKES AND THEY SWERVE. THEIR FACE SO BIG THROUGH THE WINDOW. THERE'S A SECOND CAR BEHIND. THE REAR VIEW MIRROR RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE. AND THE DARK ROAD. THEN THEY'RE ON TOP OF THE SHADOW. THE OTHER CAR FROM INSIDE. THE STEERING WHEEL AND THE HUNCHED SHOULDERS. AND THE DRIVERS GLOVES GRIPPING THE WHEEL. THE BRIGHT ROADS RUSHING AT THEM. ONE OF THEM'S SAYING. "LOOK AT THE RIGHT. LOOK AT THE RIGHT. LOOK AT THE RIGHT." VERY QUICKLY. SOMEONE'S SHOUTING "OVER TO THE RIGHT! RIGHT!" A CAR CROSSES THE ROAD BANG IN FRONT. ANOTHER RED ONE COMES IN FROM SOMEWHERE. JUST MISSES THAT OTHER CAR. SLIDES ACROSS THE TARMAC. THE FRONT WING'S ALL BASHED IN. THE TAIL TILTS. SLIDES. THEN EVENS OUT. "I GOT IT!" HE PUNCHES IT RIGHT IN FRONT. THEM IS THE STRIPY BARRIER. THE CAR SWERVES AGAIN. THE BRAKES SQUEAL. THEN THE SAME GUY YELLS "PUNCHIT! PUNCHIT! PUNCH. IT!" THE WINDSCREEN'S SMEARED WITH SHIT. "LET IT GO!" THE STRIPES GET CLOSER AND CLOSER. THEN THEY BANG RIGHT THROUGH. YOU SEE ANOTHER CAR COMING AT THEM. PULLING OUT OF THE LAYBY. THE PASSENGERS SCREAMING FEAR. "OHHH SHHHHIT." AND HIS HAND CLANGING ON THE DASHBOARD. THE RIVER ECHOES "OH SHHIT!" THEN THE CAR IN FRONT'S SWERVING A RIGHT ANGLE LEAVING ARCHING TIRE MARKS BEHIND. THE WHEELS LOOK LIKE THEY'RE GOING THE OTHER WAY. LIKE THEY'RE SLINGING TO COME OFF. HE SEE THE PASSENGER FACE AGAIN. BLUERING ACROSS. THE CAR SWERVES AGAIN. HE'S PUSHING AROUND AND TO MAKE OUT WHAT'S GOING ON. THE ROAD OF THE ENGINES. "THIS IS A CAR! HEAR ME!" THE ENGINE SCREAMING SO HIGH. RIGHT IN FRONT IT'S. JUST THE BACK OF THE SHINY RED CAR. THE BACK OF IT. THE LIGHT AND ENGINE BLARING. THE PILLARS TRODE IN FRONT. THE DRIVERS FACE IS REALLY CLOSE. LOOKING STRAIGHT INTO THE ROAD. SO MANY SPARKS. LIKE A FIREWORK GOING OFF. IT SCRAPES ALONG THE TARMAC DEEPER AND DEEPER. LOW ON ONE SIDE. BUT SPEEDING. IT TURNS ACROSS THE ROAD. MORE SLOWLY. THE FRONT OF THE CAR FLIPS HIGH AS IT ROLLS OVER THE RAMP. INTO A PETROL STATION. DRAGGING THE FIRE UNDER. IT PULLS STILL. THE BODY JERKS. THE DRIVER JUMPS OUT AND GIBBS. PUSHES THE ROADS OF THE ENGINES. "THIS IS A CAR! HEAR ME!" 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This same day at the Broad, I found myself walking back and forth to be able to read: “if you’re so successful why do you feel like a fake” (red letters again) on a horizontal mirror. I slid my head on the side, carefully avoiding my reflection in the mirror. I was more interested in the way my own self and surroundings were reflected too, hence altering my understanding of the work, than in the text itself. *“to read is to wander through an imposed*

<sup>k</sup> The description is awkward to follow, it is also difficult to identify where to restart the text is overlapping, the narrative is incomplete with descriptions of rapidly unfolding events and short quotations, all of this in an eye burning red, filling up all the canvas.

system”<sup>25</sup> says Michel De Certeau, and it is even truer when considering Barbara Kruger’s work. I felt deeply uncomfortable when I caught my own gaze in the mirror as I was trying my best to avoid any reflection to manage to read the work. As if I wasn’t supposed to exist when facing a written artwork. And random visitors appeared in the reflection too - ‘Who dares entering my little reading bubble?’ - I soon replaced this dramatic thought with Jane Rendell’s words: ‘I just think I am missing the point’.

