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Illegibilities •
Reflecting • Reading

con • stel • la • tions

Temporal Communities × DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program

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con·stel·la·tions 03

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Illegibilities Reflecting Reading

Textem Verlag

Barbara Bausch
A Practice in Its Own Right

Reading is an everyday and, at the same time, strange, sometimes even magical practice. We commonly understand it as a mental technique that involves the visual recognition of written signs, the actualisation of the sound image of words and the comprehension of their meaning. Reading is one of the fundamental cultural techniques of modern societies. Once learned, reading in writing cultures modulates our relationship to ourselves and the world; it creates connections across time and space and is a site of society's self-understanding.[1] However, reading is a black box that is difficult to fully apprehend: the act of reading produces something that cannot be derived from what is read alone.[2] It is a practice that simultaneously participates, as Roland Barthes writes, "in perception, intellection and association — but also in memory and pleasure".[3] Our "knowing how to read" is consequently

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1 See for example Otto, Isabel-Dorothea. "Leser". *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik Online*, edited by Gert Ueding, De Gruyter, 2013, pp. 170–71; Honold, Alexander and Rolf Parr. "Einleitung: Lesen — literatur-, kultur- und medienwissenschaftlich". *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft: Lesen*, edited by Rolf Parr and Alexander Honold, De Gruyter, 2018, pp. 3–26; Griem, Julika. *Szenen des Lesens: Schauplätze einer gesellschaftlichen Selbstverständigung*. transcript, 2021.

2 See Aust, Hugo. *Lesen: Überlegungen zum sprachlichen Verstehen*. De Gruyter, 2011 (first published 1983), p. 235; Darnton, Robert. *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History.* Norton and Norton, 1990, pp. 154–87; Hron, Irina and Christian Benne. "Gebär(d)en des Lesens". *Lesegebärden*, edited by Irina Hron and Christian Benne, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2024, pp. 7–21, here p. 15. Hron and Benne base their conceptual reflections on Flusser, Vilém. *Gestures*. Translated by Nancy Ann Roth, University of Minnesota Press, 2014 (first published in German, 1991).

3 Barthes, Roland. *Variations sur l'écriture. Œuvres complètes IV, 1972–1976*, edited by Éric Marty, Éditions du Seuil, 2002, pp. 267–315, here pp. 303–04, my translation. In the original: "quelque chose qui participe à la fois de la perception, de l'intellection, de l'association — mais aussi de la mémoire et de la jouissance". To my knowledge, this text by Barthes has not yet been translated into English.

"without basis, without rules, without degrees, and without end": a "plural field of scattered practices, of irreducible effects".[4]

The breadth of the field of reading is already indicated by the etymology of the words used to describe the practice.[5] In most Indo-European languages, e.g. Greek (*légein* [λέγειν]), Latin (*legere*), Italian (*leggere*), Spanish (*leer*), French (*lire*), German (*lesen*), Dutch (*lezen*) or Swedish (*läsa*)*, the meaning of the word evolved from 'to gather together, collect' scattered material to 'to read (aloud), recite'. Only the English etymology of *to read* is isolated, going back to the Old English *rædan*, which means, among other things, 'to guess' and 'to explain', linking reading with (solving) riddles. The French linguist Émile Benveniste points out even more nuances and origins, such as in Old Persian (*pati-pṛs*), 'to ask', or in the Slavic languages (Russian читать, Croatian *čitati*, Czech *číst*)*, 'to calculate', 'to count' but, etymologically, 'to be intensely attentive'. He highlights the coexistence of two dominant understandings of reading: on the one hand, "public utterance (the reader-crier)" and, on the other, a silent mental process of understanding characters — which in some languages, such as Akkadian, Chinese or Gothic, is even reflected in the verbal distinction between 'reading with the eyes' and 'reading aloud'. For the linguist Benveniste, this duality is significant because he sees writing as "speech converted by the hand into speaking signs" and thus as a by-form of speech. This close connection makes writing a counterpart of speaking, reading a counterpart of hearing: "speech, auditive only, becomes writing, visual only".

> The primary system voice (mouth)–ear is *relayed* by the secondary system hand (inscription)–eye. The hand plays the role of emitter when tracing letters, and the eye becomes receiver when collecting the written traces.
>
> Between the mouth and the ear, the link is the *phone* emitted–heard; between the hand (inscription) and the eye, the link is the *graph* traced–read.[6]

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4   Barthes, Roland. "On Reading". *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, University of California Press, 1989 (first published in French, 1976), pp. 33–43, here p. 35 and p. 33.

5   On the following, see Benveniste, Émile. *Last Lectures: Collège de France, 1968 and 1969*, edited by Jean-Claude Coquet and Irène Fenoglio, translated by John E. Joseph, Edinburgh University Press, 2019 (first published in French, 2012), all quotes pp. 114–15.

6   Benveniste, *Last Lectures*, p. 118 and p. 116. On the relationship between reading and seeing (beyond the study of notational iconicity, especially by Sybille Krämer, in the last decades), see Coch, Charlotte et al., editors. *Lesen / Sehen: Literatur als wahrnehmbare Kommunikation*. transcript, 2023.

While, in the late 1960s, Benveniste reflected on writing and reading against the background of spoken language, the semiotician Roland Barthes, in his work of the same period, increasingly opposed the idea of a primarily communicative function of writing. Analogous to his concept of *écriture*, which understands writing as an 'intransitive' act that is not (primarily) oriented towards the author's intention or reference to the world but is aesthetically relevant in its mere performance, Barthes also projects reading as an independent practice beyond its supplementary function of deriving the meaning transported by the text.[7] Particularly in *Variations sur l'écriture* (written in 1973), he emphasises that writing has never been used solely to transmit but "sometimes (always?)" also to *"conceal"*. "The true mission of writing", he claims, "is cryptography."[8] Barthes argues against the "myth of a linear, purely informative writing" as a code secondary to speech by referring to the genesis of writing, which he identifies with the archaeologist André Leroi-Gourhan before any semantics and figuration around 35,000 BCE in graphism: the common origin of writing and art, according to Barthes, lies not in meaning but in "rhythm".[9] He thus sees the real relationship to writing as "the relationship to the body"—which, at the same time, "naturally runs through the relay (through the code) of a culture".[10] It has often been stressed that something written depends on being actualised, and thus co-created, by a reader. But what Barthes projects goes beyond this. This is particularly evident in *Le plaisir du texte* (1973) and the essay *Sur la lecture* (1976). Here, reading, as a "gesture of the body",[11] is a practice potentially performed *for its own sake*: as an intransitive *doing*, to be understood not merely as deciphering but as developing,

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7   See Barthes, Roland. "To Write: An Intransitive Verb?". *The Rustle of Language*, 1989 (first published in French, 1966), pp. 11–21; and, on intransitive reading with reference to Barthes' essay "On reading", Pethes, Nicolas. "Leseszenen. Zur Praxeologie intransitiver Lektüren in der Literatur der Epoche des Buchs". *Leseszenen: Poetologie — Geschichte — Medialität*, edited by Irina Hron et al., Universitätsverlag Winter, 2020, pp. 101–34, esp. pp. 102–08.

8   See Barthes, *Variations sur l'écriture*, p. 270: "[…] l'écriture a parfois (toujours?) servi à *cacher* ce qui lui était confié. […] La cryptographie serait la vocation même de l'écriture." And further: "L'illisibilité, loin d'être l'état défaillant, monstrueux, du système scriptural, en serait au contraire la vérité (l'essence d'une pratique peut-être à sa limite, non en son centre)."

9   Barthes, *Variations sur l'écriture*, p. 272: "le mythe scientiste d'une écriture linéaire, purement informative"; and p. 310: "le rythme". On the genesis of writing, see esp. the passage on "Origine", pp. 279–80.

10 Barthes, *Variations sur l'écriture*, p. 300: "La relation à l'écriture, c'est la relation au corps. Cette relation, bien entendu, passe par le relais (par le code) d'une culture, et cette culture varie".

11 Barthes, "On Reading", p. 36.

not as decoding but as 'overcoding', not as closing texts but as open-ing them.[12] And as a mental as well as a physical *state* of receptivity and even porosity of the self, in which readers allow themselves to be "infinitely and tirelessly traversed" by the "languages" they accu-mulate while reading.[13]

Such a view of reading, which emphasises dimensions of read-ing (and writing) beyond its communicative function, resonates with reflections on reading in recent years, which increasingly focus on the scene of reading as "a non-stable ensemble of language, instrumen-tality, and gesture".[14] These approaches highlight the interpenetra-tion of semiotic and semantic, as well as aesthetic, physical and cul-tural aspects of reading, stressing that text comprehension is always embedded in and enabled by dimensions such as space, time, body or technology.[15] Nevertheless, not only everyday understanding but also large parts of (Western) academic research, influenced by a notion of writing as linguistic representation, are still strongly focused on read-ing as a process of making sense and understanding meaning—we think, as Andrea Polaschegg notes, "within the paradigm of *infor-mation* (conceptualised as fundamentally independent of media)".[16]

But how can we bring into view the wide variety of reading's dimensions, which unfold and oscillate between transitivity and intransitivity? And how to focus readings beyond the paradigm of information and mere communicative means: readings that still have a sensual and physical effect but no longer necessarily develop a

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12 See Barthes, "On Reading", esp. p. 36 and pp. 41–43.

13 Barthes, "On Reading", p. 42.

14 Campe, Rüdiger. "Writing; The Scene of Writing". *MLN* 136 (5), 2021 (first published in German, 1991), pp. 971–83, here p. 973. Campe explicitly takes Barthes' notion of *écriture* as his starting point. Nicolas Pethes offers a praxeologically oriented approach that transposes Campes reflections on reading. See Pethes, "Leseszenen", esp. p. 110.

15 See in particular *Lesegebärden*, edited by Irina Hron and Christian Benne, 2024. Hron and Benne do not draw on Barthes but, as mentioned, on Flusser's theory of the gesture of writing, which defines the gesture as "a movement of the body or of a tool connected to the body for which there is no satisfactory causal explanation": as an autonomous doing and free movement not conditioned by nature. Flusser, *Gestures*, p. 2 and p. 19.

