the

distance
between

words

Joel Swanson

NEW

ALWAYS

FREQUENTLY

OFTEN

SOMETIMES

TYPICALLY

USUALLY

INTERMITTENTLY

OCCASIONALLY

SELDOM

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NEW

Introduction

In 2020, New Collection invited Joel Swanson to produce a series of experimental works in response to a 1929 edition of Webster's Dictionary.

Dictionaries are linguistic time capsules reflect historical norms and standards. While the advent of online dictionaries has made print dictionaries antiquated, historical dictionaries are valuable as they offer insights into how language was used and defined in the past. This 1929 edition of Webster's Dictionary was the catalyst for the artworks in *The Distance Between Words*.

The works in this exhibition explore the *physical*, *durational*, and *semantic* distance found within text. Swanson's experiments take on various forms: large format prints, digital animations, a durational sound-based work, and a monumental neon installation. His practice is driven by a desire to make the familiar unfamiliar and the ordinary extraordinary as he works to reveal the power dynamics embedded within the structures of language. His systematic, obsessive, and at times absurd examination of this dictionary uncovers and foregrounds language's profound influence on how we see the world.

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In 2020, New Collection invited Joel Swanson to produce a series of experimental works in response to a 1929 edition of Webster's Dictionary. The content within the dictionary's pages acted as a catalyst for the artworks showcased in *The Distance Between Words*.

Dictionaries are linguistic time capsules that reflect the standards and norms of language from a specific era. The advent of online dictionaries has made print dictionaries obsolete, but historical dictionaries still feel special as they offer glimpses into how language was used in the past. The works in this exhibition derive from this source as they explore the physical, durational, and semantic distance found within the text. Behind Swanson's inquiries are processes that unfold in various forms: large format digital prints, digital animations, a sound-based work, and a large-scale neon installation.

Swanson's practice is driven by a desire to make the familiar unfamiliar and the ordinary extraordinary as he works to reveal the power dynamics embedded within language structures. His systematic, obsessive, and at times absurd examination of this dictionary uncovers and highlights language's profound influence on how we see our world.

New Collection

mistral (mis-tral'), *n.* a cold, dry, northwest wind that blows over the Gulf of Lyons and the adjacent Mediterranean countries. It chills and has a depressing effect on all who feel it.

mistress (mis'tres), *n.* a woman who exercises authority or governs; the female head of a family, school, &c.; a woman well skilled in anything; a woman courted and beloved; sweetheart; a kept woman.

Mistress (mis'tres), *n.* a title of address prefixed to the name of a married woman; abbreviated *Mrs.* (mis'iz).

misty (mis'ti), *adj.* [*comp.* mistier, *superl.* mistiest], characterized by, or obscured with, mist; dim; obscure; clouded.

misunderstand (mis-un-dẽr-stand'), *v.t.* to take in a wrong sense; misconceive.

misunderstanding (mis-un-dẽr-stand'ing), *n.* misconception; disagreement.

mite (mīt), *n.* a minute insect of the division Acarida often found in cheese; a small coin formerly current; a very small object or quantity.

miter, mitre (mī'tẽr), *n.* the head-dress of the high priest of the Jews; a kind of crown cleft in the middle, worn by archbishops, bishops, and sometimes by abbots on special occasions; the dignity of a bishop; the junction of moldings at an angle of 45°: *v.t.* to adorn with a miter; join at 45°. [Græco-Latin.]

mitigate (mit'i-gāt), *v.t.* to render less severe or rigorous or painful; soften; alleviate.

mitigation (mit'i-gā'shun), *n.* the act of mitigating; alleviation.

mitigative (mit'i-gā-tiv), *adj.* alleviating.

mitigator (mit'i-gā-tẽr), *n.* one who, or that which, mitigates.

mitigatory (mit'i-gā-tō-ri), *adj.* tending to mitigate.

mitrailleuse (mē-trä-ĭ-yẽz'), *n.* a breech-loading gun formed of many barrels fitted together, and capable of being fired simultaneously. Invented by the French in 1869, and named from the word *mitraille* (grape-shot).

mitral (mī'tral), *adj.* pertaining to, or shaped like, a miter.

mitriform (mī'tri-fôrm), *adj.* shaped like a miter; conical.

mitten (mit'n), *n.* a fingerless winter glove; a fingerless cover for the hand or wrist.

mittimus (mit'i-mus) (Latin "We send"), *n.* a warrant of commitment to prison; a writ transferring a record out of one court to another.

mix (miks), *v.t.* to unite or blend into one mass or compound; join: *v.i.* to become united in a compound; associate; mingle.

mixture (miks'tūr), *n.* the state of being mixed; a compound or mass formed by mixing, especially one in which the particles of each ingredient retain their property.

mizzen (miz'n), *n.* the hindmost of the fore- and aft-sails of a vessel.

mizzle (miz'l), *v.i.* to rain in very minute drops; to take one's self off: *n.* fine rain.

mizzly (miz'li), *adj.* drizzling; misty.

mnemonic (nē-mon'ik), *adj.* assisting the memory. [Greek.]

mnemonics (nē-mon'iks), *n.pl.* the art or science of assisting the memory.

moan (mōn), *v.i.* to utter a low sound from, or as from, pain or sorrow: *n.* a low prolonged expression of sorrow or pain.

moat (mōt), *n.* a ditch round a fortress, &c.: *v.t.* to surround with a moat.

mob (mob), *n.* the populace; a rude disorderly crowd; riotous assembly; rabble: *v.t.* to attack in a disorderly crowd; crowd about and annoy.

mobcap (mob'kap), *n.* a woman's plain headdress or cap. [English.]

mobile (mō'bil), *adj.* easily moved.

mobility (mō-bil'i-ti), *n.* susceptibility of motion.

mobilization (mō-bil-i-zā'shun), *n.* the act of mobilizing.

mobilize (mō'bil-īz), *v.t.* to call into active military service; place troops on a war footing.

mobocracy (mob-ok'ra-si), *n.* the rule, or ascendency, of the mob.

moccasin (mok'a-sin), *n.* a sandal or shoe worn by the American Indians; a poisonous American snake.

āte, ärm, at, awl; mē, mẽrge, met; mīte, mit; nōte, nôrth, not; bŏŏn, book; hūe, hut; think, *then.*

mocha (mō'ka), *n.* a kind of coffee from Mocha, a seaport of Arabia.
mock (mok), *v.t.* to ridicule; mimic in sport, contempt, or derision; deride; disappoint the hopes of; tantalize: *n.* derision; ridicule: *adj.* false; counterfeit.
mockery (mok'ẽr-i), *n.* derision; ridicule; delusion; imitation.
mocking (mok'ing), *p.adj.* derisive; mimicking.
mocking bird (bẽrd), *n.* an American thrush noted for mimicry of the notes of other birds.
modal (mō'dal), *adj.* pertaining to mode or form; indicating some mode of expression.
modality (mō-dal'i-ti), *n.* the fact of being a mode; in law, the quality of being suspended by a condition.
mode (mōd), *n.* form; custom; fashion; manner; variety of a syllogism.
model (mod'el), *n.* a pattern of something to be made, or reproduced; example for imitation; standard copy; a person who poses as a subject for a painter or sculptor: *adj.* serving as a pattern or model: *v.t.* to form after a model, especially in some plastic material: *v.i.* to practice modeling. [French.]
modeler (mod'el-ẽr), *n.* one who models.
modeling (mod'el-ing), *n.* the act or art of making a model, especially of a work of art in some plastic material.
moderate (mod'ẽr-āt), *v.t.* to keep within bounds; lessen; qualify: *v.i.* to become less violent or intense; preside as a moderator: *adj.* (mod'ẽr-at), kept within bounds; not extreme or excessive; restrained; frugal; calm; reasonable; mild. [Latin.]
moderately (mod'ẽr-at-li), *adv.* in a moderate manner.
moderation (mod-ẽr-ā'shun), *n.* the act of moderating; the state of being moderate; freedom from excess; equanimity.
moderator (mod'ẽr-ā-tẽr), *n.* one who, or that which, moderates or restrains; the presiding officer in a church meeting.
modern (mod'ẽrn), *adj.* pertaining to the present time; recent: *n.pl.* people of modern times. [French.]

