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“Ik wil graag een giraf schrijven:
A (visual) analysis of what writing can be”
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This is to certify that to the best of my knowledge; the content of this thesis is my own work. This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or other purposes. I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Zela Odessa Palmer', followed by a period.

Zela Odessa Palmer

“That’s why I like being a poet, because I can make a spaceship into a giraffe.”¹

- Derek Beaulieu

“it’s my fate to only write one story,
again and again I place the words down
until I reach the end of the page
I tell myself that if I can describe things well enough
place words accurately enough, or capture it
succinctly enough, finally I will arrive at the
truth
and this is the myth I live by – that from a story, I can
describe the world as if it makes sense
here I am – an author to nothing
sunlight watching over my shoulder”²

- (manifesto) by Sam Winston

¹ “Derek Beaulieu on Conceptual Writing and Concrete Poetry by Writing the Wrong Way with Jonathan Ball, PhD.” *Anchor*, 24 Nov. 2020, anchor.fm/strangerfiction/episodes/Derek-Beaulieu-on-Conceptual-Writing-and-Concrete-Poetry-e160kbd.

² Wellcome Collection. “States of Mind - Sam Winston.” *YouTube*, uploaded by fowlerpoetry, 22 July 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=VVzxmUL6CHw.

I have always believed that writing can be more than the language we know. As a child, when my mom one day asked me what I wanted to do, my response was:

“Ik wil graag een giraf schrijven”

translation:

“I would like to write a giraffe”

Even though, at the age of four, I most likely did not truly understand the meaning of my words, I probably mixed up drawing and writing as I did not know the difference between the two. However, I still stand by those words today, twenty years later.

The words never changed, but the meaning has shifted: I would like to write the impossible, to find the boundaries of writing and surpass them.

Language, after all, is only a device to communicate with. Who says we cannot discard the existing rules and follow our own? Text can be written in the form of an image, it can be an image itself and even can be a giraffe.

In this thesis, I will delve into this deep urge of mine to write something that I have no words for, and discover what writing means to me.

I will write a giraffe.

introduction

In the past, countless books, texts and other types of writing have been created to communicate a plethora of thoughts, feelings and any other bits of information. The written word has gone from being an elite form of transferring stories of religion, to a way of exchanging knowledge with the highly educated, to an enjoyable hobby and now, to something uncontainable and universal.

While the history of language is an interesting one, it is not what will be discussed in this particular thesis. Here, I will be uncovering the curious concept of writing as an art form, specifically the kind of writing that uses barely any, if any, words and rather focuses on the visual aspects of writing.

What kind of information can be communicated once the writing ceases to be about the words, and solely focuses on what it conveys visually? Is it possible to write without words? Can we define writing without words even as writing at all? What is the need for this type of writing?

One could argue that there is no need for writing without words, since we have art to fill that gap. Art is a great tool for expressing something that cannot be said in words. I feel, however, that art is not exactly what I am looking for and somehow is still missing something. My quote was not “I would like to *draw* or *paint* a giraffe”, I clearly stated that I wanted to *write*.

There are two art forms or ways of writing that use language in an unconventional way, those are *concrete poetry* and *asemic writing* (or asemics). Both play with the definition of writing and try to cross the boundaries of that definition. They do not follow the usual rules of classical writing, instead, they challenge them.

Concrete poetry and asemic writing become a reflection of what writing can be.

At times, they get taken to such extremes, that it makes you question what writing is and if there are any limitations to be found, at all.

This is why I am here, writing this; how far can it go?

Is there such a thing as too far?

Through theoretical and material research I will try to find an answer some questions such as:

What happens when we focus on the visual qualities of text?

Is it writing if it does not include sentences or words?

When is it not considered writing any longer?

What actually is writing?

concrete poetry

When we take one of the more artistic and visual forms of writing and specifically look at concrete poetry, we can see that there is a clear focus on

the use of space.