16 Polaschegg, Andrea. "Enigmatische Ästhetik: Zur Kulturgeschichte unlesbarer Schrift und ihrer künstlerischen Transformation". *Schreiben als Ereignis: Künste und Kulturen der Schrift*, edited by Jutta Müller-Tamm et al., Fink, 2018, pp. 173–97, here p. 177: "Gleichwohl bleibt zu konstatieren, dass sich dieses Wissen nicht recht in den gesellschaftlichen Common Sense einschreiben will, schon gar nicht in das Alltagsverständnis einer Gesellschaft, die sich wie die unsrige im Paradigma der (als grundsätzlich medienunabhängig vorgestellten) *Information* bewegt".

mental understanding of meaning? How, moreover, can we describe such gestures in view of the fact that reading as a practice usually remains (in contrast to writing) without a material trace, making it impossible to observe and at least complicating its description?[17]

This is where the *un*readable comes into play. The act of successful reading is so automatic for literate users of writing that it is almost impossible to distinguish between seeing the forms of the written signs and deciphering them, between what is written and what is read.[18] It is in the experience of illegibility that this distinction becomes very clear. When reading fails as an act of deciphering information, the materiality and mediality of what is being looked at, as well as reading itself as a psycho-physiological process, come to the fore. The illegible disappoints our expectation that writing is a transparent medium for transporting information. Successful reading operates in the mode of 'looking through', as a process in which we supposedly look through the written signs to their meaning. In dealing with something illegible, by contrast, the sensory aspects of reception become foregrounded in a mode of 'looking at'.[19] What is revealed via the experience of trying to read something that one expects to be writing but that remains unreadable is the interrelationship between sensory perception and reading as a (failed) decoding process.[20] The illegible exposes—albeit in the negative—the fundamental promise of writing to communicate, as well as its character as a potentiality dependent on actualisation by a reader. Thus, it makes reading as an *aisthetic* and semiotic practice accessible to reflection in a special (and peculiar) way.[21]

The present volume is based on the assumption that reading—as a practice that eludes observation, that remains mostly materially untraceable, and that is extremely diverse—can only be detected 'in flagrante'[22] and that a "reading of reading, meta-reading" is possible (if at all) only in the plural, only "in fits and starts, blow by blow".[23]

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17 See Pethes, "Leseszenen", p. 112.
18 See Aeberhard, Simon. "Unlesbarkeit". *Lesen*, edited by Rolf Parr and Alexander Honold, pp. 194–210, here p. 194, and, also in the following, Polaschegg, "Enigmatische Ästhetik", pp. 176–81, here in particular p. 181.
19 See Jäger, Ludwig. "Störung und Transparenz: Skizze zur performativen Logik des Medialen". *Performativität und Medialität*, edited by Sybille Krämer, Fink, 2004, pp. 35–73.
20 See Polaschegg, "Enigmatische Ästhetik", p. 179.
21 See Müller-Tamm, Jutta et al. "Einleitung". *Schreiben als Ereignis*, edited by Jutta Müller-Tamm et al., pp. 1–14, esp. p. 2 and p. 6.
22 See von Herrmann, Hans-Christian and Jeannie Moser. "Nachwort". *Lesen: Ein Handapparat*, edited by Hans-Christian von Herrmann and Jeannie Moser, Klostermann, 2015, pp. 227–31, here p. 230.
23 Barthes, "On Reading", p. 35 and p. 33.

The essays of this book thus tentatively unfold—in implicit as well as explicit communication with each other—a field of questions to sound out the multifaceted practices and effects of reading. They do so from a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives and in a highly exploratory manner. Scholars from fields such as literary studies, anthropology, philosophy and cognitive ethnology as well as writers, visual artists, sound poets and translators have been invited to approach reading from its absolute limit: the illegible. Their reflections depart from an object of observation that presented itself as text or writing, thus seemingly asking to be read, but that could not be processed in the usual sense—because the sign system used had not been learned, because it consisted of an unknown code or turned out to be something only similar to writing.

By focusing on the fringes and margins of reading, the essays assembled here engage with the practice not only as an automatic process of deciphering signs, of searching for and assigning meaning. They specifically highlight those moments when reading becomes a decidedly *aesthetic* practice, i.e. one that is not instrumental but self-referential in sensory perception, poetic and/or performative, affective, interpretive, as well as experimental, transgressive and thus potentially political.[24] Reading, to name at least some of the dimensions reflected, is thus addressed as an embodied interaction with textual artefacts and their affordances, as a basis for playful engagement or individual as well as collective performance. It is addressed as an interaction that can be seen as a practice of attention or even a form of meditation, as well as in its intimate relationship with writing. And it is addressed and interrogated as a metaphor for understanding and interpreting the world, as well as the privileged and exclusionary mode of Western epistemology—and, conversely, in an emphatic sense of *legere* not only as collecting but also as preserving, as making visible and accessible.

Just as the practice of 'reading' can imply a wide range of processes, 'unreadability' unfolds as a spectrum of failed or only partially successful decoding operations—illegibility, in other words, cannot be understood solely as a property of something written.[25] In an attempt

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24 On aesthetic practices as specific forms of social practice beyond means-end rationality, see Reckwitz, Andreas. *Kreativität und soziale Praxis. Studien zur Sozial- und Gesellschaftstheorie.* transcript, 2016, pp. 225–30.
25 See Aeberhard, "Unlesbarkeit", p. 199, who, however, considers (literary) writing under the premise of signification and treats illegibility as incomprehensibility—thus focusing on the idea of the simultaneous legibility and illegibility of literature or art in general.

to unravel this spectrum, one can approach the issue of (un)readability on the basis of a reader's skills. Several essays reflect on interactions with textual artefacts in the context of pre-literacy, contrasting the latter with the state of being unable to read one particular text despite having acquired the ability to decode one or more sign systems. It is only the second state that can be described as an experience of illegibility in the strict sense of the word, which marks an unfulfilled expectation, the failure of an anticipated reading process that transforms signs into sound and meaning.[26] Only by perceiving the world through the lens of literacy (and thus perceiving a promise of meaning from things that suggest legibility) can one experience a particular sign, a particular chain of signs, as illegible—which is precisely what Jessica Barr and Elias Kreuzmair, among others, find themselves painfully confronted with. But, of course, such a clear-cut definition is challenged by the fact that reading is a scaled and multi-layered ability. After all, as Sarah Bro Trasmundi's observations show, an understanding of reading, or at least an embodied engagement with textual artefacts, can exist before or beyond the ability to read. Moreover, as Karolin Meunier's letter illustrates, the meaning of a text that is perfectly readable for a literate subject, in the sense that its letters can be read and even articulated, may still be incomprehensible because a known system of signs is used in an unknown code. And how, we might ask with Michael T. Taussig, does the refusal to read (despite the ability to do so) relate to the complex of illegibility?

One can also approach the matter from the side of the textual artefact. Charlotte Coch proposes a distinction between fundamental illegibility on the one hand and defeasible illegibility as a puzzle to be solved (cryptography, code) on the other. While Angélica Freitas

experiments with creating "something deliberately illegible" by writing signs that do not correspond to any established writing system (asemic graphisms that still resemble writing), Ulrike Draesner must come to terms with her own unintentionally ambiguous, defaced writing—and thus with referential writing of marginal readability. Kinga Tóth, on the other hand, takes up the challenge of reading aloud her own visual poetry, the illegibility of which stems from the fact that, although there are readable elements, they do not form words or a coherent meaning. The spectrum of illegibility becomes even more

complex if we include Draesner's differentiation between "readable in letters" and "there" in the sense of a trace, which evokes an understanding of literature as "unreadability woven into readability."

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26 See Polaschegg, "Enigmatische Ästhetik", pp. 173–82.

And then, beyond the threshold of tangible textual artefacts, what about books, as Elias Kreuzmair asks, that remain phantoms: that have been mentioned but are not to be found? And what, as Raisa Inocêncio Ferreira Lima insists, about literary traditions that are not readable or even meant to be read, in the sense of reading as a silent mental process, because they are not written down and are thus marginalised or excluded from cultural heritage and (Western) epistemologies? Last but not least, to return to the aforementioned lens of literacy, what about the desire to read the world: to read signs that were never written but seem to be there in "leaf veins, roots, barks"?
"If you admire a thing for quite some time," Nhã Thuyên is sure, "you can hear its voice and decipher its language."

Questions such as these open up the field to the notion of reading as a metaphor for the subject's relationship to the world, underlining not only the correlation between engaging with a text and engaging
with the world, but also the political aspects of reading. Such a notion is proposed, among others, by the philosopher, mystic and activist Simone Weil. In her *Essai sur la notion de lecture*, she stresses that reading and the operation of giving meaning are inextricably intertwined. Human beings, Weil argues, are subject to reading in that they immediately attach meaning to sensations that are in themselves insignificant (such as "some black marks on a sheet of white paper"): "what we call the world are the meanings that we read."[27] Although one perceives something as an appearance from the outside, these supposed appearances "do not actually appear, or hardly ever; what does appear is something else that is related to appearances as a phrase is related to letters."[28] In this act of reading as an operation between perception and interpretation, the meanings one reads in, for example, "the sea, the sun, the stars, human beings, everything that surrounds us", depend not only on how one is (emotionally) affected by what one encounters in the world, but also to a large extent on the prevailing public opinion. The meanings "arise from every corner around me, taking possession of my soul", since each reading, at the moment of its occurrence, seems to be "the only real, only possible way to look at things"—any other meaning remains illegible and thus nonexistent.[29]

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27 Weil, Simone. "Essay on the Concept of Reading". *Late Philosophical Writings*, edited by Eric O. Springsted, translated by Eric O. Springsted and Lawrence E. Schmidt, University of Notre Dame Press, 2015 (first published in French, 1946), pp. 21–27, here p. 22.
28 Weil, "Essay on the Concept of Reading", p. 24.
29 Weil, "Essay on the Concept of Reading", p. 23 and p. 25.

There is something violent in this notion of reading as an approach to the world to which one is subjected. But it is possible, if one is willing to work at it, to change, at least to some extent, the meanings that one reads in the appearances that are "imposed on" oneself. This is where reading reveals its ethical and political dimension. One must, according to Weil, strive for a state of non-reading[30] or, at least, "seek out a technique that would permit one to pass from one reading to another", multiplying and layering readings in order to transform meanings and separate perception from automated interpretation.[31] Practising better ways of (dealing with) reading, trying to shift one's awareness of the world in favour of a form of attention that does not superimpose meaning on everything seen, thus becomes an ethical responsibility.

In this sense, reading—and perhaps especially engaging with the illegible—can be understood as a practice in the sense of an exercise: a step towards a radical receptivity that makes what is encountered present beyond the primacy of meaning and information. This is a path, to spotlight a final approach to reading, that is also followed by Hélène Cixous. Developing her ideas by reflecting on her own reading, Cixous frames her engagement with the writings of Clarice Lispector as a lesson in "learning to read".[32] As such, reading is, in an emphatic sense, a lesson in openness to the other. The aim is "not to absorb the thing, the other, but to let the thing present itself". It is about "[k]nowing how to 'see,' before sight, knowing how to hear, before comprehension, to keep the space of waiting open."[33] It is a difficult lesson, but it is possible. For "attention is magical matter".[34]

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30 See, with reference to Weil's reflections on the concept of non-reading as an active-passive state of pure attention in her *Cahiers*, Bengert, Martina. "Die Seele als 'Zwischen'". *Recherches germaniques* HS 16, 2021, pp. 123–36.