Indeed, in her catalogue essay *On thinking that I am missing the point* for Sally Morfill’s show, she reflected on the artist’s interest in exploring uncomfortable viewing positions. I haven’t experienced this particular work but I can relate to what it feels when facing *If you’re so successful...* which seems to be here “*precisely to frustrate my visual pleasure*”<sup>26</sup> By writing a canny statement on an eye level mirror Kruger wants me to focus “*on thinking that I am missing the point*”.

A couple of days after, scrolling through my Instagram feed, I came across a selfie taken on the same mirror - the photographer half hiding the text, half trying to reveal it - maybe that was the way to experience the work, embracing the egocentric side of the viewer.



Image found on the Internet

I try to make my way through the mass of people to catch a glance at the explanatory text written on the wall.

I don't like the texts in museums.

But I like the way they appear and disappear and are sometimes a bit wobbly. When I spot the missing letter in the pedantic descriptive paragraph, I feel like I've won over the institution.<sup>1</sup>

It is breaking my artist confidence when I go to an exhibition to discover art, yet stumble upon a word I don't understand or simply stay more time in front of a text I am trying to decipher than in front of the actual artwork. One would wisely advise me not to read the text if I don't want to. - The text is written big on the walls around me, should I just pretend it's not there? - I walk out, feeling like I've missed the point again - I sought knowledge instead of pleasure.

*"A few individuals, after having long considered themselves experts speaking a scientific language (...) suddenly realized that for the last few moments they have been walking on air, like Felix the Cat in the old cartoons"*<sup>28</sup> There is some kind of authority to the way writing is considered and displayed in the art institution that, once again, divorces the body from the mind. I do feel like Felix the Cat sometimes when visiting a museum; my mind elsewhere, high in the clouds and my body on automatic. Feeling like I walk eyes closed, through the museum's room.

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<sup>1</sup> As if the text and I were a team trying to prank the big power over us. *"Think of it as an act of civil disobedience"* says Maggie Nelson's friend when she tries to *"limp in the face of"* her heartache. *"Let the police peel you up."*



Still from *Felix the Cat and The Magic Bag* (1959)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=amGbBFsiuzc>

How can one not think about the ‘art language’ in this way too? In Triple Canopy’s article, they coined the expression ‘International Art English’ standing for the language used in contemporary documents. It was born with the *October*<sup>28</sup> art magazine, which, in 1976 started translating French post structuralist texts into English, asking for this new exclusionary Anglo art criticism language to be recognised instead of understood.<sup>m</sup> “*Those who could recognize the standard feints were literate*”<sup>31</sup>. Whatever the content is, the aim of IAE (International Art English) is to sound worth listening to, by adopting a fragile imitation of a foreign elite language. More than a change in the art criticism, it triggered an enormous impact on art interpretation too. Leaving the viewer behind at the cost of twisted sentences, swearing fidelity to a very particular interpretation of the work (the one guaranteed by the wall text/the ‘elite’).

The kind of writing adopted by *October* in the seventies spread to most of the art revues. “*A decade later, much of the middlebrow Artforum sounded similar. Soon after, so did artists’ statements, exhibition guides, grant proposals, and wall texts*”<sup>31</sup>. It is, indeed, very easy to copy and consume IAE style without understanding much of its rules. It seems like it is reaching to everyone while cheekily avoiding the ‘banal’ reader to understand it.

I visited a friend shortly after going to Glenn Lingon’s exhibition at the Broad. I remember being still confused about the information written around the work. I shared my confusion with him, and we looked together at the leaflet, composed of every wall texts. The one accompanying *Untitled (I Am a Man)*, presents a huge leap in logic between the second and

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<sup>m</sup> The trend was to say more rather and fewer, building long adverbial sentences peppered with contradictive adjectives.



third paragraph; going from a historical explanation of the work to a complex and general theoretical explanation where more meaning-making would be required. I was still troubled, actually pretty pissed-off.

And I wasn't troubled about this overwhelming information or lack of sense but because I felt like a fool. So used to reading and believing the museum's text that I didn't even notice the details of the work itself, flooded by the too many supposed interpretations of it.

