

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

to tug the venetian cord

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

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A PAPER

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ART

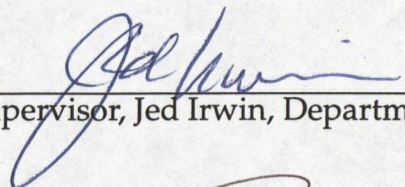
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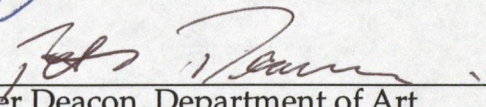
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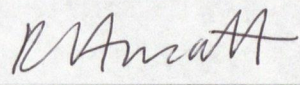
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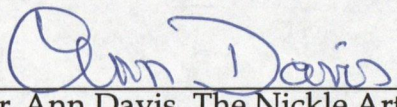
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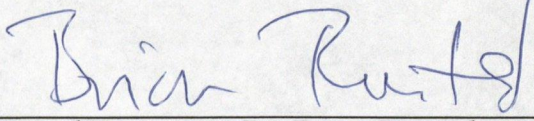
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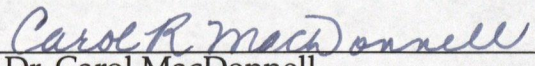
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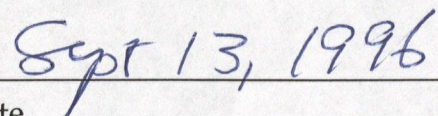
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ABSTRACT

"to tug the venetian cord" is an exhibition of fourteen related works, encompassing paintings, mixed media, sculptures and installation. Manipulating various combinations of Braille code and non-representational field, the exhibition queries the relationship between language and visual art, each work revealing its own distinct content. This paper examines the exhibition in five parts. Chapter 1 introduces the premises of the exhibition, while Chapter 2 discusses the separate works. Chapters 3 and 4 present issues arising from the works, addressing, respectively, issues of language and of art history. The conclusion describes the function of the *objective correlative* within the exhibition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank my supervisor Jed Irwin and my committee members Ann Davis, Peter Deacon and Ray Arnatt for their constant support, encouragement and guidance throughout my time in this program. I am also grateful for all the faculty, staff and colleagues I have had the privilege of working with and befriending, in particular Helen Miller, Arthur Nishimura, Carol MacDonnell, Steve Nunoda, Rick Calkin, Jody Godwin and Katy McKelvey. I would like to thank The Nickle Arts Museum, the Department of Art, and the Faculty of Graduate Studies for their contributions to the Master of Fine Arts program. I gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance of the Saskatchewan Arts Board, the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, the Faculty of Graduate Studies, and the University Research Grants Committee. For their unwavering faith and encouragement, I thank my parents, family and friends.

I reserve my deepest and most profound gratitude for Craig Wells. Thank you for the cadence.

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CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

Thus, one tires of living in the country, and moves to the city; one tires of one's native land, and travels abroad; one tires of Europe, and goes to America, and so on; finally, one indulges in the sentimental hope of endless journeyings from star to star. Or the movement is different but still extensive. One tires of porcelain dishes and eats on silver; one tires of silver and turns to gold, one burns half of Rome to get an idea of the burning of Troy. But this method defeats itself, it is plain endlessness.

... My own method does not consist in such a change of field, but rather resembles the true rotation method in changing the crop and the mode of cultivation (rather than the field). Here we have the principle of limitation, the only saving principle in the world. The more you limit yourself, the more fertile you become in invention. A prisoner in solitary confinement for life becomes very inventive, and a simple spider may furnish him with much entertainment. 1

When the protagonist in the first volume of Søren Kierkegaard's Either/Or writes an essay on "The Rotation Method," he poses what could analogically be a differentiation between two modes of an artist's production.

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, Either/Or, translated by David & Lillian Swanson (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959) 1:287-288. Quoted in Lawrence Weschler, Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: a life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 69.

The first mode, likened to the farmer who cultivates a progression of fields, follows an endless path of investigation. While not necessarily self-defeating, this mode is defined by the absence of parameters the artist delimits in pursuing media, means of production, conceptual intent, or stylistic adherence. It is a mode without limitations in which the crossing of certain borders engenders the search for further ones. In contrast, the second is that of the artist who creates an expansive body of work precisely because of self-imposed restrictions. Be the limitations formal, aesthetic or conceptual, they ground the artist within an arena that demands inventiveness to sustain production.

Both modes produce by following different paths. As an introduction to this support paper, I characterise my working method resembling “the true rotation method in changing the crop and the mode of cultivation (rather than the field.)”

The works in the exhibition *to tug the venetian cord* are the culmination of a sustained body of work, begun before my entrance to the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Calgary, that has reached a point of resolution during these past two years. This body of work began with a desire to find a way to communicate through painting without recourse to representational images or explanatory statements. The impetus can be posed as a question: Can paintings communicate with the clarity and range of possibilities that language seems to command? In retrospect, this has proved to be a fairly naïve question. However, in defining the genesis of this exhibition as a question, I am not suggesting that the work arrives at an answer. Rather, this query directed my work to investigations that have informed and sustained the exhibition — the thesis — presented. By this

question I am not proposing that the resulting work is an illustration of studies of theory and philosophy. My project has not been to display communication. Rather, it is to establish a means of conveying the content, sensibility, and varied conceptual premises of which my work is composed, but for which I had not previously developed an adequate vocabulary. Soil needed to be tilled, furrowed.

In addressing the initial question and the ensuing investigations, parameters were determined for the work much as Kierkegaard's farmer defines the perimeter of his field. The two discourses I sought to compare and contrast — painting and language — are both limitless entities. No measure of naïveté could presume to condense their scope. It has been my project to understand how facets of each can interact within my work to determine its voice.

The borders of investigation are defined by two specific forms of subject matter; the non-representational field and the code of Braille. Each functions as a conceit, fulfilling various roles, within a discourse between painting and the spoken or written word. As the work in this project progressed, some individual pieces utilize or reference only one or the other of these. Such exceptions will be discussed in following pages. This initial explanation is intended as an introduction to the general thesis of the exhibition.

The non-representational field becomes the agent for painting — which I define as objects produced through a formal, visual vocabulary of colour, line, form, composition, etceteras. Mute, painting does not access the spoken word and, devoid of alphabetic characters, it does not manipulate the written. Painting communicates through visual perception alone, not through language.

The tactile code of Braille becomes a proxy for language. In its strictest connotation, language is communication through the spoken or written word. It is the domain of text and literature, the subject of linguistics and semiotics, and seemingly the metalanguage for all human activity. This paper refers to written and spoken language and its application to communication as formed through phonetic alphabets, and does not consider such concerns as body language, dance or gesture. Presented in visual works, Braille is stripped of its communicative function. Formed in manners not intended for tactile perception by the blind, the code is no longer Braille, no longer text, but *a representation of language*.

Beyond a delineation of parameters, Kierkegaard's "Rotation Method" ceases to act as a paradigm for my approach to this work. While the work manipulates the subject matter described above, individual pieces surpass boundaries to explore content through their relationship and do not present the relationship itself. In fact, sculptural works in the exhibition manipulate only one or the other choices of subject matter, to address issues that arise from painted works.

This support paper, as an accompaniment to the exhibition, is not intended as a tautology for the thesis presented. Rather, it is an opportunity to present in written form select tangents of my central concern and aspects of its manifestation in the work. My preference is to give primary consideration to the work, and to discuss relevant points from art history, criticism, and theory as ancillary contextual references.

The paper begins, then, with a piece by piece discussion of the exhibition. Subsequent chapters will address the relationship between language and visual art, question the supposition that the structure of

language is the paradigm for all human activity, and form connections between this work and certain art historical precedents. The final chapter will return to a discussion of the exhibition. By concentrating on the intention to communicate, consideration will be given to the sensibility of the works and their affect on the viewer. The resulting paper maintains an open relationship between the explorations that formed the exhibition, the resulting works, and their counterparts in language.

