Signs of Substance: An Investigation Regarding the Confluence of Art and Language in an Elementary School Context

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ABSTRACT

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In this document two key points are presented to argue that a teacher with a visual arts background can make experiences with language arts more substantial in the elementary school classroom. The first point is that there are solid grounds for attention to the "object", or "concrete" qualities of language within elementary art and language instruction, and this leads to the second point, that elements of Conceptual art practice can inform our uses of language within elementary school. Written from the point of view of a reflective practitioner, a description of academic research and practical experiences support and illustrate the theoretical speculations put forth in the document. Strategies initiated by Conceptualist artists are utilized to foster a rich learning environment in which language and visual art function as complementary modes of expression.

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I am interested in comparisons that can be drawn between visual codes and linguistic codes; in the differences and the similarities between how we see and read words and how we see and read pictures. Art is often referred to as a 'language' but the metaphor is rarely qualified. I believe that it is fruitful to explore the relationship between art and language as a bid toward expanding our understanding of both. I intend to use the lens of post-modern art education (Cary, 1998) to examine how elementary school teachers can engage students in language experiences.

In Chapter One, The *Question and the Context*, I will introduce the central topic dealing with approaches to elementary school language arts that are prompted by visual art strategies. I will discuss the influences that shape and underpin my proposal for confluence between visual art and language arts in elementary school. Furthermore, I will explain how my background as an art educator has influenced my evolving views on Visible Language within the context of elementary school. The term 'Visible Language' is taken from a journal of the same name and is a usefully straightforward term describing language we are able to view (as opposed to hear). In closing the chapter, I will present a glossary of key terms.

The *Literature Review* of Chapter Two presents concepts from literature instrumental in my investigation. Writings by Arthur Efland (1976, 1990, 2002), David Ecker (1966), and Rudolf Arnheim (1969) form the theoretical grounds for my insights into the 'substance' of language, while articles from the journal Visible Language present historical and practical examples of how language is represented and manipulated by graphic designers and artists. I also provide a brief overview of Constructivist Pedagogy; as a contextual backdrop for the propositions I advance.

In Chapter Three, *Writing on the Wall*, I will place the phenomena of language within visual art into a historical context. I will present a definition of Conceptualism focusing on how Conceptual artists use language. I will describe the understanding of Conceptualist art I acquired as a college art student for use within my art and my teaching. In order to preface a discussion of Conceptualism I will then briefly present the points in early twentieth century art history when Visible Language emerged. This short history precedes and supports my proposed link between Conceptualism and Constructivist learning theory. Finally, this chapter concludes with discussion of my interest in Visible Language relative to the stylistic form of 'school art'. Within this discussion I consider the space of the entire classroom, (from the walls and floors, to the surface of pages of paper) as an aesthetic space in which active student involvement is desirable.

In the final sections of this chapter, I suggest that there is an important interplay of skills between writing and drawing perhaps best described by the concept of "transfer" (Brown et al. 1983; Dyson, 1986).

In my fourth and final chapter *Inventing a Language: Theory to Practice* I return to the conjecture that aspects of Conceptualist art practice could influence elementary language education in unique and effective ways. The influence of Conceptualism is identified within the work of three contemporary Canadian artists, Robert Fones, Ken Lum and Greg Curnoe; work by each of these artists is chosen as a useful example of language use in visual art. In this thesis I show how core strategies employed by each of these artists, and concepts drawn from Conceptualism as a whole are relevant and can be employed in language arts instruction. I conclude with an apt example of text used within the classroom in an artistic manner.

Appendix A is a collection of five lessons plans that I composed and delivered to students in Grades One, Four, Five and Six, during the Spring semester of 2001. each demonstrating a particular aspect of language as a visual phenomena. Appendix B presents a collection of drawings and text, created to communicate a specific concern and passion for art and language with other teachers. This collection has been created in the spirit of the artist's books, comics, education

booklets and assorted pamphlets I have collected over time. My thesis discussion will be supported by illustrations of artworks made by recognized modern and contemporary artists, as well as children with whom I have worked. I have chosen to reproduce works that are key `to the thesis argument through drawings in order to both represent and further understand them.

CHAPTER ONE: THE QUESTION AND THE CONTEXT

A SUBSTANTIAL, CONCRETE INTEREST IN LANGUAGE

The notion that language might have a substance of its own has a firm grip on my imagination. This thesis was conceived as an opportunity to critically examine this idea connecting art and language within the context of the elementary school classroom. My research question asks what advantages does a teacher with a visual arts background bring to the treatment of language arts instruction in the general classroom? This question stems from a lifelong attention to, and affinity for, snippets of language I've encountered in urban and rural environments.

When I first encountered the term 'concrete poetry', while studying at art college I took it to mean poetry that had been literally constructed from concrete; mixed, formed and set to dry. Although I subsequently learned that the term "concrete" as used in the context of poetry referred in fact to an enhanced emphasis on the visual and sensory qualities of text, the half-truth of my misconception remains with me. Traditional concrete poetry per se is not a central reference in my artwork and the work I conduct in the classroom, but it serves as a clear example of my way of looking at language. Throughout this document I will refer to this phenomenon of language tactility as Visible Language.

I am interested in forming a general classroom practice that blurs distinctions between language arts, and visual arts. It is my intention to situate a visual arts perspective on text within an elementary school language arts curriculum, and expand notions of what a learning environment that is rich in print might look like. I will describe an art-based approach to language use and provide examples of unique presentations of letters and words - Visible Language; constructed from ink, paint, paper, bits of wood and wire.

VISUAL AND LINGUISTIC CODES

It has always fascinated me how configurations of line and shape can be formed to construct meaningful written language. As a lower elementary school teacher I have the privilege of observing language as it is continually recreated; for many elementary students they are forming letters for the first time in their lives. My role in relation to this phenomenon is two-fold; first to share and celebrate the joy in creating these meaningful forms for primary expression, and second to assist students in conforming to useful conventions. Through teaching I attend to the processes of making and sharing language. Although there is a predominant curricular bias toward language instruction in the school system, I acknowledge through my work in the classroom that children are also working to develop visual understandings of the world.

As children begin to understand concepts such as where the sun is in the sky, or how eyes, nose and mouth relate to each other on a face students demonstrate to the best of their ability, these sorts of visual understandings through their art. While children use words or pictures in their struggle to express what they know about the world, I often use art to investigate what I am not sure of. Questions, rhetorical statements, appropriated text and pieces of vernacular language form one branch of my ongoing body of artwork; visual abstractions form another. Language is predicated on a relationship between that of a sender and a receiver; art similarly is based on a relationship between some sort of an object (painting, drawing, sculpture, performance art) and an audience. At best, art and language remind us both of things we know, as well as things we do not know.

THE PROCESS OF FORMATION

This document and the accompanying collection of drawings are built around a combination of scholarly, action and studio research. My experiences over eight years working in Halifax, Nova Scotia; Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; Montreal, Quebec and Guelph, Ontario as an elementary art, and classroom teacher provide the background against which all of my speculation figures. I view this document as an attempt to summarize an ongoing process of investigation; a summary that is reflective of the inventive potential of the phenomena in question.

My primary approach to collecting data for this paper has been to meld academic research with action research while producing and reflecting upon artwork. I have accessed information through library, local resource and internet sources. As part of my course requirements at Concordia University I proposed and conducted a pilot project in a classroom with a single group of Grade One students. I have also maintained a practice of drawing and writing.

There are two related ways in which the results of my research take shape. One, as specific programmatic applications, in the lessons being taught in the classroom, and two as a generalized effect on approaches to language and art in the classroom (such as the way language is represented in the classroom). Both of these manifestations of research address an identical end; to expand notions of 'school art' (Efland, 1976), and to facilitate language in the classroom providing additional modes of expression to children. The research I have done for this thesis should enhance my future work as a classroom teacher by providing a theoretical framework from which to work and concrete examples to expand upon. I intend to present an addendum on the look and purpose of school art and language arts through this work.

LOOKING TO ARTISTS

I will focus upon contemporary visual artists that make use of letters, words and short phrases to form their artwork; these artists work within, or in reference to the idiom of Conceptualism. The work of early Conceptualist artist Lawrence Weiner revolves around the participatory and communicative features of art and language, while in the more contemporary artwork of Greg Curnoe, Robert Fones and Ken Lum, the 'object' or 'concrete' quality of language is more evident.

Conceptualism, a domain of visual art anchored by cognitive processes (rather than material concerns) may be one of the least likely streams of contemporary art to influence elementary school art education (aside from extreme manifestations of performance art characterized by highlights such as nudity and violence). I will present Conceptualism as a contrast with school art motivated by visually expressive, formal concerns.

AN AESTHETIC LIGHT: SCHOOL AS A SITE FOR ART AND ARTISTS

Concurrent with expanded notions of children's art in the classroom I will argue for a consideration of school buildings as a surface/site for art production, locating expression and inquiry beyond the bulletin boards, on unclaimed surfaces and spaces. I will be claiming that elementary school spaces are a keen location for 'transforming gestures' (Quebec Education Program, 2000, p. 234) and cognitive development. During my first visit to an elementary school as a

pre-service teacher, I became aware that the environment of a typical North American elementary school offers an aesthetic experience. Coming from the context of an art college, I viewed the school environment as art; an installation of light and space, punctuated by objects. I was attracted to the visual details in school; the open expanse of a gymnasium with sunlight streaming in, two brooms propped quietly against a wall, the rhythm of a line of children's boots arranged on the racks. This initial aesthetic appreciation for elementary schools was disconnected from the social realities of elementary school. My appreciation has become more complex as I work with students, and gain an understanding of the schools. Over the time that I have worked in schools, I have come to realize that my "aesthetic knowing" (Richard Cary, 1998) extends beyond autonomous spaces and objects; I now look at all the material that teachers decide to value by putting on the wall. I also strive to gently challenge the parameters of what a classroom is commonly thought to look like; the "aesthetic codes" (Rosario & Collazo, 1981) of the classroom. These are the grounds upon which I propose we consider visible expressions of elementary school students in a new aesthetic light.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

What follows is a definition of the terms used in this document, to provide a sense of the personal meanings that they hold. Note that the meaning of some of these terms varies according to usage:

the artworld. 1. In his 1993 essay In Defense of a Theory of Art for Art Education, Jack Hobbs discusses the challenges of teaching amidst pluralist definitions of art. In the course of his discussion he presents a concise description of the concepts of the artworld, as originally articulated by George Dickie (1974). Hobbs explains that: To Dickie an artwork was a status conferred on an artifact by the network of people and conventions involved in the "artworld"- thereby treating the work as "a candidate for appreciation." What this theory does is remove the argument over definition from the realms of perception and metaphysics and places it in a social context. The context in this case includes not only the artworld, i.e., various institutions (galleries, museums, the art press, universities) and authorities (artists, curators, museum directors, art critics), but also the public, which consciously or not, accepts the social convention of an artworld (p. 107). 2. Writing after Dickie, Howard Becker (1982) introduces the concept that the artworld is a system constituted by the sum of its parts, namely collective activities and shared conventions. There are two related aspects of Becker's theory that I identify with as a teacher/artist; they are the following, as quoted from his Art Worlds (1982): "The artist works at the center of

a network of cooperating people, all of whose work is essential to the final outcome" (p. 25). "The artist's involvement with and dependence on cooperative links thus constrains the kind of art he can produce" (p. 26). Within Becker's model of the art world, I see myself as a 'link'; my responsibility lies in determining the nature and degree to which I constrain, or enable children as they produce art. 3. Arthur Danto (1981) writes about Dickie's term *artworld,* describing the proprietors of that world as "an institutionally enfranchised group of persons who serve so to speak, as trustees for the generalized musée imaginaire, the occupants of which are the artworks of the world." (p. 91) I would like to suggest building new additions on the "Musée Imaginaire."

bookwork. 1. A book used as a venue for exhibition of images and/or texts.

2. Books have been used as an artistic medium for centuries. From Medieval illuminated manuscripts to the artist books that emerged in the twentieth century, books can be seen as a space within (and upon) which artistic expression and inquiry is located. 3. Artists such as Ed Ruscha and Dieter Roth who began working in the mid-1950's experimented with offset printing and photocopying to produce bookworks that focused on aspects that are primary to the medium of "book". In works by Ruscha and Roth, the conventions related to making, distributing and reading books became subject to question and experimentation. 4.See Zine.

child art. 1. In simple terms; art made by a child. 2. "Child art refers to objects and events made by young people between the ages of 1 or 2 and the middle-teen years, which adults (and children who are influenced by them) classify as art because they often look and function somewhat like the things that adults create". (Wilson. 1997, p.81). 3. "...an object is an art work at all only in relation to an interpretation. It transforms objects into works of art" (Danto, 1986, p.44).

conceptualism. 1. A genre of visual art that emerged in the mid nineteen-sixties covering a range of diverse and sometimes contradictory values. What typically unifies Conceptualist artists however, is a preoccupation with language and philosophy, (often referring to the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein). The use of language by Conceptual artists fits well with the work of Wittgenstein because "traditional philosophical arguments play little role in Wittgenstein's work; his procedure is to *show* (italics added)) language at work". (Kelly, 1986, p.460). The broadness of the concept of language is reflective of the diversity of artists working within the Conceptual idiom. This shift by artists from traditional, material based forms of art (such as painting, drawing and sculpture) to language itself as a form of art represents a radical challenge to a standard definition of art. Dematerialized, language based approaches to art (Lippard, 1997) still presents a challenge to audiences of art because it diminishes the physicality of the experience of viewing art. I use Lawrence Weiner's (1980) work as a primary example of this phenomenon because although it is rooted in language, he uses

his work to refer to a physical experience. Take for example the following artwork that we may see as referring to a material such as sticks or stones. To consider the work itself however, clearly we are faced with three self-referential sentences comprised of eighty-seven letters forming twenty words (many things) placed here and there in specific relation to one another:

MANY THINGS PLACED HERE & THERE

TO FORM A PLACE CAPABLE OF SHELTERING

MANY OTHER THINGS PUT HERE AND THERE

- Lawrence Weiner (1980)

At the elementary school level, the notion of an expressive art practice, rooted in materials and hands-on involvement, is generally assumed to be most appropriate. Conceptualism in its earliest, most doctrinaire form rooted in linguistic theory and 'made' with language is thus highly abstract and contrary to the aims of traditional elementary school art education.

contemporary art. 1. This general term is defined by the Canada Council as "Artistic work from the present era that uses the current practices and styles of its discipline" on the website, www.candacouncil.ca.

constructivism. 1. A theory of learning based upon the notion that the experience of the learner is integral to solving problems and making meaning. A Constructivist position is at odds with the model of a passive learner most thought of as an 'empty vessel'. An educator and/or student working within a Constructivist framework might conceptualize his/her implicit role in education as that of an inventor, a "participant in a conspiracy for which we are continually inventing the customs, rules and regulations" (Bednarz, Larochelle. 1998. p. 2). 2. Child centred learning, teacher created materials, individualized instruction.

language. 1. An expansive term that variously refers to forms of expression facilitating communication; it is sometimes used metaphorically (as in 'the language of love'), or to characterize the elements of a particular medium (as in 'the language of painting'). In Critical Art Pedagogy (1998), Richard Cary presents a succinct definition; language, he states "...provides symbols and the procedures for using them to construct and convey meaning. In essence language provides the content and the structure of thinking." (p. 113). 2. For the purposes of this document I use the term language primarily with the written form in mind.

language arts. 1. "The subjects (reading, spelling, literature, and composition) that aim to develop the student's comprehension of, and capacity to use, written and oral language." (Miriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, 10th edition, p. 307)

letter form. 1. A configuration of lines and shapes arranged in a manner that is representative of a distinct sound, which can be produced within the context of human speech. 2. One of the twenty six symbols that comprises the Western alphabet. The meaning of letter forms is entirely contingent upon a given cultures agreement that each letter represents a particular sound.

school art. 1. Art made by children as directed, while in a school. Often different in content and form from 'child art' (Wilson, 1997) that has been made independently 2. Defined in critical terms by Arthur Efland in his landmark essay The School Art Style: A Functional Analysis (1976). Plainly stated, school art is art made within the context of school, particularly elementary and secondary school. School Art is also the title of a popular, long standing magazine devoted to art education in schools. However the term "school art" is not a neutral descriptor; rather it connotes a form of art that is reflective of the conditions of school. 3. Picture a two dimensional construction paper landscape with a rolling hill, one tree, a sun in the top corner, and carefully applied spatter of snow from an aerosol can. Picture twenty-three similar landscapes. This is an example of school art.

signs. 1. Some signs look like the thing that they describe 2. Some signs have lots of words. Some signs have only a few words. Some signs have no words at all. (Reit, Seymour, 1963, pp. 20-21) 3. Semiotics is the complex study of the

relationships between signifiers and the signified. Richard Cary summarizes these two concepts, "the signifier can be a word, a sound, an object, an image, or anything other than itself. The signified is a concept, an abstraction, that which is represented" (p. 189,1998). 4. Given that my study is concerned with teaching elementary school children it is appropriate that I direct my focus toward the signifiers, the hands-on physical objects (paint, pencils, paper) with which we communicate or signify. For the purposes of this paper, I steer clear of direct reference to semiotics preferring to take the term "sign" literally (words displayed on a flat surface).

substance 1. Theme, subject, material as opposed to form, (the substance is good but the style is repellent). (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English, 1976) 2. The stuff with which things are made.

text. 1. An object, collection of words, or activity read in terms of its immediate and contextual meanings. In her doctoral thesis, Miriam Davidson (2000) explains that "...texts can be constructed and meaning can be explored and generated through a variety of symbolic systems such as music, dance, math, advertising, film, and the visual arts" (pg. 171).