My friend told me that American soldiers are trained to scan the landscape from right to left. To do so, they sit backward facing when taking the train. This process of reverse reading forced them to look with more attention therefore picking up more hidden information and details. *'We are so used to read from left to right that we don't see the details anymore'* he added.

I believe he tried to tell me that we read the same way we understand, with a trustful, passive home-loving gaze. Like with IAE, I don't question how it's written and what it's writing about: *"the artwork always arrives already swaddled in IAE"*.

*"We must relearn our relationship not only with information, but with knowledge itself."*<sup>34</sup>



Image taken from James Bridle's article, *Reading from left to right* (2015)

One needs to break down the way we read about work to understand it more fully. Some contemporary writers and theorists agree with that. It is the case of James Bridle who states *"we must learn over once again how to operate in the world, how to transform and transliterate information, how to absorb it, think it, search for it and deploy it."*<sup>35</sup> In his article *Reading from Left to Right*, Bridle praises the way digital medias can reinvent the

relation between the reader and the work. It does not conform to the formal shapes expected by critics. Instead, it creates new surfaces of reading and systems of comprehension through the use of links, multiple screens, online maps and so on. Triple Canopy's article seems to aim at this transformation of knowledge consumption too. Surprised, I noticed how my screen was shaped by the article itself: each footnote echoed to a hyperlink, opening a new window on my tab, transforming my usual way of scrolling, passively waiting for information. The text guides my eyes (looking at the pop up windows), my hands (clicking on different links) and partly decides the layout of my screen. I become an active reader of the digital age.

In the late eighteenth century Diderot wrote the *Encyclopédie*, publishing a part titled "*Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*". It set the position of art next to the one of science, almost mixing them up.

Articulated scientific language tried to be applied to 'arts and crafts' to dignify them.

However, in the article Art, Diderot clarifies the separation between art and science. He explains that the enlightened discourse applied to art is not more than the making of art.

I feel at peace when I read Wittgenstein intend to "*bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use*"<sup>38</sup>.



I guess I am seeking that *everyday use* when looking at art. I want to find the one detail that can prove me that a human hand is behind the artwork.

- It reassures me the same way I feel better when I see the cook in a restaurant<sup>n</sup> - real humans, no faceless crowd -

I am attracted to artworks composed with handwritten writing. I try to recognise the handwriting and the words chosen, as if I was getting more intimate with the artists. As if I could say how they feel by the pressure of the chalk on the surface.

I am starting to be comfortable with the fact that I am a romantic - against my deepest wish to be terribly conceptual - and I accept my voyeuristic sides.

When I am lonely I tend to cling onto any small human connexion possible and try to be part of someone's life<sup>o</sup> That day I visited the Broad I had recently move to Los Angeles and had had no human encounter longer than 30 seconds at a supermarket's till - and even 30 sec seemed like a lot. But looking at Cy Twombly's large paintings made me forget about my loneliness<sup>p</sup>.

I tried to decipher Twombly's scribbling, I felt excited to grasp at his thoughts: I was a voyeur reading a diary.<sup>q</sup> In his book *On being blue*, William Gass argues that what the reader really wants is "*the penetration of privacy (...) we want to see under the skirt*"<sup>39</sup>. And I have to admit, it is even more exciting in a knowledgeable and silent art institution.