CHAPTER 2 - WORKS IN EXHIBITION

I. Introduction

There is something secret in appearances, precisely because they do not readily lend themselves to interpretation. They remain insoluble, indecipherable. 2

Within *to tug the venetian cord*, aspects of the works call attention to their appearance — the subtleties of the surface, the stark contrasts in value, the sense of emanating light, the sensuousness of the materials, the configuration of the Braille characters, the structure of the subliminal grids. Yet the content of the works, the message or meaning of each piece, is elusive and not immediately apparent. The works are not obviously representational, the titles are not didactic — appearances suggest meaning but do not reveal secrets.

Jean Baudrillard, in The Ecstasy of Communication³, considers the charm and seduction of the appearance of things. Through his discussion, one is led to realize that seduction is aroused not by exposed truth or meaning, but by that which is unknown or hidden. A dichotomy is set forth between the irrepressible drive for the truth that, when successful, destroys the seduction of the secrets carried in appearances.

² Jean Baudrillard, The Ecstasy of Communication (New York: Semiotext(e), 1987), p. 63.

³ Baudrillard, pp. 57-75.

... seduction operates through the subtle pleasure which beings and things experience in remaining secret *in their very sign* — while truth operates through the obscene drive of forcing signs to reveal their secrets. 4

Therefore by writing a support paper to accompany *to tug the venetian cord*, I am faced with a conundrum. Consistently throughout the works, the act of veiling the meaning of each behind its surface has been deliberate and strategic. Inference is employed rather than statement, abstraction rather than representation, tone rather than colour, tactile rather than visual code, metaphor rather than simile. Yet to discuss the works and the decisions from which they were formed, revelations must be made.

What follows is an introduction to the separate works in *to tug the venetian cord*. Beyond physical appearance, the content, references, questions and premises of each work will be discussed. While every attempt is made here to examine the pieces synchronically, chronological and conceptual links between several works are also in evidence. To impart the content or meaning of the works is not to destroy the "subtle pleasure" of the exhibition, but to establish a critical foundation for the work which subsequent chapters may address.

⁴ Baudrillard, p. 66.

II. Metaphoric Title

A screen for a window, made of light laths fixed on strips of webbing, used to prevent the entrance of too much light, or to keep people from seeing in. 5

To begin, the title of the exhibition itself — *to tug the venetian cord* — introduces the works through the metaphor of the venetian blind. This type of window covering is made of slats fixed in front of a window at stationary intervals — no material may be added or removed. It is the subtle act of setting the angle of the slats that controls the amount of light allowed into or kept out of a room. The venetian cord regulates light — light that physically permits or prevents vision. The two extreme positions of the slats represent borders that delineate vision; they open to total light or close to complete darkness, both of which destroy sight. The presence of blindness, the absence of sight, is a metaphor present in the works through the subject matter of Braille.

The initial work encountered in the exhibition is *The Implications of a Commonplace Act*. An installation created specifically for the 10 foot by 12 foot wall at the main entrance to the space, this piece functions literally and figuratively as a sentry to and a screen through which the other works may be viewed. The wall becomes a monumental page of Braille text, and the manipulation of scale determines how the several occurrences of Braille in the exhibition are intended to be perceived. Here, the code is presented in the

⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1989), v. 2, p. 287.

exact proportions and relations typical of a Braille page set for tactile reading. The plaster half spheres form a relief emulating the real page, yet the size of each and their position beyond the reach of most viewers indicate that the purpose of this wall is *not* to be read. Through the scale of the work, the sense of touch is denied as the work gives itself over from reality to appearance. As with all the works in *to tug the venetian cord*, the Braille is intended as visual and conceptual subject matter — whether formed in relief or by pattern only — and not as written communication for the blind.

The Implications of a Commonplace Act contains the definition of a venetian blind and through this a metaphorical entrance is offered. The Braille is the translation for a definition of the venetian blind alluded to by the exhibition's title. The tug of the venetian cord is the commonplace act, the results of which are open or shut, light or dark, sight or blindness.

The implications of admitting or blocking light are, perhaps, the most obvious functions of a venetian blind. Its definition also includes reference to the veiling aspect of the blind — to tug the venetian cord is to block out the gaze of others and maintain privacy. When the works translate text into Braille code, they conceal the meaning of that text from the viewer.

Allusion to the manipulation of the venetian blind is present in another work in the exhibition, *Open & Shut*. The title suggests the two extreme positions of the slats, open, or perhaps through the act of blinking, closed. In this diptych, however, it is the materials chosen more than the title that act metaphorically to create a dichotomy. From a long viewing distance, both panels appear as windows, one opening to the wall and emitting light, the other closed and darkened. Both seem to have equal weight. From a middle distance, the lead that forms the right hand panel becomes

recognizable and visibly heavier than the paper panel on the left. Lead is used in this piece precisely because of its relationship to light, because of the property of lead that blocks the transmission of light. At close range, it is revealed that both panels contain raised Braille characters. On the left, a page of text taken from a Braille publication is machined and precise. The Braille characters in the lead panel are obviously made by hand; they are jumbled and in comparison to the page, quite clumsy. Visually, the texture and surface of the lead are more inviting, almost more approachable, than that of the paraffin-coated paper. The wax, however, is more appealing to the touch particularly when one considers the toxic effects of lead. Oppositions are brought forth between light and dark, appearance and deception, lightness and weight, attraction and repulsion, emission and absorption — not to resolve their differences but to present them.

III. Sight, Body, Senses

In the work *Open & Shut*, the apperception of its materiality stimulates the viewer's sense of touch. A relationship between sight and another perceptual sense is formed, just as one is with sight and the body moving through viewing distances to perceive the work.

The painting *Cicatrix* deliberately explores the senses of sight and touch as forces acting upon the body and upon painting itself. Several equations between the painted surface and the body can be drawn. Skin is the surface of each, covering and hiding layers of both flesh and material. Each has a memory, which in the instance of the painting is the physical history of the canvas evidenced by the visibility of the organising grid lines — every

layer of paint from the first lines to the final varnish is detectable. *Cicatrix* shows the trace not only of the brush on canvas, but also the caress of the hand on skin.

The painting is divided into twelve sections, each containing a grouping of stenciled Braille characters. Within each grouping, three words are written one on top of another; "skin," "flesh," and "wound." The words all relate touch to the physical body; the surface felt, what is protected from touch, and the wound that mocks the fragile casing of skin. Vision metaphorically contacts the body through those same words; it can caress the skin, seek out the flesh, or through the power of a gaze, cruelly wound. Vision and touch act upon the body, empowering the senses and leaving the body subject to their forces. The aftermath of each force is cicatrix — scar tissue. Nails forced into the frame to register the grid lines remain as evidence — as scars — of physical acts exercised upon the painting.

The painting *few things can be considered a given* also brings touch and sight together on the surface of the canvas. Here, however, touch has been frustrated as finger tips trace through the paint, searching for the raised dots of Braille. The path of the fingers of both hands emulates the action of reading Braille — right hand searching forward for the next sequence of marks, left hand guiding the right and placing it upon the page. Where the hands search for text, there is none. Where the eyes seek subject matter or representation, there is none. One can not assume to find truth readily perceivable in black and white — where there is no absolute, meaning and understanding are mired in indistinguishable grey. *few things can be considered a given* presents touch and sight as equally as in *Cicatrix*, yet here they are matched in their impotence.

The imperative title of *Listen* begs the involvement of a different bodily sense, that of hearing. Lead is again employed for its metaphoric properties of toxicity and opacity, yet more directly for its malleability as a physical material. Braille is rendered in two different manners; in the upper portion, the lead has been sand-blasted to reveal barely perceptible images of Braille, and in the lower area it has been formed into precise tactile characters. The tactile word, the command "listen," is contrasted with the ineffectual visual images of Braille. The sand-blasted lines are themselves commands — don't look, don't touch, don't question — that implore the viewer not to confer meaning onto the work through sight, touch or language. Rather, by employing the demand to listen, this work asks the viewer to consider its appearance only, not the truth of its words.

