

IF I WERE A WORD

If I was a word, would I rather be held in a semiotic chain, with my passage known and chartable, or would I happily throw myself into Roland Barthes floating chain of “unanchored signifiers”, or cast about as Charles Pierce’s “dynamic interpretant”? Here I might happily eschew certainty in favour of the random berths and hooks of subjective association.

To float as a word sounds much more fun. Floating is three-dimensional. It allows each word a volume of its own. A floating signifier is sculptural: it relays across time and space between possible interpretations, rather than being anchored in line by a forceful denotative. Barthes refers to the polysemy of meaning as a dysfunction of language – one that requires urgent “fixing” with various linguistic techniques. However, rather than hammering meaning into place through cultural contexts, or shared nomenclature, why not celebrate the dysfunctional nature of these uncertain signs?

Rather than questing always to know “what” it is – as is the goal of semiotic theory – why not seek out what “it” really is? What force does a word have on its own? What magic in its shape, what structural juxtapositions can it form using its own consonants, its own etymology, and its own openings and endings?

And so, here on the aptly named “splash page” of the 8th Berlin Biennale, Agatha Gothe-Snape floats her words. To create this cumulative evolving project, *Untitled* the artist collected words like pocket objects. As is typical of Gothe-Snape’s word-smithery, she gathered her words and felt their tension, sensed their round curves and their sharp bits, and then, through trial and error, stripped and freed them. Released from their usefulness, these words can now just be. Allowed to wallow or react as they please, they are deployed back into the world of words freed from the need for meaning – endlessly open to signification. Active with their own agency.

It is as if Gothe-Snape sees the world of words as a raised surface from which we may frottage a pattern. She presses paper atop this world and rubs until the strongest, sharpest, most well-formed word takes shape under the charcoal. Reconsidered for its strength and its clarity, the word comes to meaning in isolation, allowed to stand alone, vibrating with its own affect.

Gothe-Snape frees language from its civilising web. Sitting beside her in a lecture is something: the words spoken into the air are sieved through her body and released in abbreviated snippets, phrases jotted in her notebooks, as if she has a punctum sieve built into her cerebral cortex. But then, don’t we all? The prick that grips our attention as we view an image may be small or mnemonic – connecting threads from our past – making it significant on a personal level. It is this that compels us to make meaning.

But to perform this punctum operation upon language is much more complex than if one performed it on an image. The processing of language must pass through a great many more interpretative checkpoints before it can form any kind of meaning. However, Gothe-Snape sidesteps these filtering devices through her choice of communicative platform.

Increasingly we are conditioned to absorb information, rather than to decipher it. When receiving some forms of communication – such as online splash pages, advertising screens, billboards and even PowerPoint presentations – we no longer read language, we absorb it. Perhaps because its importance is so normalised by our sorting mechanisms, we simply let it slide under the usual discursive structures and cognitive deconstructions. It gains entrance to our beings without a ticket. Without any baggage it simply sits, waiting to relate – opportunistically attaching itself on a less conscious level.

This process has been cruelly manipulated by advertisers to create “need” where “want” was, and Gothe-Snape reclaims it from the corporate world. She uses the platform of the splash page to emphasise the true affective resonance of her words. Our open, uncritical absorption of a splash page coalesces with Gothe-Snape’s untethered, disrupted semiotics. Here, in this work, is an instant transmission of the soak of language, a spreading that moves through the body before cognitive functions kick into gear. Temporal, fleeting and ever open to signification, this work ensures that we must always EXPEDITE EXPRESSION or ELSE.

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