

APOPHATIC ART:
ENACTING EXHAUSTED
LANGUAGE / EXHAUSTING
ENACTED LANGUAGE

by

Curt Cloninger

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ABSTRACT

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Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee: Professor Iain Kerr
Department of Events

Christian forms of visual art and theology since the reformation have been largely mimetic, symbolic, and intellectual -- representing God and worshipping him in ways that reduce him to and ground him in human finitude. Such forms of representation might be understood as 'kataphatic' - a kind of speaking about God that reduces him to a definable, categorizable, summarizable 'thing.' In early and medieval Christian writing, kataphatic ways of speaking about God were often balanced by 'apophatic' writing -- writing that confounds and undermines itself in order to perform the inability of language to properly speak about God. These two forms of writing (kataphatic and apophatic) reverently balance each other as they dare to approach God. As theologian Bruce Ellis Benson explains, "One affirms something but denies it, because to affirm it too strongly would be heretical and to deny it completely would also be heretical" (Benson 2002, 153).

Recent unbalanced forms of kataphatic representation in Protestantism have led to a metaphysical dead end -- reducing the living God to an ontologically (or at least symbolically) 'knowable' object, robbing him of the full glory and reverence that are his due, and robbing humans of the ecstatic confusion and hyper-saturated wonder that are his gifts to us. One solution to this problem is to recover an apophatic tradition which seeks to un-delimit God by

performative acts of reverent unsaying. Certain apophatic writers (particularly Dionysius and Meister Eckhart) suggest tactical strategies that can be conceptually employed in the genres of performance and installation art to act as apophatic machines which perform and enact a sensory, phenomenal (failure of) language. Such strategies of unsaying find an ally in forms of minimalist music (Steve Reich), minimalist theater (Samuel Beckett), and language-based sculpture (Arakawa & Gins). In order to revivify and properly perform these apophatic traditions, my art practice uses disontological language, hand-written typography, visual and auditory layering, and generative compositional structures to speak a language of unsaying that becomes an affective event which lays the groundwork for an encounter with God in ways both immanent and transcendent, -- beyond mere mimetic/symbolic/rhetorical understanding -- worshipping him more holistically, deferentially, and relevantly.

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GLOSSARY

Aleatoric/Generative ‘Alea’ is the Latin word for ‘dice.’ Aleatoric musical compositions employ ‘chance operations’ to determine various elements (tones, rests, durations, rhythms, dynamics, etc.). Composer John Cage famously used dice and the Chinese system of i-ching in the composition of many of his pieces. Aleatoric composition is not the same as generative composition. Cage used chance operations to determine the parameters of each individual composition, but once these parameters were determined they were fixed, and the piece was performed within these fixed parameters. Whereas generative composition is meta-aleatoric: a rules based system is coupled with an aleatoric element to produce an infinite series of compositions.

Apophasis/Kataphasis (Negative Theology) Apophatic writing in the Christian tradition is a way of talking about God that seeks to properly revere him by not overly delimiting him. ‘Apophasis’ is negation and ‘kataphasis’ is affirmation. Kataphasis is akin to revelation – what God reveals about himself in the Bible. Since God is beyond all we can affirm about him, in order to more accurately describe him, we must balance our affirmations with reverent negations. Theologian Bruce Ellis Benson explains, “One affirms something but denies it, because to affirm it too strongly would be heretical and to deny it completely would also be heretical” (Benson 2002, 153). This balance of kataphatic affirmation and apophatic negation is also sometimes called ‘negative theology.’

Immanence/Transcendence Theologically, immanence is the act of God’s dwelling within being (time and space), and transcendence is the act of God’s ‘dwelling’ beyond being (if one can be said to ‘dwell’ in non-space). Jesus’ incarnation made God immanent not only within being, but within ‘human-being-ness.’ I do not think that humans ever transcend the horizon of their own being (even in Heaven). If humans are to encounter God, it will be immanently – not because we ascend to God, but because he condescends to meet us where we are in being.

Orthodox/Heterodox ‘Orthodox’ comes from Latin and basically means “right belief.” ‘Heterodox’ comes from Latin and basically means “another belief.” So an orthodox Muslim and an orthodox Buddhist will have two different belief systems, according to the inherited traditions of their respective faiths. Orthodox Buddhism would be considered heterodox Islam. When I use the term ‘orthodox,’ I am referring to my own understanding of orthodox Christianity. When I use the term ‘Orthodox’ (in capital letters), I am referring to the traditions of the eastern Orthodox church, the church from which the western Catholic church split in 1024 A.D.

Metaphysics ‘Metaphysics’ comes from Greek and means “after physics.” It is what Aristotle named the book he wrote after he wrote his book called *Physics*. Since then, it has come to mean “beyond physics.” In philosophical jargon, it is the study of causal/originary principles, and the way in which these principles relate to the things they cause. Of course, this assumes that such causes exist at all apart from things themselves. Metaphysics is related to transcendence and immanence. The metaphysical realm could be thought of as a transcendent realm of first principles that affects the immanent realm of things (a la Plato). How humans gain access to this transcendent realm is a topic of some debate. Metaphysics is also related to ontology. In order to ontologically categorize things, one has to first abstract their metaphysical attributes, compare these attributes, and then categorize the things according to their abstracted attributes.

Ontology/Disontology ‘Ontology’ comes from Greek and means “the study of being.” Ontology assumes that being is made up of things, and it tries to understand the ‘nature’ of those things – what they are like individually and how they relate to each other. Indo-European languages (including English) presume an ontological understanding of being. To ask, “What is being?” is already to presume that being *is* some kind of ‘thing’ that has a metaphysical ‘nature.’ If being is instead understood as a series of becomings and events in perpetual flux (al la Deleuze), then this alternate understanding of being is not simply a new ‘kind’ of ontology, but an entirely different ‘thing’ altogether – a new way of thinking that requires a new way of speaking, one that doesn’t presuppose ontology.

Furthermore (and more germane to the purposes of my practice), if God is both immanent and transcendent, then he cannot be properly spoken of ontologically. Ontology presumes to step outside of being and look back on it, but how could any human step outside of God’s transcendent non-being and look back on it? For that matter, how could any human even step outside of plain old being and join God in non-being? Humans can speak kataphatically about God insofar as God has revealed himself to us (“It alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is” [Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 50]). But humans can never speak ontologically about God as if he were some sort of categorizable thing (“He is nothing. He is no thing” [Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 103]).

‘Disontology’ is the name given by literary historian Michael Sells to the kind of apophatic writing that refuses to reduce God to an ontological thing. Disontology is not simply an alternative way of practicing ontology. Instead, it opposes the ontological project altogether, (ab)using language in order to undermine and confound its ontological presumptions.

Pataphysics ‘Pataphysics’ is from Greek via French (because French writer Alfred Jarry invented the word and the concept in the 1890s). It means “after metaphysics.” Pataphysics is an intentionally absurd critique of metaphysics. Its goal is to be as far removed from metaphysics as metaphysics is removed from reality.

Performative A performative utterance performs what it is saying in the process of saying it. For example, “I promise.” I describe apophatic language as performative, and contrast it with ontological language, which is reductive. “God is irreducible” is an example of ontological language. The statement makes God a thing and assigns to him the quality of irreducibility. In so doing, the statement reduces God to ‘irreducibility.’ What the statement *says* is disproved by what it *does*. In contrast, performative language would attempt to reduce God to language and fail to do so. It would perform the irreducibility it meant to convey.

Phenomenology When I say ‘phenomenology,’ I am referring to philosopher Martin Heidegger’s understanding of the term. Heideggerian phenomenology seeks to supplant (pre-Kantian) ontology and offer a new understanding of being. Heidegger understands being (or at least human-being-ness) to be comprised not only of things (objects), but also of perceiving subjects. To understand being is to understand the relationship between the two. Old school ontology failed to take into account the influence that perceiving subjects have on being. It presumed that there was such a thing as an ‘objective’ perspective. Phenomenology has been used as a way of interpreting minimalist sculpture of the 1960s (particularly the work of Donald Judd). Judd focused not solely on the sculptural object as an ontological thing, but on the overall phenomena that occurred when the sculptural object was encountered by the body of the viewer in actual space. When I talk about a phenomenological experience, I am talking about an experience in the world that is an admixture of ‘objective’ agency (objects ‘out there’ in the world doing what they do) and ‘subjective’ agency (the subjective experience of the perceiver).

Semiotics ‘Semiotics’ is the study of signs. When I critique ‘semiotics,’ I am critiquing the dualistic semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure. In 1906, Saussure proposed that language was a system of ‘signifiers’ (words) that pointed to corresponding ‘signifieds’ (things or concepts in the world). This way of thinking about language reduces it to an abstracted, metaphysically removed, written system of signs rather than an uttered, embodied, enacted force in the world.

Theremin Arguably the first electronic musical instrument, the theremin generates electronic tones. It is also arguably the only instrument one plays without touching. The pitch and volume are controlled by the distance between the player's hands and two metal rods protruding from the body of the instrument.

I. What Is Apophatic Writing and Why Use It To Make Art?

What Is Apophatic Writing? (A Kataphatic Explanation)

Apophatic writing in the Christian tradition is a way of talking about God that seeks to properly revere him by not overly delimiting him. ‘Apophasis’ is negation and ‘kataphasis’ is affirmation. Since God is beyond all we can affirm about him, in order to more accurately describe him, we must balance our affirmations with reverent negations. Theologian Bruce Ellis Benson explains, “One affirms something but denies it, because to affirm it too strongly would be heretical and to deny it completely would also be heretical” (Benson 2002, 153).

Dionysius (a.k.a. Pseudo-Dionysius or Denys the Areopagite) might be considered the godfather of Christian apophatic/kataphatic thinking.¹ Writing around 500 A. D., he describes God apophatically as follows: “God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing. Of him there is conception, reason, understanding, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name, and many other things. On the other hand he cannot be understood, words cannot contain him, and no name can lay hold of him. He is not one of the things that are and he cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in all things and he is no thing among things. He is known to all from all things and he is known to no one from anything. This is the sort of language we must use about God” (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 108-109).

Note that negation never takes primacy (for then it would turn into a kind of affirmation), nor does it ‘cancel out’ the affirmative. Instead, negation and affirmation work hand in hand as we try to reverently speak about God. Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion explains, “Negation and affirmation bear upon the same attributes, only envisaged from two points of view. Instead of neutralizing one another, they reinforce one another with a properly unthinkable tension” (Marion 2001, 148).² Dionysius further reminds us that

God is necessarily beyond even this apophatic/kataphatic way of thinking: “We should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regards to beings, and more appropriately, we should negate all those affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all [God] is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion” (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 136). In other words, even the kataphatic knowledge gained by the apophatic/kataphatic way of saying must itself be apophatically unsaid *ad infinitum*.

Theologian A.W. Tozer even implies that the apophatic/kataphatic way of saying and knowing might be applied to everything, not just God: “Any real explanation of even the simplest phenomenon in nature lies hidden in obscurity and can no more be explained than can the mystery of the Godhead” (Tozer 1961, 17).

Some things Christian apophatic writing is not: Dadaist absurdity, Zen mysticism, Oulipian pataphysics, Derridean deconstruction, or Korzybskian general semantics. Neither is it simply illogical, irrational, random, arbitrary, or generic. On the contrary, apophatic writing is rigorous, non-arbitrary, and quite specific. Literary historian Michael Sells explains, “The apophatic paradoxes are constructed upon a foundation of conventional logical distinctions; the more highly tuned the rationality of the kataphatic context, the more successful will be the apophatic paradox” (Sells 1994, 212). The Christian apophatic tradition (from Gregory of Nyssa [c. 335 A.D.] to Jean-Luc Marion [b. 1946]) involves specific faith in the kataphatic affirmations of the Bible, believing them to be the revealed words of God. Apophatic writing confounds/unbinds/extends/reinforces these Biblical affirmations, but always in fear and trembling, with the intent of properly revering God.

In choosing to develop an apophatic art practice, I am by no means denying the appropriateness and efficacy of symbolic forms of kataphatic church art. I am simply recognizing their overabundance in contemporary visual religious art, and am making an apophatic move to unsay them in order to more accurately, holistically, and reverently approach God through art.

Intermission: An Apophatic Disclaimer (Immediately Made Kataphatic Again By This Very Title)

All I have done so far is reduce the event of apophatic writing to a kataphatic, ontological definition. Such reduction was bound to happen due to certain biases inherent in the formal language of an academic thesis.³ This disclaimer is an attempt to at least begin to try to unsay some of that over-delimited saying. Throughout the rest of the thesis, I will occasionally employ my own mild forms of apophatic writing to properly enact my “meaning” rather than simply kataphatically indicating it.

In this sense, my thesis and my art will (hopefully) fail to ‘sum up’ the apophatic/kataphatic dance, because to reductively sum up the relationship between apophasis and kataphasis is to render their relationship static and impotent. Samuel Beckett’s reverence of ‘failure’ is instructive in this regard. According to critics Bersani and Dutoit, “When Beckett speaks of failure as the artist’s vocation, as ‘his world,’ he is not referring to the artist’s subject matter; rather, he is speaking of a failure intrinsic to the very process of artistic production... To fail does not mean to represent successfully existential failures or existential meaninglessness; *it means to fail to represent* (either meaninglessness or meaning)” (Bersani 1993, 14). They go on to describe Beckett’s writing after 1960 as “A new type... of a text that performs its own powerful resistance to representation” (Bersani 1993, 27). In this thesis, whenever I reduce the irreducible to the term ‘irreducible,’ whenever I make the ineffable my ontological subject matter, I am not practicing apophasis, and it is time for another disclaimer.

Why Use Apophatic Writing To Make Art? (or How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love The Bomb)

“All creatures want to utter God in all their works; they all come as close as they can in uttering him, and yet they cannot utter him. Whether they wish it or not, whether they like it or not, they all want to utter God, and yet he remains unuttered.... All creatures would like

to echo God in their works, but there is little indeed that they can manifest" (Eckhart 1981, 204-5).

"It alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is" (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 50).

I have been letting Jesus rule me (with varying degrees of yielded-ness on my part) for most of my adult life. In that time I have personally experienced many uncanny, phenomenological experiences that I am convinced are caused by the supernatural power of God. They include praying in tongues I do not understand, being knocked down by an invisible force, shaking uncontrollably, weeping uncontrollably, laughing uncontrollably, being struck dumb and speechless for extended periods of time, being bodily immobilized for extended periods of time, being healed of chronic physical pains as an immediate result of healing prayer, and receiving accurate 'words of knowledge' from God about people I have just met. These experiences are by no means the highlight of my Christian life. (God's grace and favor towards me and his gradual healing of my heart over time are probably the highlights so far). Nor are these experiences my primary reason for believing in and following Jesus (indeed, they all happened to me subsequent to my deciding to follow him).

I mention these experiences for two reasons:

1. They convince me in bodily, phenomenological terms of the power, love, and autonomy of the God called Jesus. I am not personally prone to sensationalism, spiritism, or mysticism. I was not seeking these experiences.
2. They are in no way scientifically, philosophically, or rationally 'provable' to anyone else. They are easily dismissible as wish-fulfillment, social coercion, socialization into a certain culture, psychosomatic healing, misattribution of cause to effect, inability to holistically discern the cosmic relationship between discrete material entities and fluid flows of energy, undigested beef, Elvis – the list is endless.

I am utterly unable to objectively convince others of the veracity of these significant personal experiences. To me, this inability to objectively

convey my experiences does not cause me doubt my experiences (indeed, I know that I know that I know what I have experienced). Instead, it highlights to me a fundamental shortcoming of logical, scientific communication.

One ostensible solution to this impasse might be to bypass rational language altogether and attempt to re-create these experiences phenomenologically. But this is no real solution, because if I succeed in recreating such experiences via sensationalism alone, then they are no longer the same kinds of supernatural encounters with God that I initially experienced.

There is a third solution, which is simply to love and pray for people, and allow God to do the convincing should he so choose. This frees me to speak logically and make phenomenological art without the burden of needing to prove anything. But I'm still left with the shortcomings of language and art, their inability to objectively convince anybody of anything.

It turns out that the real problem is not that language fails to objectively convince, but that language parades itself as being able to objectively convince. Language further tries to convince people that objective communication is also the job of art, and that art is falling down on the job. We immediately object (using language, of course). "You're wrong!" we say. "Art need not objectively convince anybody of anything!" Language leans back, strokes its chin, and tautologically concludes, "So be it. Art has my permission to be useless." Art shuffles off to make mud pies in the studio while language catches a limo uptown to be interviewed on Larry King Live.

But that's not the real problem either. The real problem is that language has become schizophrenic. Language thinks its job is to put *everything* into a tidy ontological box. Christians using this kind of language treat God as a thing and put him inside a box labeled *something*. Atheists using this kind of language treat God as a thing and put him inside a box labeled *nothing*. Yet despite what language *claims* about itself, language is actually *behaving* like a thing in the world. Language itself is a force that bears upon and is borne upon by other forces and things in the world. Language, it turns out, is actually a fine source of sculptural material.

Since neither ontological language nor phenomenological art are all that great at pointing people toward God anymore (if they ever were), I want to use phenomenological art to turn ontological language against itself. What's left when the smoke clears may not be an immediate experience of mystical union with God. It may simply look like bare ground, cleared of rhetoric and spectacle, a helipad for the living God (should he choose to descend).

II. Apophatic Tactics Applied to Art (A Phenomenology of Language)

Introduction: Meaning as Event (Language Is As Language Does)

Photographer Hollis Frampton famously observed, “Photography is not a substitute for anything.” Art historian Liz Kotz later proposed the radical corollary, “Language is not a substitute for anything” (Kotz 2007, 188). The implication is that language, like photography, is freed from the burden of representation to be its own medium. Apophatic writing does not simply declare, define, or describe. Instead, it uses language to enact the limitations of language. As such, apophatic language is less usefully understood from the Saussurean perspective of signifier/signified and better understood as a meaning event in and of itself. This idea of ‘meaning as event’ encapsulates all the apophatic tactics I will discuss. Although the tactics differ appreciably and affect the art to which they are applied in different ways, all are based on a presupposition that meaning is not disembodied and propositional, but context-dependent and enacted.

If language is communication between a speaker and a listener, then the ‘speaker’ of written language ‘speaks’ once. Her speech is then archived and time-shifted. It is translated into a potential communication event that is only completed (performed) upon its reading. With each new reading (even by the same ‘listener’) the communication event (re-)occurs. But since the writer has already completed her single performance, the event aspect of this two way communication can be easily forgotten, replaced instead by an emphasis on the static words themselves, what they signify, and how they fit into a syntactic or semiotic system. This calcification of the written word, this emphasis on its denominational, denotative aspects, is what the apophatic writers struggled ingeniously to overcome. They wanted each reading to cause an experience in their readers which modeled and enacted the unsayability of God. In order to cause their readers to have these confounding experiences, their texts necessarily

had to ensure that the texts did not merely denotatively describe such unsayability. Yet this was a challenging task, since text is a medium most often used for ontological description. It was as if they were having to use denotative cinder blocks to build an experiential roller coaster.

Samuel Beckett's language can also be understood as an event, and his communicative tactics are strikingly apophatic. Although he never made installation or performance art per se, Beckett's plays and poetry are a useful bridge between something like Dionysius's *The Mystical Theology* and Bruce Nauman's neon text sculptures. Of course Beckett's plays were literally en-acted on the stage with real-time speakers and listeners, but the language structures and stage instructions he used in his plays also formally enacted his themes rather than merely dramatizing or declaring them. Referring to Beckett's *Not I*, Actress Billie Whitelaw observed, "Plenty of people can write a play about a state of mind, but [Beckett] actually put that state of mind on the stage in front of your eyes" (Beckett 1990). Writing on Beckett, Philosopher Gilles Deleuze echoes Whitelaw: "Many authors are too polite, are content to announce the total work and death of the self. But this remains an abstraction as long as one does not show 'how it is'" (Deleuze 1997, 154). Again, referring to Beckett's use of simultaneously specific/indefinite imagery, Deleuze writes, "The image is not an object but a 'process.' We do not know the power of such images, so simple do they appear from the point of view of the object." (Deleuze 1997, 159). From the reductive, object[ive] point of view, Beckett's plays are 'about' nothing. Nothing as an object is *no thing*, but nothing as an event is something else entirely. Likewise, from a propositional, dialectically reducible perspective, apophatic language is nothing more than a synthesis of its sayings and unsayings. It is the event of apophatic language, the gymnastics its reader must perform in order to negotiate it, that is the language's real 'meaning.' (Even in saying this, I have overly reduced the event to something called 'meaning.')