Another work in the exhibition, *Judas*, directly equates the canvas with skin, vision with touch. Both panels of the diptych are stroked by the brush to emphasize surface, and the Braille characters in the top panel are as perceptible through touch as through sight. The lower panel contains thirty pairs of lips — thirty Judas kisses — that were formed by pressing lips to the canvas as one would to a body. The resonance of this work within the exhibition, however, arises from considerations other than the meeting of touch and sight on the painted surface and, as such, must be discussed separately.

IV. On the Inclusion of Early Work

Judas stands as the first work in this series culminating in *to tug the venetian cord*. However, it is also the last piece I completed before entering

the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of Calgary. The inclusion of this work in the exhibition, therefore, requires some justification and explanation of its place within the show.

Judas contains the first occurrence of Braille within my work, and its role is that of concealment, of shrouding meaning first in language and then in tactile code. It differs from many later works in the series in that — apart from scale — the effort is made to emulate the look and the relief of Braille characters. Prior to this piece, my work involved a lexicon of images manipulated to function as a matrix of representations that could collectively lead the viewer to locate meaning. A sharp, almost iconoclastic, break from this work occurred with *Judas* — an eschewing of images in favour of language and of the non-representational field. Through words, both in the title of the work and those translated into Braille, I sought to lead the viewer to references more directly than through images holding many potential, and for me erroneous, interpretations.

The subject matter of *Judas* is not solely the story of the disciple who handed Jesus to the Romans. Rather, the impetus for the work is the concept of betrayal embodied by Judas, of exposure to one's enemies. *Judas* also considers other connotations of betrayal, in particular of self-betrayal; of the revelation of self and the personal through painting, of sexual unfaithfulness, and of seduction followed by desertion. While the number and colour of lips refer to the thirty silver coins Judas received for his treachery, they also embody a sensuous pathos. Open mouthed and supplicant, they offer themselves to be deceived.

In *Judas*, one can see the inception of several considerations that inform the works in *to tug the venetian cord* — the manipulation of Braille

code, the act of veiling meaning, a reliance on language over representational images, the equation of the painted surface with the physical body, the employment of metaphor. Later works, however, consider more closely the conceptual and critical implications of disguising language in the code of Braille. In doing so, the role of Braille in the work shifts from that of a mask for meaning to becoming the meaning itself — from being a provocation to uncover what is concealed to being the secret.

V. Text to Image

Following *Judas*, several works employed Braille as a cloaking device for words, phrases or passages of poetry appropriated from diverse sources for the content, metaphor or cadence of the original reference. Most of these are successful works, particularly in their aspect of uniting painted surface and Braille code into an aesthetically cohesive object. But the resonance of the *content* could be seen as borrowed, and the works as illustrating the original source. The comprehension of the idea or impetus for the works necessitated translation of the Braille, revealing the content as existing outside the work itself. In many works, though not all, the veiling device of Braille took on the semblance of a parlour game — a sleight of hand gesture hiding nothing but the mechanics of the trick itself.

Searchlight quite obviously contains the image of Braille — graphite circles arranged in the composition of Braille characters. It should be equally apparent that the characters are *not* Braille; the dots are stenciled and flat, and should one touch its surface, only the paraffin wax encasing the drawing would be felt. The placement of the drawing within a shadow-box frame

prevents the viewer from in fact following through with touching either — the tactile surface must be understood through visual perception. The removal of relief shifts the pattern from *being* Braille to being an image of Braille — from real object to appearance. With changing the function of the Braille from tactile code to visual image, the treatment of Braille becomes objective. A further conceptual strategy was taken in *Searchlight* in order to direct the work away from using Braille as a clever trick. The pattern of the dots was created by using templates recycled from an earlier work onto which a passage from T. S. Eliot's Gerontion was transcribed. The templates were here arranged in random order, dissolving the progression of the verse, and were inverted so that the characters "read" from right to left, bottom to top. The image of Braille becomes as random and as objective as the marks covering the surface of the paper — translation is neither possible nor required. The treatment of these marks mimics the paper itself, but also seems to search for the dots, for information.

Searchlight moves from translating text into Braille code, to considering the content of what becomes encoded. In this, the path of the drawing resembles that of a searchlight. Its arc hits now upon some things, then upon others — eventually the terrain is defined. In works subsequent to this, the resonance, references and metaphors arise from within the piece itself. Representing language through Braille, not presenting Braille, is an objectification leading to self-contained work and to further examinations of language, vision, and non-representational art.

Table & Mirror employs an inversion of characters similar to that of *Searchlight*. Arranged in the three drawings are all 72 possible permutations of a single (6 dot) Braille cell which form both individual letters and entire

words. The inversion of *Table & Mirror*, however, is such that the mirror image of each cell is represented. Through mirroring, the straight association of the erased dots with the charts transferred to the drawings is foiled. The mirroring of the cells in the Braille tables refers also to the mirror as a device for self-portraiture in the history of art — the reflection of the artist hidden in the work. The use of "table" in the title refers not only to the Braille charts, but also recalls the indirect portraiture of the *memento mori* tradition as the table supports and presents the symbolic images.

Table & Mirror retains the strong image of the grid necessary for the placement of the Braille dots, and so refers to a more recent history of painting. As will be further explored in Chapter 4, my association with the grid conjures associations with aspects of modernist and minimalist painting. The primary colours of the grids in this particular occurrence contrast sharply with the otherwise grey drawing. Just as the 72 cells represent all possible Braille characters, so the primary colours represent the potential for all possible colours.

All Over continues the use of the Braille cells to present not specific text, but the possibility for all text. Quite directly, each of the three panels is filled with the full 6 dot matrixes of Braille characters. It creates an open relationship that carries the potential for all to be written, yet nothing is. As their function as code is removed, the Braille cells move from code to screen; a pattern losing its relationship to language returns to a state of pure pattern.

All Over is framed with copper — a choice made partially for aesthetic reasons but more significantly in response to the properties of the material itself. As an element, copper is an excellent conduit for electricity, and here seemingly conducts a transmission of information, of code. In works such as

All Over, Listen, and Open & Shut, materials other than paint and canvas are used for aesthetic, conceptual and metaphoric reasons. These works are characterised by their objective treatment of Braille as they move from language to the image of language. A different manipulation of the materials approached in these works engenders works that move from language to object.

VI. Text to Object

The Implications of a Commonplace Act could very well be re-examined as one of the object pieces in the exhibition, particularly as it conditions the viewer to the perception of Braille. However, the wall piece should be distinguished from other, sculptural works in the exhibition. In the instance of *The Implications of a Commonplace Act*, the concept for the piece, the idea to create a monumental page of Braille, dictated the materials and form of the work. In the other sculptural works — *Palimpsest*, *Touchpoint*, and *Base* — the opposite holds true. The ideas for the works arose from the resonance and form of the found objects and materials manipulated.

Palimpsest was created from the decision to use pages from a Braille publication⁶ as found objects incorporated into a work, not as source material. The pages are presented as found, and no translation from the Braille code is offered nor even attempted. In this context, *Palimpsest* shares with *Table & Mirror* and *Searchlight* the objectification of Braille code, rendering its text,

⁶ The Braille Monitor (A Publication of the National Foundation for the Blind, January 1995).

pattern. Further decisions were made to bring the found Braille into the context of painting, blurring the distinction between object and painting. Mounted to canvas, the pages were then covered with paraffin wax. When applied at a certain temperature, the wax hardens almost immediately and retains the trace of the brush. The twofold action of the brush stroke is that of the palimpsest. It erases the raised surface of the Braille text (not visually, but through the tactile sense) and prepares the surface for a new text. Or could the brush strokes be considered a new text, one in the language of painting? The four panels are framed with lead to address the viewer with a decision — to succumb to the inviting waxen surface and touch the pieces, or to withhold touch because of the prohibitive, toxic lead frame. *Palimpsest* also recalls, through the serial presentation of the four panels, the appearance only of certain Minimalist work, in particular that of Donald Judd.⁷ The piece, however, does not retain the cool impersonal nature of such work. The objective pages are rendered subjective through the mark of the brush, the trace of the hand — a trace endangered by the lead frames.

