

For the conceptual artist neon is a means of public writing; it displays the text for collective reading, unlike the text in a book, which is essentially for private consumption. Stefan Bruggemann's ongoing series of 'Text Pieces' shows an awareness of this dynamic. Moreover, the public display and nature of these works suggest a break with linguistic understanding, an argument that is underscored by Bruggemann's 'Obliteration Series'.

Through the employment of a form of public address, the statement is enhanced, and its weight is all the greater. We therefore assume the statement to be of a certain significance, an utterance beyond the ordinary. Additionally, the text is given a visual shape, a form that sets it out from the wall. Therefore, the statement tends towards the condition of a picture or object. Having been prised from the serried ranks of the text, the words turn into images.

Furthermore, the words are illuminated, quite literally alight or burning, making a lasting (after) image on the spectator's retina; we are usually warned not to look directly into light-sources as this places undue stress on the eyes. What shines brightly attracts us, but it also introduces the potential for momentary loss of sight or even permanent blindness. To see then, is to become temporarily blinded. We see nothing but the afterburn of the image, something that belongs in the past. And this image eclipses the present.

'In the beginning there is ruin. Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze' argues Jacques Derrida. 'Ruin is...what remains or returns as a spectre from the moment one first looks...and figuration is eclipsed,'¹ whilst also supporting the claim that what we are looking at is indeed no longer there, and each act of looking reinforces its status as a ruin. These text-images, these ruins that displace the present, underscore our desire for completeness, for the clarity of a perpetual present. As artworks, they have the potential to exist outside of language, in the realm of the 'unsayable'. Ludwig Wittgenstein argues that generally what cannot be said tends towards the condition of nonsense, with the possible exception of the metaphor, a mechanism usually employed in literature and art.² The artwork may then be anchored in a web of textual references, but essentially it attempts to supplant them, to escape language. Accordingly, text-based artworks are rooted in language, but simultaneously attempt to locate themselves outside of linguistic utterance. Born out of language, they cross over into the realm of the unsayable. They try to address a space, a void that remains outside of comprehension. It is arguable that the work's ambition is to 'stand in' for something that is beyond reason, perhaps linking it to a more visual, sense-driven form of thought. The writer Georges Perec begins his own description of the void by asserting that the task may only be attempted by describing what surrounds it; to describe its frame, then, is to examine the conditions of the void, rather than the void itself.³ The conditions under which something occurs is often a useful means of finding common ground for discussion; to describe something absent may be undertaken by examining the

space it occupies. Similarly, the meaning of a thing of great complexity that does not signify in a straightforward manner (and artworks never do) can be addressed through its context, its viewing conditions.

‘We do not explain pictures: we explain remarks about pictures-or rather, we explain pictures only in so far as we have considered them under some verbal description or specification. The nature of language or serial conceptualization means that the description [of a picture] is less a representation of the picture, or even a representation of seeing the picture, than a representation of thinking about having seen the picture.⁴

In this way, the perceptual apparatus and the method of reasoning come before the actual image; they precede and frame the communication about the artwork. Moreover, the means of looking at- and describing the work becomes part of its history and content.

I have already asserted that text-works tend towards the condition of images, regardless of their clear relationship with language. In other words, they conform primarily to the way we concern ourselves with images. This position appears to be vindicated when such text-images attempt to dissociate themselves from their linguistic roots by means of erasure or overwriting of the

text, rendering it illegible. Bruggemann's 'Obliteration Series' uses the mechanism with the explicit aim of opening a discourse around the idea of lack. Therefore, when the text is crossed out, it does not cease to exist, it remains as a reminder of a previous action, it becomes part of the work's history. Furthermore, unwriting is equally a textual strategy, albeit an oppositional one. It might be imagined that the erasure of the text rendered the work even closer to an image, to be read in formal terms. But, on the contrary, the absence of intelligible words underscores the loss of language; here, the text has ceased to signify in a direct manner, its meaning has been displaced. Nevertheless, that palpable absence of something once present makes us feel its loss to an even greater extent. Finally, what happens when the act of erasure is placed into a void? When erasure precedes writing, when there is nothing to be deleted? What remains is the action of elimination, a gesture without apparent purpose. As nothing is eliminated yet, the action is placed in the future; in other words, the gesture anticipates a postponed erasure that might happen at some future stage. By putting the effect before the cause, the artist breaks language's link with the past, with memory. Instead, the task of unwriting projects us into an anticipation of what is to come: a future tense. Once more, the act of visual perception renders us blind; the unintelligible text suggests that we have lost touch with the past, as we are unable to see what was once visible. We must wait for the unwriting's next application, sometime hence. The spectator is resigned to waiting; what is no longer cannot be retrieved, and what is to come

cannot be divined. Unable to access the past and the future, we find ourselves locked in a perpetual present divested of our sight.

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1. Jaques Derrida, *Memoirs of the blind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993, P.68
 2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logicus Philoshopicus*, Routledge Classics, London, 2001, OP.CIT.
 3. Georges Perec, *A Void*, Trans. Gilberto Adair, Harpercollins, London, 1995, OP.CIT.
 4. *Michael Baxendall*, In: James Coleman, George Baxter (ED), MIT Press, Camb. Mass, 2003, P.113