In my art, language is not used to describe or denote, but rather to undenominate and disrupt. The 'meaning' of such disruption is necessarily understood in the context of a speech event. Whether it is cryptically dis-labeling physical objects (*The Unbearable Being of Lightness*, *The Emily Dickinson*

Difference Engine) or confounding the spoken word (“let/light | be/was” and “let light” from *During The Beginning*), language is admixed with extra-textual media to perform an apophatic event. I am less concerned with what the words denotatively mean and more concern with their performative affect. (Of course, according to the kataphatic/apophatic Christian tradition of saying/unsaying, the denotative meaning of language and its performative affect are inseparable.)

There are kinds of ‘meaning’ that don’t involve ‘language.’ As philosopher Mark Johnson observes, "Meaning traffics in patterns, images, qualities, feelings, and eventually concepts and propositions." (Johnson 2007, 9). For instance, there is a continuum between instrumental tone, voiced tone, voiced speech in a foreign tongue, and voiced speech in one’s own tongue. A phenomenological affect can be achieved by applying phased compositional structures to simple instrumental tones (Steve Reich’s *Music for 18 Musicians* is a classic example). But a qualitatively different phenomenological affect is created when similar phased structures are applied to the human voice speaking English words (as in Reich’s *Come Out*). In my current work, I am not simply interested in achieving a phenomenologically disorienting affect by using tones without language, line without letterform, or space without choreography; instead, I am attempting to achieve a kind of phenomenology of language that enacts and extends Christian apophatic writing.

To literary critic Michael Bakhtin, the event of any single conversation between two people is an extension of a larger, ongoing historical conversation. Each ‘utterance’ (Bakhtin’s term) is a speech act in reply to another utterance, going backwards through time. It is not merely that we all inherited the syntax of a common language system. We are all cultural inheritors of every preceding conversation that has happened historically. Our current, nuanced understanding of language is subtly colored by every utterance anyone has ever made. In Bakhtin’s own words: "Any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding

utterances -- his own and others -- with which his given utterance enters into one kind of relationship to another... Any utterance is a link in a very complexly organized chain of other utterances." (Bakhtin 1986, 69).

From a Biblical perspective, this chain of utterances begins in Genesis 1:3 with God ("And God said..."). Adam and Eve responded with their own utterances, and the dialogue has continued to the present day. Thus all language is a relational vehicle which is simultaneously dependent on its immediate, subjective context and on a history of previous contexts. To quote novelist Robert Anton Wilson quoting Emerson, "Every word is a fossilized poem" (Wilson 2001).⁴ Or, as linguist Philip Lieberman would have it, language is not something we *have* (a la Noam Chomsky), but something we *do* (Keneally 2007, 79). Language is not merely denotative or syntactical; it is relational. Apophatic language (and apophatic art) is a way to confound language's denotative function in order to (re)activate its function as a relational event – between the artist and the reader/viewer/participant, and potentially between humans and God.

Not only does language relate people to other people and to God, but language itself is in dialogue with the things of the world via the act of the utterance. Bakhtin explains, "Language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through concrete utterances as well" (Bakhtin 1986, 63). He goes on to clarify, "The natural meaning of the word applied to a particular actual reality under particular real conditions of speech communication creates a spark of expression... Only the contact between the language meaning and the concrete reality that takes place in the utterance can create the spark of expression. It exists neither in the system of language nor in the objective reality surrounding us" (Bakhtin 1986, 86-7).

The specific, contextual, historical event of the utterance is the time/space act that inextricably (con)fuses Saussure's semiotic signifiers with their concrete signifieds. Language is no longer hermetically and metaphysically sealed off from the world of being. In its uttering, the utterance opens up a reciprocal channel of exchange between language and things. The utterance keeps language 'real,' giving it a kind of material accountability.

Art made using such uttered/embodied language differs greatly from art which treats language as a pure, non-material bearer of abstract ideas. In his video performance pieces, Vito Acconci uses language in the former sense, as an uttered force in the world. According to Kotz, "For Acconci, speech, like all language, is an extension of pragmatic human action and interaction, not a codified aesthetic sphere; it is a field of force, a field of encounter" (Kotz 2007, 165). Whereas conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth sought to use language in the latter sense, as a non-material bearer of ideas. Kosuth abandoned "materials" for language because, in his own words, "There is always something hopelessly real about materials" (Kotz 2007, 186). Unfortunately for Kosuth's theory (but fortunately for his art), language itself is a real material, obliquely imbuing even the most object-less conceptual art with an inescapable, "hopelessly real" accountability.

Additionally, according to the speech-act theory of J.L. Austin, certain kinds of "performative utterances" enact what they say. For instance, "I promise" actually makes a promise (Kraynak 2005, 13-14). My apophatic art practice recognizes the embodied function of such alchemical speech events, but seeks to further confound them. In the "let light" station of my *During the Beginning* installation, the viewer/participant is asked to repeatedly say the word 'light' aloud while watching a video of water shaking on top of the written word 'light.' As she says the word 'light,' the video is replaced by a negatively exposed video of water shaking on top of the written word 'let' (figures 1a-b). During the silence between utterances of the spoken word 'light,' the written word 'light' rushes back into view on the screen. In this way, the agency of the participant's speech act is foregrounded, but immediately re-wired. The very word she is speaking ('light') actually causes light to recede (both the written word 'light' and the actual light from the screen). This confusion of speech, text, sound, sight, matter, and energy creates a meaning event that is a kind of un-speech-act.

"In the beginning... God said let there be light; and there was light" (Genesis 1:1,3)⁵, but there is much more apophatic potential in this verse than is denotatively conveyed. Rather than simply use interactive media to embody the

denotative meaning of the verse (the participant says 'light' and the lights come on), the piece uses interactive media to drive an apophatic wedge between the apparent meaning of the words and the embodied experience of the language event. Rather than reinforce the already too-strong paradigm of propositional language, the piece uses language, media, and the body to undermine itself. It performs its inability to perform *a* creation event. In so doing, it apophatically models the inability of words to adequately describe God's own "speech-act" at *the* creation event. The piece enacts the fact that although all language events have some kind of phenomenological affect, and although new media art can heighten and foreground such affect, apophatic language events are qualitatively different than kataphatic ones.

In *During the Beginning*, *St. Frank and the Wolf*, and *Breathing in B Flat*, the 'subject' of my practice is a kind of performative formalism. Each piece enacts its own inability to sufficiently kataphatically/mimetically '(re)present' its own 'content.' Thus their 'subject matter' becomes this enacted inability itself.

The embodied, event-centric language in my installation spaces and performances takes on a fluid, analog quality. Language is no longer subdividable into discrete digital elements. For instance, in the "large table" station of *The Emily Dickinson Difference Engine* installation, hand-written typographic phrases are perpetually and generatively projected and superimposed on top of each other, constructing surprising combinations and entirely new non-words. These phrase overlappings rarely repeat. The text is given an ethereal, ephemeral physicality, but it is a physicality nonetheless (it moves; it occupies space). Such event-inscribed language resists ontological dissection. The reader re-visits the text only to discover it has changed. The text retains elements of its original, kataphatic meaning, but an apophatic slippage has been introduced. Bruce Nauman's *Lip Synch* and Steve Reich's *Come Out* achieve similar slippages by embodying language into linear/audible time, and then gradually shifting the phase of that time. Words that seemed like discrete, digital units of syntactic, semiotic meaning erode into a stream of phenomenological sounds that nevertheless retain a kataphatic nucleus of their original meaning, now '(under)stood' in overtly sensual terms.

The Principles of Apophatic Language

In his touchstone book *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Michael Sells meticulously examines five canonical apophatic writers (a neo-Platonist, a Sufi mystic, and three Christians, two of whom were accused by the Inquisition of heresy). By sampling writers whose faith systems differ, Sells exposes a kind of common apophatic syntax underlying these three traditions. Sells himself would strongly resist such a characterization, since there is no rote ‘syntax’ or ‘formula’ for apophasis. Nevertheless, his reluctant summation of what he calls “The Principles of Apophatic Language” (Sells 1994, 206-210) serves as an invaluable template for my attempt to create an artistic practice of apophasis. All of the separate principles Sells delineates are actually so tightly intertwined as to be almost inextricable (and well they would be, since delineation is an ontological exercise). As such, I have taken the liberty of combining some principles and re-labeling others to suit the idiosyncrasies of my own practice. Also, I have reconsidered these principles as tactics, since they are strategies governing my own production of work. The first three tactics (disontology, banal sublimity, and semantic transformations) each have their own section, but are not so practically distinct. I combine the final three tactics (refusal of closure, self-undermining, palimpsest) into one section, since they all overtly negotiate issues of time.

Throughout I will discuss artwork by other artists which serve as models for how these tactics might be successfully enacted in art. Additionally, I will discuss elements of my own work that relate to each tactic. Some of my pieces (*During the Beginning* in particular) will be discussed in multiple sections, each time focusing on the work from the particular perspective of that section’s tactic. Just as these apophatic tactics overlap, elements of my work overlap and become almost inextricable. This is as it should be. In this thesis, I am merely artificially/ontologically dissecting the pieces for the sake of academic inquiry. Hopefully they will emerge from under the scalpel intact and still breathing.

Tactic 1: Disontology (God is No-Thing)

"Whoever perceives something in God and attaches thereby some name to him, that is not God. God is above names and above nature" (Eckhart 1981, 204).

"He is nothing. He is no thing" (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 103).

The job of language is inherently reductive. For example, although each pinecone in the world is unique and different, a language that had a different word for every single pinecone would be useless. Language abstracts the complexities of the world into manageable words. It creates ontological categories, delimiting what it considers to be the important differences, and ignoring what it considers to be the inconsequential differences. Thus English distinguishes between 'pineapple' and 'pinecone,' but not between 'pinecone a' and 'pinecone b.'

The challenge is to keep from reifying words -- to avoid thinking of words as the phenomena they abstract.⁶ In the famous phrase of philosopher Alfred Korzybski, "A map is *not* the territory" (Korzybski 1996, 750).⁷ Although language is not the exact phenomena it describes, neither is it merely metaphysical. It doesn't simply sit outside of the world and describe it. Instead, language is an active force within the world. It exerts its own agency on humans and historical events. Apophatic writers use the agency of language in the world to undermine (and thus balance/leaven) language's more metaphysical, ontological tendencies.

Indo-European languages inherently reduce phenomena in the world to subjects & predicates, action verbs & linking verbs. A subject can act on a predicate ("Dogs chase cats."), or a subject can be a predicate ("Dogs are pets.") The biases of these languages become particularly acute when we use them to describe God, since God is irreducible and un-abstractable. Even when I use language to say "God is irreducible," I am reducing God to a subject described by a predicate adjective. If I say "Language cannot fully describe God," I am reducing God to a predicate acted upon by the subject 'language.' In order to

keep from overly reducing God (which is a form of idolatry), each sentence I say about God must be qualified by a subsequent sentence, and that sentence must be qualified by a subsequent sentence, ad infinitum. Michael Sells calls this apophatic project of using language to un-delimit God “disontology” (Sells 1994, 7). In order to keep words from always having the last word (and thus delimiting God), we must continually use words to unsay themselves. This strategy of disontology is a performative one, perpetually deferring any single, final, all-encompassing definition.

Such a telescoping chain of unsaying is more than simply a single negative assertion. For example, Magritte’s famous painterly assertion, “Ceci n'est pas une pipe” (This is not a pipe) is more interested in exposing “the treachery of images” than in undermining the treachery of words. Had Magritte wished to enact the kind of apophatic language I’m describing, he might have painted another painting of the first painting and labeled it “This is not *not* a pipe,” etc.

Prose is a difficult medium in which to enact disontology, because prose is so used to being denotatively meaningful. Deleuze explains Samuel Beckett’s turn away from words and toward music, space, and image: “The reason [Beckett] became increasingly intolerant of [words]: the exceptional difficulty of ‘boring holes in the surface of language so that ‘what lurks behind it’ might at last appear... [Words] are so burdened with calculations and significations, with intentions and personal memories, with old habits that cement them together, that one can scarcely bore into the surface before it closes up again. It imprisons and suffocates us.” (Deleuze 1997, 172-3).

Nevertheless, Beckett and apophatic writers like Dionysius and Meister Eckhart were forever wrestling against the strictures of prose. This is why their tactics had to be so ingenious and extreme. When these same radical apophatic tactics are applied to the less denotatively bound media, an even more disruptive form of apophasis can occur.

One way to avoid the inherent ontological project of language is by using language to *perform* its ‘meaning’ rather than merely *say* its meaning. To perform language is to exert its agency in the world. One overt way to exert the

agency of language in the world is to make language explicitly more physical, more embodied. Several supra-prose media strategies achieve this.

Embodied Language via Multimedia Synesthesia (eye [h]ear you)

Human/Computer Interface designer Joy Mountford once observed, “When the computer stares back at you, it sees you as one eye and one finger” (Utterback 2004, 218). In other words, we have designed our computer interfaces as if we ourselves are disembodied minds. A corollary might be, “When the book stares back at you, it sees you as one eye.” New media art has the capacity to engage much more than our minds, but new media artists must purpose to make work that speaks an embodied language. In my practice, I am particularly interested in using language in conjunction with software-controlled animation, audio, video, and physical installation spaces. I want to enlist the viewer of these artworks to experience language in more holistic, less disembodied way. As apophatic writing is meant to performatively confound “the mind” of the reader, I want to confound the entire body of the viewer.

New media artist Camille Utterback writes, “As we create new interfaces between our bodies and our symbolic systems we are in an unusual position to rethink and re-embody this relationship” (Utterback 2004, 226). Utterback and Romy Achituv achieve such a remapping of the relationship between text and body in their piece *Text Rain* (1999). Letters from a pre-selected poem ‘rain’ down as projections from the top of a screen. Viewers can ‘catch’ the letters as they fall and hold them (sensors in the room read the viewers’ body outlines and feed the coordinates of these outlines into the projection system, causing the letters to ‘land’ on them). The letters can be gathered as words and phrases, which can then be recombined (figure 2). Although successful according to the artists’ intentions, the weakness of this piece from the perspective of my own apophatic goals lies in its lack of conceptual coupling between the pre-selected text and the behavior of the system. The text is from a poem *about* bodies and language (Utterback 2004, 221), but the poem itself is still mimetic – it doesn’t *embody* language. Simply porting such a text letter by letter into an embodied multimedia system doesn’t magically cause the ontological function of the

original text to disappear. Although the interactive system itself is admirably novel, a tighter conceptual coupling between what the text says and what it does is required in order to achieve a more embodied form of language.

Arakawa and Madeline Gins' *The Mechanism of Meaning* (1963-1996) seems far more successful at achieving a phenomenological embodiment of language, and subsequently disrupting it. The piece consists of multiple stations constructed as simple interactive exercises. Each exercise examines a different cognitive aspect of "meaning-making." The exercises are largely text-based, but the text is always situated in a kind of mock-Cartesian painterly space, and its letterforms frequently do more than simply denote (figure 3). There are always accompanying lines, diagrams, and images, as well as instructions that require bodily (or at least mental) action on the part of the viewer. Often the exercises stations even extend physically into the gallery space with various apparatuses to be manipulated.

The Mechanism of Meaning succeeds where *Text Rain* fails because the textual 'content' of each of Arakawa and Gins' exercises is tightly and non-arbitrarily coupled with the embodied event they mean to enact. Whereas *Text Rain* might be considered a phenomenological installation with semi-arbitrary text (altering the text doesn't radically alter the phenomenological affect of the piece), *The Mechanism of Meaning* is a phenomenological installation whose text is integral. Indeed, the phenomenological affect of each exercise is created in no small part by the text itself. If we were to extract the text of *Text Rain* from the installation and set it in Helvetica typeface as poetry in a book, its meaning would shift due to the change in context, but it would still maintain the integrity of an English language poem. Whereas, if we were to extract the texts of *The Mechanism of Meaning* from their spatial con-texts and set them in Helvetica typeface as poetry in a book, they would read as alternately facile and meaningless. Likewise, if we were to inject another text into the *Text Rain* installation, the overall impact of the system would remain largely unaltered. Whereas, if we were to inject other texts into *The Mechanism of Meaning*, the impact of the installation would be lost. Although *The Mechanism of Meaning* employs no 'new media' (or even video for that matter), its purposeful and

ingenious diagrammatic mechanisms achieve a phenomenological impact that most new media artists only hope to achieve.

Lawrence Weiner is another artist whose language installations don't rely on 'multimedia' or 'interactive media,' but who nevertheless powerfully embodies language by treating it sculpturally. Weiner once wrote, "Art is not a metaphor upon the relationship of human beings to objects & objects to objects in relation to human beings but a representation of an empirical existing fact. It does not tell the potential & capabilities of an object (material) but presents a reality concerning that relationship." (Bee 2000, 201-202). It may seem curious that the term 'language' doesn't appear in Weiner's definition of art; but to Weiner, the inclusion of 'language' would be redundant since language itself is simply one more form of sculptural material. Words are the very 'objects' of which he speaks. As such, words are not mere 'metaphors' that 'tell;' they are 'materials' that '[re]present' real relationships in the real world. In his work, Weiner doesn't so much introduce agency to language (language already has agency). Instead, he foregrounds language's agency by giving it a new kind of embodied, sculptural physicality in the world. In so doing, he activates and catalyzes its performative relationship to other objects and to humans.⁸

Richard Serra's *Boomerang* video (1974)⁹ is another example of embodied language, this time using tape-delayed audio feedback and spoken words. The speaker in the piece (Nancy Holt) is equipped with headphones and asked to speak into a microphone. Her voice is played back to her through the headphones after about a half-second delay. Watching the video, we see her speaking and listening, and we hear both her original spoken voice and the delayed voice. She narrates her perception of the experience, and as she does the language which she uses to describe the experience perpetuates the experience she is describing. At one point she says, "The words become like things. I'm throwing things out into the world and they are boomeranging back... My mind goes out into the world and then comes back to me." It is telling that Holt associates language not with her voice or her body, but with her disembodied mind. When presented with this disjunctive phenomenological experience of overtly embodied language, she not only experiences language as

physical, she also experiences her “mind” as having embodied agency, going “out into the world.” This simple experiment suggests further audio/visual strategies for enacting embodied language.

Appropriating Arakawa and Gins’ use of separate, disontological ‘exercise’ stations, the various stations of my *During the Beginning* installation shift the viewer’s perception of language from descriptive to performative. “let light” is the most (at least mechanically) ‘interactive’ station of the installation. The viewer/participant sits in front of a screen and puts on headphones which play the sound of water shaking in a jar. On the screen is a video loop of the written word “light” at the bottom of a jar of shaking water. The viewer/participant is instructed to speak the word ‘light’ aloud while grasping a Mason jar full of water and translucent glass fragments which sits in front of the screen (figure 4). As she speaks, the water in the headphones grows silent and the light from the screen darkens to reveal a negatively inverted (dark) video loop of the word “let,” again as seen through a jar of shaking water. The volume of the viewer/participant’s voice determines the opacity of the video loops. If her voice is 100% loud, the negative video loop is fully opaque and the positive loop is not visible. If her voice is 50% loud, both negative and positive video loops are equally visible, superimposed on top of each other to form a hybrid word, “[i]e/g[h]t.” If her voice is silent, the positive video loop is fully opaque, and light from the screen brightens and refracts off the surface of the physical jar she is holding. (The audio volume of the water in the headphones is likewise controlled by the viewer/participant’s voice. The softer her voice, the louder the water in the headphones.) In this way, the light from the video of the jar water on the screen is ‘in dialogue’ with the actual jar water in the physical space of the gallery. An excerpt from the flow of this installation event is as follows: The viewer/participant’s voice travels from her throat through the room, dimming the light coming from the screen which shines through the water in a jar that she is grasping with her hands. In the midst of this closed circuit, the handwritten word ‘let’ is superimposed over the handwritten word ‘light,’ as pre-recorded water in a pre-recorded jar visually undulates between these two

words on the screen. The louder the viewer's voice, the more 'let' appears and 'light' recedes.