Touchpoint is again a found object work, presented in its original condition, devoid of manipulations. The work does not aspire through the treatment of the object or control over materials to make the object fit an idea. Rather, a context had to be established through which the object would be perceived and the concept manifested. The copper sphere is hard and insoluble. When fixed to the wall it remains a full sphere, yet it recalls the half spheres of *The Implications of a Commonplace Act*. The material of copper and the solid presence of the ball are, however, much less ephemeral

⁷ John Griffiths, "Donald Judd," in *New York New Art*, edited by Dr. Andreas C. Papadakis (London: Academy Editions, 1989), pp. 46-49.

and more authoritative than the wall of Braille. It is as if all the Braille, all the relief, all the characters and materials in the exhibition have concentrated into one fixed point — the only Braille character composed of a single dot, the letter "A." Positioned to the left of the entrance, *Touchpoint* acts as the letter "A," the beginning of the alphabet and of the progression of works around the exhibition. It is a constant reference point from any position in the exhibition, and is immediately reachable, inviting the touch.

Touchpoint is the figure of the letter "A," nothing else — no ground, no field, no context other than its placement in the installation of works. *Base* functions as its antithesis, for the sculpture bears no marks or relief on its lead surfaces, no figure for language. If *Touchpoint* is the beginning of the exhibition, *Base* is the end. Understood in physical terms, the lead books appear to be figures resting upon the aluminum ground. Considered differently, perhaps the books are the ground. They are objects devoid of text, language, code, metaphor, narrative — yet the recognizable form of the books communicates the idea of language, of reading and knowledge. They are grounds for language, that because of their place in the context of the exhibition, carry the expectation of the figure of Braille. The inscribed marks on the aluminum base become the figures for language, the scored, questing marks call to mind the lines of *Searchlight*. Through an inversion of figure and ground, a fruitless search is implied.

VII. Literary Reference

The affiliation of works in the exhibition with literature will be addressed independently in the conclusion of this paper. However, some

attention must be paid to more direct literary references in order to introduce the two final works. The gestures that formed works such as *Searchlight*, *All Over*, and *Table & Mirror* were made to create self-contained works, free from a dependence on separate literary works to explicate their content. This independence gained, and a fuller consideration of the roles of Braille in the works and a developed understanding of language achieved, these works return to literary references to augment, not control, their content.

Anthem is such a work. The two panels establish contrasts between each other. The top canvas is luminously white, and covered with a screen of stenciled dots. Arranged according to formal decisions, *not* determined by code, the dots do not represent Braille but carry the appearance of coded information. The black lower canvas is composed of several layers of closely fitted, small scale brush strokes. There is no coded information — only the mark of the brush. The layers of black barely cover the red ground, the base remains exposed. White is set against black, order against chaos, exactitude against imperfection, information against expression. Although the processes undertaken to construct each piece are equally rote, the connotations created by the appearance of each panel are opposed.

A further layer of interpretation is developed by the oblique reference of the title to Ayn Rand's novella Anthem.⁸ It is a discourse on the will of the individual set against a collectivist society. If the more expressive, imperfect lower panel can be understood as the individual, it then takes on an uneasy relationship with the cool, controlled tone of information regulating the white painting. Thoughts of the pervasive, and perhaps

⁸ Ayn Rand, Anthem (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Publishers, 1966).

invasive, nature of communication technology conceive of a rapidly developing and controlling collective web within which the individual is a mere coded blip. Simultaneous with the instant coding, collection, analysis, transmission and manipulation of personal information arises a certain fear for the loss of the individual, for one's assimilation into the structures of communication.

Judas and *Cicatrix* can both be seen as indirectly sensuous, as involving the body as a sexual screen for touch and for sight. The triptych *this is not erotic, and you are obscene* is more overt in its sexual references, especially as the title directly implicates the viewer. Yet the title is coy, for what is not erotic, and what is the obscenity?

The painting itself is not sexual in open, raw terms. It has a certain sensuous appeal — the radiant waxen surface inviting the caress of a hand. If anything, the work acts seductively because of the layers of paint. The previous applications lie hidden beneath the surface, evidenced only by the traces left on the exposed edges of the canvases. The calm, smooth surfaces belie an expectation of tumultuous paint beneath.

If *this is not erotic, and you are obscene* appears seductive, perhaps it is so in Baudrillard's connotation. Following from this supposition, obscenity must also be examined in his terms. I have previously referred to Baudrillard's conception of the seductiveness of the secret, the allure of the hidden. Counter to this, he positions the "ecstasy of communication"⁹ — the prevalence of truth through information and communication. Obscenity is no longer confined to sexuality, because communication technology has

⁹ Baudrillard, p. 22.

made every aspect of every thing, every being, every thought immediately available and transmittable. It is an immediacy that Baudrillard deems pornographic, that he equates with, for example, the close-up of sexual acts in porno films. All secrets and all seduction have been lost from communication.

It is no longer the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but that of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more-visible-than-visible; it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication.

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this is not erotic, and you are obscene is a painting of many secrets. In the sense that the viewer desires to know the meaning of the work, to know what the representation of Braille "says," he or she is also obscene within the ecstasy of communication.

The title and the text are derived from the book of poems, Poems for Men who Dream of Lolita,¹¹ a written response to Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita.¹² The title character of both works is a young girl, sexually involved with men. In Nabokov's novel, she is presented as an object of desire, and not as a character with expectations, desires and emotions of her own. When the novel is re-told in the poems, it is in the very different voice of Lolita.

10 Baudrillard, p. 22.

11 Kim Morrissey, Poems for Men Who Dream of Lolita (Regina, Saskatchewan: Coteau Books, 1992).

12 Vladimir Nabokov, Lolita (New York: Vintage International Inc., 1989).

The reference to these literary works is layered and will not be accessed by the viewer. However, the title evolves from the conflict between the novel and the poems — issues of perspective. What is erotic to one is obscene to another, what is seductive to one is pornographic to the next. Seduction, eroticism, obscenity and even the perception of one's body are all equivocal. When accused of being obscene, perhaps the viewer questions his or her particular conception of the phenomenon of obscenity.

VIII. Conclusion

In my work, there is a fascination with things equivocal — with concepts not definitely understood one way or another. While this may be a point of interest in the work itself, it can bring about a certain lack of clarity when writing unless suppositions are evaluated against theory that is generally agreed upon.

Therefore, the following two chapters examine established theory, criticism and art history, almost as a standard against which to compare and contrast this exhibition. Chapter 3 considers various discourses between language and visual art, while Chapter 4 explores the possible resemblance of this exhibition to other work in art history.

CHAPTER 3 - ABOUT LANGUAGE

I. Introduction

to tug the venetian cord approaches language from multiple perspectives and treats it as many different things: as a construct, as a system of communication, as a tool, as subject matter and as a symbol of communication. Examining this body of work is rather like playing with a set of nested matroyschka dolls, where opening each in succession reveals a smaller, slightly modified version — LANGUAGE LANGUAGE LANGUAGE LANGUAGE.

From the perspective of this support paper, the largest doll is perhaps the language of theory and criticism. Writing about art is not mere description or evaluation of a work's relative success and merit. Rather, such language can access the ideas behind the work, and provide a contextual discourse for it. The critical context for *to tug the venetian cord* arises from contemporary postmodern production, where the distinctions between the art object, its criticism, and the theory that informs both are nebulous. Before placing this body of work within this milieu, it is beneficial to briefly trace the development of current relationships between the languages of criticism and of visual art. From within that discourse, a particular vantage point from which to consider the exhibition will be suggested.

II. Modernism and Critical Language

In order to understand the contemporary position of language within postmodernism, one must understand its roots within modernist criticism. When discussing modernism in art, the term most generally applies to the styles and ideologies of art dating from approximately 1860 through to the 1970s. The lineage of early modernist styles marks a progression toward the purity of abstract art forms, a progression that led away from representation toward abstraction, to a greater emphasis on the formal properties of art (line, colour, volume, etc.) than on the content or relation to the objects on which the abstraction was based. Of particular interest to this paper is the culmination of this lineage in formalism, the period of modernism arising after World War II and continuing into the 1970s.

