



*Inscription
of the
Girly Man*

**The Politics of Stupidity
in the Age of Intelligent Machines**

Brad Borevitz

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For the prisoners ...

Inscription of the Girly Man:
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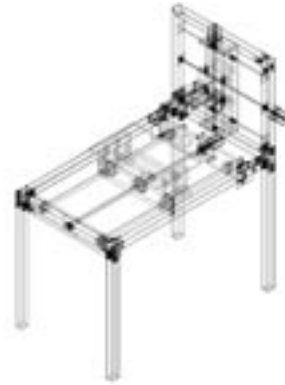
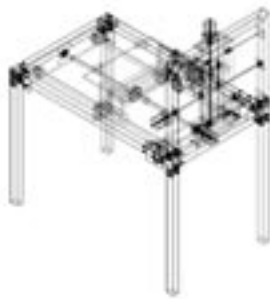
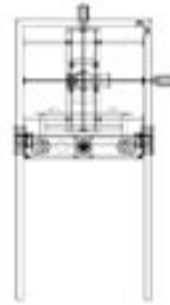
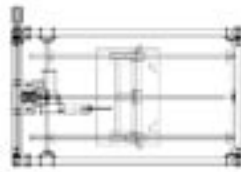
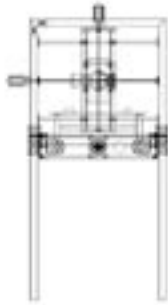
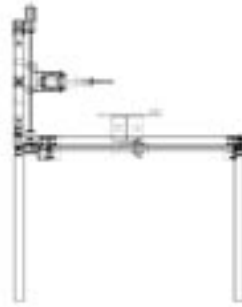
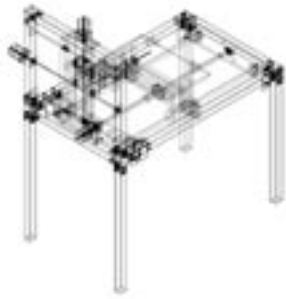
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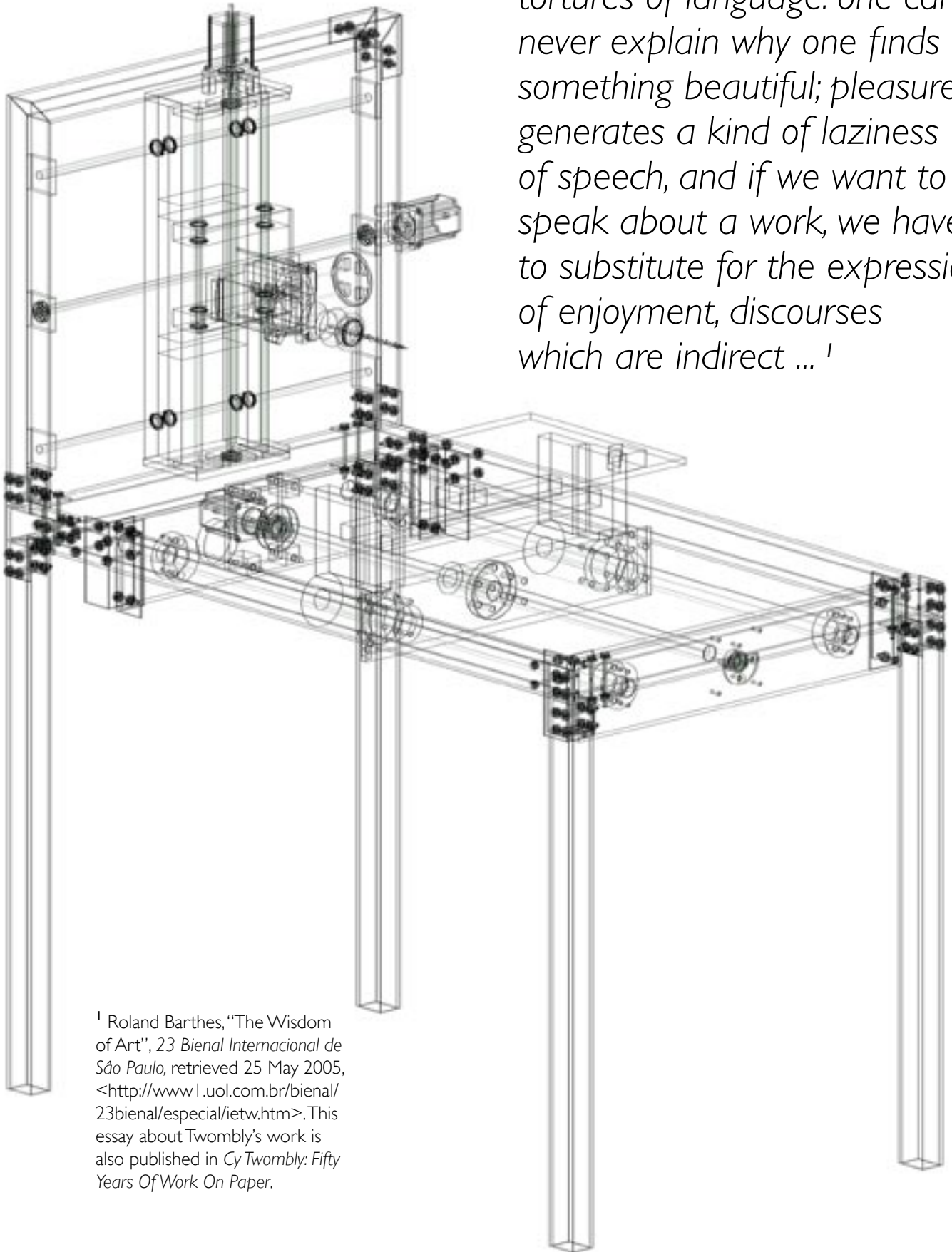
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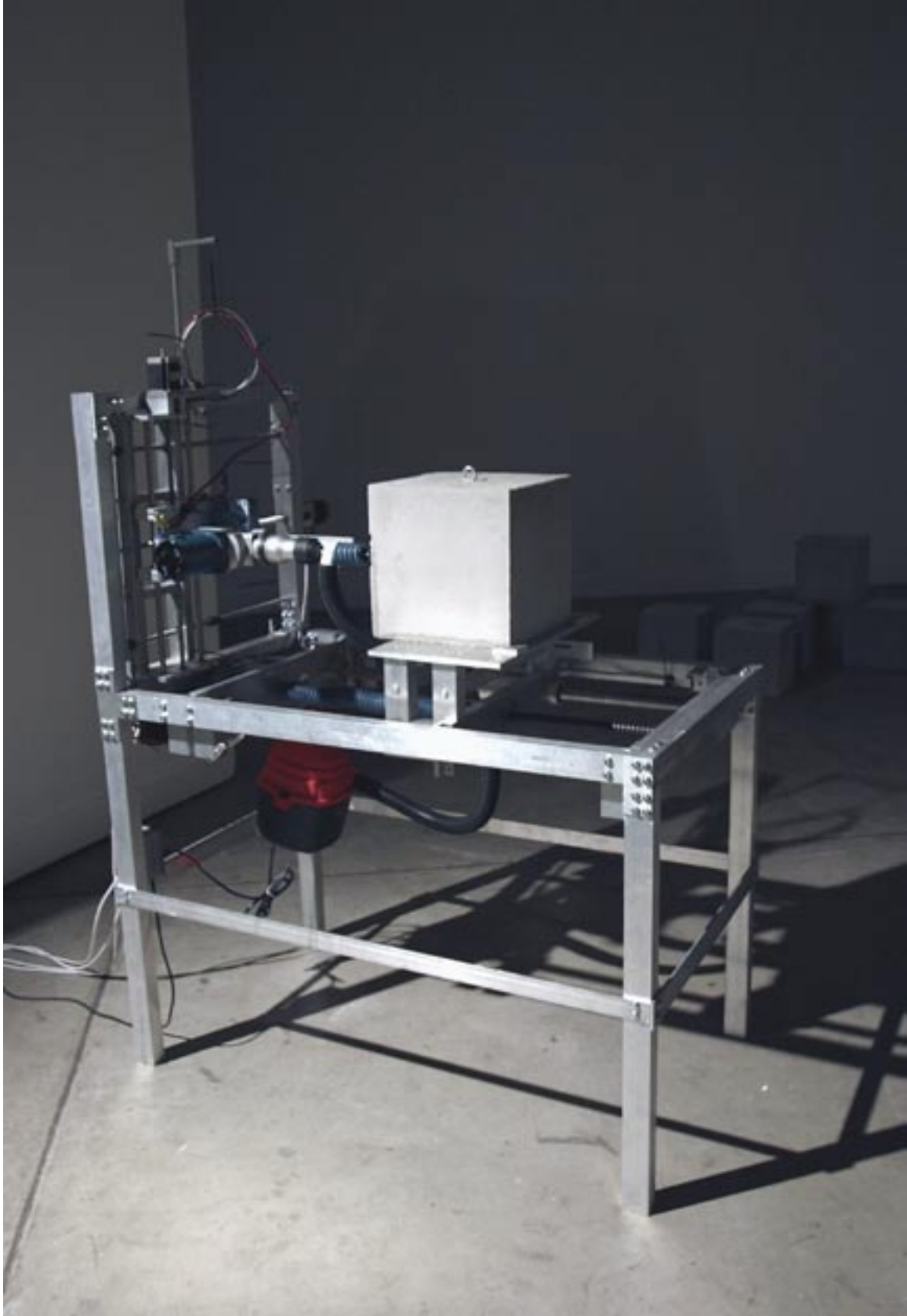
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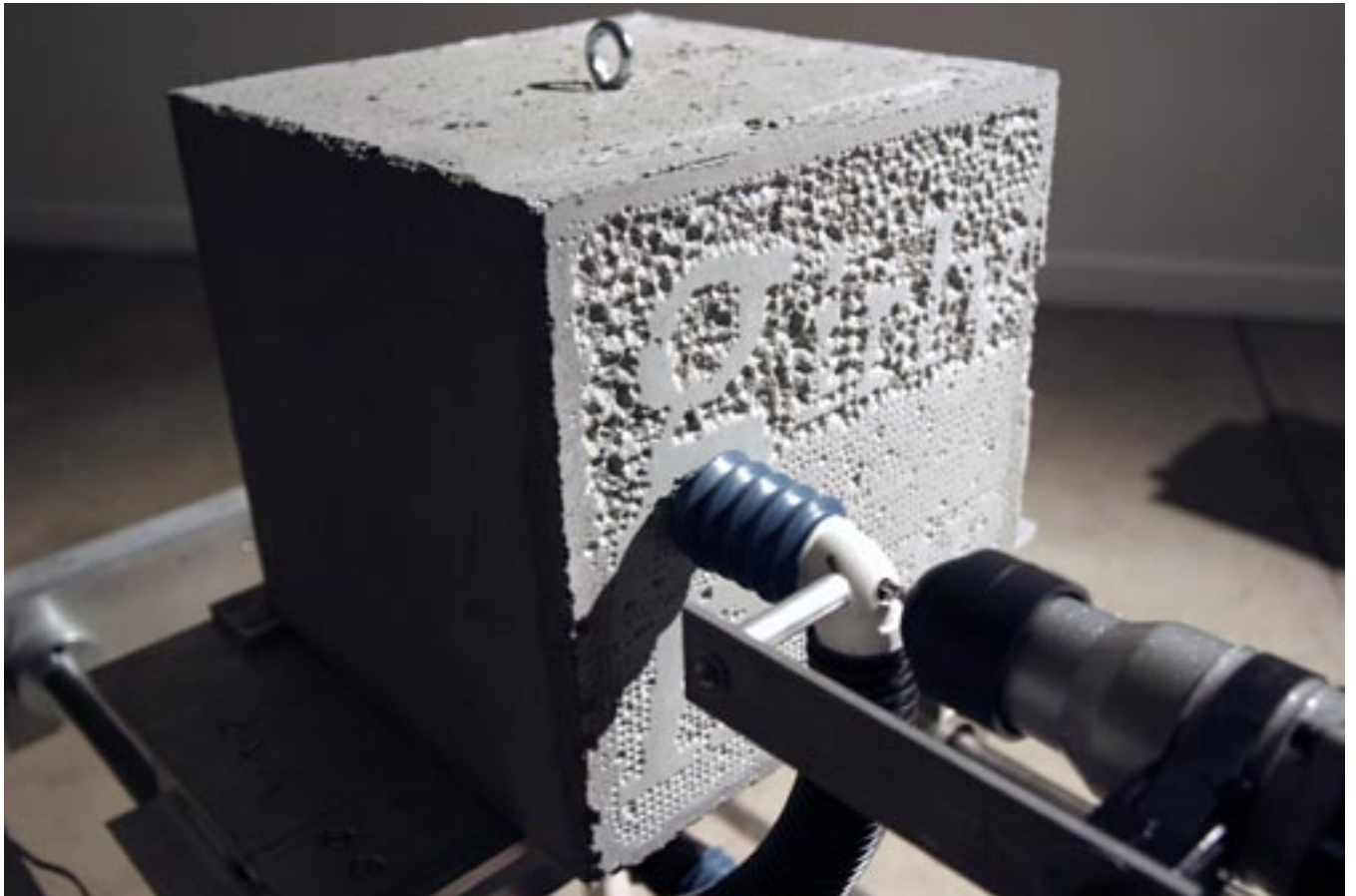