I am fond of the following quote by Umberto Eco cited by Karen White: "A text is a lazy machine that forever requires that one help it accomplish its task." (p.1.1996); in terms of visual art, Eco's statement characterizes a certain kind of cognitive experience, one in which the viewer is considered to be an active participant in the creation of meaning.

visible language. 1. Language that you can see. 2. Title of an independent journal with a stated premise that "writing/reading form an autonomous system of language expression on its own terms. " (p. 1. 2002).

zine. 1. Broken Pencil magazine, the primary venue for review of independent publications in Canada defines a zine in its introduction as "[...] an independently published, not-for-profit publication" (2000, p. 2). Although most zines are photocopied and hand-stapled, some zines are professionally printed. Variations on the zine include the comic zine (indie comics), the lit zine (literary-poems, fiction, essays), the perzine (personal, autobiographical) and also the ezine (zines published only on the internet).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW / RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

In this chapter I will review literature that has proved instrumental in allowing me to follow an investigation and construct my key propositions. My search for art education research that deals specifically with visual expressions of language in elementary art has yielded slim results. I have however located other examples of research dealing with elementary art and language in other ways such as teaching alphabets through art (Klager, 1975), art as a vehicle for learning language, (Newton 1995); art as a reflective tool for evaluating reading skills, (Fast, 2000), drawing as a correlative to writing, (Dyson 1982) and "drawing as a language" (Steele, 1998).

ARTHUR EFLAND'S SCHOOL ART

It would not be possible to propose revision to our commonly held notions of elementary art education without attention to Arthur Efland's essay, The School Art Style: A Functional Analysis (1976). Efland outlines common perceptions of school art, noting that it is a form of art rooted in sensory experience and is typically not considered to be intellectually challenging. In recreating school art, art educators are expected to reflect these persistent notions about the expressive function of art and artists.

In his essay Efland notes that school art should be viewed as an institutional art style, similar to other institutional styles such as church art, corporate art and museum art (p.38). Making this point, Efland emphasizes that "school art should be art that is understood in the context of its educative function" (p. 38).

In his essay Efland makes the point that the standard elementary school system in North America has had a longstanding influence on the kind of art made on its premises. It has been my experience that—while it is common for teachers to make use of art by modern, popularized artists--rarely are students exposed to art made by conceptual artists. In a bid towards fostering visual literacy and enabling different learning styles, I believe that it is useful to explore with students the work of contemporary artists. I have chosen to write in Chapter Five about Conceptualist Lawrence Weiner, and three contemporary Canadian artists who make work dealing with language: Robert Fones, Greg Curnoe, and Ken Lum.

I have examined a number of essays by different art educators who investigate the implications of, and suggest revisions to, Efland's landmark essay concerning school art. In Authentic instruction in art: why and how to dump the school art style (1998), Tom Anderson and Melody Milbrandt redress Efland's notion of a disconnect that exists between art made at school and larger social contexts. Anderson and Milbrandt point out that in hindsight we can see how the school art

style is in fact quite reflective of art made in the late modernist period. School art is seen to be analogous to modernist art in that it offers aesthetic experience "as a sense of relief from the more important things in life" (p.14). Put in these terms, art at school on Friday afternoon as respite from Math and Language seems a logical rehearsal for a relaxing day as an adult at an art gallery.

Theresa Marché (2001) expands on Efland's research in her essay Swimming in the invisible sea: children, artists, and art education reform. In this essay she states that actual changes in art education have been largely guided by developments in education, and that those changes are out of step with shifting notions of 'artist', and 'child as artist'. Marché reasserts Efland's position that art education is tethered by a conception of the artist largely built around an expressionist paradigm. I concur with Marché that art teachers are guided by these particular concepts of what it means to be an artist, and what it means for children to make art in school. Marché's work is valuable for the scope of her research on the expressive romantic paradigm, and her emphasis on the degree to which expressionism predominates in art education because we are asked implicitly to consider the extent to which our own work in the classroom maintains or revises those concepts.

RUDOLF ARNHEIM'S VISUAL THINKING

I have turned to the work of Rudolf Arnheim (appendix B. p. 97) for his contribution regarding the psychology of vision and thought. Arnheim's book Visual thinking, (1969) informs my interest in links between language and our physical experience of the world. In his chapter entitled Words in their place, Arnheim helps to qualify the nature of a relationship between art and language; his work forms a rigorous comparison and analysis of the similarities and differences in visual thinking and verbal thinking. Arnheim argues that the visual medium holds more inherent meaning than the verbal, and that visual media is more intimately related to our perceptual experience of the world. Arnheim goes on to assert that although referential language has evolved to a highly abstract system of representation, it remains rooted in our physical reality. He explains that however abstract language may seem, its fundamental origins are reinforced by the primacy of visual/physical concepts. In order to comprehend a concept such as 'depth of thought' for instance, there must be a concrete awareness of the meaning of the word depth such as the depth of a well. This key point speaks to the ambiguity of the title of my own document, Signs of Substance, which articulates a meaning that is at once literal and symbolic.

Arnheim asks the pertinent question, "What are the mental shapes of thought?" (p. 227). "Language is a set of perceptual shapes - auditory, kinesthetic, visual..." (p. 229), states Arnheim, but he points out that inherent meaning of the shape

that language takes is limited, and he concludes that the function of language is largely dependant upon its intended meaning. When listening to, or looking at a language with which we are unfamiliar, our lack of understanding of that language reflects the limited meaning of the form of that language. We can appreciate the aesthetic shape, or form of language, the gestural brush paintings of Chinese characters for instance, or the lovely intonation of a romance language; however our appreciation of that language is inevitably more involved when we find out what it actually means. Arnheim's concern for the shape of language is one that I share, particularly in its visual form. It has been my experience in the classroom that when making art with words, the intended meaning, or referent, will indeed take priority over the form.

Arnheim claims that we do not need language in order to think, but that it helps. Illustrating this fact, Arnheim cites Wittgenstein who asserts that to communicate "in a sentence, a world is put together tentatively... as an automobile accident is represented with puppets, etc., in a Parisian court of law" (p. 240). Because of the limits of language in constructing thought, Arnheim states that it is important to consider "the help [that] words lend to thinking while it [thought] operates in a more appropriate medium such as visual imagery" (p. 232).

As an elementary school teacher, I am attracted to the notion that a word could be considered to be a 'puppet'; and that perhaps our use of words to communicate is a performance of sorts (appendix B). With Arnheim I am drawn to consider what shapes we might create if we represent our thoughts using art materials.

VISIBLE LANGUAGE

The graphic design journal Visible Language focuses on contemporary research on language as visual experience. The journal is described by its editorial board as being "concerned with research and ideas that help define the unique role and properties of written language" (p.1. 2002).

In her article Word Space / Book Space / Poetic Space: Experiments in Transformation in Visible Language (2000), Lucinda Hitchcock cites Gaston Bachelard who referred to a "space that we love, (one that) is unwilling to be permanently enclosed" (p. 164). Hitchcock identifies that the space she has loved "since the beginning of (her) conscious memory" (p. 164) is the space of words. As an assistant professor of graphic design, Hitchcock's interest in the experience of text is approached in a practical manner and revealed through experimentation as well as the projects she assigns in class. Hitchcock's spatial conception of language is very much in accord with the artistic sensibility with which I approach language arts in the elementary school classroom.

Through her work, Hitchcock describes "various aspects of our conceptual, emotional and imaginative response to words and letters and to the manner in which they exist" (p. 167). Hitchcock advocates interactions with text in ways that exist outside of accepted notions. For example one project that Hitchcock describes, entails chopping up a book and planting it in her garden; for another project, she asked that her students construct three-dimensional letter forms and photograph them in a chosen environment. Each one of Hitchcock's projects suggests that the act of making a text is very much an act of creation. For my purposes, Hitchcock's work is an effective demonstration of ways to expand students' experiences with text.

DAVID ECKER'S QUALITATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING and WARRANTED GENERALIZATIONS

I have looked at the work of David Ecker (1969) for insight into artistic processes, and to ascertain what might be said about the very act of using language as a material with which to make art. Ecker's philosophical discussion is centred on the notion that there are qualities unique to each artist's medium, which in-turn affect the artistic process. Ecker brings attention to the body of related qualities that are inherent in an artist's medium and the process of manipulating that medium, referring to the process as "qualitative problem solving" (1969). A question that Ecker's work suggests is, "what are qualities of text and language that might be considered artistically relevant?" This question directed my analysis

of work by text-based artists, and led me to deduce a group of central concepts. Text has distinct physical properties that include the structure of letters and placement of words; visual aspects of text can be highlighted through drawing, painting and sculpture; the language we use in art can be found in the visual environment around us; and language use is a participatory phenomena.

David Ecker's discussion of artistic process provides me with a framework for research methodology and analysis. Ecker makes the claim that the kind of thinking artists do is intimately related to their medium, characterizing the end product of an artistic problem as entirely reflective of its means. He notes that the solution to an artistic problem, simultaneously presents an opportunity for articulation of another "experiment" (p. 285), or closely related problem. This notion of a cyclical, reflective artistic process has been useful for my ongoing attempt to determine the meaning of, and the methods for, treating language in a visually engaging manner in elementary school. Thus, I regard my art work as well as my research in the schools as a continuum with each piece of art or research reaffirming or negating the work which has preceded it.

CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING THEORY

Constructivism, as it is used here, is an educational term describing a distinct theory of learning, and should not to be confused with the Russian art movement that peaked in the early twentieth century. Constructivist education theory is the conceptual framework in which learning is construed to be an active, ongoing process characterized by reciprocity between teacher and student. In the Encyclopedia of Creativity (1999, pp. 691-697), Natalia Gajdamaschko presents an overview of the psychological work of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), work that is foundational to what we now know as Constructivist pedagogy.

Vygotsky's approach, known as the new Soviet psychology is characterized by three interrelated features of development; these are instrumental, cultural and historical (p. 693).

1) Instrumental psychology is described as the higher psychological tools that individuals use to analyze and modify their own behavior, thus transforming the structure of mental processes.

2) Cultural development is based on the accumulation of mental and physical skills, or "tools" (p. 696) such as language, arithmetic, and symbol systems, that a child is directed by society to use.

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3) Historical development is conceptualized as a feature closely related to cultural development, as history contextualizes the 'tools' developed by a culture.

An important aspect of Vygotsky's notion of history is that it is intended to be a study of current "aspects of life that are in the process of change" (g.694) as well as changes that occurred in the past. An awareness of the constancy of change is at the foundation of Vygotsky's work. An individual's response to the conflicts and tensions that motivate change is seen as intimately related to the 'tools' extended by society. Thus interrelating and interacting, the individual and society create one another anew.

Though Constructivist learning theory is not in itself a methodology, a great deal of pedagogy is based on, and cites, an interpretation of Constructivism. Some of the precepts of Conceptualism that have held my interest are clearly in accord with Constructivism. An aesthetic rooted in viewer participation, and a regard for the most effective ways of expressing what one has learned is described by the Quebec Department of Education (2002) in the following statement:

> This approach sees learning as a process, and the student as the principal agent in that process. The situations that are most conducive to learning are those that present a real challenge to students by obliging them to re-examine their learnings and personal representations. (p.34)

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In a classroom formed around Constructivist principles, learning is construed to be an ongoing, active process. This kind of learning is supported by a degree of reciprocity between teacher and student that I have not seen explicitly encouraged in public schools that I have worked in or visited. As a teacher I observe, encourage, evaluate and assess personal growth in students. My exploration of Visible Language in the classroom stems from a desire to sustain expressive and engaged learning in my students.

CHAPTER 3: WRITING ON THE WALL

I have titled this chapter Writing on the Wall as a double entendre; to imply that I see Visible Language as a potential, forthcoming influence upon elementary art education and as reference to the place that we imagine visual art to typically be; on a wall. In this chapter I will describe two dichotomous notions of art, one related to language as a primary medium for artistic expression, the other; expressiveness rooted in an awareness of art materials. I will illustrate these positions with a recounting of two encounters and responses to language based art. I will present a short history documenting the entrance of language onto the picture plane of twentieth century modern art, locating Conceptualist art practice as a pivotal point within that history. A number of examples from this discussion of words in modern art are illustrated in appendix B. In addition I include passages describing the relevance of comic books and calligraphy to my study of words as images.

Within this chapter I have chosen to focus on Conceptualism because it presents a definite (albeit austere) example of language made visible; experiences of art and language synthesized. I identify a connection between the philosophical underpinnings of Conceptualism, and Constructivist learning theory that enables me to argue that elements of Conceptualism, participatory aesthetics and text as visual art material, are relevant to elementary school teaching.

Examples of contemporary work clearly linked to Conceptualism are discussed later in Chapter Five to illustrate that Conceptualism leads to broader notions of Visible Language.

TWO ENCOUNTERS WITH LETTERS AND WORDS

I would like to describe two very different personal encounters with visible language. The first encounter represents my initial befuddlement at the inclusion of text within a piece of visual art; the second encounter a few years later represents my enthusiasm and acceptance of language as a form of visual art.

An early encounter with text based visual art involved a piece of art made by a fellow student at an art college I attended. The woman (who has since turned her skills toward curatorial and writing projects), constructed a tableau of layers of plexiglass with a few photocopied images of people and volumes of autobiographical writing scratched into the plastic. I recall being annoyed upon viewing this installation, giving the writing a cursory view, I dismissed the piece as an image that I did not find visually engaging. The fact that this artist had chosen to form most of her pictorial image with handwritten text was not an artistic choice that I was familiar with, and as such I was not able to sufficiently engage with the work, much less bother with the words.

The second encounter came a few years later as I drove through the Nova Scotia countryside. As I drove briskly along, I saw a carved wooden letter "R" standing perhaps four or five feet tall on the front lawn of a house. The briefness of this experience (I was not able to revisit this place) did not detract from the effect that it had; after passing the carving I repeated the name of the object out loud, "large carved R, large carved R, large carved R". My apprehension of the piece seemed so immediate, and the concrete, phonological reality of the large letter delightfully complete in itself that I was compelled to record it in a drawing (appendix B, p. 107).

These two accounts describe responses that have been guided by both personal inclination, and a visual arts education. Though I do not remember the precise instance when I first clearly understood text as an aspect of the world of pictures, over time my awareness and understanding of art with language has expanded. My acceptance and embrace of language within visual art has affected both the manner in which I approach the teaching and making of art, as well as the way in which I regard visible language in the built environment. I have presented these two examples to illustrate how we might read and see objects and texts. What follows is a brief description of the point in twentieth century modern art at which words migrated into the picture plane.

TWO POSITIONS OF LANGUAGE AND EXPRESSION

While discussing sculpture curriculum (Sculpture, 2002, p. 49), Tom Butter of Parsons School of Design articulates a crisis encountered as we try to understand the meaning of contemporary art, he describes "two polar ideas of defining truth and making art". One idea about the meaning of art is rooted in linguistic models, is to varying degrees communicative and interactive (and tends to be ephemeral in nature favouring forms such as video or performance). Butter notes that (at college level) "...this approach is so accepted institutionally...that many educators and artists assume it to be the only approach and don't realize that it is a relatively recent development" (p. 49). The other idea that Butter defines is a traditional notion of art that "involves thinking and making originating with the physicality of the world" (p. 49). This art is formed from specific materials and is defined through issues such as scale and position (through forms such as painting and sculpture). Butter recognizes that "a graduated series of positions exists between these two polar ideas about truth [and what art means to us], but that they all derive from the fundamental differences in beliefs and values defined by the poles" (p. 49).

These positions might help characterize two sorts of responses to artwork constructed with Visible Language. The first view accepts that text can be aesthetically meaningful in its appearance as well as in its meaning; the other view then is plainly a rejection of text as a form of art in and of itself.

Understanding the nature of this dichotomy helps me to clarify an objective, to bridge that distance between the two types of response to text as art. It is my hope that I can provide meaningful opportunities to do so through the art I produce and through my approaches to teaching.

ENTRY POINTS OF LANGUAGE INTO EARLY 20TH CENTURY MODERN ART

Work made by Conceptualist artists prompts us to consider a dichotomy between text and image but it is important to recall the significance of when and how text became central to contemporary art. In Adam Gopnik and Kirk Varnedoe's exhibition catalogue (1990), they survey the work of Cubist, Futurist, and Dadaist artists. In each instance the context and methodology of the artist's work is given attention. The collage work of cubists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque created at the beginning of the twentieth century illustrates an initial relationship between modern art and popular culture (appendix B, p.109). In this work, words found in newspapers and on billboards were taken out of context and given new symbolic, personal meanings; often the phrases used were 'in jokes' between Picasso and Braque. These artists broke from the approach to making art that favours the artist as the sole creator of the image often integrating typography and mechanically reproduced images into the work.

