

THE UNREADABLE WORD

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This autobiographical problem in lieu of thesis explores the subject matter of the sculpture, revolving around the issues of dyslexia and literacy, and builds upon the idea of metaphor and its function in relationship to the sculpture. The four visual and conceptual elements that are emphasized are: (a) the juxtaposition and arrangement of elements and materials; (b) inability to open the books; (c) alteration of the text to make the words illegible, by creating words that are fuzzy or transparent; and (d) repetition and scale. Also discussed are ideas of post modern criticism with an emphasis on semiotics and writing of Derada in relationship to his contemporary analysis of his sculpture.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

According to Derrida, language is a communicator; it is the construct that defines our thoughts and thus our perception of reality. The written word has been the backbone of civilization for centuries. Since the decline of the oral tradition, writing and reading have been a significant means of communicating ideas to the next generation. So, imagine a world in which you lack the means to access written information. This is the situation that affects millions everywhere. The reasons vary but the effect is the same. Without the ability to access the written word, an individual ability to succeed in the modern world is severely hampered. Whether one is “learning different”, or a blind student struggling with often inefficient and inadequate disability accommodations or an inner city youth dealing with disparate distribution of educational resources, one will enter the professional world at an unfair disadvantage. The limited access to reading or writing materials will make it more difficult to succeed in today's competitive marketplace. As an artist, one of my main goals is to elicit an empathetic response from the viewer and to communicate the idea of inaccessible text and all of its implications.

In many ways, the reason I started making art and the reasons that I am making art about issues of text today are the same. This issue is one with which I personally struggle. I have dyslexia and have a great deal of trouble with reading and writing. This gives me a unique viewpoint on the subject matter; and a personal interest in its successful communication. As a child I was drawn to the arts because I did not have to struggle with reading and writing. Thus, art gave me a feeling of success in an arena where I was not judged by my disability. As a young man, I had a growing desire for

intellectual stimulation. This lack of stimulation caused me a great deal of frustration because I hated to depend on others to read me the information I sought.

I consider my story one of success because I have managed to excel in the academic arena. I have overcome challenges that many find difficult and are even harder for me. Even though I have proven that I can succeed in a reading world, issues of struggle have particular poignancy to me.

As an undergraduate student I found myself enthralled by philosophy. The ideas presented to me during my philosophical studies became manifested in my art work. The idea of personal intellectual freedom was of particular importance. This idea of intellectual freedom resonated with my own personal struggles.

In 2002, I decided to become more direct and autobiographical. My work then became less about an abstract struggle for personal freedom and more about inaccessible text and the struggle to access the information I desperately needed.

#### Aesthetic and Conceptual Influences and Ideas

I am personally drawn to work that communicates ideas or emotions. However, it is not necessary that the idea or emotions communicated be immediately obvious to the viewer.

Many other artists have influenced me at different times. Magdalena Abakanowicz has inspired me with her use of scale, repetition and emotional impact of particular interest is by the way in which she handles the human figure and the relationship of materials to her conceptual message. Antony Gormley, likewise, has an acute understanding of the quiet sculpture, the sculpture does not move, but the sculpture radiates a sense of stillness. Formal considerations such as economy of form,

similar to those ideas emphasized by minimalist artists like Donald Judd, maintain the work's simple yet sophisticated honesty.

Scale is a key element that determines the way in which the viewer interacts with the work. Changing the scale of how work is presented determines how the space the work occupies is perceived. I am particularly interested in activating the space to engage the viewer. In many cases, material choice has a direct correlation to the work's conceptual intent. Each material has its own aesthetic quality. This quality serves to enhance the work.

The use of gesture or implied movement tends to give a sense of traveling through the space. Without gesture, an object communicates without referencing a particular moment in time and is given a timeless quality. I have recently become fascinated with communicating this timeless quality and limiting the use of gesture in the work.

#### Statement of Problem

The use of metaphor is a significant way in which I can convey concepts in sculpture. Visually, I have investigated some of the formats in which I can best convey the idea of inaccessibility of text to the viewer. I have explored which metaphors have communicated my concept in a direct and visually stimulating manner. I have also explored how the use of text affects both the visual and conceptual aspects of the work. The relationship between this text and its metaphorical meaning relates the form, material and concept. Likewise, the sculpture references an overall sense of inaccessibility.

