

Scissors  
are sweet wounds  
and heal

Elfi Seidel







Scissors are sweet and heal wounds

Thesis by Elfi Seidel



For the beautiful is neither the veil nor the veiled object but rather the object in its veil.

**Walter Benjamin, *Goethe's Elective Affinities*, 1924**



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## Introduction

I have been fascinated by language all my life. Its sounds, cadences, grammatical structures, dialects, expressions and idiosyncrasies seem to provide an inexhaustible source of joy and enchantment. When I was a child, perhaps eleven, I had a red notebook which I filled with proverbs and idioms that involved the use of the ‘Genitiv’, the second of four grammatical cases in the German language indicating someone possessing something. I found pleasure in listing all expressions I could possibly think of involving this specialty, this grammatical treat. And whenever a new one popped into my mind, it felt like a new gem added to a precious collection.

In an artistic sense, I find myself being drawn to the materiality and non-materiality of text, to the impact that the look of language has on its content. I am fascinated by the mechanism that turns language into visual material by means of typography and by the visual appearance which, once generated, influences the content. Aesthetic circumstances not only enable the perception of the semantics of a word, but rendering the verbal visual also means to exceed its semantics. Whenever language as such turns into text and thereby – in addition to its inherent linguistic existence – gains visibility, it makes me wonder: in what ways does the visual manifestation of a word touch upon its verbal meaning?

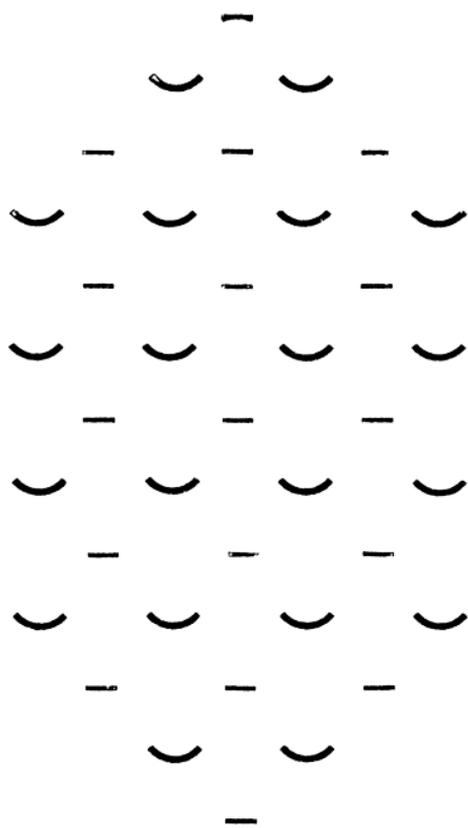
I attempt to address these thoughts by analysing different phenomena revolving around the experimental use of language in poetry and visual art. The notion of meaning-as-use formulated by Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is crucial here as a starting point for reflections upon ways in which the use of language in visual art can bridge the gap between what can be *shown* and what can be *said*.

Some issues I touch upon are:

- I to approach language as material
- II to generate meaning by building around and distilling from existing structures
- III to generate meaning by breaking apart existing structures.

My investigations are a direct result of my desire to express my fondness and felt artistic kinship for ways of using language that are not burdened by imposed narrative structures or representational modes of storytelling, but open for a free way of perceiving words, letters and signs as such. Various artistic-poetic experiments are used to investigate how words and punctuation marks can 'make sense' outside the constraints of conventional modes of representation and narration. A word is not a cast-iron entity, but an array of possibilities. Reflecting this inherent multifariousness of language and its richness in potential meanings, the chapters complement each other to form a unity that

does not need to be read chronologically, but offers multiple perspectives and, I hope, ways of engaging with the text.



“poem”

## I approaching language as material

### Christian Morgenstern's poem FISCHES NACHTGESAN $\circ$

In an early stage of gathering material for this paper, the poem FISCHES NACHTGESAN $\circ$  (*Fish's Nightsong*) by German poet Christian Morgenstern<sup>1</sup> revealed itself to me as one of the examples I wanted to use. In the light of the fact that I was attracted to the text for its visual-verbal trespassing, I was surprised by my obliviousness to a practical, maybe too obvious consequence of this very feature: never actually having read it, I still referred to the object of investigation as a 'poem'. Is readability a constitutive element of poetry? Or have we entered the realm of visual art treating language as material? FISCHES NACHTGESAN $\circ$  seems to be a vivacious example of a piece of text created in the transition area between visual and verbal meaning.

The text at hand – apart from its title – visually certifies its abandonment of language. The poem is constructed purely of macrons and breves: metrics that, according to their initial function, do not have any meaning of their own, but instead function as mere tools, meta semantic signs used for the analysis of poems. Drawn above the lines of the actual lyrical text, they indicate whether a syllable is to be pronounced as a short or a long one. The piece may look like a fish, like closed eyelids or like reflections of moonlight on a water surface slightly

ruffled by the wind. Unlike these associations stirred up by the visuality of the text piece, the signs themselves neither possess any phonetic value nor are they a reference to any semantic sense.

What can be regarded as pure nonsense can also be an entrance into musings on the entanglement of content and form. Throughout the history of structural linguistics, much research has been done on the relationship between word and world. According to Swiss linguist and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure there is nothing compelling about the bond between a word (the *signifier*) and the object it refers to (the *signified*<sup>2</sup>): calling a bird 'bird', for example, is not logical, but completely arbitrary. As opposed to this proposition by Saussure, an onomatopoeia is a word created to phonetically mimic what it refers to, a *sound-image* of a *concept*<sup>3</sup>. The world of animal sounds offers brilliant examples, e.g. a bird's singing being vocalized as *ciu-ciu* in Albanian, *twiet twiet, tjierp, tjielp tsjilp* in Dutch, or *tsif tsif* in Hebrew. Morgenstern uses signs that do not have any phonetic counter value which could allow for an onomatopoeic interpretation of the text piece: confronting the reader/viewer with his or her own inability to actually pronounce the text synchronises this reading experience with the muteness of the fish that the text not only refers to but also conveys sensuously. My own attempt to build this bridge from the word (or more accurately in this case: the *signifier*) to the world, the *signified*, was obstructed by the self-referentiality of the signs, turning my gaze straight back to the signs

themselves. Leaving behind their initial purpose, the signs gain autonomy, making the poem appear as an abstract image which becomes perceivable on a visual, rhythmical level rather than on a semantic one – matter as matter rather than matter as symbol as put by minimalist Carl Andre<sup>4</sup>, whose fondness for self-referential grids and structures manifests in poetry and sculpture. In any case, traditional semiotic models seem to have been disrupted here. The mute signs offer passive resistance against the imposition of any narrative, as if they do not want to be complicit in the process of generating meaning and instead serenely protect their subtlety among other – perhaps more vociferous – characters in the linguistic realm. The poem seems to be a gesture of generosity; a space that has been carved out to be filled in or not to be filled in; an offer; a pool of possibilities. I find it highly liberating to be offered space instead of content or rather space *as* content. Someone who apparently shares my feelings of relief is American poet and professor Ann Lauterbach, who is outspoken about experiencing narratives as downright ‘polluting’:

‘Poetry resists false linkages... Both conventional narrative strategies and the mimesis of visual description are inadequate to the demands of contemporary experience... Resisting false linkages while discovering, recovering, uncovering new ones, poets might help sweep the linguistic path of its polluting and coercive narratives, helping us

to reperceive the world and each other with efficacy, compassion, humor and mutual regard.’<sup>5</sup>

Lauterbach, born in 1942, addresses contemporary poetry, but to look at **FISCHES NACHTGESANG** from 1905 through the lens of ‘the demands of contemporary experience’ is enticing: Morgenstern’s piece keeps pace with those demands in a remarkably effortless way, offering a plethora of potential meanings instead of employing said narratives that nauseate Lauterbach. The poem refers to nothing but itself. Considering what was contemporary at the time of its initial publication, the boldness of using the metrics in such a free-floating way appears even more clearly. Perhaps my favourite way of seeing the piece is as a template for countless yet unwritten poems:

long

short short

long long long

short short short short

long long long

short short

long

A resemblance with musical notations becomes visible, a duality of being both an autonomous text as well as a call to action, an implied sense of performativity. The feeling of space and openness, of something that might, but needn't necessarily be added, shows a certain similarity to the way Yoko Ono employs an *economy of means* in her instruction pieces published in a book called *Grapefruit* in 1964.<sup>6</sup> Ono was trained classically as an operatic student, so the resemblance of her pieces with musical scores is no coincidence. Listen to the sound of the underground water one of her pieces pleads. How many people may have obeyed her order? Does it even matter for the piece? Regardless of how many or how few people have followed her instruction, the physical presence of the piece printed on paper is unwavering. Both pieces – FISCHES NACHTGESANG and Ono's WATER PIECE – gain their strength from the friction between their conciseness and their authors' acknowledgement that the outcome is beyond their control. The conceptual gesture that is at the core of these pieces is one of high precision, yet their interpretation is to be defined and re-defined at the moment of reception. A like-minded generosity is present, a direct, but open-ended one-way communication. Very much in line with the humility that I feel is present in Morgenstern's way of using signs, American writer Lisa Carver notes about Yoko Ono:

It takes an

enormous lack of ego to

stand

back, to hold back, to keep your mouth shut. To yell with your  
silence when you know you very well could make  
soothing and welcomed sounds at the drop of a hat.<sup>7</sup>

Standing back, holding back, keeping one's mouth shut: fitting with the recurring notion of presence and absence, in the preface of *Grapefruit*, Ono commands to burn the book after reading it, reducing to ashes the paper and with it, inevitably, the content – at least on a material level.

Another avid admirer of Morgenstern was none other than Gerrit Rietveld. I would assert – without wanting to make assumptions that are too far-fetched – that there is something of an aesthetic affinity between the way the signs point at what is not there in *FISCHES NACHTGESANG* and the way Rietveld constructed his *Red and Blue Chair*, using thin wooden beams and plates only as a material necessity to define and accentuate the space *between* them. But that might be another topic.

Morgenstern creates a new awareness around the notion of looking for and finding meaning. The title of his poem to some degree frames the signs and anchors them in an image, the night song of the fish, something sweet for the mind to hold on to, something still quite close to nocturnal images of nature in German Romanticism. However, I consider what we have in front of us – this concise

and, dare I say, ultra-conceptual composition of instructive signs – to be much more than a night song of a fish. I would go as far as claiming that it is a radical inquiry into what a poem is and can be:

expression which is more than meaning, yet expression which functions only in tension with meaning—it needs a signifier as the limit to transcend and to reveal its beyond.

to borrow words from philosopher Mladen Dolar.<sup>8</sup> What I would argue is most radical about the poem, though, is that the use of the macrons and breves has been shifted from their initial descriptive function to being expressive in their own right. Expressive (and often self-referential) ways of using signs, letters and numbers have reappeared in visual art under various labels, e.g. Surrealism, Lettrism, Dada, Fluxus, Pop Art, Conceptual Art and Text and Image. Language increasingly being understood as matter and not ideas since the 1960s, as proclaimed by American artist Robert Rauschenberg,<sup>9</sup> has made it commonplace for contemporary artists to take the use of language as a material for granted and create work that could not live in the realm of *visual art* without a fierce belief in the equality of all materials<sup>10</sup> – including language.

“ ”

- 1 Christian Morgenstern, *Alle Galgenlieder*, Insel Verlag Frankfurt am Main und Leipzig 1972, p. 31
- 2 Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin, Peter Owen Limited 1959, p. 67
- 3 Ibid. Saussure would oppose to this, arguing that onomatopoeias are no phonetic equivalents, but mere approximations, thus arbitrary as well, see p. 69
- 4 Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At Language in 1960s Art*, MIT Press 2007, p. 2
- 5 Christian Egger, *Sighs Trapped by Liars – Language in Art*, <http://www.km-k.at/en/exhibition/sighs-trapped-liars-sprache-der-kunst/text/> (accessed September 19, 2016)
- 6 Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit*, Wunternaum Press 1964, n. pag.
- 7 Lisa Carver, *Reaching Out with No Hands, Reconsidering Yoko Ono*, Backbeat Books 2012, p.17
- 8 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, MIT Press 2006, p. 30
- 9 Liz Kotz, *Words to Be Looked At Language in 1960s Art*, MIT Press 2007, p. 3
- 10 Gabriele Wix, *Nach Bildende Kunst/After Fine Arts Lawrence Weiner*, trans. Brian Currid, Hatje Cantz 2012, p. 13