modernize (mod'ẽrn-īz), *v.t.* to render modern in usage or taste.
modest (mod'est), *adj.* restrained by a due sense of propriety; diffident; decent; chaste. [Latin.]
modesty (mod'es-ti), *n.* the quality or state of being modest; propriety of behavior or manner; chastity; diffidence; moderation.
modicum (mod'i-kum), *n.* a little.
modification (mod-i-fi-kā'shun), *n.* the act of modifying; the state of being modified; slight change in form.
modify (mod'i-fī), *v.t.* [*p.t.* & *p.p.* modified, *p.pr.* modifying], to change slightly in form; vary; qualify; reduce.
modiste (mō-dēst'), *n.* a fashionable dressmaker. [French.]
modulate (mod'ū-lāt), *v.t.* to vary the sound of; change the key or mode of: *v.i.* to pass from one musical key to another.
modulation (mod-ū-lā'shun), *n.* the act of modulating; the state of being modulated.
modulator (mod'ū-lā-tẽr), *n.* one who, or that which, modulates; in the tonic sol-fa system, a chart to indicate its modulations.
Mogul (mō-gul'), *adj.* pertaining to the Mongolians: *n.* a person of the Mongolian race. The Emperor of Delhi was called the Great Mogul.
mohair (mō'hār), *n.* a fabric made from the hair of the Angora goat; an imitation of such a fabric.
Mohammedan (mō-ham'e-dan), *adj.* pertaining to Mohammed, or to Mohammedanism; *n.* an adherent of Mohammedanism. Also Mahometan, Mahomedan, Mussulman, Moslem.
Mohammedanism (mō-ham'e-dan-izm), *n.* the religion, doctrines, or institutions founded by Mohammed. [Muhammad, Arabic, meaning "he is praised."]
moiety (moi'e-ti), *n.* one of two equal parts or shares; half. [French.]
moil (moil), *v.i.* to toil; drudge.
moiré (mwär-rā'), *n.* watered silk.
moire-antique (mwär-rā'an-tēk'), *n.* a superior variety of watered silk.
moist (moist), *adj.* containing water or other liquid; humid; damp.
moisten (mois'n), *v.t.* to make moist.
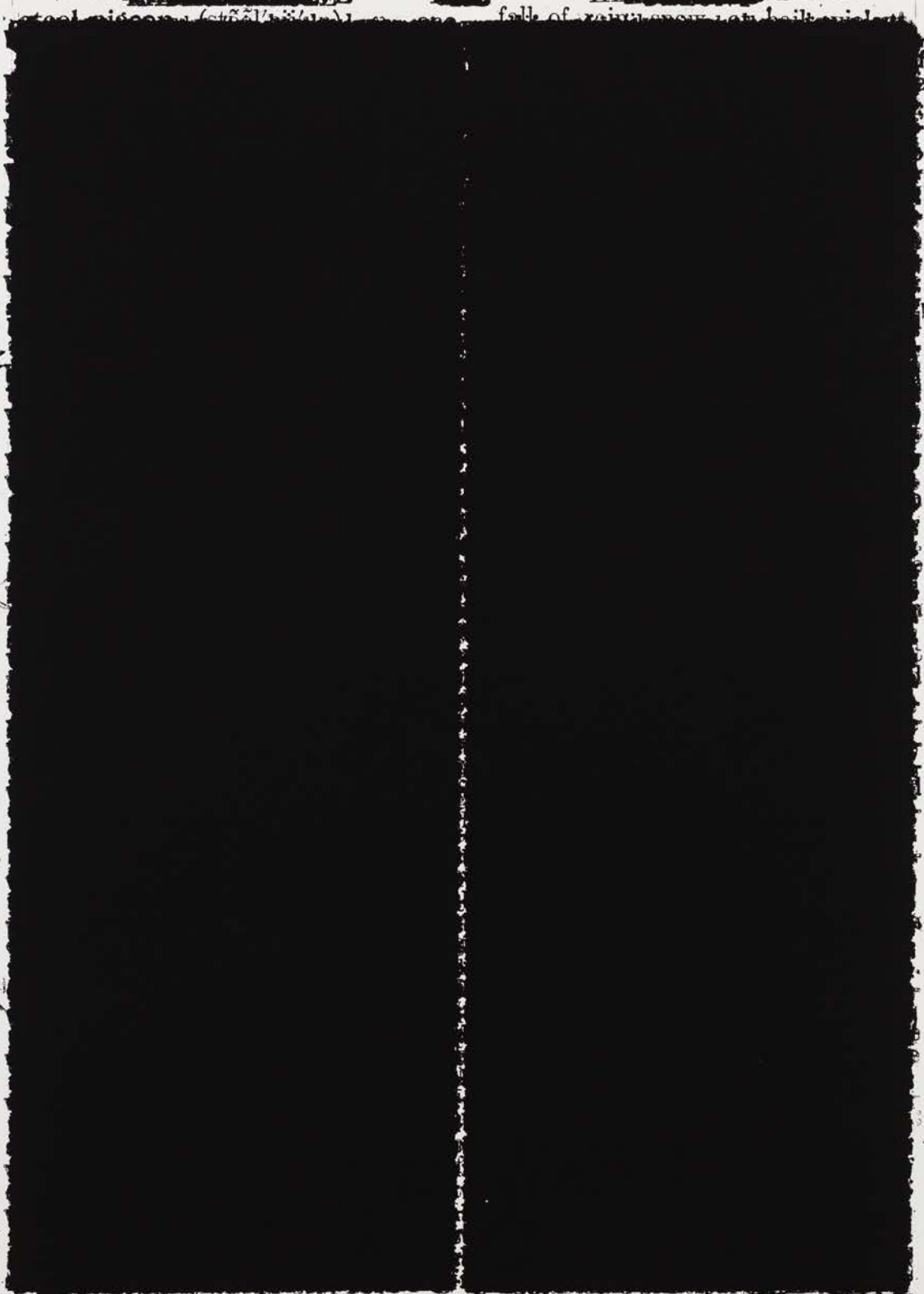
# Physical Distance

The amount of space between two things

Every Page (Recto, Verso)

Recto and *verso* are Latin terms used to refer to the front and back sides of a page. This series was created by scanning and layering all the pages from the dictionary into two merged images, rendering the text unreadable. By removing the space between the pages, this artwork highlights the importance of physical space within written language.

Every Page (Recto) detail
2022
56 x 40 inches
digital print on paper
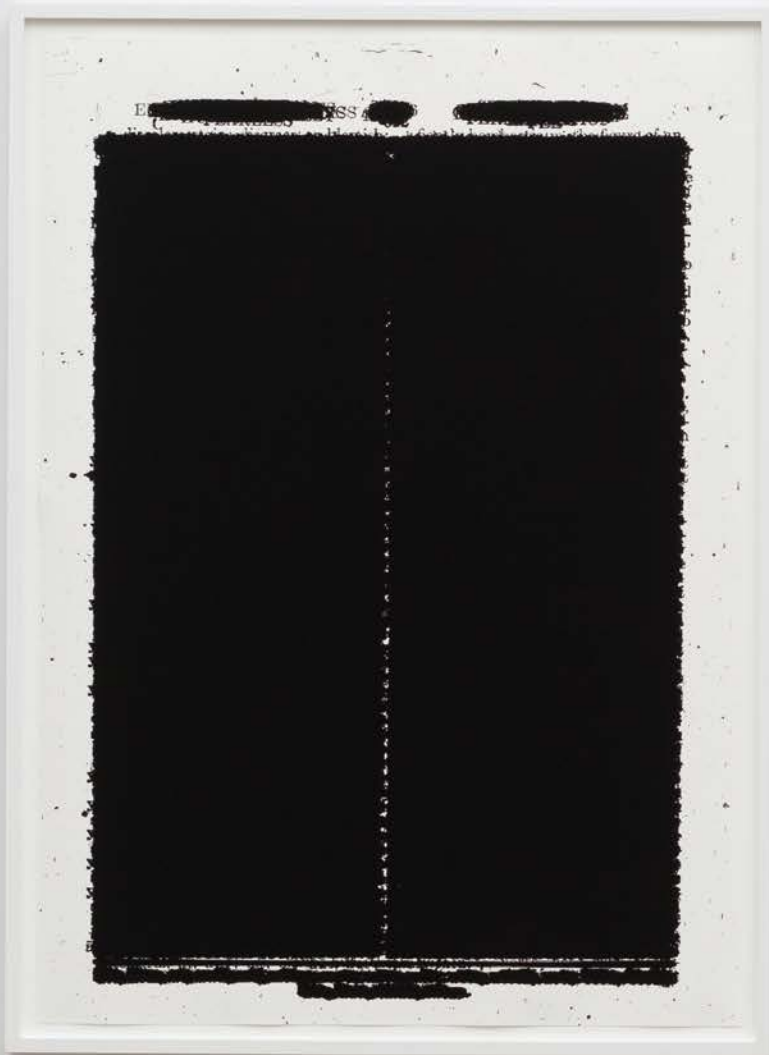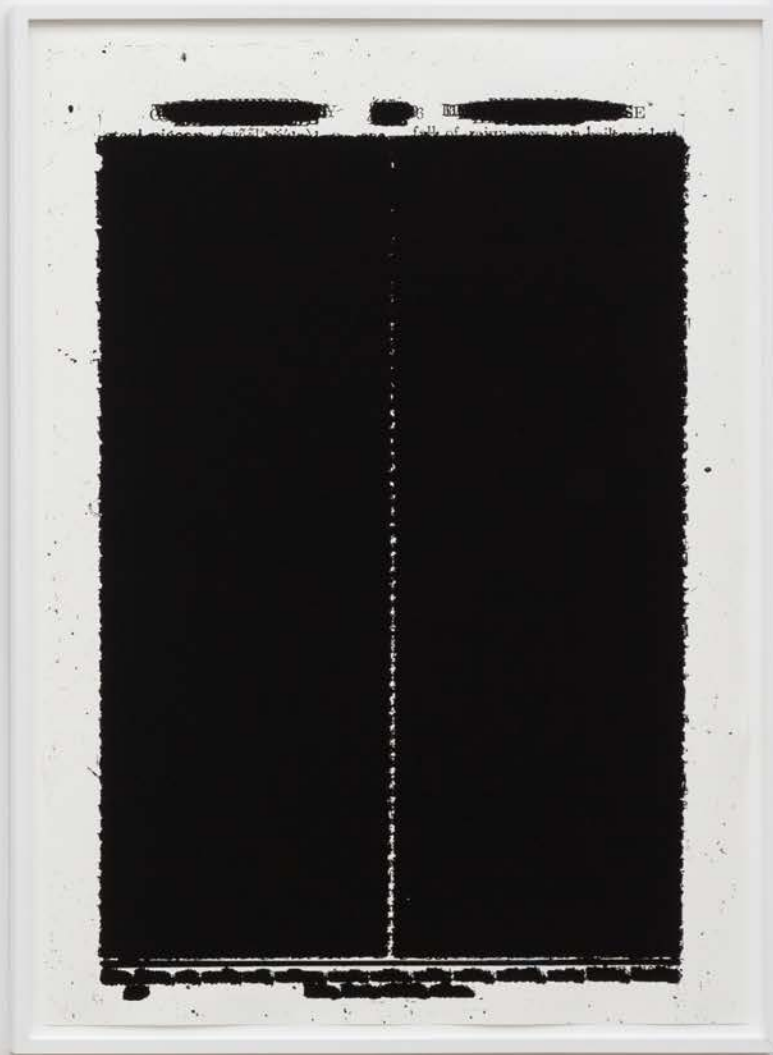
Every Page (Recto, Verso)
2022
56 x 40 inches
digital prints on paper
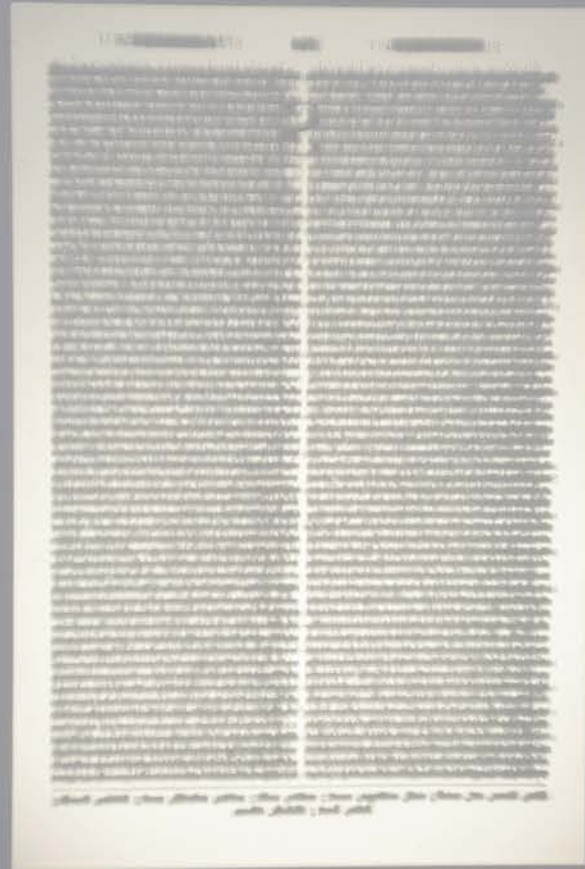
ENTLY

