

Faye Hirsh
Tema Celeste
November/December 1992

Written on the Wind

A woman is invaded by a torrent of garbled or silent messages before she has even begun to speak, language always one step ahead of her. Many are the voices yammering simultaneously in her cells, adapting themselves more adeptly than the wildest viruses to the narrow stretches of her veins and the silken expanses of her skin.

A struggling figure's head has fallen into her own hollow body. The spooked head peering out from the empty cavity does not speak, and with no arts, this figure cannot write. She can't go anywhere, for her torso and legs are twisted in opposite directions. Radiating yellow indicates a heated effort, the sparklers explosive tension, but there is no explanatory text; these exogenous marks demand none. Megan Williams, in *Arc*, visualizes the plight of a subject acutely aware of a language traced only through its somatic effects. The woman in another drawing by Williams, *Innards*, is descended from animation and the comics; she knows that about her there should be a speech bubble, but, to her horror, it has been displaced by uncoiling viscera. Williams couches her drawings in the sign systems of the comics, in the netherworld of the "low," where expressivity is never embarrassed, and where the look, the physicality, of writing is as important as any content. Replacing the writing, however, are bodies in desperate straits.

Artists like Williams plant themselves where language electrifies bodies.¹ Steeped in a pragmatics of language rather than in hypostatized rules and regulations,² their work is a "stuttering of sense in the face of its own determinacy," as one critic writes of Suzanne McClelland.³ They have learned the lessons of semiotics, but have found its boundaries too restrictive, suspecting that the killing power of the word surely has a trickier mechanism than the formalization signifier/signified can allow. Likewise, they realize that a deconstructionist loop of signs merely distracts attention from a chronic somatic influx. They are often more inspired by enunciation than writing, more by the endlessly muting spoken word, the place where accidents are more likely to reveal hidden agendas. Theirs is the excess, the spillover.

Although there are men I can think of who similarly engage language – Ed Ruscha, Bruce Nauman, Mike Kelley – an all-woman roster has proven fortuitous. Feminism has successfully demonstrated that more directly and pervasively than men,

¹ By bodies, I mean not that mysterious entity "the Body" that's become endemic in contemporary discourse, but bodies of all sorts – my body, paint's body, and inscription's body, a body of water, etc. Matter that in being named snaps into one shape until and while it is named again.

² One of my sources for this discussion is G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics," in *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), pp. 75-111

³ Barry Schwabsky, in *ARTS*, December 1991, p. 63

women feel the effects of language in their bodies. The question is no longer whether this is the case, but what, precisely, the mechanism. Theories of representation and signification challenge women to resist a passable, constructed position in language, but such theories often fail to take account of the most subtle workings of language, frequently those falling outside the accounts of psychoanalysis. Just as the most mundane, banal political and social operations wreak the greatest historical havoc, so it goes in language. Women may find in the “illocutionary,” a term I borrow from Deleuze and Guattari, the site where unaccounted-for bodily affects are to be found. The illocutionary “designates [an] instantaneous relation between statements and the incorporeal transformations or noncorporeal attributes they express.”⁴ Such transformations and attributes are relayed linguistically, but have consequences where they inevitably touch down on bodies. Deleuze and Guattari cite examples in statements such as “You are no longer a child,” or “You are now hostages,” when uttered by people with the power to follow through, as opposed to madmen. As a formulation, the illocutionary not only assumes the precession of language in social and identity formations, but positions it as an abstraction with an effect on bodies so instantaneous, that it makes language something inextricably somatic.

“Order-words,” or the force in language that compels through implicit presuppositions – as, for example, in promises and questions – are the substance of the illocutionary.⁵ To acknowledge the order-word is to identify a linguistic relation that touches signification only coincidentally. The figures in Megan Williams’ drawings cannot accept this relation with ease, and despite their ostensible humor, their pastel colors and funnies feint, they are dark and scary. From them she has wrested procession into textuality, narrative, or coherent speech – they are stopped dead in their tracks, denied a certain power of forgetting demanded of the daily habit of language. Linguistic definition will never belong to the mother and child of Holes in the Air, for they are unmoored in a limitless space, cut-up dictionary pages floating about them in circular fragments. Yet every moment they feel language written on the breath of a malevolent wind.

A woman is invaded by a torrent of garbled or silent messages before she has even begun to speak, language always one step ahead of her. Many are the voices yammering simultaneously in her cells, adapting themselves more adeptly than the wildest viruses to the narrow stretches of her veins and the silken expanses of her skin.