#### Questions

What role does metaphor play in my work?

How does scale function in my work?

In what ways can I use text to successfully convey the inaccessibility of that text?

### Methodology

To answer these questions, I have created pieces that involve metaphorical relationships whose overall effect give one the impression of inaccessible text. Some of the work incorporates text that is either illegible or difficult to read.

The major work will be a large-scale wall made of books. The material choice made in this piece and in the other corresponding pieces have a conceptual relationship to the form. The wall, in its relationship to the book, metaphorically indicates the inaccessibility of the books. The wall is the stopping force that metaphorically relates to the inability to read text. Through the action of making, in relationship to these questions, I have improved my understanding of the significance of the idea and the place of metaphor in my work.

## CHAPTER 2

### AS THE WORK UNFOLDED

When this body of work began, I started thinking about ways and means of communicating. One of the primary ways that individuals communicate is through reading and writing. It became important to think about a visual language that I could use that might allow a conversation about not being able to read or write. Therefore, in some ways I was making language into visual metaphors to talk about written language in general.

After making the pieces in this body of work, four dominant visual elements presented themselves as significant to the integrity of the work. Each piece in this series of work uses some or all of these elements to communicate the essential ideas inherent to the body of work. The four visual and conceptual elements that will be discussed are as follows: (a) the juxtaposition and arrangement of elements and materials; (b) inability to open the books; (c) alteration of the text to make the words illegible, by creating words that are fuzzy or transparent; and, (d) repetition and scale.

#### Juxtaposition and Arrangement of Elements and Materials



1. Eric McGehearty. *Repetition of Unreadable Books*. 2003 Books set in Concrete blocks 15'x10' (variable

The choice of materials was integral to all of the pieces created in this series. In some of the work I used books as found objects. Most of the times, when found objects are used, they become a self-referential symbol. Also, the raw materials used carry their own significance. In “Repetition of

Unreadable Books,” (fig.1) I set books in concrete blocks to make them impossible to open. The use of concrete was important. If the books were set in blocks of cast Styrofoam, the ideas important to the integrity of the piece would have been lost. Similarly in the piece entitled “Synapse,” (fig.2) the use of copper wires were important to communicate the idea of the electrical impulse in the brain. If a non-conducted material or a material not associated with electricity was used the audience, would not have clues necessary to decipher the visual language presented.



2. Eric McGehearty. *Synapse*. 2003 Plastic and Steel Books with Copper Wryer,



3. Eric McGehearty. *Outside the Box*. 2003. Books set in Concrete blocks and Painted, 5' X 5'.

Also important to this visual language is the arrangement and position of elements in relationship to each other and the viewer. “Outside the Box” (fig.3) provides an excellent example of such a relationship. The only element in this piece that remains unpainted sits apart from the other

objects. This physical separation, coupled with a lack of surface treatment, isolates this unique object; thus, allowing for the title “Outside the Box”. Essentially, the arrangement of elements creates a visual metaphor which is then punctuated by the title which emphasizes with a text-based metaphor.

Out of all the work in this series, the wall of books is the most direct metaphor.

The “word wall” is used commonly in language to indicate a stopping force or an impediment to something. An individual may describe it as “putting a wall up” or in another instance an individual may feel like they were, “running into a brick wall.” The wall was constructed directly of the object that I associate with difficulties in reading. Therefore, a metaphor becomes as comparison between the wall and the book.

The written metaphor seems simple in comparison to a visual one. The visual metaphor is complicated by the implications of the titles of the books, the pages of the books, and the heights and length of the wall. All of these elements come into play by making the books not openable.

#### Physically Making the Book Unopenable



4. Eric McGehearty. Hidden Books. 2003. Books set in Concrete blocks, 8' X 4'.

Physically making the book incapable of being opened is one of the primary metaphors used in the construction in many of these pieces. “Repetition of Unreadable Books” (fig.1) is one of the first pieces I made with this concept in mind. By setting the books in concrete blocks, the books are affectively sealed forever. Symbolically, these locked books relate to the lack of access to information.