This is one of the small tortures of language: one can never explain why one finds something beautiful; pleasure generates a kind of laziness of speech, and if we want to speak about a work, we have to substitute for the expression of enjoyment, discourses which are indirect ...¹



¹ Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art", *23 Bienal Internacional de São Paulo*, retrieved 25 May 2005, <<http://www1.uol.com.br/bienal/23bienal/especial/ietw.htm>>. This essay about Twombly's work is also published in *Cy Twombly: Fifty Years Of Work On Paper*.





The console with its empty chair stands as a marker of the alienated psychic labor that disembodied and set within the rungs of a silicon ladder; continues to work as a productive memory of post-subjective mentation.



a

The pile of blocks sits on the unmarked floor of the room so that each block makes its place by its presence alone.



b

The carriage of the machine is the space for the block: the mobile space of the vehicle. The transformation of form is compared with and depends on the translation of location in space.



c



On the pedestal which holds the finished block, place is symbolically hierarchized: there is the high and there is, in contrast, the low.

d















The Language of Machines

There is a language of machines. While we may not know we know it, we do. It is our language too. Our sensitivity to the mechanical gesture confirms our affinities with the inanimate. We are the becoming thing of animality.

The machine is a mirror that reflects a ghost—a ghost that stands outside of it, and yet remains of a piece with it. This ghost does not stand in for the soul. There is no soul save that

which nostalgia presents to bait sentiment. I write we are haunted, because we are unable *not* to press the awareness of our machinic

being to the limits of our consciousness. It becomes thin there, and peripheral; its movements, caught obliquely, seem alien and threatening. No, we are machine; a will to machinic fluency moves at the shallows of our shells. We are the division of self into the organismic-machine and the machinic-organism—an unequal splitting, a deforming mitosis.

Machine Language:

The representation of a computer program which is actually read and interpreted by the computer ... Humans almost never write programs directly in machine code.²

² Free Online Dictionary of Computing, 17 May 2005, Imperial College Department of Computing, retrieved 25 May 2005, <<http://foldoc.doc.ic.ac.uk/foldoc/>>.

