Visual/Verbal: Symposium Response

THE VISUAL MATERIAL RESISTS THE VERBAL

I began with letterpress, holding the language in my hands. Now to the computer

EXPECTATIONS THE CLEAN MACHINE OF READING

searching for the shape in the murky pixels on the screen. Not all of writing has to

HESITATES, DISRUPTED BY THE INTERFERING

be treated to this breach of decorum, only some, which permits its own laboratory

SUBSTANCE WHICH DISTRACTS THE EYE. THE

explorations. Mallarmé remains, of course, the major point of reference, though he

LOOK OF LITERATURE IS NOT A SURPLUS, EXCESS,

was not my original source, which lay, simply, in the handling of elements in the

NOT SOME TRIVIAL ADDITIVE MISBEHAVING IN A

typecase, and in trying to solve problems in the works through visual and graphic

FLAMBOYANT BID FOR ATTENTION, BUT RATHER,

means. A community exists, but my sense of my work is really separate. The old

THE THICK FLIGHT OF FANCY STUCK IN THE HOT

congelists of the 1950s and 1960s seem reductive and simple by and large, and

FORM OF LETTERS ON A PAGE, WRESTLING,

the zaum typography of Filz in some ways comes closest to my own sensibility. I

EMBRACING, STRUGGLING WITH THE EXPRESSIVE

have always believed in sense, not nonsense, and the Dada gestures offer some

FORM IN APPREHENSION. LEARNING TO LOOK THE

tools, now that I study them, as do the Constructivist and Futurist designers and

EYE, DELIGHTED, RETURNS THE ABSENT, ELUSIVE

poets. Closer to my own generation there are, of course, all kinds of people — but I