“I, Debbie, nigger faggot cunt crippled by my sawed-off dick, was once a baby who wanted nothing more than to recount humorous anecdotes to the little bees and dinosaurs inhabiting my crib but I was transformed before the age of one, even, into a truncated dream girl projected on the landscape by the powerful brain of a fitful male sleeper, a captain of industry and finance and medical research obsessed with carving order out of chaos.”

“Debbie Brown,” the subject of performances and stories by Laurie Weeks, is an Anygirl in the typing pool who mutates as language bombards her from every direction, spatial and temporal.⁶ In the visual domain, L.C. Armstrong registers the hybridization of

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari, op. Cit., p.81

⁵ Ibid, p. 79

⁶ Laurie J. Weeks, “Debbie’s Barium Swallow,” unpublished.

language and corporeality in such works as *Leda* (1991) and *Seven Times Seventy* (1989), composed of neat stacks or clipboards of ink-lined latex sheets resembling notepads. The “empty” lines are in fact dense with the fleshy substance of the medium, already written and inscribed with messages so pervasive that the shape of words is too narrow a confine. *Leda* was once transformed from human to swan; here she is transformed again from swan to slate board and reading lamp, her earlier incarnations remembered in latex/skin and lamp/neck. Each metamorphosis is the byproduct of linguistic relay, as witnessed by the lined and waiting sheets. The title *Seven Times Seventy* alludes to expressions of infinity in the Bible, the repetitious grid of latex sheets provoking memories of a history with a lost origin – the untraceable Word diffused in Babylon⁷ and spreading laterally over a body with none of the usual organic limits.

Carol Szymanski also critiques the notion of linguistic origin in her drawings and musical instruments based on letters of the International Phonetic Alphabet. An Abstraction of human speech, the phonetic alphabet conceives spoken sounds as symbols, so that in choosing certain phonetic symbols, Szymanski in embodying the sounds they are meant to convey. But where the symbols in the Phonetic Alphabet are static, their reference is not, for it is to the most unpredictable and least controllable site of language: enunciation. The Phonetic Alphabet itself is, in other words, highly suspect, indeed inherently unstable from the start. And Szymanski further dismantles the assumption of a “true” equivalence among sign systems. The shape of the symbol, turned on end, rotated, spun out in combinations with itself and other phonemes, is delivered to a realm of visual form largely divested of the “originating” symbol. The dominant shape in *Horn* “th” is still recognizable as the phonetic symbol for the “th,” but it is also subsumed in the flourish of bell and mouthpiece, essential to the elegant form of the object, but a compromise of the integrity of the original symbol. And as musical instruments, the symbols produce a sound that, *mutatismutandis*, is not the sound “originally” signified. Phonemes toggle into phenomena and back to a different starting point.

Szymanski’s sculpture has been explained by Roman Jakobsen’s concept of transmutation, or the “interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems.”⁸ This formulation is woefully inadequate to convey the heat that’s emitted as these various sign systems slip and slide in their impossible effort to connect. When Szymanski’s *Drum* “u” (1991) is beaten, as it was last year in a work by composed Ben Neill, its piebald skin alive as the haunches of a cow, and palpably resonating, too many lines are crossed. *Drum* “u”, in fact, makes pastiches of bodies and grammatical components kept separate in the normalizing realm of signification and *significance*. It has become a monster, an over-loaded hybrid of too many sign systems. These abstractions instantaneously disappear into the body of the work, secreted into its interior, and emerging only in glimpses through the abstract machine of interpretation. Meanwhile, there’s fun to be had, for Szymanski offers a sunny alternative to the darker moods of Williams and Armstrong. For if order-words can sear the body, as in the case of

⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, introduction to Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After, Collected Writings 1966-1990*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

⁸ See his 1956 essay, “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation”; quoted by D. Carrier in *Tema Celeste*, January-March 1992.

Armstrong who burns sanded enable surfaces with lit bomb fuses, they can also touch down on its pleasures. There they disappear into orgasmic time.