This piece is like Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1928-29) on mescaline. Written text and spoken text are admixed with glass, water, light, tongues, hands, and empty space. The viewer thus unsays the word 'light' -- not in a one-to-one, clap-on/clap-off mimetic sense, but in a phenomenologically confounding, deeply embodied sense. Embodied language (via multimedia synesthesia) becomes a vehicle to activate and infect the embodied 'mind' without the viewer having to negotiate a larger, literal, more physical obstacle course.

The second exercise station of *During the Beginning* is a two-channel video piece of intricately composed and edited loops entitled "let/light | be/was." The first loop interleaves four short fragments:

1. Video of the hand-written word 'light' accompanied by the spoken word 'light' once.
2. Video of the hand-written word 'let' accompanied by the spoken word 'let' once.
3. Video and audio of my mouth saying the word 'light.'
4. Video and audio of my mouth saying the word 'let.'

Each fragment is sliced into micro-fragments, and these micro-fragments are then interleaved with each other. The result is a kind of flicker version of a mouth saying 'light' and the written word 'let' 'saying' 'let.' . The two words sound similar and are received by the viewer simultaneously. Alternate combinations are repeated and restructured to achieve various rhythmic and cognitive effects. The viewer is thus left with the task of assimilating this hybrid language of mouth, sound, letterform, and light -- not intellectually or even consciously (the video is playing too quickly for that), but at an almost visceral, bodily level. The viewer comes to bodily 'understand/stand-under' a new kind of word amalgam ('let/light'). This amalgamated word is not conjoined symbolically via intellectual rigor, but performatively at an affective, embodied level.

The second video channel is composed according to the same system, except instead of ‘let’ and ‘light,’ the two words are ‘be’ and ‘was.’ Both channels play in the same space on opposite walls in the same corner of a room.

To add even more disruption, the middle of each four-minute video loop consists of two mouths superimposed over one another and scrubbed on a timeline (figure 5). Similar to a DJ scratching records back and forth on a turntable, I scratch these video channels back and forth using video editing software. This results in breathy, partial phrases that stutter backwards and forwards, both audio channels mixing together across in the installation space. These staccato phrase fragments still retain traces of their original tonal inflection, but are now removed from any single denotative word. The whole audible experience runs the gamut from laughing to ecstatic breathing to angry grunting.

As part of an overall installation called *During the Beginning* which explores the impossibility of representing the Genesis creation event, “let/light | be/was” is a piece with no beginning and end, but only an eternally deferred middle. The four words ‘let,’ ‘light,’ ‘be,’ and ‘was’ are blended, fragmented, and rehashed until they lose their molecular identity and fuse into an atemporal (or sempiternal) event. The source words are excerpted from Genesis 1:3: “And God said let there be light, and there was light.” In the piece, the cause/command ‘let,’ is fused with its effect/result ‘light,’ ignoring the temporal arrow of time and the dictates of subject/predicate causality. Likewise, the present tense ‘be’ is fused with the past tense ‘was.’ The entire two-channel loop seeks to create a time that is no time, ‘during’ which things that are not are called into being as though they are. But of course the materials used in the piece (human mouth, human voice, human handwriting, sound, and language) are not created by me from nothing. They have already been created. The best I can hope to do is apophatically employ these media in a way that performs their inherent inability to approximate or represent the Biblical creation event.

Handwriting as Gestural Voice (Let Your Fingers Do The Talking)

Concrete poetry and other forms of “visual” writing (Mallarmé, Appollinaire, Marinetti, Dada, e.e. cummings, Fluxus) are obviously forms of embodied language -- moving beyond the merely denotative, abstracted meaning of words and onto concerns about typography and spatial layout between words on the page. Yet, as critic Johanna Drucker polemically argues, “Very little visual poetry is interesting, but all poetry is interesting in its visuality” (Drucker 2005). Her point is that the ‘language’ of text has always been affected by its own means of physical production, whether intentionally or accidentally. Currently, with digitally animated typography expressively spinning, morphing, and oozing its way through the title sequences of every new Hollywood movie, after the digital typographic revolution of *Émigré Magazine* and David Carson’s shattered *Raygun Magazine* layouts, now that the formal techniques of visual poetry have become production staples of popular media culture, there is no longer anything *formally* radical about the intentional spacing of words on a page and the intentional use of typography to set words on a page.¹⁰

Drucker further argues that there is no such thing as a historically generic visual style. Although conceptual artists tried to avoid expressive style altogether, this attempt became inescapably associated with a kind of recognizable ‘un-style.’ “Lawrence Weiner's stenciled letters on the wall, as industrial and un-aesthetic as he can make them, or John Baldessari's otherwise-empty 1967 canvas bearing the words ‘True Beauty’ in block letters are striking instances of self-conscious use of graphical codes. A rough-and-unfussy industrialism, uninflected by the artist's hand, un-expressive of emotion or personal voice, provide the distinctive character to conceptual visual language.” Drucker goes on to explain, “No one ever accused conceptual artists or writers of over-doing their graphic design. The under-stated and un-inflected attempt at neutrality is now as formulaic and recognizable-as-code as any other set of graphical principles” (Drucker 2005).

From the perspective of embodied language, a neutral graphic style is indeed impossible, since even the most standardized printed page of text is always *doing* more than it is simply *saying*. If there is no neutral visual style, what

then what should a purposefully “embodied” typeface look like? I am aiming for a typeface that focuses on the physicality of the words in order to apophatically foreground their performativity rather than their ontological function. Human handwriting is a natural solution. As psychiatrist Hans Prinzhorn observed in his analysis of art by mental patients, “Even the simplest scribble... is, as a manifestation of expressive gestures, the bearer of psychic components, and the whole sphere of psychic life lies as if in perspective behind the most insignificant form element” (Rhodes 2000, 63). Handwriting infuses the physical movement of the artist’s hand into the denotative ‘meaning’ of the word itself. It takes a willful, performative, historical, time-based event -- an event during which the writer is thinking the meaning of the word that her hand is inscribing -- and couples it with the ‘word itself.’ In this sense, the handwritten word is inscribed with a psychic trace of the internally imagined word. Handwriting blurs the line between movement, writing, text, word, syntax, semantics, and semiotics – all the sub-categories into which ‘language’ might be subdivided.

Several software artists have experimented with hand-drawn line as a form of user input. Golan Levin’s *Scribble* performances and his interactive *Yellowtail* software take an initial line gesture drawn by the artist or a user (via mouse or digital pen pad), analyze the nature of the line based on its curves and the speed with which it is drawn, and immediately animate the line in a manner driven by the analysis. If you draw a slow, wiggly, sideways line, your line begins slowly wriggling across the screen. If you draw short, fast, straight, vertical lines, they speed down the screen like rain. Levin’s *Alphabet Synthesis Machine* takes similar input – a squiggly written gesture, and interpolates it into an entire “alien” alphabet for the user to download as a digital font.

These pieces fall somewhere between line and letterform, but neither piece is dealing with ‘language’ in the sense that I am interested. Neither piece begins with a denotative, kataphatic statement, so there can be no real apophasis (since a concrete ‘saying’ is required before any ‘unsaying’ can occur). For me, Levin’s pieces serve as intriguing prototypes in abstraction and writing-based

computational animation – potential formal models for my more language-specific conceptual interests.

Amit Pitaru's *Sonic Wire Sculpture* comes a bit closer to what I consider language-specific art in that it maps hand-drawn lines to audio tones. The user draws lines that are instantaneously spun around a y-axis in virtual 3D space. As each line 'comes around' to the front, it emits a tone. The closer the line is to the top of the screen, the higher the pitch of the tone. A single, gradually undulating line drawn high on the page screen sounds like a violin. A series of short dashes drawn low on the screen sounds like bass percussion. Every time the piece revolves around, you can add more lines, gradually composing time-based music via your sense of dimensional space. The piece is inspirationally synesthetic, embodied, and phenomenological; but like Levin's pieces, it lacks any form of ontological source language.

Even closer to my practice is Diane Gromola's *Biomorphic Typography* -- a strange hybrid of generative and typographic systems. Gromola describes the project: "The user is hooked up to a biofeedback device that changes the visual character of the font she is writing with in real time. So, for example, the font 'throbs' as the user's heart beats, and grows tendrils and spikes, as the user becomes 'excitable'" (Wardrip-Fruin 2004, 230-31). Note: the user is not really 'writing;' she is typing; so the mapping of heart to hand is still mediated via keyboard and typeface. The user is baffled trying to 'read' the typed words to discern their disembodied, ontological meaning while at the same time 'watching' the letterforms of the words expressively move in response to what her body is 'feeling.' Even this strange connection between body and typography was too overtly mapped for Gromola, so she modified the system to give the typography its own autonomous, animated agency in conjunction with the user's biofeedback input. Gromola explains, "If there is no legibility of cause-and-effect, if the interactivity is not legible, I might as well play a videotape. But this intermingling of responsiveness can be a way to sustain awareness and at the same time, to continually provoke different kinds of awareness of autonomic states." She goes on to wonder, "Do emergent

properties need to be perceived as such?” (Wardrip-Fruin 2004, 232). I would answer, “It depends on what one means by ‘perceived.’”

In trying to negotiate the continuum between an overtly legible phenomenological experience and an utterly bewildering one, Gromola begins to touch on kataphatic/apophatic concerns. The ideal solution is not to compromise these differences and meet somewhere in the middle, but to somehow allow both extremes to affect the user simultaneously – an experience that is both totally explicable and utterly baffling.

My *Emily Dickinson Difference Engine* installation uses a typeface I created based on Dickinson’s own handwriting and combines it with generative animation, projection, and found objects. Dickinson’s own particular and expressive handwriting system is arguably essential to a full and nuanced appreciation of her poems (Howe 1993). Since only a handful of her poems were published (typeset) in her lifetime, her handwritten fascicles are the medium through which she intended to transfer almost all of her work (if she intended it to be transferred at all). More than other poets of her era, Dickinson’s idiosyncratic handwriting is a particularly non-arbitrary bridge between her poems and her embodied person. In the large table of my installation, Dickinson’s handwritten phrases are projected onto a table in lines, with the ending words of one phrase frequently overlapping the beginning words of the next. The phrases fade in and out individually and gradually, emerging and receding. Between the lines of projected words are scattered objects that the phrases seem to want to describe (figure 6). The phrases appear, attempt to connect ontologically to the solid world of these objects, fail in a moment of disontological rupture, and recede from whence they came. It is as if the poet, embodied in the gesture of her own hand, is trying to re-connect to these objects across time in waves. Her failure is a kind of unsaying.

Again and again in her poems, Dickinson recognized (and playfully negotiated) the slippage between language and ‘nature.’ Her language was rarely ontological in any accurate sense of the word. *The Emily Dickinson Different Engine* foregrounds and amplifies that slippage, forcing a disontological disconnect between words themselves and objects – a disconnect that

constitutes an apophatic event. If art is indeed a reality concerning “the relationship of human beings to objects & objects to objects in relation to human beings” (as Lawrence Weiner claims), then this piece is a reality concerning the cracks and slippages in the relationship between human beings, words, and objects – across historical time and space.

“go sand gold” from my *During the Beginning* installation is another of my pieces that incorporates hand-written typography. This time the handwriting is my own. Words are (pseudo)randomly¹¹ selected from a database of forty-two source words. These words fade in and out on top of each other as they slide vertically and horizontally across the screen. New words perpetually replace old words, creating a semi-symmetrical patterns that never identically repeat. The coded system of the animation is the same, but because the words are randomly inserted, the actual form of the animated collage rarely repeats. It is kind of like a generative, animated mandala of handwritten letterforms (figure 7). Occasionally, a single word will come into focus in the midst of the chaos, but it will soon recede, replaced by hybrid non-words and abstract patterns formed from the source words.

Originally, I took the words from Genesis 1:3 (“And God said let there be light, and there was light”) and plugged them into this hybridizing system. I then observed the system and looked for hybridized words that arose. Then I took those words and plugged them back into the system, and recorded new hybridized words that arose. Finally, I removed the original words from Genesis 1:3, and simply used the forty-two hybridized words by themselves. The words are (in groups of seven):

1. goat, bless, louse, swirl, feign, glue, go
2. sound, cloud, faust, death, land, egad, get
3. thigh, fight, lend, base, wean, food, oath
4. squid, guest, beast, sand, bent, coat, bee
5. least, agent, solid, wood, beet, glee, void
6. less, lease, legal, band, here, fast, gold

No word is longer than five letters. Spaces are then added amidst the letters of words with less than five letters, so that each word totals five characters

(including spaces). This addition of spaces further fragments and particularizes the ensuing animated language collage.

Since the original creation event gave birth to all things in the world, it is fitting that the Biblical words used to describe that event give birth to other words that describe things in the world (gold, wood, sand, squids, etc.). Indeed, Meister Eckhart observes, "All created things are God's speech" (Eckhart 1981, 205). All these words are then placed back into a system of ongoing flux that apophatically performs the confusion of language and gestural form. The handwritten text creates idiosyncratic patterns that are more erratic and peculiar than patterns created by modern sans-serif typefaces (Helvetica, Futura, Univers) based on 'pure/ideal/Platonic' geometric forms. The handwritten letterforms are not based on a metaphysical, disembodied ideal of form, but on the specific motion of my embodied hand in real-world space/time. "go sand gold" begins with the hand of a created being (me). It then inputs the trace of that hand into a system that performs the failure of (re)presenting the proto-event that created my hand.

Although a quasi-grid pattern emerges from the animation, the animation itself is non-linear, bombarding the viewer with a total field of gradually morphing language. It is less a delineating and more of a spewing or oozing. This is in keeping with Bakhtin's theory of the utterance: "When we construct our speech, we are always aware of the whole of our utterance... We do not string words together smoothly and we do not proceed from word to word; rather, it is as though we fill the whole with the necessary words" (Bakhtin 1986, 86). "go sand gold" is always perpetually 'saying' all that it is ever saying, namely: the performative exhaustion of saying.

An Object Language (A Language of Objects)

A final argument can be made for a language of objects that includes no words at all. If Weiner is right, if words are objects in the world with their own agency in relation to other objects in the world, if language is a force in the world in relation to other forces in the world, then might non-linguistic objects inversely be treated as words in their own kind of language system? Words relate to and

act on other words depending on the ways in which they are arranged, generating ‘meaning.’ Might objects also be arranged in ways that act on other objects in order to generate ‘meaning.’

I don’t mean to be so open-ended as to simply claim that there is a ‘language’ of expressive movement called ‘dance’ and a ‘language’ of expressive tone called ‘music,’ etc. Although these statements are certainly valid in some sense, I am more interested in trying to develop a specific synesthetic syntax of objects in physical proximity to one another. This project is bound to fail from a verifiable, objective, scientific perspective, because objects aren’t words in the same way that words are objects. In the song “Smoke Rings” (1986), Laurie Anderson provocatively asks, “Que es mas macho, pineapple or knife?” Our abstracted words for pineapple and knife are categorized as masculine and feminine according to the grammatical rules of Spanish, but the objects themselves don’t inherently possess any objective degree of masculinity or femininity. Indeed, do any objects inherently possess any degree of any quality (qualia)? Do humans? What other questions might be raised by attempting to construct even an admittedly subjective language of objects?

Original Chinese ideograms can be thought of as a written language of abstracted objects. But there is nothing terribly apophatic about using a drawing of an inkwell to stand-in for the word ‘writing.’ More potentially apophatic is creating an embodied language of objects whose syntactic relationship might be ‘sensed’ but never ontologically delineated. Such an object language shifts the emphasis from the objects themselves to the relationships between the objects to the kind of overall system that might encompass and sustain such relationships as systematically meaningful. But no object-to-English ‘translation’ need ever be given.

The object ensembles of Fred Wilson and Mark Dion approach what I’m calling a language of objects, but Wilson’s ensembles of museological artifacts tend to be too didactic and metaphorical to meet my criteria for a language of objects (too kataphatic without an apophatic counterpart); while Dion’s meticulously arranged ensembles of freshly excavated artifacts tend to be too abstract and painterly to meet my criteria (too apophatic without a

kataphatic origin). In all fairness, neither artist is trying to construct an apophatic language of objects. They are pursuing entirely different conceptual goals.

Haim Steinbach's object ensembles (figures 8a-b) come closer to the embodied object language I hope to explore. Indeed, Steinbach claims that objects "have functions for us that are not unlike language" (Decter 1992, 115). His objects are not so much stand-in signifiers for abstract signifieds (colonialism, consumption, New England history, etc.). Instead, because of the strangely purposeful/purposefully strange way he selects, arranges, displays, and labels them, his objects begin to resonate with each other (to 'speak to' each other) in a way that implies a disontological syntax of embodied sympathies. This syntax has something to do with the physical characteristics of the objects (color, surface material, weight, reflectivity) and something to do with their cultural history (what they are actually used for, what era they connote), but it is not simply a composite of these two components. In some sense, their syntax happens in addition to them. This implicit disontological syntax is also governed by the way the objects are positionally in the world in relation to each other. Steinbach's rigorously constructed shelves and their precise placement on the wall as much a part of his work as the objects themselves. Fellow sculptor Lisa Lapinski argues, "The shelf works are fractions: the things in the world divided by the minimalist object" (Hailey 2007, 339).

All objects are probably related to each other in a similar way, but we humans aren't used to perceiving these irreducible relationships (and the objects themselves feel no obligation to disclose them to our ontological 'minds'). The genius of Steinbach's installations is that they begin to hint at this mysterious embodied syntax that might exist amongst all objects. Whether and in what form this syntax of objects actually exists is ultimately unverifiable, but the mere suggestion of its existence is disontologically thrilling.¹²

In my work, I have just begun to scratch the surface of an object language. In my installation *The Unbearable Being of Lightness*, I tried selecting and placing objects and object parts (mostly fruits and vegetables) in an intuitive relationship with each other that confounded ordinary ontological language, but

I was not rigorous enough in my investigation of the objects themselves to succeed in overcoming/unsaying my own ontological relationship to them.¹³

In the window performance component of my *Emily Dickinson Difference Engine*, I placed myself on a table surrounded by a large collection of various objects. Three phrases from Dickinson's poetry were projected down onto the table in separate locations in front of me. These phrases were (pseudo)randomly replaced by new phrases every two minutes. In the two minutes between phrase changes, I improvisationally constructed miniature object ensembles for each of the three phrases (figure 9). I did this every two minutes for three hours. I did the performance twice in a three day period.

My hope was that this performance structure would create a situation that caused me to make a disontological (dis)connection between the phrases and the objects. There were moments when I personally began to sense a relationship between different groups of objects and different phrases, a relationship that was not ontologically explicable. Most of these moments were accompanied by emotions of sadness related to my memory of the acquisition of the objects. These emotions were compounded by the lyrical beauty and melancholy of the phrases themselves (most of the phrases I chose from Dickinson were related to death, written after her father died and a few years prior to her own death). Nevertheless, I would often fall back into symbolic modes of ontological illustration, accompanying the word "sea" with the object of water, and so on. The main failure of the performance is that I was unable to convey my personal disontological experience to the audience watching the piece. Perhaps had I involved the audience in the acquisition of the pieces in some way, or invited them to submit their own pieces, or invited them to participate in the arrangement of the pieces, they would have had a more personally disturbing experience.