There has been, and is, a proliferation of stories on the emergence and development of modernism and formalism, and the point here is not to re-tell any of them, nor to formulate a story of the 'death' of modernism (true, modernism is no longer the avant-garde but, as W.J.T. Mitchell suggests, has survived by falling into a rear guard tradition that serves as an influence or a foil for the new avant-garde¹³). Rather, the point is to examine how formalist abstraction, with its stringent repression of language in favor of the purely visual, formulates an equation between art and criticism. As the influence of formalist criticism increased, so did the premises of theory that determined painting should pursue all elements that are 'purely' painting to the exclusion or repression of all content, influence, representation or

13 W.J.T. Mitchell, Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 213.

reference that lay outside painting. An examination of this process of segregation, of how the (excluded) text operates, of what becomes of the texts the artists themselves 'left out' of their work, determines the success of the formalist agenda; if painting truly became pure and utopian, or if it ultimately became slave to that which it had sought to oppress.

The "agenda" that positions art within a single aesthetic discipline stems from a proposal of the absolute difference between verbal and visual arts that arose as a popular conception in the nineteenth century. Such distinctions were made to evaluate the relative merit of each art form and to establish hierarchies among them, and these distinctions were made along verbal/visual polarities. Poetry and painting were defined as following separate axes: poetry aligned with the temporal axis, as both the process of reading and any implied or direct narrative proceed through time metaphorically; painting, as it is static and occupies physical space, was aligned with the spatial axis and the associative power of metonym. Formalist abstraction sustained and promoted the verbal/visual dichotomy *ad absurdum*, advocating that painting adhere to the spatial axis and repress contamination from any art form not falling directly on that axis.

Pre-modern aesthetic endeavors tended in the majority to fall into the space delineated between the two axes; painting often found its allegorical basis in forms of literature, or poetry, as in the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, could aspire to emulate painting. The formalist project of "pure" painting, situated firmly on the spatial axis, was a radical deviation from a norm understood to be impure, mixed and composite. Purity was not a natural or inevitable stance but a utopian pursuit best understood as an ideology. Formalism did not claim that heterogeneous mixed art forms were

empirically wrong, but that they must be resisted in pursuit of higher aesthetic value: the more pure in form the art, the greater its value.

The role of the critic within formalism was to explicate, defend and describe works of art, but also to define this ideology and evaluate art in its terms. As this ideology dictated the exclusion of literary influences from painting in order to facilitate its purity, the critical work had to place itself completely 'outside' the art. Because it sought to exalt painting, formalist criticism then assumed the role of the herald.

The critic's writings, not the artist's, compared the work with ideological principles; the critic became empowered to determine the aesthetic value of an artist's work. The critic was then the authority of formalist art, the naysayer, the judge of merit, and ultimately assumed a position superior to that of the artist. Formalist art had repressed theoretical discourse, yet came to depend on it and, eventually, became determined by it. Within the formalist tradition, "artists create objects and leave critics free to formulate the conceptual implications of their art. 'As such,' [Joseph] Kosuth says, 'the traditional artist functions like the "valet's assistant" to his marksman master.'"¹⁴

The segregation of these disciplines is based in the initial disunity of the visual and verbal arts, which can be seen ultimately as linguistic criteria.¹⁵ Throughout the course of modernism and formalism, the linguistic origin of the principle that formed the distinction between the arts

14 Jessica Prinz, Art Discourse / Discourse in Art (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), p. 5.

15 Craig Owens, "Earthwords," in Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1992), p. 45.

remained veiled to ensure art a properly defined territory in which the repression of language would not be questioned. Language was modernism's unconscious, held there in order to support the entire project. In the 1960s, however, when language again approached aesthetics it did so with the vengeance of the oppressed.

III. Postmodernism and Language

Postmodernism in visual art is a multivalent term. Chronologically, it is the period following modernism. Restrictively, it is perceived as a reaction against modernism, as anti-modernism. Postmodernism also takes a position against such a chronological progression, a master narrative of the history of art. Postmodernism is discussed as a stylistic period in terms of the art generated or revived within it; hybridized art forms that blend, distort, and cross boundaries between traditional forms. Similarly, postmodernism is couched in terms of theory, of the discourses that once were distinct academic pursuits, and have now mutated into cross- or inter-disciplinary practices. Postmodernism also defies definition by its very existence, by a pluralism of styles, theories and modes of production in opposition to a mainstream orthodoxy. Postmodernism is alternately all of this, none of this, and more. For the purposes of this paper, however, I am interested in only one seemingly inarguable tenet of postmodern production and theory - its intersection with language.

Immediately preceding and concurrent with the development of postmodernism in the visual arts during the 1970s is the immersion of

language within aesthetics. Language in this instance is synonymous with criticism emerging from its ancillary role within modernism, with the employment of language as the organizing principle of, or subject matter for, artists' work, and, through linguistics, the positioning of language systems as the paradigms for endeavours of epistemology.

By the late 1960s formalist theories of modernism that promoted the purity of separate forms of artistic production were called into question by artists who turned increasingly to language as subject matter and methodology — artists such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Joseph Kosuth, and the Art and Language Group who presaged the arrival of postmodernism in the visual arts. Through them, "language exploded into the aesthetic field,"¹⁶ — an eruption that is "coincident with, if not the definitive index of, the emergence of postmodernism."¹⁷

While the role of language does not define or encapsulate postmodernism, linguistic positions such as semiotics, structuralism, and deconstruction can be seen as having engendered postmodernism in art. This view gains credence when one considers that as barriers between disciplines broke down, and literature, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, etc., were assimilated into the aesthetic field, visual art became a discourse in which the effects of linguistics in other fields exerted increasing influence.

The contribution of literature is of primary importance to the development of postmodernism in visual art. The postmodern turn in literary fields predates its effect on the visual arts by more than a decade, undermining both literary conventions and philosophical assumptions of

¹⁶ Owens, p. 45.

¹⁷ Owens, p. 46

reality. It was the concurrent literary criticism — the applied linguistics of semiotics, structuralism, and deconstruction — that was absorbed into visual art's adaptation of postmodernism. A radical change from the purity of formalism, this shift is characterized as a decidedly linguistic turn —

... the merging of disciplinary boundaries that occurs within the 'paraliterature' of our time, the confusion of theoretical and creative practice by philosophers like Derrida and Wittgenstein, and critics like Barthes. The widespread reading of language philosophy by contemporary visual artists is itself significant, and a commentary on the orientation of contemporary thought toward language.

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As Julia Kristeva would have it, the visual arts had arrived at the "discovery of the determinative role of language in all human sciences."¹⁹

IV. The Role of Language

Philosophies of language had become a paradigm for art production, theory and criticism. These philosophies can be seen as various branches and offshoots of applied *linguistics*: that is, application of the scientific study of human language to aid in the study of language-based enterprises. Somewhat more specifically, *semiotics* is the science of signs used in communication systems such as language. The term itself is several hundred years old, but

¹⁸ Prinz, p. 9.

¹⁹ Prinz, p. 5

has risen to prominence in this century through the investigations of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Ferdinand de Saussure. Semiotics does not analyze classical philosophical propositions such as aesthetics, but instead analyzes the language in which they are couched in search of underlying nature, biases and systems.

Semiotics influenced *structuralism*, a twentieth century philosophical movement applied to such areas as linguistics, criticism, and anthropology. It posits that human practices are structures, of which any part is significant only as it applies or relates to the whole. The essential proposal of structuralism is that these systems are composed of interacting, arbitrary signs. Structural linguistics introduced the term for this component; the *linguistic sign*, which is further dissected into the *signifier* (the sound or mark) and the *signified* (the concept it represents). As the relationship between linguistic signs is arbitrary, so is that between the signifier and the signified (although for persons speaking the same language, this relationship appears valid and obligatory). Roland Barthes applied structuralism to literary criticism, insisting that the critic should determine the meaning of a work from its structure, not from any reference outside the work.

This approach is radicalized in Barthes' later work, which more appropriately is termed *post-structuralism*, the manner of criticism or thought based on the practice of *deconstruction* founded by Jacques Derrida. Deconstruction unseats language as the paradigm for meaning, viewing text as a 'decentred' play of structures from which there is no ultimately determinable meaning. It reveals the multiplicity of potential meanings generated by the discrepancy between the ostensible content of a text — which

may be a work of art — and the system of visual, cultural, or linguistic limits from which it springs.