According to Gopnik and Varnedoe (1990), the Italian Futurists' approach to language was more performative than that of the Cubists. Futurist artists such as

Giacomo Balla, and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti worked at the same time as the Cubists and were interested in the sounds of modern life. Futurists transcribed these sounds and noises of the city as "an earnest act consistent with their urge to get down to the basics of communication" (p. 49). At the same time Russian Futurists were also interested in the phenomena of language in modern society. Artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko and Vladimir Mayakovsky applied that interest by developing their own typographical innovations; bold graphic forms designed specifically to address a mass audience and reflect revolutionary change.

Text has long had a presence in contemporary art throughout the Twentieth century through to present day. Emerging in the middle of the nineteen sixties, international Conceptualist artists such as Joseph Kosuth, Lawrence Weiner, the Art and Language group, and Hans Haacke produced work in which the picture plane existed entirely in the form of texts. This idiom remains crucial in the works of Jenny Holzer, Richard Prince and Colin McCahon (Barnes et al, 1996), among others. The notion of text as a form of art has become widely accepted in the 'art world', and as such is generally recognized, if not accepted, by audiences of art. I have chosen to reference my study to the work of Conceptualist artist Lawrence Weiner because it indicates a point during the twentieth century at which visual art is entirely composed of language.

The font that Weiner uses is one of his own design; sans serif letters meant to exist plainly on paper or within a chosen environment. I deal with Lawrence Weiner's work later in this document, within the context of Art and Language projects conducted in elementary schools.

COMIC BOOKS

I grew up reading my mother's early Disney comics such as Donald Duck, as well as Marvel super hero comics such as Fantastic Four and Thor. I still collect comics and enjoy the combination of visual art and written language. Though slowly experiencing a renaissance in North America, comic books still occupy a particular place where guilty pleasures are enjoyed. This is partly because the subject matter (superheroes and talking animals) of many comic books appear to be intended for children but the form itself is also problematic.

In his self-published tome on cartoonist Chris Ware, Daniel Raeburn (1999) offers the following insightful explanation of how comics have retained their bad name: Comics are an intuitively understood, yet strangely elusive art. Their words and pictures work together, both in harmony and in counterpoint. The possibility born from this union of prose and visuals is a third thing, trickier than its respected parents, and perhaps for this trickiness comics are still called a bastard child. (Raeburn, p.3)

In his milestone analysis of comics, Scott McCloud (1993) describes the Dadaists and Futurists as having "breached the frontier between appearance and meaning" (p.148). He goes on to explain how modern artists (such as Rene Magritte) "addressed the ironies of how words and pictures work head-on!" (p.148). McCloud then draws a clear line between modern artists' exploration of word and image, to comic books. The influence of low art upon high art is amply explored by Gopnik and Varnedoe (1990). The authors present numerous examples of how comic books have provided inspiration for modern artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Saul Steinberg and Philip Guston.

THE CALLIGRAPHER AS ARTIST

In Donald Jackson's historical overview The Story of Writing (1981), he describes how the development of modern interest in hand lettering, or calligraphy rose as a response to the growing industrialization of nineteenth century Great Britain. Concurrent with William Morris' articulation of an aesthetic rooted in "hand craftsmanship" and "a slightly sentimental socialist philosophy" (p. 155) newly founded schools of Applied Arts and Design presented opportunities to develop decorative writing skills. William Morris advocated a return to hand lettering as a legitimate branch of fine arts; an act of recovering a dwindling base of skills eclipsed by the printing press. The calligrapher was, claimed Jackson, an artist who "paints with the shapes of letters, and makes them with a quill as well as a brush." (p. 156). Though calligraphy and hand lettering as an art is not widely

taught, there is good reason to investigate telling examples. The care and attention that is brought to hand lettering is in accord with the concern for technique that young children need to bring to their printing of letters. Illuminated letters, such as those found in The Book of Kells offer marvelous examples of how the visual impact of written language can transcend the limitations of standard letter-forms.

CALLIGRAPHY AND CORE BELIEFS

I have chosen to briefly address calligraphy in this study primarily because it exemplifies a reverent approach to writing concerned with visual appearance. Although calligraphy per se is not part of what I teach my Grade One students, some of the concerns associated with calligraphy inform the instruction I provide. As I am obliged to teach children the conventions of printing, proper posture and pencil grip are emphasized and as well the appearance of neatly formed letters is highly valued. Perhaps it could be said that printing is a discipline, and calligraphy is an art.

Calligraphy fulfills an important function within the context of Islam, conveying core beliefs as expressed in the Qur'an. In Islam figurative art is regarded as tantamount to idolatry; thus an important expressive vehicle for reflecting the cultural values of the Muslim world are the shapes and sizes of words and letters. The high priority that writing is given in Muslim culture is revealed in the

ubiquitous application of writing onto interior and exterior wall surfaces and countless objects. The visual expressiveness, creativity and purposefulness typical of Arabic and Persian writing piques my interest. I am attracted to the notion that text may be elevated to the status of art, and that it can transcend the page to be purposefully applied or installed into an environment, or onto an object for reading/viewing.

On the website www.islamicart.com Anthony Welch cites the following quote from the Qur'an underscoring the educative function of writing:

Thy Lord is the Most Bounteous,

Who teacheth by the pen,

Teacheth man that which he knew not.

-(Surah al-Alaq, 96:3-5)

My personal experience with non-western forms of writing is limited; working briefly in a large urban Canadian city brought me in contact with large populations of children from Muslim families. I can remember clearly one Grade Three boy who had arrived from Cairo the day before, not speaking a word of English. As he sat in the classroom apparently overwhelmed an aide tried to help him understand what was happening around him. I feel that my own understanding of forms of writing such as Arabic calligraphy, illustrations of the

Koran or Japanese brush calligraphy is limited in the same way that the boy was;

limited to the way that English language sounds and looks quite apart from its

meaning.

THE CONCEPT OF CONCEPTUALISM

The genre of Conceptual art can be characterized by a critical perspective on the

political and economic systems that sustain western art (Dictionary of Art, 1996).

Conceptualist artists have produced work that de-emphasizes the sensory

elements of art and places more importance upon communicating an idea than

producing a permanent object (Craven, 1996). A concern for language usage

and philosophical inquiry unifies the diverse range of artists who have worked

within the Conceptual idiom. These artists, such as Lawrence Weiner, Joseph

Kosuth, and Sol LeWitt often cite the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In his volume of collected writings, Joseph Kosuth (1993) articulates a

connection between Conceptualism and Wittgenstein's work in the following

statement, "Art is itself philosophy made concrete." (p.52).

The participatory and communicative features of Conceptual art are well

illustrated by the text-based artwork of early Conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner.

Alexander Alberro makes the point in The Encyclopedia of Aesthetics Vol.1

(1998) that Weiner's work is made with the aim to diminish the distance between

making and viewing art. Weiner's "participatory aesthetics" (Alberro 1998)

operate in the form of 'statements' that are dependant upon the response of the viewer, or in Weiner's words, the 'recipient'. The form that we would most often see when we look at Lawrence Weiner's art are words on the wall; those words are thus interpreted literally (we create what Weiner has described) or simply translated into a mental image. The 'recipient' of the work, through purchase or viewing, is responsible for the decision of how the work is to exist. Weiner's criterion is articulated in his piece, Declaration of Intent:

The artist may construct the piece

The piece may be fabricated

The piece need not be built

Each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist, the decision

as to condition rests with the receiver upon occasion of receivership.

-Lawrence Weiner (1968)

Consider also as an example then, the following work by Weiner:

ONE HOLE IN THE GROUND APPROXIMATELY 1'X1'X1'. ONE GALLON WATER BASED WHITE PAINT POURED INTO THIS HOLE

-Lawrence Weiner (1973)

This work is able to exist in a number of forms: as a text installed onto a gallery wall, as a literal interpretation of the description, executed by the artist, recipient or hired person; or purely as a form of knowledge (it has been described, thus it exists). The point being that the aesthetic experience of the viewer in this instance is predicated upon involved engagement with the work.

Undertaking this project, I am reminded of the influence that the precepts of Conceptualism have had on the work I have done as an educator and artist. An awareness and acceptance of Conceptualist precepts was woven into a great deal of the studio practice and dialog at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, in Halifax, Nova Scotia where I attended from 1991 until 1995. A preoccupation with language and methodology, a critique of the institutions of the artworld and the dematerialization of the art object are among the primary features of Conceptualism that I learned about during my undergraduate studies. When I began work as a public school art specialist and then classroom teacher (expected to deliver a variation of "school art"), my key priority became the children I was working with. While finding ways for children to make art that was integrated into the core classroom programs, my interest in Conceptualism did not pass, instead becoming integrated into my work as a classroom teacher.

CONCEPTUALISM AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

As I present them in this paper, most examples of 'words as art' I will discuss are chosen for the visual qualities, but never for those qualities alone; I am interested as well in what the words literally say. I believe that the relationship between what words mean and what words look like; the interstices of appearance and meaning is worth investigating for the purpose of claiming a unique pedagogical space within the fields of elementary school Language arts and Visual arts. Artwork that is theoretically grounded in Conceptualism is predicated on a cognitive experience; this stands in contrast to the expressive, sensory experience usually associated with non-verbal children's art. Conceptualism is reductive and immaterial in form, and when translated from its original context in the art world to the markedly different world of elementary school, the general rationale and purpose of the work needs to be addressed. I believe that there are two distinct elements in the Conceptualist approach that translate particularly well to elementary school art and language education.

The first element is that Conceptualism encourages us to consider art as a medium of expression based on active participation for both the viewer and the maker. The notion of 'participatory' aesthetics prompted by Weiner's work is in accord with what Richard Cary (1998, p.273) describes as "critical aesthetics". The involvement of the viewer in each of Lawrence Weiner's statements is made clear in the following line from his declaration of intent: "...the decision as to

condition rests with the receiver upon occasion of receivership". Weiner is in effect literally encouraging viewers to 'make what they will' of his work, (that is if they choose to engage at all in his work).

In simple terms, art that has a 'participatory aesthetic' invites involvement and within student work it may ask a question (a text painting reads "what are shadows made from?"), cite a personal reference (a small sculpture made of wooden bits spells the word "Mother"), or provide instruction (a cue card directs you to "cut off your hair and glue it to the wall"). Language engages us on an interactive and interpretive level and if willing, the viewer of text-based work is potentially drawn to interact with the work in a way that the artist cannot predict. The act of reading is an inherently active process requiring focused involvement on the part of a reader. While a young reader will understand words to be meaningful based upon what they refer to (CAT means small furry animal), and the personal associations they conjure (CAT reminds me of my own cat); the physical appearance of the word is often overlooked.

The second element then, is that Conceptualism enhances awareness of text as a visual phenomenon. Lawrence Weiner's work can be read strictly for meaning, viewed simply as a block of text. The following text piece by Weiner could be seen as a description or suggestion, or self-referentially as eighty seven upper case bold letters combined to form twenty words dispersed over three lines.

MANY THINGS PLACED HERE & THERE

TO FORM A PLACE CAPABLE OF SHELTERING

MANY OTHER THINGS PUT HERE AND THERE

-Lawrence Weiner (1980)

In the self-referential spirit of Weiner's preceding piece, I posted a question on the classrooom wall, close to where students engaged in independent play. The question read:

CAN YOU MAKE LETTERS THAT LOOK LIKE THESE FROM BLOCKS?

Student responses to this question indicated that they had been drawn to enage with the very letters composing the question. My primary objective, that I provoke students to "make" language was achieved.

ART AND LANGUAGE PROJECTS

Many of the lessons I have presented in the classroom have dealt with the visual appearance of letters and words, and the meaning of those words. One example is the 'one word sentence' project (Appendix A, p. 74; Appendix B, p. 99), inspired by a passage by Lee and Rubin (1979, p. 59). In this description of the beginnings of speech, the notion is put forth that one word "may express a thought in certain contexts". Lee and Rubin ask rhetorically "how can a word be a sentence?" and state "without a context, of course, it could not be." (p. 59). I

thought it appropriate to use the one word sentence as an effective way to involve students, particularly the young ones with Visible Language; a word being a unit or module of language with which they have acquired some degree of proficiency, (as opposed to more syntactically advanced sentence structures). In curricular terms, the grade one student is assumed to have enough knowledge of letters and the sounds to identify and generate a basic vocabulary of what educators refer to as 'sight words'. The notion that the children might have a stronger connection with a single word through the experience of constructing that word from concrete materials, as a picture, is at the root of this pursuit.

This experience in the classroom however brings me back to Rudolf Arnheim's (1969) point that the shape of language has limitations that are superseded by the intended reference of language. For example, the meaning of the word 'mother' eclipses the sound of the word when spoken or looked upon as a word printed on the page.

PRINCIPLES OF WRITING

The relevance of using art as a tool for fostering an understanding of written language becomes more apparent when reviewing the principles of writing. Lee and Rubin (1979, p. 59). list a number of these principles; I have summarized them as follows:

Recurring principle

- elements are repeated

- there is control over strokes, letters, words

Generative principle

- there are rules for arranging and combing elements in written language

- letters and words can be combined and strung together in new and inventive ways

Sign and message principle

- writing consists of graphic symbols that carry a message

Flexibility Principle

- letters can be paired to form new letters (P transforms to B)

- there is an awareness of the boundaries of print conventions (only certain variations of letters are identifiable as language signs)

Contrastive Principle

- there are differences between letters; comparing & contrasting letters comes spontaneously as children act on what they know about written language

Certain elements of these principles such as: repeating elements; control over strokes; combining, comparing and contrasting; and the meanings conveyed by symbols can be pertinent to a program of visual art as well as to a language art curriculum. Lessons described in appendix A each demonstrate different aspects of the principles of writing.

Two lessons, "one word sentences" and "statements as art" exemplify the "sign and message" principle of writing. Based on the work of Laurence Weiner, "statements as art" (Appendix A, p. 47) emphasizes the message that letters and words carry, as opposed to the appearance of those letters. Students imagine and then describe a situation, in this case stacks of objects. While I asked my Grade One students to describe a stack and then actually create it, I presented the same project differently to grade Five and Six students. Here I asked the older students to describe a stack that did not necessarily have to be possible to create in real life, that is to say that the description of the work was in fact its completion.

The line drawing lesson "basic patterns of letter forms" (Appendix A, p. 77) refers to the specific elements that comprise letters. In this lesson lines and shapes that construct letters are used to create individual, directed drawings. Students are instructed to fill their drawing space with specific elements such as "a series of lines running from top to bottom", "a series of lines running from one corner to another", or "a series of lines hanging down from circles". Using these simple

elements for drawing activities supports the notion that letters are composed of a series of repeating elements, while at the same time requiring controlled use of a drawing instrument.

The lesson "drawing letters" reveals to children that although there can be differences in the repeated appearance of an individual letter, (such as A, A, or A), the elements that comprise and structure individual letters are consistent. When I ask children to draw a letter as an individual, single object, I am suggesting that a single letter can be appreciated for its finer qualities.
I keep a collection of letters from signs and print media in the classroom for appreciation, as well as asking children to form their own letter collections.

The impulse to collect things is strong in First Grade and I employ that impulse in a lesson I call "a number of things are made into letters". We combine elements found in our desks, or perhaps brought to school from home to make letters. This is an interesting project because it asks students to identify and show the basic elements that comprise a letter from the alphabet using objects that are not letters. One of my favourite responses to this project was the deft use of a pair of sunglasses used by a Grade One student to portray an uppercase B. As with the "drawing letters" lesson, this lesson also asks students to consider different ways to represent the same letter.

In Grade One, students learn a base of individual words ("sight words"). Students do so by developing an understanding of the rules that determine the different sounds each letter represents and the words made by combining those letters. The lesson "one word sentences" asks that students arrange letters they have made from a variety of materials (such as sticky paper or paint) and combine them to form individual words, thus demonstrating the "generative principle" of writing. Occasionally in class we will play with different arrangements of letters to create new, nonsensical words. While it is enjoyable for students to use tactile materials to make words, it is also a useful assessment opportunity for me, allowing me to observe the range of abilities within the class to generate written language.

THE CONCEPT OF TRANSFER

The art lessons and the principles of writing I have summarized reveal connections between language and art. I believe the interplay between drawing activities and learning to write might best be described with the concept of 'transfer'. Learning involves transferring appropriate strategies, information and knowledge of patterns from one situation to another (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara & Campione. 1983). When students learn an effective strategy in one situation (such as predicting when reading) they can transfer the use of this strategy to a new situation (such as predicting when planning an experiment).

In a very real sense, transfer is the essence of what happens when learning occurs; the student calls upon familiar knowledge and effective strategies to understand and master new material (Brown et al. 1983).

A specific research design would allow one to observe students demonstrating the concept of transfer. For example, the research might focus on a directed line drawing and follow it with a letter-form exercise. Students in the classroom do occasionally make it clear that 'connections' have been made; this might be apparent in a comment made by a student, or in the work produced by that student.

Once, after completing the "basic patterns of letter forms" lesson, a Grade One student suggested that the drawings looked like "Egyptian inscriptions". He went on to show the class his book bag with its printed border of hieroglyphics. I was thrilled that a student was able to offer this interpretation of the drawings, thus transferring his experience of the drawing lesson to a language application. I explained to the class that it was commonly thought that the Egyptian alphabet was among the first alphabets in the world.

