2000

Textuaries

Patricia Millar Boas
Portland State University

THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Patricia Millar Boas for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Painting were presented on May 30, 2000, and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

COMMITTEE APPROVALS:

[redacted]
Elizabeth Mead, Chair

[redacted]
Rita Robillard

[redacted]
Sue Taylor

[redacted]
Joseph Biel

[redacted]
Gregory Goekjian
Representative of the Office of Graduate Studies

DEPARTMENTAL APPROVAL

[redacted]
Rita Robillard, Chair
Department of Art

ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Patricia Millar Boas for the Master of Fine Arts in Art: Painting presented May 30, 2000.

Title: Textuaries

The paintings, sculpture and digital prints presented for this thesis explore language as a field where sense and non-sense coexist. With my focus on the activity of deciphering, both literally and metaphorically, I have examined the play between word as image and image as word. What poetry lies embedded in the strange physicality of familiar graphic marks? What is the pleasure we find, as the poet Robert Pinsky suggests, in language only partly understood?

Following the lead of the Surrealists, who used the camera to investigate the paradoxical notion of reality as a sign, I amassed a collection of newspaper photographs to use as raw material for drawing and painting. The half-tone dot screen of commercial printing became a metaphor for language, and for a time provided me with a system after which to compose field paintings that referenced contemporary artists such as Sigmar Polke and Vija Celmins. This work, the *Reading and Writing Series,* moved from the purely visual code of filtered photographic

images, transferred by hand and painted on wooden panels, to an examination of the vagaries of text itself.

Having traveled from image to word, I endeavored to bring them together in a further series of paintings based on newspaper photographs of texts that contained culturally significant information. The *Document Series* paintings were conceived as system paintings similar to the *Reading and Writing Series.* These paintings, however, each mapped a different territory.

As my working method broadened, I began to spatially explore the concept of "the book." Using found text and found objects, I made a series of three-dimensional tableaux meant to posit language as a doorway between the inner cognitive realm and external reality. The final site for this investigation became the dream. Here I have stopped to consider the text as a collection of keepsakes, the reader as a dreamer and the abstract beauty of common codes.

TEXTUARIES

by

PATRICIA MILLAR BOAS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS
in
ART: PAINTING

Portland State University
2000

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures ii

Introduction 1

Of Reading, Randomness and Readymades 1

Of Raster Dots and the Romance of the Hand 6

Of the Book as Sculpture 17

Of Erasures, Constellations and Consolation 18

Of the Reader as Dreamer 19

Of the First and the Last 21

Conclusion 22

Notes 23

Figures 24

References 29

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. *Document Series #3 (Tattooed Hand)* 24

Figure 2. *Document Series #4* 25

Figure 3. *Untitled* 26

Figure 4. *The Unconsoled, Part II* 27

Figure 5. *First Book, Last Book* 28

Introduction

It begins with a line. Curving or looping, the line becomes a letter and the letter a sound. The lines arch and bend, one toward another, then words are formed. And in a rush toward meaning, the simplicity of the line is forgotten.

Reading is a way of structuring reality. One looks up at the sky to determine whether it is likely to rain, a speaker looks for signs of understanding in the expression of the listener, a crowd gathering in a normally vacant area signals something out of the ordinary is taking place. These are instances of image as information; they populate each waking moment of every day.

But, do we make all visual perception into "language" before we are able to make it into sense? I am fascinated by the way the line becoming a letter, or the pattern of dots in a half-tone screen, induces a cognitive process that results in meaning. A photograph, commonly understood as evidence, can be enlarged to the point where it loses its identity. The pattern of lights and darks, then, become the code that the viewer must try to break, to read.

Like all language, the code remains ambiguous. What poetry lies embedded in the strange physicality of those familiar graphic marks? What is the pleasure we find—as the poet Robert Pinsky suggests—in language only partially understood?

Of Reading, Randomness and Readymades

The body of work presented here explores language as a field where sense and nonsense coexist. With my focus on the activity of deciphering—both literally and metaphorically—I have made use of vernacular structures, looking for an abstract beauty in their common codes.