A most noticeable effect of post-structuralism on visual arts is the tendency for postmodern writers to term works of art 'text,' this perhaps following the lead of Roland Barthes' 1971 *From Work to Text*.²⁰ Barthes puts forth a series of propositions that differentiate the terms 'work' and 'text' as objects of criticism, and supports the usage of 'text.' In doing so, these propositions also outline the deconstructive technique and some of the tenets of postmodernism. Barthes concludes that nothing is outside of text, as it is "that *social* space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder."²¹ That is, *everything* is a text, and *everything* is subject to deconstruction in a culture where no language is immutable and there is no absolute truth.

Of course, it would be difficult to prove that postmodernism — defined by its pluralism — operates under a single ideology. It would nevertheless seem that the 'explosion of language into the aesthetic field' has engendered an ideology of linguistic imperialism. The art object is redefined as text. Inherent meaning is removed from the image as its significance becomes suspended in linguistic structures: "Meaning is not the label of a particular thing; nor is it a picture of it. [It] is the result of a system of substitutions."²² According to Rosalind Krauss —

20 Barthes, Roland, "From Work to Text," (1971) in Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp. 169-174.

21 Barthes, p. 174.

22 Rosalind Krauss, "Introduction," in The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1985), p. 3.

Postmodernist art enters this terrain (the theoretical domain of structuralist and poststructuralist analysis) openly. And it is this phenomenon, born of the last two decades, that in turn has opened critical practice, overtly onto method. 23

Termed this way, the envelopment of postmodern art within the metalanguage of linguistic methodology appears as a natural, even inevitable, progression of logic. Perhaps one should question, though, the ease by which one system of communication is subsumed by another. Rather than shouting "Eureka!" one can consider that linguistic imperialism is not a given, but a cultural phenomenon developed within a society that is itself a development of the phonetic alphabet.

V. The Role of the Alphabet

In his book, The Skin of Culture²⁴, Derrick de Kerckhove examines the relationship between our culture and its communication technologies. In particular, he focuses on how electronic media have affected the nervous system, physiology and psychology of the individual. The present media revolution, he claims, has arisen through — or because of — linguistic precedents that frame media culture in both a technical and biological sense.

23 Krauss, p. 6.

24 Derrick de Kerckhove, The Skin of Culture: Investigating the New Electronic Reality, edited by Christopher Dewdney (Toronto: Somerville House Publishing, 1995).

Language and writing are regarded as technologies developed from the usage of phonetic alphabets. What follows is a paraphrasing of de Kerckhove's analysis on the progression, and its effects, from the development of phonetic alphabets to what I would call linguistic imperialism.

The phonetic alphabet represents sound, and all writing systems that do so are written left to right. De Kerckhove maintains that this is so because of the way human brains and visual perception are structured. The right visual field, controlled by the analytical left brain, perceives bits of information one piece at time, in sequence. Our alphabet is composed of characters, both consonants and vowels, representing sounds. In order to form words, these must be recognized and organized in a linear sequential manner — a task best accomplished by the right visual field. We read our alphabet from left to right because it is easier for the brain to do so. Yet the reciprocal effect of the reading process, that the structure of our language pressures our brain to emphasize its sequential processing capabilities, must also be explained.

De Kerckhove develops a hypothesis that "learning to read and write alphabetic text will condition the basic processing routines of eye-brain coordination," which "in turn have a feedback effect on other sensory and psychological process."²⁵

Looking at moments in history that saw sweeping developments due to alphabetization — such as the Golden Age of Ancient Greece and the invention of the Guttenberg printing press — de Kerckhove provides examples of how the alphabet re-organized the "mind set" of culture. These

²⁵ de Kerckhove, p. 30.

moments coordinate organization of visual and spatial information through devices such as foreshortening and perspective. The impact of these devices on art itself is much less significant than the fact that perspective became "a model for organization of thought itself."²⁶

The alphabet gave rise to perspective, which in turn framed the human mind to looking at the world rationally, manipulating it according to space and time. With such coordinates came the ability to extract information from one context and place it in another. Thus, de Kerckhove sees the alphabet as having oriented human culture towards change, innovation and invention.

Given that the alphabet has shaped the very mind set of our culture, it is little wonder that we should look to language as the structure for all human activity. This appears especially true when de Kerckhove views writing as a technology that, by supporting language, also shapes the nature of human intelligence.²⁷ Understanding the impact of the alphabet as working on all aspects of human culture seems to support the postmodern view of "the determinative role of language in all human sciences."

In the chapter, "Oral Versus Literate Learning,"²⁸ de Kerckhove turns his attention to what he calls the "tyranny of the eye"²⁹ over other perceptual sense organs. Literacy has had a profound effect on culture, but also within our bodies.

²⁶ de Kerckhove, p. 32.

²⁷ de Kerckhove, pp. 193-201.

²⁸ de Kerckhove, pp. 99-112.

²⁹ de Kerckhove, p. 101.

Vision and hearing are regarded as the "higher" senses, used selectively for functional purposes. Even "our sense of touch is also a rational, puritanical affair, except in rather specialized and intimate circumstances."³⁰ Because we are trained through literacy to look for sequential information, for concepts, in what we read, we privilege our eyes as the sensory organs that provide us with information. Our general use of sight, by association, becomes trained in the same manner:

... the frontal experience of visual concentration is also what is acquired, sometimes at the cost of great efforts, as one becomes literate. Thus literate people, who need to make and control their sense of everything, first trust their eyes before they even consider their ears. They also tend to concentrate their attention on the linear unfolding of events, conversations and situations, they have to 'see it to believe it.'

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Even examining this paper, one notices that I use expressions such as "we see," or "it appears to be," rather than "it sounds like." Culling information from the world by relying on vision is a learned process. A child first learns through the combined efforts of his nervous system, through imitation, gesture, sound, sight and action. Learning to be literate — to organize and put together isolated concepts — engenders the primacy of a certain kind vision, one that seizes control of one's nervous system, over the other senses. When we read, we tend to do so in silence or with the ability to shut our ears to the

³⁰ de Kerckhove, p. 100.

³¹ de Kerckhove, p. 102.

noise around us. In fact, we are discouraged from reading aloud, both individually and collectively.

VI. Conclusion

To this point in the chapter, language and visual art, philosophies of language, and the effects of language on culture and the individual are explored. What has not yet been attended to is how these examinations are related to the works in the exhibition. As stated earlier in the paper, language entered my work through an effort to communicate "with the clarity and range of possibilities that language seems to command." However, I can not claim to have produced this body of work because I had an inherent understanding of the theories and systems of language outlined briefly in this chapter.

Quite the opposite is true. These investigations were undertaken to inform my work and place it within the web of linguistic concerns of postmodern production.

It is important to state as well that systems and effects of language are not the subject matter for the work in *to tug the venetian cord*, but are considered tools that produce and establish context. The effect of the work is not completely reliant on visually reading it, particularly because of the attention paid to involving the viewer's sense of touch. Therefore, language theory, literacy and reading can not presume to be the only entrances to the exhibition. Perhaps, as W.J.T. Mitchell suggests, the exhibition should be approached as defining, or explaining, itself:

The investigation of these questions doesn't begin with a search for contemporary texts that betray structural analogies in some parallel literary institution or tradition. The starting point is with language's entry into (or exit from) the pictorial field itself, a field understood as a complex medium that is always already mixed and heterogeneous, situated within institutions, histories, and discourses: the image understood, in short, as an imagetext. The appropriate texts for 'comparison' with the image need not be fetched from afar with historicist or systemic analogies. They are already inside the image, perhaps most deeply when they seem to be most completely absent, invisible and inaudible. 32

CHAPTER 4 - ABOUT APPEARANCE

I. Introduction

Within *to tug the venetian cord*, there are issues and ideas that arise through the work and the support paper. Some issues arise from mere appearance, by its resemblance to work from other genres. Other thoughts are called to mind by terms used within the paper. This chapter will address issues considered to be the result of the form of the works and how ideas are communicated through them. The aesthetics of the works, their relation to modernism, and the occurrence of the grid will also be discussed.