INTER

OFTEN

SOMETIMES

Durational Distance

The gap in time between two events

always 100%
typically 90%
usually 80%
frequently 70%
often 60%
sometimes 50%
intermittently 40%
occasionally 30%
seldom 20%
rarely 10%
never 0%

Frequency Adverbs

This monumental neon installation began as a sketch that the artist made over a decade ago. Swanson was interested in the relationship between natural language, which is subjective and imprecise, and mathematical language, which is specific and discrete. Relying on his own subjective understanding of English, he chose ten adverbs that correspond to numerical percentages:

always	100%
typically	90%
usually	80%
often	70%
sometimes	60%
intermittently	50%
occasionally	40%
seldom	30%
rarely	20%
never	10%

Each neon word is programmed to be illuminated for a specific percentage of time, so *always* is illuminated 100% of the time, and *never* is never illuminated. The eleven words are vertically arranged according to alphabetical order and horizontally according to the frequency at which they blink.

Frequency Adverbs Sketch
2012
14 x 11 inches
graphite on paper

Frequency Adverbs
2022
156 x 336 x 4 inches
neon, electronics

All the Silence
2022
20 hours, 3 minutes, 42 seconds
digitally processed audio

All the Silence

The multi-layered process to create this durational sound work began with the artist using optical character recognition to convert every dictionary page into machine-readable text. Next, he created a recording of a computer "reading" the entirety of the dictionary, resulting in an audio file over 100 hours in length. Finally the artist wrote an algorithm to remove all the spoken words from the recording, leaving only the silence between the words. This silence, the space between words, is poignant and full of meaning as it gives form to spoken language.

audio sample

All the Silence
2022
20 hours, 2 minutes, 42 seconds
digitally processed audio
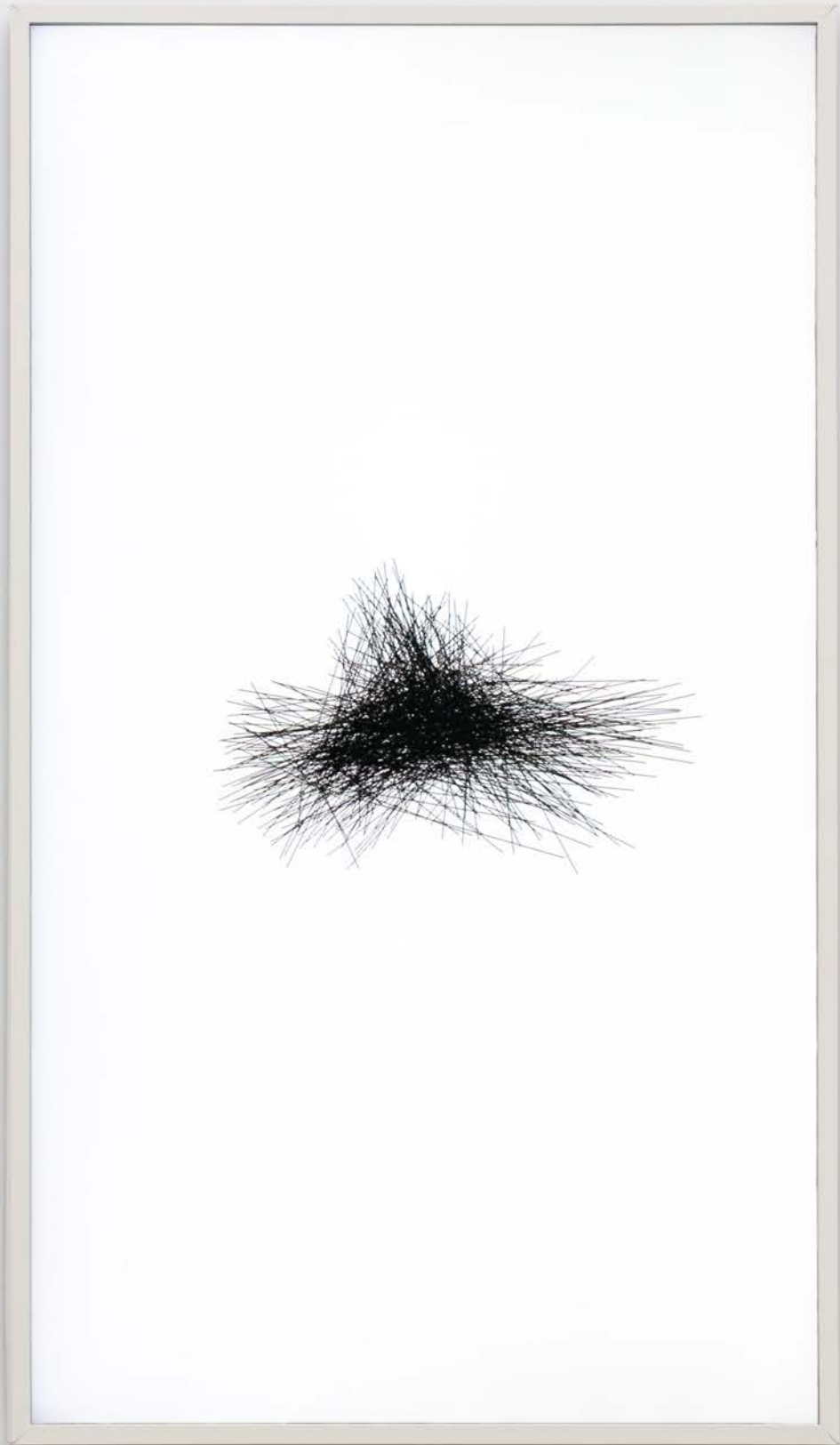
Semantic Distance