CHAPTER 4: INVENTING A LANGUAGE-THEORY TO PRACTICE

Concluding my effort to draw connections between some of the precepts of Conceptualism and elementary art and language education I will itemize the elements that I feel are relevant for consideration; I will also touch upon aspects of Conceptualism that I feel are problematic for this project. In Chapter Three I described early modern artists who brought language to modern art. In this chapter I would like to present some key examples of how the tradition of language in art, as well as elements of Conceptualism has continued through the work of three Canadian artists (appendix B); Robert Fones, Ken Lum and Greg Curnoe. Direct links will be made between the language strategies of each of these artists and practices for working with language in elementary school. I will discuss examples of work by these artists that have been used or might be used to directly illustrate concepts in visual art to students, and how I have taken more general directions from these artists in how I deal with language and art in the classroom.

I have formed a list of concepts that are central to text-based art and function as the backbone of activities for the classroom. This list is drawn from the work of all the artists I have examined throughout this study, Finally, in closing I will reassert my key points dealing with the "object" quality of language and aspects of Conceptual art practice as they relate to elementary education.

CONCEPTUALISM: AN UNDESIRABLE STYLE

Arthur Efland's critically analytical essay "The school art style: a functional analysis" (1976) has provided a strong point of reference while pursuing my interest in the use of text in elementary school visual art. The work I have done based on the meaning and appearance of text and letter-forms is a response to Efland's gentle challenge to a standard model of school art. I have observed that students are reluctant to embrace statements, or descriptions for instance as a form of art; this reluctance is measured by looks of confusion from students; the classic comment: "I don't get it"; and the impatient question: "when are we going to paint?" It is in these responses I witness Efland's assertion that in upholding the typical model of school art, "avant-garde styles like conceptual art would not be desirable." (p.42).

Conceptualist preoccupations such as: the dematerialisation of the art object, focus on language, and an implicit or forthright critique of the artworld and authoritative definitions of art, all stand in opposition to the common expectations that students, administrators and parents have of an art program. However undesirable the style, or methodology of conceptual art might be as an influence upon elementary school art, it remains prevalent and widely influential within the sphere of contemporary art.

In the interest of fostering an art program that draws from current art practices, all the while motivated by sound educational purposes, I feel justified in my work with conceptualism. While a negative response in the classroom can be discouraging, the inevitable seepage of avant-garde art into the realm of elementary school art education remains a recurring phenomena and can be charted at various points during the twentieth century. This can be observed in the expressionist tendencies in art education that came to prominence during the nineteen-fifties and again with post-modernism during the middle nineteen-eighties and early nineteen-nineties. At this second point, practitioners of Discipline Based Art Education began to place an emphasis on the inclusiveness of social concerns and looked to the avant-garde for different voices.

Conceptualism stands in apparent contrast to the creative visual expressiveness of school art. The common perception of school art is that is rooted in sensory experience, and does not present an intellectual challenge (Efland, p.42). Conceptualism presents the view that language use can be simultaneously a cognitive process and visual experience. Within elementary education a Conceptualist concern with language is neither fully appropriate within visual arts, or language arts curriculum, yet at the same time, has clear relevance for each. Some Conceptualist artists use language as an art material because it facilitates a dematerialization of the art object, and this agenda is at odds with the cognitive developmental concerns of a typical lower elementary aged child (Philips, 1969).

I would conclude that traditional Conceptualist art practice, reductive in form, is a style of art that cannot be translated wholesale into an elementary school context.

Despite the formal limitations of Conceptualism however, I have gone to great length to argue that there are in fact some aspects of Conceptualism that are relevant to elementary school art education and classroom practice. To support this claim I have chosen three artists who have drawn from Conceptualist art practice to form bodies of art that are comprised of Visible Language. These artists motivate me and provide useful models from which I have taken direction for concepts and activities, (some that have already introduced in the classroom and some that I propose developing).

THREE CANADIAN ARTISTS USING LANGUAGE IN THEIR ART

ROBERT FONES

Robert Fones' understanding of the object quality of printed letters is based on his reciprocal practices as an artist, historical researcher, and writer. In an exhibition catalogue of his work, (Bradley, 1994) Fones reflects on the fleeting point in a child's development when letters are seen for their morphology; primarily as pictures for single sounds, and less as abstract symbols to combine and use for describing the world. Fones revisits this point, not for the romantic

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appeal of seeing the world through the eyes of child, but as an artistic strategy intended to highlight letters as "palpable things which have cultural meanings beyond their intended purpose." (Bradley, p.19). Fones' body of artwork Historiated Letters (1994) is a series of flat, large-scale letter-forms that he has fabricated from aluminum; surfacing each with a photographic image (appendix B). Fones, work relates to diverse issues such as typography, semiotics, museology, and industry. I see Robert Fones' notion that a single letter could be viewed as an artifact as a wonderful model with which to appeal to children who have a propensity for collecting. Each letter in the alphabet has a rich and multi-layered history, as well as a functional role combining to produce sounds and meaning. Investigating the historical evolution of each letter in the alphabet as well as the range of typographic possibilities enriches the presence of language in the classroom. I envision a yearlong course of study involving the curatorial manipulation of words in the classroom; finding the letters (and words), displaying them, sharing them and discussing them for their look and referent.

GREG CURNOE

Greg Curnoe's lettered paintings are apt examples of language as art, as they exist as words directly printed onto canvas. In the text accompanying his exhibition, Greg Curnoe- Some lettered works, 1961-1969, (1975) Curnoe describes in straightforward terms, the methodology and intent behind his use of text as an artistic medium. Curnoe describes his systematic approach to making

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language paintings; a process of observing and recording in a journal, then transcribing his observations using rubber stamps on canvas. A distinction is drawn between the stamped text on a canvas and the writing in a journal; the text on the canvas being a self-contained selection from the journal. Curnoe remembers an early experience with an art educator who attempted to dissuade him from including words in the drawings he made. This connection between word and image is perhaps clearest in his early tableau drawings of notebooks and cartoon characters. Reflecting on this experience, he connects his interest as an adult making drawings of language, to the comic books and children's books with captions underneath he looked at as a child. (pp. 1-2). Curnoe states that he made notes for his descriptive text paintings " …using language that was as simple as possible using no metaphors" (p. 5) Curnoe's concern for plain, unencumbered language reflects his interest in philosophy, notably that of Ludwig Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 2001).

Curnoe shows language as a personal, visual means of expression using immediate and accessible methodology (rubber-stamping). In my experience however, rubber-stamps are cumbersome when children are using them for producing longer passages and are perhaps best suited for representing single words or shorter phrases. Students often use rubber stamps in the classroom as a way to practice the weekly spelling list. The notion that mechanical reproduction of language can be used in an artistic manner is a primary concept

worthy of consideration. I am also intrigued by Curnoe's translation of journal writing into visual art. This movement from one mode of expression to another; the editorial selection from a larger body of text to create a single piece of visual art is an activity I could envision elementary students engaging.

KEN LUM

Like Greg Curnoe's work, Ken Lum's Language Paintings (appendix B) are constructed using letter-forms. Lum's Language Paintings however are more visually dynamic than Curnoe's and evoke a 'voice' that is similar to commercial billboards. The words that Lum uses within his paintings are nonsensical words; one painting features the statement: "IGNTH DITI LAT", another "KETIN-BO M A F F - G R A   H E S M E S "

Ken Lum's work mimics the language that we see in the world around us; it shows the colour and dynamic composition of signs and advertising. ". Jeff Wall (1991), writing on Lum's work, proposes that the words in these paintings are suggestive of a "world-language", (such as Esperanto), but that since no such language actually exists, we "imagine we are simply reading signs written in a foreign language." Wall cites Julia Kristeva's 1974 book "La Révolution du language poétique", which states "the pulverization of language is a fundamental characteristic of avant-gardism". Wall situates Lum's work alongside other examples of dematerialized writing, such as concrete poetry, sound poetry,

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phonic poetry and lettrism. The claim Wall makes is that Lum's 'Language Paintings' have the capacity to affect our perceptions of language "at a cellular level". While this claim may be somewhat conflated, it does perhaps point to the visual immediacy and linguistic brevity of each of Lum's 'Language Paintings'. Linguistic revolt and avant-garde pretensions aside, Lum's paintings are fun. While Lum employs nonsensical word play as a bid towards dematerializing language, I believe that it is useful to employ word-play in the elementary classroom for the opposite reason: to aid children in their development of language. Two classroom activities I have presented can be connected to Ken Lum's use of popular images of text and his word play; these activities are painted sound effects and a nonsensical spelling list.

Responding to the nonsense words that Ken Lum depicts, I provided grade four students with a list of scenarios that result in a particular noise. They were asked to generate creative, phonetic spellings of sound effects using pencil and paper then depict their sound effect texts using paint and paper.

Here are student examples:

A piano falling from a building: KKAAAAplllllllOlOoioioioioiioioioinnnggggggg

A river of ice thawing in the sun: CCCCCccccrrrrraaaaaAAAKKKKKKkkk

A bag of popcorn being spilled onto the floor: plplpl pi piplplp   pliplplplliiiiplplplpl

Inspired by Ken Lum's work, grade one and two students were provided with a spelling list, (I call it a "Smelling Twist") using nonsense sounds for a directed learning opportunity. I composed this list to encourage accurate listening skills; students were dircted to document the word as they heard it, using letter/sound knowledge they have acquired. This enjoyable activity provided me with an opportunity to evaluate the ability that students have to hear and represent various word sounds. A range of possible representations for each 'word' distinguishes this activity from traditional spelling tests that emphasize a single spelling convention, related to a specific word. The shift from a right/wrong answer to an answer that qualifies by matters of degrees also serves to remove pressure to succeed a pressure that sometimes impedes the ability of students to perform academically. Here is a sample selection of Smelling Twist words: boogerflee, brip, crudder, brap, dackler, nonono, and derdoo (Appendix B, p. 92).

CONCEPTS TO DEMONSTRATE

As I have indicated throughout this document the confluence of language and art (language in art or as art) is a prevalent contemporary phenomena. While examining the Visible Language in contemporary art through the lens of postmodern art education It is useful to try and itemize some of the basic concepts that are central to text based art. Activities composed for the classroom could be built around some of these concepts including, (but are not limited to) the following:

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Language is a phenomena with distinct physical properties; there are formal, visual qualities of text (Visible Language), this includes the structure of letters and the placement of words. In the classroom there are conventions that students learn as they practice their printing skills. I have carried some of these conventions concerning line and shape into drawing and painting activities. For instance, the "basic patterns of letter forms" drawing activity directs students to experiment with the same lines and shapes used to form letters.

There is a relationship between what language means, and what it looks like. I choose the fonts that I use for worksheets carefully, usually trying to avoid a particular association, but occasionally choosing one to accentuate a topic ("chiller" is a font I use around Halloween time.). The most classic example of this concept, and one that I use perennially, is an image of the word "ice" as it appears on the side of a corner store freezer. The letters painted to appear as though they are frosty and cold. To promote discussion of this concept, it would be useful to show English speaking students a French version of the same sign, "glace.

Questions such as "What could this sign say?" "What is it that gives us the idea that this sign says ice, or cold?" could be asked to try and get underneath the concept of the combined look and meaning of language. Semiotics for Grade One students perhaps?

Text, like drawing, painting, and sculpture, can be used as a visual medium of expression. I have successfully illustrated this concept to date by installed a printed sentence onto the floor of the classroom or hallway. The installation of text printed in large scale font (190 point) onto the floors of the school shows an unconventional regard for how text can be handled. By installing a simple sentence (i.e. "Today I will walk into Grade One!") onto the floor of the school, students' experience of text moves from the confines of books, pages, posters, etc to a more kinesthetic engagement. A few months after I debuted this strategy for presenting text, parents at the school appropriated the same technique to advertise a chocolate bar fundraiser. I saw this as proof that I had stumbled onto a good idea.

Mechanical reproductions of language can be used in an artistic manner. Much of the text I produce for use in the classroom, (sentence walks, posters, worksheets) relies upon the use of a computer to produce it. When I am retrieving the work I have sent from the computer to the photocopier room for printing, there is commonly positive interest from other

teachers in the style and size of the fonts I use, and the size and format of paper I print onto. I often print worksheets onto ledger size paper (11"x17") with simple bold fonts primarily because I believe it is most appropriate for the students I teach (big paper to accommodate gross motor movements, and large bold fonts for visibility). I make a point of explaining to other teachers why I have made the decisions I have, and showing when they are interested how they can obtain some of the same results (i.e. how to select "ledger size" when creating a document).

The language we use for art can be found or observed in the visual environment around us and then inversely we can place language-as-art into the environment around us. Signs, posters, graffiti, large scale words on the walls and floor, word sculptures displayed in school vitrines; these are all examples of where we find language (and where we can put language) around the school. I enlivened the one-word sentence activity by showing students photographs I had taken of recognizable signs in their neighbourhood. Students were engaged with the words and letters that they were looking at...they then used those letters as models with which to create their own meaningful words. The words that the students produced were installed in the gymnasium to be viewed during a school function.

Text and image can be combined to create a specific meaning. Elementary students in Ontario are encouraged to communicate visually using a range of media. The production and interpretation of images provide an ideal bridge between oral language and written language. Students work throughout the year in a "half-and-half" journal; a notebook with lines on the bottom half of the page for writing and space at the top half for drawing. I discuss with students how the drawing should show things that the words cannot easily portray, and the words explain what might not be apparent in the picture.

Language is a medium that is based upon participation. It is important to me that whenever possible the language we work with in the classroom comes from us (students and teacher). I listen carefully to conversations in the classroom and recount snippets via a weekly newsletter, turn them into posters or bring them back to the children for discussion (i.e. I once overheard in a Kindergarten class the following statement "I like coming to school because Mr. Senitt lets me paint on the weasel.") This comment provided both an amusing anecdote for my newsletter, as well as an impromptu language lesson (easel, weasel, diesel, measles...). If the language we use comes from a text-book, the level of engagement is predictably flatter than if comes from our own experiences.

MATERIAL NOTES

Thus far I have described art pieces with only passing reference to materials and construction. While Visible Language might be produced with a wide range of materials (letters are made with lines and shapes), there are some common materials that I utilize myself in the classroom. Some of the materials I use in the classroom for forming letters and words are: paint, ink, pencil, sign maker's vinyl, pipe cleaners, modeling clay, wooden blocks, stuffed animals and found objects. Materials are chosen for their visual appeal as well as their grade level appropriateness.

The most common materials used for making Visible Language are those that are typically considered as "fine art" media such as such as paint and ink applied to paper or canvas. An example such as the cubist work of Picasso and Braque (appendix B) shows how language becomes visible in oil paintings, collage and drawings on canvas and paper. The examples of work such as Laurence Weiner made later in the continuum of Visible Language show use of materials such as house paint applied directly to surfaces such as the gallery wall, or perhaps installed outside the gallery walls into the urban environment.

A visit I once made to an installation of work by artist Jenny Holzer showed that carefully selected media affects how artwork is received. Appropriating the LED (light-emitting diode) signs most often used in advertising, Holzer filled the gallery space with signs programmed with her own texts. The effect of the signs with their scrolling messages was visceral and immediate. The lights were bright, colourful and visually disorienting. The reflection of the signs on the floor added to the impact of the rapidly scrolling messages. Take for example the following selection of statements, or "Truisms" as Holzer (Gopnik, Varnedoe, 1990) refers to them:

PROTECT ME FROM WHAT I WANT

ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE

MONEY CREATES TASTE

Holzer's choice of the electronic signboard to represent her texts seems appropriate given that her statements speak to the tension between personal experiences and public expression.

Using art materials in the classroom to make words engages children and provides them with an opportunity to experience language in a manner not usually provided by teachers in elementary school. Once while casting plaster words into an outdoor sandbox during recess with a group of Grade Four students I observed that a large group of other students from the school had

gathered around. There was a palpable sense of anticipation as we all waited for the plaster to dry so that we could flip the casting over and see how it had turned out. Once it was time, we gently poked a stick under the word to pry the word upright to see. Students craned their necks to see as the sand was brushed off to reveal the word. The word had broken into 3 pieces that were placed back together to read. A number of voices read the word at once, "Courtney". The importance of a particular word had been made more substantial by revealing it anew.

THE LOOK OF LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

In my discussion of Art and Language in the elementary school classroom thus far, I have recounted examples of projects to illustrate what it could look like. I want to see the classroom as a workshop; as a room in which all surfaces are potential indications of experimentation with, and refinement of language.

A successful example of my treatment of text in the classroom is an ongoing project Sentence Walk. This project consists of a single sentence printed onto photocopy paper in 150-point font and secured to the floor with transparent tape. The first sentence in this series read: "I can put my foot on words", and was installed outside the entrance of my grade one classroom door. Before installation, this sentence was presented within the classroom as a study of basic sentence conventions looking at characteristics such as use of capitals, finger

spaces between words and periods. We then counted the words in the sentence and took turns gingerly stepping on each word while reading it out loud. My intuitive choice to install the text from the door out into the hall proved very effective as students slowed to walk the text each time they left the classroom. It unexpectedly functioned as a constructive and educative traffic-calming zone. Students from other classes and teachers also expressed an interest as they passed by. As one teacher inquired about the text, she first offered her own insights into what my intentions might be. Simply put, she suggested that I had wanted to show that "words are all around us", and gave a few examples such as t-shirts and billboards. I replied that her 'reading' was accurate (and in line with my own ideas articulated in this document).