This can mean the placement of the poems or text on its surface. These surfaces can range from paper and books, to websites and documents, or even on walls, virtual spaces and so much more. The words of R.P. Draper probably describe it best:

*“In its simplest definition concrete poetry is the creation of verbal artefacts which exploit the possibilities, not only of sound, sense and rhythm—the traditional fields of poetry—but also of space, whether it be the flat, two-dimensional space of letters on the printed page, or the three-dimensional space of words in relief and sculptured ideograms.”*³

Draper mentions, apart from space, the sound, sense and rhythm of concrete poetry. Which are, of course, a crucial part of concrete poetry. Semantics and phonetics are as much part of concrete poetry as the visuals, which is made clear with the term *Verbivocovisual*, which roughly translates to ‘verbal vocal visual’. This term was coined by three Brazilian poets (Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos and Décio Pignatari) who were an integral part of the group of poets that started the concrete poetry movement.

However, for the sake of this thesis, which will be discussing more the visual side of writing, I will leave the verbal aside for now and touch upon the vocal a tad later. Now I want to focus and continue with the visual analysis of concrete poetry.

Originally, concrete poetry would be seen as a poetry form that represents the content in the shape of the poem. Here is an example:

 this is a heart
 made out of text and
 if I were to write a poem about
 love, this would be a stereotypical
concrete poem. the content describes
 the shape of the text. this is not
 what concrete poetry means
 nowadays and not what
 I will be talking
 about in this
 thesis.

If I were to follow the heart of my four-year-old self literally, I would create a poem in the shape of a giraffe. The text would contain all the qualities of giraffes that I find interesting. However, that seems a tad boring and honestly, a waste of my time. I am not looking for a literal translation of what a giraffe is. Although I cannot yet describe what it is, I am looking for something more and this is not it.

³Draper, R. P. “Concrete Poetry.” *New Literary History*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1971, p. 329. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468606>.

In any case, the forms of concrete poems in contemporary art are more abstract and not always as clear as the example above. They become less descriptive and more experimental.

While concrete poetry still has this clear poetic side to it, because of the subtle suggestions to a deeper meaning, it can also be even further away from any figuration or reality than traditional poems tend to refer to.

The poems seem to forget about the words and the rhythms they create in their placement and instead, they become individual letters connected in no particular sequence, fitted together based on their visual qualities. This is when writing tips more towards the side of typography, in which the letters become graphics. By speaking of letters rather than words, Draper makes it clear that concrete poetry in a lot of cases, does not focus on words, but actually focuses on the individual letters and how they are placed in relation to each other.

The title of this chapter can be an example of how concrete poetry uses letters instead of words to create an image. This image is not a figurative one, as the example given above, but on the other hand, gives the viewer a chance to interpret it freely.

A more typically poetic and abstract way of using concrete poetry can be described through the words of Eugen Gomringer, who compares concrete poems to constellations; “*as if they were clusters of stars*”⁴

Gomringer (1925), an important person in the world of concrete poetry, is a German writer and one of the first concrete poets, who founded the concrete poetry movement in Europe⁵ in the fifties, along with other poets, such as Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, Décio Pignatari (the three Brazilian poets that invented the term *verbivocovisual*) and Max Bill.⁶

Gomringer’s comparison gives a good visualization of how concrete poetry can make use of space. When we look at stars in the sky, we can see that they are distanced from each other in a random sequence. With this, we can make connections between the individual stars and create an image through it. However, when we see stars from the perspective of space, they seem to be grouped together, even overlapping and we can hardly distinguish one star from the other.

While this is only a metaphor, some concrete poems truly do resemble the stars.

An example for this, would be the work of Derek Beaulieu (1973), a poet from Canada.⁷ The letters no longer form words, and because of it, the visual qualities of the letters create a stronger image. The size of one letter to the other, and the way they tilt and spread out in different directions, they become snakelike and seem to be dancing without the help of the poet.

In this case it is inevitable to mention the way the poems of Beaulieu make good use of the *verbivocovisual*. It almost seems as though the letters are pronounced and make sounds by themselves. The O’s echoing in my mind and the Z’s putting me into a sleep-like trance.

⁴ Gomringer, Eugen. “From Line to Constellation (1954)” *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. Indiana University Press, 1968.

⁵ Solt, Mary Ellen. “Charles Sanders Peirce and Eugen Gomringer: The Concrete Poem as a Sign.” *Poetics Today*, vol. 3, no. 3, [Duke University Press, Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics], 1982, pp. 197–209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1772399>.