II. The Look of the Field

In the introduction to this support paper, two independent subject matters were defined as central to the work in *to tug the venetian cord*. Of these, one is the non-representational field, defined earlier as the agent for painting. The term "painting" should be understood beyond its broadest possible connotations, to include all the work in the exhibition. They are works made of paint and canvas, but also of lead, paper, aluminum, wax, leafing, copper and plaster. Some are flat, some involve relief and others three-dimensional form. They are all visual works of art, for which painting has been the most descriptive collective term.

The term "non-representational" has been used for description as well, to summarize the general appearance of the works. The word abstract could have just as well been used, however it would imply that the works are based

upon or abstracted from some aspect of concrete reality. Apart from the appearance of Braille, this is not generally the case. Representational exceptions are apparent — the lips in *Judas*, the hand prints in *Cicatrix*, and the lead books of *Base* — arising from the content of the individual work.

The surfaces of the works are exactly that — paint is paint and lead is lead. However, they evoke the memory of other surfaces such as skin, stone, or metal. The manipulation of the materials through colour, mark and texture is the outcome of the sensibility employed in order to engage the viewer. The works bow to a notion of beauty, to attract and perhaps enchant the viewer.

What is at issue here is not any philosophical approach to the so-called "aesthetic experience," but the intent of a producer to attract viewers. Not merely to grab their attention, but to call them, seduce them, into a sustained search for what is hidden in the works. To search thus, perhaps to respond in empathy, is for the viewer to communicate with the work. The success of my intent to engage the viewer, manifested in aesthetically appealing works, should not dismiss their content nor undermine their conceptual premises. The lure of the works serves to lead the viewer to an individual understanding of their meaning and content.

III. Connotations of the Field

To use the words "non-representational," "abstract," and "field" in conjunction with painting creates certain associations with late modernist painting. To state, as has just been done, that "the surfaces of the works are exactly that," seemingly reinforces the association. To attempt a discussion of

the exhibition as modernist or formalist works would, however, be to dismiss their intent. An assumption would have to be made that the work is involved with one or more tenets of formalism: flatness, all-over field, colour, edge, expression, purity, repression of subject matter or elimination of the figure-ground relationship.

Their purpose, however, is to communicate with painting through accessing the system of language. The relative success of this is best evaluated on an individual basis, following the description of the works given in Chapter 2. However, a generalized summation of features common to the works can be used to demonstrate its opposition to, or at the very least its lack of involvement with, the ideologies of modernism.

Formalism, the pinnacle of modernist tendencies, sets forth an imperative that painting respect the flatness of its two-dimensional nature, and avoid reaching into the third dimension physically or by creating the illusion of it. Works such as *Judas* and *Open & Shut* most obviously act against this imperative as they employ relief to physically involve depth. The works also counter flatness in a less direct way. Within formalism, any semblance to a figure-ground relationship is suppressed to sidestep the illusion of space. Within the works, the fields serve as grounds for the figures of Braille text. The role is that of a foil, to highlight the cells of Braille as in *All Over*, or it is that of cohesion that subsumes the figure, making it the object of frustrated desire as in *few things are considered a given*. Where formalist work tends to deny the edge of the work, achieving the effect of a limitless field, these works call attention to their edge and emphasize their containment or their small scale — consider the nails remaining in *Cicatrix*, or the dark confining frames of *Palimpsest*.

With late modernist work, particularly Colour Field painting, the rejection of illusory depth was also achieved by the suppression of gestural brush strokes or marks. One need only regard the range of mark making in *Table & Mirror*, or *Searchlight*, or the layered and heavily worked illusion of depth in *this is not erotic, and you are obscene* to understand that depth, gesture and space are entities sought, not avoided, in the work. In formalist work, there is no subject matter other than the formal properties of the painting itself — the colour field represents only the qualities inherent to painting.

Perhaps this is the only point that must truly be made. For in this exhibition, the painted field is a component of the work, not the entirety. The field is part of the subject matter, and supports various conceptual premises and visual effects. The fields do not arise through the pursuit of or adherence to modernist ideology, but revel in their relationship to that which modernism repressed — language.

IV. The Grids

Several works in the exhibition openly display a network of straight lines that can only be called a grid — *Table & Mirror*, *Cicatrix*, and *this is not erotic, and you are obscene*. Other works, such as *All Over* and *The Implications of a Commonplace Act*, contain subliminal grids where lines are implied by the measured, linear arrangements of dots within the Braille cells.

Mention of the grid immediately recalls its appearance throughout modernist art, from the work of Piet Mondrian, to Ad Reinhardt, to the contemporary work of Sol LeWitt and Agnes Martin. Rosalind Krauss

describes the grid as "an emblem of modernity by being just that; the form that is ubiquitous in the art of our century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all, in the art of the last one."³³ In another essay, Krauss discusses two particular attributes of the grid in relation to modernism. The first of these is its connection to the avant-garde's quest for the original, the new, the modern. Stating that the grid appears to offer the absolutely uncovered, bare structure of the canvas to artists, she goes on to explain,

Perhaps it is because of this sense of a beginning, a fresh start, a ground zero, that artist after artist has taken up the grid as the medium within which to work, always taking it up as though he were just discovering it, as though the origin he had found by peeling back layer after layer of representation to come at last to this schematized reduction, this graph-paper ground, were *his* origin, and his finding it an act of originality. Waves of abstract artists "discover" the grid; part of its structure one could say is that in its revelatory character it is always a new, unique discovery.

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The second aspect of the grid put forth by Krauss is its imperviousness to language. This implies that a certain silence, a refusal of speech, is an

³³ Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," in The Originality of The Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1985), p. 9. Reprinted from October, no. 9 (Summer 1979).

³⁴ Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of The Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths," in The Originality of The Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1985), p. 159. Reprinted from October, no. 18 (Fall 1981).

aspect of the grid. The grid binds the spatiality of nature onto the two-dimensional surface of the canvas, creating a purely cultural object. Silence results from this protection of the canvas from nature, from the outside world of references. By aligning the grid with modernist works and ideas, Krauss detects in it not only a will to silence, but a hostility to language, reference and narrative.

Yet, other contemporary discourse on the grid that does *not* necessarily freeze it within modernism states that "metaphor for both equality and bondage, the grid is one of the most flexible and pervasive devices we have invented."³⁵ Thus, "rather than reading the grid in formal or metaphorical terms, we might attempt to develop an analogy between its use in art and as an element of architecture."³⁶

The grids within *to tug the venetian cord* need not even be addressed through the analogy of structure, for they *are* structure. They are exactly what they appear to be — devices used to measure and arrange the Braille characters. Their relationship to language is not hostile; if there is a relationship it is one of facilitation and structural support — a means to stay on the lines and between borders. Decisions in some works to leave the grid visible and not to erase or cover its traces are made for reasons specific to the piece. In *Table & Mirror*, the colours of the grids represent the possibility for all colours; in *Cicatrix* the visible grids attest to the physical history of the painting.

³⁵ Robert McKaskell, Unlocked Grids (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1992), p. 2.

³⁶ McKaskell, p. 3.

The decisions to render the grids as visible components of the works were not made in ignorance of the history of the grid in twentieth century art. Nothing that ubiquitous goes unnoticed. As this history was known, no pretense of originality accompanies the appearance of the grid in this work. If anything, the use of the grid, considered an emblem hostile to language, to *support* language is done somewhat tongue in cheek.

V. Conclusion

By discussing the concerns of *to tug the venetian cord* as working through language, metaphor, and reference to the world of ideas, what the works are not is also defined. They are not solely beautiful works, nor are they manifestations of formal pursuits. The works communicate, and do so through rather restricted representation and subject matter. The Conclusion to this support paper offers a suggestion of *how*.