The "Gumball" video loop from my *During the Beginning* installation is a more successful attempt at a kind of embodied object language. The six minute audio/video loop begins with a blurry shot of an isolated wooden 'gumball' fruit from a Sweetgum (aka Gumball) tree. The gumball is set on a white background which turns out to be a piece of linen cloth. The camera's auto-

focus setting is forced to struggle with the form of the object, sliding the image backward and forward through various ballooning degrees of focus and blurriness (figures 10a-b). The ball appears to pulsate, as if trying to come into being. The video is accompanied by ambient noise (created by an analog synthesizer), itself phasing in and out of various stages of stasis, never able to commit to any one. The gumball does come into focus briefly during the loop, but only in short, interspersed edits that make it difficult to ‘read.’ The piece negotiates a variable timespace between being and pre-being.

The gumball object is only seen in relation to the background cloth and the artist’s hand, and these only intermittently and briefly. The gumball is mostly seen in relationship to itself and its own becoming. It appears as alternately vague and crisp, round and spiky, aimless and purposeful. The accompanying audio gives the gumball a kind of resonant life. Yet it is not anthropomorphized, allegorized, or symbolized. Nor is its ‘essence’ revealed (a la Paul Klee). The gumball is still itself. It just ‘means’ something more than it did simply sitting on the workbench of my studio. Or perhaps it ‘means’ precisely the same thing as it ever did; the video simply positions us in a new relationship to it, a relationship that suggests we at least try to ‘read’ it. If not altogether legible (due to the apophatic ‘syntax’ of the piece), the gumball has at least been made ‘lingual.’

Conclusion

Although God is not a thing to be ontologically categorized, the ontological language that would describe him is itself a kind of thing/object/embodied force in the world. My goal is not to eradicate the denominating, kataphatic function of language. Instead, by foregrounding its performative function, I seek to have it apophatically unsay itself. Silence alone will not accomplish this, nor will absurd babbling. Language must do while it is saying in a way that unsays what it is doing, so that we may be confounded by what it is (un)doing and (un)saying.

Tactic 2: Banal Sublimity (Transcendence Via Saturated Immanence)

One of the central paradoxes of apophysis is that there is no transcendence (ascending beyond the world to God) apart from immanence (being fully immersed in the stuff of the world). The incarnate Jesus is the locus of this paradox.

According to the Bible, God did more than create matter; he became a human being made of matter. Jesus' incarnation riddles the immanent in both senses -- it shoots it through and through with the hyper-saturated goodness of God, and in so doing, it baffles the immanent. The incarnation turns human-being-ness inside out. Humans are no longer situated in Being between God on one side and rocks on the other. Jesus didn't merely come into universal Being as a vague spiritual cloud; he put on our human-being-ness and became particularly, historically human. The mystery of the trinity unites Jesus with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the incarnation unites Jesus with humans and sanctifies the (seemingly) banal and ordinary.

Pastor Eugene Peterson writes, "God reveals himself most completely in a named person: Jesus" (Peterson 2005, 53). Dionysius adds, "He came into our human nature, he who totally transcends the natural order of the world" (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 52). And according to theologian Henri Nouwen (in a wonderful phrase which highlights the radical paradox of the incarnation), we see in Jesus "the lovely human face of God" (Nouwen 1987, 51).

True 'mystical transcendence' is antithetical to immateriality. The apophatic way is actually rooted in phenomenological stuff. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton warns, "The doctrine of mystical 'unknowing,' by which we ascend to the knowledge of God 'as unseen' without 'form or figure' beyond all images and indeed all concepts, must not be misunderstood as the mere turning away from the ideas of material things to ideas of the immaterial. The mystical knowledge of God... is not a knowledge of immaterial and invisible essences as distinct from the visible and material" (Merton 1971, 84).

Jesus didn't come simply to bridge the gap between the immanent world and the transcendent God. He actually brings the transcendent God with him

and infuses Human Being-ness with the divine. In opposition to a Gnosticism that attempts to transcend the stuff of Being, Eugene Peterson argues that, “Jesus is our access to creation as the time and place to believe. Jesus immerses us in everything material, from the water pots at the Cana wedding to Lazarus's stinking corpse at Bethany. Things, stuff, bodies are holy” (Peterson 2005, 108). Jesus super-charges the Immanent with God’s glory. Jesus doesn’t just honor and sanctify material objects, he honors and sanctifies the limitations of time and space inherent to universal Being. Peterson observes, “Never, impatient with the limitations of time, did Jesus slip through some time-warp and bypass the waiting. Never, chafing under the limitations of place, did Jesus replace the local with some generalized and ethereal spiritual ‘presence.’ Anything and everything in creation was an occasion for the glory, the entire creation manifesting the bright presence of God, even in, *especially* in, the most unlikely times and places; the line between supernatural and natural constantly was blurred. Very God in the utterly ordinary” (Peterson 2005, 107). Paradoxically then, (to Remix C.S. Lewis), we ascend “further up” to God by going “further in” to immanence (Lewis 1994, 203-216). Peterson suggests, “If we are going to live... to the glory of God, we cannot do it abstractly or in general. We have to do it under the particularizing conditions in which God works, namely, time and place, here and now” (Peterson 2005, 107).

This immanent/transcendent paradox has profound implications for art making. The found, banal, and seemingly insignificant become all the more saturated with sublimity. Arguably, minimalist sculptors have always know this. Donald Judd’s boxes are so concrete in their materiality that they begin to assume a kind of radical transcendence (although Judd himself would not have put it in those terms). Regarding Samuel Beckett’s disconcertingly specific descriptions of non-imagery (detailed instructions of particularly blank settings), Gilles Deleuze remarks: “The image must attain the indefinite, while remaining completely determined.” (Deleuze 1997, 160). Janet Kraynak says of Alain Robbe-Grillet’s “new novel” genre: “The new novel... with its excessive description of the minutiae of the physical world and experiences, often yields a dizzying sense of estrangement from them.” (Kraynak 2005, 33). The more we

purposefully attend to ordinary objects, the more hopelessly impenetrable and utterly mysterious they become.

Composer Steve Reich's early speech pieces (“It’s Gonna Rain” [1965] and “Come Out” [1966]) apply a structured compositional process to the cadences of ordinary human speech. In a sense, they achieve a kind of transcendence by immersing themselves in the particular immanence of a single, brief phrase, compulsively and repeatedly processing it. Regarding “Come Out,” Reich explains, "By not altering its pitch or timbre, one keeps the original emotional power that speech has while intensifying its melody and meaning through repetition and rhythm" (Reich 1992).

Reich’s structural process is transparent. He is simply lagging one tape loop slightly in relation to another. Yet from this simple system coupled with source material of plain human speech, an element of mystery emerges, made all the more mysterious by the banality of its source material and the transparency of its system. There is no ‘man behind the curtain.’ Starting with (next to) nothing, “Come Out” and “It’s Gonna Rain” achieve something sublime. Reich contends, "Even when all the cards are on the table there are still enough mysteries to satisfy all. These mysteries are the unintended psychoacoustic by-products of the intended process. These might include sub-melodies heard within a repeating melodic pattern, irregularities in performance, harmonics, difference tones, etc". (Sutherland 1994).

My *Pop Mantra* performances similarly employ the banal, but in an even less subtle, more ‘brute force’ way. I select short fragments of popular music songs and perform these fragments repeatedly for several hours (singing and playing either a Rhodes electric piano or an electric guitar). As the performances unfold, the phrases begin to take on quasi-epic proportions, becoming much weightier than they were in their original contexts. Phrases have included:

“We ride tonight / Ghost horses” (from Radiohead’s “You And Whose Army?”)

“For a minute there I lost myself” (from Radiohead’s “Karma Police”)

“White elephants, sitting ducks / I will rise up” (from Radiohead’s “I Will”)

“Little babies’ eyes” (from Radiohead’s “I Will”)

“Love” (from U2’s “Until The End of the World”)

“I can feel your love teaching me how” (from U2’s “Vertigo”)

“Now” (from The Good, The Bad & The Queen’s “Herculean”)

“I am the world’s forgotten boy / The one who’s searching to destroy” (from The Stooges’ “Search and Destroy”)

My goal is never to gloss these phrases, but to simply and dutifully perform them as energetically, rigorously, and perpetually as possible. *Pop Mantra* began as a kataphatic counter-approach to my other apophatic projects - a kind of moronic, insipid, brute-force short-cut to transcendence that was bound to fail. But the way in which it fails is (perhaps unsurprisingly) apophatic. As time, banality, language, human voice, and human action (instrument playing) combine, the piece begins to foreground the utterance as an embodied force in the world. Additionally, after three straight hours of singing, the utterance is rendered unexpectedly strange, all the more so because of the initial banality and familiarity of these pop song excerpts.

The materials used in *The Language of Meaning* by Arakawa and Gins (discussed previously in “Embodied Language via Multimedia Synesthesia and Sculpture”) are also very banal. Construction-wise, each station seems like it could be a booth at a high school science fair project. The banality of the materials prepares the participant to be underwhelmed. When she does actually experiences heavy cognitive dissonance, it is made all the more acute by the apparent familiarity of the materials. If these apparently banal materials (paper, string, mirrors, stenciled text) can be so perplexing, the rest of the world opens up as a site of terrifying amazement.¹⁴

The small table in my installation *The Emily Dickinson Difference Engine* acts in a similar way, except instead of a science fair, the metaphor is of a children’s primer. In a classic children’s reading primer, the word “ball” would appear beneath a picture of a ball, “chair” beneath a picture of a chair, and so on. The small Dickinson table is a rough, Victorian-era table with a wicker-backed chair. Inset into the table horizontally is a computer screen covered by Plexiglas set flush with the surface of the table so that the screen appears part of

the table, like an inset light box. Instructions on the table in Emily Dickinson's (simulated) handwriting instruct participants to "place objects on the glass above words." On the screen are four sets of phrases from late-era Dickinson poems that fade in and out in a staggered order. The phrases are culled (pseudo)randomly from a larger database of around 200 phrases. As participants place objects on the glass, they are presented with a kind of disontological primer, one that undermines any overt connection between words and phrases (figure 11).

The computer that drives the animation and houses the database of words is hidden out of view beneath the table. Although the piece is ostensibly technological, it is set in a banal context of crude table & chair, wicker & wood, handwriting & objects. Any cognitive slippage that occurs between the objects and the phrases is amplified by straightforwardness of the installation. It is just words, objects, and a simple system of shuffling, but the results begin to charge the ordinary with an element of strange, inordinate import. The small table station acts as a kind of apophatic primer which is further augmented by the large table of objects and words in the same exhibition space (discussed above in "Handwriting as Gestural Voice"). The "go sand go" handwriting animation from my *During the Beginning* installation is housed in the same table/screen mechanism (this time without the chair). The piece functions as a pedagogical way station in a larger 'language fair' of stations. Approaching the banal table from a distance, one hardly expects to discover the 'baby universe' of fractured typographic (re)generation seething within.

Playdamage is a internet art project I began in 2000. It is a kind of multimedia journal cum digital wonder cabinet that I update screen by screen over time. Each screen contains an animation loop and a short audio loop. Upon visiting the site, the viewer first encounters the most recent screen and then clicks through subsequent screens in reverse chronological order. As of November 2007, there were sixty-six screens. My self-imposed limitations are that no screen be over 150 Kb. This is so that the screens will download fast, but also to limit myself and my production possibilities. The audio is culled from short fragments of my favorite pop songs. The source material for the

animations is mostly found online, although occasionally I will use my own low-resolution digital photographs. I am trying to see how much visceral impact I can get out of these simple, ready-to-hand elements. In a sense, *Playdamage* functions as a serial digital counterpart to something like Joseph Cornell's cabinets. I allow myself to work for weeks on a single screen.

I purposefully mean this work to reside on the internet, in a context where people are usually moving quickly and trying to accomplish tasks. Each screen of the site extends to the edge of the browser; there are no contextualizing borders; there is no welcome or explanatory text. The last screen of the site sends an email to me, although it never explain who I am. The responses I have received over the years are very telling. By the time a visitor has clicked through sixty-six screens of these non-sequitur, micro-tableaux, she is either quite empathetic and appreciative or quite overwhelmed and exhausted. Web surfing is generally a private affair, which (potentially) invites a more intimate, 'precious' experience. Were the piece in a gallery, viewer expectations would be higher – people having physically traveled to see it rather than stumbling upon it while web surfing, and it would not have the same banal/sublime effect.¹⁵

Internet art holds great promise when combined with the pedagogical model of the children's primer. Rather than individual stations for mental exercises spread throughout a gallery space, a online piece can have subsequent screens. Or a piece can be devised to exist both online and in a gallery space, playing on the differences between the affordances and expectations of these two contexts. Language is also an ideal material for the medium of internet space. Language is low-bandwidth but has the potential for highly disruptive cognitive impact.

In November 2007 I saw two exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art – Olafur Eliasson and Joseph Cornell. Although Eliasson's spectacular, room-scaled, phenomenological body-teasers 'stole the show,' afterward my mind kept returning instead to Cornell's tiny, dimly-lit boxes. I would have liked a year to perpetually handle, look at, think about, and live with them. One afternoon was not enough time. And of course, they were under

glass. In a way, though, I have been handling them in my mind ever since. Cornell's boxes didn't attack me. They actually seemed to recede from me, as if uncomfortable at having been amassed together so conspicuously in one place, each trying its best to lay low until the show was over and it could return to its respective corner. I will never be the Olafur Eliasson of the web (such a term is probably oxymoronic), but to be the Joseph Cornell of the web might not be a bad aspiration. Joseph Cornell meets Arakawa & Gins in cyberspace kindergarten: open your primers to screen sixty-seven, and let's begin...

Tactic 3: Semantic Transformations (Drive It Like You Stole It)

Rather than attempt to transcend the limitations of language, apophatic writing rigorously, strategically, and ingeniously stresses language until it buckles under the weight of its own inadequacies. Apophatic language does not simply state, “language cannot properly describe God.” Such a statement is too tidy and hermetic. It fails to get at the revealing, intriguing, and specific ways in which language particularly fails to properly speak of God. Instead, apophatic language performs and displays the various ways in which language specifically fails so that its reader may experience and observe these failures. To employ some southern American slang, the apophatic writers ‘drive language like they stole it,’ until language winds up overheated, exhausted, and wrecked in some ditch. The end result of these wild linguistic rides is ultimately not as important as the performative contortions of the rides themselves.

Sometimes we are taken on a gradually unfolding ride of expansion and contraction – three steps forward and two steps back. Other times we are taken on a circuitous ride of inversion, self-reflexivity, and symmetrical cancellation. Still other times we are taken on a ride through a wireframe landscape where the structural mechanisms of analogy, simile, and metaphor are more substantively important than the tenors, antecedents, and subject matters they compare.

Although not historically considered an apophatic writer, Samuel Beckett’s language provides ample examples of the semantic transformations I hope to elucidate. Bruce Nauman’s video installations, Emily Dickinson’s poetry, and Ben Marcus’ fiction all serve as further studies in semantic unsaying. Additionally, my own art work implements various tactics of semantic transformation, in media including but not limited to written text.

Gradual Unfolding (Ballooning Without Moving)

In his *Sermon 2*, Meister Eckhart says that a man who conceives God in himself is “good,” and a man in whom God conceives himself is “better.” Next he introduces the idea of “a joy so incomprehensible and great that no one can tell it all,” and then spends the following three paragraphs telling of this joy via

analogy. Finally Eckhart proceeds to tell of a communion with God that occurs in the selfless heart (the “little town”) which is “free of all names, it is bare of all forms, wholly empty and free.” Man cannot look at its glory. The three persons of the godhead as separate individuals may not even look into it, but only the unified triune God himself (Eckhart 1981, 177-81).

I will call this rhetorical apophatic tactic ‘gradual unfolding.’ Eckhart introduces a great thing, then humbles it by an exponentially greater thing, and so on until the greatness of the last thing is experientially felt due to the time it takes us as readers to arrive at his final description. A rhetorical balloon is expanded breath by breath until it finally, climactically pops with implicit revelation.

Samuel Beckett employs a similar ballooning tactic, except in his version, there is no climax. The balloon simply stretches and shrinks, exploring its potential capacity, not *heading toward* any pre-established climactic form or event, but simply *passing through* various possible states.¹⁶ According to literary critic Marjorie Perloff (referencing Beckett’s translation of the penultimate stanza of Rimbaud’s “Bateau Ivre”), “In a Beckett ‘vision,’ there is only... the abortive attempt to reach conclusion, a process in need of constant renewal because the anticipated epiphany never quite comes” (Perloff 1981, 223). Such ‘plots’ often “fizzle” out (to use Beckett’s own term), slowly deflating – the rocking chair gradually coming to a dead stop. Beckett uses this semantic ballooning to explore the psychology of what I will call ‘variable’ time, a time in which Beckett’s protagonists are ‘bound’ to exist.

Beckett’s *Lessness*, *That Time*, and *Rockaby* each occur in a kind of variable temporal dimension. Time isn’t linear, nor does it loop. Instead, it iterates with slight variations. Each iteration is quite similar – but the iterations vary enough to inspire in Beckett’s ‘protagonists’ (for lack of a better term) to hope in the possibility of an eventual iteration that will vary enough to enable a breaking free. The Hollywood example of such variable time is *Groundhog Day* in which Bill Murray’s character is doomed to relive the same day until he is able to convince Andie MacDowell’s character to fall in love with him. Beckett’s protagonists seek a similar escape, but they lack the agency to affect it. They

aren't exactly doomed. They choose to keep standing, to keep remembering, to keep rocking. Eventually variations do occur that tease out change, but whether for better or worse is never quite clear.

The cosmic protagonist in *Lessness* stares at the sky. Beckett's iterative phrases eventually and gradually yield variations, but they are not enough to affect true climactic difference. The building blocks of the story remain the same. The protagonist stands and waits (in vain?) for the universe or himself to evolve.

The underlying structure of *That Time* is more readily apparent because of its three different narrators. In addition to the macrocosmic structural iterations occurring at the narrative level, there are also numerous microcosmic iterations -- subtler ballooning sub-stutters happening at the phrase and word level. The structure of the three narrative voices (A, B, and C) is as follows:

A C B / A C B / A C B / C A B
pause | breath
C B A / C B A / C B A / B C A
pause | breath
B A C / B A C / B A C / B A C
pause | smile

The last stanza of the last iteration fails to vary the order of narrators (as the two previous iterations have), contributing to the variable rupture of the smile rather than the breath. Our protagonist is remembering; the narrators are helping him remember, or they are his rememberings. Rather than waiting to evolve as the protagonist of *Lessness*, the protagonist of *That Time* is waiting to resolve/absolve/be absolved – waiting for absolution. He somehow tricks out a variable difference in the third iteration of his rememberings, but the smile that results is one of dementia. Perhaps the two previous breaths/sighs were more desirable. He was resigned and trapped, but at least he was breathing.

Rockaby is similar to *That Time*, except its protagonist is not remembering her past but observing her immediate present. She is listening to

the narration of her own entrapment. She keeps asking for “more” – more iterations of her own ballooning un-story, in hopes that one of the iterations will vary enough to break free and afford her an escape into death. The last iteration does this, releasing her (and the audience) from the variable time that was her life.

In *Stirrings Still*, the protagonist exercises his agency beyond merely asking for another iteration. He actually leaves his house and goes for a walk! He walks into a field and either dies or gets immobilized for a long time. The problem is, the tower clock sounds the same outside his room as it does inside his room. His action (going for a walk) changed his environment, but not his interior mind. He thus remains trapped in the variable iterations of near-sameness that are his life. Stirrings (movings) still (ultimately) still (the same) still (not moving).