⁶ Hilder, Jamie. *Designed Words for a Designed World: The International Concrete Poetry Movement, 1955–1971*. 2nd ed., e-book, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016.

⁷ <https://nl.pinterest.com/pin/543598617496407218/>

This is when the visuals come together with the sounds in concrete poetry and get amplified, so to speak.

While the sonic and phonetic aspect of concrete poetry can give the poem a different meaning, so can silence or space in between the letters and words:

*“The obvious point made is that silence is the absence of something; the poem speaks most eloquently where it does not speak at all. But the gap could not “speak” were it not for the surrounding words, and, further paradox, nothing, in any case, is actually spoken. Silence is thus contextual, and the context exists essentially in space.”*⁸

Because of the empty spaces in between the text, the content becomes more significant. Not writing, can sometimes make a clearer point than writing too much:

⁸ Draper, R. P. “Concrete Poetry.” *New Literary History*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1971, p. 329-340. *Crossref*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/468606>.

What would happen if I let the words run freely on the page?
The writing would get a different intonation and the rhythm changes.

the focus is on space,
the placement of the words
and the emptiness in between.

sizing,
caPitalziNG
and **Handwriting** or in print

text can be something more
than what we have seen before

images can be created through text

existing only of
sentences
words

and
l e t t e r s

scattered over the page,
creating a sea of disconnected playfulness;

To conclude, it is clear that the content of every concrete poem becomes stronger because of its visuals. This means taking the shape of what is being said within the poem, placing the words and letters in an unconventional order or because of the space surrounding it that speaks as silence. There are no limitations to it, the playground is vast and not fully discovered yet.

asemic writing

In contrast to concrete poems, asemantic writing loses most of the content by obstructing the visuals, but gains something else in return.

In asemantic writing the importance is not placed on the words or sentences either, but contrary to concrete poetry – which focuses on the letters – the importance is placed on *how* the text is written. Asemantic writing includes, but is not limited to, illegible writing such as messy handwriting or overlapping text, but also text that was never meant to contain any meaning and simply gives the impression of being text. It is writing with none of the letters or symbols of any existing script.

The official definition of the word ‘asemic’ describes it as “using lines and symbols that look like writing, but do not have any meaning.”⁹ This, however, gives a false perspective on asemantic writing in art. The meaning is not in the words, but in asemics as an art form, the meaning becomes significant in the context, just as with concrete poetry.

To give an example, Mirtha Dermisache (1940-2012), an artist from Argentine who frequently used asemantic writing in her art, did not use letters. She would draw lines or scribbles that could be mistaken for actual words and sentences. The way the scribbles are drawn, makes them seem even more alike to a readable piece of text.

This becomes obvious in one of her works called “Diario N° 1: Año 1”¹⁰, in which she used the template of a newspaper and took out the words and replaced them with lines that resemble letters. Because of the differences in boldness, size and density of the lines, you could be convinced that there was an actual news story to be read. Even the strategic use of columns and paragraphs makes it all the more convincing.

However, the news in the paper is lacking. There are no stories to be read, because there are no words. The newspaper is empty and nothing is communicated, yet the piece of art says a lot more than meets the eye.

When looking at the fake newspaper, you can feel the same as you would with a real newspaper, that at first glance, looks like it contains important information.

Because of our association with everyday papers, we recognize this in Dermisache’s work. Looking at the work, anyone would think there is a story there. A political scandal, a climate change crisis, a war announced in a remote country and many more articles about how the arts really do have a positive impact on humanity. We barely even have to read a newspaper to know what is happening in the world, because this is already so familiar to us. Dermisache illustrates this clearly with the lack of words and as a result, the need for words becomes obsolete.

This work, even though it is a clear example of what asemantic writing can be, it also a rather political comment on contemporary life and illustrates a very recognizable concept. It does not play with abstract interpretations as concrete poetry does.

What I am curious about is how this way of writing can be used to describe something I *actually* have no words for. How can I use them to write my ‘giraffe’?

⁹ “Asemantic Meaning: 1. Using Lines and Symbols That Look like Writing, but Do Not Have Any Meaning: 2. Using Lines And.... Learn More.” *Cambridge Dictionary*, 2022, dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/asemic.