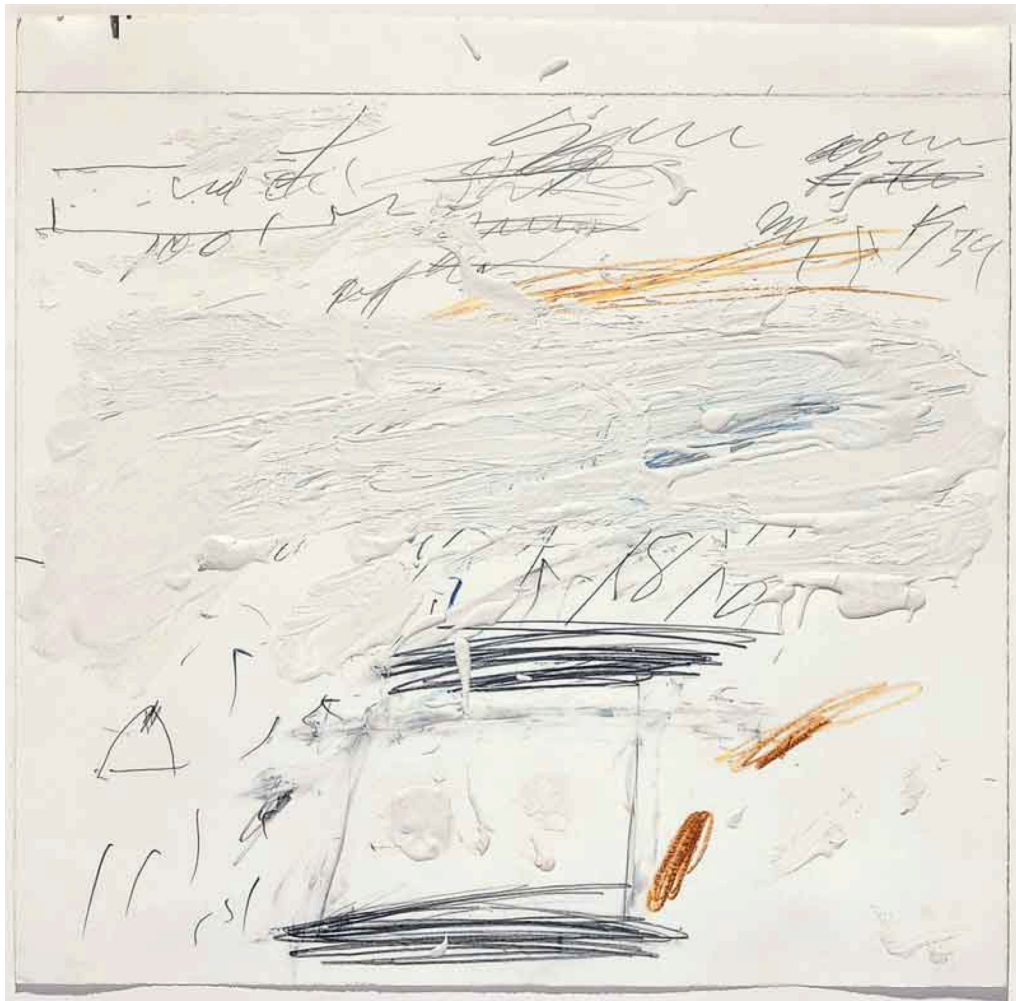
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<sup>n</sup> Even more when the cook is an old lady writing her own specials with a chalk on a board.

<sup>o</sup> When one is extremely lonely, one doesn't even want to be facing another human being.

<sup>p</sup> Contrary to Barbara Kruger's work who powerfully reminded me of my detachment to the world by reflecting myself surrounded by strangers.

<sup>q</sup> When one is very lonely one doesn't want to establish a connexion, one wants to study the other - writing makes it sneakily possible.



*Poems to the Sea*, Cy Twombly (1959)

To be honest, in many art spaces I visited in Los Angeles, I was surprised to hear groups (art and non art related people) actively discussing about the pieces exhibited. I never came across similar situations in France. I guess the 1<sup>st</sup> amendment really makes a difference.<sup>r</sup> However, at the Broad Museum, I witnessed groups of French tourists wander around the museum's rooms. Whispering.

Some of them were trying really hard to read the work, referring first to the box's explanations to see clearer, desperately flicking through the exhibition leaflet. None of them talks. In need for some legible language that would give them a "*truth about operating*", in opposition to the "*lies of speech*"<sup>40</sup>. They wouldn't question what the text says. Indeed, the interpretation of the text traditionally belongs to scholar, intellectuals or actually to the

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<sup>r</sup> LOL

Church who decided what should be read and who should read it. This context is now far, but can still be felt in the socio cultural power games present in knowledge acquiring.

Obviously, my point is not to blame individuals who try to find clues to understand art. I however need to question why one feels like needing to assert one's thoughts with text to be confident enough to express them?

