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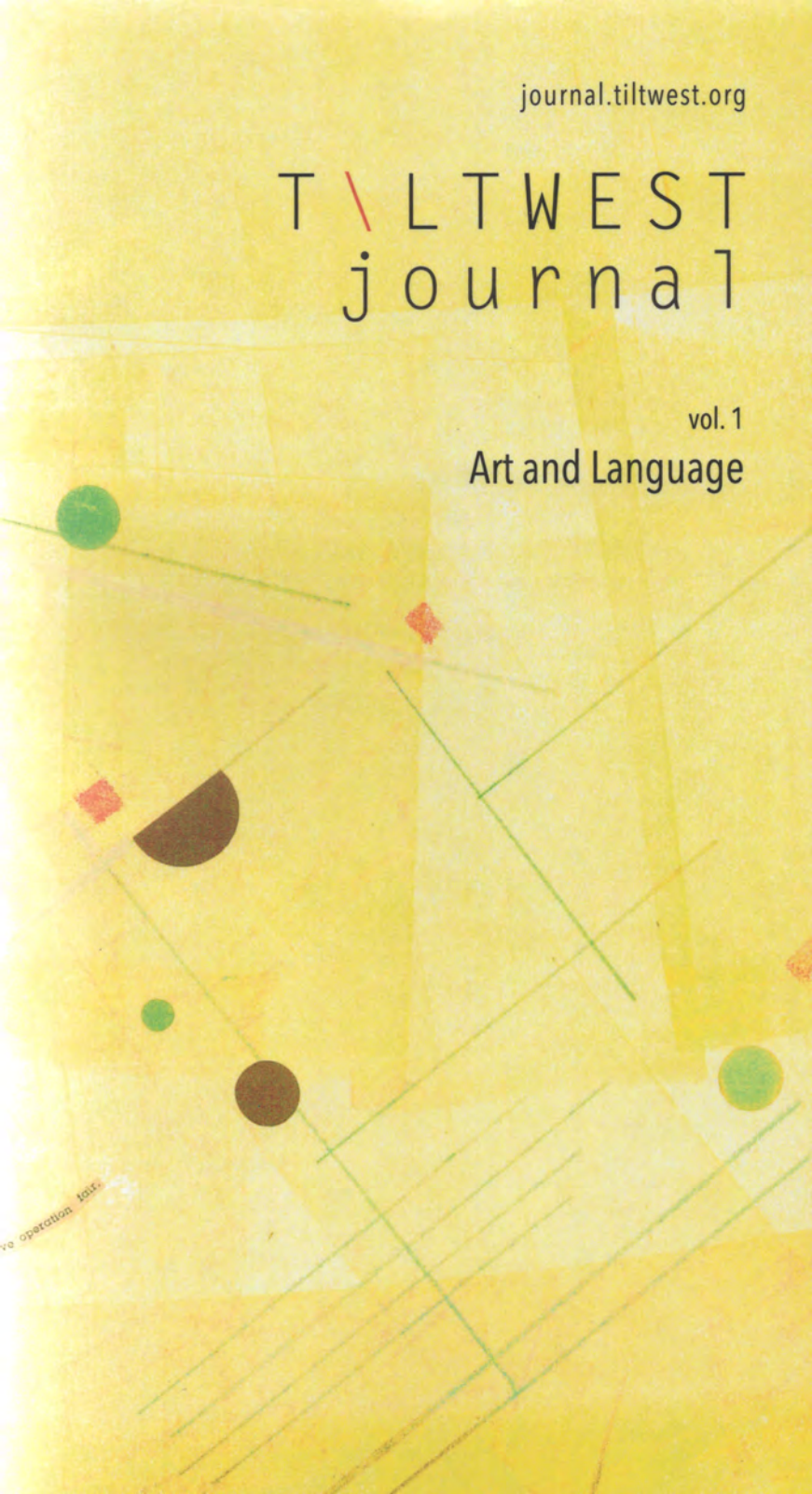
Art and Language



Poet and editor Juan Morales addresses a different aspect of translation in his touching personal essay, "Let's Call It Home: Learning Language, Translation, & Literary Citizenship." Morales explores the complexity and struggle of being a Latinx writer who was not raised to be bilingual. He describes his experience of learning Spanish—a language that is for him both formative and foreign—as an adult.