Finally, in *What Is The Word*, the folly of even trying to define the folly of defining “the word” is enacted in fitful ballooning starts. Beckett takes fifty-three lines (here are five of them: “this -- / what is the word -- / this this -- / this this here -- / folly given all this –“) to arrive at the glaringly anti-climactic line: “folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what” -- a line that no more answers the question posed by the poem’s title than do any of the smaller lines. The poem’s title might better be interpreted as a cryptic equation: *The Word = What*.¹⁷

If Beckett’s ballooning structures represent a temporal and psychological entrapment that his protagonists wish to escape, the fugal structures of sacred harp singing create a kind of counterpoint – an eternal (albeit short-lived) experiential structure in which its participants wish to remain. Sacred harp ‘singings’ are all day events where singers sit in a four-sided square facing one another, each side representing a different harmony part. The singers take turns leading songs from the sacred harp hymnal, each song leader standing in the middle of the square for their turn. There is no real ‘audience’ (other than God and the other singers), and the optimal listening experience occurs in the middle of the square. The songs are often composed in fugal rounds, with each harmony part beginning halfway through a line and echoing

the previous part – the lines successively accumulating on top of each other and then gradually receding, like waves on the shore. Although most sacred harp songs are short (few last longer than three minutes), during the singing itself, one feels (and hopes) that the song will go on forever. When asked his favorite song from the sacred harp tradition, one singer insightfully answered, “My favorite song is the one I’m singing” (Hinton 2006).

Like Beckett’s plays, sacred harp singing is temporal and performative, but it is also more participatory and phenomenological. There is a multi-directional ‘wall of sound’ effect at a live sacred harp singing like a compound shellacking of tone. This simple fugue structure combined with an auditory experience of volume[tric] layering produces a kind of unhinging effect. Linear temporality is (temporarily) replaced by a kind of accreted ballooning that is neither simply looping nor simply linear. In this way sacred harp singing is akin to Beckett’s quasi-looping plays. By piling up the same words and music successively (adding harmony upon harmony with every piling), sacred harp singing uses a simple scheme of structural transformation to achieve an undoing of linear time which opens onto a kind of ecstatic, ‘heavenly’ time-out-of-time. Whereas Beckett’s characters cannot wait for their variable time to be up, sacred harp singers wish their variable time would never end (which is why the singings last all day).

My “Gumball” video (described above in “An Object Language”) performs another kind of unhinged ballooning – a ballooning that refuses to commit to either entrapment or ecstasy, but instead explores an impossible historical time (while simultaneously exploring the impossibility of exploring such a time). The image of the gumball pulsates through various ballooning degrees of focus and blurriness, as if the object itself is trying to come into being.

The piece ostensibly explores the Genesis creation event by trying to enter into it and imagine what happened not “in the beginning,” but ‘during the beginning.’ The impossibility of such a re-presentation is perpetually performed. Prior to Genesis 1:3, neither time, matter, nor light have been created. The impossibility of trying to film such a state is immediately apparent.

Did God say, “let there be light,” and instantaneously there was light? Was the time between his utterance and the coming into being of light durative to him from his own perspective? What was the experience like from the perspective of light itself? “Gumball” envisions a kind of alter-time in which sound (the voice of God? the sound of matter emerging from the void?) enters into an asynchronous dialogue with matter, each slipping in its ability to exactly synch and stabilize. The occasional, ephemeral hand of the artist interspersed throughout the video is a form of banal sublimity -- an admission of artifice, an acknowledgement that we can only even begin to approach this kind of pre-created proto-time/space from the necessarily limited perspective of material beings living in time. The video loops in the installation space, but there is never a climactic resolution – only fleeting moments of focus immediately followed by a return to this fluctuating timespace. These perpetual, ballooning negotiations are a kind of apophatic unsaying.

My *Breathing in B Flat* performance explores another kind of variable time, one that is more formally palindromic and improvisational. Like Beckett’s palindromic pantomime play *Quad*, *Breathing in B Flat* is based on an underlying structural composition. Its basic components are a series of pre-recorded audio/video loops of my head singing different notes. These notes and their correspondent video heads are then mixed together according to two separate improvisational vocal performances. These two performances (and their resultant mixes of projected heads and notes) are also recorded and videotaped. Finally, these two improvisational meta-performances are again remixed and projected live by a final live, improvisational meta-meta-performance. The result is one small live head, two small projected heads, and four large projected heads all translucently emerging and receding on top of each other (figure 12).

The piece reverses itself halfway through and runs backwards for the second half of the performance. Thus the performance gradually increases in complexity, comes to full complexity in the middle, and then gradually decreases in complexity. Although this rising and falling is a structural given for every performance, the final live meta-performance guarantees that no two

performances will be the same (although each will contain similar components). By using live elements to real-time mix pre-recorded/time-shifted elements, another kind of variable time is achieved. The performance arcs and ends, but the exact nature of each arc varies from performance to performance. There is a kind of variable ballooning and deflating that occurs, with syntactic words replaced by tones, human vocal timbre, and a moving human face.

Subject/Object Torsion (I Am He As You Are He As You Are Me and We Are All Together)

“[The Preexistent] is not a facet of being. Rather, being is a facet of him. He is not contained in being, but being is contained in him. He does not possess being, but being possesses him. He is the eternity of being, the source and the measure of being. He precedes essence, being, and eternity. He is the creative source, middle, and end of all things” (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 101).

Philosopher Alfred Korzybski polemically argued against using the word ‘is’ to equate a subject with a predicate (for example, “Ed is hungry” or “Ed is a man.”) He sought to avoid what he considered the inherent pitfalls of Indo-European subject/predicate language structures -- namely, the over-determination of a real-world subject by language (Wilson 2001). The subject/object torsion that I am proposing to abstract from apophatic writing and apply to art does more than simply avoid subject/predicate structures. It performatively confounds them (as in the Dionysius passage above).

Beckett’s pantomime play *Act Without Words 2* purposefully foregrounds underlying subject/object structures by explicitly not using words, thus focusing on the relational structures between embodied entities rather than on any single word or phrase that would seek to abstract these entities. By so focusing and exposing, Beckett critiques our presumption of the underlying relational structures of language that make the meaning of words possible.

In *Act Without Words 2*, both characters *A* and *B* begin as objects (enclosed in sacks). *A* awakens (having been prodded by the mysterious, disembodied “goad”), exits his sack, dresses, and takes on the role of subject,

transporting sack *B* across the stage. *A* then re-enters his sack and resumes the role of object; whereupon *B* awakens (having been prodded by the goad), exits his sack, dresses, and takes on the role of subject, transporting sack *A* across the stage. *B* then re-enters his sack and resumes the role of object, etc. This pantomime ‘object lesson’ is not about *A* or *B* as ‘characters’ (subjects) or as ‘props’ (objects), but about the relative ease of the subject/object oscillation ‘act’ itself.

Beckett’s *What Where* begins with a kind of pantomime of three characters (Bem, Bim, and Bom) directed and overseen by a fourth (Bam). After the first pantomime iteration, the voice of Bam says, “Now with words,” and the iterations begin again, revealing an underlying structure of deferred torture and confession. Bom describes torturing someone (it is unclear who) in order to get him to “say it” (which Bom claims his victim never says). Bam then enlists Bim to torture Bom until Bom confesses “that he said it [and what] to him.” Bim then describes torturing Bom in order to get him to say “it” and “where” (which Bim claims Bom never says). Bam then enlists Bem to torture Bim until Bim confesses that “that [Bom] said where [and where] to him.” Bem then describes torturing Bim in order to get him to say “where... and where” to him (which Bem claims Bim never says). So Bam leads Bem off to torture Bem himself. If the similar names are not confusing enough (particularly as spoken in the play rather than written), the stage directions call for “players as alike as possible. / Same long grey gown. / Same long grey hair.”

It would be convenient to interpret this play as an inner psychological monologue of perpetual self-torture (similar to *Eh Joe* or *Rockaby*), but Beckett explicitly gives the characters different names, and none of them ever wind up torturing themselves (although Bam’s disembodied voice perpetually ‘directs’ Bam’s embodied character). Rather than reading *What Where* as the study of a single schizophrenic character, it is more interestingly read as a critique of the very subject/object linguistic relational structures that allow us to toggle from perpetrator to victim so seamlessly, and of the violence that such structures perpetuate. The play is less about words or characters than about the structural roles of subject and object. Beckett rapidly and disorientingly twists (literally

‘tortures’) these roles in order to foreground the problematic nature of their very structure. In the final ‘epilogue,’ the voice of Bam resigns, “Make sense who may.” “Who” is thus left to make sense of “it,” “him,” “what,” “where,” and a host of other indefinite pronouns that act as mere placeholders for ‘who knows what?’ -- pronouns that reveal an underlying, pre-determined, generic, relational role structure more than they refer to any specific person/thing/entity.

Beckett’s *Come and Go* implements a similarly contorted formal symmetry and features a cast of almost equally interchangeable characters (stage directions again call for “three figures as alike as possible”). The same deferred role playing that enables the perpetual torture of *What Where* also enables the ‘friendship’ of Ru, Vi, and Flo in *Come and Go*.

Finally, in Beckett’s film *Film*, the characters *E* (eye, the eye of the camera) and *O* (object, the object of its gaze) collapse, as the camera faces the actor’s (Buster Keaton’s) face full-on, and the actor recoils in horror. Beckett reveals in the stage directions that *E* and *O* are the same ‘self.’ The collapse of this subject/object distinction, rather than being a thing of integration and healing, is depicted as a thing of psychological terror.

In all of these plays, Beckett’s relationship to the subject/object dichotomy is by no means simply critical. In the case of *Come and Go* and *Film*, it is as if such distinct, dichotomous roles are a kind of necessary evil that maintains civility and sanity. More relevant for my art practice is not so much Beckett’s personal philosophical stance on the dangers of Indo-European transitive verb structures (particularly since Beckett’s authorial stance on anything is usually far from apparent), but the ways in which Beckett theatrically twists, contorts, and distorts presumed subject/object relationships. By minimizing ‘character development,’ ‘setting,’ and even dialogue, Beckett further foregrounds these structural inversions, causing us to focus on the formal relationships between his character-props rather than on the atomic, isolated character-props themselves.

Bruce Nauman’s *Live Taped Video Corridor* installation (1970) affects a similar subject/object torsion by creating bodily, sensory, phenomenological

confusion in its audience. Lacking words, it is akin to Beckett's pantomime plays, except in Nauman's case, the audience members become the 'actors.' The piece consists of a long narrow corridor, at the far end of which are two video monitors. The bottom monitor displays a pre-recorded videotape of the empty corridor. The top monitor displays the feed from a live camera placed at the entrance of the corridor, pointing toward the monitors. When the viewer enters the corridor, her back immediately becomes visible on the top monitor. As she walks down the corridor toward the monitors, the image of her back becomes increasingly smaller (since she is moving away from the camera at the corridor's entrance). The viewer thus has the disturbing bodily experience of walking toward a monitor that becomes progressively larger while the monitor displays an image of her back becoming progressively smaller. She experiences the feeling of simultaneously walking toward herself and walking away from herself. She becomes simultaneously subject and object.

As Janet Kraynak observes, "A disturbing disjuncture results between vision and experience: I feel myself getting closer, yet I see myself receding further away. The two forms of sensorial information do not coordinate but rather contradict each other. Such strangeness is not only unfamiliar but unsettling" (Kraynak 2003, 28). She further asserts that such technological mechanisms (live cameras and video monitors) as employed by Nauman, "do not simply filter experience but render it largely unmanageable" (Kraynak 2003, 34-35).

Three of my own pieces ("let light" from *During the Beginning*, *St. Frank and the Wolf*, and *Breathing in B Flat*) distort subject/object structures – the former by creating a slippage between the viewer/participant and the result of her actions, and the latter two by superimposing a time-shifted 'object' performance onto/through a live 'subject' performance. *St. Frank and the Wolf* is a series of solo, improvisational multimedia performances abstractly based on the story of St. Francis making peace with a wild wolf. Functionally, it behaves similar to *Breathing in B Flat* (discussed above in "Gradual Unfolding"). The performances consists of two separate audio/video loops. One loop is a close-up view of me wearing a white cloak, playing a theremin, and singing. A

painting of St. Francis is projected onto me. The other loop is a far-away view of the same scene (but a different performance). These two loops are then projected onto me in the live space as I use a theremin and my voice to mix between them. The louder my live performance, the more opaque and loud the close-up view becomes. The softer my live performance, the more opaque and loud the far-away view becomes.¹⁸ The results blur the distinction between real/virtual, live/pre-recorded, solid/ethereal, and subject/object (figure 13).

During both *St. Frank and the Wolf* and *Breathing in B Flat* performances, I would occasionally lose track of which voice was live and which was recorded. I would try to modulate my voice beginning with the pitch I thought I was currently singing, only to discover that I was actually singing a different pitch. The results were very disorienting, as if my subjectivity had been multiplied and dispersed across time and space. I wasn't simply 'playing' the system; the system was also 'playing' me. Perhaps something similar was happening to my audience via mirror neurons, but it couldn't have been as phenomenologically disorienting as what I myself was experiencing. My challenge, then, was to put the audience in the midst of this experience, not as passive onlookers, but as active participants.

"let light" attempts to do just that. It comes closer to the disorientation that Nauman achieves in *Live Taped Video Corridor* because it puts the viewer/participant in the midst of a disorienting subject/object space, a space that (in *St. Frank and the Wolf* and *Breathing in B Flat*) was previously inhabited only by me (the artist/performer). The sensory confusion that the participant experiences between the sound of water in the headphones & the sound of her own voice in the room, between the light of water on the screen & the light from the screen refracting through the water in the room that she is grasping, between the spoken words she says & the written words she reads – all of these confusions contribute to a blurring of subject/object distinctions. The participant is simultaneously the subject who initiates an effect, and the object acted upon by the system into which she has been inserted.

Simile Structures Lacking Substantive Antecedents (Why Ask “What?”?)

"As [God] is simply one, without any manner and properties, he is not Father or Son or Holy Spirit, and yet he is a something that is neither this nor that" (Eckhart 1981, 181).

"Before there were any creatures, God was not 'God,' but he was what he was" (Eckhart 1981, 200).

"God said to Moses, I am who I am" (Exodus. 3:14).

If God is irreducible, then it is impossible to ontologically categorize him as anything other than himself. (As we have already observed, even the phrase “God is irreducible” ontologically reduces God to the category of irreducibility.) One apophatic approach to this linguistic conundrum is to construct sentences that emphasize analogous and relational structures while de-emphasizing the actual ‘subjects’ compared by these structures. The focus thus shifts from the things being compared to the nature of the comparison itself. ‘Like’ and ‘as’ take primacy over ‘this’ and ‘that.’ Emily Dickinson, novelist Ben Marcus, and Samuel Beckett each employ their own kind of object-agnostic simile structures – Dickinson at the microscopic phrase level, Marcus at the macroscopic narrative level, and Beckett at both microscopic and macroscopic levels.

*

In 1872, at age forty-one, Emily Dickinson wrote, “Tell all the truth but tell it slant -“ (Dickinson 1999, 494 [Franklin #1263]), a dictum that has since been applied by critics to describe her overall approach to poetry. Not all of Dickinson’s 1,800 poems are cryptic. Some are actually quite straightforward. And all initially seem straightforward, which makes the cryptic ones even more disorientingly cryptic (Dickinson was an early practitioner of banal sublimity). Numerous critics have observed that Dickinson’s poems often focus more on their simile structures than on the nouns those structures compare. Literary scholar Sharon Cameron explains, “To look at the history of Dickinson’s criticism is to see that what is memorialized are her ellipses, her canceled

connections.” She then proceeds to offer examples. Geoffrey Hartman refers to Dickinson’s “revoked... referentiality;” Jay Leyda to her “omitted center;” and Robert Weisbuch to her “Sceneless... analogical language” (Cameron 1993, 3).

I have chosen just two Dickinson poems to gloss. They are admittedly excellent case studies of her preference for simile structures over ontological definitions, but they are by no means unrepresentative of her larger body of work. Incidentally, both poems are undated, and both Franklin and Johnson (Dickinson’s most notable editors) place them adjacent each other in their (necessarily inexact) sequencing of her work. The first poem is ostensibly ‘about’ joy, and the second ostensibly ‘about’ emotion; but upon closer examination, it is hard to say with certainty what either poem is denotatively ‘about.’

Here is the first poem:

The joy that has no stem nor core,
Nor seed that we can sow,
Is edible to longing,
But ablative to show.

By fundamental palates
Those products are preferred
Impregnable to transit
And patented by pod.
(Dickinson 1999, 628 [Franklin #1762])

The poem is not about generic ‘joy,’ but about a particular, singular instance of joy that the poem proceeds to (un)describe. This joy is compared to a fruit by way of saying it is not a fruit. It can be eaten by “longing,” but longing paradoxically never satisfies its hunger. The medical and scientific definition of “ablative” has to do with removal and erosion. The grammatical definition of

“ablative” is explained by literary scholar Adam Potkay: “In Latin, ‘ablative’ is the noun case of adverbial relation, translated into English by adding the prepositions ‘from,’ ‘in,’ ‘with,’ or ‘by’ to a noun. Thus, one can speak or otherwise express oneself from, with, in, or by (through) joy – but one cannot ‘speak joy,’ that is, speak its essence or experience. (In Latin, a thing spoken would be in the accusative, not the ablative, case)” (Potkay 2007, 19). In both scientific and grammatical senses, this particular joy is ‘removed from’ revelation. And indeed, its ontological meaning is removed from Dickinson’s poem. She apophatically talks about what this joy is not, in order to avoid revealing what it is. In so doing, she reveals its imperviousness to being revealed.

Proceeding to the second stanza: plants are ordinarily “impregnated” via the “transit” of cross-pollination. But this joy is “impregnable to transit” itself, let alone to impregnation via transit. This joy is not merely difficult to share, it is inherently impossible to share. And yet Dickinson does not denotatively write, “This joy is impossible to share.” Instead, she “tells it slant.” Her paradoxical language performs the impossibility of sharing. In so rigorously failing to ontologically define this joy, the poem succeeds in opening up this joy’s exquisite closure. “Patented” etymologically means ‘lying open,’ literally ‘obvious.’ One acquires a patent to openly lay claim to an invention. But a “pod” is closed. Again, we are given an oxymoronic analogy that obscures more than it reveals (and in so obscuring, reveals obscurity).

Here is the second poem:

The mob within the heart
Police cannot suppress
The riot given at the first
Is authorized as peace

Uncertified of scene
Or signified of sound

But growing like a hurricane
In a congenial ground.
(Dickinson 1999, 628 [Franklin #1763])

The previous poem at least gave us the straightforward noun “joy” as its subject, shifting and ephemeral as that noun turned out to be. The nominal subjects of this second poem are “mob” and “riot,” themselves cryptically analogous to some (presumably) more explicit force that remains unnamed. These nouns are described as insuppressible & “authorized,” “uncertified” & unsignified, and “growing like a hurricane.” But lest we think this mob/riot is simply violent, it is authorized “as peace,” and its hurricane force is growing “in congenial ground.” A peace mob, a congenial hurricane – what is Dickinson talking about? She is not talking about the essence of any *thing* as much as she is demonstrating the behavior of a *force*. “Uncertified of scene / or signified of sound” seems prophetic of Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle: you can know how fast an electron is moving and where it is, but you cannot know both things simultaneously. Dickinson is less interested in freezing her moving force and more interested in implying its velocity. The fact that this force is contained “within the heart” makes its power all the more (implicitly) thrillingly terrifying.

The various components of my *Emily Dickinson Difference Engine* project capitalize on the fungibility of Dickinson’s language by randomly cross-applying her phrases to physical objects in the world. Her own poetic simile structures are replaced by the system of my software. The nominal antecedents of her poems are replaced by physical objects in the gallery space. The new connections that occur between her open-ended descriptions and the objects with which they are randomly coupled become even more cryptic and hermetic because these new pairings are beyond her control. Sometimes the pairings are straightforward and comical (“His never slumbering plan” is paired with a man’s cell phone). Other times the pairings reveal the impenetrability of objects and their tendency to recede from human ontologies (“Enchanting by remaining” is paired with a piece of cotton, a bottle cap, and a crab claw). The piece

decontextualizes the objects and Dickinson's phrases, and then recontextualizes both together within a generative system in order to foreground the mechanism of human meaning-making itself. The piece is not 'about' any single phrase/object pairing that arises. Instead, it exposes and critiques the ways in which humans rely on ontological language to 'make' meaning.