Like Szymanski's instruments, Finnish artist Kirsi Mikkola's plaster figures, enacting animated pantomimes in which they struggle for control over language, find themselves in the those of its unpredictable transformations. Glo & Quickie pairs a blonde, pigtailed girl, alluding to such European girl-icons as Heidi and Pippi Langstrump, with a "ready fuck" character Mikkola draws from pornography. Their mouths are open in a huge gag, tongues mutated into penislike excrescences. "Quickie's" blowjob becomes her speech, an affect parroted and parodied by "Glo" with great gusto. Far from the blanket condemnation in reductive critiques of pornography, Mikkola's work wrests from pornography an expressive and rebellious silence, as an over determined language is stuffed into the mouths of the "offended" parties. Perversely, it becomes their speech, their own language, coded as a brand new bodily member. Mikkola's characters are not satisfied to remain mutely paralyzed or in carping exile outside the realm of the symbolic. They can, on the contrary, force the freshly recognized somatic dimension of language into a new abstraction within which they exert a greater pressure. This is the only way to intensify, let alone galvanize, a dominant "tongue".⁹

Suzanne McClelland seizes on a pragmatics of language that takes each instance of enunciation on its own terms, evaluating the particular force and impact of a word or phrase. No one since Ruscha has so adeptly inflected the word on a surface, and no one except Twombly so adroitly fused the *graphie* with the painted gesture. McClelland can be tireless in her pursuit of the vagaries of a single word or phrase, "there, there." "now," "no," "someday," each drawn and painted repeatedly, meanings bounced and stretched throughout each particular version – just as every enunciation, no matter how innocuous or repetitive, is subjected to the vicissitudes of emotional weather. McClelland sets words up as traitors to the firing squad of language. They are the material evidence of order-words that are perforce kept hidden. "Someday" painted by McClelland three times is a promise broken, invested in, or still hovering in dreamy irreality. Each version of *Someday* or *Forever* shows a "speech act" executed in the movement of paint. Each version is completely different, and in this McClelland embodies the uncanny ability of the order-word to mutate. This is why the same phrase can come as a surprise each time.

Recently McClelland has been drawn to words that answer the question, "when,"¹⁰ (as in "someday," or "forever") – the sort of answers that fascinate and transfix the questioner. *Someday* is paradoxical, crushing a welter of small, dark letters and marks beneath the dematerializing D and A. The F of *Forever* rotates at the left of another picture, sending the paint spinning into barren stretches. But it doesn't matter if the word is a promise – it can be a simple answer, *No*. Not so simple, however – with its O a gigantic black hole and the consonant's strength reduced to decorative buttons, the authoritative tenor of the word is undermined. Some other order-word, some other affect altogether, has crept into the old familiar "no"; some other one of the simultaneous voices

⁹ Deleuze and Guattari. "What is a Minor Literature?" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. (New York: New Museum, 1990), pp. 59-69

¹⁰ Interview with Jennifer Rubell in *Suzanne McClelland*, exhibition catalogue, Jason Rubell Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida. 1992, p. 50.

murmuring within each voice has sabotaged its self-evidence. McClelland also takes relative parts of speech – adverbs and prepositions – which, less explicitly than promises and commands, prove that order-words lie hidden in every linguistic shadow. *Then* amusingly marches in a circle, tiny E's bouncing on the laps of big H's; solidity playing with openness, whiteness and blackness, the surface of writing with the depth of the space. For revivalist McClelland, an expressionist gesture can be either a letter or a mark, but it's always consubstantial with painterly matter as the order-word is with bodies. Inherently dynamic, it becomes revitalized as it opens a word to the vagaries of meaning. Like other clever painters today, McClelland charges the formal tropes of abstraction with new and specific content, here the subtle workings of language on interlocutors.

With McClelland, I return to artists who use words in their work, many of whom I have skipped over despite projects that likewise take as their concern the somatic underpinnings of language. Cheryl Donegan, for example, bakes bread in letters that pun her name, (*Done Again*) to corporealize the effects of influence, in this case Bruce Nauman, whom she has “done again.” She variously displays or draws loaves of bread capped with little wigs, her *Pains têtes*, surreal objects overdriven by language into absurdity. Kay Rosen's visual punning, Leone & McDonald's shorthand, Lesley Dill's meditations on Emily Dickinson – their work, too, could be enlisted to demonstrate the non-textual dimension of language that even exerts its power in and through words. While my focus has been on art that mainly eschews an explicit use of language in order to embody its illocutionary dimensions, a greater challenge might lie precisely in art that rests in the extra-textual even as it wields words and texts. For the “order-word” is never what it appears, since it rarely makes an appearance, but is registered only in incorporeal effects. As McClelland knows, these transformations are key, even when they are hidden in the shape of the typewritten word. The task is to expose them.