We hope we've piqued your curiosity and whet your appetite to enjoy the provocations and cross-pollinations inspired by the work in this inaugural issue of the *Tilt West Journal*. As always, we thank you for engaging in this ongoing cultural conversation.

—Kate Nicholson and Whitney Carter

Special thanks to Sarah Wambold, who conceived and developed our digital platform with help from Marty Spellerberg. We are also grateful to Maria Buszek for her editorial assistance and to all of our board members for everything they do!

Language Blinks

Joel Swanson

For summer vacation my family would go on cross-country camping trips. Our travels took us on highways that wound through small towns peppered with those mid-century motels that have become icons of the American roadtrip. We typically never stayed in these places since we were camping, but one time we did—I can't remember why. Excited by the rare opportunity to stay in a motel, my sister and I stayed up late drinking Diet Rite, watching cable TV, and wondering at the utility and function of a coin operated vibrating bed.

Most of these motels had a neon sign out front with the words "NO VACANCY" below the name of the motel, the illumination of the "NO" indicating a lack of available rooms. As a kid, it made me sad whenever we would pass a motel with the "NO" illuminated, because it eliminated any potential of spending the night in a bed instead of a sleeping bag, but even then, the cleverness and economy of this blinking sign fascinated me.

Blinking is ubiquitous; digital technologies are constantly vying for our attention. Mobile phones, crosswalk signs, turn signals; there is even a light on my electric toothbrush that blinks when it needs to be recharged. As I write this, the cursor on my computer screen is blinking at me, compelling me to write, a visual metronome for the written word. Things blink sonically and haptically; ringtones and silent vibrations

form recognizable patterns of sound and motion. "Phantom vibrations" of the phones in our pockets speak to how ingrained these Pavlovian patterns have become in our contemporary psyche. The blink is a signifier for the digital age, but what does it mean? How do we theorize something so pervasive?

Letters blink. Words blink. Language blinks. Blinking is intrinsic to the core functionality of sequential language. The *persistence of vision* is the phenomenon that occurs within film and animation whereby the illusion of motion is created by a quick succession of still images, like in one of those flip books made on the corner of a stack of Post-It notes. Perhaps there is an analogue within language and reading? Words are typically static, fixed forms on the page. But reading requires motion; as we read, our eyes scan the page, left to right, top to bottom (in western languages), producing not the *illusion of motion*, but perhaps an analogous *illusion of meaning.* Similar to the flickering images of film, while reading we focus on one word, then the next, and the next, forming a time-dependent chain of signification. Letters and words are simply shapes to which we ascribe meaning, and grammar is the set of rules that governs the sequence of language. But as Ferdinand de Saussure theorized, the connection between the form and the meaning is arbitrary.[1] There is no inherent or natural connection between a letter and the sound it represents. There is no causal relationship between the word and the thing it signifies. Meaning is constructed, an arbitrary illusion of signification. This meaning is more than the sum of its parts; sequence is significant.

Language also blinks within conversation. As Maurice Blanchot explores in his essay "Interruption: As on a Reimann Surface," conversation is based on a series of interruptions. A Reimann surface is a mathematical concept that defines a one-dimensional complex manifold, or put more simply, a plane with peaks and valleys, like corduroy fabric. For Blanchot, this form of highs and lows is a metaphor for the interruptive nature of conversation:

> *The definition of conversation (that is, the most simple description of the most simple conversation) might be the following: when two people speak together, they speak not together, but each in turn: one says something, then stops, the other something else (or the thing), then stops. The coherent discourse they carry on is composed of sequences that are interrupted when the conversation moves from partner to partner, even if adjustments are made so that they correspond to one another. The fact that speech needs to pass from one interlocutor to another in order to be confirmed, contradicted, or developed shows the necessity of the interval.*[2]

Blanchot's Reimann surface is an analogue of the blink, a material encoding of speech and silence. At almost every level of language, from its fundamental structure to its performance in reading, speech, and conversation, the blink can be seen as a primary feature of language.