Making work that deals with language is likely to be viewed in the context of sixties Conceptual art, though already in 1917 Marcel Duchamp had declared that an artist was "someone able to rethink the world and remake meaning through language."[1] Early conceptualists, like Joseph Kosuth and Lawrence Weiner, examined the relationship between reality and the words we use to represent it to reach a deeper understanding of the social, cultural and political implications of art. Many of the artists associated with Conceptualism endeavored to expose the way institutions exploit the vagaries of language, positioning the work they produced within a "discourse of social awareness."[2] Implicit in their investigations was the idea that though "[w]e imagine language is our tool, ... it is we who are the tool and language is our master."[3]

Some thirty years later, I was interested in language as a doorway between the interior cognitive realm and external reality, and was drawn to the Surrealists' use of the camera to capture what they called "the automatic writing of the world."[4] Over the past few years I have explored this paradoxical notion of reality as a sign through the collection and use of found photographic images. For a period of time I followed a daily practice of harvesting images from newspapers, specifically the *New York Times*. At first I was interested only in amassing an archive of images to use in photo-based printmaking, referencing a tradition of appropriation from Duchamp through Pop,

Rauschenberg and beyond. I soon became intrigued by the *path* of the newspaper photograph: the phenomenon of fossilized light finding its way along some long and unknown trail from the event it represents to the breakfast table via the morning paper. Newspapers, I began to understand, function as a kind of collective memory.

Over time these images severed from their sources became my "sketchbook." I did not consciously direct myself toward specific categories, or choose images for any obvious aesthetic qualities. I was not interested in personal utterance, but in what could be gleaned from collective experience. Thus I thought of myself as composing a text of which I was not the sole author.

The question arose whether this "guided randomness" was in any way random. It certainly was not a Cagean "chance operation." But a look at the notion of chance in relation to Cage gave me some insight into the appeal this kind of image-gathering held. In her essay "Chance Operations: Cagean Paradox and Contemporary Science," N. Katherine Hayles presents a definition of chance as "the intersection of independent causal chains. Each is deterministic on its own, but the intersections create unthinkable complexity and inevitable unpredictability."[5] The point is not to deny the connection between things, but to subvert the "anthropomorphic perspective that constructs continuity from a human viewpoint of control and isolation." For Cage, this opens us

to "a more capricious view of connection that engages us in the world rather than isolates us from it."[6]

In a 1961 lecture at the Museum of Modern Art entitled "Apropos of 'Readymades,'" Duchamp asserted that "the choice of these 'readymades' was never dictated by esthetic delectation. This choice was based on a reaction of visual indifference with at the same time a total absence of good or bad taste . . . In fact a complete anesthesia."[7] Though he disavowed intentionality in pieces such as *Fountain*, the bicycle wheel or *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, no viewer can confront this work without also confronting a host of associations and implications. Meaning clings no less to objects than it does to words, making the world of objects a constantly changing text.

Rosalind Krauss, in *The Optical Unconscious*, suggests that unconscious intention indeed underlies the choice of the readymade. Concerning the found images Max Ernst used as a basis for his collage work, Krauss invokes Freud in a way that would become important to the direction my final thesis work would take. The readymade, she wrote,

> lying at hand, becomes the vehicle for a past experience—one that had made no sense at the time it occurred—to rise up on the horizon of the subject's vision as an originary, unified perception. Freud describes this, for example, in relation to secondary revision, that process of the dream work that comes, *après-coup*, to construct a façade for the dream—the one we seem to remember upon waking, the one that gathers the chaos of the dream representations together, creating the

> relative coherence of a narrative. This façade, Freud says, is a readymade—a narrative lying in wait to be affixed to the dream material, its readymade condition making its attachment possible in the very split second of waking.[8]

Found images, then, can be understood as readymades *recognized* by an "always already-filled" subconscious.

But how meaning is gleaned remains a mystery. When we read, writers and scientists who ponder the process agree, we each fabricate our own meaning by establishing relationships between our personal knowledge and memories and the passages we scan. Far from being "an automatic process of capturing a text in the way photosensitive paper captures light, [reading is] a bewildering, labyrinthine, common and yet personal process of reconstruction."[9] Alberto Manguel suggests that examining the process too closely may reveal that "language may be in itself an arbitrary absurdity, that it may communicate nothing except in its stuttering essence, that it may depend almost entirely not on its enunciations but on its interpreters for its existence...."[10] In the words of William Blake, "Both read the Bible day and night / But thou read'st black where I read white."

The play between word as image and image as word—the "structured and structuring space within which the reader deploys, and is deployed by, what codes he or she is familiar with"[11]—became the ground for my final thesis work. The half-toned photograph, the document, the book and the dream: these became the sites of my

investigation, an excursion that took me from the solidity of syntax to the realm of the poetic.