31 Weil, "Essay on the Concept of Reading", pp. 25–27.

32 Cixous, Hélène. "Clarice Lispector: The Approach". "*Coming to Writing*" *and Other Essays*, edited by Deborah Jenson, translated by Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddl and Susan Sellers, Harvard University Press, 1991, pp. 59–77, here p. 59.

33 Cixous, "Clarice Lispector: The Approach", p. 63 and p. 62.

34 Cixous, "Clarice Lispector: The Approach", p. 70.

Ulrike Draesner
translated by Sharon Howe
Why I Perpetually Struggle to Read
My Own Handwriting,
and Where That Process Takes Me
(Insider Tales: Splendour and
Misery of Literary Writing 3)

WRITING DOWN

Writing down. Downwards, netherwards, earthwards—up the mountain, down the hill, the constant undulation of the landscape, of the body within it : transferring this to paper.

'Writing down' is something we learn at school. To write something down : to bring it down from the level of the mouth, from out of the air, onto the paper.
To force it down : to use violence.
To drag it down : to make it (heaven forbid!) manageable.
Then it's no longer just inside your head. And no longer in front of it either, as speech, occupying the space between you and others.

Writing it down: copying. The copier is often perceived, by analogy, as low-status. Writing down is a childish task, 'woman's work'.
The idea itself is conceived higher up, in the male brain-mouth, and sent forth into the ether. The secretary is there to record, to write down.

If she makes a mistake, she must correct it.

If he makes a mistake, she must correct his mistake.

"Take this down!"

When something is written down, it is written *in* ('*in*-scribed').
Written into the writing body.

Into the hand that memorises the connections and learns to write down faster. Perfects the technique.

This is how it started.
My mother was a secretary.
All the bosses were men. All the bosses had secretaries. At home, my father was the boss and used my mother as a secretary.

The sheet of paper had to be flawless. *One* sheet, *one* script.

Preferably a typescript. Guaranteed legibility.
Guaranteed by maximum uniformity. Repeat repeat repeat : tap tap.

No traces, no layering.

In case of a mistake, the whole sheet had to be retyped.

The law knows no overwriting.

Or doesn't admit to it.

We practise reading until it becomes automatic. Automatism guarantees speed. Once we can read, we never register every letter. We scan clusters of letters. The brain fills in the rest based on expectation. Just like ChatGPT-style language models. Standardisation. As often as not, my volume of poetry *für die nacht geheuerte zellen* ("cells hired for the night") was introduced as "für die nacht geheuerte zeilen" ("*lines* hired for the night").

The written-down text favours automatic reception. The written-down text refuses to budge.

A large sign rests against the wall of my parents' house. My father is an architect, I am familiar with these signs : you see them at the entrance to building sites, advertising the name of the builder from on high. Somewhere in that jumble of words and numbers of different heights and widths must be my father's name. Eva, the girl next door, five years old like me, helps me find it. She can already read; she points to the name and runs away.
    Afternoon light. The sign lies lengthways; I incline my head to see the letters the right way up, homing in on my father's name.

I could 'read it out' to any passer-by. In reality, I am fixing my eyes on the letters and pondering their mystery. How can it be that these shapes contain his name? Where is the meaning hiding?

Literature is the opposite of the kind of 'writing down' that squashes the layers flat. Literature writes *up*. It sets the layers free. De-automatises.

    The question of where the meaning lies—how do I produce it (as a reader, I participate in this process)—arises once again.

Layering is the luxury of an unsmoothed world.

A world capable of seeing itself as transient and fragile.

PUTTING DOWN (ON PAPER)

A rebellion is put down. Meaning it is suppressed.

Perhaps also erased from the (official) memory.

But not everything that is put down disappears. On the contrary. Putting something down in writing makes it endure. It is extracted from the air, condensed into graphic symbols. Like water condensing on a window pane.

The window pane gains an extra layer.

For that to happen, the water had to undergo a transformation.

Is writing a form of condensation?

Down and up. Always a dual action. One that needs skins. Makes an impression on the retina, on the membranes and cells of the body. Was once written on animal hides. And now on the body of a tree.

Writing translates material. And language.

Spoken language is condensed into writing.
    It has to undergo a transformation. From a stream of air to a

stream of pigment, of ink, of chisel marks.
    It is the thing we do not see.

The thing that remains unreadable.
    The subtext.

Was it ever even there? When a text isn't spoken, for instance,
but only conceived in the mind and instantly typed?

Yes, even then. Because the language we use bears the traces of our
bodies (pauses, timing, morphology, imagery, intonation).

Not readable in letters. But there all the same.

OVERWRITING

The written(-down) text — a transformation of speech/thought
(with its own individual colour, rhythm and body) — is made
readable through the medium of another material : screen, paper,
stone, leaf, skin, sand, etc.

Writing is material. A crossing of materials.

It can be erased. Take the writing device described by
Sigmund Freud, for example:

> The Mystic Pad is a slab of dark brown resin or wax with
> a paper edging; over the slab is laid a thin transparent sheet, the
> top end of which is firmly secured to the slab while its bottom
> end rests on it without being fixed to it. This transparent sheet is
> the more interesting part of the little device. It itself consists of
> two layers, which can be detached from each other except at their
> two ends. The upper layer is a transparent piece of celluloid;
> the lower layer is made of thin translucent waxed paper.
> When the apparatus is not in use, the lower surface of the waxed
> paper adheres lightly to the upper surface of the wax slab.[1]

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1   Freud, Sigmund. "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'". *The Standard Edition
    of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol. XIV (1923–1931)*,
    translated and edited by James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud,
    The Hogarth Press, 1961, pp. 227–32, here pp. 228–29. In the German original:

The celluloid is inscribed with a stylus. The indentations produce the 'writing'. The contact with the wax makes them appear as dark strokes. To erase the writing, the upper layer is raised slightly from the wax slab. The contact between the paper and the slab is then lost and the writing disappears. It is not restored when the paper is replaced.

A trace is left in the waxed paper and on the slab. It is very faint, but can be read when held up to the light.

Freud likens the device's capacity to be written on over and over again to the "structure" of the mind's "perceptual apparatus".[2]

Writing over writing. And traces.

In this sense, writing down always meant overwriting.

Layering : a reflection of our way of relating to the world and ensuring that we don't forget that world.

The Mystic Writing-Pad renders visible an aspect of the writing process that we generally cover up as best we can when writing on paper (making a mistake, rubbing it out and writing over it), yet which always has a role to play.

What it renders visible is that every act of 'writing down' is an act of displacement and condensation.
A mountainous landscape : up and down, light and shade.
Compression, reversal, tumult. I erase, capture, de-pict.

"Der Wunderblock ist eine in einen Papierrand gefasste Tafel aus dunkelbräun-licher Harz- oder Wachsmasse, über welche ein dünnes, durchscheinendes Blatt gelegt ist, am oberen Ende an der Wachstafel fest haftend, am unteren ihr frei anliegend. Dieses Blatt ist der interessantere Anteil des kleinen Apparats. Es besteht selbst aus zwei Schichten, die außer an den beiden queren Rändern voneinander abgehoben werden können. Die obere Schicht ist eine durchsichtige Zelluloidplatte, die untere ein dünnes, also durchscheinendes Wachspapier. Wenn der Apparat nicht gebraucht wird, klebt die untere Fläche des Wachspapiers der oberen Fläche der Wachstafel leicht an." Freud, Sigmund. "Notiz über den 'Wunderblock'". *Gesammelte Werke XIV: Werke aus den Jahren 1925–1931*, edited by Anna Freud, Imago Publishing, 1955, pp. 3–8, here p. 5.

2   Freud, "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'", p. 229. In the original: "die Struktur des seelischen Wahrnehmungsapparats". Freud, "Notiz über den Wunderblock", p. 6.

Literary writing is a form of overwriting that, like all writing, erases concrete articulation, vocal pitch and the physicality of speech but that is aware of its own overwriting function.

And that may reflect subliminally on ways of replacing that lost physicality by verbal-graphic means (through the use of typeface or prosody, for example).

THIS TEXT IS NOT WRITING

It is voice.

Unreadable. But there all the same.
    My voice. And yours. Together, they speak inside your head, tiny ghosts that attach themselves to the cells, the muscles, the mirror neurones — ghosts that occupy and inhabit the human ego. Meanings, recollections, resonances.
    These are sounds that were never uttered.
    Never needed to be, though in a way they were. (I say the words silently to myself while writing, voice what I'm typing in order to feel it. The text takes its breath/rhythm from the voice. Physicality runs through it like a transparent trail.)
    Through the interaction with you, inside your head, other sounds will emerge. Sounds the like of which I could never make myself, not physically (or mentally), but through which the written word, the written-down word, is resurrected : and sings.

At the same time, the text you have in front of you *is* writing. Literary writing, or something of the kind. An essay in loosely constructed mode. Personal writing : the reconstruction of a transparent trail — translated into blank space. Marks/signs/stains on paper. For you.

Literature : unreadability woven into readability.
    Something readable, rendered transparent on something uncharted, unrecovered.

PENELOPE'S SHIP

I am and always have been unintelligible to myself. That is a commonplace. It applies to every one of us. Blind spots can be a blessing. But sometimes it's good to be reminded of the fact.

May 2024. I have made a few notes on a university notepad for the long poem *Penelope's Ship*. The poem is nearly finished.

But then something has been added, an edge, an aspect. Here is the word for island—*Eiland*, *Ei*, ö in the Nordic languages (a graphic illustration of the thing itself). I am thinking, writing fast, the pen and my right hand (I am a reformed left-hander and sometimes write with the left, but I can tell it was the right one here) can't keep up with my imagination.

Imagination is more a planar than a linear phenomenon.

Like words swimming towards and away from each other in a particular constellation inside the head.

An email pops up, the child comes in. Chores and appointments impose themselves between me and the poem. Time passes. By the

time I finally pick up the piece of paper again, I can no longer read my own writing in places.

It has happened again. A familiar experience. I ought to type up my notes straight away. Translate my one-handed cogitation into whole-body corporeality (typing with two hands). Editing, correcting, clarifying as I go. Before I lose it.

I have put a squiggly line under the bits I can no longer read.