This simple gesture of installing text on the floor has brought me back to a quality of engagement in the classroom that I most enjoy; inspired, well-informed experimentation within language and art education. The self-referential, materialist aspects of Laurence Weiner's work seem slightly less problematic in an elementary school when watching six-year-olds mouth the words that describe the experience of their feet. "I can put my foot on words" becomes less a metaphor than a concrete, self-referential description of the process of reading. The art installation of a sentence facilitates a meta-cognitive awareness of the reading process.

PICTURES OF WORDS FOR SHARING

The collection of drawings and text accompanying this document (Appendix B) represents an archive of my frolic with language. My interest in scavenging and playing about with words and letters manifests itself in my sketchbook, studio, and in the lessons I teach in my classroom. It is my hope that the illustrations in this document kindle an appreciation of the spectrum of visual qualities possible within alphabetic text while offering a glimpse of how the tradition of language in contemporary art enters elementary education.

In the past I have used appropriation as a strategy for generating the content and stylistic presentation of my artwork. These illustrations are directed towards my two primary peer groups, teachers and artists. The drawings work in consort with the text. Not unlike a New Yorker magazine cartoon, the image engages and is brought to some closure through the text (functioning as a sort of gallery exhibition label). I have chosen not to categorize the images in the booklet and they range in kind. I have included images of individual letters and text; some invented and some found.

I have an emotional attachment to many of these works. One image, of the text UNION, acquires specific meaning when it is revealed that I chose the image as a wedding announcement. There are specific Alphabetic images; each indicating a personal narrative or pertinent examples of modern and contemporary visual

art. My drawing of Robert Fone's EGYPTIAN EXPANDED g /LION'S MANE (Appendix B, p.110) is an appreciation for his attention to letters-as-objects, and an opportunity to describe an example of my own compulsive collecting and hoarding of letters and words.

THE VISIBLE SUBSTANCE OF LANGUAGE

The immateriality of Conceptualism thwarts and confounds expectations of visual art, and more specifically School Art. The work of Lawrence Weiner has been an effective example to focus upon because he uses plain language unencumbered by metaphor and excessive description in order to create art that is more akin to sculpture than writing. Weiner has provided a model for me; a reference as I create lessons and organize the classroom in a manner that focuses attention on text as a physical experience. Giving attention to Weiner's work, (as well as other artists) has helped me find my way from a problematic hypothesis, towards constructive realizations. My students and I benefit directly from this thesis as I used what I have learned to develop curriculum aimed at building student understandings of language, through art.

The connections I make between elementary art and language education and Conceptualist art practice in this thesis have been a bid to reconcile the abstractness of Language with the materiality of Art; doing so has revealed for myself and others, certain opportunities for learning. The overall impression I

wish to make with this thesis and the accompanying collection of drawings is that examining the structure, appearance and meaning of the letters and words we use to express ourselves is worthwhile and productive for elementary school teachers.

I have found Conceptual art to be an unlikely, yet useful tool with which to teach language. I have clearly seen the advantages to children that are provided by an introduction of Conceptualist concerns into an elementary language arts program through engaged students, pertinent discussions, and the resulting art and language work. The assets that a teacher with a visual arts background brings to the treatment of language arts instruction in the general classroom have been mine to realize, struggle to articulate, document and then build upon. I have used this document as opportunity to seek reconciliation between the physicality of art, (particularly at an elementary school level) and the abstract qualities of language. Working as an artist and teacher, I want to disrupt our mundane response to text in order to kindle an appreciation of the visible substance of language.

Appendix A
Five Lesson Plans

Lesson #1 **LETTER DRAWINGS**

Objectives and Rationale

The lesson focusing on letterforms is a drawing exercise in observation and

copying. Students will view a variety of font samples and use them to produce

observation drawings.

Materials

6" squares of cartridge paper

black pens and markers

Resources

laminated reproductions of interesting letter-forms

e.g. *Rustic and Rough Hewn Alphabets* (selected and arranged by Dan X. Solo)

Procedure

1. **Motivation.** Distribute examples of different expressive fonts, one letter per

   card. Discuss the qualities of line, and elements of shape that form each

   letter. Emphasize that this is a drawing activity rather than a printing exercise.

   Discuss use of appropriate use of pen and marker for producing lines and

filling in shapes respectively. Demonstrate observation drawing on chalkboard, with an emphasis on sketching the layout of the basic form lightly first.

2. Students will use font samples to produce accurate observation drawings of letters, one letter per square of paper.

Evaluation

Students will produce accurate drawings of letters copied from samples of different font styles. Students will demonstrate awareness of basic layout of letter design through execution of letter drawings

Follow-up

- These letter samples can be used to form entire words.

- Students can use these letters as forms in other work they do such as posters, book reports or art projects.

Lesson # 2 ONE-WORD SENTENCES

Objectives and Rationale

Student will be introduced to the concept of the one-word-sentence; a personally meaningful word that will be represented within an art context through skillful use of materials. Students will explore the notion that one word can imply more than its literal meaning through the manner or material with which it is presented, and the context in which it is presented. For example, a child yelling MILK clearly is indicating need, frustration and urgency; this meaning is indicated by tone of voice as well as the time of day that the word is presented. The same issues of intonation and circumstance are relevant to the meaning a painting, drawing or construction of a word. The colour, proportions and style of a word also affect the meaning of a word. Students will review how different colours have different emotions, (red-anger, blue-glum, yellow-energetic) and lines can indicate a variety of different qualities, (calm, busy, lazy). In order to complete this project, students should have had some previous experience looking at and considering the graphic qualities of letter and word design in their own artwork. If English is not the first language of the students in the class, suggest that they work in their own language. Perhaps they might provide a translation in fine print at the bottom of the page.

Materials

Wood scraps, construction paper scraps, drawing materials (pens, pencils, markers, pastels, crayons)

Resources

images of single words collected; these could consist of photographs from the neighbourhood students live in or print media clippings.

Procedure

1. **Motivation.** Discuss the concept of a one-word-sentence with students; print the word *milk* on the chalk board and ask students to free associate a range of different meanings: what does *milk* mean to you?, what else could it mean? Articulate how a single word can have a specific meaning depending on the way it is used, if spoken orally, or, if it is printed, drawn, painted or constructed, how it appears.

2. Students will be directed to work in an art centre to form a single word using a choice of cut paper glued onto a cardstock background, paint on paper, drawing materials such as pens and paper or an arrangement of wood scraps glued to a cardboard background. To avoid overuse, it may be advantageous to restrict certain common words such as 'mom' or 'dad'.

3. Students will engage in a discussion about the personal relevance of the word that they have chosen as they are working on that word.

Evaluation

Students have produced a single word of their own choice using an art material of their own choice. Each student can provide some explanation as to why the particular word they chose is personally meaningful.

Follow-up

- Students could start a collection of meaningful words found in print media, copied from the environment or even overheard in conversation.

- This project could be a connection to a spelling program; the significance of the words created then would be that they conform to curricular spelling patterns.

Lesson #3 BASIC PATTERNS OF LETTERFORMS

Objectives and Rationale

This lesson was inspired by a Wim Crouwel's article in *Visible Language* entitled *A Proposition for Education in Letterforms and Handwriting* (1974). In this article Crouwel suggests we should help children "develop the natural feeling for basic patterns" (involved in forming letters) and ambiguously recommends "rhythmic scribbling exercises" as a method for meeting that goal. This suggestion was the impetus for my design of a drawing activity based entirely on different configurations of lines. Each configuration is based upon the lines and shapes that compose letters. It is a directed-drawing activity, which means that specific instructions are dictated for the drawing, while students are drawing.

Materials

choice of drawing tools

11"x17" cartridge paper

Procedure

1. **Motivation.** Ask students to fold their page once lengthwise and twice crosswise to form a grid of eight squares once the page is unfolded again; it is

often useful to conduct this folding together as a class having everyone hold up their page after each fold to confirm success.

2. Explain that they will make a directed-drawing and that each square is to be filled. Here are some possible directions for each square:

-a series of lines that are horizontal   -a series of lines that are vertical

-a series of lines from one corner to the opposite   -a series of lines that are wavy

-a series of lines that zig-zag   -a series of lines that loop

-a series of overlapping circles   -a series of overlapping squares

-a series of circles attached to lines   -a series of half circles

-a series of lines with lines crossing them   -a series of humps

-a series of lines and dots   -a series of dots

Evaluation

Students will complete a grid of eight directed drawings

Each drawing will fill the square and conform to the directions that have been dictated

Follow-up

- Students will view completed drawings and discuss how they might relate to the construction of letters.

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Lesson #4 **STATEMENTS AS ART**

Objectives and Rationale

Taking a cue from Laurence Weiner, students will view statements-as-art, and use those statements as direction for temporary constructions using objects found and stacked in the classroom. The notion of a statement-as-art in and of itself will be introduced.

Materials

-printed statement (large font on 11x17 paper laminated): "A NUMBER OF THINGS ARE MADE INTO A STACK"

Resources

a selection of photographs of stacks of objects.

Procedure

1. **Motivation.** Use these statements to initiate a discussion of the possible forms that each statement might take. Provide examples to motivate students such as " A NUMBER OF TRUCKS, or STUDENTS, or BASKET

BALLS or DESKS ARE MADE INTO A STACK"; make a point of suggesting possibilities that defy common sense, and that are viable only through the use of language.

2. Shift focus of discussion to address objects that are found around the room, that <u>can be</u> used for stacking.

3. Instruct students to each invent a statement based upon an object in the classroom and translate that statement into a physical form. Emphasize safety and respect for one and others belongings will be emphasized. Remind students that in order to give physical form to each statement, the objects must conform to the statement, for instance if a number of things are made into a 'stack', then they must make a stack, and not a 'pile'. Each physical form will be photographed. All objects must be returned to their original location, in an undamaged state.

Evaluation

Students are involved. Each student has successfully produced, and disassembled a stack. Each student successfully describes their creation orally (e.g. A number of _____ are made into a stack).

Follow-up drawing activity

- Students will construct a stack of five objects found within their desks, and draw that stack.

- This activity can be done regularly as a connection to work in math using different numbers of objects.

Lesson #5 A NUMBER OF THINGS ARE MADE INTO LETTERS

Objectives and Rationale

Students will view a statement-as-art, using that statement as direction for a

temporary construction of a letter sculpture using objects found in student desks.

Through involvement in this activity, students will learn to responsibly borrow and

return materials found in the classroom environment.

Materials

printed statement (large font on 11x17 paper laminated): "A NUMBER OF

THINGS ARE MADE INTO LETTERS".

Resources

- *Boite à outils (box of tools)* by Rascal
- Found objects in the shape of letters
- Alphabet book showing shapes as letters

Procedure

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1. **Motivation.** Read the alphabet book, *Boite à outils (box of tools)* by Rascal; this book depicts a collection of individual tools that form each letter. Students will identify each object and the letter it represents.

2. Students identify the shape of different letters using objects they have found within their own desks or around the room. For example a pair of sunglasses could be used to represent 'B', or a pair of scissors could be used to represent 'X'.

3. These found letter sculptures might be photographed for inclusion in a class book, All objects must be returned to their original location, in an undamaged state.

Evaluation

Students successfully follow the guidelines of making temporary sculptures, (respect for the property of others, clean-up). Students are able to identify the shape of letters in objects found in the classroom environment.

Appendix B

Images and Texts

These ink drawings and text have been composed and collected to illustrate concepts that are enlarged upon in the written component of the thesis. I wanted the collection of images and text to be an engaging personal account of my interest in visual language and my experiences teaching. Getting myself to draw takes a real effort; crafting drawings is work. I have always been envious of my students who are compulsive drawers in class; highly engaged, drawing on all available surfaces and seemingly able to work without ceasing. Constructing these drawings has been an exercise in conjuring all the skills I have acquired over time, and superceding the 'little voices' that conspire to belittle my progress. While working on this combination of drawings and text I have spent time gazing variously at comic books, fine art, contemporary and historical educational pamphlets, design magazines, books by artists, books about artists, internet sites, art education literature, student art work, signage, children's literature, found ephemera, (and inevitably my navel). Lines of ink brushed or scratched across the page appeal to me for their immediacy and craft. These drawings have been created as the artifacts of a thesis idea. The text is intended to guide you along as you read the drawings.
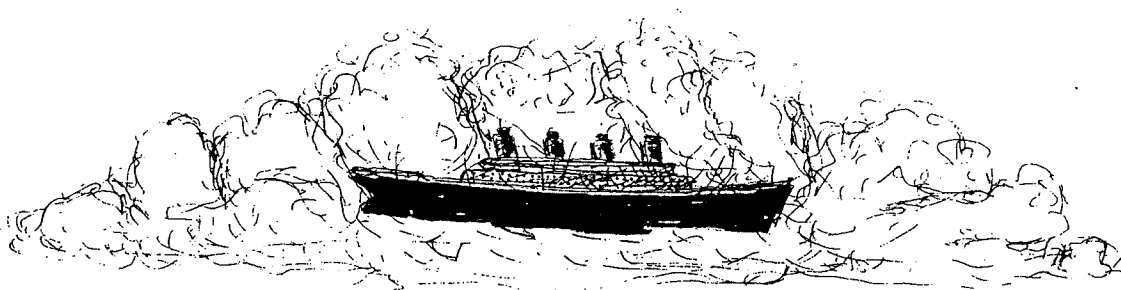
The Titanic flauting on
a huge cloud

Lawrence Weiner

One day I entered a gallery and found only words by Conceptualist artist Lawrence Weiner printed on the wall; they read something like "5 GALLONS OF LATEX PAINT POURED DIRECTLY ON THE FLOOR" I returned later in the week expecting to actually see five gallons of paint poured onto the floor, but found that the gallery still featured only the words I had previously seen. The proprietor of the gallery informed me that Lawrence Weiner typically used only language in his work, and that the words on the gallery wall were in fact the work itself. This event stands out as another turning point in my acceptance of how in simple terms, language can function as a material for making art. I sometimes use this piece to introduce the concept of words as art to students; this is one of my favourite responses from a boy in Grade Five.
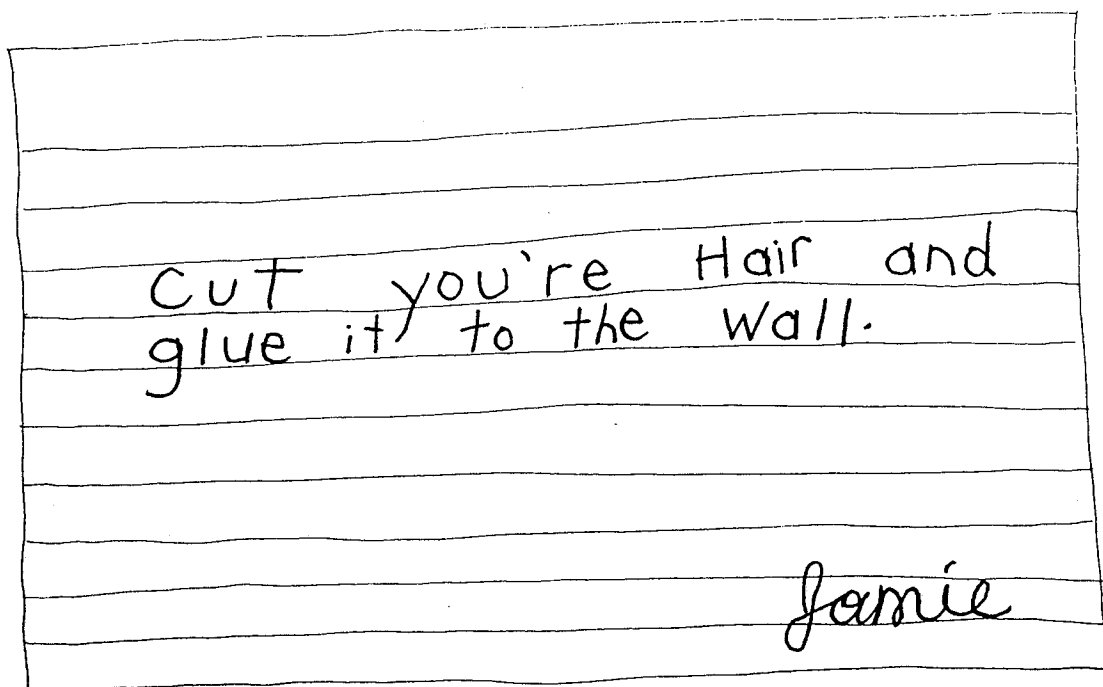
Cut your hair and glue it to the wall

This drawing shows a piece of art made/written by a Grade Four student who worked in my Language Arts Resource classroom. I liked the edgy sensibility that Jamie brought to his work. On another occasion he completed a painting with an image derived from three words he had chosen from three separate columns of words; "dirty drinking grandfather".