¹⁰ www.bibliopolis.com. “Diario N° 1: Año 1 by Mirtha Dermisache On.” *The Idea of the Book*, www.theideaofthebook.com/pages/books/862/mirtha-dermisache/diario-n-1-ano-1?soldItem=true. Accessed 3 Feb. 2022.

without words

If I were to follow the rules of concrete poetry, I could write a text in the shape of a giraffe and be done with it. That would be taken too literal and not at all what I am after.

Instead, I could use asemic writing, but how would I go about that? The giraffe is a metaphor for something, but what for?

Because of the lack of words that come close enough to describing the thing I am looking for, it becomes too much of a search, I would be here still twenty years later and would have found no words. Before I can answer the question “How do I find it?”, I first need to clarify what it is I am expecting to find.

Henri Michaux (1899-1984), a French poet and artist from the nineteen-twenties, asked a similar question. Michaux made asemic art in search of something that could not be described with words; he called it a “sentence without words”.

“The desire for a “sentence without words” led him to an asemic practice that emphasized both continuity and constant change—that is to say, movement.”¹¹ This “movement”, according to Peter Schwenger, could be an emotion.

A temporary moment, an emotion, captured in art. Trying to hold onto something that will disappear quickly. This is the allure of trying to do the impossible. This desire Michaux had, changed constantly, so whenever he thought he was close to what he was looking for, it slipped away, out of reach again. Possibly, this is what compelled him to keep going.

The movement and emotion that Michaux describes, coincides with the movement of writing by hand. The force and urgency of spilling out thoughts and feelings, similar to the actual movement of the pen in someone’s hand, leaving marks on the paper. Wild marks, that speak with so much intention. This expressive writing is something that writing in print is lacking.

“...asemic writing has the potential to restore elements that are obliterated in the technology of the alphabet; and it can do this more effectively and eloquently than is the case with computer technology.”¹²

The pure emotion simply cannot be recreated with a machine that does all the writing for you. This is why so many miscommunications happen over text. There is no way of knowing which emotion the person was feeling at the time of writing, through the words they were using. Unless they would state clearly whether they were happy, sad, angry or anything else. With handwriting, one can make out when the hand got tired and the writer took a break, because the words got messy towards the end of a sentence. You could tell when someone was too emotional and made many mistakes while trying to find the right apology: the words would be forcefully crossed out and there might even be some water damage on the page. Computers get rid of those mistakes and you might never know there were any mistakes to begin with, they leave out any room for emotion.

¹¹ Schwenger, Peter. *Asemic: The Art of Writing*. 1st ed., e-book, Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2019. p. 24

¹² Schwenger, Peter. *Asemic: The Art of Writing*. 1st ed., e-book, Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2019. p. 14

Can you tell my frustration towards computers? No, right? Because I edited the text until it was emotionless. (now we can see how writing by hand would change this text?)

Anyway, to get closer to the strange and unexplained feelings that need to be expressed by Michaux, me and many other artists, asemic writing needs to be used.

In Michaux's work it is obviously that they are anything but static. The lines seem to be moving restlessly on the page, in clear contrast to the work of Dermisache, whose crisp line drawings seem predetermined and more developed. However, this restlessness in the work of Michaux could have also been a result of his use of hard drugs while writing.¹³

¹³ Tate. "Henri Michaux 1899–1984." *Tate*, www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/henri-michaux-1628. Accessed 14 Feb. 2022.

an author to nothing and a sentence without words

Michaux was, by far, not the only one who was looking for this concept of writing without writing. Sam Winston (1978), an English artist working with typography, concrete poetry and asemic writing, is on the hunt for something similar as Michaux. His methods of creating art are immensely different, though. Winston uses a more meditational and spiritual approach while creating art.¹⁴ His works come more from a place of peace, rather than intense emotion.

In his work “Darkness Visible”¹⁵, Winston spent a month in darkness, creating art through which he wanted to find an answer to the question: “does our identity and self-awareness rely on stories in time and space to be stable?”. However, the answer to this question is, in this thesis, not as relevant as the work he created while spending his time in darkness.