## II generating meaning by building around and distilling from existing structures

Natalie Czech's photographic series *Il Pleut*  
by Guillaume Apollinaire and *Hidden Poems*

To be able to extract meaning from letters and the patterns woven from them – texts – one has to have acquired a certain skill: reading. More than 785 million adults in the world have not had the chance to acquire this skill, meaning that one in five humans perceives texts as a mere abstraction<sup>1</sup>, something we can relate to when we think, for example, of vertical rows of Asian signs that we can solely *look at* unless we are, by some chance, familiar with the decoding of those signs. Supposedly, the perception of pictures works quite differently: generally assumed to not call for the skilful deciphering of coded meaning, images appear to manifest themselves in a directly perceivable, democratic way. Interestingly though, in an interview conducted for the documentary *Conceptual Paradise*, artist John Baldessari stated that ‘one of the challenges of any good art’ was to offer something of interest to ‘the most aesthetically cultivated person’ as well as to ‘the most visually illiterate person’, thus clearly assuming varying degrees of *visual literacy* among his audience.<sup>2</sup> Art and language are interrelated in a multitude of ways. Fine arts have always been sustained by language, yet at the same time, the romantic claim that the art work itself bears something metaphysical that

cannot be approximated with words maintains its significance. The experience of being speechless in front of a work of art reveals the problematics of language in a very tangible way: using words to circle around what one sees and feels, one oftentimes simultaneously becomes aware of a gap between what one says and what one aims to say. Instead of instilling their viewers with a suitable and compelling vocabulary, art works often seem to simply reveal the *limits of language*<sup>3</sup>. Reassuringly, in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein remarked that:

There is indeed the inexpressible. This *shows* itself; it is the mystical.<sup>4</sup>

FISCHES NACHTGESANG is a poem so visual that it might be best placed on the very outpost of poetry, a place that blends in with visual art. Approaching the visual-verbal spectrum from the other side, language-based works of art often strongly rely on the visual features of language, which of course does not diminish the presence of an actual meaning. That being said, it appears that the permeation of art by language does not make the situation any less mystical – on the contrary: both visual and verbal, to be looked at as well as to be read, language-based art works introduce an area that is hovering between the inherent referentiality of words and their potential as visual entities, as brought forwards by the Cubists, for example, who used words as pictorial elements in painting. In the

1960s and '70s, some conceptual artists went as far as claiming language as an entity almost completely emancipated from its role as *signifier*, thus in many cases consciously dismissing the linguistic implication of words in favour of an approach that stressed their material properties. In the foreword to her book *Words to Be Looked At*<sup>5</sup>, art historian and critic Liz Kotz comments on the sometimes complicated twofold role that language plays in art, igniting battles between verbal and visual signification time and again:

By their nature, words are both here—concretely and physically present on the page, or in the moment of utterance—and yet also elsewhere—referring to, evoking, or metaphorically conjuring up sets of ideas, objects, or experiences that are somewhere else.

This chapter looks at different processes of words becoming images. Two sets of work by visual artist Natalie Czech – whose artistic practice is ‘opening up the connections between photography and writing in such a way as to eventually obscure their distinction’<sup>6</sup> – will be used as tools for reflecting upon the reciprocity of the visual appearance and the content of texts, the interweaving of semantics and visual presentation. The first work, a photographic series called *Il Pleut by Guillaume Apollinaire* takes as its starting point the calligram IL PLEUT (*It's Raining*) by the French poet Apollinaire (1880-1918).<sup>7</sup> The characteristic feature of a calligram is that the words’ visual appearance is matched with their meaning, creating

a synchronicity between content and form. Visually alluding to lines of rain drops, Apollinaire chose to arrange the letters vertically instead of horizontally, which does not extinguish the possibility of reading them, but does impart a distinct visual presence to the text.

### It's Raining

It's raining women's voices as if they had died  
even in memory/

And it's raining you as well marvellous  
encounters of my life O little drops/

Those rearing clouds begin to neigh a whole  
universe of auricular cities/

Listen if it rains while regret and disdain weep  
to an ancient music/

Listen to the bonds fall off which hold you  
above and below<sup>/8</sup>

# IL PLEUT

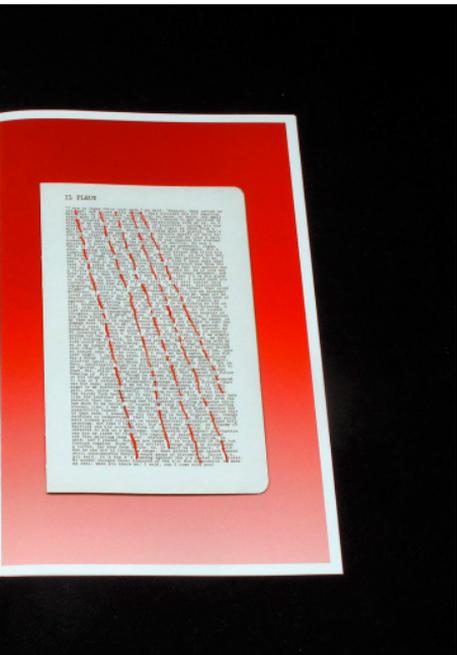
il pleut des voix de femmes comme si elles étaient mortes même dans le souvenir  
cest vous aussi qu'il pleut merveilles rencontres de ma vie ô gouttelettes  
et ces nuages cabrés se prennent à hennir tout un univers de villes auriculaires  
écoute sil pleut tandis que le regret et le dédain pleurent une ancienne musique  
écoute tomber les liens qui te retiennent en haut et en bas

Czech invited several writers with different mother tongues to write texts that embed the letters of the calligram – in their initial position on the page – within a new text (which would not be possible without the change of reading direction performed by Apollinaire). The new texts host the Apollinairian letters in new havens: written in English, French, German, Portuguese and Italian, they allow the letters to blend in, rendering the calligram invisible on a page now evenly populated by letters. Czech, who graduated in photography at *Kunstakademie Düsseldorf* in 2005, lets the calligram reappear amidst the new text by making a move that stresses the materiality of both texts: a series of photographs shows the texts printed on the page of a booklet and mounted on a colourful backdrop, with the calligram highlighted in acrylic paint directly on the enlarged photograph.