For a blink to have meaning, the sequence must be given a context. We need the corresponding language of Morse code for the sequences of dots and dashes to carry meaning. I need to be instructed that the blinking light on my electric toothbrush means that it needs to be recharged. An LED light that is programmed to blink randomly carries the "meaning" of randomness (which is no small field of research within computer science). Even distant pulsars blink at a rate corresponding to the rotation of their electromagnetic fields. Whether natural, cultural, or technological, the meaning of the blink is always inscribed and contextual.

The interval, the sequence of the blink, carries meaning at various levels. When Morse code was a popular form of communication, operators could distinguish other operators by the cadence of their tapping. Morse code carried its inscribed or literal meaning but, like the cadence and intonation in speech or the subtle variations of letterforms in handwriting, there is a surplus of meaning that conveys identity and personality. Patterns have affect, denotative and connotative layers of meaning that interpenetrate one another.

But what is the substance or materiality of the blink? A blink is a pattern, a sequence that holds meaning. Just as presence requires absence, the *blink* requires the *blank*. Absence is required as the antithesis of presence; it gives presence its form. Similarly the blink requires the pause, gap, or lacuna. Like binary data, blinking requires two states, O and 1, on and off, there and not. This is the structural requirement of the blink: there is no such thing as a solitary blink, just *blinking*.

This binary of presence and absence has subtly but powerfully influenced the way we think about the world. In her essay, "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers," N. Katherine Hayles traces the dialectic of presence and absence into its contemporary, posthuman equivalent: pattern and randomness:

> *The contemporary pressure towards dematerialization, understood as an epistemic shift toward pattern/randomness and away from presence/absence, affects human and textual bodies on two levels at once, as a change in the body (the material substrate) and as a change in the message (the codes of representation).*[3]

The dialectic of pattern and randomness recuperates, or is built upon, the dialectic of presence and absence. These dialectics theoretically, historically, and materially influence the forms and communicative potential of language.

Even at the most simplistic forms of meaning—binary code—the blink reigns supreme. As voltage differences are read by a transistor, 0's or 1's, these *blinks* become patterns of meaning. It is astounding to think of the vast amount of information that is stored as binary data. From binary to machine code to the text we see rendered on a screen—and all the interconnected layers between— digital text is predicated on the blink.

As an artist, I am drawn to works that formally and conceptually blink. Vito Acconci's work *READ THIS WORD THEN READ THIS WORD* from 1968 directly builds upon this idea that language blinks formally and conceptually. The work consists of a simple sheet of paper with the following text:

> *READ THIS WORD THEN READ THIS WORD READ THIS WORD NEXT READ THIS WORD NOW SEE ONE WORD SEE ONE WORD NEXT SEE ONE WORD NOW AND THEN SEE ONE WORD AGAIN LOOK AT THREE WORDS HERE LOOK AT THREE WORDS NOW LOOK AT THREE WORDS NOW TOO TAKE IN FIVE WORDS AGAIN TAKE IN FIVE WORDS SO TAKE IN FIVE WORDS DO IT NOW SEE THESE WORDS AT A GLANCE SEE THESE WORDS AT THIS GLANCE AT THIS GLANCE HOLD THIS LINE IN VIEW HOLD THIS LINE IN ANOTHER VIEW AND IN A THIRD VIEW SPOT SEVEN LINES AT ONCE THEN TWICE THEN THRICE THEN A FOURTH TIME A FIFTH A SIXTH A SEVENTH AN EIGHTH*[4]

The work, deceptive in its simplicity, draws us into the liminal space between the mechanics of reading (motion) and the meaning generated through those mechanics (literal meaning of the words themselves). The text is imperative, didactic in its content. For me, the power of this work is in its ability to make the reader keenly aware of the motion of language and its contingency on the way words blink optically and conceptually.