The pistons of this engine return: a clock? or a train, or a missile? The same

contraption? And what contrivance is History? A one hundred year romance with the machine. Constructed, Futured, Dreamt and Fathered. Crying now in your shadow, Atom son of Adam chased us to the bunker. Had us there, but sleeping we imagined it was aliens; they knew us better than we knew ourselves. We desired machines and they desired each other. It was jealousy or join them and so we have.

But thoroughly fucked, aren't we now limp and sore-ready to live in the world of the "post-" where materiality becomes a ghost and language as data rules the melty over-coded, encoded, transcoded uni-verse of capital's triumphant apotheosis?

No.

Haraway's cyborg refuses to simply leave the old world behind and inhabit the new as a virtuality. Instead, she troubles the boundaries: human/machine, human/animal, myth/technology.³ Myth is technology and technology myth. A corollary: language is technology and (via a commutative theorem) technology is language. Although the radiant glamorization of the cyber and

³ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London, Free Association, 1991.



the virtual tempts us into imagining the ascendancy of data that leaves the material behind, the cyborg myth insists on a hybridity that maintains the significance of physicality within the domains of ontology, epistemology, and phenomenology. These are the spaces we inhabit as lubricious border entities: partial machines, hungry for connection.

A practice, in the here and now, which focuses attention on the problematics of language as disturbed by a confusion over the status of the material and the ideal, as re-formed by the situation of the present, necessarily touches the previous iterations of the same.⁴ The

- Apparatus**
- Appliance**
- Contraption** **Instrument**
- Contrivance** **Machine**
- Device** **Mechanism**
- Engine** **Prosthesis**
- Equipment** **Robot**
- Extension** **Thing**
- Gadget** **Tool**
- Implement** **Widget**

difference of this return with a difference must be specified within conjectures about the *zeitgeist*.

The border territory is worked over-again and again. It may be the only territory that works, ever. This is the place that we live, so this is the place that we

⁴ I begin to suspect that there is something in the character of the time that echoes the era of three and four decades ago. This is the basis of the special relevance of critical, conceptualist, and minimalist strategies of the '60's and '70's to contemporary "new" media practices.

work. The edge-condition is the troubling of trouble. It once (upon a time) was the troubling of language. And it is that. It is the trouble with language again. What troubles us this time is the code. There has been code as long, at least, as there has been codex, but now code is taking over. That situation makes us ask questions of language again.

Some questions are the same:

... questions about the structure of language, but we observe that the structure of language is seen as well in the structure of the machine, and wonder what that means about the machine and about language.

... questions about the performativity of language, but we see that, in the machine, code performs in a way that ordinary language never dreamt of performing, and wonder what *that* means.

... questions about the materiality of language, but we notice that, in the machine, there is no software, and wonder if we must rethink the sign as a regress of embedded codings that obscure the material substrate of linguistic performance.⁵

⁵ See Friedrich Kittler, "There Is No Software," *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999.



... questions about the intersubjectivity of language, but we detect how our communications are directed at, and responded to, by inanimates, and wonder how to conceptualize the subject of intersubjectivity, when the other of the dialog is not conventionally human.

... questions about the iterability of language, but we scrutinize the conventions of our ritual pronunciations of linguistic formula—they seem to depend for their functioning on communities and traditions of use, though this gives way, in the machine, to a conventionality of invention, which depends only on a temporary and contingent consensus—and we wonder if there is an escape from history or culture.

Of course, some questions will be different, as will some answers.

Do not anticipate a sudden countercultural efflorescence. The reaction—if there is one—to a certain intensification of technocracy, media, globalization, religiosity, war and, for want of a better descriptor, proto-fascism, will undoubtedly be different. But this is what we are contending with. And in order

to engage in an ethical practice of any sort, and especially to engage in an ethical practice called art; we need to account for a relationship between our situation and our actions, between our work and its reception, between affects and effects.

To the questions posed to language by code mentioned above, should be added the questions posed to language by its styles of deployment within the cultural and political spheres. In these, there is a shift towards iconicity that is characterized by abbreviation, compression, and the dominance of affective ascription in the place of meaning. The space of language contracts so that the sprawl of rhetoricity cannot be sustained in the vaporous and narrow corridors between media nodes and their spectacular events. What can be supported, and what is ultimately effective in this landscape, is the epithet, the slogan, the logo, the quip, the tag, the sound-bite, etc.; these are all symptoms of the becoming brand of politics—what is a variation, for our time, of Benjamin's aestheticization of politics.⁶

⁶Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1968, p. 241.



That brand strategy—that staple of corporate behavior which is definitive of capital's face in the era of globalization—becomes the communicative strategy of the political sphere is significant. Debate is excluded from an arena crowded by the deployment of brand automata. These are the memic machines of a freestyle battle for attention and allegiance, where conviction no longer exists as an index of rhetorical efficacy, but is redefined as faith beyond reason. Language has become deviant and autonomous: colonizing rather than communicating. Yes, as Bill Burroughs had claimed all along, language is a virus. It works on its own but in the interest not just of itself, but of its species being, which profits by the transformation, via exo-digestion, of the solid to the liquescent glimmering agar of info-capital. We do not ingest the circulating memes as they produce affections and allegiances, enmities and rivalries, they abrade us from the outside. We dissolve into the soup of them and our loyalties are the flows and eddies that move and mingle within their rich and turbulent waters.



The Micro-Mechanics of Material Metaphor

What started one place ended in another; in between it passed through something.

A computer-controlled machine carves the surfaces of 150 pound, cubic foot, blocks of concrete with its hammer drill. Each block is lifted onto the machine in turn

and held inside its mechanism. The drill moves in a path across the block's surface and laboriously traces out the words "girly man" in various configurations. The marked

blocks stand on one side of the machine while the intact blocks lie in wait at its other side. A wall separates the controlling computer from the machine and the blocks.

*It
is therefore
never naïve ... to ask
oneself before a painting
what it represents. Meaning
sticks to man: even when he
wants to create something against
meaning or outside it, he ends up
producing the very meaning
of nonsense or non-
meaning.⁷*

It looks like an installation: a mixed media assemblage of various items arranged in

⁷ Roland Barthes, "The Wisdom of Art".

the space of a gallery in such a way that the experience of the visitor has some relation to the conceptual territory being explored by its creator. I would not challenge that description; and at least it answers the question, "what is this?" by connecting the work to a known (art) practice with roots in conceptualism.

... the separation between one's own ideas and one's use of materials ... becomes almost uncommunicatively wide when confronted by a viewer.⁸

At its best, a gallery would become a contemplative space. But as conceptualists must admit, to assume that anyone experiencing the environment and its objects will be having similar thoughts is presumptuous. And if the art of it *is* in the idea, then one has the choice between presumption or the evaporation of art as the situation fails to convey the intention

of the artist. The ball has been dropped. Kosuth worried that material objects would unsuccessfully communicate ideas and justified a turn toward language as an effort to narrow the gap.

⁸ Joseph Kosuth, in Arthur R. Rose, "Four Interviews," *Arts Magazine* (February 1969), p. 23, quoted in Liz Kotz, "Language Between Performance and Photography", *October 111* (Winter 2005) p. 10.



Yet his own work in language betrays the very imprecision of language itself.¹⁰

... all I make are models. The actual works of art are ideas ... the models are a visual approximation of a particular art object I have in mind.⁹

If the play continues, it might be better to simply let go of intention and be satisfied that use is sustained across an intersubjective divide. It is just a **think-thing**. The use of it, as well as the making of it, is that: play—play, which is thinking. If it is possible to value thinking outside of the overestimation of reason which constitutes us as instrumentalizing monsters, that

is what I wish to do. The things in the gallery are my think-things—artifacts of a contemplative existence that consists of asking questions about a situation, and searching for ways to inhabit it. The think-things are at once models of situation and of habitation, models *of* and models *for*. But I would want to make a distinction between Kosuth's notion of model—which seems like an instantiation or illustration of an idea which proceeds

⁹ Joseph Kosuth, "Statement" (June 1966), *Collected Writings*, p. 3, quoted in Kotz, p. 13.