## II. PLEUT

It was an hour to the south. Two at most. Up the fjord. I was wet and walking along cookie-crustered benches covered in rockweed on my way to the logician. Before bailing chances alone, I wanted to ask whether he, believer in possible worlds, out on the harbor, knew of a world like sleep, where entropy asked cruel, undoing reason. And was it at hand? My will to live there bent my thirty-odd years of pillars into seros, changed them to vast castles, emptied by thieves. And like the mussel on the rugged seashore, such a world seemed easy to gather yet refused any attempt to fracture it undone; sensitive, a closed system needs skilled cooking up, slow steam, unless its forkfuls are never to be released. I was drenched. Ragged. And sticky. Among the trees up on the famine trail, existed an abode: granite-made, barricades for a door. Abandoned the first time I curved here, I pacified a night under its corrugated metal roof wearing sheep skins, leftovers from some shepherd. There had been a vagrant pleasure in the shed, in the skins, that I wanted again. Rusty, old, chains—It had called surreal this century for a few fugitive hours. I moved to the door and went to remove the barricades but a lurch and a boxy lock baroquey smashed me, whose shed was this? Had someone moved in? I was too numb to refute the truth of needing in. I shouted but couldn't see a thing. Bleats, and wallings of sheep, covered the hill. One was quite close. Is there no lord? It came from within. I called again with no answer, I called and expected a dog's qui vive. I tried to fix open the padlocks, and, I was never so happy as to learn that whoever had added locks—even-bless! his soul—more than I had seen at first, merely attached them half-closed. Undone, I went within. Then, disrobed. My brain, languaged, plebe: quo usque tandem? But where was that from? Even more distress arose—my utter unwhittability to disrobe. None of this made any sense. I never even, besides from the logician, had heard Latin before. "Mountains didn't exist an hour ago," he had said once—a challenge to everything peaked my talks with him—and this was ammunition against my ragged earthly experience here in the shed, where all of my solid, previous knowledge of myself melted into brackish substances. Impossible. The world that I richly rendered in sleep was surfacing alone. Or was this but willfulness extended? Naked, shaking, I ached in my providence; blankly and in agony; it hurt deep in my real bones, I then swaddled myself. Fleece after absorbing fleece covered my shoulders. The intense cold existed—heat enveloped everything—then, I fell into a palatial sleep. Uncoupled, the thickening galaxy exploded. Life's wild time-some cadences gave in to the real tinnage of the shadow. I felt this world, an absence, loosening of expansive magnetism and saw youth with nettles embracing songs, singing, turning nonlexically into stone. A snow-fd body of water sheltered a mirrored sterility, filled with meteors... I saw all this: rays piercing elastic fantasies of day. I was paling in the painful in-between. There seemed no escape. Wind was in the trees. I expected a rainbow to ooze in but the only thing I could see was my arm. It was dark. A crackle uncorked my greatest fears, the owner was here, beak—beak—I opened, the rone-like chained door, and-out on the fjord in flushed moonlight, I saw a diving seagull trailing a horseward boat. The storm was muted, a house's pest fire duplicated the clouds. There was no one here, Arcadia. Night's inflated terrain coerced me to rest here until daybreak, encouraging bogginess to remain within. Thirty, I found my clothes and started sucking on them. Beggarily, I sniled. As I hung my clothes along the fence, sheep's eyes trailed me with envy, hate. Love in them is dancing, if that old saw's blades are even sharp today. Right then, I beheld my visitor: egret, dressed in snow. No longer agitated, I fell back asleep, destitute of any further dreams, sinking, deep, as if I permeated a raked-over layed bed from the famine era and sunk still deeper past dark beavens past crop blends, into the acidic mountain itself. I woke up in the morning to beaing and scratching outside. My intuition over-brimmed: the antagonist shepherd was here. I flung open the door. Mistake! The sheep flicked in the shed, a dead give away, I managed to squeeze by, I was hopeful to get dressed, before the shepherd entered, and quickly shoved the ovine out, but my clothes were nowhere to be found. Nowhere. This fact seemed to bother only me; a lamb grazed where I left them and-looking closer—at was clear he was eating my dry pants. Ha! Laugh, you ill-bred bastard! Laugh! And be done with me! With no other options, I ran erringly into the shed and hid among the trapped sheep—what could I do? As I hid, I acted lamb-like, ate grass, practiced beaing. Easi! Detestable creature! Withdrew! My new plan was to be silent, look like a stone, sad, a hide, fleece, a stack of them, and buried myself up to my eyes with bucolicism. Now it was too late to do anything. I heard the awful barking from a dog. Next, the shepherd's cursing, it surprised me—he didn't whip us or even come in. Just get about mending some fence, petting his locks and dog. I want to say it was an hour—it could have been two, the sour odor of suck no longer bothered me, an aversion to nakedness, woolly being caught, too. But when he threw open the barricade, shivers ran all over, as I saw his similitude to the logician: wiry, thin—but with whiskers. Their likeness was monstrous. Terrified—I-held-onto a sheep's midriff, held, quee potest oratorcopor inventit! under it, then witnessed his servucialness as he took out his diseased penis, looking like clusters on the flower of wild rhubarb, and entered me. I felt new again. And never went home.





The second work, the photographic series *Hidden Poems*, acts as the methodological counterpart to *Il Pleut by Guillaume Apollinaire*. While in the case of the former, letters were used as beacons in the sea of language, pointers to navigate around and to elegantly pick up, *Hidden Poems* uses texts found in a variety of print media as a starting point: newspaper and magazine pages, Sol LeWitt's *Sentences on Conceptual Art*<sup>9</sup>, letters and illustrated books. Czech extracts existing poems from this basic raw material by simply highlighting the respective words with a pencil or a marker pen. The process of reading texts 'through each other', of a text 'transpiring through, stuttering itself into existence, into enunciation'<sup>10</sup> as phrased by Czech, is again concluded with a photograph of the two entangled texts.