Acconci's work also plays with reference in a disorienting way. When Acconci writes, "READ THIS WORD," does THIS refer to the word THIS? Or does THIS refer to WORD? Acconci makes the referential nature of words blink; my eyes jump back and forth as my mind processes which word is referring to which. His work reveals certain rules and aspects of language that are always present, but rarely noticed. The motion and cadence of reading is contrasted with the content of reading, creating a space of playful discomfort.

I also think about Jenny Holzer's quintessential LED works. These horizontal dot-matrix screens are typically used for news feeds, stock tickers, and other types of "important" informational display. Holzer repurposes these signs, displaying her own words—and the words of others—that relate to identity, politics, and the body. At times enigmatic and at others literal, the words create the "content" of these textual sculptures that synthesize the blinking of technology with the blinking of language. Holzer's installations require the attention of the reader in both time and space, reminding us that reading requires both mind and body. As the individual LED lights blink on and off, they create the *illusion of motion*: the words aren't moving, but the choreographed patterns of blinking lights create the appearance of movement. Holzer's works also invoke the *illusion of meaning*: materially, these are just solitary blinking lights, but the shapes they form are inscribed or coded with the meaning(s) that we interpret as language. Marshall McLuhan said, "It is the framework which changes with each new technology and not just the picture within the frame."[5] Holzer's work reminds us that both the picture and the frame of language are technological constructions. More than any other artist, the blinking of language is manifest in Holzer's work.

In 2018, Mark Bradford installed a new work as part of the University of California, San Diego's outdoor Stuart Collection. The work, entitled *What Hath God Wrought,* is a 199-foot flagpole with a flashing white light attached to the top. This beacon blinks out the titular phrase, "What Hath God Wrought" in Morse code, which was the first message that Samuel Morse sent from Baltimore to Washington in 1844.

There is an irony within this work, as Morse code isn't a commonly understood format of language. The typical viewer would see the blinking light but not be able to interpret the message. What does it mean to put a message—even a famous quote—into a coded format that few can read? What does it mean to put this enigmatic message on

top of a flag pole, a position typically reserved for symbols that claim identity, territory, or nationality?

Morse code played an extremely significant role as a popular encoding of language alongside its contemporary ancillaries like ASCII and UNICODE. These encodings, formats, and protocols of language define the very potential of communication within networked media. After all, we can't use an Emoji unless it is approved by the UNICODE Consortium, which controls the allowable characters of digital text. But what does it mean to *encode* language at all? Encoding can both obscure a language intentionally (e.g., a "secret code") or unintentionally. Is obscurity the unavoidable byproduct of encodings and formats that attempt to simplify language in the attempt to make language more universal? Morse code is often touted as a global format due to its simplicity, but this supposed simplicity assumes the universality of English, or at least some shared meta-language. Technology certainly has a penchant for blindly recuperating the colonial tendencies of language.

Bradford's piece also highlights the durationality and physicality of reading; it is typically thought of as a still and sedentary act. But reading is an active and durational practice that requires a physical presence in time and space. As we gaze up at Bradford's flag pole we are also reminded that our notions of time, space, and reading itself are historical and social constructions.

Bradford is known for his large-scale collage works that materially speak to identity, race, and marginalization. This minimal, austere flag pole is divergent from his typical work. His Wikipedia page states that this work is about "the powerful influence of technology on communication," but I am inclined to believe that there is something deeper.[6] There is an inherent tension in this work between the Samuel Morse quote, the distance from the light source to its viewer, and the inability of the general population to read the coded message. Most of us are just left looking up at a blinking light wondering what it all means. This is the powerful message behind this work; it is about agency, literacy, and the way that language itself functions as a technology that disempowers as much as it empowers, marginalizes as much as it privileges.

We are driven by a desire or compulsion to make meaning, to make sense of things. The history of technology parallels the history of the systems and structures of meaning we have developed to record and

communicate our experience. Although novel at first, these systems and structures penetrate our daily existence and become second nature; they are so familiar we no longer *see* them. The modest pencil was once a cutting-edge technology, but with its ubiquity the pencil has become invisible as a technology. The same is true with language; we need artwork that makes language strange again.