¹⁰ Kotz's article mentions both her own and Buchloh's observations regarding the persistence of the gap between artistic intention and reception within Kosuth's linguistic practice, pp. 10-11.

*To whom
No subject
No image
No taste
No beauty
No message
No talent
No technique (no why)
No idea
No intention
No art
No feeling¹¹*

it—and the notion of a think-thing, which resists any sense of its priority, and insists on a leveling of the hierarchy presumed between materiality and language. Thinking adheres to things; there is no idea that can exist in a “platonic” vacuum. Thinking and materiality are not separable except within conceptual fictions of structure. Thinking, just like language, is bound to materiality irrevocably.

*... writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.*¹²

¹¹ John Cage in regard to the white paintings of Rauschenberg, quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, *John Cage*, New York, Praeger, 1970, p. 111. For Cage's notion of “indifference” see also Kotz, p. 12.

As Cage's aesthetics of indifference demands, and Barthes's and Foucault's discussions of the death of the author confirm, the matrix of creation is irrelevant; meaning is constructed in the



¹² Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, New York, Hill and Wang, 1977. “To give a text an Author,” writes Barthes, “is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.”

¹³ Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*. Ed. Donald F. Bouchard, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977, pp. 124-127.

audience. It might seem extreme to insist that nothing is conveyed—that audiences share nothing with authors that would form the basis of some sort of communication, dialog, argument, or consensus, communities of understanding, discursive networks, identities, ethnicities, nationalities, etc. But the assumption that there is no transparency in any cultural production, makes reception a matter of struggle, contestation and difference, metaphor, semblance, and resonance, (mis)apprehension, (mis)interpretation, and mistaken identity. To paraphrase Barthes, the reader is the space on which writing is inscribed. And the given of reception is simply the text; authorship is a fictional function which need not persist. It is destination rather than origin which matters.

*... these aspects of an individual, which we designate as an author (or which comprise an individual as an author), are projections, in terms always more or less psychological, of our way of handling texts ...*¹³

The think-thing offers itself to others as it is discarded by its previous user: it is the sad orphaned toy in the recycle bin. It is taken up again by one who recognizes in it a possible use that need not acknowledge the item's provenance (although it might). The thing bears the marks and wear of its past use; its form conforms to the shapes and habits of its situation, which might interest the new user because they are her own, or her alternate, or her past, or her future—or because she might invent a future by employing the thing as a lever against her current state, and shift the trajectory of her habitation.

It is also important to disavow that there is an idea. There is no idea which is whole, complete, unique, and separate. There is only a thinking—an activity, a gesture, an event, a process, a movement, a meeting, a collision, a coincidence, an alliance, an appropriation. There is only a relationship between a situation and a habitation, both of which are dynamic trajectories.

This, the think-thing you are reading, is also a model. It models a play that is possible in relation to the think-thing that is **Inscription**. But it has the same status as the thing; the thing



is not its origin, and it does not supercede it. This is not the thing's explanation, not a substitute for the thing—not an artist's statement, not a substitute for the maker. It supplements the thing which readily admits its incompleteness, but it does not complete the thing, and it remains patently incomplete itself.

Here is written: I write this thing and I made that thing. But the I that is written expresses doubts about the usefulness of the concept of authorship. Authorship, if it exists (*i.e.* if it is a useful notion), exists as the prior use (not the originary use) of the thing; and the thing, if it exists, exists as the trace of a use.

This thing is the re-use of the thing called **Inscription**. This inscription is the trace of the use of the thing. The use of the thing is the thinking of the think-thing. This trace of the use of the thing is the thinking of thing—is the thinking through of the thinking of the think-thing.

A wall sits on the divide between software and hardware, between command and controlled. The arrangement of the

room re-presents the configurations of computation and production as axes of a diagram mapping the structure of language onto everything. A sign, as we well know, is diacritically cut at the seam between signifier/signified; and, the containment of signification relies on this tentative alliance between the material and the immaterial, which cleaves and is cleaved. Likewise, the space is divided.

The room gives four views: two concealing and two revealing the conspiracy of the divided system. View **A** gives priority to the immaterial, to idea and to control, while obscuring the mechanics of the transformation of raw material into finished products, and arrogating to concept, the power of transformation. View **B** foregrounds raw materiality, nature, and the formless; but from here, the continuity of material with the combined forces of mind and muscle fill it with the scent of purposiveness, while relegating the perfected and transformed to the distance as utopic vision. (How, one might ask, does a manufactured cube stand in for the formless? The answer is that it does so, just as the word "formless" stands in for the formless: only because it is iconically blank, and only because



we can tolerate quite a bit of irony.) View **C** embraces *techné*, centering it neatly between the raw and the cooked, and hides the wizard where he would be hid. View **D** presents the child as the successful hero of an oedipal drama, with the scene of his struggle depicted in all its tawdriness behind him.

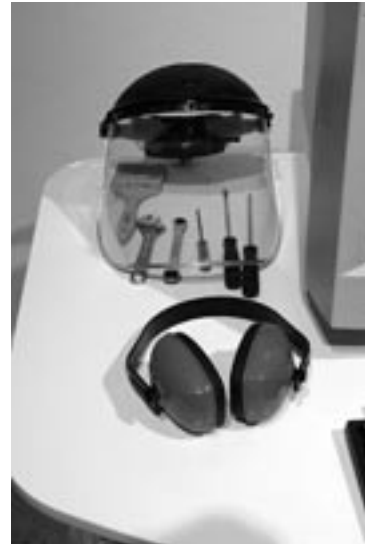
Only one scene of these four tableaux is immediately betrayed (although their co-presence in the room betrays them all): the serenity of the view from the gallery gate is pierced by the cries of the instrument and its captive. While the rule of opticality enables the structuring of the space, and sets up the possibility of differential readings, the pervasiveness of the auditory element, the sonic permeability of spatial divisions and material partitions, brings attention to the fiction of hermetic containment. This neatly arranged space is traversed by networks of flux that both follow and ignore the visible structure of its material arrangement, which is only one dimension, and a humbled one at that, of a more complex nexus of interpenetrating structures.

The elements of the work are the console, the machine, and the blocks. The console and the machine make

up the system which processes the blocks as in a Taylorist assembly line, although all together the group forms an analog of the Turing Machine. The series of blocks functions like the infinite tape of inscription divided into squares, the machine as the moving, marking and erasing apparatus, and the console as the mechanism for tracking state and recording and following the table of operations.

The console with its empty chair **(a)** stands as a marker of the alienated psychic labor that disembodied and set within the rungs of a silicon ladder; continues to work as a productive memory of post-subjective mentation. That only certain tools and certain memories have an inertia that keeps them working, even at a distance from their makers or users, is emphasized through placement of the console. The human touch is temporary; the empty chair tempts the visitor to sit in for a moment and reminds us that the machine does not really run all on its own: it requires both the first mover and the maintenance man. Moreover, the mercy seat is the first of four holes, four spaces, four absences at the core of each of the stations of the cross (for subject, object, material, and product). The mercy seat, please recall, is nothing but an empty chair riding on a book of rules. And, at a certain level of abstraction all holes are equivalent.

The pile of blocks **(b)** sits on the unmarked floor of the room so that each block makes its place by its presence alone.¹⁴ Because the block inhabits a location, its presence anticipates its absence by opening up the possibility that it can be removed and replaced. Presence converts the emptiness of space into the locative of place and enables the containment permanent in the state of spatiality to become manifest. Presence initializes the procedures of seriality, and the possibility of use, by inaugurating the possibility of absence, which is the possibility of use.