A number of things are made into a stack

Students are shown the statement "A number of things are made into a stack" and asked to find things in the classroom that could be used to make a stack. A firm rule is that afterwards all the components of the stack have to be able to be returned unaltered to their original place. This project is a good way to encourage students to explore the room and interact with one another in a cooperative way. This boy needed to obtain approval from a number of his fellow students in order to complete his stack.

Owens Art Gallery
Mount Allison University
Sackville, New Brunswick
29 March to 16 May 1993

Memorial University Art Gallery
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland
8 September to 24 October 1993

The University of Lethbridge Art Gallery
Lethbridge, Alberta
15 January to 15 February 1994

Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec
3 March to 16 April 1994

Agnes Etherington Art Centre
Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario
11 September to 6 November 1994

McMaster University Art Gallery
Hamilton, Ontario
3 January to 4 February 1995

List of Galleries/Poem

This list of galleries and exhibition dates was once described by Alex, a Grade Four student as a "poem". Because Alex was a boy who had great difficulties reading I have always assumed (admittedly without having had the opportunity to ask him), that he was responding to the visual form of the text, and not the meaning. While Alex might have "seen" the visual form of the list as a poem, I have always enjoyed the added layer of meaning provided by the fact that the objects on the list are galleries. We appreciate the same object in similar as well as different ways.

CLASS WORKING HERO

Our Class Working Hero this week is:

Nicholas

Class Working Hero
This is a weekly award that is bestowed upon a single student in my classroom. I choose a student who has worked persistently, cooperatively, or with uncharacteristic enthusiasm. I take time to hand letter the name of the student I have recognized in a decorative font of my own design. The name of the award is a twist on the phrase, "working class hero"; another cheery nod to the power of the union.

A got one of it's legs chewed off **B** has 3 circles instead of 2 **C** grew big sharp teeth **D** has a pointy hat **E** lost one of it's lines **F** has fallen down **G** has googly eyes **H** is hopping **I** is doing a crazy dance (like this) **J** caught a fish **K** has wheels like a car (though we all know car starts with a different letter) **L** is lovely **M** is a monster **N** is not normal **O** is growing ears **P** is losing it's circle **Q** is asking questions **R** is roaring **S** is stuck **T** is being used as a table **U** was left in the rain and filled up with water **V** is being used as an ice-cream cone **W** is wild **X** got lost in a place of french-fries **Y** was used as a funnel and then finally **Z** zipped right off the page!!!

The Awfulbet by Aaron Senitt 2003 ©

Awfulbet

I dictate my "awfulbet" to students as they draw each letter. This activity came to me in a moment of combined indecision and inspiration. While this activity was borne in the spur of the moment without a great deal of forethought, it has become a standard drawing activity each year.

boogerflee
brip
mowfing
wheathy
sidupanook
crudder
hoodlig
brap
dackler
nonono
derdoo

Smelling Twist
This is a list of nonsense words that I compose to accompany our weekly spelling test. Each word is based on spelling patterns found in the weekly list; for instance "brip" rhymes with "drip". These nonsense words are an excellent way to encourage and assess accurate listening skills, and knowledge of letter/ sound correlation; lest we be seen as having meaningless fun at school, I feel particularly obligated to explain my objectives for this activity to parents. Activities like these illustrate well my favourite quote from Ludwig Wittgenstein; "For heaven's sake don't be afraid of talking nonsense! But you should pay attention to your nonsense."
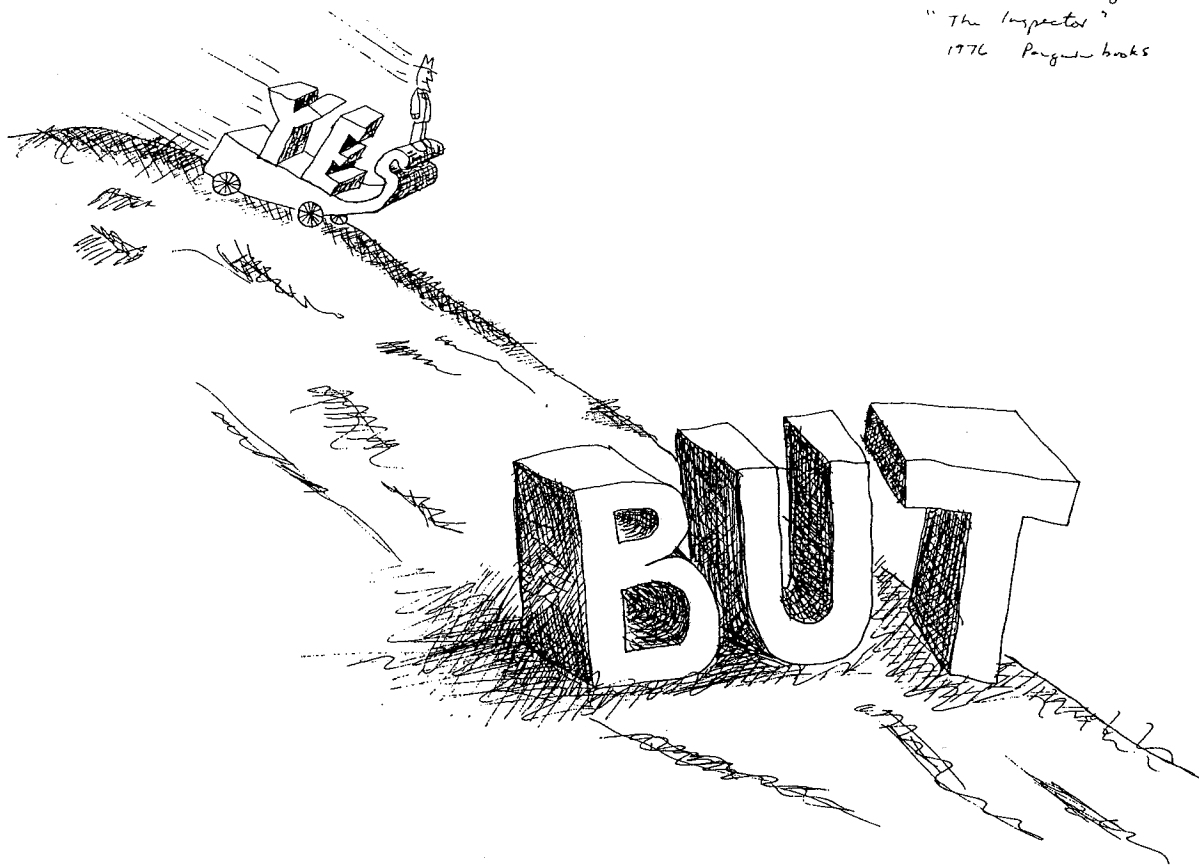
from Saul Steinberg's "The Inspector" 1776 Penguin books

Saul Steinberg
Animated words, words with anima. It was particularly enjoyable to find a drawing by Saul Steinberg to copy. These words are not printed, they are certainly drawn.

Word with Box around it

In lower elementary school, sometimes we look at the visual form of the words we are trying to learn. What we are trying to encourage is a visual recognition of "sight words"; words that are learned primarily by rote practice as well as knowledge of their connection to other words that have similar spelling patterns. We look at words in math class as well; what is the perimeter of your name? How much area does your name take up?
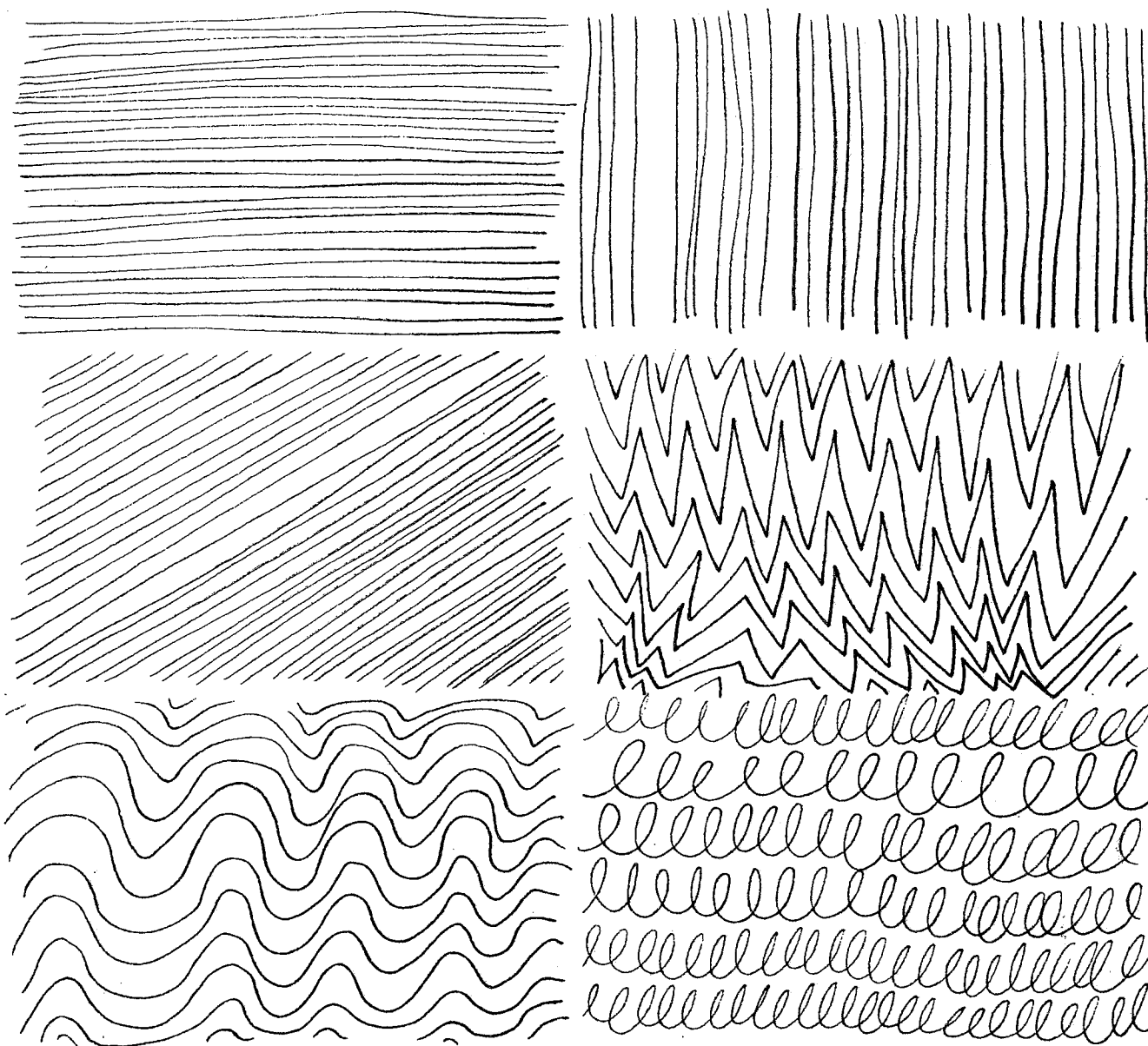
Basic Patterns of Letterforms

Letters are a series of lines oriented in different, particular ways within a defined field. These are non-representational "directed drawings"... simultaneously warming up for printing and drawing.

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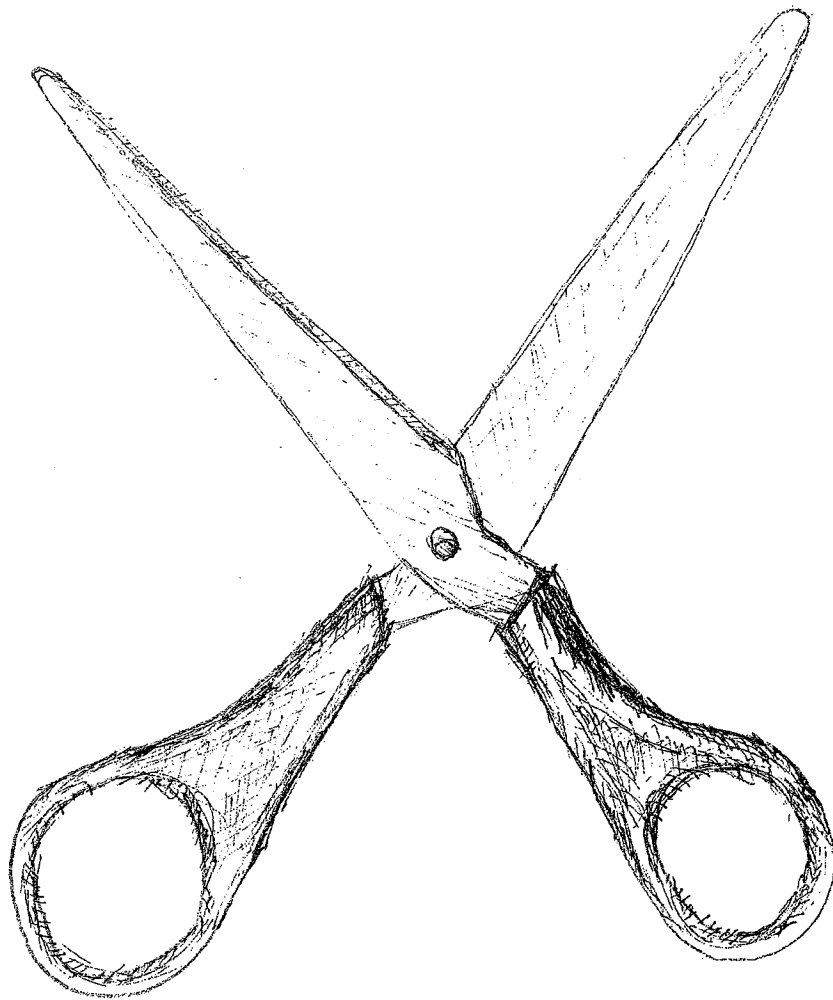
Scissors

This is an example of a "one word sentence" that I provided as a model for students. While demonstrating how to construct the word from cut paper, I paused for a moment, scissors displayed in hand to ask the rhetorical question "now why did I choose to make the word 'scissors'?