The difference in meaning between two words
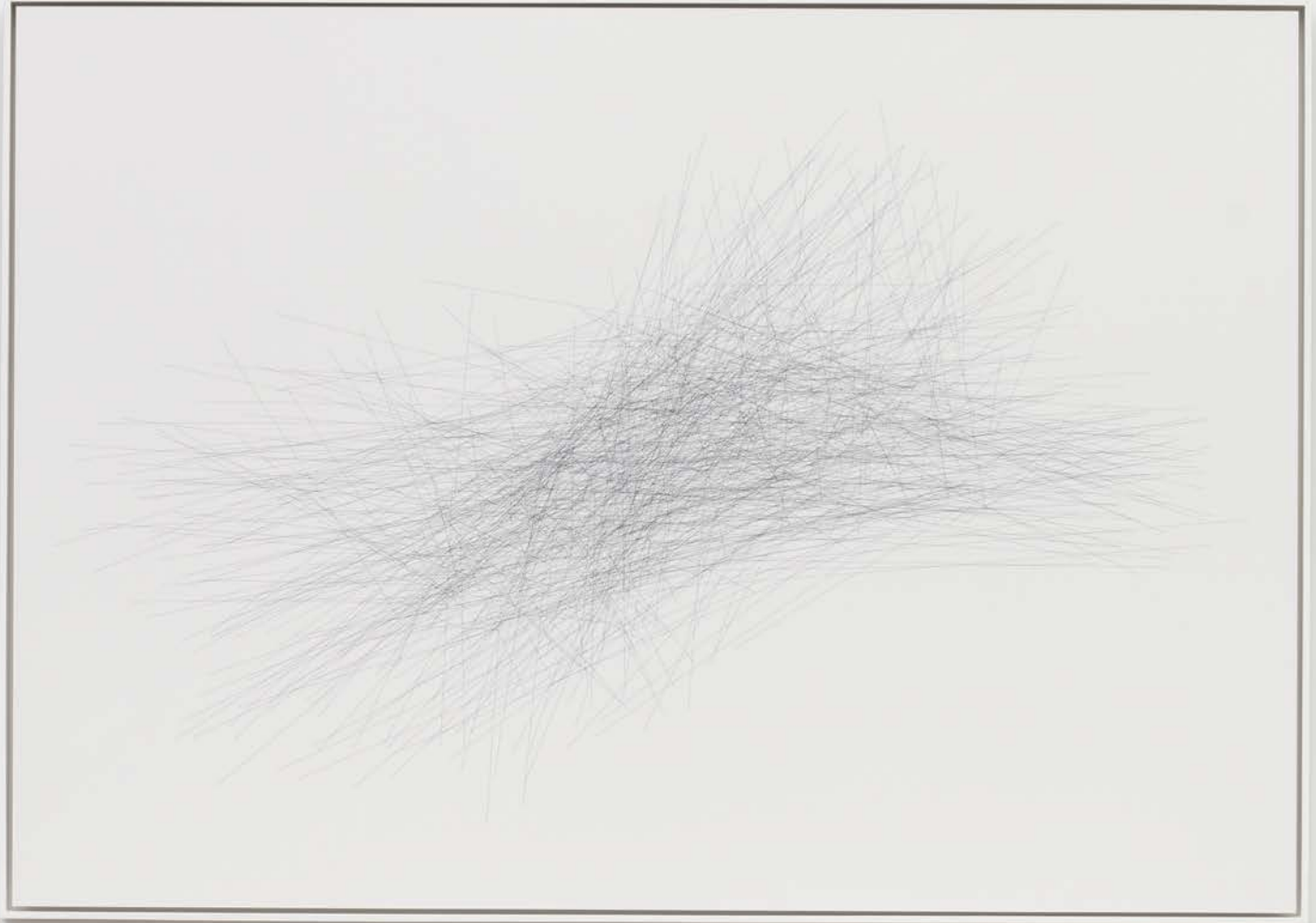
The Meaning of Lines (All Headword Pairs)
2022
48 x 67 inches
digital print on aluminum

The Meaning of Lines

Lines connect two points, creating a relationship in visual or mathematical space. *Headwords* are the words located at the top of a page that help us alphabetically navigate reference texts like encyclopedias and dictionaries. To create this series, Swanson used *word vectors* to measure and map the difference in meaning between headword pairs, plotting the difference as a line in space. To work properly, word vectors require vast amounts of text to use as training data, but these vectors were unconventionally trained on the dictionary itself. The large print and video animation contain all the headword pairs; the smaller prints contain headwords separated by their initial letter, A–Z.

• *dog*

• *cat*

• *spaceship*

Word Vectors

"You shall know a word by the company it keeps."
—John R. Firth, 1957

Word vectors (or word embeddings) are an attempt to model the semantic meaning of words mathematically. This technology is used in text-to-speech applications, spelling and grammar-checking applications, predictive text, and artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT.

Word vectors are based on the premise that words with similar meanings are frequently found near each other in a given text. They are created by training a neural network on a large collection of text, or a corpus. The training model measures the distance between each word in the corpus. These distances are used to calculate the probability of finding a given word near another word. These probabilities are then used to create an n-dimensional model of the meaning of the words from the original corpus.

The graphic on the left illustrates how semantic meaning can be plotted within dimensional space. The words "cat" and "dog" are located close to each other because both describe four-legged domesticated animals. The word "spaceship" is located farther away due to its difference in meaning.
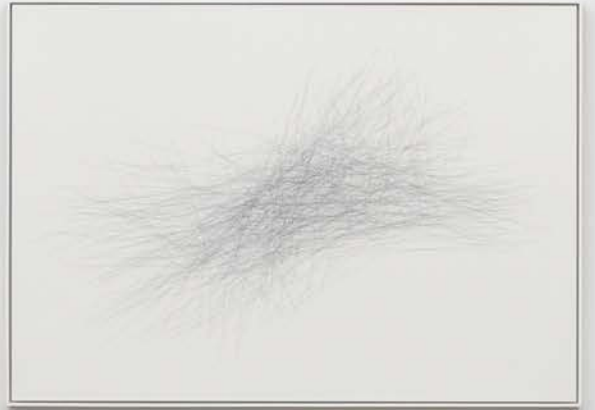
The Meaning of Lines (All Headword Pairs)
2022
digital animation

The Meaning of Lines (All Headword Pairs)
2022
48 x 67 inches
digital print on aluminum
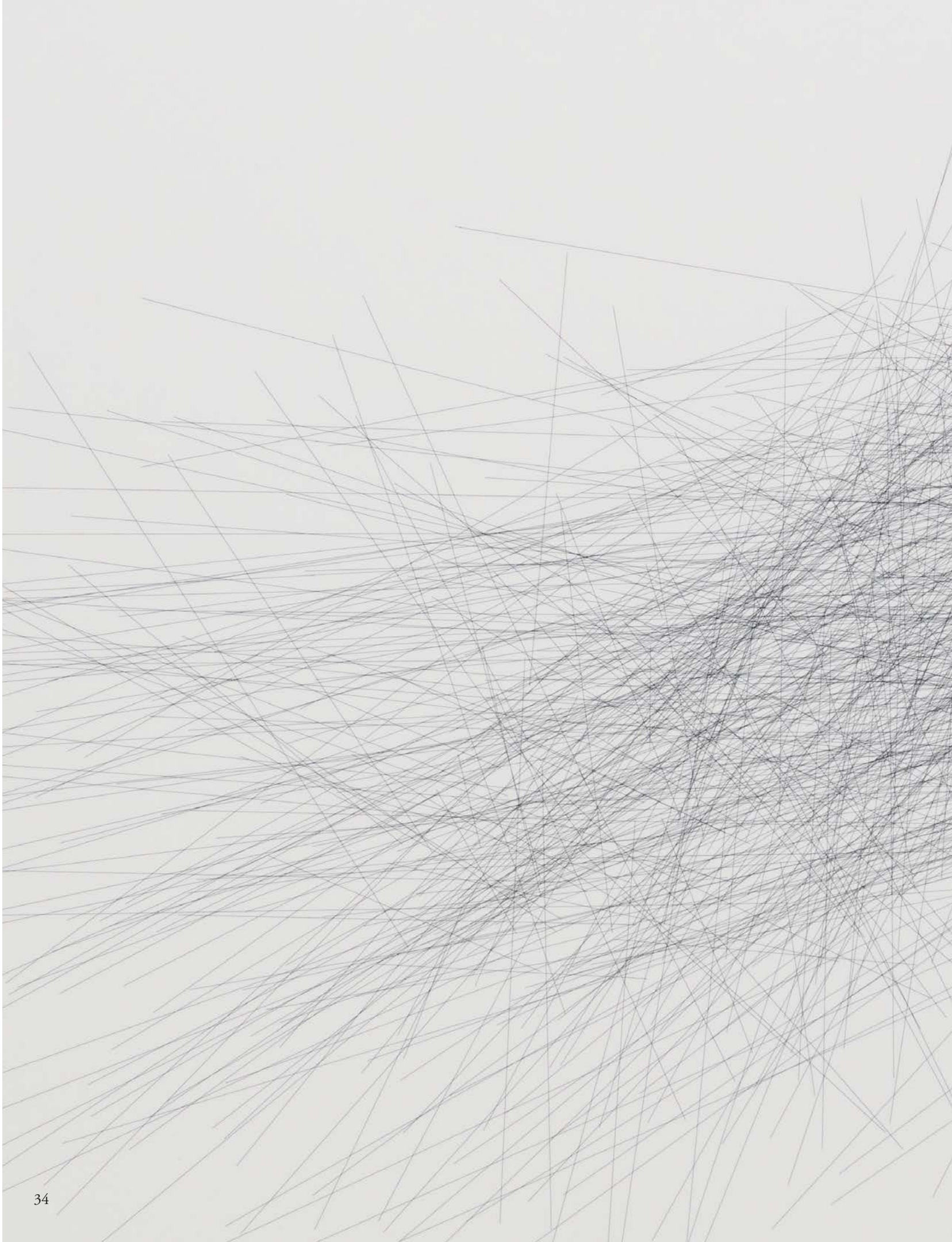
The Meaning of Lines (A–Z Headword Pairs) series of 26
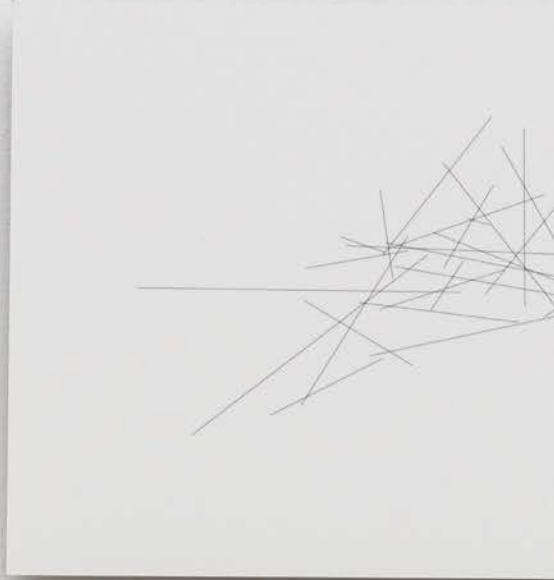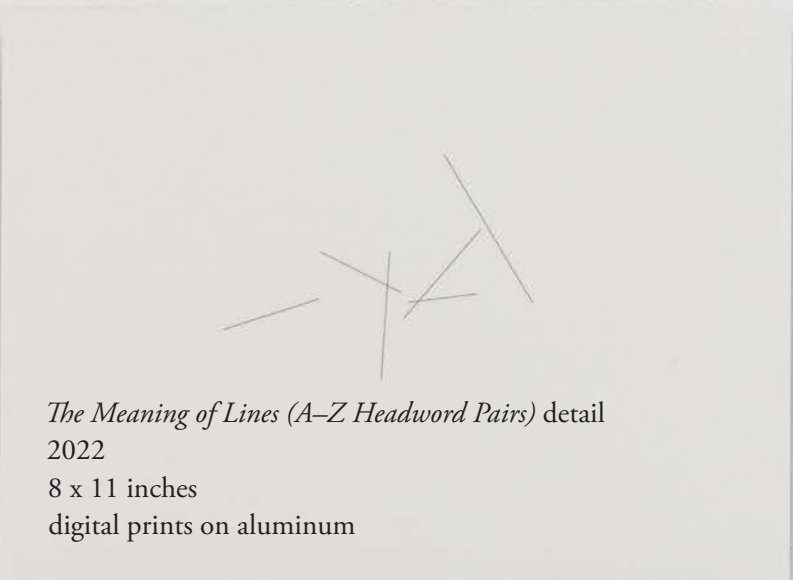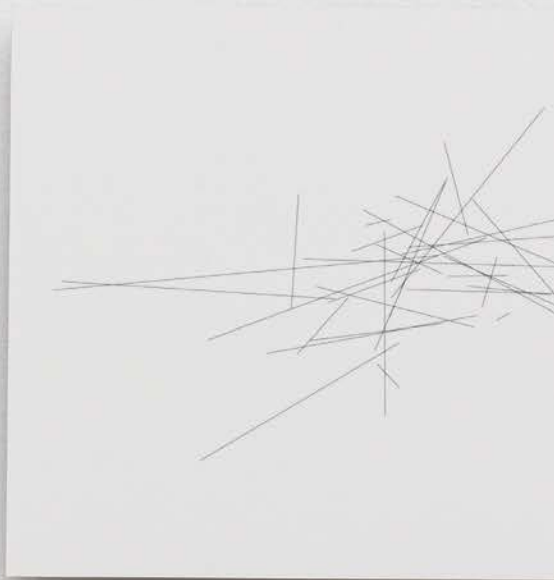2022
8 x 11 inches
digital prints on aluminum