¹⁴ This notion, as well as many of the ideas about containment below, relies on Deleuze's discussion of place and the empty square in *The Logic of Sense*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

The carriage of the machine **(c)** is the space for the block: the mobile space of the vehicle. The transformation of form is compared with and depends on the translation of location in space. In contrast to the movement of content, which produces the emptiness of place, vehicular place moves with its content, and transforms its content by manipulating its locative properties. The container function of a static place is equivalent to the container function of a mobile space, which conveys its content—or its emptiness—between events, events being the conjunction/disjunction of contents and spaces.

On the pedestal **(d)** which holds the finished block, place is symbolically hierarchized: there is the high and there is, in contrast, the low. The containment function of place allows the differential assignment of value which depends on the possibility of separation. Judgment relies on the difference that is provided by the containment function of space. The pedestal allows the place of the finished block to be separated from the floor and marks the function of the pedestal by its contrast with the unelevated placement of the blank blocks. The temptation to an overestimation of the value of the product is balanced by the ironized use of the pedestal's conventionality, and its figured insignificance in comparison with the machinations of the system, which stands actively as its situation, its ground.

The machine is the main focus of interest within the room. It attracts attention by its noise, by its metallic gleam, by its complexity, by its motion, and by its violence. The machine orchestrates a repetitive event cycle in which its two main parts force the collision of a block and a hammer drill. The block, mounted on the carriage of the machine, travels back and forth within the constraint of a single dimension of movement along the line of the z-axis. The drill secured in its opposing mount, travels within the constraint of a two dimensional movement defined by the single plane of the xy-axes. The violence of the machine is expressed at the moment when the paths of the two actors intersect. The impossibility of the cohabitation of space generates a force that breaks the block, the drill, and the machine; it produces an accommodation by fractioning an actor; and transforming the habitation function of some part of it, into a containment function: a hole is formed.

Whatever it is that is inscribed on the block, that inscription is the outcome of an event that results from the constrained movements of the two actors. Inscriptive production is described metaphorically as this violent

Deterministic:

... a system whose time

evolution can be predicted exactly.

... an algorithm in which the correct next step depends only on the current state. This

contrasts with an algorithm ... where at

each point there may be several

possible actions and no way

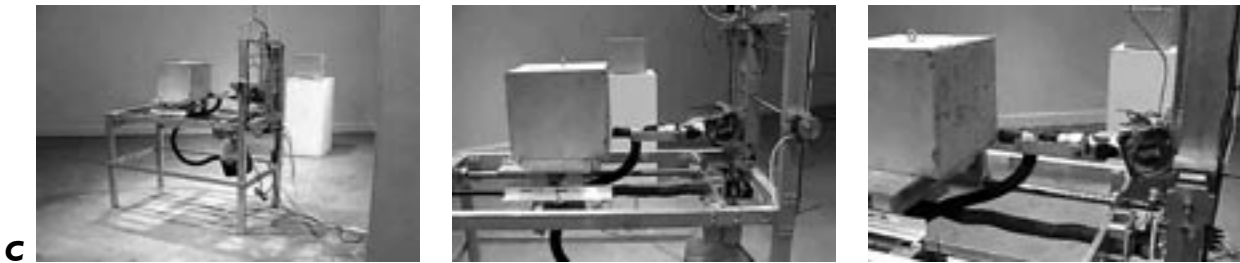
to chose between them

except by trying

*each one ...*¹⁵

con-
junction
that makes
work of collision.
The appearance of the
aggression of the actors is
only a perspective on their con-
strained movement. Their mechanical
constraint is shadowed, doubled and
motivated by the rule sets that govern the
motion of the motors: the programmatic control

¹⁵ Free Online Dictionary of Computing.



of the machine by the rules of the console. Although the rules are determined in the choice of the inscription (the block is sentenced to bear the caption of its crime) the outcome of the event is not strictly deterministic.

The indeterminacy of the outcome is not, in this case, a result of a probabilistic or generative strategy in the console, but rather play in the physical system itself. The gesture and the texture of the inscription on the block—and even the degree of success in achieving the completion of the inscription, its legibility, its correspondence with the instructions and programmatic intentions of the console and its operator—is a product of the combined contributions of mechanical and programmatic constraint with the play of the actors—which is to say, of the material qualities of the hardened mortar, the aluminum structure, the physical linkages, the efficiencies of the mechanics, the deficiencies of the motors, and the limitations of the software.

The locations of slack are multiple and dispersed throughout the entire apparatus, but their significance is concentrated and multiplied in proximity with the collision events.

The brittleness of the block and the looseness of the drill bit are primarily responsible for the consistency of the worked surfaces of the bit and the block. The bit has a considerable tendency to wear, which though less visible and dramatic than the effects on the block, must be noted to understand that the destruction is mutual. The bit is like a pencil, since its use, uses it up. Unlike a pencil though, inscription happens in this event, not as its substance is distributed across a surface, but as its insistence, the force of its intrusion, breaks the coherence of the opposed surface. Since the machine's grip on the bit is loose, each successive press of the bit to the block channels the trajectory of the event in one of three possible types of paths: through the wear of previous events; or along a line of facture; or directly into the block along a path of fricative abrasion and micro-fracture which produces a new hole. The worked surfaces are the aggregation of serial events which accumulate and collect secondary proximity effects. These effects are based on the interaction between events, and produce a probabilistic surface, a surface where tendencies toward certain types of trajectories cohere and form patterns



of accommodation and refusal, of likelihood and improbability. Texture is the map of these effects.

This discussion, which might be termed “the micro-mechanics of material metaphor” opens the installation **Inscription** to metaphor, without specifying any intended mappings between the situation of its construction and its manifestation. Any object is, of course, always already subject to metaphoric use; by “open” I mean only to suggest that the discussion exposes less obvious aspects of the material properties of **Inscription**, and in doing so facilitates their availability as think-things. Think-things offer themselves to thought.

Alternatively, this text is simply constructed as available in that capacity. Its existence is not necessarily dependent on the pre-existence of the machine, and could as easily have been created in relation to an imagined, virtual, or fictive machine—an imagined, virtual, or fictive world. Here is written: It was not; if I am not dissembling, the machine was constructed in the context of a particular cultural and political landscape,

the thinking through of which produced the machine and its installation. But what are these scapes? The following passages explore them as a way of laying alongside *these things* (this text, the installation) another thing, so that the proximity effects of all these things will be open for your thinking-through.

... an exhibition is a system of meanings, a discourse, which, taken as a complex unit or enunciative field, can be said to constitute

Mary Kelly comments that the exhibition "conducts a passage"

*a group of statements: the individual works comprising fragments of imaged discourse or utterances which are anchored by the exhibition's titles, subheadings, and commentary, but at the same time unsettled, exceeded, or dispersed in the process of their articulation as events.*¹⁶

¹⁶ Mary Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism", *Imaging Desire*, MIT, 1996, pp. 99-100.



(ambiguously a textual fragment or an experiential journey) out of "its spatiotemporal disposition, conventions of display, codes of architecture"—that is, the installation (of an exhibition) orchestrates the reception of its contents in a way that remains at least partially open and "at the disposal of the spectator" because of her agency within the mechanics of perusal. The catalog, however, or any written accompaniment to the exhibition, fixes the narrativizations of display and image, and "confers an authorship, an authority, on the exhibition events."¹⁷

Here is written: My hesitance to create this text (I had neglected to mention I was not happy to do this.) is the consequence of my reluctance to authorize a particular reading of the work—to construct a conventional subject of authorship and intent. My own use of the materials is dynamic and promiscuous, as they hold interest only as long as they can sustain the mobility of thinking. If I am not changed in the experience, I am disappointed. The astute reader will recognize the signs of my transformation within this text—this text being a trace of my passage through **Inscription**. It is not a rehearsal

¹⁷ Kelly, p. 100.

of my motivations, it is not an explanation of what the piece definitely means. It is a page made blank by the scars of a previous use.