One poem that Czech found in an illustrated book among other, supposedly unrelated, words is a poem by the American minimalist poet Robert Lax, which shows a strong verbal-visual entanglement: rather minimal in scope, the 28 words used are strung together in a compact vertical composition, simultaneously broken apart and linked together by means of erratic line breaks that sometimes even cut through words. Lax composes his poems with such all-entailing aesthetic devotion that any binary thinking about the literary versus the visual treatment of words seems to have become obsolete.

does  
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run  
to  
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sea

&

is  
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sea  
a  
home  
for  
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rose

&

home  
ward  
now  
the  
riv  
er  
goes

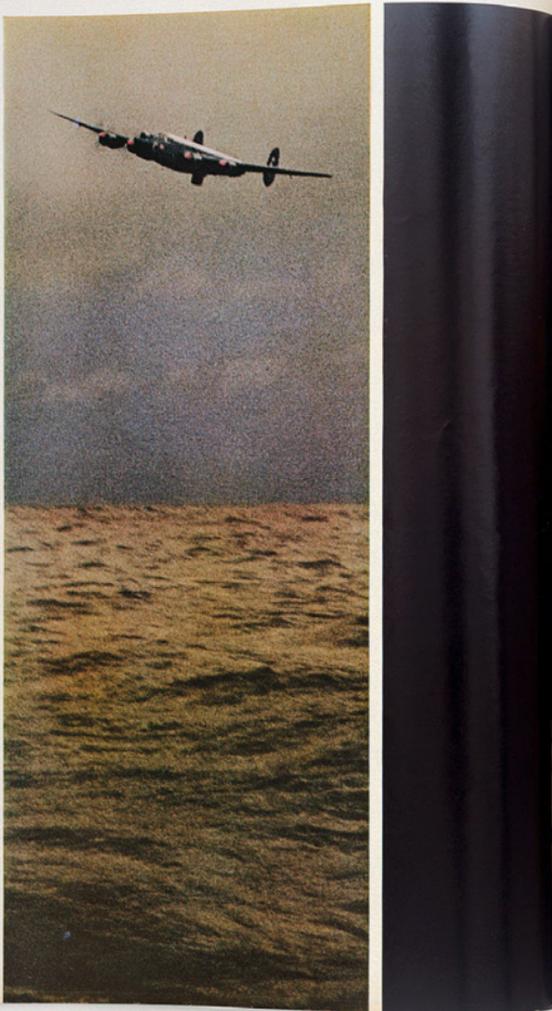
## 'On the 69th day, a plane came bearing oranges,

does it go? About three weeks out, riding at sea anchor in the morning, went broadside to the waves and *Tinkerbell* was knocked far over—her mast almost in the water.

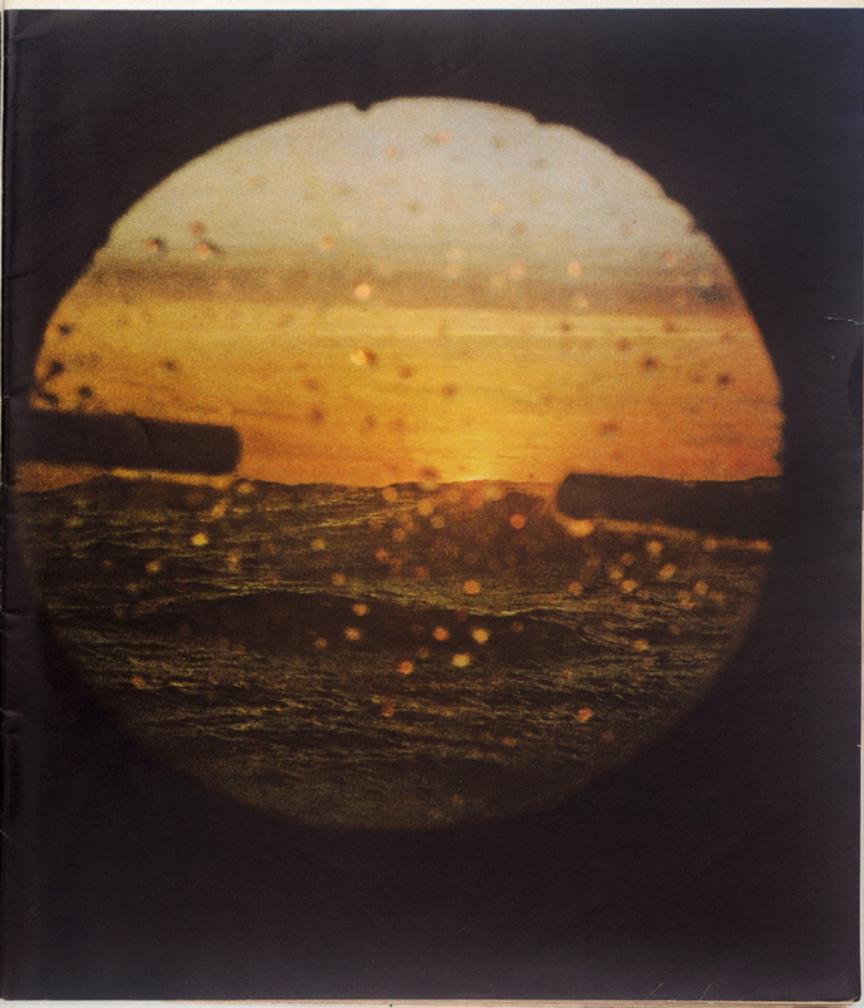
I was dismayed by the weather during the first days of August. The wind blew *even* harder than before, and I was *trying* to trust that the huge waves *driving* at *Tinkerbell* would not upset her. She is broad beamed and *is* *moving* pretty slow. It took a heavy ripple of wind to move her. Then she tended to head into the strong sea breeze and I had to pull hard on the tiller to keep her on course. The strain proved too much for the rudder and twice it broke. The first time, I replaced it with a spare I had brought. When the spare broke, I spent a day and a half drifting—luckily, it was a calm sea—and putting together the strongest parts of the two rudders. I had felt unbearably lonely at first but then this loneliness became a part of the routine of life at sea. I would talk to *Tinkerbell*. I did not know anymore where and what was home. When she was being balky for any reason, I would scold her, *remember*! I began to talk of the pair of us as We. **7**

On Aug. 8, a Belgian freighter, the *Belgoff Glory*, hailed me and asked if I needed any supplies. Although I had sufficient provisions left, I happily accepted the fresh fruit, bread, beer and the roast chicken hot from the oven that they offered. The captain gave me my position, which was 270 sea miles from Bishop's Rock, my projected landfall off the southwest corner of my former homeland England. The captain also said he had heard from the Coastal Patrol that planes were looking for me, which I first could not believe and thought they must be searching for someone else. I had given myself 75 days for the crossing and wasn't overdue yet. I told him that my trip was not always sunshine and roses and then he reported my position to the British Coastal Patrol, and at 5 p.m. that same day, an RAF plane flew over me. The plane dropped canisters containing oranges, bananas, apples and a message welcoming me to British waters. The next day, the RAF returned and dropped more canisters, one with a note from my wife. I was *happick* and looking forward to seeing her now, as soon as possible. The Cleveland *Main Dealer* had blown her and our two children to the London harbour on the South bank of the river to await my arrival. That night, on my 70th day at sea, I photographed the setting sun through the spray-flecked porthole and went peacefully to sleep knowing that I was on the last leg of my long odyssey.