Of Raster Dots and the Romance of the Hand

My project, in its initial and simplest form, would be to explore the half-tone dot-pattern of commercial printing as a visual metaphor for language. Aptly called a "screen" by the printing industry, the half-tone reproduction mimics the continuous tone of photographs through concentrations of larger or smaller black and white dots. They are an invisible part of our visual vocabulary, parent to newer generations of image-making particles, such as pixels and video lines.

The German painter Sigmar Polke used "raster dots" to undermine the notion of authorship in a series of drawings and paintings of the late fifties. He claimed inspiration from Cézanne, who treated his entire painting surface—whatever it depicted—in the same manner. In Polke's hands, the raster dot paintings revealed a "mechanical system gone haywire ... leading to the denial of its purported function as an objective carrier of meaning."[12] He layered different stencils and templates, creating off-register moiré effects and mimicking printer's errors, "to purify the perceptual process of all conditioned reflexes ... [bringing] an element of uncertainty into our automatic mechanisms for apprehending visual codes."[13]

I, on the other hand, wanted to confound the indexical nature of the photograph by seeing how the information would change when my body, with its irregularities of rhythm and touch, became the means of reproduction. Where Polke used the tip of a pencil eraser dipped in ink, and later a radiator grate and spray paint, I began tracing—by hand—photocopies of enlarged sections of a half-toned photo of Puget Sound. I made a sandwich with the photocopy over a piece of graphite transfer paper that was laid against a sheet of Japanese rice paper, and marked in the white areas. With this method I produced two drawings at once: a "positive," where the graphite had been transferred to the rice paper and a "negative," where the graphite had been rubbed off the transfer paper. In these drawings I noticed that the arrangement of marks could be "read." Though they followed a basic pattern, at irregular intervals they would congeal or stop and start up again, calling upon the viewer to account for the changes—to interpret. This, it seems to me, is narrative in its simplest form.

Using xerox copies as my subject eased the transition from the photo-mechanical processes on which I previously had relied. Tracing machine-made patterns seemed like a more democratic activity—something akin to writing—than drawing as a display of skill or an indication of personal gesture. I wanted to make pieces that had about them a veneer of objectivity, and recalled the earlier influence of the German artist Hanne Darboven. Darboven's work since the sixties has taken the

form of massive accumulations of found information united by her practice of "daily writing." In installations, catalogues and artist's books, Darboven presents seemingly endless sequences of numbers, letters, or lines of mock writing that amount to images of information rather than information itself. Her vast, whimsical and meditative projects track "the signature of all things."[14]

Another early influence that I now recalled is the Latvian-born, New York-based artist Vija Celmins. Like Darboven, Celmins has built her entire production on a scaffold of obsessive mark-making. For more than thirty years, she has mined the same narrow territory in her meticulously rendered paintings, drawings and prints: the surface of the Pacific Ocean, a piece of night sky, the cracked floor of the desert. Writer Nancy Princenthal has likened Celmins' work to the novels of Henry James, both of which are "animated by sheer descriptive exertion, filling in facts and then filling in the facts between them in an endless pursuit of an unassailable text."[15] Slowly laying down dense all-over networks of minute marks, Celmins makes works in which "everything counts because everything must be actually made."[16]

Tracing the outsize dots of the Puget Sound photocopies—itself an obsessive, meditative activity—brought me into conversations with both Celmins and Darboven. I could see my hand embedded in the finished drawings, in the way the marks built up a greater or lesser density from area to area and displayed some hint of the speed or

lack of speed with which they were made, in the visual accretion of the time it took to make them. As Susan Stewart has observed, "[s]peech leaves no mark in space; like gesture, it exists in its immediate context and can reappear only in another's voice, another's body, even if that other is the same speaker transformed by history. But writing contaminates; writing leaves its trace, a trace beyond the life of the body."[17] Only later would I see the relationship of the water drawings and paintings to writing itself: the rippling pattern of darks and lights across the surface resembling a text's linear burst of words.

After the first set of drawings, I began painting fragments of the same image on black-gessoed wood panels, this time exploring color, which earlier I had banished to approximate more closely the printed page. Together with the drawings, this work became the *Reading and Writing Series.* I thought of them at once as photo-realistic and abstract: photo-real because the images were carefully transferred from their photographic source to the painting support, and abstract because of the fragmentation and abbreviation of the coded imagery.