CHAPTER 5 - CONCLUSION

In order to apprehend *how* the works enter a discourse with each other or with the viewer, one might look to the general operating of the *objective correlative*. In literature, the *objective correlative* was first used by T. S. Eliot as a term for the objective events in an artistic work that represent the essential emotion. As stated by Eliot:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an *objective correlative*; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of the *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. 37

Eliot's interpretation of the *objective correlative* illustrates his view that experience cannot be adequately described in rational language, but can be fully realised only when expressed in images. When it is at work in visual art — already a composition of images — the action of the *objective correlative* seem to shift:

When an artist is able to detach from subjective, personal involvement, long enough to allow an objective existential phenomenon to use art — writing, film, painting, music,

³⁷ T. S. Eliot, "Hamlet and His Problems," in The Sacred Wood (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1969), p. 100.

installation — to analogize itself in an essentially undistorted (i.e. 'objective') artistic parallel, the aesthetic state or condition of *objective correlative* can be assumed. Through *objective correlative* the concepts and situations are not presented *by artists* per se ... but, instead, the essential form-concept presents itself through the artist, who becomes, as it were, delightfully transparent although certainly not invisible. The subtle flavor of unique individuality remains.

Instead of using an idea or an issue to get attention for himself, the situation is reversed; a syndrome of ideas, situations, beliefs and visions — an iconological concept — uses the artist and all his resources and talents, to realize itself on another level of existence, such as a painting, poem, or installation. 38

Within the exhibition, the concepts and ideas behind each work are not directly rendered. The "images" that present them are the limited set of elements manipulated — Braille, field, material, tone, mark and title. *These* are formulated to evoke not the exact originary concepts, but their impact and affect. *this is not erotic, and you are obscene* does not present Baudrillard's theories or the narrative of Lolita. However, it brings forth the experience of seduction, of accusation and perhaps victimization, and consideration of one's own sexuality and obscenity. *Judas* presents references to the disciple, but evokes a quiet sense of pathos.

38 John Stocking, Garry Williams: Cathedrals (Lethbridge: Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 1993), p. 2.

The "syndrome" of ideas behind *to tug the venetian cord* evolves from conceptions of communication and its inherent frustrations, of the inarticulate nature of both language and visual art, of the limits and the powers of vision, of notions of sexuality and the pleasure of seduction. However, to present such abstract concepts directly would be to render the works descriptive, and so remove resonance, empathy, and seduction from the concepts themselves. It is my project to have certain experiences understood, rather than the ideas described.

Throughout the works, Braille is a representative of language, for text and for the spoken word. Yet it also raises the spectre of the blind — a transparent presence in the *to tug the venetian cord* — to become a proxy for both the creation and perception of the works. His sight veiled, the blind man gropes through the space, reaching with hands forward, grasping for meaning and struggling to comprehend that which can not be seen.

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APPENDIX 1

Please see attached slide sleeve for reproductions of the works in *to tug the venetian cord*. The following works are documented:

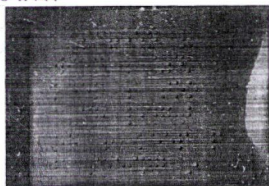
- 1 *The Implications of a Commonplace Act*, 1996
cast plaster
120" x 144"
- 2 *Open & Shut*, 1996
Braille paper, lead, parafin on wood & graphite
13.5 " x 29" (diptych, each 13.5" x 13.5")
- 3 *Base*, 1996
lead, and aluminum on wood
10 " x 36" x 48"
- 4 *this is not erotic, and you are obscene*, 1996
oil, graphite, parafin on canvas
18" x 264" (triptych, each 18" x 84")
- 5 *few things can be considered a given*, 1996
oil, chalk, silver leaf on canvas
66" x 47.5"
- 6 *Table & Mirror*, 1996
graphite, chalk, xerox transfer, parafin on paper
60" x 140" (67" x 213" framed)
(triptych, each 60" x 40" ; 67" x 47" framed)
- 7 *Listen*, 1996
lead, chalk, parafin on wood
40.5" x 25.5"
- 8 *All Over*, 1996
oil on board with copper
18" x 42" (triptych, each 18" x 12")
- 9 *Searchlight*, 1996
graphite, pencil crayon, parafin on paper
40" x 60" (47" x 67" framed)

- 10 *Cicatrix*, 1995
oil, chalk on canvas with wood and brass pins
72" x 48"
- 11 *Palimpsest*, 1995
Braille paper, parafin, lead on canvas
50" x 22" (four pieces, each 11" x 22")
- 12 *Anthem*, 1996
oil, graphite on canvas
82" x 54"
- 13 *Touchpoint*, 1996
copper
7" diameter
- 14 *Judas*, 1994
oil, leaf, wax on muslin
96" x 27"

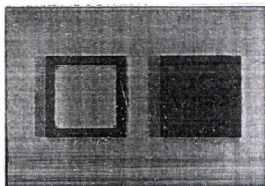
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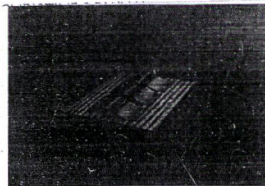
CHRISTINE SOWIAK
The Implications of a Commonplace
Act, 1996
cast plaster
120" x 144"



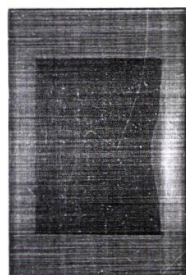
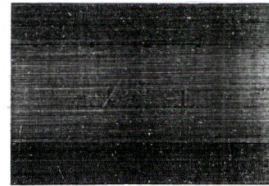
CHRISTINE SOWIAK
Open & Shut, 1996
Braille paper, lead, paraffin on wood &
graphite
13.5" x 29"



CHRISTINE SOWIAK
Base, 1996
lead, and aluminum on wood
10" x 36" x 48"

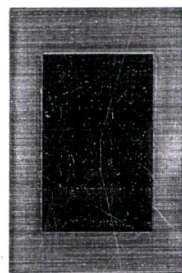
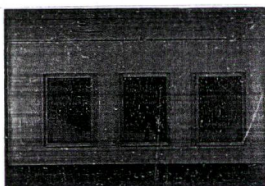


CHRISTINE SOWIAK
this is not erotic, and you are obscene,
1996
oil, graphite, paraffin on canvas
18" x 264" (triptych, each 18" x 84")



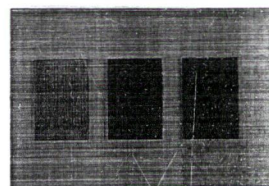
CHRISTINE SOWIAK
few things can be considered a given,
1996
oil, chalk, silver leaf on canvas
66" x 47.5"

CHRISTINE SOWIAK
Table & Mirror, 1996
graphite, chalk, xerox transfer, paraffin on
paper
60" x 140" (67" x 213" framed)

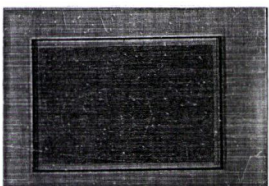


CHRISTINE SOWIAK
Listen, 1996
lead, chalk, paraffin on wood
40.5" x 25.5"

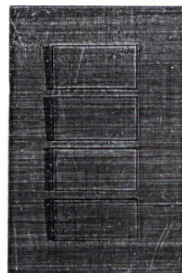
CHRISTINE SOWIAK
All Over, 1996
oil on board with copper
18" x 42" (triptych, each 18" x 12")



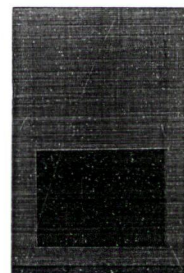
CHRISTINE SOWIAK
Searchlight, 1996
graphite, pencil crayon, paraffin on paper
40" x 60" (47" x 67" framed)



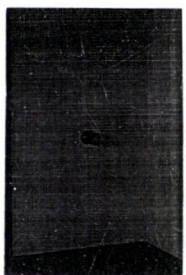
CHRISTINE SOWIAK
Cicatrix, 1995
oil, chalk on canvas with wood and brass
pins
72" x 48"



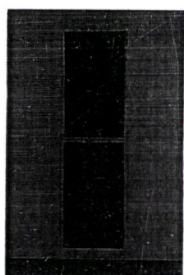
CHRISTINE SOWIAK
Palimpsest, 1995
Braille paper, paraffin, lead on canvas
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Anthem, 1996
oil, graphite on canvas
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Touchpoint, 1996
copper
7" diameter



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Judas, 1994
oil, leaf, wax on muslin
96" x 27"