Gradually (usually by a slow and painful process), the illegibility I habitually create (for no one but myself) with my handwritten notes comes to acquire a certain 'charm', even though it's always a pain to decipher. It forces me to reflect. To mobilise words/thoughts. To trace, search, improve, find the best version. Not : to read *myself*, in retrospect, but to read myself as the person considering the thing in question and 'navigating' a position in her head. This process of reconstruction means seeing layers. My own illegibility is my stepping stone back to the creation process, which thus becomes traceable. I force myself to de-layer, to doubt.

I read:
und ist pulsares flüchten
    das sich abzeichnet
            einwellt

das licht in kombüse schimmert

(re-reading the text, I know exactly where we are in the poem:
Medusa, Penelope's daughter, lies in her berth contemplating the
sleeping woman beside her, whom she desires)

                        in dunkelwintersloop (?)
                wie bunt flüssigerhirntang (but doesn't it say
                                "tagung"?? meaningless …)
                        treibt

sprechen (sprache?) *über ~~eiland~~*

        (I remember : that word "eiland" (island) came to me
    too soon, and I immediately crossed it out again; the chain
    starts from "o", Odysseus' initial)
                o
                ö
                ei
                eiland

mel. (clear from the context as short for "Melantho") *sagt sitze ja
schon hier*
    als   winkel — zug
        weide amphore
        hintergrundrauschen

The marginal legibility of the whole thing ("make an effort") invites me, carried on the wave-like spectrum of possibilities sustained within the manuscript (the navigational nature of the writing), to go on tapping the letters to see what else they might yield. Will any more words drop out? If I go back into that space (berth? galley?) : It's not just words that drop out but scenes too. Things.

No doubt about it, it says *winkel−zug*. But now I'm in deciphering (displacement) mode, I read experimentally:
winkend−zug
Not 'angle' but 'waving'. Does that make sense? The women are rowing. Do the oars look as if they are waving? Does their farewell go with them even now, days later? Thus, emotions, too, drop out of the text−into my consciousness (they may have been there when I scribbled the words down, but I didn't catch them, they simply slipped through me).
     weide?
     wickel?
     weiche (weiße?) *amphore*
Here is a new idea. A black-and-red amphora, of the Ancient Greek kind, already features in the poem. Is an additional white one being

introduced here? Or is this amphora the boat? Is it a vessel for women? What happens if I apply this metaphor to it?

mel. for Melantho, I wrote just now. Or could it be 'medicine'? Penelope and her women have considerable healing expertise and surgical skills. Or is it *med.* for Medusa, Penelope's eldest daughter? She is the one speaking these lines, but she could be referring to herself. Or perhaps it is indeed Melantho, the black ex-slave who shares the berth with her and hasn't spoken since the return of Odysseus, who came back with PTSD (as one might expect, and as vividly depicted in all its symptoms in Homer's *Odyssey*). Once again, the ambiguity of the handwritten characters (my 'scrawl') calls the content into question. Inspiration, unleashed by the swiftness of the creative idea and its oscillating, trembling, fleeting form—a form preserved in the handwriting. But also imperilled by that process.

    What do I read?

Is Melantho thinking of herself or someone else? What happens if I continue the poem along either of these paths? If I let the semi-legibility of my own notes lead me to the notion that, with the women's departure from Ithaka, the vastness of the ocean, and

the dissolution of existing social hierarchies, their identities are
beginning to blur, to merge in their own eyes? That automatism
(you are the daughter of X, therefore you are …) is suspended?

One voice underlying another.
　　One language underlying another.
　　Ancient Greek, English, words from Phoenician, German.
　　The multilingualism of the poem: the thoughts that have just
occurred to me help me to understand it better myself.

The writing instrument helps write the idea.
　　The letters help write the memory. The fingers, the keyboard,
the screen.

Letting this happen.
　　Cursing. Deciphering. Bending. Opening up —

WRITING *UP*

I am typing this with both hands.

The act of writing down, turned into a cycle, a reciprocal
relationship. In it, the traces of what is not said (and not known, at
least not in so many words) may emerge.

I write by way of examples; the ideas for this essay sail along in
tandem. They weren't preconceived but prepared — in two drawings.
This fleeting-flowing script overwrites the drawings. Hovering
alongside are remembered questions about the connection between
body and mind. About duality. Metareflexivity. About 'female
writing'.

Etymologically speaking, the German word 'nieder' in
niederschreiben (to write down) is derived (like the English word
'nether') from the Indo-Germanic syllable *ni. As such, it is
related to the word 'nest'.

Palimpsest — nest. Trace beneath trace. Spoken words, words
murmured by the writer, jotted down by hand, laid aside, re-read,
translated. The single trace (script) : one straw in a nest. For that

one visible straw, there are any number of hidden ones.
The visible line of the manuscript : interwoven in not directly
visible places with other scripts—voices—silent
thoughts—texts—times—memories—emotions.

Nest.
Nest, a space of potentials.
A space created by bending, contorting, from heterogeneous,
processed, possessed material.

The nest underlying this text:

P: Gedanke

VERLIEREN
BEDECKEN
SCHÜTZEN
WISSEN
EICHHÖRNCHEN
SCHATTEN
SIMULATION
VORDER/HINTER/GRUND
CODE
DURCH
OPAL
OBAZDA
BOTE
FEHLEN
AFFE
TEILE(N)
VITRINE
KÖRPER
MÜDE RASTER
HORIZONT ALS
    GESCHENK

P4: Dialekt
    gedicht

DURCH
MIT HILFE
DANK
DANACH

Spuck *

Seele
Cals eine
Kategorie
der Ordnung
+Ökonomie)

Ereignis
Sphären
Kollaps

Gehirn
Lösche
jaloux
reflekt
System
Fühl
UNG

P1 Nose *
Occipar
(nicht sehen)
(Sturm)

Welle *
Bey

W.1

Diplin *

Glitcher
unordentl
Auflösung
Himmel Bricks
Repertoire Gras
Decay
Zeit

K-A

Art *

Zerstört *
Gedächtnis

gedicht
+ mis
schleich
Schmerz
(Cut-up)

Medien
Hand Tiger P4
photo Schlagzeug
Umwälzen
BIENE

Knie C *
(Mensch)
Knirr
Knirr

Ring *
(Party)
Spiele

* Scharre
(Zombie)

Px:

* List hono-slab götte   Litz
Bach, Hand, phon, Brin, Ainzi,   (Clan)
sing, hier(hear),   oar(Ohr, Gras,   rear (fear)
Teil (Cruse), Sand, Land,
Danach (Intter), Reim(rhyme), fein (fine) | false
Treck, Angl (angle), Spektrum(spectre) | friends
actual (actual)

Chärfe [Razor Scherbe]

Spiegel (Schliff)
Händigkeit
Wie streicht man →(?at
dunne?

Hautback
Menber
Spürr

AUGE
Videogrid
Storytly

Rummel (beliebte
Rumor Pilinpad)
rumour
Charisle Spurle andy
Flecken

Poet—
Wemdy

nimmt sich die Freiheit
(das äshletk, Erlöslere)
immer weiter zu machen
PX2

KE

AB Sonne
Grenze
Epimly
Kraft)
(der Kleine
Smeh/
Buch)

KE

Gore
Zeit
Papier
Hoch

Phulit P10
(zara)
Schle
des Rest als
Punkt
Fligenrliss

[ENDE]
Adler
Kleine nur
(PX)

: Rega als
Parlinpost
Ceitung (Leub-
Hintgrund)
C1 hand dimm
Behauptung — kennt
dahu

fallig awake
ein ikel →kopf (?
Leben so dimm

W
A
K
E
↓
W
A
C
H

PXH

HIMMELS-
Kemper
Schre
(zu hell)

Mein
Denke
nicht

Poetie
Erleubtui
form

Sprache
(eine ef
einer
anderer)
[Linie 2]

Schlage
Nouns
Junge
(Schnel
Pardiesnacht

P16: Essay) — Gedicht
Flege
PXH: Alice Orwal
Gedicht
PX2: what is
poetry

Thomas Bernhard once said that we have at least three lives : a real one, an imagined one and one that we are unaware of. As a young woman, I was not yet aware of who I was. I hardly dared to want to be the person I could be.

But I began, with two hands and head almost erect, to type on a fluidly flexible, luminous non-paper. I wrote a dissertation on how, in the narrative process, one thing is articulated by another.
As ostensibly oral speech, yet in writing.

'Female writing' : the diktat of monolingualism, of secretarial neatness, undone.

The word 'palimpsest' itself only appears to suspend hierarchies. Indirectly, it recognises them. It defines a Below, an Above. Instead of "the old chaos of the sun".[3] In which we bide and breathe. Bustle and collect. Gather in. Into bags, for example.

Inside them : the Below-and-Above.

Because layering, too, is a construct.

To go further, then : to undo the neatness of the layering.
Our perceptual apparatus doesn't deal in neat layers either.
Nor does our dreaming, our emotional apparatus.

The drawings that you see : did they come before this text?
Presumably.
This text : did it come before the drawing? Absolutely. But not in this form.