The Meaning of Lines (All Headword Pairs) detail
2022
48 x 67 inches
digital print on aluminum

The Meaning of Lines (A–Z Headword Pairs) detail
2022
8 x 11 inches
digital prints on aluminum

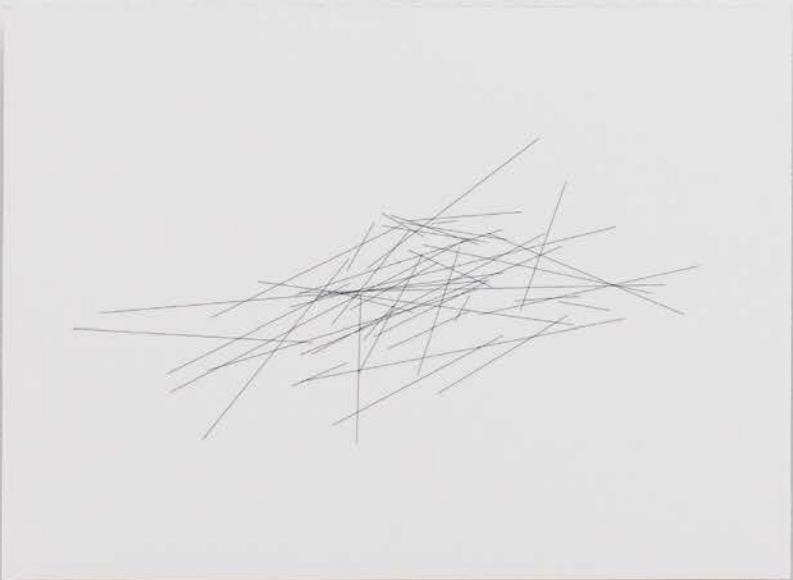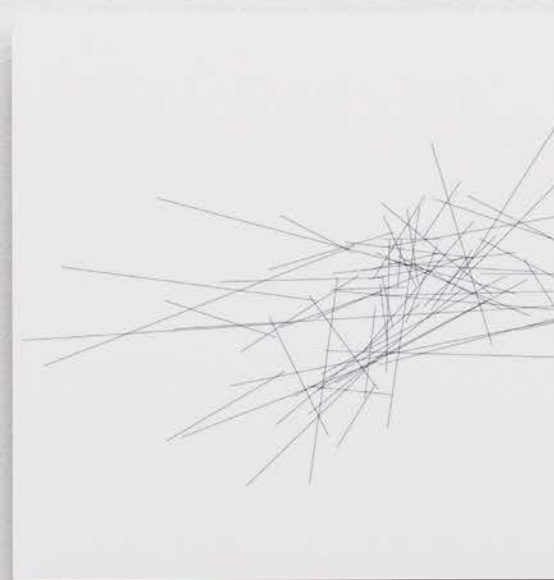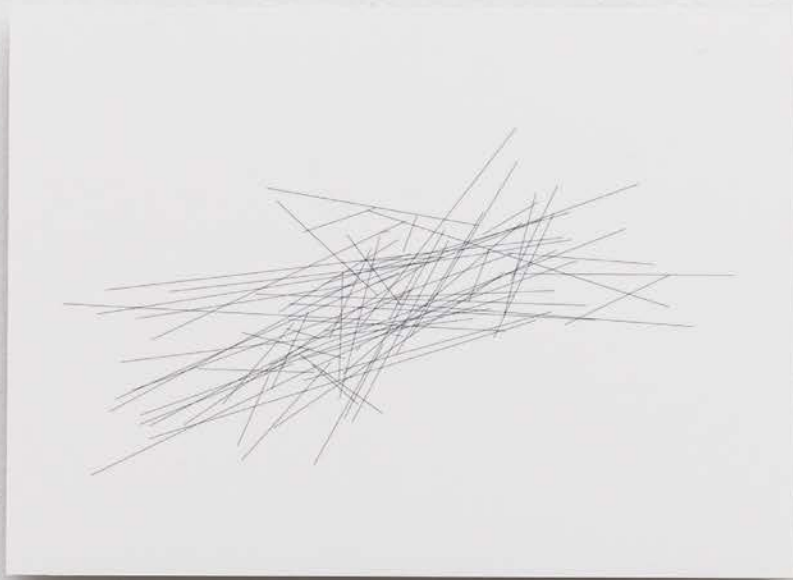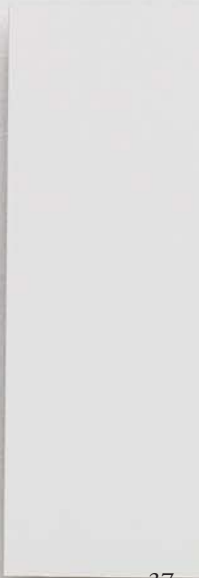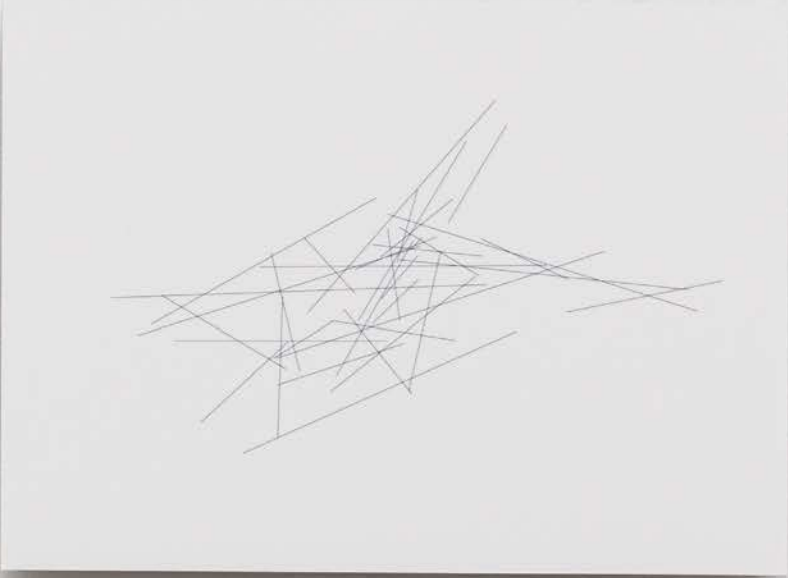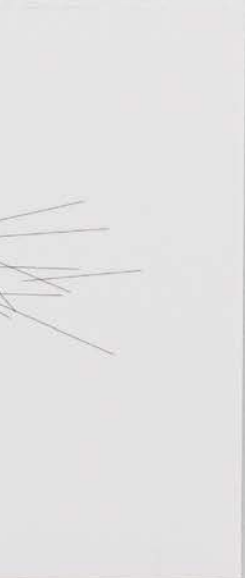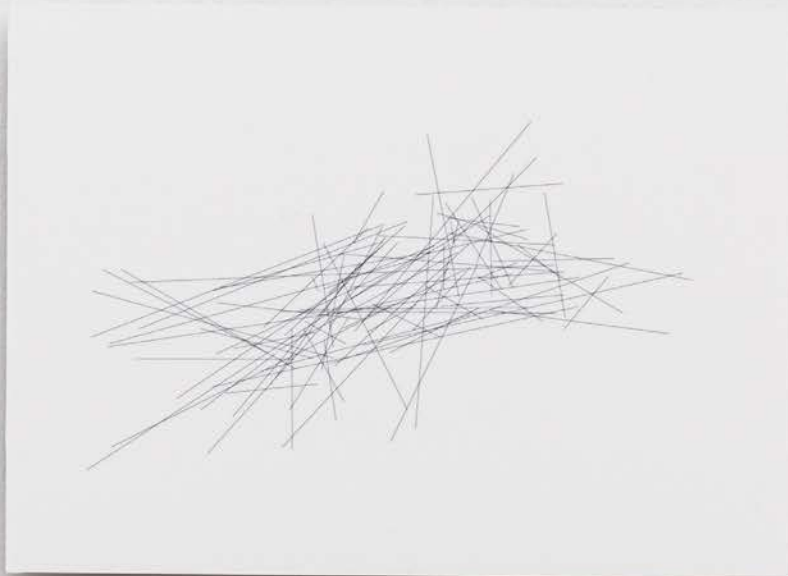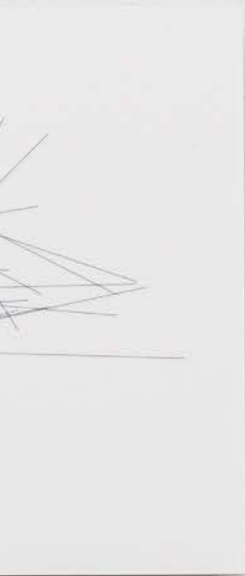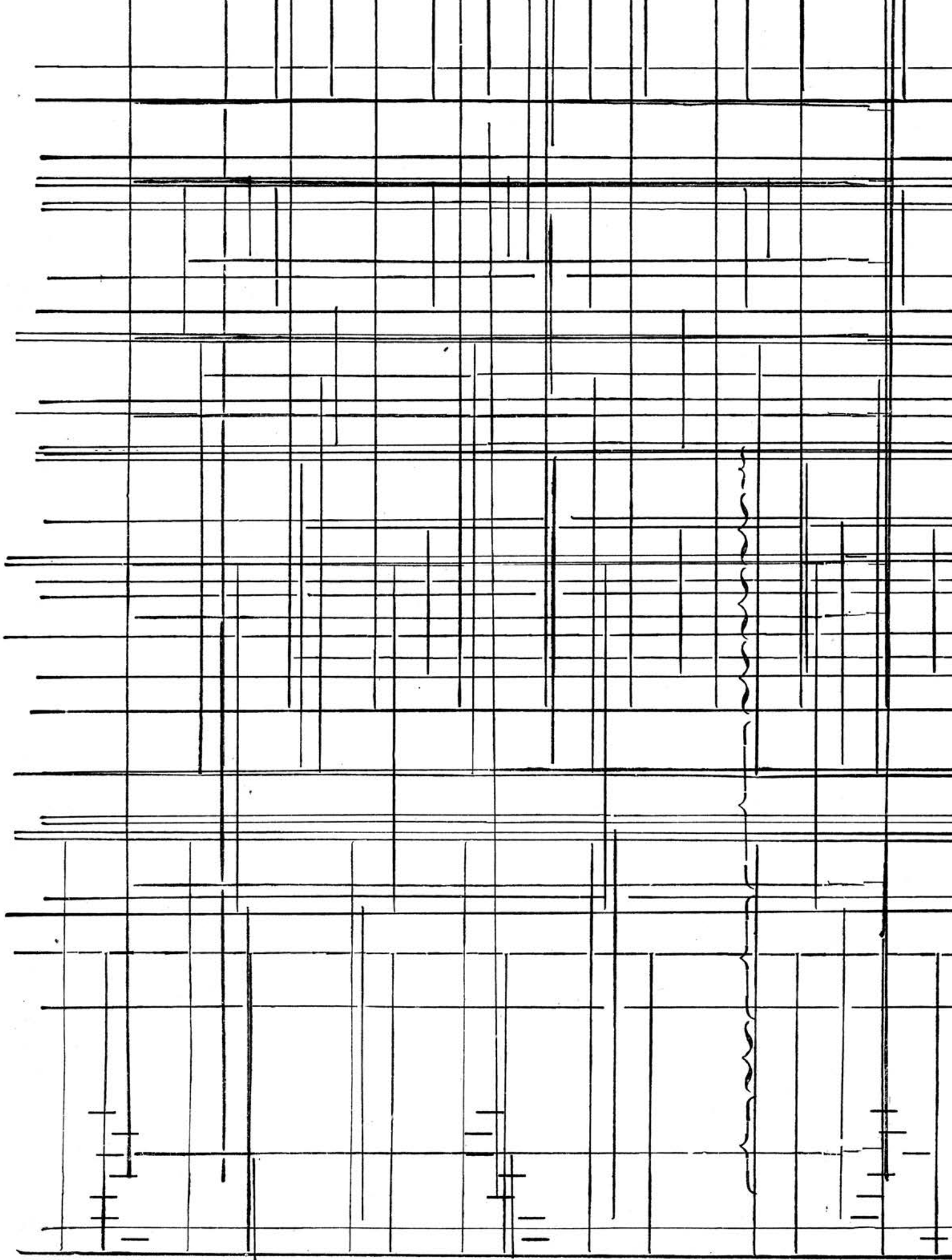# Appendices