Bowl

Ear

Counter

Link

Descender

Loop
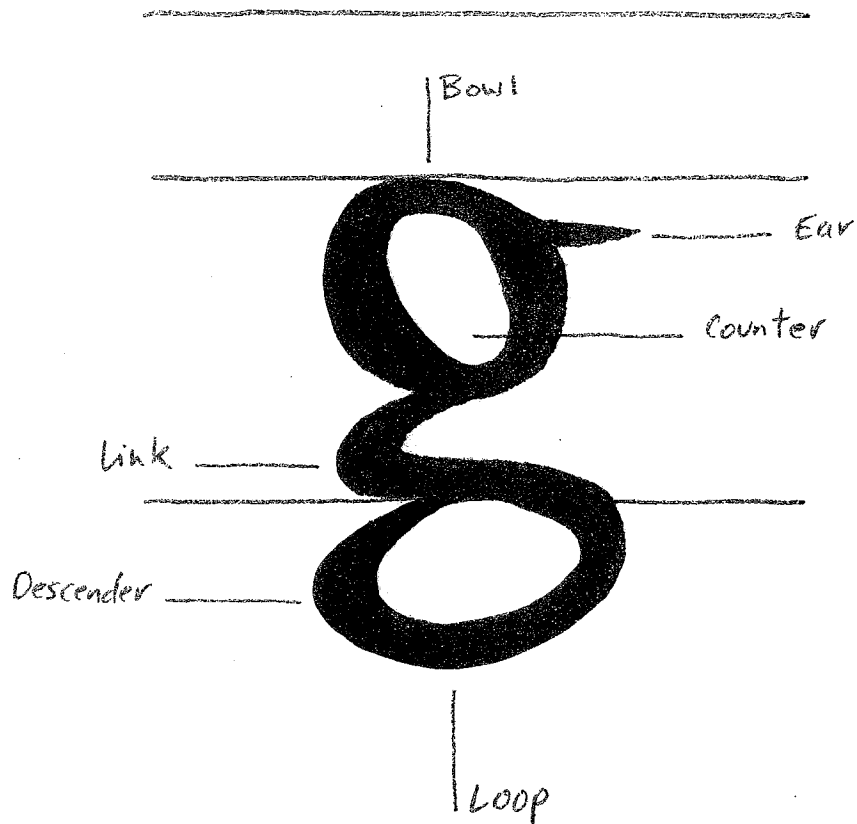
G with technical information

While the typographer has a deep knowledge of the structural components of letters, the substance remains by and large, ink on paper.
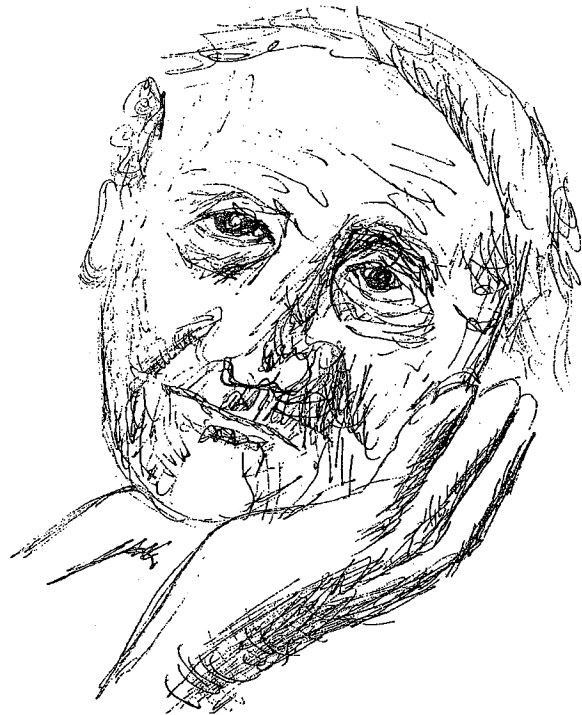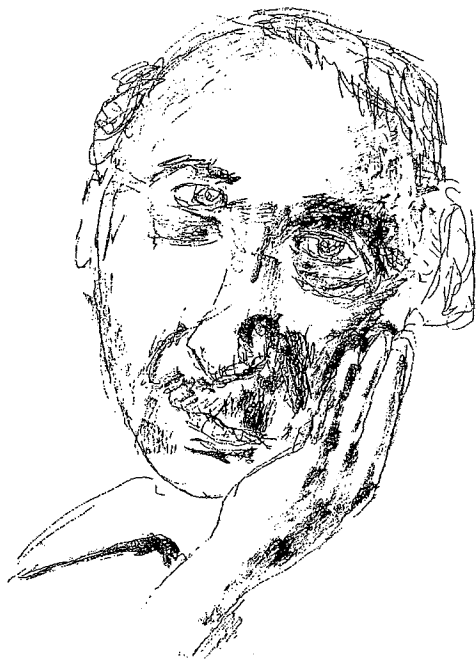
Four attempts to draw a Portrait of Rudolf Arnheim
Arnheim's book "Visual Thinking" contains a chapter titled "Words in Their Place". In this chapter he asked "What are the mental shapes of thought?" I tried to draw a picture of each of the key authors I read while writing the thesis; unnecessary but helpful all the same in my ongoing bid to connect with the literature I was reading.
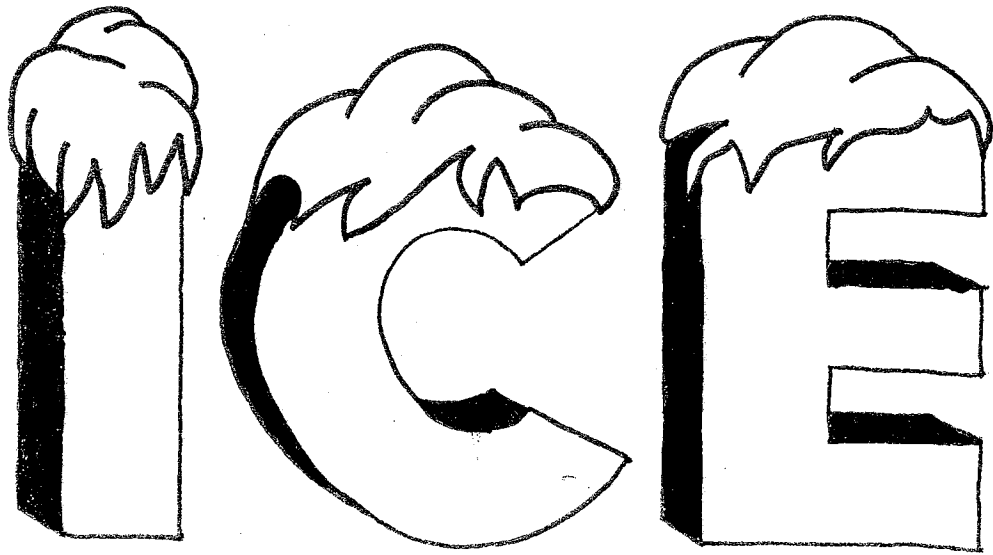
Ice

This ubiquitous image is a hit-you-over-the-head obvious example to use when attempting to illustrate the classic art project "Make a Picture of a Word that Shows what the Word is Describing". Some other words I have seen illustrated in the classroom are "fire", "steam", "crazy", and "angry". I like the idea of showing students in English Canada a French "glace" sign first. Though they might not know the literal meaning of the word, the image is telling.

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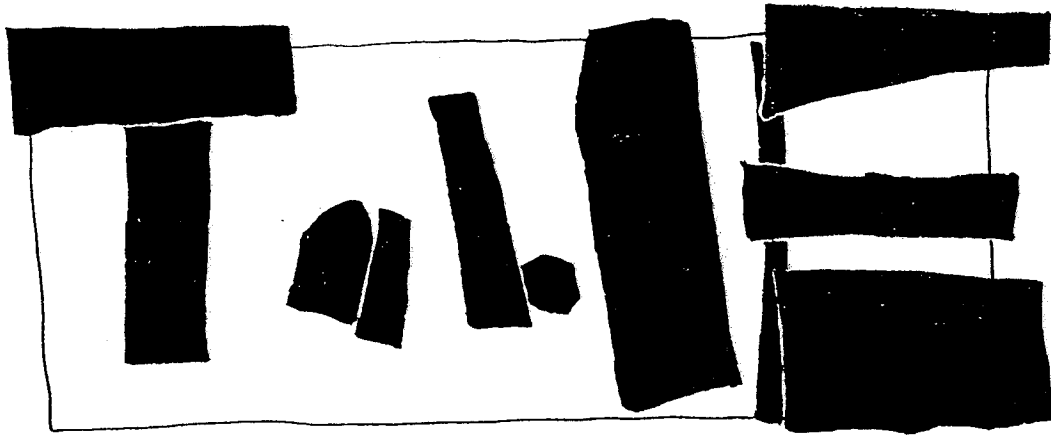
Table

This is an example of a "one word sentence" made by a Grade One student. The student explained that he had chosen the word table " 'cause I'm sitting down...at a table!" One word can comprise a sentence but the meaning of that word is largely dependent upon the context of its usage. For example when a child yells "milk" from her bed in the middle of the night, it is implied that she wants some and you are expected to provide it.
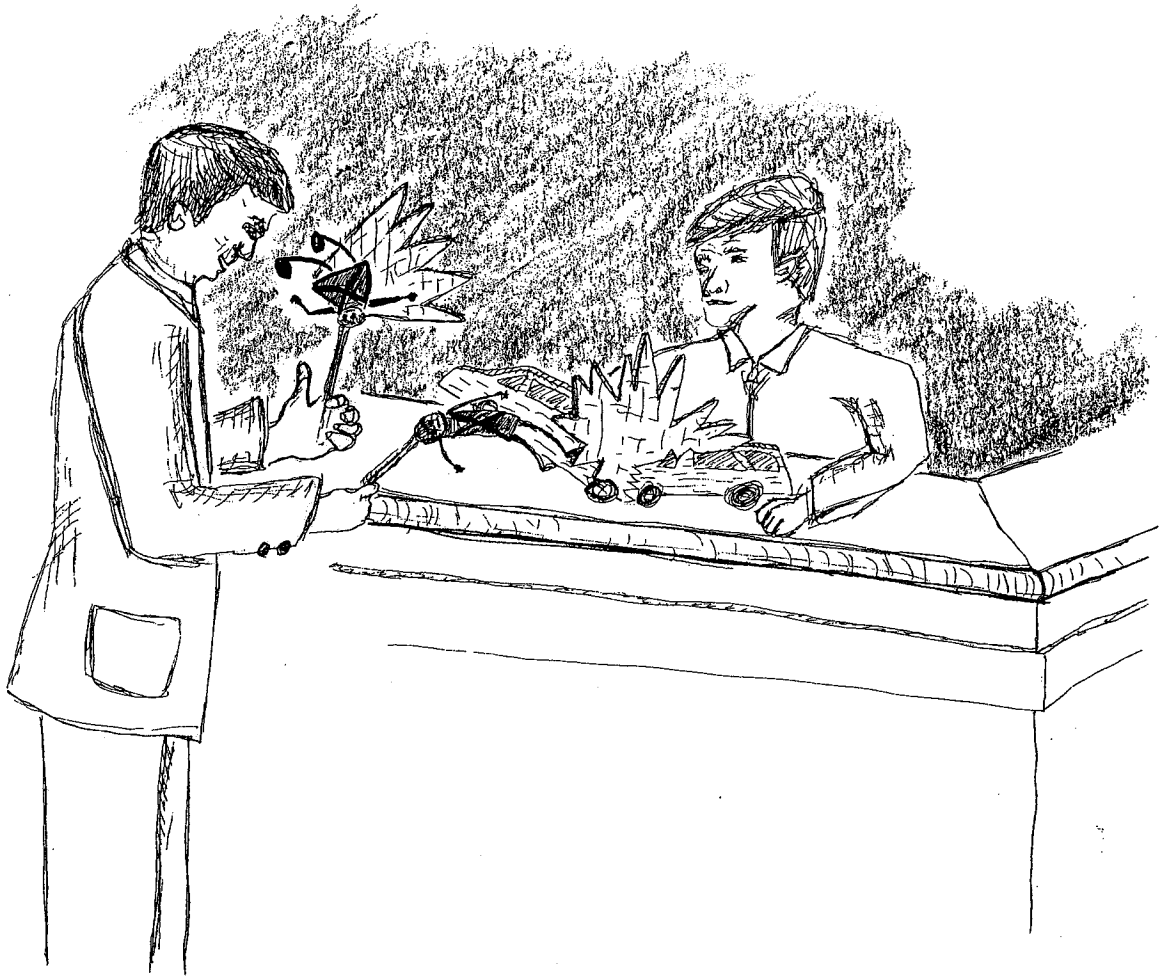
Auto Accident Represented by Puppets

Ludwig Wittgenstein said that "…in a sentence, a world is put together tentatively as an auto accident is represented with puppets in a Parisian court of law." I love this quote and the mental image it conjures. Though I have difficulties liking my own drawings, I actually like what I have scratched together for this quote because the drawings are pulled into service like puppets. The drawing was composed entirely from images found on an internet search engine under "court" and "judge".

Cartoon Characters
This cartoon reminds me of a couple of things; firstly that language is a medium based upon participation and secondly of a recurring scene in the Jim Jarmusch film "Ghost Dog". In this scene the main character Ghost Dog has a conversation with his friend the ice cream man; Ghost Dog speaks only English and the ice cream man speaks only French. They appear to understand each other well.

Michael Fernandes drawing anywhere on Anything

This is an image from an exhibit by Halifax artist Michael Fernandes titled "Drawing Anywhere On Anything". This title reminds me of some of my impulsive-little-mark-making-students who draw on their desks, chairs, notebooks, faces, hands... I enjoyed a number of drawing classes with Michael when I lived in Halifax. His teaching ranged from development of straight technical skills to more experimental mark making. During one class a bird got into the room, he asked us each to make an impromptu performance about getting the bird out of the room (even though the bird was long gone by then). When it was my turn I sketched a picture of a small bird, crumpled it into a ball and through it out the window. I wish I could remember what some of the other responses were.
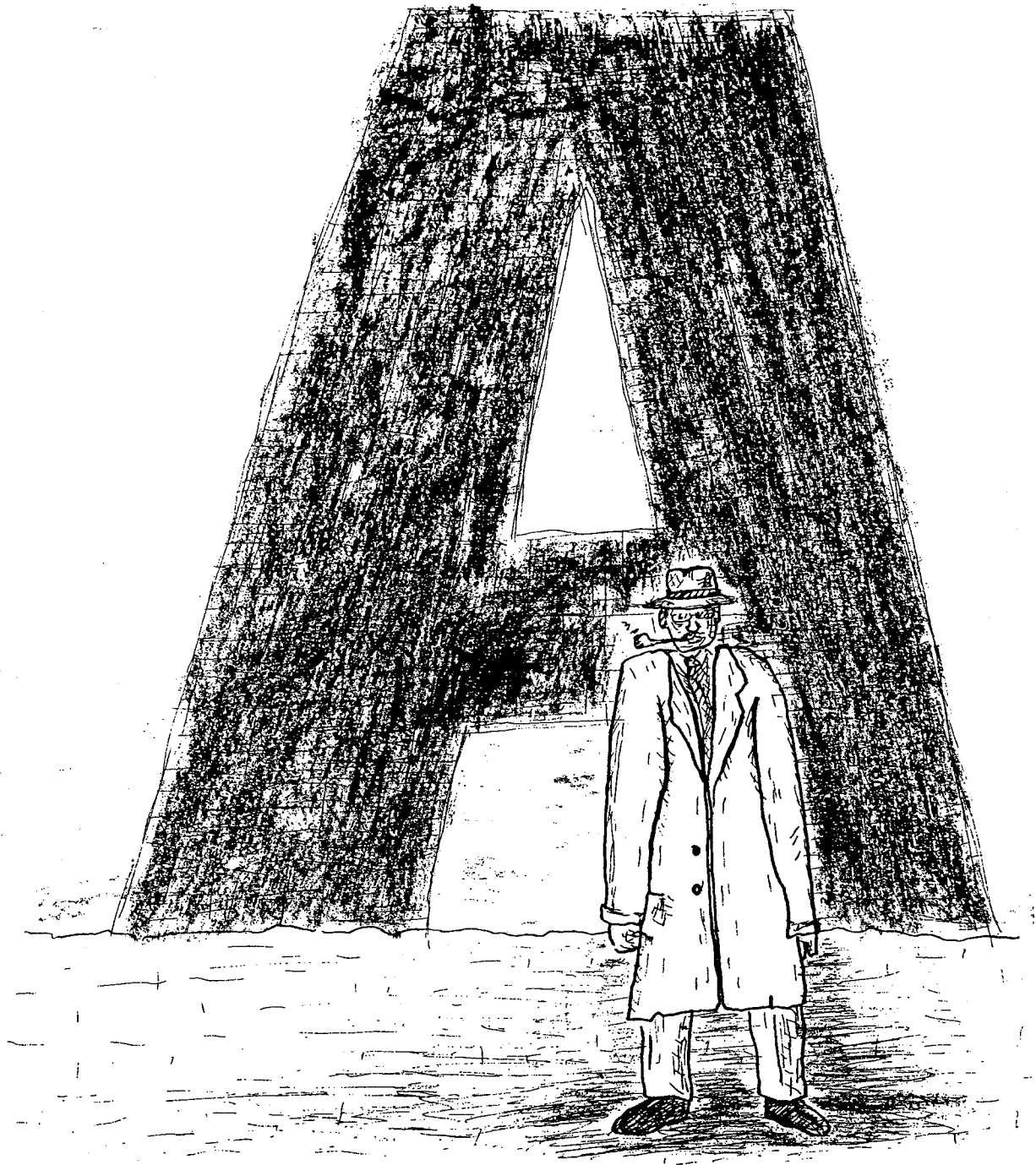
Great big A

This drawing is from an image in a design magazine; I have tried to draw it a number of times but am yet to be happy with the results. Drawing tasks that challenge me most (broad flat surfaces and human figures) are the key elements in this image. When I was growing up, I would sometimes be referred to as "big A".

eE
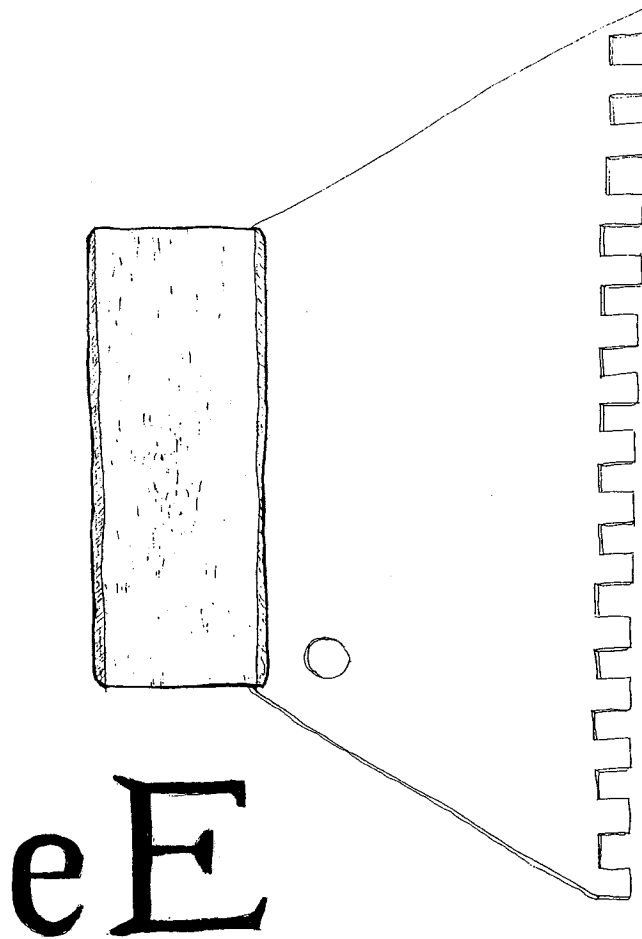
Boite A Outils

The letters in the alphabet book "Boite a Outils" (box of tools) are comprised entirely of tools. The tools feature exquisite wear and patina, and are by and large well chosen to represent each letter. I appreciate that some letters represented are not entirely true to their form such as this letter E. One of my strategies for teaching the correct form of a letter, or spelling of a word, is to present it incorrectly so as to allow the students to show that "they know better". Six-year-olds quite enjoy proving their teacher wrong.
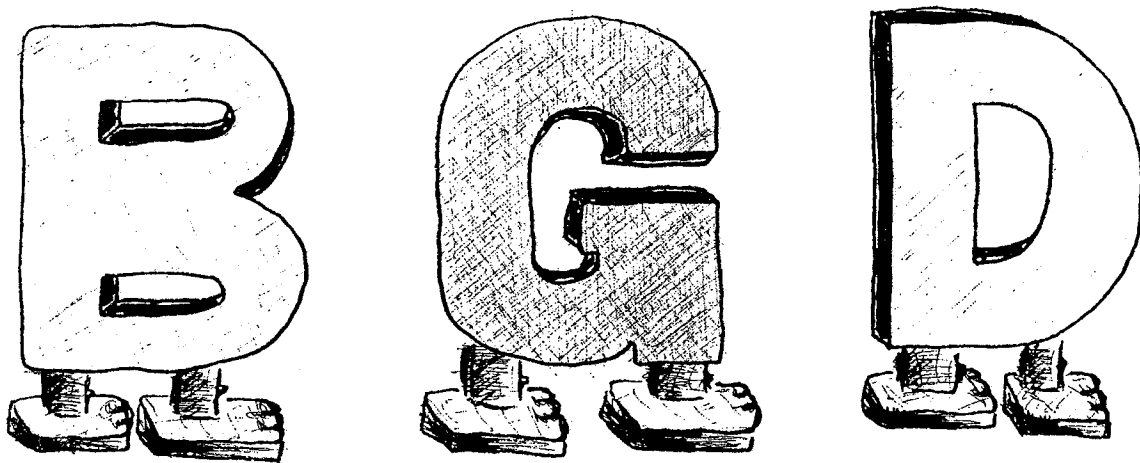
Small letter toys with Feet