I imagine that even within the volubility of this text, a certain reticence can remain in the writing, and that the writing will fail to completely foreclose the potential for an open use of itself and of **Inscription**. The writing takes up a paratactical strategy, declining to explicitly map the micro-mechanics of metaphor onto the particularities of context. It should be left to user of these materials to construct the passages between, and to make connections among, the forms and fictions that are on offer. A resonant system remains inert until disturbed by the event of contact or excitable proximity; only then does it wake and ring.





Inscription of the Girly Man

The work
Inscription
might be said to
have three fathers:
Arnold, Franz
and Michel. Or, it
might be said that
the dirty business
of conceiving
Inscription was
the consequence
of an even more
crowded couch in
which these daddies
where only the last
to deposit their gifts,
and that therefore
the memories of
their conjugal adieus
are just easier to
re-member. Each
stands, in a way,
for a category, a
body-type, a way of
thinking and acting, a
story, a function, an
example for which
their names are only
one instantiation.
They are archetypes,
proto-types,
exemplars.

*[I]f they don't have the guts,
I call them girly-men.*

ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER
Governor of California, July 17, 2004

*Enlightenment comes to the most
dull-witted. It begins around the
eyes. From there it radiates ...
Nothing more happens than that
the man begins to understand
the inscription ... our man
deciphers it with his wounds ...*

FRANZ KAFKA
In the Penal Colony

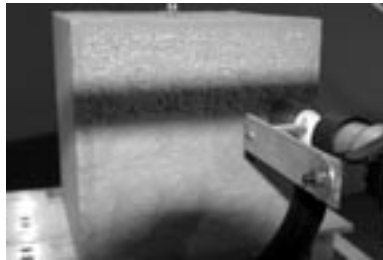
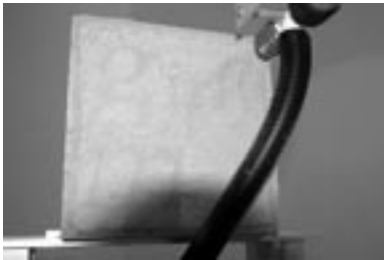
*The body is the inscribed surface
of events (traced by language and
dissolved by ideas), the locus of
a dissociated Self (adopting the
illusion of a substantial unity), and a
volume in perpetual disintegration.*

MICHEL FOUCAULT
Language, Counter-Memory, Practice



Epithet-Body

How is it that the image and the epithet have replaced rhetoric as the stuff of American politics? This is the question proper to Schwarzenegger's exploitation of the insult "girly man" in order to attempt to force the recalcitrant state legislature to assent to his budget proposal. The logic of rhetoric somehow does not apply, and his epithet is immunized against critique whether based on observations of it being contradictory (since the legislators who are called weak are those who are strong in their opposition) or impolitic (since the insult is both sexist and homophobic). It is not sufficient to simply enumerate the casualties of this change in the political landscape (women, gays, immigrants, the poor, people of color, etc., and also debate and political discourse itself) or to note the effectiveness of the strategies, but it is important, because the invisibility of these, both the changes and the



casualties, are at least one reason for the effectiveness of the techniques.

In one sense, the function of the epithet is to displace discourse by naming, and to disqualify, thereby, an abject term of the political equation. Interpellation is already a trap; the recognition of the address by its target is an acceptance that forecloses denial. The substitution of epithet for discourse still requires more explanation. It seems that there is little appetite for extended debate on issues. The attention of the masses is so shrunken, deformed and impatient that it seems hardly capable of sustaining debate, preferring instead to take up sides as a fan would, a spectator in a theater of conflict. This is the role that media constantly trains us for. In this role, the function of the iteration of insult by an audience is to produce an identification with the hero in battle, to transform the violence of actual combat into the barbs of verbal warfare. The vicarious passivity of spectatorship does not require understanding, only a subordination of will to the chosen champion (or team). The repetition of insult is authorized by an identification with the heroic figure of the champion. And the responsive chant of

the crowd authorizes, in return, the actions of the figurehead as mass body.

The system of Schwarzenegger's body and Schwarzenegger's utterance depends in a peculiar way on the specificity of his form, together with the construction of his public persona through cinema and its attendant media manipulations (public relations, and advertising). His rise to the governorship relied heavily on a confusion between his person and his cinematic persona, which is well captured in the use (even if ironically) of the title "governator." The titles of his most popular movies give an impression of a kind of violent masculinity: *The Terminator*, *Predator*, *Conan the Barbarian*. And this impression is born out in the roles he plays and in the mediated circulation of his reputation. His movie success depends on the congruence between his form, the massive musculature of a body builder, and the roles he takes on; that is, it relies on the equation of effective violence with bodily massiveness as an iconic guarantee of hypertrophic masculinity.

As if his own frame were not male enough, Arnold re-frames his masculinity by surrounding himself with a host of



phallic signifiers, from guns, knives and other weapons, to cigars, to massive cars. His allegiance to the Hummer is particularly noteworthy in this regard, since it also partakes of a certain confusion between fantasy and reality. The tank is repurposed for the fantasy of the urban soldier. The Hummer's three tons of metal arm and massify the suburban male—fuel his identification with the warrior body, and prop up his sagging masculinity by transforming domestic tedium into urban combat. For Arnold though, these toys are claimed as the natural collateral of his wealth, power, mass and maleness. In his iconicity, Arnold's possession of them functions as origin for their use by the anonymous male. Still, it is hard not to be suspicious that a certain supplementarity attains in his situation as well.

In any case, Schwarzenegger's figure is not singular and unified, but rather a constellation of idioms of masculinity: power, violence, possession, massiveness, wealth, performance, stupidity, cupidity. This swirl of testosterone emits language in such a way that its sting is tied to the poison of that that hormone. The epithet is thrown from the body as if by centrifugal

force; but the body remains linked to the utterance, and gives it force and effectiveness.

The interpellated subject of Schwarzenegger's insult is trapped by it, because the intellection required as a defense, will only act as a confirmation of an identification with the named effete class. The other defense is a violent one that Arnold is immune from given his symbolic status as iconic hero, emblem of the strong, the victorious. On a practical level, he is immune by virtue of his attendance by a retinue of armed security personnel who make his imposing stature redundant.

The utterance, "I call them girly-men," refuses to be a position or an argument, it is simply and only a naming. It sets up a deictic equivalence that suffers no contestation; it is indelible, irrevocable, irreversible. It is a magisterial gesture that enthrones its speaker as the phallic king of a political boys club membered by two species of male. There are no women

*... and whatsoever
Adam called every
living creature, that
was the name
thereof.*¹⁸

¹⁸ Genesis 2:19, *King James Bible*, Project Gutenberg edition, Second Version, 10th Edition, 1992.



in this arena for they would turn the epithet into nonsense. "I call them girly men" is an adamic gesture of nominal origination that precedes the existence of the feminine; it brings the feminine into being by pulling it out of a masculine body with the extension of an accusatory finger. The deictic "them" puts Arnold at the source of truth, beyond justification and bathed in the anointing authority of gubernatorial victory, in the mythic excess of meritocratic validation, with its presumed reward, the accumulation of political capital.

The anti-grammatical, anti-rhetorical abbreviation of language is linked with the deployment of a hyper-masculine iconicity; they ascend to power together as an aestheticized regime. Here we should notice the echoes of that twinned aestheticization of war and politics about which Benjamin warned us.¹⁹ We must add to that alarm a recognition of the way

*Its self-alienation has reached
such a degree that it
can experience its own
destruction as an aesthetic
pleasure of the first order.
This is the situation of
politics which Fascism is
rendering aesthetic.*¹⁹

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 242.

that gender functions in the mapping of these battlefields. The machinic, the heavy and the solid are idioms of both masculinity and power, which locate themselves in opposition to the thoughtful, the ephemeral, and the delicate, all taken as signs of weakness, and therefore gendered female.