Among other works created throughout his ‘dark’ month, he wrote a manifesto that he repeated on the same page. The words start visibly overlapping and smudging all over the page until they are illegible and the paper nearly turns black of ink.

While Winston phrased his quest in his manifesto (mentioned in the quote on the first page) a little bit differently, it relates to the notion that Michaux had. They both were seeking this “truth” through writing. Winston, however, believes that it is possible to find this through using specific words, even if this might be false hope (possibly, he already is aware of this fact during writing). His use of repetition in writing, while writing the same words over and over again, contradict his statement that he will find the “truth” once his words are “enough”. When will the words of Winston be ‘enough’? It is safe to assume that they never will be. These words, that he is looking for, probably do not exist or are not invented yet. Winston’s writing turns into a paradox that he cannot escape.

To step outside of this cyclical thinking, we can look back at the beliefs of Michaux, who believes that it will be enough to give up on words and delve into the core of his writing. Michaux would certainly have found his “sentence without words”, if asemic writing was the answer to his question. Sadly, it could be that this is not the case.

In my opinion, this whole scavenger hunt is not about getting to the core of something, but rather to experience the process of writing. In the eyes of both artists mentioned above, the art created during this process is a by-product.

Possibly, this answer could be ignored, because what would the point of creating be if we are not looking for something? The urgent need for an explanation is what drives, arguably, most artists to make art. Once this need is fulfilled, we would stop, but we do not.

Winston seems to be accepting of the fact that there is no end and because of it, calls himself an “author to nothing”; the word “nothing” referring to the ‘by-product’ that is his art.

It could be that, even though, both Michaux and Winston are looking for a similar thing, they have a complete different goal in mind. Michaux seemed to be anxiously awaiting the moment he would understand and was looking toward the future. Whereas Winston appears to be perfectly happy not finding anything and focuses more on the present, with his spiritual look on art.

¹⁴ “Sam Winston - Art as a Spiritual Practice.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Conscious Life, 16 Feb. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xbRBRVhKD4.

¹⁵ “Darkness Visible —.” *Sam Winston*, www.samwinston.com/darkness-visible. Accessed 3 Feb. 2022.

It is intriguing to join Michaux and Winston in this process of making art and trying to find an answer to their conundrums.

Although I am more similar to Michaux in the erratic and chaotic way he approaches art, perhaps I should emulate Winston's tactics and become more comfortable with not knowing. Possibly, then will I get closer to the end of my chase, or the chase might not even be necessary anymore.

what is writing?

So, if I were to get closer to the “sentence without words” that Michaux tried to find, how would I go about it? Is it possible to continue the emotional path that Michaux was on, or should the search become a bit more rational?

To go further into it, we need to know what writing is and also, what writing is not.

What are the limitations of writing, in the most general sense of writing?

Classical writing would need a surface and some borders. Either on paper, in books and anything written with the use of a machine.

Four lines, boxing in the words. Black letters on a white background, clear, visible and legible. Linear and right side up. From left to right in the west or right to left in the east. Even top to bottom will do in some places, but never bottom to top. Now that would just be confusing.

One line under the other, no overlap within the text. Handwritten or in print.

Mostly correct grammar, spelling and punctuation.

Columns, paragraphs and sometimes chapters.

In contrast to those rules, how do we cross all those boundaries of writing?

No surface nor borders.

White words on a black surface. Messy, hidden and illegible. Nirelnoan (non-linear) and upside down. Bottom to top, to make it a little confusing.

Overlapping text and no order in the sentences.

Absolutely correct no grammar, spelling and no punctuation

Or only punctuation...¹⁶

I would consider the out of boundaries ‘text’ still writing. It might not be the easiest to read, but one can still figure it out, if they were to try hard enough. The one example that goes the furthest away from the definition of writing, is the document with only punctuation.

This document leads to a deeper question of what writing is.

(I do wonder, would thinking about words and letters be writing?)

The best books written are the ones that have never been written down. There is so much potential in not doing something, but that is all it will ever be, potential.

If I never wrote down this thesis, but kept it in my mind, would it be a piece of text? I bet my thesis supervisor would disagree.)