These are small plastic toys I found on a log near a cabin outside of Dawson City, Yukon. I show this image to schoolchildren when I am trying to encourage them to make lettering that is more animated than their standard printing. I embellish the story by telling them how I stumbled upon these letters, rare creatures that I was fortunate enough to snap a picture of before they scurried away into the under brush.
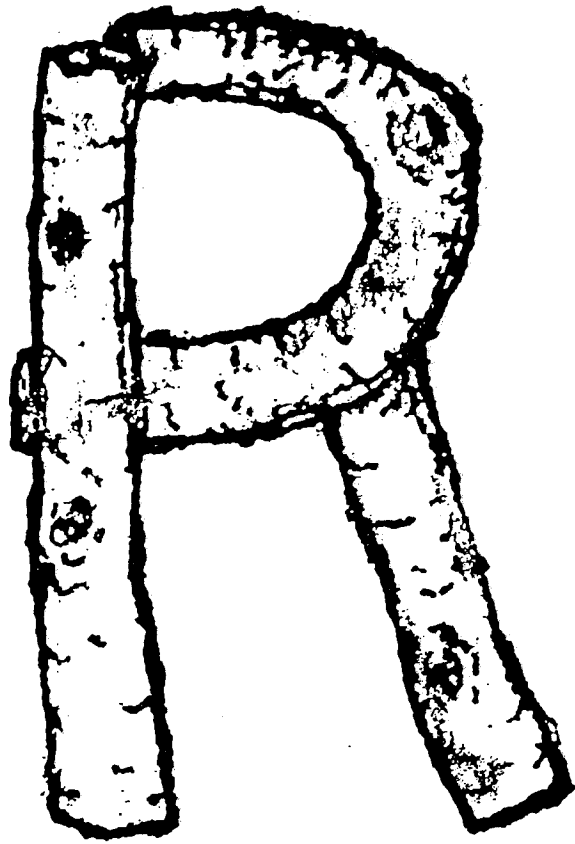
Large Carved R

I once saw a large carved wooden letter **R** sitting in someone's front yard in rural Nova Scotia. As I drove by and glimpsed it briefly, the image of the object and the words describing the object occurred simultaneously. It has stayed in my mind since as an immaculate example of concrete poetry. I love how the sound-of-the-words-merge with the existence of the object.
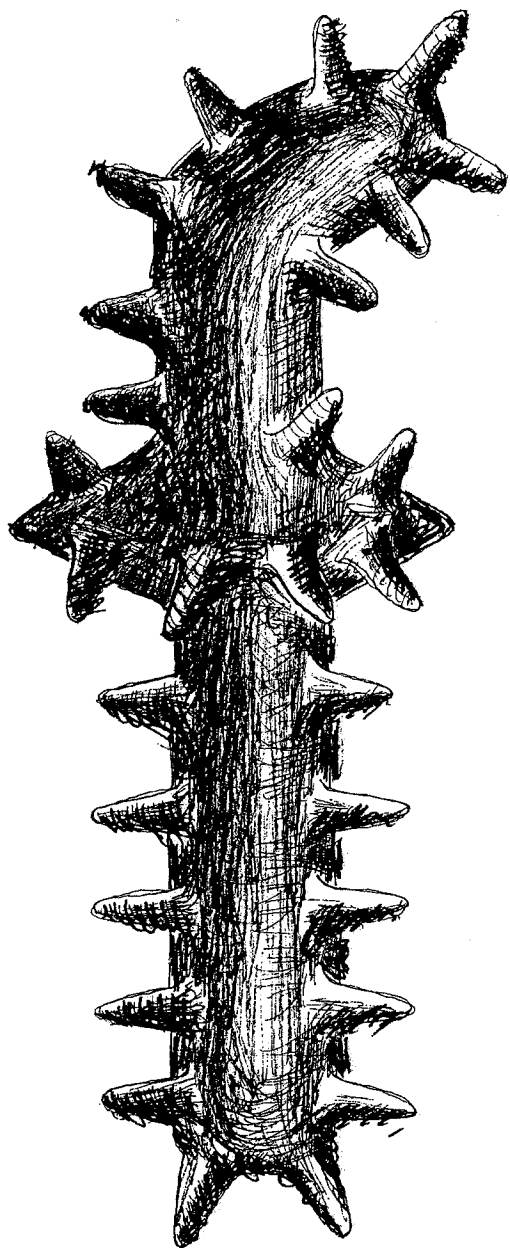
Sex aid F

This letter was designed by Zuzana Licko and is titled "modula ribbed". In the original image, taken from a design magazine, it appears to have been modeled entirely with a computer. A font modeled on a novelty condom, what fun!
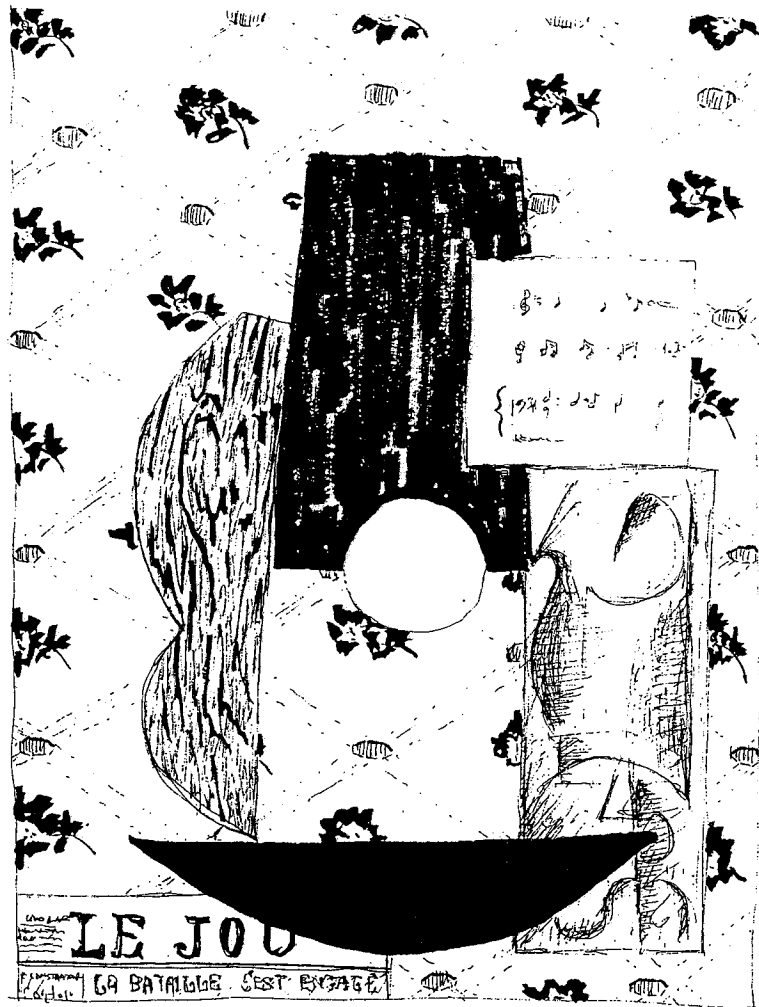
Picasso

Pablo Picasso's early collage work shows an initial relationship between modern art and popular culture. In this work, words found in newspapers and on billboards were taken out of context and given new symbolic, personal meanings; often the phrases used were 'in jokes' between Picasso and Braque. I like the magpie impulse that is brought forth through the process of collecting text and images for making collage. I love the fact that Kurt Schwitters, another collage artist worked by day as a graphic designer for the city of Hamburg, Germany and then undid that same work each night by using some of the same materials in his collage. A gentle kind of quiet, personal subversion of the very system he works within.
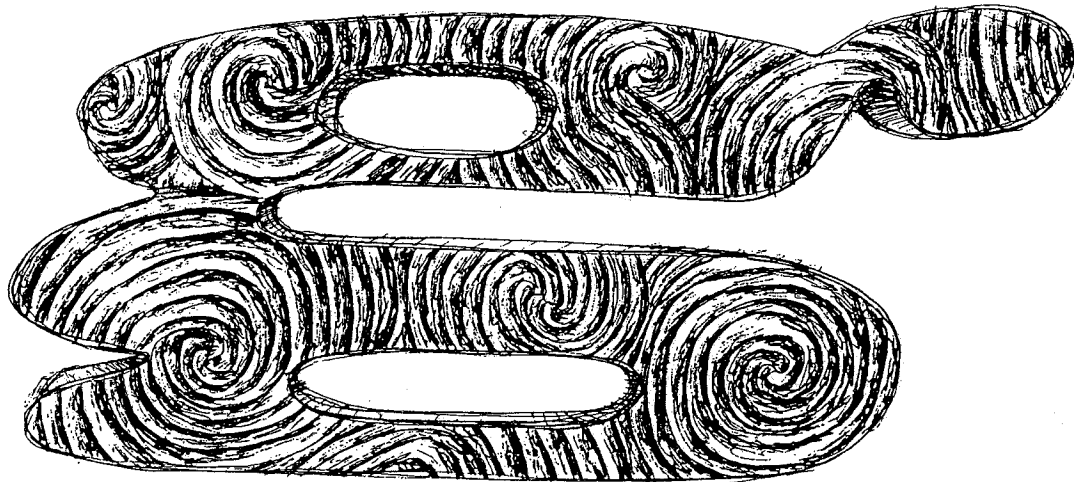
Robert Fones' G

Robert Fones' describes letters as artifacts This is a drawing of
Fones' 1999 piece, *EGYTIAN EXPANDED g / LION'S MANE,* I think
children who have a propensity for hoarding things might find the idea
of collecting bits of language appealing. When I was a teenager I had
a penchant for collecting bits of chrome lettering off of cars
(abandoned or in junk yards). A prize find was one that read "HEAVY
DUTY".

A painting by Ken Lum
Ken Lum's work is colourful and often produced through commercial techniques. Drawing it with black ink presents a challenge. Every week I present my students with a list of nonsense words for them to try and spell. I am very fond of thoughtful nonsense. In his essay for this work by Ken Lumm, Jeff Wall claims that Lum's 'Language Paintings' have the capacity to affect our perceptions of language "at a cellular level". I am inclined to discount such as grand claim but then....what if art can affect us on such a deep level?. The work is of course much more effective in colour.

UNION

This is the image that Carolyn Meili and I chose to announce our marriage in 1999. I like the singularity and solidity of this image, (though I constantly see it as the word "onion"). Though I don't have any experience working directly for a union, I value the benefits and rights that the teacher's union has provided for me. When we were married, my Uncle David who presided over the ceremony reminded us "It's work, my friends, but very good work".

**Housekeeping helps everyone helps...**
I have an ongoing interest in bits of text that are symmetrical and I am curious at how they sometimes describe situations that are inherently well balanced. This is the text from a wood shop safety poster that I used for a low relief sculpture. The symmetry of the text mirrors the arrangement between people who participate equally in domestic chores.

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Never the same twice
twice the same never
the same twice never

The same twice never...
This is a text that is trilaterally symmetrical. A man I worked with in a woodshop uttered the first line; he said it as we struggled to produce uniform pieces of woodworking. The second and third lines are my reconfigurations of the first line. Taken out of context, the text essentially refers to itself...a hallmark of contemporary art!
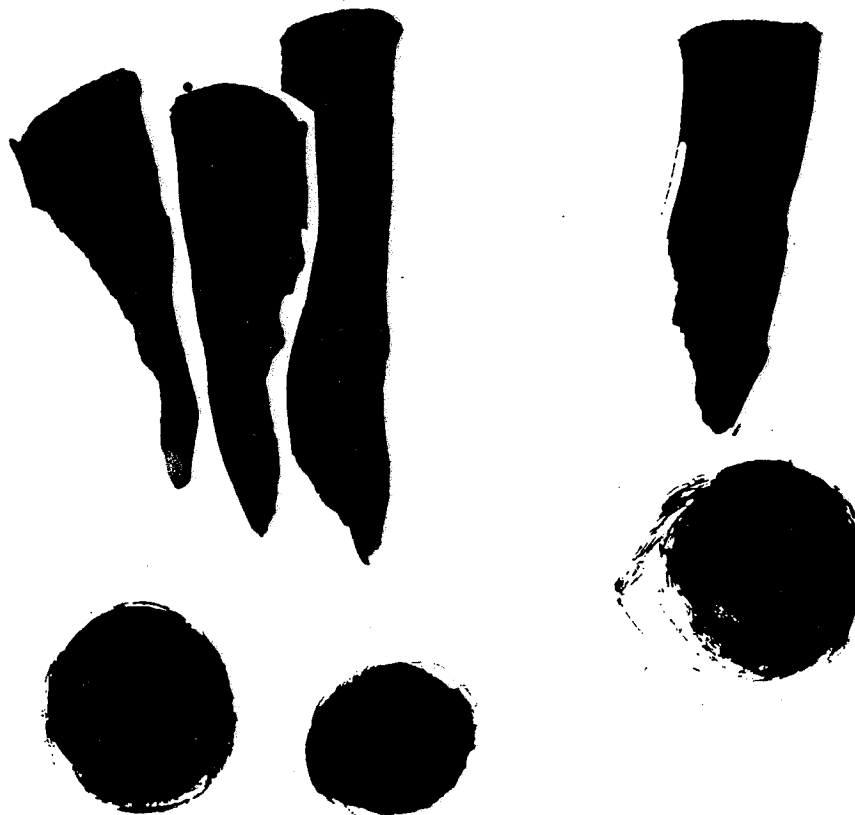
Phonoskulptur

One morning while walking to school I decided to start an art movement. It would be called "Phonoskulptur", and would integrate my interests in sculpture and language. I dropped the E from sculpture and added a K to give the word a more European sound and to conjure the notion of some sort of genesis; the UR of sculpture. As I walked across the wide expanse of the Halifax Commons thinking about this idea I saw my friend Mitchell and wanted to shout out, "HEY MITCHELL, THERE'S A NEW KIND OF ART!!!". I'm not really the sort to shout out pronouncements in public though so I kept it to myself for the time being. I did use the idea for a series of drawings and sculptures produced in my basement. I grandly described the resulting 3 issues of the zine', *phonoskulptur*, as "a periodic publication for those with a particular interest in the substance and structures of art and language". It was a real miss-mash of collected thoughts and images that I sent unsolicited to a small selection of friends and colleagues to varied response. Here is an ink drawing from *phonoskulptur* illustrating my enthusiasm for drawing and language.

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ILLUMINATING EXPERIENCE=
CONCENTRATION OF ATTENTION + SENSE OF REVELATION
+INARTICULATENESS + MEMORY RETENTION
and of particular educational significance...
AROUSAL OF APPETITE
these lead to, but not necessarily in discrete order,
COMMITMENT-EXPLORATION-DISCRIMINATION
-SEARCH FOR BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE
+HEIGHTENED ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS
an important bridge between
the study and practice of art

Unselfconscious poetry of appropriated and anonymous curriculum

Continuing my occasional foray into text as a form of performance, I anonymously posted this short passage on bulletin boards around Concordia University. This is a found palette of words describing a relationship between thinking about and looking at art, and making it. I was attracted to this passage for the way the layout supports and emphasizes the meaning of the words. The part that attracts the eye most immediately "arousal of appetite" encourages an analogy between reading and eating. Good art and education should I suppose make you hungry for more...

Man with Suitcase

Among my countless yet-to-be-fulfilled projects is an attaché case for teaching. In this case I would carry reproductions of art illustrating concepts of visible language, rubber stamps, stencils and drawing materials for making letters, a wide range of examples of different font styles and examples of work made by other students. I would call this case my "valise variable".

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