Our bodies carry a trace of the blink: our eyes blink, our hearts beat, our neurons flicker as they send signals between brain and body. These innate biological patterns are reflected in language; we are connected conceptually, historically, and materially to the words we use. By paying attention to these material aspects of language, we can use language more responsibly, critically, and creatively. "NO VACANCY" signs no longer make me sad, but instead remind me of our potential and responsibility to shape language as it shapes us.

Appendix

A non-exhaustive list of things that blink, in no particular order: crosswalk signals, red stoplights at four way stops (or when a stoplight malfunctions), eyelids, lights on routers and modems, microwaves and ovens when the timer is done, fire alarms, neon "OPEN" signs, almost every sign in Las Vegas, Morse code, beacons, runway lights, railroad crossing lights, traffic signs, twinkling stars, pulsars, turn signals, strobe lights, almost everything at an EDM show, lights on airplanes, the light on my dishwasher, the cursor on my computer, directional traffic signs, smoothie machines, "recording" lights on video cameras, the "fasten seat belt" signs on airplanes, fireflies, Christmas lights, the reflection of sunlight on water, lighthouse lights, fake LED candles, heartbeats, fireworks (sort of), streetlights when you are driving by them, fish scales catching the light, leaves in the wind, answering machine lights (back in the day), twinkly lights.

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1. Ferdinand De Saussure, Charles Bally, and Wade Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics*, edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye in collaboration with Albert Reidlinger, translated from the French by Wade Baskin (London: P. Owen, 1961), 73.

2. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 79.

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2. Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 79.

3. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 29.

4. Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At: Language in 1960s Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 166.

5. Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 273.

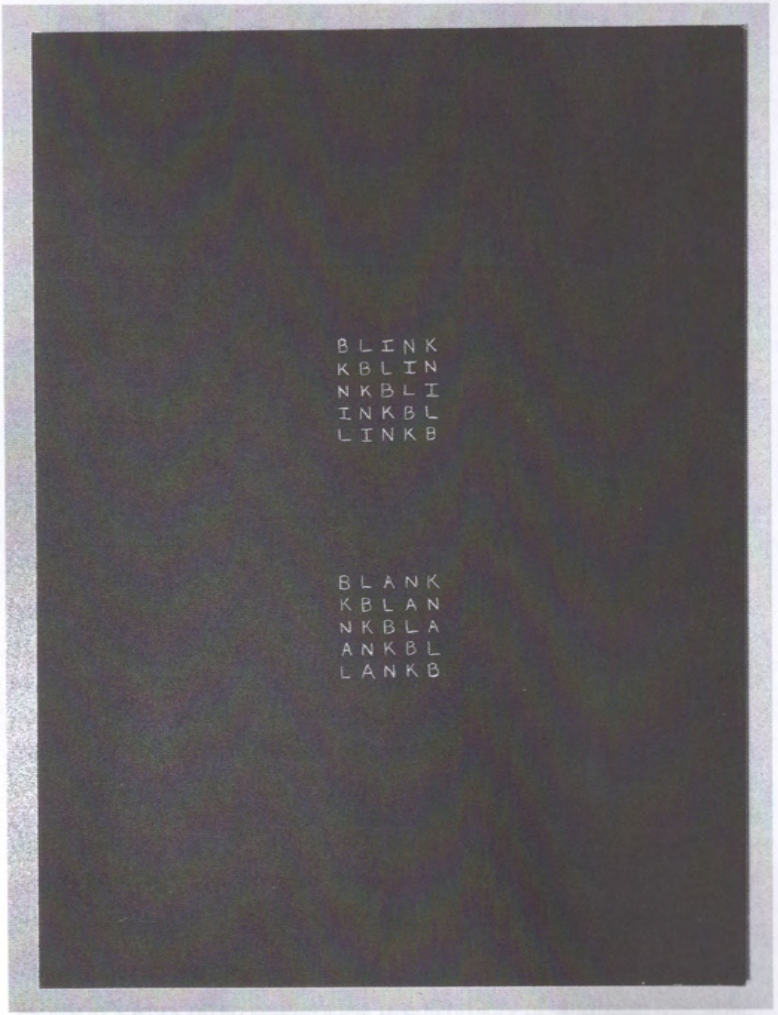
6. "Mark Bradford," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Bradford]{.underline} (accessed April 17, 2019).