But it never goes as fast as you expect. It took five days to sail free of the current, and that was long enough to cause those waiting in England for my arrival to be concerned. As far as they knew, *Tinkerbell* was lost.



*bananas and a welcome to British waters'*



Some years ago, classical modes of writing started to increasingly instil in me a kind of inexplicable unease. The traditional model of sender-message-receiver, the idea of a text serving as a mere medium for a message being transmitted from author to reader, the idea of the protagonist being called Anna or Sarah, and eventually even the idea of a novel entailing a plot just felt pretty dated. This aversion must have been a fertile ground for a profound fondness for conceptual art to grow, an art form which proposes more abstract ways of coming to terms with the world. The two works by Natalie Czech establish ways of using language that disrupt said models. Gracefully undermining the authority of the text, the works follow the same process in reverse motion: in the case of *Il Pleut* by *Guillaume Apollinaire* the smallest units that language can be broken down to – letters – are used as starting points to write a net of content around them. *Hidden Poems* performs the opposite action: the entity of a text is used as raw material from which words are distilled, hence going from a large body of text to small fragments. Placed on the same Moebius strip of language, both works call for a reconsideration of the idea of clearly defined artistic ownership. Following this line of thinking, I am almost inclined to read Lax's poem as an interpretation of the working method of Czech by assuming the words by Lax and the letters by Apollinaire to be rivers, being temporarily extracted from and led back to the sea that is language.

Czech treats the texts she works with in the

artistic tradition of the *found object*.<sup>11</sup> What fascinates me most about her artistic strategy is that revealing, hinting at, making visible is given preference over actual creation – suggestion rather than imposition. Taking pre-existing texts as a point of departure, Czech lucidly observes and materialises her observations by taking photographs of moments in which texts happen to meet. She alludes to the boundaries between texts not being fundamental, but gradual and evolving, simply because all texts, *rivers* if you please, cannot escape the fact that they share the same vocabulary as a source material, the *sea*. In their book on Ludwig Wittgenstein called *Wittgenstein's Vienna*<sup>12</sup>, professor of philosophy Allan Janik and philosopher Stephen Toulmin also use the sea as a metaphor to elaborate on the all-encompassing nature of language:

Just as an ocean simultaneously separates and joins continents, so too language is at one and the same time a bridge and a barrier between men—

They proceed to comment on the fluidity of language by adding that

“words are always *in statu nascendi*.” Not only language, but the whole of culture as well, is continually in a state of transformation. Nothing stands still.<sup>15</sup>

Czech is very aware of this *statu nascendi*, this constant rebirth of letters and words in different

contexts and of the resulting difficulty of assuming clearly defined authorship. I find it remarkable how her work stays away from a didactic way of pointing to the presence of one text within another. Rather than performing a magic trick that lets something vanish only to let it pop up elsewhere, her work is suggestive of the mutual dependence and radical coexistence of all literary material in between, around, on top of and next to each other. By creating fields of tension between found materials, new sets of interdependencies arise, new potential meanings emerge between the words, between the letters even. Rather than functioning as the containers of solidified meaning, the new texts draw on intertextual linkages and on the newly created and ever-shifting fusions of existing materials – hybrid text creatures living in between other texts. Artist and language-animal Tine Melzer<sup>14</sup>, in turn referring to Wittgenstein, remarks on this topic:

If a word's meaning is determined by its very use — 'meaning as use' —, then an entire context, or network of words, necessarily surrounds every word. Consequently, words are not predefined units of signification isolated from each other; on the contrary, they are hinges in a flexible, multiple and open-ended network of vocables.

**It appears as if Czech moves around in this open-ended network of vocables with great ease. She treats all texts with the same degree of respect, expecting potential for poetic charge in descriptive texts or newspaper articles as much as in poems by**

20th century avant-garde poets such as Gertrude Stein, Robert Lax, E.E. Cummings or Tan Lin. The same spirit is present in the way she uses revelation and concealment to revise the found material. Modifying the texts by crossing out, encircling and highlighting words and letters, she never changes the texts beyond recognition, consistently maintaining the option to trace back the initial form as well as leaving space for multi-faceted dialogues between the materials. These materials may initially have come from very different sources, but the framework in which they meet supports the dignity of them both.

Another feature present in both *Il Pleut by Guillaume Apollinaire* and in *Hidden Poems* is their approach to challenging the borders between text and image. Regarding image and language as antagonists or, at least, as fundamentally different realms appears to be a rather constitutive feature of the way our society is structured: to start with an example from my immediate surrounding, I would like to suggest a closer look at the name of a department at the *Gerrit Rietveld Academie: Beeld en Taal* (Image and Language). Choosing the neutral conjunction 'and' keeps the vast areas of language and image juxtaposed instead of rhetorically allowing for overlaps or entanglements. Similarly, the name of an event taking place at the academy on a regular basis – *Show & Tell* – verbally assumes a split between the two supposedly different processes. While both of these examples take up a non-judgemental position towards the split between

image and language, the journalistic paradigm *Show, Don't Tell* implies that images have supremacy over texts. A commonly quoted platitude even claims that 'a picture is worth a thousand words',<sup>15</sup> blatantly weighing up the alleged opponents in a quantitative way. This idiomatic phrase, not very sophisticated to start with, quickly discredits itself, though, as even a superficial internet search suffices to show the saying being attributed alternately to Confucius, Napoleon Bonaparte or simply being classified as a 'Chinese proverb'. In actual fact, though, it is likely to stem from American advertising strategies, praising the compelling immediacy of pictures as opposed to long-winded verbal elaborations.