The installation **Inscription**, explores these issues through abstraction, analogy and transformation; it investigates the problem of the gendered relationship of an aesthetics of power to the act of writing. **Inscription** is a staging of the encounter between these opposed idioms in the guise of software and hardware, materiality and language, instrument and substance.



Narrative-Body

The explorer seemed to have accepted merely out of politeness the Commandant's invitation to witness the execution of a soldier condemned to death for disobedience and insulting behavior to a superior.²⁰

Kafka's story, "In the Penal Colony", reverses the narrative of a technological intervention which, in the sphere of justice, renders discourse moot. The explorer in this tale happens upon the penal colony on the day of the last use of an infernal machine—on the day of its destruction and the death of its last remaining proponent. This ironic and perverse inversion acts to emphasize the cruelty of the dawning of an age where a synthesis of bureaucratic method and mechanical execution conspire to radically redefine the meaning and function of not just justice, but of the faculty of judgment itself. Language here—in the machine, and the system of justice that radiates from it—has lost its rhetorical use; it cannot sustain dialog or dialectic. It confines itself to a unilateral deployment



that preserves only the instrumentalized and performative functions of utterance. It can only accuse and punish. It can act, but it cannot communicate nor commune.

The figure of the explorer embodies a messianic fantasy of deliverance from the nightmare of an Asiatic despotism married to the fetishization of a cold, hyper-rational, mechanical efficiency. Here too, there is a reversal; the colonialist imaginary is inverted so that the colony becomes the origin of a *machinic* tyranny, and Europe figures as the strange source of a romantic Ludite-humanism.

This colony is an island, and so is the officer; the explorer; the prisoner; and the machine. They are all isolated monads floating in a sea of indifference and disconnection. Each character is painfully aware of his singular status, his inability to persuade the others or even to communicate with them. The barriers are multiple fields of difference: language, authority, culture, nationality, status. And the machine has lost its audience and its creator; it exists in a field of blind inertial facticity. Even so, the machine draws a set of these monads into a temporary and precarious configuration around itself. It shapes a network,

and as if possessed of an agency more complete than that of the people around it, it stages the events of its demise and erasure. This machinic will is somehow responsible for not only the end the juridical regime of which it is the center, but for the alteration of language: its instrumentalization. It takes, it seems, the presence of a machine to effect this cruel transformation. While the working of the machine on the body of the condemned models the direct transformation of people by technical activity, the sheer presence of the machine, the mere witness of its operations, has transformative properties as well. There is a contagion of automatic functioning that extends from the machine to those in its attendance.

"The lower one is called the 'Bed,' the upper one the 'Designer,' and this one here in the middle that moves up and down is called the 'Harrow.'" ...

"As soon as the man is strapped down, the Bed is set in motion. It quivers in minute, very rapid vibrations, both from side to side and up and down. ... in our Bed the movements are all precisely calculated; you

²⁰ All quotations from Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," *The Complete Stories*, Ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, New York, Schocken Books, 1971.



see, they have to correspond very exactly to the movements of the Harrow. And the Harrow is the instrument for the actual execution of the sentence."

The apparatus of execution has a three part construction that consists of a controlling mechanism, the Designer, an inscribing mechanism, the Harrow, and a holding mechanism, the Bed. This familiar structure of automation symbolically presents the ontic division of existence into mind, body, and world, as well as the conditions of mechanical instrumentalization which depend on the externalization of human parts and faculties as prosthetics. In the body of this machine we have a head, and two hands, one writing, and one holding. Making consists of controlling the grasping and the transforming of the otherness of materiality; it requires exactly these parts: for controlling, grasping and transforming respectively. The story, showing that writing is structured in this way, just as is any other technology, threatens to expose the ideology of language's immateriality as a diaphanous disguise for the physicality of persuasion.

"He doesn't know the sentence that has been passed on him?" "No," said the officer again, pausing a moment as if to let the explorer elaborate his question, and then said: "There would be no point in telling him. He'll learn it on his body."

If language is then a matter of physical persuasion, talk is redundant and irrelevant. Is it a demand for efficiency, a principal that the machine supposedly brings with it, that guarantees that redundant gestures are not performed? Does the machine disqualify other criteria which might advocate for gestures motivated by play, compassion, or pleasure? Rule is provided here by the officer and not by the machine. It is his becoming machine, in what McLuhan identifies as a narcissistic reincorporation of a misrecognized exterior image of the self, that forces this efficiency.²¹

²¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media; The Extensions of Man*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2001, p. 11.

"My guiding principle is this: Guilt is never to be doubted."

"The captain came to me an hour ago, I wrote down his statement and appended the sentence to it. Then I



had the man put in chains. That was all quite simple. If I had first called the man before me and interrogated him, things would have got into a confused tangle."

Judgment becomes mechanical as an avoidance of the confusion of accusation and defense, which would require the negotiation of opposed deployments of rhetoric. There can be no mechanical resolution of disputes and contested facts, of stories told from more than one perspective. In his allegiance to method, the officer adheres to a nominalization of justice that requires no judgment whatsoever. All that is required is to name the criminal and to name the crime. Justice consist in the perfunctory task of suturing one to the other inside the penal apparatus.

"So there have to be lots and lots of flourishes around the actual script; the script itself runs around the body only in a narrow girdle; the rest of the body is reserved for the embellishments."

The machine is actually not efficient at all, but is in thrall to a very particular aesthetic, which demands of it a baroque ornamentation, as a way to align means and ends according to the strict rhythms of mechanical time. Temporal exactitude is what guides the art of the machine—not efficiency exactly, but speed and tempo. Machines make work for themselves in order to fill their time, and they make work for us as well.

... for he traveled only as an observer, with no intention at all of altering other people's methods of administering justice.

The explorer traveled under this Startrekian prime directive, the refusal to interfere or change the other; and yet, in Kafka's moral tale, his presence seems to catalyze the downfall of the machine. The disapproving gaze of the stranger is the condition under which the machine and its proponent dismantle themselves. He listens passively, yet unmoved, to the officer's explanations. He, almost silently, simply refuses to assent; and this is enough to set the fall in motion.



This story, however, inverts the time and the space of the machine's domination. "In The Penal Colony" portrays the machine already in decline, and at the very end of its reign, at the very periphery of the circuits of power. It is not hard to imagine that in that situation a small gesture could cause its demise. We can hardly imagine, though, that a small gesture in the present could collapse a system in its ascendancy, and at the height of its power. And neither can we imagine a place outside this regime from which we might come to intervene. At a time where there is a foreclosure of discursive possibilities, it might seem appealing to relinquish as well the faculties of scrutiny, and to thereby forgo the anguish that their use will cause. Still, there remains the option, and perhaps even the obligation, to observe, as long as the fantasy of observation as resistance can be sustained. Otherwise, if another chance to speak with force comes, what will we say? And might there be something that observation will prompt us to do?



Event-Body

The body is not a given—not a whole, finished, and closed container of thought or of substance—but a kind of technical construction, always under construction. The subjectivity, which is miserably and mysteriously attached to it, is continuously subject to transformations through the actions of forces which manipulate the body—which stress, mold, and fracture it. The meaning of the body, the perception of the body, the form of the body, and its functioning, are all mutable, malleable, fissionable. Flesh and self are concomitants, but neither is a preexistent condition of being. Flesh is a becoming—a becoming of self.

What is deconstructed in the regime of the machine is bodily integrity and autonomy. The body is subject to the methods of machinic construction and operation. These methods are that of which the body consists: division, modularity, automation, variability, and interchangeability.²² Being changeable, rather than eternal, the body is loosed in time. A body



exists in space as a locatable object, and it exists in time as an event.