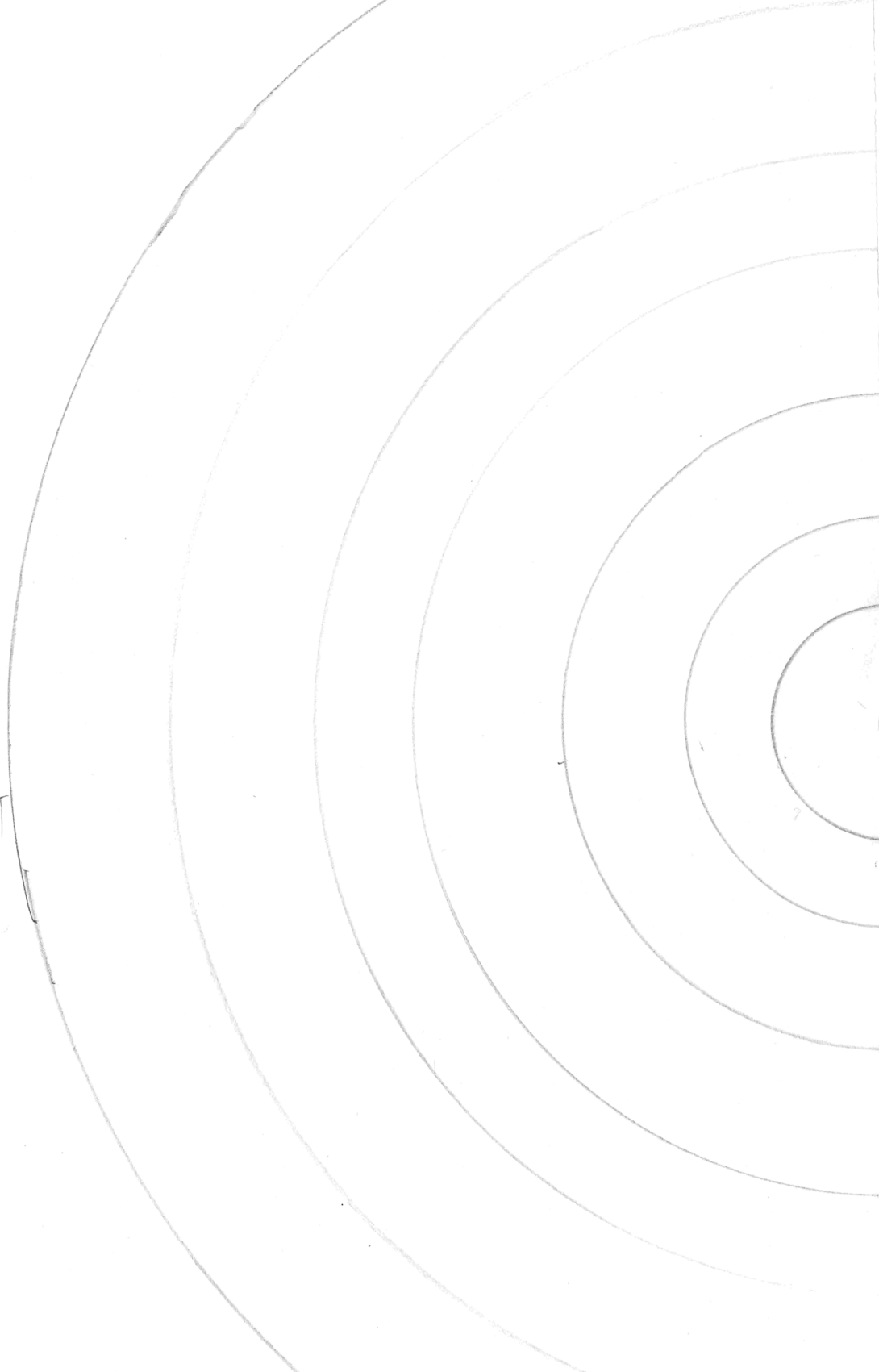Nest palimpsest.
The almost-green leaf.
A place of interwoven heterogeneity in which the bird lands and lingers a while.
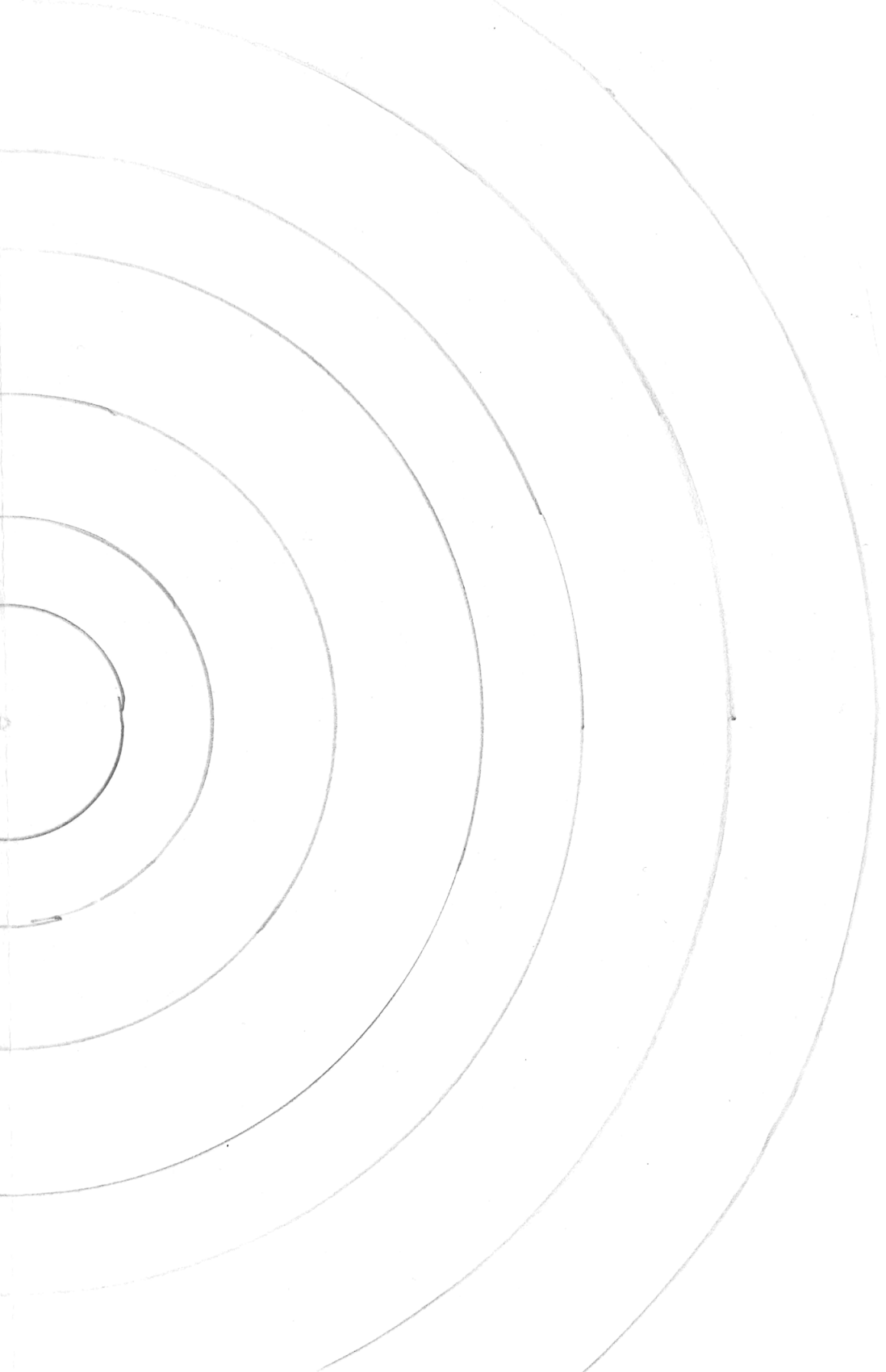
And then?
Then it flies with the wind.

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3   Stevens, Wallace. "Sunday Morning". *Harmonium*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1923, pp. 100–04, here p. 104.

Like the voice (or Penelope's ship).
The voice that can do likewise.

Jessica Barr
Lectio non-divina.
An Ignorant Reading of the Heart Sutra

PREPARATION

A medievalist should be well equipped for this challenge.

After all, isn't much medieval reading—at least, medieval monastic ways of reading, which is what I study—a process of allowing the text to emerge *for* the reader? Of letting its meaning unfold, ideally through *caritas*-driven meditations or, even more ideally, the intervention of God?

I'm not talking about scholastic or even literary reading but contemplative reading: the *lectio divina* encouraged for the cloistered. *Lectio divina* is a meditative, prayerful means of approaching a (sacred) text in order to achieve not just knowledge but wisdom.[1] How one reads *matters*, and matters deeply. When we read a holy text, Augustine argues, we need to read with *caritas*, or love: the "presence of God" in the soul that allows God to be found in Scripture.[2] This practice, however, is imperfect, as our human condition is imperfect; after the fall from Eden, signification became flawed such that we could no longer know God intimately through an "unmediated intellectual vision."[3] Now, in our postlapsarian state, we cannot hope to regain a clear, immediate vision of God; we are caught "in a glass darkly", as Paul says.[4] But the situation isn't hopeless. Reading with

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1 Leclercq, Jean. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God.* Translated by Catharine Misrahi, Fordham University Press, 1961 (first published in French, 1957), p. 78.

2 Pucci, Joseph M. *The Full-Knowing Reader: Allusion and the Power of the Reader in the Western Literary Tradition.* Yale University Press, 1998, p. 79.

3 Jager, Eric. *The Tempter's Voice: Language and the Fall in Medieval Literature.* Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 52. See also my discussion of signification, sin, and reading in *Intimate Reading: Textual Encounters in Medieval Women's Visions and Vitae.* University of Michigan Press, 2020, pp. 62–66.

4 1 Corinthians 13:12.

caritas can guide us to a true meaning, even if this is not the meaning that the writer intended. "Provided", writes Augustine, "that each person tries to ascertain in the holy scriptures the meaning the author intended, what harm is there if a reader holds an opinion which you, the light of all truthful minds, show to be true, even though it is not what was intended by the author?"[5] But this doesn't mean that we can allow anything we like to cross our minds and call it "true"; this is not radical relativism. On the contrary: the "light of all truthful minds" must confirm our interpretations. And determining whether *that's* the source of our musings is another problem altogether—one that I most certainly haven't solved.

Reading goes deeper than the eyes. Medieval readers often read aloud, partly to better understand texts written in *scriptura continua*—that is, without division or punctuation—but also to more fully embody the language. In Duncan Robertson's words: "Reading aloud transforms reading into prayer." Words become sensory and sensual, "tasted" in the mouth and thus known to more than the intellect alone.[6] *Lectio divina* is fundamentally active: reading aloud or in a low voice to oneself allows the reader to "inscribe[], so to speak, the sacred text in the body and in the soul." Metaphors of eating and consumption—of "mastication", "spiritual nutrition", and "digestion"—are common in descriptions of *lectio divina*, revealing it to be a process of internalizing and transforming the text, not just looking at it.[7] In the twelfth century, Guigo II argued that reading is useless "unless by chewing and ruminating […] we draw out the juice and by swallowing transfer it into the inner place of our heart."[8] Reading is

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5   Augustine. *The Confessions*. Translated by Maria Boulding, New City Press, 2018, p. 261. "[D]um ergo quisque conatur id sentire in scripturis sanctis quod in eis sensit ille qui scripsit, quid mali est si hoc sentiat quod tu, lux omnium veridicarum mentium, ostendis verum esse, etiamsi non hoc sensit ille quem legit […]?" Augustine. *Confessions. Vol. 1,* edited by James J. O'Donnell, Clarendon Press, 1992, 12.18, p. 174.

6   Robertson, Duncan. *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading*. The Liturgical Press, 1996, pp. xiv–xv.

7   Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, p. 78.

8   "Quid enim prodest lectione continua tempus occupare, sanctorum gesta et scripta transcurrere, nisi ea masticando et ruminando succum eliciamus et transglutiendo usque ad cordis intima transmittamus, ut ex his consideremus diligenter statum nostrum et studeamus eorum opera agere quorum facta cupimus lectitare?" Guigo II. *Epistola de Vita Contemplativa (Scala Claustralium). Vol. XIII*, edited by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, Les éditions du Cerf, 1970, p. 108; quoted in Van't Spijker, Ineke. "Model Reading: Saints' Lives and Literature of Religious Formation". *"Scribere sanctorum gesta": Recueil d'études d'hagiographie médiévale offert à Guy Philippart*, edited by Étienne Renard et al.,

meant to be whole-bodied, suffusing readers and shaping them the way that the food we eat shapes our bodies. We literally are what we read.