By this time I had become interested in using words themselves rather than a "stand-in" code. I came across a passage written by the physicist Werner Heisenberg, who observed that

> ". . . a secondary meaning of a word which passes only vaguely through the mind when the word is heard may contribute essentially to the content of a sentence. The fact that every word may cause only half-

> conscious movements in our mind can be used to represent some part of reality in the language much more clearly than by the use of logical patterns."[18]

I began to think that a text was like a collection of keepsakes—an odd assortment of ideas, images and information that each of us strings together in our own way, keeping some, discarding others. Each time we read, the collection grows, taking on a different shape and character.

The last of the *Reading and Writing Series—#4 (Mildred's Hand)*—was based on a passage of found text rather than a photographic image. I selected a paragraph from Ray Bradbury's 1953 science-fiction novel, *Fahrenheit 451*. The story is set in the future, when books are prohibited because they make people unhappy and firemen are employed to burn hidden stashes of books. Yet one fireman—the protagonist Montag—becomes curious about the books and begins rescuing some of them. Once he begins to read, a new world opens up. He eventually rebels and ends in exile with others who have dedicated their lives to preserving books by memorizing them, each person "becoming" their book. The paragraph I chose describes a close call for Montag just after he begins to collect and hide the forbidden books: "Mildred's hand had frozen behind the pillow. Her fingers were tracing the book's outline, and as the shape became familiar her face looked surprised and then stunned. Her mouth opened to ask a question . . .".[19]

Reading and Writing #4 (Mildred's Hand) speaks of seeing and remembering. The piece consists of fifty-six three-inch Plexiglas disks, each backed with an inkjet print of the words of the paragraph broken into syllables, which I had scanned and digitally manipulated. I installed the disks on the gallery wall in a paragraph-like grid that spanned ten by fifteen feet. Each unit of text became a separate object, a collectible: they are fragments, specimens in petri dishes or lenses. Words unrelated to the story's sense pop out and take the text apart, form lists or abstract poems, while the text as a whole becomes a screen behind which we reach into memory and recognition.

Having traveled from image to word, I wondered if I could bring them together in a series of paintings based on newspaper photos from my archives of texts containing culturally significant information. For the *Document Series* I developed my source images in the same way as I had for the *Reading and Writing Series*: enlarging the newspaper photo and then enlarging the enlargements until the image disintegrated and a patterned field emerged. I tried to achieve the effect of the system as a sieve that allows the viewer to see both the screen and beyond it at the same time. Though they are based on the same system, these paintings, more than the others, each map a different territory.

Document Series #1(Archimedes Palimpsest) is based on a photo of the tenth-century book in which Archimedes copied out his famous "Treatise on Floating Bodies." That text later was washed off and covered over with passages concerning Byzantine church rites. This practice of creating and using palimpsests was common in the Middle Ages because it was easier to rub out an earlier piece of writing than to prepare a new piece of vellum. Poststructuralist literary critics claim the palimpsest provides "a model for the function of writing," suggesting that "all writing takes place in the presence of other writing . . . and thus the meaning of a work is deferred down an endless chain of signification."[20]

The source image in *Document Series #1* certainly has been "deferred down an endless chain." It passed from hand to hand for over a thousand years, was lost in the early twentieth century and only recently has been recovered. Now new technologies have unequivocally revealed Archimedes' original undertext.

The photo appeared in a *New York Times* article. I cut it out, enlarged it on the copy machine several times and traced the final image onto a prepared wood surface with white graphite paper. The patterns of distorted dots retain a linear quality that evokes the horizontal scanning one performs when reading. I wanted to create in the viewer the impulse to read the painting as if the words were still discernible. The diptych format mimics the facing pages of an open book, though the central seam of

the book's binding appears not once, but three times: as a vertical line made by a faint concentration of dots just in from the left edge of the left panel; a stronger, similar line near the right edge of the right panel and the actual division between the two panels. The left and right panels have a positive/negative relationship, recalling Blake's line, "thou read'st black where I read white."

With *Document Series #1*, I became aware that my formulaic plans for constructing images—based on the all-over field as a way to negate idiosyncratic compositional choices—was meeting a formidable opponent in the act of painting and the paint itself. The right/positive panel was executed according to that plan. However, the fluidity of the paint, passing from opaque to transparent on a surface darkened by several layers of transparent glazes, gave a different quality than the black gessoed panels of *Reading and Writing*. The left/negative panel was altogether a struggle in terms of color choices and effects. I alternately glazed the surface, repainted the dots and sanded, over and over, stopping when I felt I had achieved the quality of a video screen, which carried the idea of the transmission of information through time further than I had planned.