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In his books *The Age of Wire and String* and *The Father Costume*, Ben Marcus creates entire alternate worlds that make an uncanny kind of relational sense in their own context, but whose individual components fall away into absurdity apart from the elaborate analogous structures in which they exist. Like Beckett, Marcus writes intelligible, understandable sentences; but what do they mean? Marcus's writing is not literal or metaphorical (per se), but neither is it simply absurd. His stories reverse engineer the English language whole cloth (meaning, structure, syntax, and all) and use it to describe an alternate world.

Marcus's world does not simply exist in a different place (like a sci-fi Martian world) or a different time (like a sci-fi future world). His world may even be our current world, but from the perspective of a race of beings that inhabit our world in a radically different way. This is what makes his prose so disquieting – it is almost followable. He speaks of bodies and cloth and weather and houses, similar to the things we know and yet so unlike them as to be almost completely foreign. His world is not a once-removed metaphysical version of our world. It is more like a thrice-removed pataphysical version of our world (with lots of slippage inserted for good measure).¹⁹ Marcus's 'meaning' is conveyed by the structure of his prose rather than by any single definition he offers (although *The Age of Wire and String* is full of definitions).

Marcus even goes so far as to offer cryptic definitions that cryptically define his cryptic way of defining:

RHETORIC The art of making life less believable; the calculated use of language, not to alarm but to do full harm to our busy minds and properly dispose our listeners to a pain they have

never dreamed of. The context of what can be known establishes that love and indifference are forms of language, but the wise addition of punctuation allows us to believe that there are other harms – the dash gives the reader a clear signal that they are coming (Marcus 1995, 78).

THE STYLE OF SPACE... Words have as little individuality as people – there are moments when any of them will do, provided the parts allow for a thrusting enunciation. The proper use of space is to find out the things we have not said, and how our hands might make sure they stay that way (Marcus 1995, 94).

The Father Costume is Marcus's collaboration with artist Matthew Ritchie. Ritchie aptly illustrates the book with purposefully vague seascape photographs and drawn human figures that exist in a space between abstraction and figuration (figure 14). In *The Father Costume*, language itself is described as a kind of force/material in this alter-world. It has a tangible, almost chemical relationship between fabric and food. Like Dickinson, Marcus doesn't focus on what language ontologically 'is,' but on what it can phenomenologically 'do.'

Here are some examples from *The Father Costume* of language behaving as material: "I was asked to spray the south-facing wall of our house with writing, a script to poison travelers... I used one of the safer, mouth-borne languages for the project, restricting myself to words that indicated only those things that could be concealed with burlap. When I was finished, and the wall of our house was like a language trap, I still had some writing left over, which I smeared out carefully over the sides of our boat until it had spread into an illegible, clear glue" (Marcus 2002, 21). "I would prefer an ocean scenario where certain words were restricted, due to conditions of climate. Where whole grammars were off-limits, due to cloth shortages" (Marcus 2002, 46). "Many of the statements I could make could be smothered by the proper combination of cloths. Silence is simply a condition of clothing. My father has seen to a final deaf costume" (Marcus 2002, 52).

In Marcus's world, the limitations of language actually constitute a physical inability to realize a material relationship: "I wish I could say my father's name. I would not know the grammatical tense that could properly remark on my father. There is a portion of time that my own language cannot remark. A limitation, probably, in my mouth. In this portion of time is where my father is hidden. If I learn a new language, my father might come true. If I reach deep into my mouth and scoop out a larger cave. If I make do with less of myself, so that he might be more" (Marcus 2002, 19).

One could do worse than spend an entire art career porting Marcus's pataphysical prose into meta-pataphysical multimedia installations. Ideally, each project would retain the alter-worldly logic of its own implausible context, scaffolded together by self-referential simile structures that defy the need to paraphrase their own existence. The closest I have come is my *Unbearable Being of Lightness* installation, described by psychologist Albina Colden as "a memory museum of earth made by people who are now in heaven." The installation attempted to create an alter-Victorian world that ontologically categorized and labeled various materials based on my own idiosyncratic/intuitive relationship to them. An artichoke was labeled "THE HOGSHEAD OF REAL FIRE." A bisected watermelon was labeled "THE REENCHANTMENT OF EVERYDAY LIFE" (figures 15a-b). Since the titles showed no immediately obvious relationship to the objects with which they were paired, the installation wound up foregrounding the system of ontological labeling itself. I used fruit and vegetables as subject matter because they were as good a material as any. Marcus, of course, would have known exactly why he had used fruits and vegetables, and would have created a rigorous and robust network of relationships between them -- a relationship that overlapped our 'normal' world of fruit & vegetable kinships while at the same time remaining completely other. Such an installation is something toward which to strive.

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Finally, I return to Samuel Beckett as the ultimate example of someone whose work is about its structure more than its 'content.' This fact is illustrated by a ridiculous attempt to summarize some of Beckett's plots:

Stirrings Still: guy leaves table, walks into field, and stops.

Lessness: guy in ruined fortress faces sky.

Ill Seen Ill Said: woman in cabin gradually dies.

Come and Go: three women gossip about each other then hold hands.

Shakespeare's art was not in his plots (which he borrowed), but in his dialogue and character development. Nevertheless, the plot of *Hamlet* is still substantive enough to fill a few pages of *Cliff's Notes*. Beckett's art was not in his plots or his dialogue (per se), but in his structural systems. Beckett's plays don't mimetically represent reality. They are a reality unto themselves. Critics Bersani and Dutoit observe, "The scenes of *Godot* and *Endgame*, unrelated to the real, *are* the real, and for the time of their performances they compel us not to think profoundly but to participate in the illuminating madness of words as gestures entirely determined by veiled structures" (Bersani 1993, 41). Regarding the 'plot' of *Endgame*, they write: "What the play represents has never taken place; its characters' behavior is derived not from observation of the real but from premises about the structure of being and time" (Bersani 1993, 47).

Like Marcus, Beckett is not imitating the world; he is creating structural systems that are their own worlds. The difference is that Marcus's worlds are populated with cultures, characters, geologies, histories, and all manner of marvelous materials; whereas Beckett's worlds are populated with barely named characters, barely lit stages, and pages of indefinite pronouns. Regarding Beckett's "Fizzle 5," Marjorie Perloff notes, "The process of specification is seen as urgent, and yet we don't know what it is that is specified" (Perloff 1981, 208). What is 'specified' is not the impossible setting described (millions of bodies in a ditch), but rather the enacted failure of 'objective' description itself.

In discussing his own very self-referential poetry (poems about the act of reading poems), Vito Acconci says, "It started to *seem* impossible to use on the page a word like 'tree,' a word like 'chair,' because this referred to another

space, a space off the page" (Kotz 2007, 156). The danger is that one's constructed systems might become so self-referential and hermetically sealed that they fail to connect to the world at all. Yet even words on the space of a page are *in* the world. In my own art, my challenge is to intentionally inflect and orchestrate the overlap between the world of my systems and the larger world. The works of Beckett, Marcus, and Dickinson masterfully calculate and modulate this overlap. Each writer tells the truth at their own peculiar angle of "slant" – obtuse and acute truths with opaque antecedents, apophatic truths that illuminate the 'real' world all the more by their oblique indirection.

Tactics 4-6. Refusal of Closure, Self-Undermining, Palimpsest (Back To The Future)

“He is the reality beneath time and the eternity behind being. He is the time within which things happen. He is being for whatever is. He is coming-to-be amid whatever happens. From him who is come eternity, essence, and being, come time, genesis, and becoming. He is the being immanent in and underlying the things which are, however they are. For God is not some kind of being. No. But in a way that is simple and indefinable he gathers into himself and anticipates every existence” (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 98).

The remaining three tactics have to do with different kinds of time. Art can render time telescoping & infinite, looping & regressive, generative & recombinant, encrusted & encased, and occasionally even linear; because ‘time’ is always already simultaneously all of these things.²⁰ Art simply foregrounds one aspect or another.

Furthermore, it is impossible to discuss embodied language without considering events, and events occur in/through time. Indeed, all language, however conceived, is arguably temporal. In discussing George Brecht and La Monte Young’s Fluxus event scores (written instructions like “EXIT” [Brecht, *Word Event*, 1961] and “Draw a straight line and follow it.” [Young, *Composition 1960 #10*]) Liz Kotz argues that, “Brecht aligns the temporality of language with that of the event: continual, recurring, and agentless” (Kotz 2007, 92). She goes on to contend that, “Brecht and Young present language as a model for a different kind of materiality, one structured from the outset by repetition, temporality, and delay” (Kotz 2007, 96). Brecht and Young weren’t using software, multimedia, or generative code. They were simply typing words onto cards. But they discovered that imperative, instructional language could be mapped to temporal, performed events.²¹

If regular instructional language is inherently temporal, apophatic language is even more so. Deferral of closure is a major tactic of the apophatic writers, and deferment necessarily involves time. In the words of historian Michael Sells, the achievement of unsaying is “unstable and fleeting” (Sells 1994, 217). Apophatic

language is always performative and ongoing in order to avoid reaching a definitive conclusion that might calcify into a reducible ontological statement.

As I explain the following three tactics, I will revisit my own art, seeking to better understand its relationship with apophatic time. I will also analyze selected work by other composers, performers, and experimental writers who negotiate apophatic time. I will specifically focus on time that refuses closure, time that undermines itself, and palimpsestic time.

Tactic 4: Refusal of Closure (We Have Decided Not To Die)

There are at least three ways to perpetually perform an event (thus refusing its closure):

1. Bodily perform the event live, forever.
2. Perform the event once, archive the performance, and perpetually loop the archive.
3. Perform the event several times, archive those performances, and generatively remix them forever.

Ways number one and three most interest me. Way number one achieves a kind of exhaustion and failure that is directly related to embodied limitations, while way number three opens up an eternity that never repeats.

Way #1: Human Endurance Time

The early endurance performances of Chris Burden and the six-hour-long compositions of Morton Feldman are precedences for my use of what I am calling ‘human endurance time.’ It is a time in which humans (the artist and/or audience) repeatedly perform tasks well beyond the duration normally associated with those tasks. Jesus and Ghandi’s multi-day fasts and certain rites by Indian mystics and medieval ascetics also occur in human endurance time (although I am not here considering them art).²² Human endurance time is especially marked by the physical, embodied limitations of humans. It is a mortal time – literal, historical, banal, and potentially incarnate. In human endurance time, the artist tries to extend his mortality into eternity while still

here on earth. He is bound to fail in some way, and this failure is part of the point of the art.

In one sense, human endurance time is kataphatic language trying to achieve an apophatic result by sheer brute force of repetition. However, since the repetition is embodied and human rather than mechanical, it will never achieve the perpetual deferment of apophasis. Still, the ways in which human endurance time fails to achieve apophatic deferment is itself apophatic, because the point of apophasis is to illuminate the limitations of kataphatic language.

My *Pop Mantra* performances (described above in “Banal Sublimity”) occur in human endurance time. In one version of the performance, I isolate an excerpt from the song “Herculean” by the pop band The Good, The Bad, and The Queen – an excerpt which (ostensibly) says “now.” I infinitely loop this short, recorded excerpt on an electronic device. In the performance space, I set this looping device on a pedestal with headphones for the audience to approach and wear. Next to the pedestal, I perform the same excerpt live by repeatedly singing and playing a Rhodes electric keyboard. My performance lasts several hours, whereas the ‘performance’ of the electronic device lasts indefinitely. The whole piece is analogous to the legend of John Henry. John Henry defeats the steam drill in their famous race, but he dies in the end. Except in my performance I lose, because I quit before the electronic device. Or perhaps I win, because my performance is more variable, embodied, and alive than the same short, pre-recorded excerpt repeated endlessly by the device.²³

Way #3: Generative/Variable Time

In his essay “The Exhausted,” Gilles Deleuze identifies Samuel Beckett’s four strategies of exhausting the possible. The first is “forming exhaustive series of things” (Deleuze 1997, 161). Programming (generative programming in particular) seems an ideal way to exhaust the possible. Although Beckett did not use software per se, he did use systems (stage directions, arrangements, instructions, relationships) that functioned like software. Software can be thought of simply as a set of instructions. Whether these instructions are

ultimately executed by a digital computer, a wooden loom, or an ensemble cast is not what determines them as software.

All programming is governed by three basic control structures: sequence (execution in a linear order), selection (choosing between two things), and iteration (looping). The combination of these three structures is what determines the operation of any piece of software. Introducing a (pseudo)random variable into the iteration structure results in what I call generative/variable time. Each time a loop iterates, it generates a new random variable which alters the output of that particular loop. Generative software can run forever without ever repeating its output. Generative/variable time combines the variability of human endurance time with the durativity of looped time. It is a third kind of time.

Artist David Crawford's *Stop Motion Studies* are instructive examples of generative time. Crawford's microcosmic photographic studies of people riding on subways initially seem like looping micro-films. But upon closer inspection, one realizes that the animations never actually loop. Imagine a slide projector tray filled with anywhere between three to eight slides. The projector displays these same slides infinitely, but always in random order. The projector also randomizes the duration each slide is displayed, anywhere from .03 seconds to .3 seconds. Finally, all the slides in the tray are of the same subject, all photographed within a limited time frame (less than two minutes). This roughly approximates the mechanics of what Crawford has termed "algorithmic montage." The result is a kind of stochastic motion study somewhere between static photography and linear video.²⁴

My *Synesthetic Bubblegum Cards* also function in generative time. Software pulls from a prepared set of source images and (pseudo)randomly re-collages these images based on a pre-defined arrangement system. These collages perpetually refresh, presenting an ongoing field of variable work rather than simply a single collage iteration. The piece is meant to be experienced on the internet in the frame of a web browser.

One set of cards ("the place pack") contains source material from different places I have been. Watching these place fragments perpetually shuffle

and re-collage confounds my own linear time/space memory. My grandmother's piano from her parlor in south Louisiana may be floating on the river in front of my parent's log cabin in south Alabama, framed by the mountains of Valle de Bravo, Mexico (figure 16). The "post-modern" card contains source images of passenger/pedestrian symbols signs (the minimalist icons you find in international airports). As these stand-ins for language are generatively collaged and reshuffled, they begin to 'say' humorous and disturbing things. A man raises one hand as a plane crashes to the looming backdrop of a giant coat hanger (figure 17).

The generative system of the *Synesthetic Bubblegum Cards* is one of perpetual admixture and recombination which can then be mapped to a variety of source material (Celtic ornamentation, illegible graffiti, stills from Stan Brakhage films) to achieve a variety of non-linear results (disorientation, confusion, abstraction). Reality itself is not rehashed (per se). Instead reality is abstracted to photographic digital media, and that media is rehashed. Any initial associations the 'real' viewer has with the 'simulacral' media are consequently shuffled and rehashed. The results are both 'virtually' and 'actually' disorienting.

In the small and large tables from my *Emily Dickinson Difference Engine* installation, I map generative systems to language, handwriting, and found objects. In the "go sand gold" animation from my *During the Beginning* installation, I map generative systems to language, handwriting, abstract form, and motion. These generative installations actually engage with physical objects in the world. In this sense, they are less hermetic than my *Synesthetic Bubblegum Cards*, which simply engage with once-removed *images* of objects within the computer.

A Hybrid Way: Human Endurance Time + Generative/Variable Time

My *St. Frank and the Wolf*, *Breathing in B Flat*, and "let light" pieces combine the performance elements of human endurance time with the systems-based elements of generative/variable time to achieve a hybrid time/space that is exponentially more than the sum of parts. The human performance that occurs in space over time is ephemeral, immanent, and inherently variable. This

human variability supplies the random element to the generative software system, opening it up to the 'true randomness' of the physical world. The generative output that is projected into/onto these live performance spaces is perpetual and variable. (These systems even perpetually remix themselves when the 'live' human performer is absent.) The pre-recorded, source video loops are kataphatic. The live, ephemeral remix of these video loops is complexly and generatively apophatic. This curious combination of human endurance time and generative/variable time is rife with perpetual deferment and apophatic unsaying. It confounds present events with traces of past events to open up an emergent time that refuses closure.

Tactic 5: Self-Undermining (Something From Nothing / Nothing From Something)

*"[Trinity]... Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
...where the mysteries of God's Word
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
...Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
they completely fill our sightless minds
with treasures beyond all beauty."*

(Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 135).

The above excerpt is Dionysius at his most self-underminingly apophatic. Jean Tinguely's *Homage To New York* (a machine that gradually destroys itself) is an apt sculptural analogy to self-confounding tactics employed in this passage. Arakawa and Gins *The Mechanism of Meaning* is another apt analogy -- instructions undermine and re-interpret other instructions in an inverted torus/Mobius that has no exit (figure 3). If the symbol for a simple loop is the ouroboros (the mythical serpent that consumes itself in the form of a circle [O]), then the symbol for this kind of self-undermining is the infinity symbol [∞] – self-cannibalism with a twist.

My *Playdamage* web site (discussed above in “Banal Sublimity”) intermittently shreds itself in reverse chronological order. Occasionally, the visual or conceptual material for a new screen will come from previous screens, which are then hashed and distorted to form the new screen. This of course means that these newly hashed screens eventually become the source content for further rehashings (figures 18a-c).

My minute-long video *Vertical Features Remix* performs a similar series of self-hashings until it finally disappears altogether. I begin with a series of cropped still shots of my initial source material: watercolor-painted faux-diagrams from Peter Greenaway films (figure 19a). After a pause, I proceed to a series of still screenshots of generative software remixes created from these source paintings (figure 19b). After a second pause, I proceed to a series of video freeze frames taken from a video of these generative remixes being projected onto a white cloth through a glass jar (figure 19c). After a third pause, I proceed to close-up video footage of the generative projections on the cloth (figure 19d). After a fourth pause, I proceed to video footage of my hands and arms interrupting the light of the projected generative remixes coming through the glass jar and falling on the white cloth (figure 19e). My hands and arms increasingly disrupt the light until the screen eventually becomes black, ending the video.

My goal with such self-underminings is not to advance a position of nihilism (per se), but to performatively demonstrate the failure of language and media to ontologically reduce phenomena. Of course, language and media are themselves phenomena in the world, so these acts of self-destruction paradoxically become new and beautiful events of creation. Hopefully these self-erasures also leave a smoking void that serves as the trace of an apophatic event.

Tactic 6: Instability Via Palimpsest (Yr Living All Over Me)

A palimpsest is a manuscript that has been written on more than once, with the earlier writing not fully erased and often still partially legible. More recently, digital design software has allowed designers to add layer upon layer, modifying

their designs along a kind of z-axis (an axis that extends not across or up the page, but out into space ‘above’ the page). Such layering enacts a kind of spatial chronology, mapping time onto space. The most recent design ‘event’ covers up the previous design event, with elements of the previous event still sometimes bleeding through (depending on the transparency and opacity settings).²⁵

Liz Kotz wonders if Carl Andre’s shifts in sculptural paradigms (from “sculpture as shape” to “sculpture as structure” to “sculpture as place”) might be cross-applied to language: “What might a parallel series of shifts in language look like, from ‘language as shape’ to ‘language as structure’ to ‘language as place?’” (Kotz 2997, 149). In my work, ‘language as place’ looks like a palimpsest. Language’s inherent time is exploded along the z-axis in an animated, layered admixture of past and present.