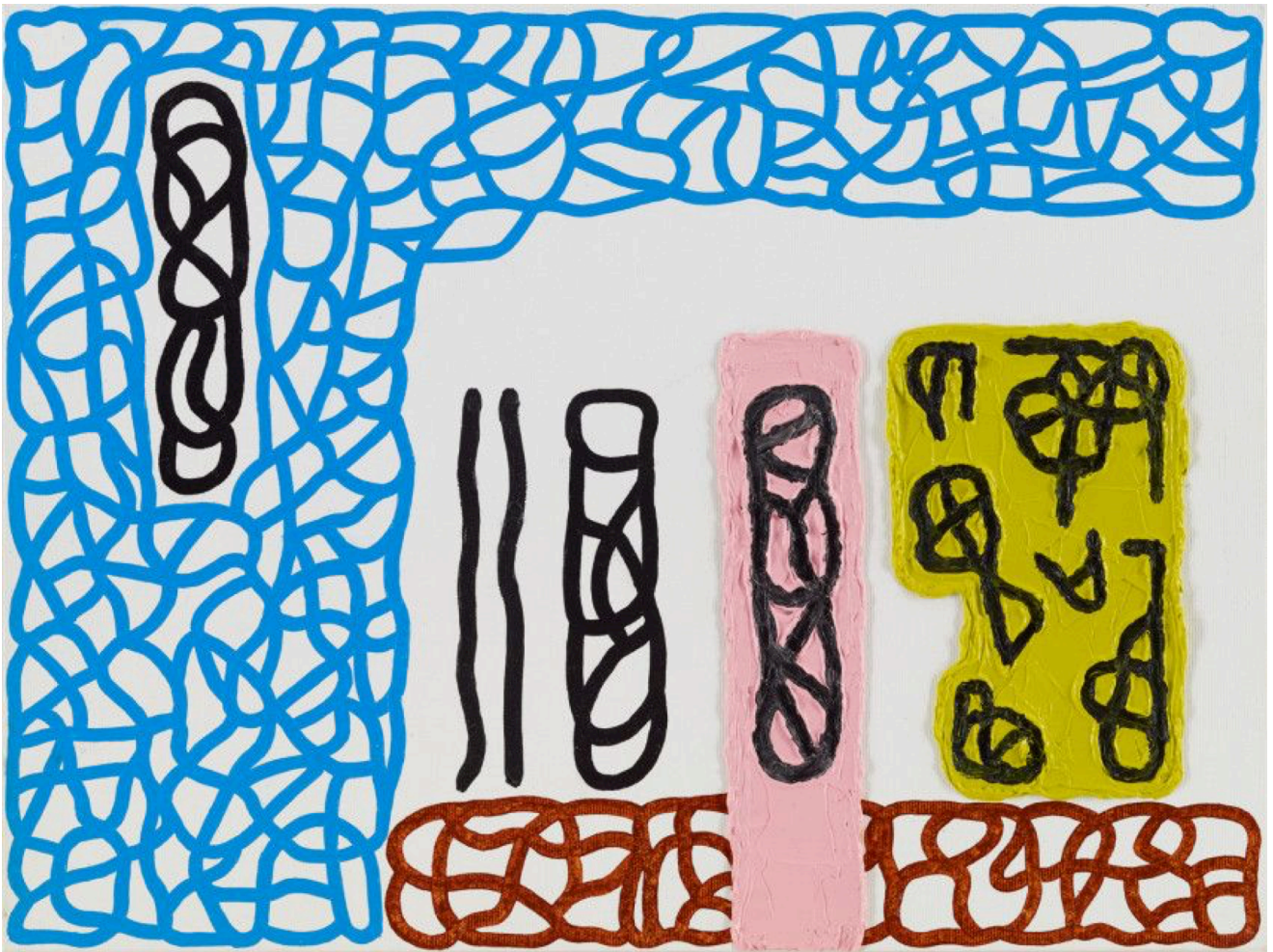
I enjoy looking at visitors bending over to read the title before looking at the artwork. I do the same and I think it's a funny movement.

To me, titles are a necessary and undetachable part of the artwork. They are a final attempt at *looking under the skirt*. And mainly, they are the only link between the artwork and the world - if accepting the fact that nothing exists apart from what is articulated by language. If not, titles are at least what enable humans to name and therefore consider the artwork. They make it real.

In an interview I watched on YouTube, painter Jonathan Lasker said, "*titles are my one life shot at being a poet*"<sup>42</sup> and nervously laughed at the end.

I think he laughed because he was terribly honest.

He then added "*but also more than poetry, they are things that I think about, broad themes for people to think about*"<sup>43</sup>. I enjoy the idea of attaching *broad themes* such as "The Spirit Life Of Things" to Lasker's loose scribble-like paintings. The lack of significance of his pictorial grammar actually adds more significance to these *broad themes*.