¹⁶ See attached document for a version of this thesis without words and only punctuation.

recognizing writing

“Is it writing if there are no words, no sentences?”¹⁷ A question asked by Derek Beaulieu in a podcast about writing. To know whether it is even possible to create a sentence without words, it would be good to know if it still would be considered writing.

In the section before, we looked at what the structure of a text could look like, and what the opposite of that would be. Now, we take a look at what language means and when something can be a language.

‘Letters to communicate, an alphabet that is organized to make sense to the reader.’

There are many alphabets that do not look like the letters I am using right now. To many people this would not make any sense if they did not know the English language.

Letters are symbols, we can read the symbols because we as humans decided on an agreed upon translation. We learn that translation and can then understand what someone is trying to communicate. Then again, I could create a secret language that only I know how to read and write and it would still be considered writing. So, it is not of importance whether or not a large group of people can read it.

If the language were to resurface long after I was gone, even then would it be writing. But what would it be if I never created a translation for the language, would it be writing?

What differentiates the symbols without meaning from drawings? Can we read drawings without them being text? Could it be that we recognize the symbols as something that can be deciphered? Even if it cannot? When do we recognize it as writing?

We get taught by repetition to the point we recognize the patterns and can repeat them to others and create our own patterns and communicate information. Yet, if there is no pattern to be recognized, we can still trick our brain into thinking it is a piece of text. This is what asemic writing taught us. A drawing could be mistaken for a written piece, and vice versa, however, we will not know when the distinction is being made by the creator, because we still view it the same way.

If you were to look at two different, yet similar scribbles, which would you assume was writing and which one would be the drawing?

(example?)

Possibly the lines get a bit blurred when we try to define asemic writing and there are more questions that come up than answers.

I suggest, we try to look at it as mumbling or even grunting. Someone can mumble something under their breath and the other person in the room would not know what they are saying.

There is no translation to the small noises that person made, no meaning. Yet, we accept that and recognize it as simply noise. (Could this be the sentence without words?)

I could conclude that it is about the intention. The mumblor did not intend to speak any words, but they still spoke. With that sound, they could have meant to say that they were hungry or tired or agreed with whatever the other said earlier. Only they know what their

¹⁷ “Derek Beaulieu on Conceptual Writing and Concrete Poetry by Writing the Wrong Way with Jonathan Ball, PhD.” *Anchor*, 24 Nov. 2020, anchor.fm/strangerfiction/episodes/Derek-Beaulieu-on-Conceptual-Writing-and-Concrete-Poetry-e160kbd.

intention was with the mumble or they also did not know. However, they chose to not use words to describe their state of being. This could be, because they were not in the mood to explain or by not using words they made their point clearer than it would with words. This is what asemics are. With mumbling, the sound becomes the most important indicator of what it means (or what the intention was) and with asemics, it is the visuals. The context defines the meaning more than the intention does.

To answer the first question, it depends. Vague answers are never fun to get, but there is no other answer to give. Someone can intend to write something to be writing, even when there are no words and then it is writing, because they decided it to be. Also, the context can indicate whether something is written or not. Meaning, the 'text' could be in a book, or as an inscription on a stone, for example. We might not be able to translate it, but we see that the place it is written, it could be text.

On the other hand, someone could simply be drawing lines on a piece of paper that are mistaken to be the text. In this case, there is no intention, but possibly there is the context. For this, I have no answer whether this is text or just perceived as text. I guess that one, would be up for debate.

writing and written in nature

In his book about asemic writing, Schwenger brings up an interesting perspective. He writes about eco-aseemics, writing created by nature. While I have been talking about humans and their intentions, is it true that writing can exist outside of our species as well?

With eco-aseemics there is no intention of writing, it resembles writing out of pure coincidence, there is no consciousness involved.

The bark of a tree might resemble the lines of writing done by hand, but it was not written by hand. Writing is an act of doing, can a tree 'do' something so human as writing?

While we have established that writing does not need to be in sequence, writing does only happen letter by letter or line by line. It is impossible to write two things at once; the human body is incapable of that. Our hands holding our pens cannot be on two places of the paper at the same time, and a computer or typewriter only goes as fast as one letter at a time. the tree bark was created in an instance, of course not within a short period of time.