Document Series #2 (Silk Code) is a façade in the process of making or unmaking itself. Three stages or layers are visible in this 36" by 72" painting. The first is a series of transparent washes that cover the entire surface. They gradually

darken and break apart into rhythmic blotches that echo the arrangement of, but do not correspond with, the next layer of code. This second layer is a collection of white graphite lines describing small, enclosed shapes that descend in vertical rows across the painting's surface. The shapes resemble islands or embryos or the characters of a forgotten language, calligraphic in their vertical arrangement like an oriental scroll. They are the traced enlargement of a newspaper photograph of a silk cloth printed with a system of letters and numbers used as code by British spies during World War II.

Leo Marks developed this system for individualized codes based on poetry.[21] Each agent chose five words from a poem and carried a silk cloth that contained several vertical lines of different codes that would be used to send one message only. The line of used code would be cut from the silk and burned, making memorization unnecessary and preventing the danger of agents being tortured into revelation. The silk was to be worn close to the body, under an agent's clothes, and would be undetectable if the agent was searched. A later innovation made it possible to print the code so it would be invisible until revealed by an ultraviolet flashlight.

As before, I intended to start the painting by building a dark ground of layers of pure color, then transcribe the photo-information and paint the top surface of the cloth around the embryo-characters. I soon saw, however, that to attend to the process of

this painting—even more so than the last—I would have to give up my preconceived plans. Much more than I had expected had occurred in building up the initial surface. To cover those dynamics unthinkingly with a solid layer of white no longer made sense. But merely to stop where I was also was impossible. I began to brush in the top layer, letting gradations of blue- or yellow-white amass "randomly" from the top and bottom margins. In this way stalactites and stalagmites formed. Stopping before all the planned passes were completed yielded an abstract composition I could liken to Freud's idea of the "magic slate."

Rosalind Krauss turns to Freud's "Note on the Mystic Writing Pad" as a model for the layering of experience.[22] In a *Wunderblock* or magic slate, the top sheet on which a child draws with a stylus represents the part of the brain that receives stimuli, recorded as a set of temporary impressions. These are visible only as long as the top sheet is pressed against the waxy undersheet. When the two surfaces are separated, the marks disappear—the slate appears to be wiped clean. But though they are no longer fully visible, traces of the lines remain on the waxy base where they form a permanent network that is added to each time the activity is repeated. For Freud, this represents the mental operations of memory—on which *Document #2 (Silk Code)* can be viewed as a meditation.

The third painting in the series, *Document Series #3 (Tattooed Hand)* (Figure 1) harbors an image that comes from a newspaper photo of the traditionally henna-tattooed palms of a Hindu bride. This time the graphic information is barely visible between layered glazes of Indian red, cobalt blue and yellow ochre. A faint network of skipping horizontal lines made by the tracks of a roller recalls the luminous lines of a blank video screen. Pooling a thin cobalt wash over the surface created an irregular flickering pattern, like the "indentures" in the rock face that the beleaguered protagonists of Edgar Allan Poe's story, "The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym," momentarily mistake for "alphabetical characters" made by a human hand. Finding flakes on the cave floor that perfectly correspond to these "indentures," they realize that nature is the author of this text.[23]

If *Document Series #3* represents a "pushing-back" of the photographic information, the final painting of the series, *Document Series #4* (Figure 2) is the ground on which the image has yet to appear. A dyptich measuring 11" by 72", this painting maps a span that recalls the five-lined music staff, appearing on the left as a positive image of ivory on dark blue and on the right as a scaffolding of faint white lines on the dark ground. *Document #4* anticipates the dreamer's books of *Untitled* (figure 3). The two sets of staves are a stage set for an event of language that will unfold in time. But will that event be image, word or sound?

Of the Book as Sculpture

"The reading ... of any text, is an act of consciousness which changes that consciousness in the process."[24] My interest in the book as subject developed two years ago when I made "Object Lessons," a series of silkscreen and lazerjet prints based on school worksheets and word puzzles. Through that body of work I began to think about reading as a means by which the reader potentially possesses all of time and space. In that sense, I thought of a book as a piece of sculpture (leaving time, for the present, out of it) and made a journal note to explore this idea.

Over the past four months, this notion returned. In addition to the painting, I began working with objects, which I altered or cast, and arranged as tableaux. These are not so much sculptures—though they engage spatial relationships—as another way to explore the ideas I have been investigating in two dimensions. Earlier I had used found photographic images because of the "authority" with which we commonly invest them. Now I am similarly fascinated by the "authority of the object."