*The Spirit Life of Things*, Jonathan Lasker (2015)

In the interview *An Explanation of Intent: Jonathan Lasker*, the artist analyses that he moved to abstract painting in the early 2000 because he doesn't need to attach any representation to the themes he is dealing with, feeling like he could say more. He therefore creates a visual vocabulary, where he can say what can't be said, free from any imagery except his own. Lasker questions the role of the painter as well as the one of the writer. He is not a slave of the images around him; he can create his own description.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> But is he really not then a slave of his own imagery when he leaves surrounded by his paintings in the world he created? I am asking myself when I look t a picture of him in his studio overwhelmed by his scribbled paintings.

Even though he never thought about creating a fully articulated language, I feel like Jonathan Lasker's work is extremely close to what I consider writing. He has this kind of funny and serious approach that makes me think about the way I write: some casualness to hide deeper unconfidence.<sup>†</sup>

And the fact that his paintings always evolve around the same pictorial forms makes me think about my inability at saying what I want to say, to get to the point. Lasker is like a writer writing the same sentence over and over. As his titles "*speak of approximation and exactness*"<sup>45</sup>, I see an awkward attempt at reaching for the world within his paintings, this back and forth movement. I see a gauche discourse beating about the bush.

It is a little bit like Proust who tries to write a book but is constantly interrupted by some memories and never manages to tell the end of the story.

I admire Wittgenstein's view 'to say only what can be said' and would love to relate to it but I sometimes feel like I need to invent a word, an image maybe, to be able to express myself. I know adding vocabulary to the world might not be the way of making it expressible but I am sensitive to Lasker's attempt at creating new to say more (while showing less). It relates to my teenage wish to say more than the world can, to be frustrated but still try.

I need to see Glenn Lingon's painting again. 'Perhaps there is no need to create more to express more', I think, changing my mind like I constantly do.

What is striking when looking at *Untitled (I Am a Man)* is the fact that there is nothing more than 4 words on a plain background to contain a universal history. Perhaps that is what Maggie Nelson meant when saying "*leave space empty so that god can rush in*". Here, Lingon said enough and left enough space for a multiplicity of voices to be heard. He frees himself of the authorial myth of gestural painting that rendered the artist's mark identical to their emotional state. Here is a proof that it is possible to say more than what one thinks possible to say with what there is to say.

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<sup>†</sup> Very IAE sentence.

I always thought that Lasker's works were an attempt at bringing humour to his painting. And I thought it was great. But I realised that he is not joking about it at all.

I come to think that bringing titles such as *The Spirit Life of Things* to a painting representing (beautiful) abstract doodle-like lines, is a smart way of thumbing his nose to the defined strict role of language in the art institution. To "*Divert it without leaving it*"<sup>47</sup>. Like a poet would do. He creates a new form of writing ordinary language while maintaining a deep approach of it. His paintings look like pieces of paper left next to the telephone, on which my mother used to scribble while talking to a friend. It's instinctive, pleasurable and legible. He brings everyday signage in the institution where language was formerly reserved to reasonable explanation. Here, "*order is tricked by an art*"<sup>48</sup>.

My gaze follows the lines Jonathan Lasker has painted. I think about the path my eyes are taking.



Meandering through the Broad I lost myself several times. I guess I wasn't used to this new space. I naturally walked through Basquiat's room many times. I thought that it would have been funny to draw my trajectories on a map of the museum, and add the visitors' trajectories too, eventually comparing them all. It could be a form of writing space of 'walking about' to use Rendell's expression. *"What does it mean to write a site that one has not visited, that can only be imagined, to know a place not with your feet, but with your eyes tracing lines on a map, dots on a screen?"* she asks in her catalogue essay for *Elles sont passées par ici*.

I usually have the same project in mind when I walk in the city. I picture a dotted line being drawn at the same time I walk<sup>u</sup>, and most of the time, the dots would severely overlap each other. One of the reasons why is I am a deep rooted indecisive and the other is that it is impossible to walk in cities (like Los Angeles or London) where your path is constantly interrupted or deviated by road signals.

I read "road closed" and docilely walk the other way. I accept it as if I had picked a card or rolled the dices.