What I mean to say, is that the tree did not write every individual line separately, it could be that some lines showed up together.

Could writing only be writing when there is some kind of human intervention involved? Could we see the stripes on zebras as nature's asemic writing? Or even the spots on giraffes? Would that mean that I would not have to write giraffe, since nature has done it for me already?

Well, yes and no. We can 'read' nature, such as finding letters in clouds and tree branches. That does not mean, however, that it can be defined as a language. The found letters are accidentally resembling letters from our alphabet and would not be intended to be read. But then again, this is the case with asemic writing as well. Plenty of the scribbles made by professionals did not mean to contain any words, but we still try to read them. So, the spots of a giraffe and the stripes on a zebra can be read, if we try hard enough, but that does not give them the definition of being 'written'.

I believe there is a clear distinction between the act of writing and a piece of written text, that I need to distinguish clearly.

A piece of writing consists of lines and symbols, that together form a system, whether functional or not. However, the action of writing is the movement of putting down one line or symbol at a time.

The tree bark in this situation cannot write, but the patterns of the tree, could be writing.

So, the questions that I am asking are:

“What is writing?” and “What does writing look like?”

these questions may seem identical, but are inherently different.

Writing does not look like anything specific, and writing is not one thing. There is no clear definition, and we are all merely guessing at their meaning.

deciphering the wordless

An interesting aspect of the type of writing that uses no words is the need for deciphering the text. When a text loses its communication, people become curious of the hidden meaning behind it, that includes when there is none. Even when people know they cannot read any of it, they still try to find any sort of explanation.

It is not only a puzzle for the artist, even the viewer tries to solve it, in the hope of an answer.

But why?

The simple answer would be that humans are, by nature, curious creatures and we cannot be satisfied with not knowing. We need an answer for everything, mostly so with the things we have no explanation for and never will have. The reason for the existence of the world, or actually, of everything is one that we have not found yet. Though, that does not stop us from looking for it. We spend our entire lives questioning everything, but never seem to come close to an answer; it is an infinite task.

This is also the case in creating art in general. The artist gets swept up into creating something inexplicable, and it gives them the urge to express themselves even more. They do not truly understand where it is coming from and try to discover that by creating more, and the cycle continues.

But I question whether asemic writing truly fulfils this need as much as we need it to. Is it true that we are looking for words that do not exist yet? Or are we satisfied with words that merely brush the surface of what we are trying to reach? I would assume this whole quest is not finished with what we have now, otherwise we would stop looking and writing.

What is the desire for a “sentence without words”?

In my case, to communicate an idea, feeling or concept, that has not yet been described.

An urge to get closer to an inner (and outer) purpose. to get to the bottom of feelings and to find words that perfectly describe them. This is also what Winston’s manifesto describes. the need to find the right words. However, they do not exist yet, or never even will.

The hope that, once we find the right words, we know the answer to everything. The purpose of life and so forth.

If I were ever to find my little giraffe, I would possibly know the secrets to the universe, and that is what keeps me going.

Conclusion

I am convinced that we, as artists and poets, are all looking for an answer, that we have right in front of us. It is not about finding anything or having an epiphany that will give us the answer to all our questions. I believe that it is the act of creating art and the feelings that come with it, that we are trying to put into words, but it is impossible. That is why we describe it through visual art.

I am not clear whether I have actually answered any of the questions that I started with. Although, I might be wiser and have more knowledge on asemic writing and concrete poetry, I have also lost the definition of writing. I could not define this abstract concept after all this time spent on researching writing. The questions did not get answered and only more were added to the long list.

To answer the question what writing is and is not, is harder than I would have thought it to be. When starting, I was confident that writing was clear to me, even if it was not clear why. Writing can be a lot, but it also does not need much. There is an endless amount of possibilities and we definitely have not found them all yet.

Similar to the journey we went on with Michaux and Winston, looking for a sentence without words and the truth, I can confidently say that the search is not over. So, to add to the already expansive collection of text in existence, I will continue to write and continue to find more. There is still more to uncover and discover, but isn't that why I started in the first place?

I have not written a giraffe yet (nor do I have any better of an idea what the giraffe could be),
but I would still like to.

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