5. Eric McGehearty. *Hidden Books (detail)*. 2003. Books set in Concrete blocks, 8' X 4'.

In “Hidden Books,” (fig.4) the idea is taken a step further by using similar bricks with books locked away inside them. These bricks are stacked in such a way that the books’ face inward to form a cylindrical shape (fig.5). The books are even further removed from the audience

physically. During the process of making this body of work, my fascinations with metaphors like this one are some of the most successful to me as a visual communicator.

### Illegible Words

It is only natural to use text in works that is *prima facie* about the inability to read that same text. However I find the process is somehow ironic. When using words which are scrambled, fuzzy, or otherwise illegible, that I am able to create a sign, that identifies familiar signifiers and increases their significance by removing their coherency.



6. Eric McGehearty.  
*Transparent Words*. 2003.  
Books set in Concrete blocks  
with Copper Sheets, 4'x 1'.

There are two pieces that use this technique to its best effect. "Transparent Words" (fig.6) utilizes acid etching on copper to produce a page which is, in places, almost legible. The surface of this piece is

rough and mysterious; the words are visible but unclear. This juxtaposition functions to communicate the incomprehensible nature of the text to me. "Out of Focus" (fig.7) and or "Synapse" communicate the same ideas into two different ways. In this instance, text was sandblasted onto a piece of plexiglass. The text remains illegible. However, since the text is presented in a book like format, it is more



7. Eric McGehearty. *Out of Focus*. 2003. Steel  
and Plastic, 2'x 1'.

straightforward in its delivery.

Both of these pieces function as a hybrid of two dimensional and three-dimensional surfaces of data. By that, I mean these pieces are two dimensional sheets because of their transparency, have three-dimensional qualities which are undeniable. This three-dimensionality is very satisfying for a sculptor.

### Repetition and scale

The use of repetition and scale is significant to the formal concept in sculpture. Many of the pieces in the series are large-scale and have a great deal of repetition (fig.8). The works are not wholly dependent upon these formal elements, but that benefit from them.



As an artist, I have always been most excited about pieces which are larger than life. Some of my childhood excitement about art comes from running around Richard Serra's work in downtown Dallas. The idea of capturing and dominating space is essential to sculpture. The sheer physicality of the work adds to its visceral nature in relationship to the viewer. Likewise, repetition is an essentially pleasing element of design. These two interrelated ideas help me to conceptualize the work and, more importantly, help the viewer to see it properly.

8. Eric McGehearty. *Rhythm of Unreadable Books*. 2003. Concrete and Books, 12' x 2' x 2'.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE IDEAS BECAME CLEAR

After reading Derada and much of postmodern criticism, I was left with the impression that signs and signifiers, which is language-based reasoning and communication is critical to the contemporary artist. Reading and communication are of special interest to this body of work, the work illustrates a lack of access to written materials.

Both signs and signifiers construct a visual and physical language to communicate the inaccessible word. Essentially, a visual language is constructed that talks about or refers to written language. Visual language is an extended way of thinking about metaphors. Metaphors are not simply word constructs; metaphors can be either visual or physical signs that relate to ways of thinking. Likewise, contemporary philosophers like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* talk about the function of a metaphor. A metaphor is a key to understanding human cognitive thought. By examining my work in relationship to the idea of a metaphor; I have become more cognizant of the significance of postmodernism and its relationship to this body of work.

The construction of visual and physical metaphors is similar to written metaphors. The tools used to create these metaphors, however are different. As discussed in the previous chapter, the relationship of physical objects to each other is one such tool. Also, physical metaphors are created by the materials chosen and the surface treatment given to those materials.

It is important to note the use of found objects in contemporary sculpture. Found

objects carry a large amount of intellectual or cultural baggage. All of these tools can be used as a written language to create metaphorical relationships.

In writing, there's more opportunity to give the audience the tools needed to fully comprehend the writer's original intent, or the story's message. In sculpture, this opportunity is possible but is often considered didactic.

The artist must rely on the audience to carry a certain amount of common knowledge in order to communicate its intent. I, as an artist must let go of the idea that it is important for every viewer to understand my work. One of the beautiful things about sculpture is that it is not like an open book. The sculpture maintains a sense of mystery and it requires intellectual active participation.

Writing this paper is a metaphor in and of itself. I have symbolically opened the pages and revealed the subtext of this body of work, but these words are not the real metaphor. To find the real message of my work, it must be seen and interpreted by the viewer.