- I wonder if UNO was inspired by street signs -



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<sup>u</sup> One should recall Kuzco's map to understand what I have in mind (cf image p. 30)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t23YSJzMEpg>

I think about Deligny's 'lignes d'erre' or 'wandering lines', these lines drawn by young autistic people with whom he lives. And about everyone's wandering lines through the city defining how people live and wander around within a set space.

Sometimes I find it funny to consider how road signals punctuate our walks. I see myself playing a giant game, developing a '*rhetoric of walking*'<sup>v</sup> I can chose between the characters of the manipulative freak (watches his step but constantly develops tricks to escape) or the wise poet (uses established syntaxes to create a sentence he likes). And play a game I call 'spatial language' where the rule is to 'turn' sentences the same way one would compose a path. It echoes to Roland Barthes' comparison of the reader with the city wanderer "*the user of the city picks out certain fragments of the statement in order to actualize them in secret*"<sup>50</sup>. The reader builds his own way with what is present in his environment.



Street signals in Los Angeles

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<sup>v</sup> Rhetoric: *manipulations of language relative to occasions* (Michel De Certeau)



After spending four months in a weirdly organised Los Angeles,<sup>w</sup> I moved back to London.

I remember walking, enjoying Tower Bridge's view, until I suddenly stopped. Face to face with a big black reflecting shape: Fiona Banner put a full stop to my pleasant stroll.

The feeling of being interrupted by language felt amazing. I was first offended by this alien's decision but soon appreciated the fact that a full stop could actually stop me. And eventually give rhythm to this fast office paced life of London, asking the crowd to stop. It gave language its full power, its almost royal ability to shape and influence a society. I considered the shiny sculpture for a while, smiling at this genius presence until I realised the suit and tie people around me were still walking fast, looking at their shoes and the tourist looking at their phone looking at the bridge.



Fiona Banner, *Full Stop*, located in Tower Bridge, London (2009).

I relate to the way De Certeau compares moving in the city to being a poet.

Perhaps Banner's work is about that too. Showing that it is not the text or the punctuation that dictates the experience but, again, only the reader/walker

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<sup>w</sup> Miles of highway cutting a neighbourhood in half, nothing at walking distances, roads closed before reaching the end of it: an absurd story written as if it was concrete poetry.

In this text, I have tried to understand what is the power of writing in the art world, whether it is in the making of art or in the institution itself.

Writing is a physical act, linking the body to the space and the surface. However, it becomes almost detached from any physicality when it is placed in a 'knowledgeable' environment such as the Museum. To the point that art criticism can sometimes be too cerebral and lose the genuine reaction an artwork can trigger. It is therefore important to consider the audience as an active reader/receiver. But also to understand this space in-between where writing gets lost and finds another form.

As I write this paragraph I think about what Bryan Griffith said in the lecture at Central Saint Martins: *"I want to create a space where I can fuck around"* and added *"how do you create this kind of space knowing all the things we know and suppose to take into consideration?"* I am delighted by the first sentence. I believe there is a real link between the *blank space* and Griffith's *place where I can fuck around*. Some place where voices can be heard like in Lingon's painting. Where reader becomes writer like in Kruger's work and where writer becomes reader as in Fiona Banner's Break Point.

Perhaps it is not only about *'fucking around'* but actually considering writing in art like an open field of possibilities that depends on the bodily experience of each and everyone as much as their psychology. Perhaps it is about leaving a space empty of duty to let the text get settled in one's body and mind, allowing many interpretations, links and memories to add their part to it. It is about creating a collective, sensorial and spatial experience, without any hierarchy, where we can all fuck around.



*Meaningless*, David Shrigley, paint on paper

## References

<sup>1</sup> *The practice of everyday life* (1980), Michel de Certeau (p.140)

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<sup>29</sup> International Art English, Alix Rule & David Levine, Triple Canopy (2012)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

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<sup>32</sup> Lutticken quoted by Alix Rule & David Levine in 'International Art English', Triple Canopy (2012)

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<sup>34</sup> *Reading left to right - James Bridle* <http://booktwo.org/notebook/reading-right-to-left/>

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Ludwig Wittgenstein (p.11)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Wittgenstein is a philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His later work, principally his *Philosophical Investigations*, shares this concern with logic and language, but takes a different, less technical, approach to philosophical problems.

<sup>39</sup> William Gass quoted by Maggie Nelson in *Bluets* (2009).

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