This series of prints and digital animations explores the unique and curious supplemental material from the 1929 dictionary. These additions include census data, radio antenna diagrams, a list of "Christian" names for boys and girls, normal heights and weights for children, and other oddities reflecting the era in which the dictionary was published.

Charts, Merged
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital print on paper

Initial Letters, Merged detail
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital print on paper

States (1920 Census)
Charts, Merged
Radio Antenna Diagrams
Punctuation, Words Removed
Radio Symbols, Merged
Initial Letters, Merged
Leading Dots (1920 Census)
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital prints on paper

States (1920 Census)
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital prints on paper
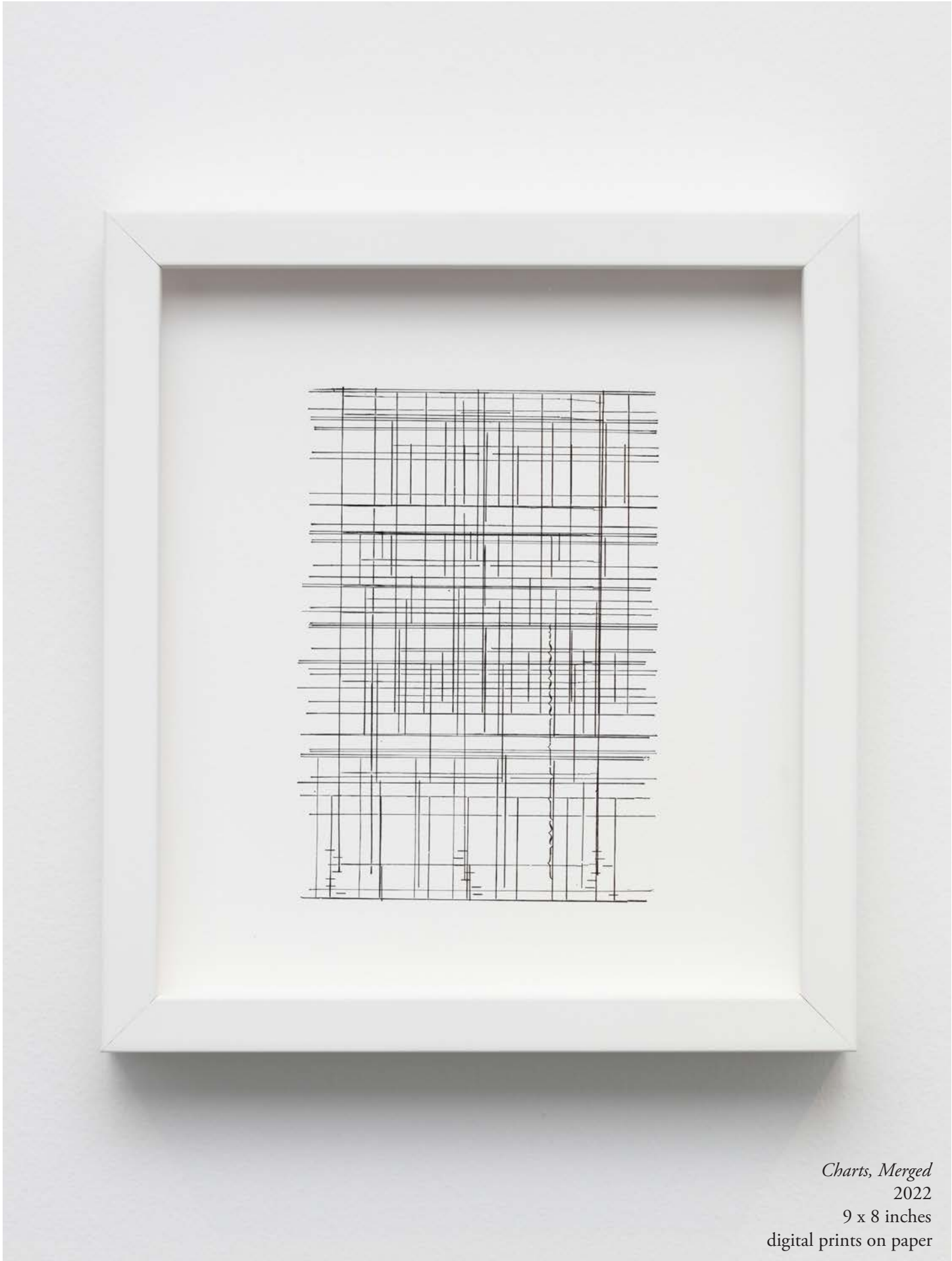
Charts, Merged
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital prints on paper
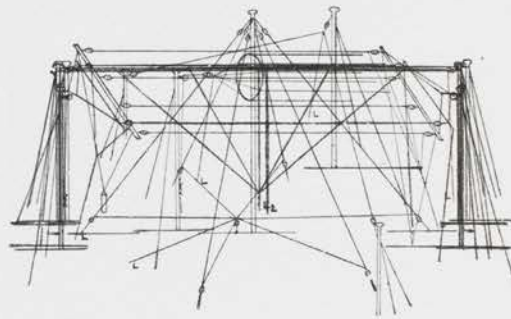
Radio Antenna Diagrams
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital prints on paper