Such meditative reading and repetition can bring about a transformation of the self.[9] This transformation can be physical as well as spiritual. Against twentieth-century understandings of reading as largely a mental activity divorced from the physical body, Karin Littau reminds us that reading is an embodied activity.[10] Our minds reside in bodies, and our senses don't shut down while we internalize written words; they affect us in visceral, sometimes troubling ways. And when we speak them, they engage our senses.

But here, today, in conducting this experiment, the absence of sound — and taste — in my reading means that the writing will be reduced to its visible form. That, too, is a sensory experience, but one that I'm less prepared for: I could 'read' an image, but these signs aren't meant to be read like pictures. (I don't think — my not-knowing is a reminder of how wholly ignorant I really am.) As I prepare, then, I'm conscious of a certain degree of trepidation: I cannot do any kind of justice to the meaning of this text; I can only treat it as a visual object, a fetish.

So when I say that a medievalist ought to be well-equipped for the challenge of reading an unreadable text, I also mean that I ought to recognize the utter futility of trying to do so. On the one hand, I know that reading is more than deciphering the symbols on the page, namely that it is grounded in a much deeper openness and receptivity to meaning that may in fact come from an inspired source (for medieval Christians, this would be God). On the other, how on earth is it possible to meditate and ruminate on a text that is — if only superficially — meaningless to my eyes? Because the surface is important; if I cannot read superficially, how can I read deeply? Dante writes in the *Convivio* that the allegorical meaning of a text cannot be understood

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Brepols, 2005, pp. 135–56, here p. 140. Hugh of St. Victor remarks on the importance, in reading Scripture, of "deeper understanding" through exposition (*Didascalicon* 3.8) and the use of text-based meditation to penetrate divine mysteries (*Didascalicon* 3.10). *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*. Translated by Jerome Taylor, Columbia University Press, 1991, pp. 92–93.

9   Robertson, *Lectio Divina*, p. 88.

10 On the "mentalist" assumptions regarding reading that dominated twentieth-century theory and criticism, see Littau, Karin. *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania*. Polity Press, 2006, esp. pp. 9–10.

without first understanding its letter,[11] and Augustine recognizes that "the best remedy for ignorance of proper signs is the knowledge of languages"—in which, here, I utterly fail.[12] Braced against this difficulty, I must reimagine what it means to read.

I'm reminded of how many, even most, medieval people would have received a text: as an icon, perhaps bearing a legal meaning that they couldn't decipher but that they nonetheless understood or a religious meaning that they could revere—or not—without the tools to decode it. I will read this text like an illiterate person. But no, that's not right; to be illiterate is not to be utterly clueless, as I am here. Medieval Europeans who were unable to read letters could still read the images in churches and (if they had the means) books of hours; they had interpretive keys to the image-systems, and perhaps even the text-systems, that they encountered. Gregory the Great claimed that images in churches were like books to the illiterate, illustrating Christian doctrine and eschatology. Years of seeing these images would have created familiarity and some degree of facility with their visual code. Instead of these tools, I'll be approaching the text with total ignorance of its context and sign-systems, on the one hand, and, on the other, a set of unerasable assumptions about texts and reading methods that are likely to mislead me, at best. It makes me nervous.

My chosen text is a religious work that I know of but have never read: the *Heart Sutra*. What I know about this book could fill a Post-it; in other words, it's one of those things that I'm aware I should read someday but have never actually looked at. This edition contains stone seals based on Chinese prototypes carved by Bhikkhu Dhammavīro alongside a Tang Dynasty translation of the Sanskrit by Xuān Zàng.[13]

It's time to begin. I sit quietly; I open the book at random and, with a slip of paper, cover the translations at the bottom of the page. The paper is too small and so I use my notebook instead. I start to write.

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11 "[S]empre lo litterale dee andare innanzi, sì come quello ne la cui sentenza li altri sono inchiusi, e sanza lo quale sarebbe impossibile ed inrazionale intendere a li altri". Dante Aligheri. *Convivio*. Aionia Edizione, Lulu Press, 2020, II.1.8, p. 64.

12 Augustine. *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, edited by John E. Rotelle, translated by Edmund Hill, New City Press, 1996, Book II 11, 16, p. 135.

13 The book I used is Wên, Ācārya Jên. *Prajñāpāramitā-Hṛdaya Sūtra: Das Sūtra vom Herzen der Vollkommen Weisheit. The Heart Sutra*. Zero Verlag, 1982.
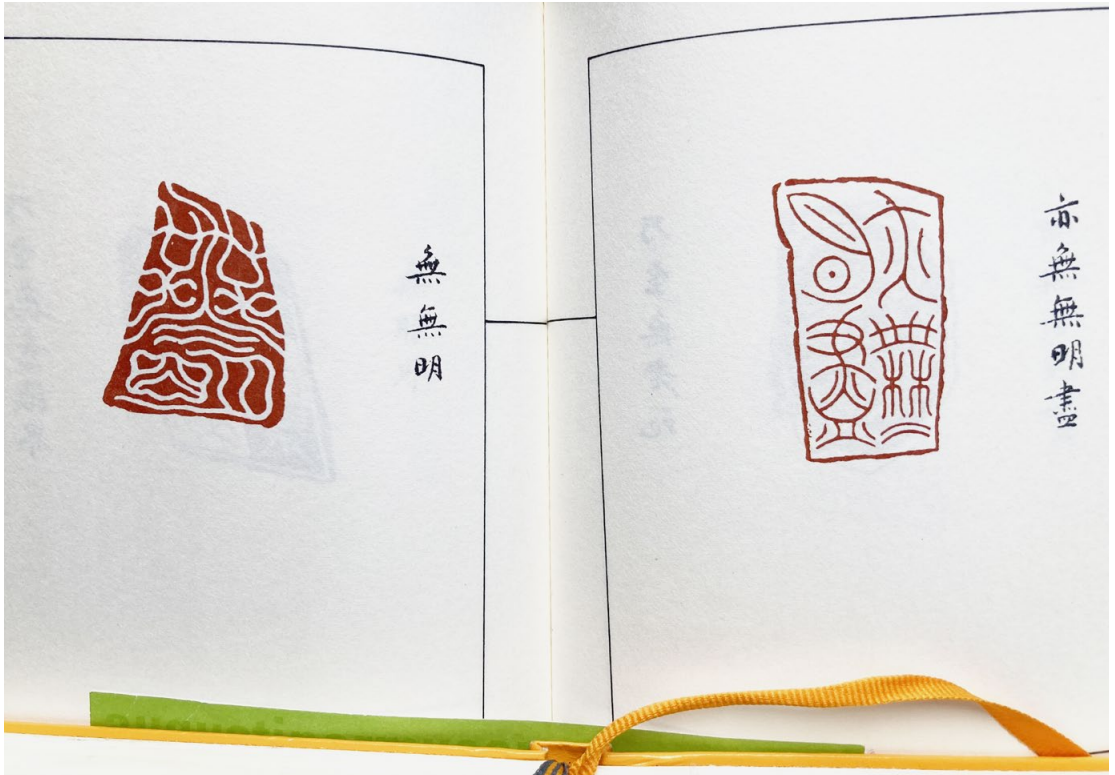
EXPERIMENT

Stone seals: I'm trying to read them like pictures. The Chinese characters only give me a sense of quantity. But the relative degree of complexity of each character also draws my eye.

I find myself comparing the seals and the characters. What carries over across the page? Do the characters repeat at all? To my illiterate eye, several of them look almost alike—in fact, the first on the left and the second on the right seem identical. Does it mean anything that the two pages are joined with a line?

Pause: Open to the meanings of these signs. Stop writing.

On the left:

A river in a dry land. Deep stillness.

Endless blossoming; a turning-towards. The characters are suggestive of great complexity supported by delicate simplicity, but the four vertical lines are also stable, steady, constant. An interruption at the end.

My eyes trace the lines of the stone sign. It tells a story of a bridge, a creature that lives beneath, two friends or flowers reaching towards one another.

On the right:

Greater energy here, a scratchiness, an engraving on the earth. Trails of sand and wind. A figure running, reaching; a leaf; a ball or an eye. Abundance and noise. The Chinese characters are denser and more numerous: stillness interrupted.

I have to stop myself from giving it all up.

*

What if these words meant God? I don't think that they do, but does that change how I receive them? What if they signified my shame or my salvation? What if they spelled my name?

I wait for them to come towards me; I've been reaching out to them for too long.

I much prefer the left to the right. I like the density of the lithograph. On the right, the staring eye takes all my attention. Must I have a preference? Can I ever renounce my own preferences? Will my relentless opinions never stop intruding on what I see?

But—have I stopped trying to make meaning of these words and signs? I take them in as pictures that have little to do with each other.

I touch them. I imagine that I can feel the difference in the quality and weight of the ink.

A realization! I see, suddenly, that all three of the characters on the left are folded into the five on the right: a new one precedes them and another follows. If this book (and it does; I check) follows European left-right conventions, then the left side comes first and is embraced or engulfed in the right. I see the line between the pages as drawing the left within.

And the more I look, the more I can see the left stone-sign in the right—a version of it, shifted into new pictures and rearranged, in the bottom half of the right image. It must be there, my mind insists, forcing connections, echoes, familiarity. I see how badly I want to put meaning on these pages, more than aestheticizing them, and I also want to be *right* when I know with absolute certainty that I won't be.

So. Do I look at the translations?

Not yet, I decide. This has been hard work. I head inside for a nap. What did I think would happen? Some kind of divine illumination?

REFLECTION

I could physically feel my brain groping for meaning but also its urging to turn away and give up; I expect to understand intuitively, for the meaning simply to emerge, to 'feel' it somehow. Dwelling on unknown signs in this way is not altogether different from ruminative reading, where meaning emerges from pious contemplation of a (known) sign; the only difference here—and it's a big one—was that the sign was *un*known and I thus tried to read it visually, as an icon, when I have no more reason to think that the signs' visual appearance reflects their content than that the word 'heart' suggests a heart.