Whatever the case, Czech's photographs include both, but eschew conclusive allocation to the categories of *either* image *or* language. Like pictures that can be viewed in two ways (one of the most famous ones being the *Duck-Rabbit illusion* by Joseph Jastrow, a picture in which one can see a duck as well as a rabbit, but never both at the same time),<sup>16</sup> Czech's work establishes a condition of ambiguity that is mutually dependent and mutually exclusive: at the moment of looking at the picture, one cannot possibly read the text. Conversely, in order to read the text, one has to surrender to the linear scanning of the lines which excludes a simultaneous perception of the letters as visual elements of equal importance for the overall composition. Both works require an active and discursive way of engaging with them in a sensuous as well as in an intellectual way – and

whether this involves reading the image, looking at the text or something in between might not be the most pressing question. *I Have Nothing to Say, Only to Show* – this title of a 2012 solo exhibition by Czech reveals the artist’s awareness of the different cognitive processes her works touch upon, implying that the photographs are something to look at, while it cannot be ignored that they also say something.<sup>17</sup> Wittgenstein asserts that:

**What *can* be shown *cannot* be said.**<sup>18</sup>

However, Czech’s text-photographs blur the distinction between what can be *said* and what can be *shown* by establishing a condition for the words to be read, thus perceived on a content-level, that strongly relies on visual features. Her way of taking pictures of texts acknowledges that a written text to some degree is a picture in itself already, while at the same time, the photographs of a text remain as readable as a notebook page.<sup>19</sup>

As much as we are trained to see content and form, the object and its veil<sup>20</sup>, as opponents, I really feel that it is time to finally allow these components to enter a productive dialogue, a mutually supportive intertwining that acknowledges the importance of them both. In their book *A Thousand Plateaus*<sup>21</sup>, published in 1980, philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychiatrist and political activist Félix Guattari refer to Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev to stress the advantages of engaging in a holistic take on the interwoven nature of the *what*

## and the *how* of language:

Hjelmslev was able to weave a net out of the notions of *matter*, *content* and *expression*, *form* and *substance*. These were the strata, said Hjelmslev. Now this net had the advantage of breaking with the form-content duality, since there was a form of content no less than a form of expression.

*The first articulation concerns content, the second expression.* The distinction between the two articulations is not between forms and substances but between content and expression, expression having just as much substance as content and content just as much form as expression.

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- 4 Ibid, #6.522
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- 8 English translation of *Il Pleut* by Edward Hirsch, January 23, 2006, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/articles/detail/68423> (accessed October 23, 2016)
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### III generating meaning by breaking apart existing structures

Ewa Partum's performance *Active Poetry*

The Italian Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti disdained the imprisonment of words in books. He aimed to resolve this dilemma by making big posters which – in an attempt to create a visual equivalent to the simultaneousness of modern-day city life – presented words and letters simultaneously, freeing them from the linearity of books, which he thought were a bourgeois lockup. Unsurprisingly, one of the demands Marinetti expressed in the *Futurist Manifesto* in 1909 was the catchphrase ‘parole in libertà’: words in freedom.<sup>1</sup>

If we think of language as an infinitely continuable system built from interlocking elements of different sizes, then Marinetti's liberation of words from books has been developed further by Polish artist Ewa Partum. Partum, who works with poetry, performance and film, not only freed words from books, but took Marinetti's demand to the next level, onto macro scale, by freeing letters from the clusters that they got put into to form words in the first place. In one performance undertaken as part of the performance series *Active Poetry*, realized between 1971–1973, Partum scatters single letters that were contained in an excerpt of James Joyce's iconic novel *Ulysses*<sup>2</sup> in various outside locations: on a shore, in a backyard or on the peak of a mountain. Initially published in 1922, *Ulysses* is

widely regarded as one of the most game-changing works of literature of the last century, for it was the first time that the, then revolutionary, stream-of-consciousness technique was used throughout an entire novel. The technique used by Joyce to describe one single day on 783 pages breaks up linear narrative structures by interweaving the description of the actual events taking place in this given time span with sudden and non-cohesive interjections of thoughts, associations, off-topic memories, description of sounds and other sensuous impressions or entangled shifts of perspective. On a side note: I put my copy of *Ulysses* on the kitchen scale and found out that it weighs 0,8 kg. Being aware of the silliness of my experiment, I told my mother about my deed, whereupon she remarked that the book would be just as heavy if it contained only empty pages. This point is hard to deny of course, but while the weight of the book does not need *Ulysses* in it to exist, *Ulysses* does need some kind of material support to exist: a book, a kindle, a computer document, a bunch of pages – even a voice reading the text out is something.

To return to the main line of thought: using language in such a fragmented way was an attempt to approximate the text to the working of the consciousness with its many likewise non-cohesive streams. Joyce himself, who – marginally noted – was so exhausted upon finishing *Ulysses* that he did not write anything for a year, proudly asserted:

‘I have included so many riddles and secrets that *Ulysses* will keep professors on their toes for centuries, quarrelling over what I might have meant; for this is the only way to secure for oneself immortality.’<sup>5</sup>

Unimpressed by Joyce’s ostentatious demeanour, Ewa Partum did not care about figuring out what he ‘might have meant’. I saw the film documentation of *Active Poetry* in an exhibition in Graz, Austria<sup>4</sup> and was struck by the conceptual purity that the gesture exuded: there goes the masterpiece, being swirled around in the wind by a natural force. If we regard culture as a wheel that can keep turning only on the condition of receiving a push once in a while, Partum’s contribution to the motion of the wheel was not the intellectual examination of *Ulysses*, but the clearing of the clutter until all that was left was a bare-bone inventory of the material that allowed Joyce to write *Ulysses*. Partum took a leap forward by igniting a transgression to a state of consciousness where all bonds like names, syntax, semantics, sense, grammar and obligation to meaning simply fall off. While Marinetti performed a turn away from the linear towards the simultaneous, Partum went from the linear to the sculptural, literally filling three dimensions with letters that used to be strung together in neat rows, page after page. She lends the text ephemerality and spaciousness. The order of the letters that emerged as a result of Joyce’s writing is not merely substituted by an ordering principle

of another kind, but the whole material basis of the text is put in a state of eternal flux, surrendering to a constant reshaping caused by natural forces.