Punctuation, Words Removed
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital prints on paper

Radio Symbols
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital prints on paper

Initial Letters, Merged
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital prints on paper

Leading Dots (1920 Census)
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital prints on paper

Initial Letters (Revolved)
2022
00:01:00
digital animation

 videos
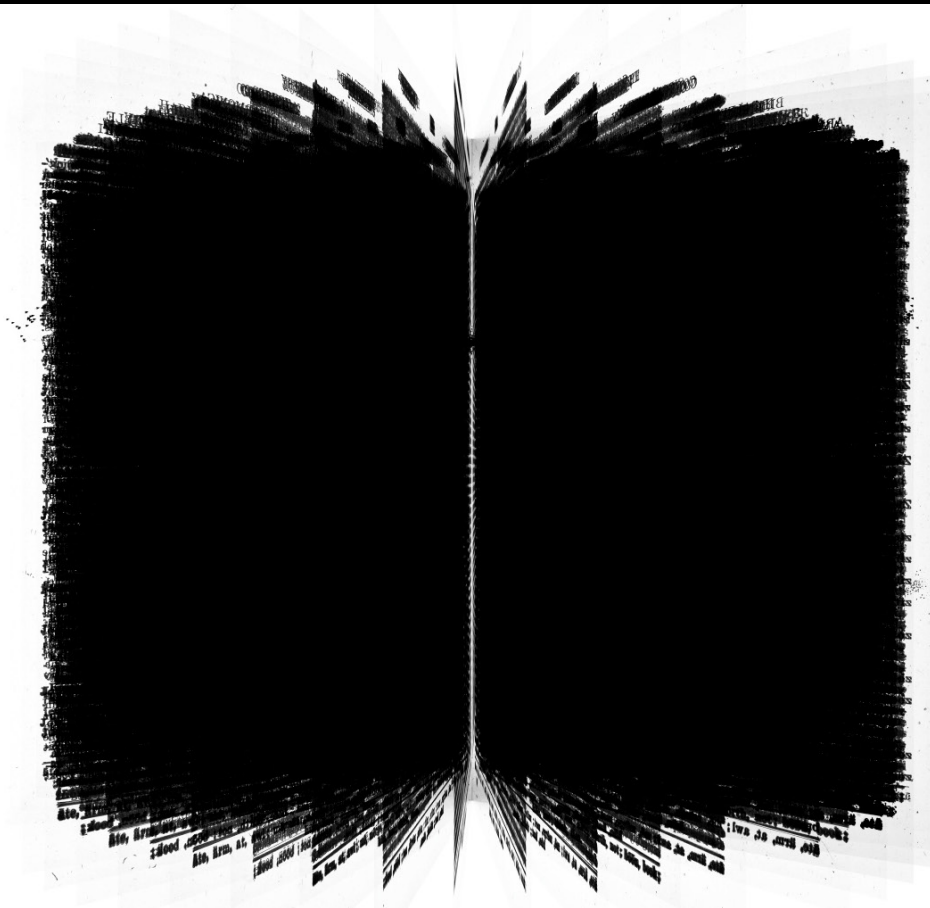
Recto/Verso (Rotated)
2022
00:03:00
digital animation

art (ärt), *n.* the employment of means
to the accomplishment of some end;
the skilful adaptation and applica-
tion to some purpose or use of
knowledge or power acquired from
Nature; a system of rules and estab-
lished methods to facilitate the per-
formance of certain actions; famil-
iarity with such principles, and skill
in applying them to an end or
purpose, as of a practical, useful, or
technical character: opposed to sci-
ence; one of the fine arts; the fine
arts collectively; the power or qual-
ity of perceiving and transcribing the
beautiful or æsthetical in Nature, as
in painting or sculpture; practical
skill: dexterity; knack; cunning;
artifice: *pl.* the branches of learning
included in the prescribed course of
academic study.

Definition of the Word, "Art"
2023
vinyl
21 x 20 inches

Joel Swanson:
The Distance Between Words

by José Antonio Arellano
First published in *Daria Magazine*, Dariamag.com January 12, 2023

For well over a decade, Joel Swanson has explored how language and technology structure our lives. His work has appeared in the Denver-land area, not to mention the Venice Biennale. As part of the entrepreneur Nicholas Pardon's New Collection, a project-based arts initiative, artists Amber Cobb and Mario Zoots prompted Swanson to create the pieces that make up the current exhibition. *The Distance Between Words* is on view at Pardon's private gallery The Vault.

Cobb and Zoots handed Swanson a 1929 edition of *Webster's College, Home and Office Dictionary* and invited him to play. As dictionaries go, this edition boasts its Websterian pedigree with the inclusion of various glossaries and tables.[1] The dictionary's selection criteria elude me.

There are graphs listing census data and information including the "Occupations of Persons 10 Years Old and Over in the United States." There is a map of American mail routes in operation; color plates of collections including "Eggs of Various American Birds"; a glossary of aviation terms; the latest radio antenna information; and so forth. The fact of the information's inclusion imbues the apparently random material with an aura of meaningful authority. This is how information is collated and circulated, thereby becoming "common knowledge" to those who have access.

Because Swanson dismantles the dictionary as an object and archive of knowledge, we could characterize his work as deconstructive in the theoretical sense of the term. He exposes some of the conventions that organize and render content.

From Swanson's statement: "This series of prints and animations explore the nuances of the codex book and antiquated supplementary additions found within

Webster's Dictionary from 1929. The unique and curious additions include census data, radio antenna diagrams, and other oddities reflecting the times in which the dictionary was published."

The Vault's minimalist tenor helps to activate the work and our appreciative relation to it. Swanson renews a creative trajectory described by Sol Lewitt and Victor Burgin in the late 1960s.[2] This trajectory emphasizes the motivating ideas and concepts instead of the created objects.

The "sufficient conditions" establishing this kind of work as art, writes Burgin in an infamous footnote, thus necessarily include the psychological state of the viewer. The "art object becomes, or fails to become, a work of art in direct response to the inclination of the perceiver to assume an appreciative role."[3] This is art to the extent that we are willing to acknowledge it as such.

While driven by ideas, Swanson's pieces are nevertheless meticulous, poetic in ambition, and graceful in execution. Like poets, Swanson forces us to slow down and pay attention to the   gaps   between   words we tend not to register. A facility with linguistic use can render language almost transparent, as if we see through it to capture the world it delivers. But when language breaks down, as it does in *The Distance Between Words*, we can catalogue the opacity of its mechanics.

Swanson literalizes this insight in *Every Page (Recto)* and *Every Page (Verso)*, in which he scans the right-hand (verso) and left-hand (recto) side of every page of the 1929 dictionary. He layers the scanned pages and prints them on large sheets of paper to produce two large prints. The resulting pieces look like monochromatic paintings, the rectangular material supports of which are determined by the shape of the dictionary page. The handset leading and font of the original dictionary are barely recognizable as the layered text becomes illegible in the accumulated mass of ink. Ink, in the prints, becomes noticeably more inky.

Unlike these printed accumulations of ink, a neighboring piece *Every Page (Separated by Letter, Recto and Verso)* allows us to look through the material support of the printed word: the page. Swanson scanned all of the pages of a dictionary, transferred them to a transparent medium, then stacked these scans and made a single image of them separated alphabetically. By projecting the images onto the wall using a carousel slide projector, he lets us see the stacked printed words. The idea of paper, here, is rendered transparent, while the ink does not densely amass on top of itself so much as it ephemerally floats.

The day I saw this piece, the projector was stuck on a slide, failing to advance to the next image. When our tools break down mid-use, as Martin Heidegger noted in 1927, we tend to notice their materiality.[4] And that, I think, is the point of this work, even if—especially if— its enabling technology stops working.

Swanson's use of a projector thus appears as an atavistic nod to older technology and as an homage to the developments in conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s.[5] Swanson revisits the earlier twentieth-century philosophical concerns that paved the way for this kind of art—the self-conscious impulse that characterizes what we have come to call modernism.

Think of Viktor Shklovsky, who in 1917 described art as rendering the familiar unfamiliar. "Art," for Shklovsky, "exists that one may recover the sensation of life… to make the stone stony."[6] Think, too, of how Marcel Duchamp's Fountain, also in 1917, asked the art beholder to consider the very conditions that enable art to register as art.

The loss of faith in rationality we tend to associate with the end of the 19th century led to efforts exploring the very nature of mediation—in art and language, math and logic. Artists explored the mediating conditions enabling their work, and philosophers of various traditions explored the very possibility of knowledge and meaning. Some mathematicians and analytic philosophers expressed a desire to pin down language to math, and to equate math with logic. If only we can do that, they thought, we could disclose, once and for all, the logical foundation of language, and through it everything else.