Medieval contemplative reading hinges on the interaction between text and reader, a two-way process of engagement and transformation. As Robertson notes, *lectio divina* "could affect not only the reader but also the Scripture itself; the call to the reader to rewrite, re-author as it were, the Scripture in lived application". John Cassian, in his fifth-century *Conferences*, sees prayerful reading as a dialogue between the reader and the "face of Scripture", which is itself renewed through the exchange.[14] Although I would hesitate to say that I have renewed the text of the *Heart Sutra* in any meaningful sense, in my sustained and focused attention, I did feel myself to be in a kind of dialogue, a mutual relation, with the page. Reading unknown signs forced me to wait for meaning to emerge, the way that a medieval Cistercian may have allowed meanings to emerge from a verse of Scripture. Augustine held that no interpretation that arose from love or *caritas* could be wrong. I don't believe that means much in this case—I'm quite certain that my half-baked unfinished interpretations, such as they are, *are* wrong. And who is at fault? The reader or the read or the deeper spirit, the divine guidance that directs the reading? Surely simply I, just the reader, am at fault. If fault there is.

I still haven't looked at the translation. What do these signs mean? Or is the point, here, to get beyond the drive to find meaning in the first place? Would this not abolish reading as an act, if to read is to

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14 Robertson, *Lectio Divina*, p. 87; Cassian, John. *The Conferences*.
    Translated by Boniface Ramsey, Paulist Press, 1997, p. 515, quoted in Robertson, *Lectio Divina*, p. xiii.

derive meaning? And yet meaning arises not simply from text but from the interaction between text and reader. We have had an interaction, here, today.

And what, then, do I think that it meant?

I look at the pages again and I think of a search, an aspiration enclosed in the longer narrative of a life. A threat overcome. The persistence of harmony and balance, even through turmoil.

Shall I look at the words?

I do.

"There is no ignorance, and no cessation of ignorance […]."
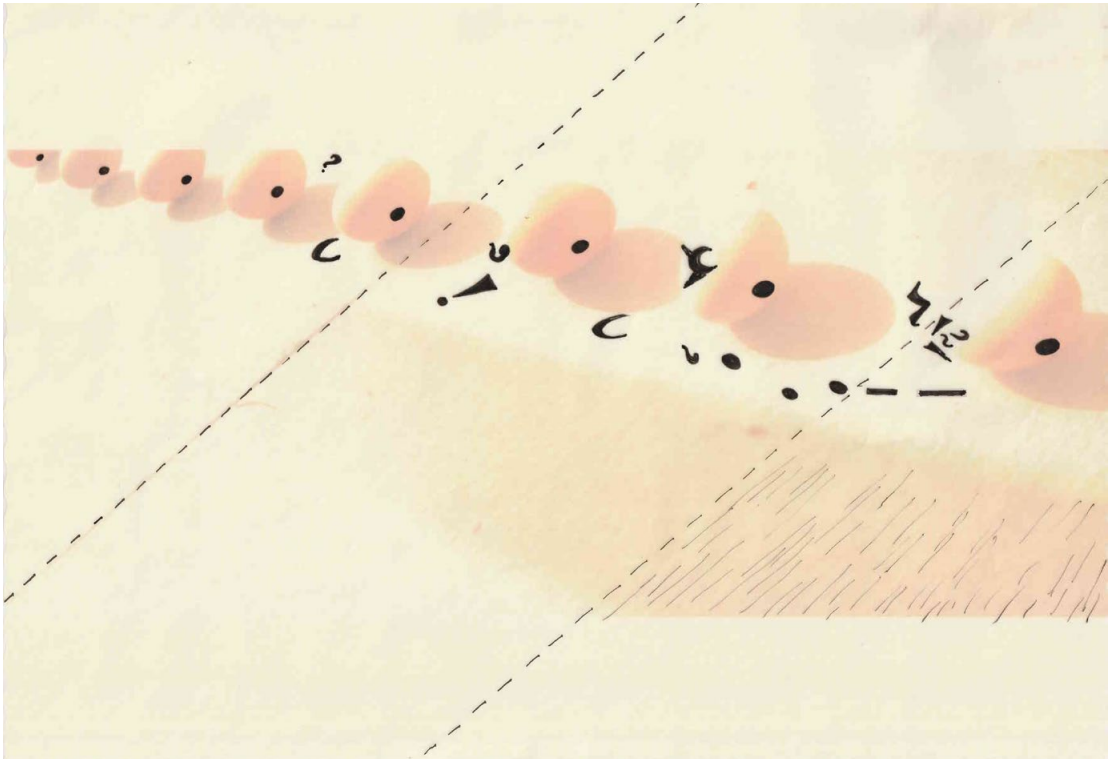
How apt, I think.

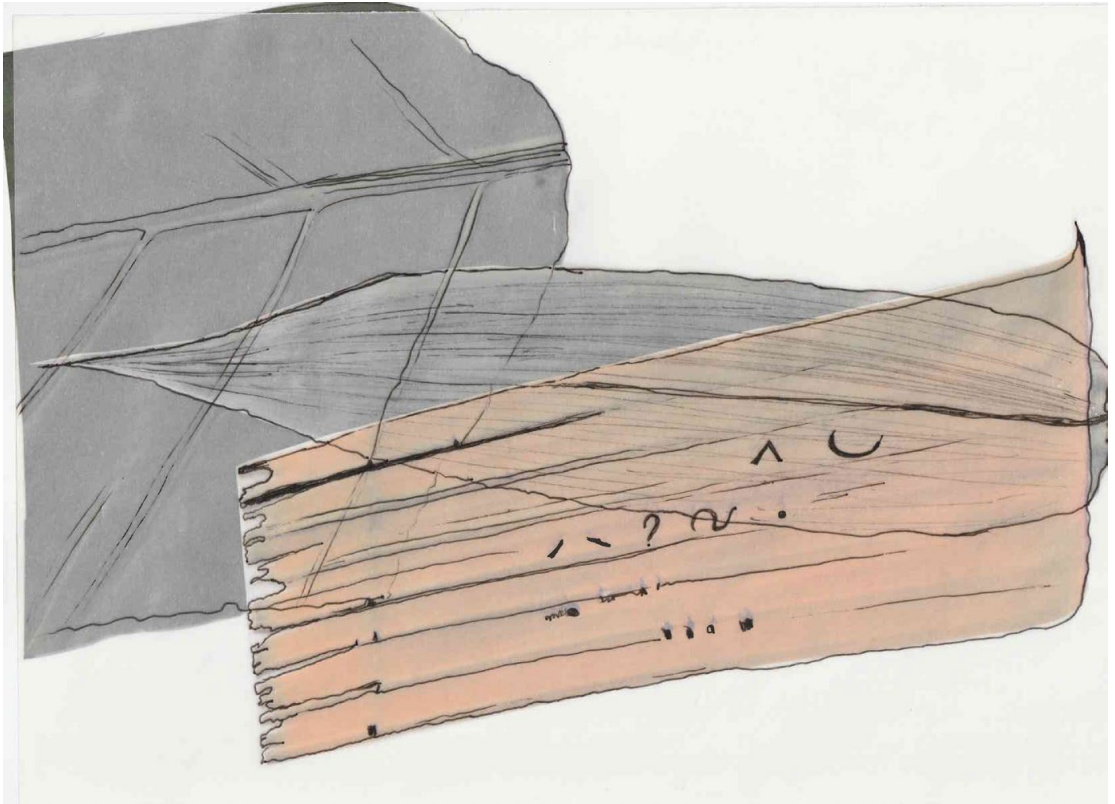My reading is wrong but perhaps not altogether so.

Nhã Thuyên
Retracing Signs

Who could, wholly, escape from signs?
—Henri Michaux

EARLY LETTER-LESSONS OF NATURAL ALPHABETS

The shadows of eggs, printed image marked with pen on transparent paper, 2024.

Vietnamese diacritics on banana leaf, scanned image marked with pen on transparent paper, 2024.

My early lessons in reading came at the same time as those in writing. The following little rhyme might be amongst the first lessons of Vietnamese letters I received from Mom:

> *o* is as round as a chicken egg
> *ô* wears a hat, *ơ* grows a whisker
> *u* and *ư* are identical
> *ư* is *u* that carries a hook

I've seen *o* everywhere since then: the egg-shadows in the sun on the courtyard, on the streets, on the walls, on the fields. Where there is sun, there is the *o*. The shadows of eggs. Manifestations of the letter *o*. My finger frequently draws an *o* in the air.

My surroundings continue to display and offer me numerous child-hood reading and writing games: with a stick and banana leaves, with rubble and sand and soil, with fingers and the shapes of clouds in the sky. There is an infinity of wondrous lines and signs to read and retrace: leaf veins, roots, barks, skins, palm lines, dancing vein-ing on stones, fields of drought, shadows in the sun, cracks on the walls, snail's slime shining on the brown earth … I imagine a natural version of the Vietnamese alphabet and its endless forms of diacrit-ics: the moon ˘, the roof ˆ, the hook ˀ, a fallen person on the ground ˜, a question mark ˀ, a rising tone ´, a falling tone ` , etc. Tim Gaze's words on asemic writing from an interview with Michael Jacobson resound here: "You could say that nature, since time began, has been manifesting asemic writing. It just needs a human to see the writing, and recognize it."[1] But *what is writing?*", he asks elsewhere, and *"what is reading?"*[2] And I add: to whom is something decipherable or undecipherable and how does the process of sense-making happen? I am convinced by the micro-poetics of seeing: if you admire a thing for quite some time, you can hear its voice and decipher its language. And you can dream into the far distant past, to breathe the ancient air with the first writer and the first reader through "this non-absent absence" drawn out by Maurice Blanchot:

> [T]he first one to write, the one who cut into stone and wood under ancient skies, was hardly responding to the demands of a view requiring a reference point and giving it a meaning; rather, he was changing all relations between seeing and the visible. What he left behind was not something more, something added to other things; it was not even something less — a subtraction of matter, a hollow in relation to a relief. Then what was it? A gap in the universe: nothing that was visible, nothing invisible.[3]

A thing speaks its language to the mind and the eyes miraculously through its sign and I can see the forming of its meaning by tracing the textuality on the surface. I can assemble my collection of signs.

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1   Jacobson, Michael. "Without Words: An Interview with Tim Gaze".
    The Commonline Journal 8, Winter 2008–2009, quoted after Schwenger, Peter.
    Asemic: The Art of Writing. University of Minnesota Press, 2019, p. 61.
2   See Gaze, Tim. "A few persistent thoughts about asemic writing".
    Utsanga Magazine, 2015, online: utsanga.it.
3   Blanchot, Maurice. "The Absence of the Book". *The Infinite Conversation,*
    translated by Susan Hanson, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp. 422–34,
    here p. 422.

But how would I possess and control natural signs the way I can own and adjust a pen? What if nature refuses my attempt at comprehending it, not letting me recognize it at all? Why do I insist on reading and translating the signs' language? Why do I persist in adding more words and to what extent can I contribute to the natural alphabets? What could I do with the gap in the universe if not just being with/in this hollow?