The following pieces are experiments in extending my work dimensionally. Though they are not "installations" per se, they are meant to be viewed in certain groupings. For this reason, it is only through the present installation of my thesis exhibit that I am able to consider the effects of what I have made.

Of Erasures, Constellations and Consolation

In 1969 Marcel Broodthaers transformed the last poetic work of Stéphane Mallarmé, "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard," by covering each line of the famous poem's irregular typography and layout with a black horizontal band.[25] Adding the word, *Image,* to the end of the original title, Broodthaers' altered version translates the poem into purely visual terms, the black bands appearing "simultaneously as erasures and as elements of increased visual emphasis and spatial presence."[26] For Broodthaers, who had already altered and rendered unreadable in various ways volumes of his own poems, Mallarmé was an obvious target. "The thought of Mallarmé," he wrote, "ends in two tracks—1, Space—and 2, Image joined in a single mind."[27]

The Unconsoled (after Ishiguro) Part I performs an erasure on the novel of the same title by Kazuo Ishiguro. In this confounding, Kafka-esque text, a celebrated musician arrives in a European town to give a concert or a lecture. The narrative is structured like an anxious dream. Though he is looked upon by the townspeople as a savior, nothing the musician does helps them solve their many problems. Time is irrationally compressed or extended, and spaces link up in impossible ways. The

reader of the novel becomes the dreamer, an impotent witness to a frustrating series of absurd events.

I scanned Part I of the novel into the computer—some 150 pages—and erased the words. (The experience was something like reading it backwards.) All that remains is punctuation—the breath, space, scaffolding of the story—sprinkled like tears across the vellum pages to which the altered text was transferred.

Of the Reader as Dreamer

A gathering of music stands huddle on the gallery floor. On each is an open book lined with staves meant for musical signatures, rests and notations. The books imply a sequence: of turning pages one at a time, of the rhythm and silences of a musical performance unfolding in time. But they are encased with a thick, amber skin through which only the blank staves and an occasional word—silent letters, spoken word—is visible. *Spoke, rose, rode* and *wove* appear on the left-hand pages of four of the books. *Woke* and *wrote* on the right-hand pages of two more. The last two books are blank: they hold no words, only the mottled traces left by the plaster shell in which they had been encased. (This is also a reference to the "natural" writing of "A. Gordon Pym"). The books on their skeletal stands wait for their absent performers. Or are they themselves "stand-ins" performing a score that is beyond our grasp? Over

all is a fine residue, a dusting of white powder that has fallen over the entire assembly, keeping onlookers a slight distance away.

Untitled (Figure 3) speaks of the silence of the dream—of those stories told in images at night—and the sound that will break the silence. In the moment of waking, the dream images must be transformed into words. I say I "remember" a dream only to the extent that I can in waking access it through language. The more precisely I recall my dream in words, the more "vivid" I judge it. But the dreamer knows the images are more than the words used to describe them; the words themselves spin off in all directions, aligning themselves with other sounds and meanings to which they have no right.

The Unconsoled, Part II (Figure 4) is a sequence of twenty-two pillows molded out of plaster that seem to hover just above the floor. These pillows are the books upon which the dreams will be written, rising and falling like the turning of a page. But the soft, white folds will never be covered with words—the play of the subconscious never fully emerges. They are stepping stones across the stream of sleep, briefly touched and left behind.

Of the First and the Last

If my thesis exhibit can be thought of as a book with different chapters, *First Book/Last Book* (Figure 5) could be the table of contents. Two six-foot spirals of black beans laid out on the floor resemble the concentric circles made in a pond when something has disturbed the water's surface. In the center of each is a pair of feet outlined in white chalk. Small black speakers hang on a wire from the ceiling above the center of each in the space where the body that belongs to the feet should be. From one speaker comes the sound of dripping water, from the other a voice repeating the alphabet. Conflating Poe's "Narrative of A. Gordon Pym" and Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel"[28]—a story in which the universe is likened to a library with all possible combinations of the letters of the alphabet contained in the books on its shelves—we can expect that, given enough time, the ripples made by the dripping alphabet will form all the words that ever could be written.

Conclusion

I began the Master of Fine Arts program with a fairly clear sense of the conceptual underpinnings of the work I wanted to make. The question that troubled me, however, was what form that work would take. For years I had been attached to the intimacy of paper. But paper always had to be transformed: framed behind glass,

laminated to wood or bound in a book. I felt limited by those solutions, but found it surprisingly hard to make the leap to other media.

Now the leap has been made, it is hard to remember what made it so difficult. I have found a manner of painting that allows me to explore ideas in a way that is both intellectually and sensually satisfying. (Though I still have questions about what it means to paint.) I also have extended my work into three-dimensions and opened the door to new media and new methods of fabrication. Finally—and very importantly for me—I have begun to understand how my visual work can act as a site for poetic investigation.

NOTES

[1] Kristine Stiles, "Language and Concepts," *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists' Writings,* Stiles and Peter Selz, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 804.
[2] Ibid., p. 808.
[3] Paul Berman, quoted in Buzz Spector, *The Bookmaker's Desire,* (Pasadena, Calif.: Umbrella Editions, 1995), p. 57.
[4] Rosalind Krauss, "The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism," *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths,* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. 1985), p. 112.
[5] N. Katherine Hayles, "Chance Operations: Cagean Paradox and Contemporary Science," *John Cage: Composed in America,* Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junderman, eds. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 227. Hales has examined the "passing strange" conjunction of the words "chance operation": "On the one hand we have that which exceeds or escapes our designs, chance; and on the other an operation, which is the process by which we put our designs into effect." p. 226.
[6] Ibid., p. 229.
[7] Quoted in Stiles and Selz, *Theories and Documents,* pp. 819-820.
[8] Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious,* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 70-71.
[9] Alberto Manguel, *The History of Reading,* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 39.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Victor Burgin, "Looking at Photographs (1977)," *Theories and Documents,* p. 856.
[12] Margit Rowell, "Sigmar Polke: Stratagems of Subversion," *Sigmar Polke: Works on Paper 1963-1974,* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), p. 18.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Lauren Sedofsky, "Hanne Darboven at Dia Center for the Arts," *Artforum,* Vol. 36 No. 7, March 1997, p. 89.
[15] Nancy Princenthal, "Vija Celmins: Material Fictions," *Parkett #44,* (Zurich, New York and Frankfurt: Parkett Verlag, 1995), p. 25.
[16] Vija Celmins and Jeanne Silverthorne, "Vija Celmins in Conversation with Jeanne Silverthorne," *Parkett #44,* p. 42.
[17] Susan Stewart, *On Longing,* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 31.
[18] Werner Heisenberg, "Language and Reality in Modern Physics," *Physics and Philosophy,* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958), p. 170.
[19] Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451,* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1953), p. 56.
[20] C.J. Keep, Tim McLauglin, robin, www.letsdeviant.com/PalimpsestS.html
[21] Mel Gussow, "Writing Codes, Movies and Now a Book," *The New York Times,* Friday, November 19, 1999, p. B37.
[22] Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious,* p. 57.
[23] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym," *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe,* (New York: Black's Readers Service Co., 1927), p. 545.
[24] Peter Schwenger, *Fantasm and Fiction: On Textual Envisioning,* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 141.
[25] Anne Rorimer, "The Exhibition at the MTL Gallery in Brussels, March 13-April 10, 1970," *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs,* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 113.
[26] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Open Letters and Industrial Poems," *Broodthaers,* p. 79.
[27] Quoted in Rorimer, "Exhibition in Brussels," p. 112.
[28] Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," *Labyrinths,* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 78-86.