Partum's performance conveys devotion and humility, it bears witness to a deeply spiritual dedication, hinting at the potentiality of language which amazes us time and again because of its very impossibility to be grasped entirely. It feels like Partum suggests that – even though created by humans – language might be something we do not own after all. Wittgenstein's notion of 'the mystical' also enters the picture again. Partum refrains from saying something definite for the sake of addressing the *limits of language* imposed by ordering principles such as grammar and syntax. She gestures towards the area that according to Wittgenstein<sup>5</sup> is by default situated outside of language – the unsayable:

**Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.**

The dispersal of letters in various outside locations (none of which has any apparent connection with the contents of *Ulysses*) calls for a reconsideration of the bond between *signifier* and *signified*, opting for a new calibration of meaning. For me, it was a moment of exceptional clarity to realize that everything ever written in the seemingly infinite spectrum of text in Latin writing is based on different combinations of the same 26 letters

and an array of punctuation marks. Much later, when my astonishment had settled, I coincidentally discovered that Galileo Galilei praised the alphabet as the ‘greatest invention that had ever been made’ for the same reason.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Natalie Czech, who seems to be in complete control of the artistic process, Ewa Partum lets the wind take care of the letters. The simplicity with which she unveils the unsubstantiality of Joyce’s ambition to secure himself immortality by declaring *Ulysses* to be the material evidence of his life is striking. However, her action elegantly eschews the question whether her attitude towards Joyce’s *Ulysses* is affirmative or oppositional. Instead, she creates a situation in which the will of a human is confronted with the will of nature, as if Partum was asking an open-ended question of man versus god. By detaching the letters from where they used to belong, she makes them accessible again as open source material, frees them from the Joycian ‘imprisonment’ – ultimately, she reclaims the letters’ right to simply be themselves.





I would like to conclude with an excerpt from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* by American novelist, poet and playwright Gertrude Stein. In this alleged *auto*-biography, published in 1933, Stein – a literary figure of the 20th century of similar greatness (and self-confidence) as Joyce – places herself in the shoes of her life-long partner Alice B. Toklas, hence talking about herself in the third person. In the excerpt at hand, Stein tells the story of her novel *Three Lives* being transcribed from a hand-written manuscript to a typewritten version. Incidentally, this process also allowed letters to simply remain what they are – namely letters and nothing else:<sup>7</sup>

Gertrude Stein tried to copy *Three Lives* on the typewriter but it was no use, it made her nervous, so Etta Cone came to the rescue.

Etta Cone was a Baltimore connexion of Gertrude Stein's .

Etta Cone offered to type-write *Three Lives* and she began. Baltimore is famous for the delicate sensibilities and conscientiousness of its inhabitants. It suddenly occurred to Gertrude Stein that she had not told Etta Cone to read the manuscript before beginning to type-write it. She went to see her and there indeed was Etta Cone faithfully copying the manuscript letter by letter so that she might not by any indiscretion become conscious of the meaning.

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#### IV boiling water until it evaporates

concluding with Bruce Lee

Language is an every-day activity, a commonplace practice, a constitutive feature of social structures. Speaking and hearing, writing and reading are part of human nature. As we need words for a discourse on words<sup>1</sup>, speaking and writing *about* language, however, can be an intricate endeavour, since the content is also the medium and vice versa.

Just like water is running through the world in an incessant circuit, the works considered in this paper (likewise affiliated with water each in their own way) also seem to be situated in different places or at different stages on the same loop of language. Maybe it is because the poets and artists mentioned arrived at an understanding of language that presumes similar formless and colourless qualities in language as are found in water. Let me, very briefly, list the aspects that allowed me to reflect on the materiality and on the non-materiality, on the context-dependent interweaving, on the mutual dependence and distinct autonomy, on the linearity and liberty of language: to begin with, **FISCHES NACHTGESANG** cannot be read out loud, as it is made of signs that are unsayable. A fact that – notwithstanding its obviousness – filled me with bewilderment. Even if one overcame the difficulty of singing under water, the impermeable quality of water would absorb the sound waves,

making the pronunciation of the poem as mute as its inscription. Yoko Ono wants us to listen to the sound of underground water, suggesting that one might come across an otherworldly language if listening devotedly enough. Her **WATER PIECE** is an example of an art work that could spark debates on what actually constitutes the work: a performance or its written testimony in the form of an event score. Guillaume Apollinaire's calligram lets poetry rain down on its reader in tiny particles, giving space to its beauty and subtlety by marginally slowing down our perception of the words as reading vertically goes against our habit of reading from left to right. Natalie Czech's photographic series *Il Pleut by Guillaume Apollinaire* and *Hidden Poems* revolve around the mutual dependence of all words and letters, problematizing as well as partially reversing the split between visual and verbal understanding, between what is intellectually and what is visually perceivable. Robert Lax ponders his place in the world –

does/eve/ry/riv/er/run/to/the/sea/&/is/the/  
sea/a/home/for/me/?/

– while Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin compare language to the ocean, because it simultaneously separates and joins continents in the same way as language simultaneously separates and joins people. Lastly, Ewa Partum cremates a part of Joyce's *Ulysses*, scattering its letters into the sea or into the wind, in either case not burying them

underground, but reintroducing them to the eternal circuit of language around which we revolve, and which revolves around us.

The law of conservation of mass states that mass is neither created nor destroyed during chemical or physical reactions. Similarly, my impression is that language may incessantly change its gestalt, but that there is also something to it, some quality within, that preserves the content and carries it through the transformations without letting it lose its essence –

– what cannot be destroyed, what remains the same in all changes.

as phrased by Wittgenstein.<sup>2</sup> Language – as an autonomous substance as well as as a container for non-material content – undergoes continual transformations, but the circuit that it is enclosed in is eternal. It is all about streams: about streams-of-consciousness or higher-consciousness-streams; about words having meaning only in the stream of life<sup>3</sup>; about the transitional stream from one aggregate phase to another; about boiling water until it evaporates and rains down on the fertile ground of artistic evolution. How to navigate through this fluid world? I leave the ultimate advice up to Bruce Lee:<sup>4</sup>

Empty your mind  
Be formless, shapeless  
like water

Water can flow  
or it can crash  
be water my friend

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## Images

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I owe the title of this thesis to a language experiment initiated by poet Pascale Petit, in which ten sentences were generated from a collectively created 'active poetry vocabulary' in response to Ewa Partum.



Elfi Seidel

Scissors are sweet and heal wounds

Bachelor thesis

Text and design: Elfi Seidel

Mentor: Paula Albuquerque

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Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam