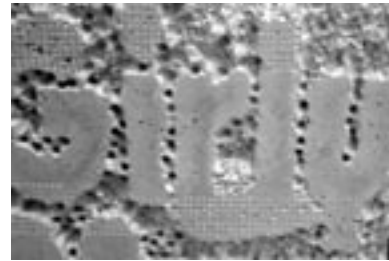
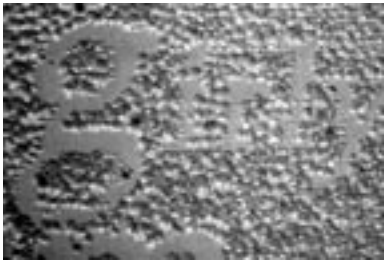
The body is not some thing for the self, it is a thing for the event. It offers the blankness of its volume to inscription through the conjunction that constitutes event as the intersection of the here and the now. That intersection, that cross, is what marks the body and what erases it. The accumulation of the markings shapes and destines the body. The body moves guided by a flow which is the channeled, dynamic trajectory of time as it passes across the inscribed surface of the body.

The blankness of the body, which it offers to event interminably, is its possibility. Every mark on its surface is still subject to re-inscription. Blankness is not the pristine state of the body, it is its potential for effacement. Erasure costs only the loss of an attachment to a previous state. But writing is not a singular event. Writing is the accumulation of events, the aggregation of marks, and the erosion of substance. Writing is the subjugation of the body by events.

²² See Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2001. These methods are identified usefully in his text, though I substitute "division" for his term "numeric representation" because what allows numerical representation is a discrete fractioning, and "interchangeability" for "transcoding" to emphasize the crucial role of substitution as a method.

The body is not some thing for the self, it is a thing for the machine. The machine is a complex event that conjoins many bodies into a system of variability inside of which the combined trajectories of bodies grasp and act on each other. The markings of some bodies are the working memory of the machine, and the markings of others are the memory of its rules. And, in the carved surfaces of still others, are the hollows in which becoming is held, and written, and moved.

So, the machine works.



Flame Hardened Bed

The site of production for **Inscription**, has a significance beyond some breezy fascination with the “making of” things. The machine shop instantiates a particular machinic aesthetic. While one can perhaps trace a complicated genealogy of this style of the machine—starting with the Constructivists and the Futurists, passing through the Bechers, and taken up by more contemporary exponents of industrial culture, like Throbbing Gristle or Survival Research Laboratories—I am content simply to observe the persistence of characteristic forms, and colors, and sounds, across a long history, and to note the connection of these traits to desire for the machine.

The culture of the shop is saturated by the sexy lines and bold colors of its machines. The atmosphere is feral, dangerous, dirty, and musked. To make machines requires a certain gendered mastery of this place and its tools—its rules and its physicality. In constructing the machine for **Inscription**, I had to acquire a range of skills that always felt foreign, no matter how well I learned them. This, to me, was the **drag** of the shop—its masquerade. I did not initially aspire to rule it like a **faux king**, but I did wear the kit, and assume the postures of masculinity, in order to do my job. Still, effete, I waltzed away from the stage after each episode, shed my drag and blew it kisses.

Here is the stage with its quaint sets and lipsticked collars. I took the photos (as if I were) in the thrall of a nostalgic reverie. And, maybe I was.

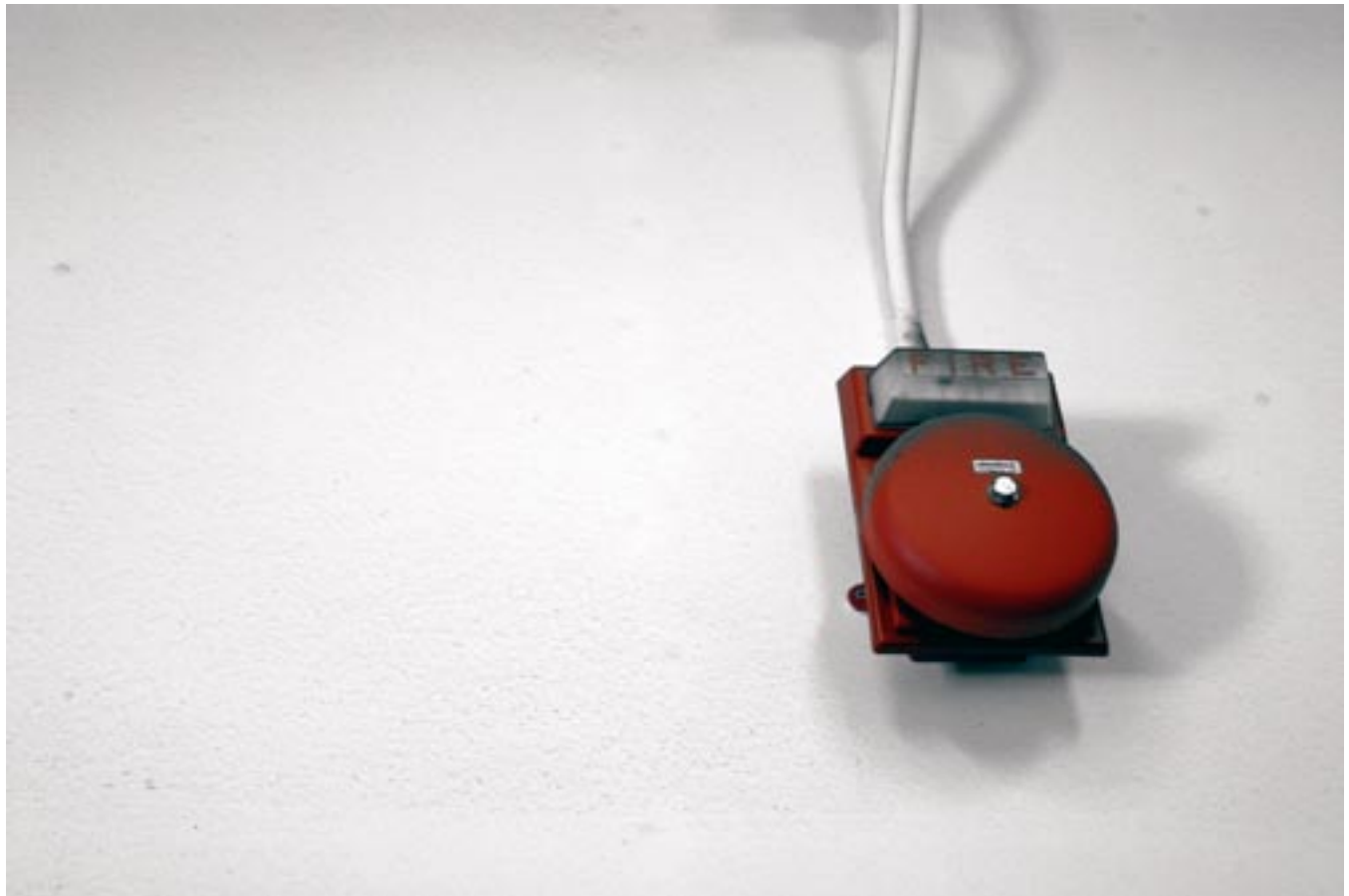










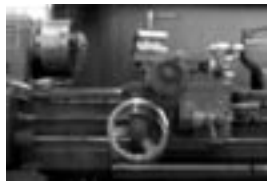


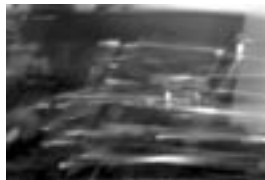












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Celephon

DESIGN

Brad Borevitz
(with inspiration from
Ellen Lupton & J. Abbott Miller)

TYPOGRAPHY

Gill Sans
Designed by Eric Gill (1931)
Edwardian Script
Designed by Edward Benguiat (1994)

PHOTOGRAPHY

Brad Borevitz
Patrick Miller

[I]f they don't have the guts, I call them girly-men.

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Governor of California, July 17, 2004

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In the Penal Colony

The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration.

MICHEL FOUCAULT

Language, Counter-Memory, Practice

We observe that the structure of language is seen as well in the structure of the machine, and wonder what that means about the machine and about language.