Figure 1. *Document #3 (Tattooed Hands)*
Acrylic on Wood
2000

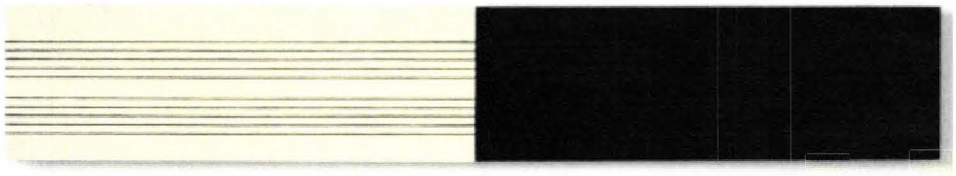

Figure 2. *Document #4*
Acrylic on Wood
2000

Figure 3. *Untitled*
Mixed Media
2000

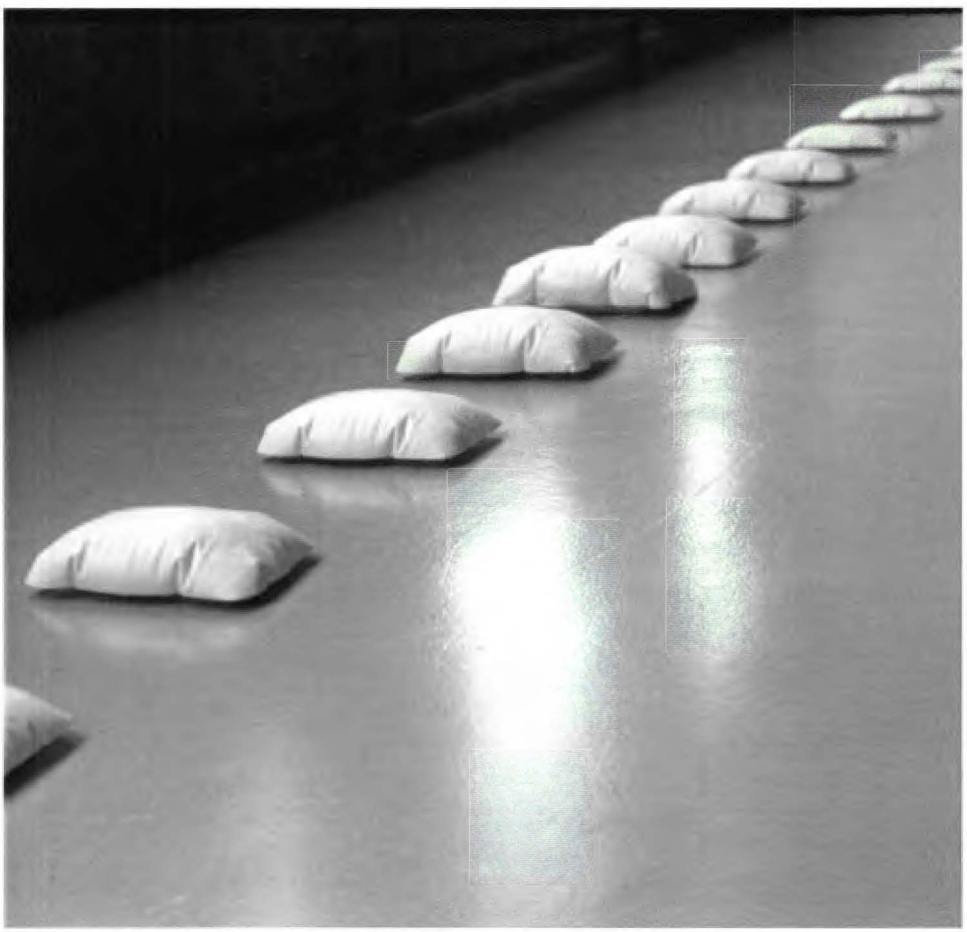

Figure 4. *The Unconsoled, Part II*
Cast Plaster
2000

Sedofdky, Lauren. "Hanne Darboven at Dia Center for the Arts." *Artforum.* Volume 36, No. 7, March 1997, pp. 89-90.

Spector, Buzz. *The Bookmaker's Desire.* Pasadena, Calif.: Umbrella Editions, 1995.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993.

Stiles, Kristine and Peter Selz, eds. *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook for Artists.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.

REFERENCES

Borges, Jorge Luis. "The Library of Babel," *Labyrinths.* Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972.

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451.* New York: Ballentine Books, 1953.

Buchloh, Benjamin H. D., ed. *Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988.

Curiger, Bice, ed. *The Parkett Series with Contemporary Artists: Parket #44.* Zurich, New York and Frankfurt: Parkett Verlag, 1995.

Gussow, Mel. "Writing Codes, Movies and Now a Book." *The New York Times.* Friday, November 19, 1999, p. B37.

Heisenberg, Werner. "Language and Reality in Modern Physics." *Physics and Philosophy.* New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958.

Ishiguro, Kazuo. *The Unconsoled.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.

Krauss, Rosalind. *The Optical Unconscious.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994.

_____. *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernists Myths.* Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985.

Manguel, Alberto. *The History of Reading.* New York: Penguin Books, 1996.

Perloff, Marjorie and Charles Junderman, eds. *John Cage: Composed in America.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym." *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe.* New York: Black's Readers Service Co., 1927.

Rowell, Margit. *Sigmar Polke: Works on Paper 1963-74.* New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999.

Schwenger, Peter. *Fantasm and Fiction: On Textual Envisioning.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999.