Robert Morris’s *Exchange* (1973)²⁶ (with Lynda Benglis) is an excellent example of post-parchment, multimedia palimpsest. The two artists exchanged analog video tapes back and forth, each responding to and editing the previous artist’s tape. Morris’s final edit of these exchanges gradually devolves into meta-meta-meta-commentary, as the visual quality of the analog tape itself increasingly deteriorates. *Exchange* refuses closure because no final, summarizing commentary ever prevails. We see images of the artist watching himself watch himself. Partially erased layers of self-reflective pasts rise up along the z-axis to confound the (time-shifted) present. By the end of the piece, the visuals have devolved to analog static.

My *St. Frank and the Wolf* performance is a reverse palimpsest, with pre-recorded performances projected on top of a live performance. The projected performances merge and emerge, their respective opacities controlled by the real-time volume of the live performance. The result is a six-armed performer with two solid hands, two tiny ghost hands, and two oversized ghost hands. Unlike a static parchment palimpsest, the z-axis relationship between past and present is constantly re-negotiated in real-time performance space.

“go sand gold” from my *During the Beginning* installation is a palimpsest that is perpetual being written and erased. Words fade in and out, eroding and

accreting simultaneously. The result is a kind of generative, time-out-of-time animation that is perpetually renegotiating its own history.

Finally, the large table of my *Emily Dickinson Difference Engine* is a conceptual palimpsest shuttling between contemporary and Victorian America. Text shuffled in generative time is projected onto found objects (each with its own historical time) in the contemporary time of the gallery space. The phrases themselves, written in Dickinson's handwriting, conceptually represent an older layer of Victorian time. Dickinson's 'voice' rises from the past to emerge dismayed amidst a collaged series of spatial and enacted relationships she could never have foreseen.

Each of these pieces employs its own form of animated, multimedia palimpsest, mapping chronological time to z-axis space, and then confounding conventional spatial relationships to create an in-between, perpetually renegotiated time of ongoing deferral.

III. Summary: Apophatic Results

First, a disclaimer: The goal of my art is *not* to create an experience of ecstatic union with God. Theologian Edmund Rybarczyk explains, “The apophatic approach is misunderstood if one envisions its goal as some kind of spiritual or ethereal experience. The Orthodox consistently warn both those whom seek some kind of phenomenological manifestation and those whom merely want to experience what an encounter with God might be like” (Rybarczyk 2005, 87-8). Hopefully my apophatic art will clear the way for a future encounter with God – a God known via his own revelation to us, unbound by our ontological categorizations of him. Additionally, I personally hope for deeper intimacy with God as I continue my practice. But this intimacy will deepen gradually over time, and not occur immediately through any single reducible encounter with any single piece of my own art.

A Collapsing of Ontological Distinctions

What I do want my art to accomplish is a collapsing of certain ontological distinctions. The six distinctions I’ve chosen are themselves ontological distinctions conveniently contrived for the purpose of this academic thesis. But these distinctions themselves should also be collapsed by my art. The distinctions involve:

1. Time (now/before/always)

“He is the reality beneath time and the eternity behind being. He is the time within which things happen. He is being for whatever is. He is coming-to-be amid whatever happens. From him who is come eternity, essence, and being, come time, genesis, and becoming” (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 98).

2. Space (in/under/outside)

“It is not God’s intention in his works that man should have in himself a place for God to work in. Poverty of spirit is for a man to keep so free of God and of all his works that if God wishes to work in the soul, he himself is the place in which he wants to work... Man should

be so poor that he should not be or have any place in which God could work. When man clings to place, he clings to distinction.” (Eckhart 1981, 202).

3. Subject/Object

“God is a Word that speaks itself... The Father is a speaking work, and the Son is speech working” (Eckhart 1981, 204).

4. Banal/Sublime

“Jesus immerses us in everything material, from the water pots at the Cana wedding to Lazarus’s stinking corpse at Bethany. Things, stuff, bodies are holy” (Peterson 2005, 108).

5. Immanent/Transcendent

“He, the transcendent God, has taken on the name of man. (Such things, beyond mind and beyond words, we must praise with all reverence)” (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 66).

6. Particular/General

“He has every shape and structure, and yet is formless and beautyless” (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 101).

Apophatic Art Making: A Perpetual Risk

“As we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing” (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 139).

“The brightness of the divine nature is beyond words. God is a word, a word unspoken” (Eckhart 1981, 203).

Apophatic art making entails a perpetual risk on my part. It necessarily involves what Michael Sells calls an ‘anarchic moment.’ He writes, “To attempt to place a guarantee within the [apophatic] anarchic moment is to transform apophatic

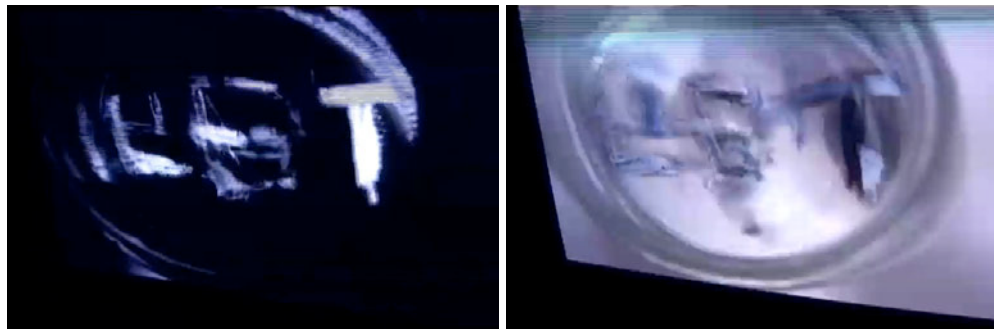
discourse into non-apophatic discourse. For the apophatic mystic, within his or her kataphatic religious or philosophical context, the risk of the anarchic moment is worth taking.” (Sells 1994, 213)

For an orthodox Christian believer (particularly a U.S. Protestant), there is the very real risk that all of these collapsed distinctions and apophatic unsayings will lead away from kataphatic Biblical revelation and toward heresy. But in order to know God as he chooses to reveal himself rather than as I logically reason him to be, the anarchic moment is worth the risk. Dionysius advises his friend Timothy:

“My advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is” (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 135).

In this thesis, I have begun to sketch the parameters of an admittedly wide-ranging and intrinsically irreducible practice. My future practice will likely involve a series of perpetual deferments and rigorously architected failures, with no single magnum opus standing at the pinnacle of a lifelong trajectory. This is to be expected. If the concerns of my practice were encapsulatable in a single great work, it would not be much of an apophatic practice. Likewise, if this thesis were reducible to one pithy, climactic, reductive, summary sentence, it would not be much of an apophatic thesis.

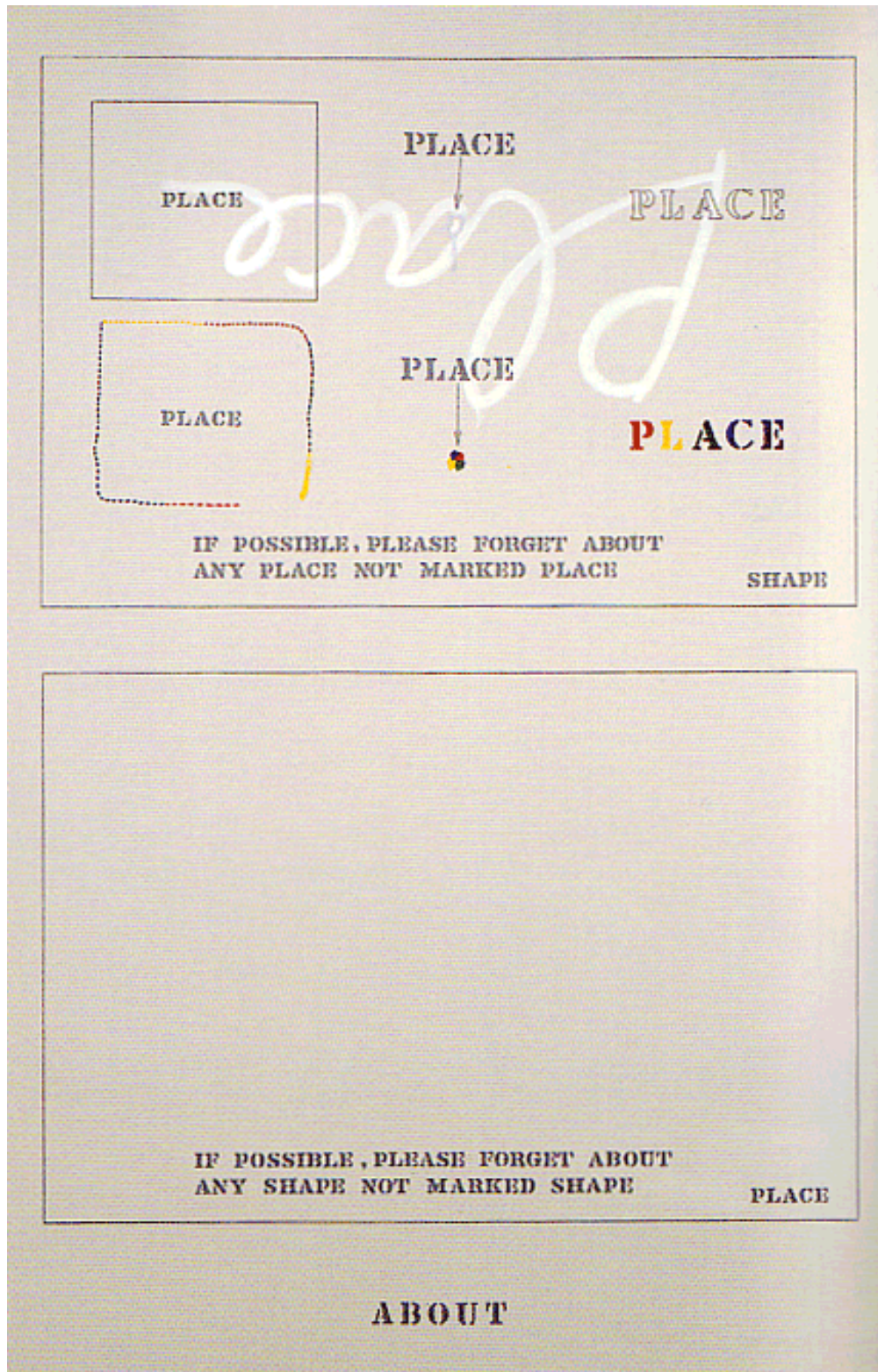
FIGURES



1a-b. "let light," 2008, installation views



2. *Text Rain*, 1999, installation view (Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv)



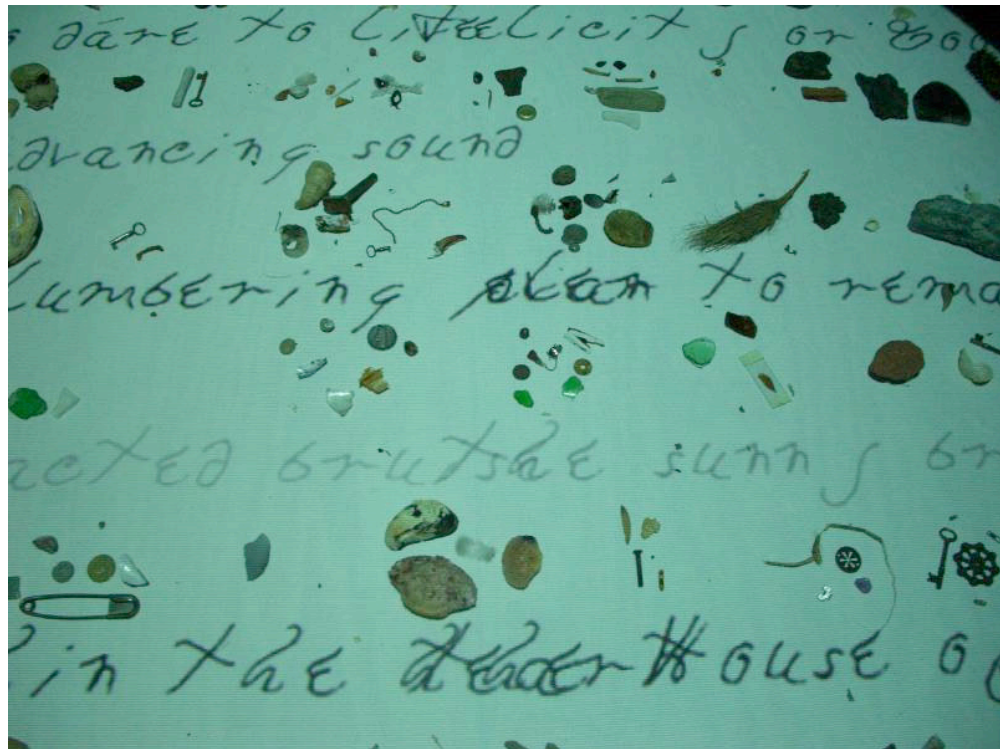
3. *Mechanism of Meaning* (15.3), 1963-97, installation view (Arakawa & Gins)



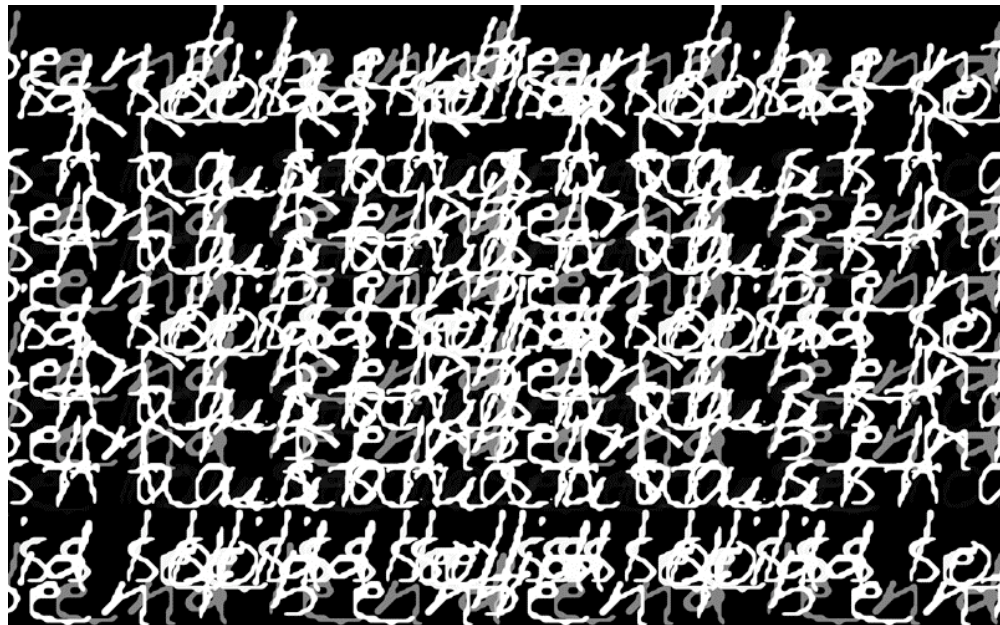
4. "let light," 2008, installation view



5. "let/light | be/was," 2007, installation view



6. *The Emily Dickinson Difference Engine* (large table), 2007, installation view



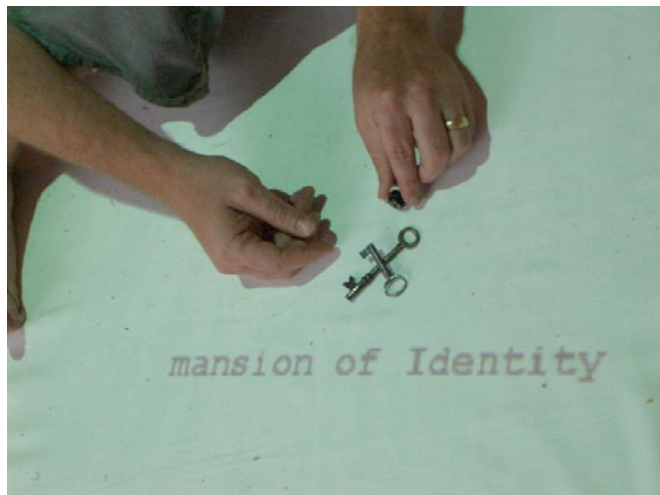
7. "go sand gold," 2008, screen capture



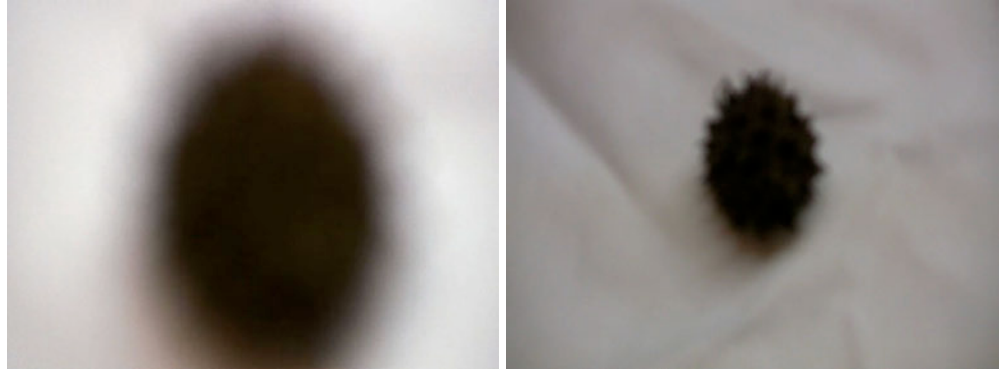
8a. *One Minute Managers V.2*, 1990, 2 plastic laminated wooden shelves, aluminum alloy stock pots, leather medicine balls (Haim Steinbach)



8b. *supremely black*, 1985, wood formica, ceramic pitchers, cardboard detergent boxes (Haim Steinbach)



9. *The Emily Dickinson Difference Engine* (window performance), 2007, performance view



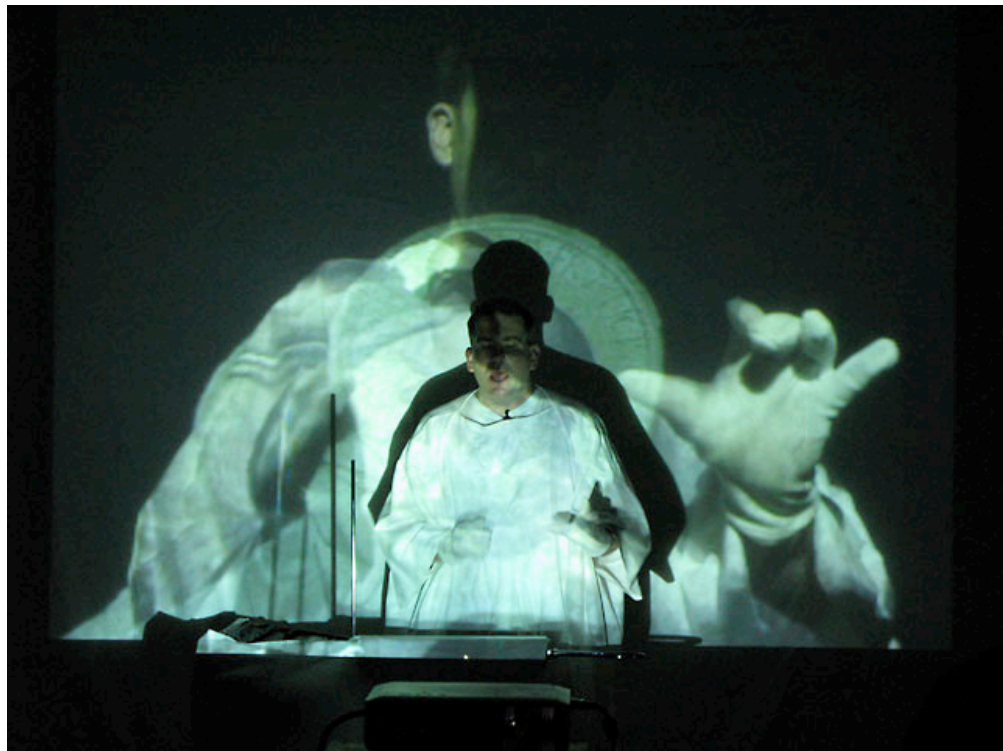
10a-b. "Gumball," 2008, video stills



11. *The Emily Dickinson Difference Engine* (small table), 2007, installation view



12. *Breathing in B Flat*, 2007, performance view



13. *St. Frank and the Wolf*, 2007, performance view



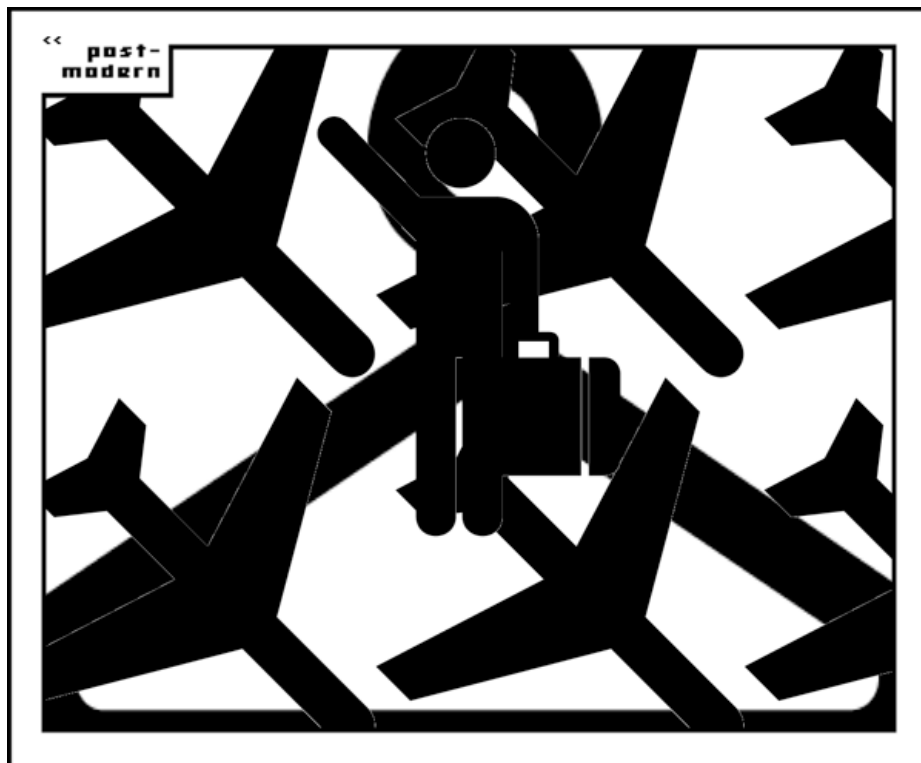
14. *The Father Costume*, page 31, 2002, illustration (Matthew Ritchie)



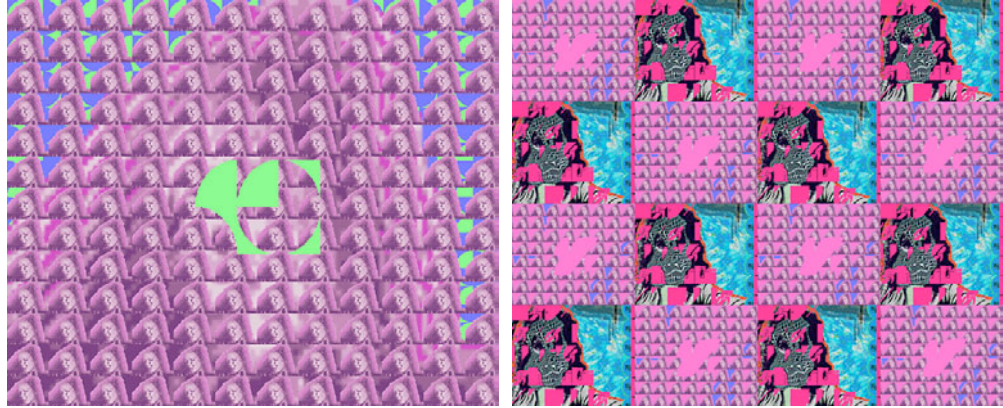
15a-b. *The Unbearable Being of Lightness*, 2006, installation views



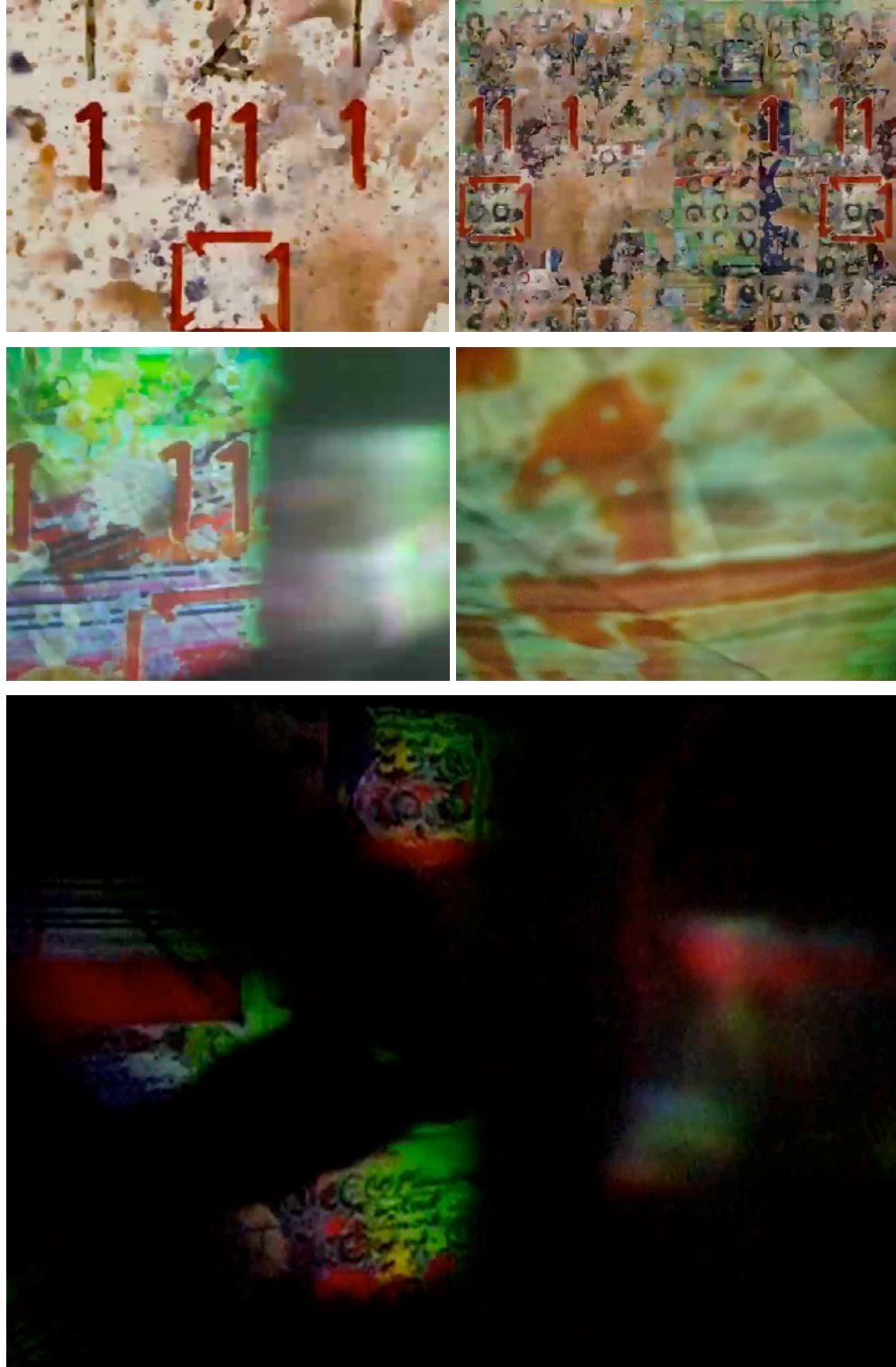
16. *Synesthetic Bubblegum Cards* (Place Pack Wildcard), 2003, screen capture



17. *Synesthetic Bubblegum Cards* (Post-Modern Card), 2003, screen capture



18a-c. *Playdamage* (49, 48, 51), (2000-present), screen captures



19a-e. *Vertical Features Remix*, 2006, video stills

NOTES

¹ Actually, there are any number of passages in the Bible that establish a precedent for apophatic writing -- either by performing apophasis themselves or by suggesting the need for it. Below are some examples [followed by my comments]:

“I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power... to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:17-19). [To know love that surpasses knowledge, to be filled with all the fullness of the infinite God – this is a kind of kataphatic/apophatic language which asserts what it denies / denies what it asserts.]

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.’” (Ex. 55:8–9). [Not apophatic writing in itself, but it warns against an idolatrous form of ideology that attempts to ground God in the limits of human reason. We don’t ontologically decipher God as if he were a species to be categorized. We are given revelation of God as he condescends to reveal himself to us.]

“We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Rom. 8:26). [Not apophatic writing in itself, but it indicates the limitations of kataphatic language. There exists a kind of spiritual groaning able to communicate effectual prayer in a way that (Greek) words cannot.]

“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my mind; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my mind” (I Cor. 14:14-15). [Again, not apophatic writing itself, but this time definitely about glossolalia (‘speaking in tongues’). There is an effectual language we can speak that is not dependent on our minds.]

“[Christ] is the image of the invisible God.” (Col. 1:15). [Apophatic language enacting the apophatic event of the incarnation. Jesus is not a stand-in for God or a symbol of God. He is himself ‘God in a bod,’ God with skin on. This fact is confounding and irreducible. I will stop trying to reduce it.]

“I pray also for those who will believe in me..., that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you

gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me.” (John 17:20-23) [This passage is itself apophatic, enacting a kind of plastically impossible, perpetually inverting series of encompassings and indwellings. Its language begins to collapse inside/outside spatial distinctions. If M.C. Escher became a sculptor and carved a set of impossibly constructed Russian nesting dolls, they might begin to model the relationship enacted by the language of this passage.]

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1 [KJV]). [This passage is itself apophatic, confounding ontological definition structures. ‘Faith = substance/evidence of things’ seems a perfectly solid ‘subject = predicate object’ ontological equation, until it is confounded by the caveat, ‘things hoped for/not seen.’ That a non-existent ‘thing’ could nevertheless have substance begins to un-delimit the horizon between being and non-being (in a Heideggerian sense) or between the actual and the virtual (in a Deleuzian sense).]

“Call to me, and I will tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know” (Jeremiah 33:3). [Here God is speaking. This is not apophatic writing in itself, but it describes the way in which kataphatic revelation supersedes human ‘research.’ Indeed it must if we are to ever be introduced to the unfathomable things of God. This is why apophatic writing which performs the ‘unsearchability’ of God is still orthodox writing – because any kataphatic knowledge we have of God is not achieved via human ‘searching,’ but via revelation from God himself. Thus God remains simultaneously revealed and unsearchable. Notably, such unsearchable revelation doesn’t come through intellectual inquiry, but through relational prayer (“call to me”).]

² This contiguous process of affirmation and negation has been called “negative theology” (after a phrase from Dionysius’ *The Divine Names*), although Marion rightly points out that, “Dionysius uses nothing that might be translated as ‘negative theology.’ If he speaks of ‘negative theologies,’ in the plural, he does not separate them from the ‘affirmative theologies’ with which they maintain the relation described here” (Marion 2001, 145). Apophatic writing has historically been associated with the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic traditions. Protestant theologians, surprised by the novelty of negation, have improperly labeled this way of thinking ‘apophatic,’ when it is best understood as ‘apophatic/kataphatic.’

³ Indeed, I will call God ‘he’ in this thesis (although Dionysius and Eckhart will occasionally refer to God as ‘it’), following the predominant Biblical kataphatic revelation of God as ‘he’ (although occasionally Jesus is referred to in scripture as a mother hen, a root, a branch, etc.). Furthermore, I will refer to the deity as ‘God’ rather than ‘G_d,’ ‘GxD,’ or any number of other spellings meant to not over-determine him in writing. Moses wrote of God as ‘YHWH’ (without any vowels) so as not to over-determine him, but Jesus’ incarnation earned the right

for believers to call God by a proper name: 'Jesus (Yeshua) of Nazareth.' Since this thesis does not claim to be a wholly apophatic text, I have no problem calling the deity 'God,' 'he,' and 'Jesus.' Furthermore, by way of disclaimer, my entire life is not an apophatic project. Meister Eckhart wrote apophatically in certain German sermons, but not all of his writing was apophatic. Likewise, my pursuing an apophatic art practice does not mean that my every utterance and action will be apophatic.

⁴ Or to quote novelist Ben Marcus quoting Emerson, "Every word was once an animal" (Marcus 1995, xi). Or to quote Liz Kotz quoting sculptor/poet Carl Andre, "Whole poems are made out of the many single poems we call words" (Kotz 2007, 141).

⁵ All Bible verses referenced are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise indicated.

⁶ The conundrum of a language's inability to fully describe the world is expressed as early as 600 B.C. in the opening lines of *Tao Te King*: "Nature can never be completely described, for such a description of Nature would have to duplicate Nature. / No Name can fully express what it represents" (Laozi, trans. Bahm). Or in another translation, "The reason which can be reasoned is not the Eternal Reason. / The name which can be named is not the Eternal Name" (Laozi, trans. Chalmers).

⁷ Cf: Jorge Louis Borges' paragraph-length short story, *On Exactitude in Science*, which describes a 1:1 scale map made by some overzealous cartographers (Borges 1999, 320). In *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, Lewis Carroll also mentions a fictitious 1:1 scale map: "It has never been spread out, yet," said Mein Herr: "the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well" (Carroll 2006, 138).

⁸ Although Weiner is probably the most famous 'sculptor' of language, he is by no means the only one. For example, a number of artists working specifically with Emily Dickinson's poetry have embodied her language sculpturally, Roni Horn and Lesley Dill in particular (Danley 1997).

⁹ Available from <http://www.ubu.com/film/serra.html>

¹⁰ Even as early as 1961, instruction-based Fluxus artists were intentionally incorporating typography and layout into their overall conceptual approach. Liz Kotz notes that George Brecht's printed event score cards resemble "the space of modern graphic design in [their] complete interpenetration of visual and textual materials -- a space that programmatically invades poetry since Mallarmé" (Kotz 2007, 95).

¹¹ It is very difficult (and arguably philosophically impossible) to achieve ‘true’ randomness. Cf: <http://random.org>

¹² Art critic Bruce Hainey succinctly and poetically summarizes Steinbach’s work: "Wittgenstein begins *Philosophical Investigations* by quoting Augustine's *Confessions* on the naming of objects. Steinbach pulls his quotations directly from the world; his confessions deranged in glorious 3-D approach the unnameable" (Hainey 2007, 339).

¹³ Part of the piece involved various hand-crushed fruits encased in antique Mason jars hanging weightlessly on thin, translucent wires from the ceiling. A year later I came across this John Cage passage from a 1958 essay entitled “Composition as Process”: “Object is fact, not symbol. If any thinking is going to take place, it has to come out from inside the Mason jar which is suspended in *Talisman*... not ideas but facts" (Perloff 1981, 312-13). Ouch! Still, I have not given up on the Mason jar as phenomenological event (as evidenced by my use of it in the “let light” station of my *During the Beginning* installation).

¹⁴ An instruction from the poster for Arakawa’s 1987 show *The Fiction of Place* actually reads: "The viewer is asked to supply whatever chaos is missing from this exhibition." (cf: feldmangallery.com/pages/exhsolo/exhara87.html)

¹⁵ The piece has actually been in two group exhibitions: FILE (Electronic Language International Festival) at the Museum of Image and Sound, São Paulo, Brazil, in 2001, and The Seoul Net Festival at the Coex Building, Seoul, Korea, in 2005. I was unable to attend either show.

¹⁶ Carl Andre's poem “Ode on King Philips War” (1969) achieves a formally similar ballooning semantic structure by subjecting excerpted phrases from E.W. Pierce’s *Indian History and Genealogy* to a Godel-esque mathematical formula (Kotz 2007, 150-153).

Thus Andre achieves lines like:

“woods woods lands woods lands meadows
lands meadows rivers rivers brooks to
meadows brooks to them and their”

Such a generative approach to poetry has implications for my animated remixing of certain ‘found’ passages (particularly the Genesis 1:3 text). Still, what Andre achieves in “Ode on King Philips War” as a minimalist poet/sculptor pales in comparison to the crushing, temporal trapping structures that Beckett constructs in a poem like “What Is the Word.” Andre means to remove his own subjectivity from the construction of his poem. Ironically, the fragments he initially chooses to permute mathematically are not themselves selected mathematically at all. On the contrary, they are patently poetic (for example, the source fragment on which the above lines are based reads, “woods lands meadows rivers brooks to them and theirs forever”), subjectively selected by Andre for their poetic potential. In contrast to Andre, Beckett doesn’t mean

to remove his subjective poetic craft from the poem as much as he means to use his craft to purposefully and rigorously create a situation that renders irrelevant semantic distinctions like subjective/objective. Beckett doesn't need Godel, dice, or the i-ching to achieve the confined ballooning his poems and plays create. He is after a more precise effect that chance operations cannot afford.

¹⁷ From this perspective, *What Is The Word* reads less like a masterpiece of existential poetry and more like Abbot & Costello's "Who's On First" comedy routine (which incidentally reads less like a comedy routine and more like a masterpiece of existential poetry).

¹⁸ Between performances, the audio/video loops continue running, effectively remixing themselves, functioning as a kind of generative installation intermission.

¹⁹ In its ability to create a coherent world within itself that nevertheless overlaps our 'normal' world, *The Age of Wire and String* is analogous to Peter Greenaway's early films, particularly *The Falls*. Where Marcus's characters obsess about weather, shelter, and textiles; Greenaway's characters obsess about birds, flight, and the Violent Unknown Event (VUE).

²⁰ I am admittedly using the word 'time' here as a nominative placeholder for something that is not really a thing at all. As I proceed to exegete my own work and the work of others, my particular conception of the function(s) of 'time' should become more clear (over time, of course).

²¹ John Cage (Brecht's teacher) realized the temporality of instructional language (in the form of the musical notation "tacet" [meaning 'silence']) as early as his notorious 1952 piece *4'33"* -- a piece which Kotz calls, "an inscription that activates a performance" (Kotz 2007, 51).

²² La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela *Dream House* (a minimalist sound and light installation that has been running perpetually for several years) also doesn't qualify as human endurance time. It is more like looped time, because the sound and light in the space is not being performed 'live' by humans. Actually, it is probably more like interactive multimedia sculpture, since walking through the space affects the participant's experience in the space, like walking around a Donald Judd sculpture affects one's experience in the space.

²³ Regarding God's desire to see a perpetual encore of the sunrise, G.K. Chesterton writes, "Perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony" (Chesterton 2004, 10). Yet the sunrise is different every day. This variability, this 'difference *in* repetition,' makes 'all the difference.' It is the difference between waking up every day to the smile of your living spouse -- a smile that is always there, but slightly different from day to day, and waking up to a picture of your dead spouse smiling the same frozen smile day after day.

²⁴ Cf: Cloninger, Curt. 2006. Eternity in an Instant: The Moving Images of David Crawford. In *Sequences*. Edited by Paul St George. Hastings, UK: The Projection Box Publishers. Available from <http://lab404.com/articles/sms/>

²⁵ Vito Acconci's poetry establishes a precedence for considering the 2D space of the page as an event space, a kind of stage. In 1972 Acconci wrote, "I can consider my use of the page as a model space, a performance area in miniature." In the same article he famously declared his intention to use "language to cover a space rather than uncover a meaning" (Acconci 1972, 4). Yet according to Bakhtin's theory of the utterance, language is always at least performative. So Acconci poems are never merely visual. Because they employ language, they still have something to do with stage craft (in all its 'enacted' connotations).

²⁶ Available from <http://www.ubu.com/film/morris.html>

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