PROPERTIES OF SUGGESTION TO THE BODY OF THE

find myself most drawn to them in academic ways, for the sake of understanding,

TEXT, ENJOYING BOTH PLEASURE AND FRUSTRATI-
talking about, writing about, their work, rather than as source material. My
TION AT THE UNCONTAINABLE AFFECT generated
favorite inspirations remain the virtuoso projects of unnamed typographers of late
IN THE STUFF, ITSELF UNQUALIFIABLE, UNLOCAT-
19th-century advertising, of 20th-century graphics before auteur design, though
ABLE IN ANY SIMPLE MAP OF MEANING. THIS CON-
some of that—Bayer and Tschichold and Rand and now Licko and Graiman and
CEPT OF VOICE IS HANDWRITING, MIND, MADE ON
others certainly provides visual ideas and stimulation. My audience seems to be a
THE PAGE AND IN THE MOUTH, TACKLING THE TASK OF
combination of poets, critics, book arts people, all of whom have various takes on
MAKING ITSELF MOMENT TO MOMENT FOR THE SAKE
the materials—and of course, my family, my father in particular, whose own life-
OF SOME UNUTTERABLE ACCIDENT OR INCIDENT
time of work in design makes him particularly appreciative of formal solutions. 1
OF RECOGNITION. THE GESTALT ESCAPES ITS OWN
show my work in bookstores, like WPA and Printed Matter, and galleries, espes-
CONTAINMENT, REFERRING TO THE WORLD OF
pecially Granary Books in New York, but also in exhibitions. Betty Bright, at
SOCIAL POLITICS AND ASSOCIATIONS, QUESTION-
Minnesota Center for the Book Arts, has been very active in this area. A lot of rare
ABLE, VARIOUS AND SUSPECT. THE ANGEL OF
book librarians and poetry archive curators are interested and very appreciative
ENLIGHTENED REASON AND THE FORCE OF
as well—certainly the Waldrops have encouraged this activity at Brown, Anne
HARD FACT ARE EQUALLY ILL AT EASE IN THE
Anninger at the Houghton (Harvard), Robert Bertholf up at Buffalo, and the pe-
METAPHYSICAL ARENA OF THE VISUAL VERNACU-
pile at U.C. San Diego in the Poetry Archive, to name only a few. Then of course
LAR, THE TABLOID PULP OF DAILY LANGUAGE AND
there are the collectors—where would we be without Ruth and Marvin Sackner! I
THE ESOTERIC FIELD OF CONTINUALLY EXPLODED
like showing the work, putting it into reproduction, since I do such small editions. I
invention, but this IS the realm of the LITER-
would love to do a reprint of my own books, of course, but also to see an anthology
ATE AND PHYSICAL, THE PLAGUED AND DISPLAYED
of New Visual Poetry—stuff of the last ten or fifteen years. It is hard to get a good
THE IMMODEST AND RETREATING, RETRENCHED,
sense of all that is out there and how representative the small sample of things one
ENTRENCHED GAMROLLERS WITH SENSATION.
comes across is actually to relative to the bigger picture. Since all other manifesta-
RESISTANCE TO LINGUISTIC CLOSURE DOES NOT LEAD
tions of visual poetry I know of are certainly historically specific, then it seems
TO ESCAPE, TO CHAOS, OR TO NONSENSE BUT TO
dear that my own practice, and that of my contemporaries, is equally informed by
THE REPLETE AND MARKED, THE LOST AND THE
current theory, and that as writers we are very much formed through context and
FOUND OF MISCELLANEOUS AND POTENT VALUES.
circumstance of language and event and theory. I guess I ultimately aspire to a kind
THE TEXT, LIKE ANY OTHER ORGANISM, REJOICES
of tabloid pulp of graphic language—somewhere between the Mallarméan project
IN THE PINBALL GAMES OF TOUCH AND UNCE-
and Flaubert’s Bouvard and Pécuchet—but updated to the so-called new millennial
TAINTY which multiply THE possible activ-
sensibility. I have not been funded much by grants for my books—letterpress work
TIES FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH AN AUDIENCE
is cheap to produce, except for labor, though I did have a nice grant from Pyramid
EXCHANGE OF SATISFYING CONVERSATION
Atlantic a couple years ago to do Simulant Portrait in offset and Macintosh. I make
LAID OUT ON THE TABLE TO SEDUCE THE EYE. ALL
enough money to keep funding my own projects, buy equipment, and be produ-
THE METAPHORS OF INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL DIS-
tive, but I think
TIONED, WHICH seems to me
ABLE serious
A NEW CONTEXT
LANGE!
the author!
A FLAYER
ETING
the marks
AGULA
instances. FOR
WITH A
 THE FL
PAGE
visual press
INTO A
posibly an...
tive, but I think money spent for the arts, in any form, is always a good idea.

tinction dissolve in the thick atmosphere
whether it comes from the government or private sources. There is a tendency, I
which surrounds, refusing a neat topography, to consider most visual poetry a form of cleverness and to dismiss its possibility of logi according to which some rules of
the serious character in the name of some kind of literary purity. It has always
a new order might be made to discipline the old
seemed to me that part of the resistance to visual work is that it presents a threat to
language in its wayward exhibitionism.
the authority of the text. By calling attention to many of the material aspects of
a played and much decorated lexicon, strut-
production, the visual form, when it is obviously manipulated, makes very clear
thing its stuff in the new syntax of the spec-
the marks of the site and subject of enunciation as well as the historical circum-
tacular, parading thru the synaptic network
stances. For anyone still attached to the character of text as a form of truth this
with a rush of stimulating friction, now in
sort of relativization is profoundly threatening. Then, of course, there is the criti-
the flesh, then to the retina, here on the
cal resistance to being split, as a reader, between reading and looking, between the
page, as the eye massages the weary brain
visual presence of apprehendable substance and the literary value of what is sup-
into a new configuration.
potentially an absence—as if one could make those distinctions.

This piece was composed as a response to symposium questions posed by John
Syrm and Crag Hill and published in CORE: A Symposium on