BLINK/BLANK

Joel Swanson

Artist	Joel Swanson
Year	2019
Dimensions	12 × 9 inches (30.5 cm × 22.9 cm)
Medium	Scratchboard
Credit	Courtesy of the artist.

A blink is a pattern, a sequence that holds meaning. Just as presence requires absence, the *blink* requires the *blank*. Absence is required as the antithesis of presence; it gives presence its form. Similarly, the blink requires the pause, gap, or lacuna.



The Dys/functionality of Language: The Art of Joel Swanson

Nora Burnett Abrams

Joel Swanson (American, b. 1978) explores language and its literal, at times even physical or material, forms. He stretches language to become an image or multiple images. Swanson continually makes clear how language is a constantly shifting, dynamic system to be pushed, pulled, and kneaded into meaning. His is a highly disciplined approach to art making, at times drawing upon the rigor of 1960s conceptual art as a foundation, finding ways of making it relevant to us today. He uses the structures of grammar and composition as sources for creative production. Importantly, such constraints become enormously productive and open up a range of possibilities for what he might do with them.

Swanson's work often renders the predictability of language unstable. In *Logic Only Works in 2-Dimensions*, 2014, a large-scale symbol is shown to be relative rather than definitive. The sideways ">" is the greater-than symbol, which when reversed, is also the less-than symbol. The freestanding, kinetic sculpture registers how this symbol can function as both, simultaneously. With this work and in other examples, such as

his ongoing series of lenticular drawings, Swanson plays with a duality within our linguistic system such that one thing can refer to or even be perceived as its very opposite. With *Logic Only Works in 2-Dimensions*, this type of dual reading is also entirely dependent upon the placement of the viewer. Pointing out the relative meaning of such a symbol is at the core of Swanson's practice, and in this effort he enables a fresh scrutiny of those subjects or ideas fundamental to and embedded in how we communicate and connect with others.

Swanson's continued exploration of the ambiguities or tricks inherent to the English language plays with the multiplicity of meaning. Studies of homonyms—words that sound alike but are spelled differently and carry different meanings—form the basis of his lenticular image *TRULY/RURAL*, 2019. Here, he encourages the viewer to move around the work to discover the different words embedded within the holographic surface. The work's title hints at the fact that this work requires the viewer's movement and investigates language and place. It is a work as much about reading as about looking and, more generally, the multivalent experience of viewing a work of art today.

Swanson is also unafraid to invite humor into his practice. In *Lady Gaga's Twitter Feed Translated into Morse Code,* 2011, a small bulb flashes incessantly as it channels the language of the pop singer into the language of Morse code. While the premise might seem irreverent or flippant, it is in fact demonstrative of another key aspect of Swanson's effort: to find ways of enabling the abstract logic of linguistic systems to be relevant to contemporary life. This quiet work speaks capaciously to the ubiquity of codes that underpin contemporary communications from emails to blogs, posts, chats, tweets, and numerous other methods for instant information-sharing. Transforming the ones and zeroes of contemporary technology into the dots and dashes of Morse brings the two languages together and indicates how similar the two are when broken down into their building blocks and component parts.

Swanson's works often act as prompts for viewer interaction, as they continually shift and move with our movements. Rather than passively observing his sculptures, photographs, and installations, viewers participate actively and, in doing so, discover new meanings in these all-too-familiar phrases, signs, and symbols. He finds dimensionality in language, bringing it out from the flatness of a screen or paper. His work helps us see, read, and experience this foundational system as the very opposite of its presumed rigor. When we see language as malleable, fluid, and active, we engage with it as relative rather than fixed. Swanson opens up the rigidity of our invented linguistic systems to reveal their porosity and, ultimately, their duplicity. The simplicity of Swanson's enterprise belies a sophisticated reassessment of language as a profoundly creative and flexible device that can be tweaked and played with, without end.