Swanson plays with something like this desire in two pieces titled *Frequency Adverbs*. Swanson, as the gallery guide states, translates "natural language, which is messy
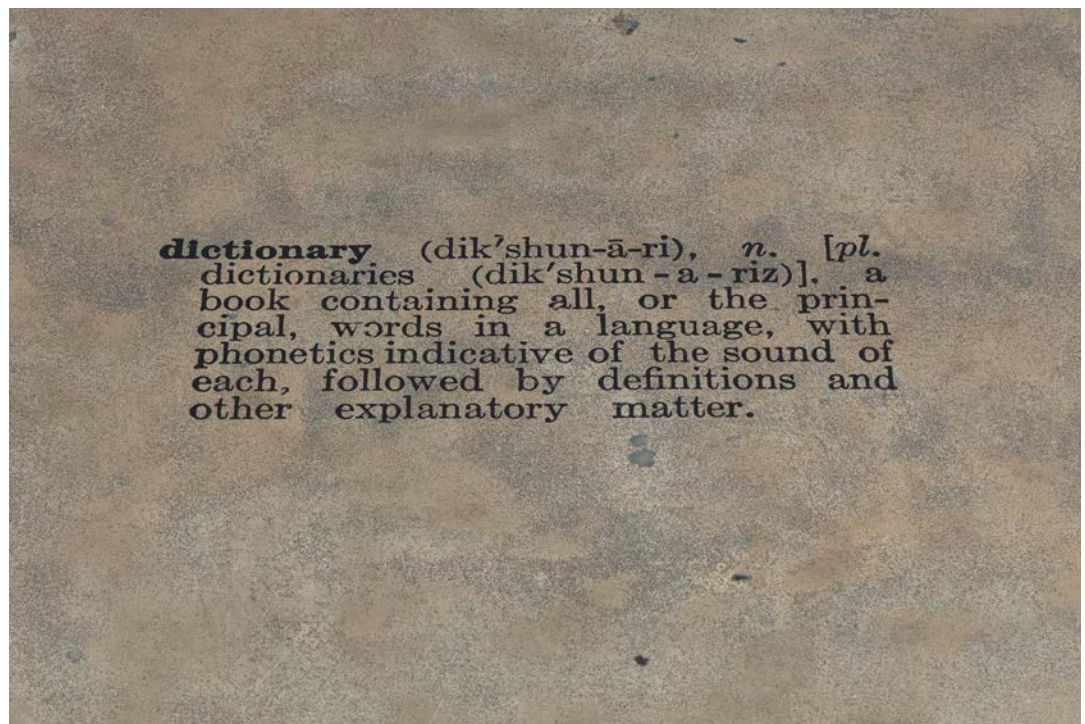
Definition of the Word, "Dictionary"
2023
vinyl
40 x 30 inches

and subjective" into "mathematical language, which is precise and discrete." In the first piece, he presents a list of words including "usually" and "frequently," "intermittently" and "occasionally," and assigns percentages that gesture toward the words' meanings.

On the gallery wall directly across from this list, an accompanying installation renders the words in neon signs lit according to the assigned percentages. The neon sign "ALWAYS" remains lit 100% of the time; "FREQUENTLY" only 70%; "SELDOM" 20%; "NEVER" remains unlit. The illumination of electronic neon glow thus sheds light, as it were, on what we colloquially refer to as "shades of meaning."

As I considered whether the work expresses faith in the desire to assuage the messiness of language with the objectivity of math, I happened to be standing near the definition of "Dictionary" printed on the gallery floor. The inclusion of this definition, taken from the 1929 dictionary, acknowledges the conceptual art of Joseph Kosuth and alludes to the conditions of the show's production.

This self-referential use of an item from a dictionary (a definition) as a work of art within a set of works (the exhibition) reminded me of the paradoxes involving sets that contain themselves as items. In the late 1920s, Kurt Godel used mathematical reasoning to explore itself and such paradoxes and he exploded the possibility of math being provably, logically consistent. With Gödel's insight in mind, we might say that whatever our understanding of semantic nuance is, it cannot be pinned down to mathematical formal calculation.[7]

And neither can meaning. In his *Meaning of Lines* series, Swanson updates an interest in language's organizing power by introducing algorithmic applications that increasingly structure our everyday. He uses the 1929 dictionary's content as the input data for a program that calculates the frequency with which words appear next to each other (how Google and iPhones can seemingly predict what you will type next).

The program maps out the semantic "distance" between the guide words atop the dictionary page (say, "education" and "effusion") and expresses this distance as lines in three-dimensional space. The resulting video is elegantly meditative, as are the accompanying aluminum prints of this series.

If we think of meaning as the correspondence between one set of symbols and another, or one set of symbols and the world, then these lines are verifiably meaningful. The meaning of this piece as art, however, surpasses verification and formal manipulation. It might expose the technological utopians' fantasy about the corrective power of algorithmic logic.

In this fantasy, the right formula, application, calculation, or algorithm would clear up the messiness of subjective perception, biases, and semantic confusion. But what

occurs when we abdicate our responsibility and offload it to technological fantasies involving the supposed objectivity of algorithmic logic?

This question and its potential answer were made available to me almost as a revelation in the audio piece *All the Silence*. Swanson had a program mechanically "recite" the dictionary's content but then eliminated the sound of the recited words. He left only the durational spaces between the words, thereby rendering the sound of silence in between spoken words. Without such punctuated silences, however minuscule, spoken language could become an incomprehensible jumble of noise.

The piece is played through a wireless speaker at a low volume. You can just barely hear the endings and beginnings of the mechanically-uttered words. This is not the melodious murmur or soothing sibilance of spoken sound. This cold, mechanistic recitation, audible for only fractions of a second, is discomfiting. I begin to envision a world in which we abnegate our responsibility, outsource it to the technology that will supposedly save us from ourselves, and in the process erase the very possibility of our self-recognition of us as us.

All the Silence appears so simple, but it allows us to recognize what has been a topic of western philosophy since Plato—an interstitial space, an in-between substratum, the void through which meaning as such shines forth.[8] What I am trying to say is that this work compels us to recognize an ineffable something through which every-thing about us as us depends: what is excluded as the condition of something being the thing it is, and what is included as the expression of its structuring forces. Our recognition of ourselves as that which considers the conditions of our own being.

This is technology understood not as instrumentally ready to extract the world's resources but as poesis.[9] This use of technology can produce the clearing through which we create and bring forth, recognize and understand, experience and elevate.[10]

The conditions prompting this exhibition create a cordoned-off zone that can seemingly bracket market pressures. The point here is creation, not commodifica-tion. The type of value at play here is thus that of a collector and not the market. And maybe, just maybe, this space can enable the creation of meaning that is not subjected to the sociology of market desires. In my view, this is the ideal condition for the creation of art as such.

But what, we have to ask, makes this zone possible? The market, while being displaced, hovers in the background. The specific year of the Webster dictionary appears not to have played a role in its selection. But I cannot help but consider the exhibition in relation to the 1920s, a decade that witnessed the creation of some of the most compelling, self-aware works of modernist art.

1929 was the year Rene Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1929) asked its beholders to consider the difference between the presentation of objects in the world and their

iconic and linguistic representation. But it is also the year of the stock market crash that inaugurated the most devastating economic catastrophe in American history, the beginning of the Great Depression, and the end of the economic boom that resulted in gross inequality.

This art will not move your passions, nor incite your political fervor. Although it could. For if the aesthetic realm is understood as existing within a cordoned-off zone, that which is excluded (the market, politics, social anxieties…) applies such pressure to the boundaries that these borders could collapse with a single thought that lets them in. And insofar as this kind of work requires that we assume an appreciative role, there is a sneaking suspicion that we may not want to. I think we should because what we might discover is the insight that only art can disclose.

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Notes

[1] "In his earliest Dictionary," writes John C. Rolfe, "Webster had introduced an Appendix, and this together with the admission of a great number of scientific and technical terms… gave his American Dictionary something of an encyclopedic character…" "The Origin and History of Dictionaries," *Webster's College, Home and Office Dictionary Illustrated*, Noah Webster and Harry Thurston Peck (Chicago: Consolidated Book Publishers. 1929), vi.

[2] See Sol LeWitt "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," Artforum 5 no. 10 (June 1967), 79.

[3] Victor Burgin, "Situational Aesthetics," *Studio International*, 178, no. 915 (October 1969), 121 footnote 4.

[4] See Martin Heidegger, §14 "The Being of the Entities Encountered in the Environment," *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein Und Zeit*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh (State University of New York Press, 2010).

[5] Robert Barry's 1960's experimentation with slide projectors is relevant here, as is Ian Burn's investigation of iterative copies in *Xerox Book* (1968). Mel Bochner's playful exploration of the phrase "LANGUAGE IS NOT TRANSPARENT," printed on various media including glass, also paved the way for Swanson's art.

[6] Viktor Shklovsky "Art as Technique" reprinted in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000 an Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 279.

[7] My point here, one that was brought to my attention by Roger Penrose's *The Emperor's New Mind: Concerning Computers, Mind, and the Laws in Physics* (1989), is that our understanding and insight is not algorithmic in nature. When converted to mathematical calculations to show their truth or falsity, linguistic statements such as "This statement is false," or "This sentence is a lie," or "This statement cannot be proved" cannot be proven mathematically using the rules of a formula. If such statements were shown to be true, they would be expressing something false. But if they were expressing something false, they would be true. But if they were shown to be true, then what they state would be false. And so on, ad infinitum. We can understand the meaning of such sentences even when we cannot prove them.

[8] See Jacques Derrida's "Khôra" in *On the Name* (1993) in which he riffs on Plato's Timaeus.

[9] See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology: And Other Essays* (New York: Garland, 1977).

[10] See Heiddeger's §28 "The Task of a Thematic Analysis of Being-In" and §36 "Curiosity" of *Being and Time*, in which Heidegger refers to a "Lichtung," translated as a "clearing."

intermittently 40%

occasionally 30%

seldom 20%

rarely 10%

never 0%

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