> a train passes through town each morning and afternoon i listen to it tell the story of the rail's immobility. how can it not be fact: i am the tracks, lying there and my illusions of moving, the trains run over my upturned body, a wind drifting, a breath stream undulating in time with the breath of earth. i read the marks left by the train rolling over my skin. a poem, a trace etched into tracks, imprinted and smoothed by sun, wind and misfortune, traces enamored by a place without people, floating traces, that self-destruct and vanish before a reader comes.
>
> now the town's afternoon is waning, the sun's blood draining, the round red letter o grows paler and paler in the void, its mouth agape. i shudder fiercely twice a day and now, somberly i count the vibrations gradually extinguished on my skin a seduction into sleep.[4]

THE INEXHAUSTIBLE OF FORM

My fondness for ink and pen, of all possible forms and materials, grows into a gravity for my poetry handwriting. The habitual act of reproducing the final version of my poems onto physical pages or copying all poems of a manuscript into a notebook, oftentimes accompanied by what I call 'nonsensical drawings', has become partially the task of ending: to mark that the productions of the poems are done, albeit, habitually, only to put them back into my drawers. While the text is decipherable, the whole process of transcribing letters is an embrace of nonsense: the futility of my brain initially inspires my fingers to do something mechanical and yet what the brain might think a senseless

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4   Thuyên, Nhã. "traces of nothing". *words breathe, creatures of elsewhere,* translated by Kaitlin Rees, Vagabond Press, 2016, p. 25.
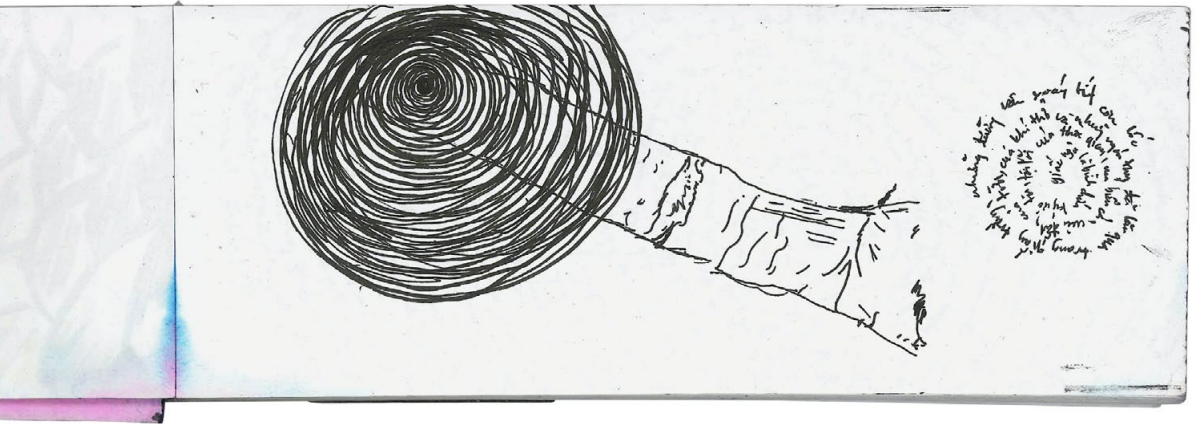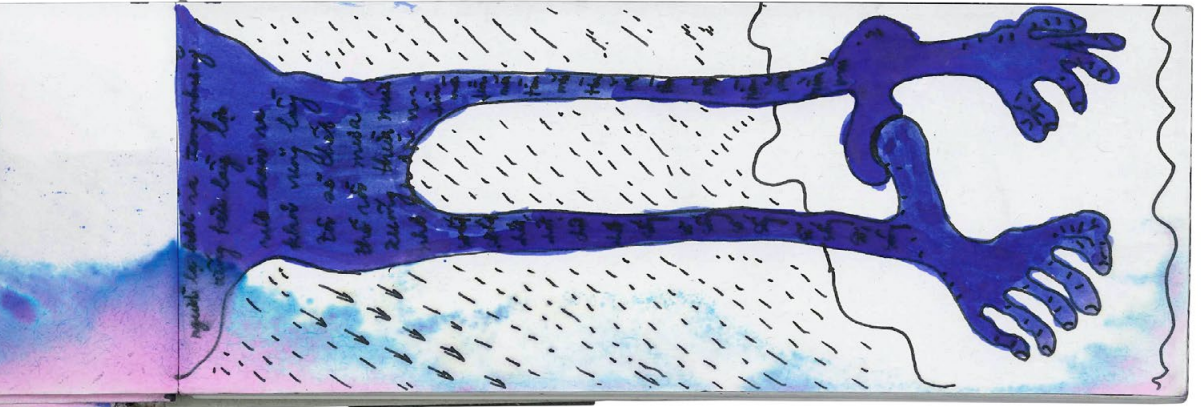
Pages from my notebook *words breathe, creatures of elsewhere*, 2014.
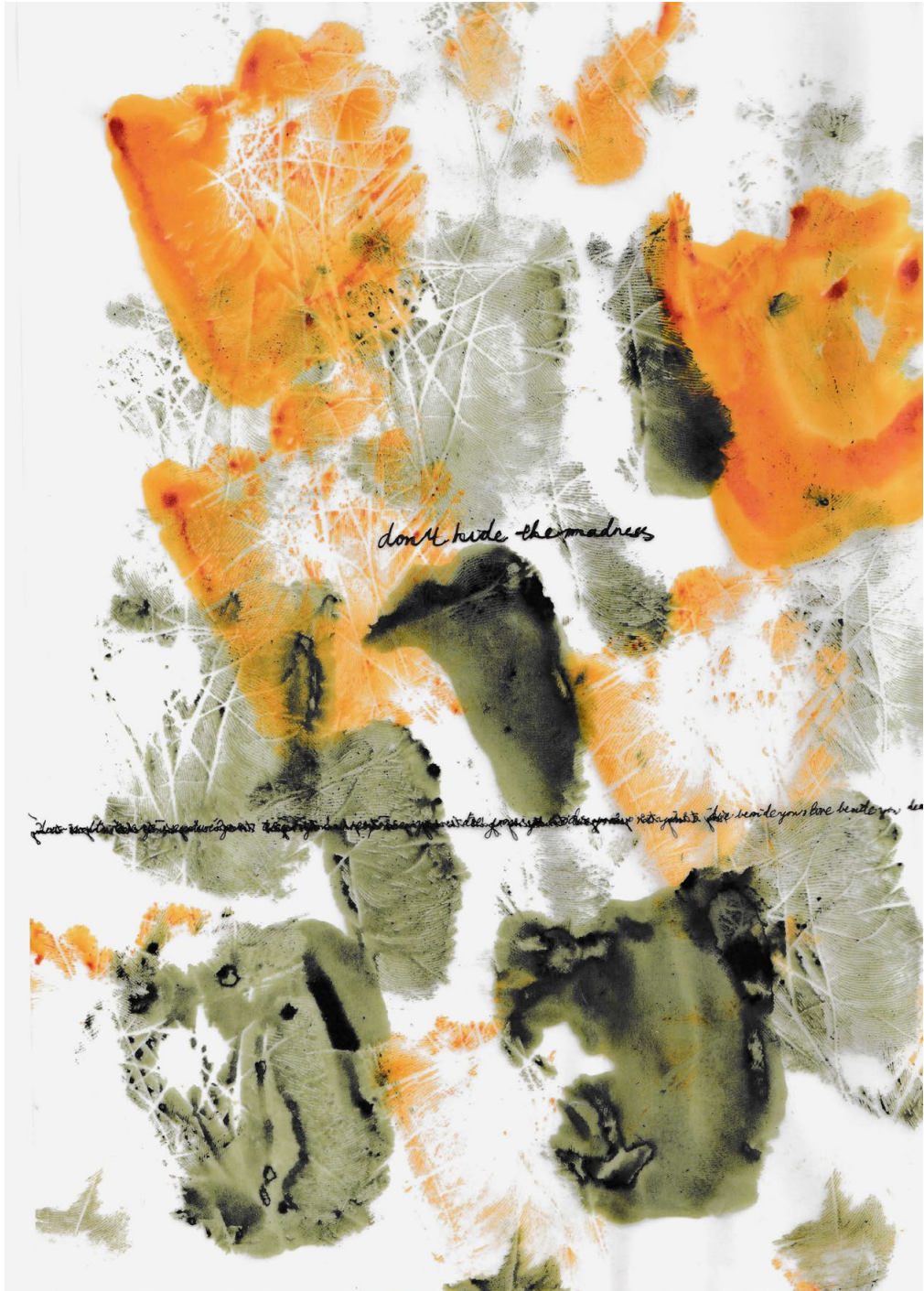
and machine-like act contradicts itself when this act harbors a latent desire of the body to dwell with/in emptiness. Even more so, my body counters: when committing to the exactitude of putting words on paper, the emergence of words appear sensible, all the more sentimental. I acknowledge this transformation: the initial mechanical act grows into a subsequent translational consciousness and a finished text that dwells in a digital or printed page is transferred into the unfinishedness of a text in-progress-of-hand-writing that only little by little emerges on the space of the page. The wholeness of the text fully relies on the assiduous labor of my fingers. The writing takes turns, circles back, gets un-done anew, sometimes with evident mistakes or even with decisive changes when eyes and hands and brain and heart do not cooperate to perfection. "You are just copying and you still make it incorrect" — my childhood teacher would complain. The mistakes and the uneven space between words mark the living signs of a handwritten piece. The result of the whole process is unpredictable: what I hope for is to maintain a personal writing pattern, to acknowledge an ending, to celebrate a denouement, to greet a completion, but what I archive (in my drawers) is an un-ending, an unfolding, an inception of something else that leads to the not-yet-known. At the expense of my exhausted hands and eyes, the words are born into another-thing, transformed into things, and their forms of existence become inexhaustible.

The opacity of light between layers of meaning and transparent papers draws me in. My handwriting is getting more and more unreadable. This happens when I am unable to bear seeing my own words, when words may recall Hélène Cixous' idea of literature — a literature that "celebrates the wound and repeats the lesion."[5] To play with the opacity and the impossibilities of translation, the arbitrariness and the improvisation of handwritten words is to expose subjectivity and, at the same time, to not 'repeat the lesion'. But how to read the wounds

Both images on this spread: *Don't hide the madness* — words and ink on transparent paper, 2024.

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5   Cixous, Hélène. "Preface: On Stigmatexts". *Stigmata. Escaping texts*, with a foreword by Jacques Derrida and a new preface by the author, translated by Eric Prenowitz, Routledge Classics, 2005, pp. X – XIII, here p. XI.

that somehow fade away and never want to be read by others? How to read aloud a text that is not to be deciphered?

> that's when we see her again scoop up handfuls of dark
> brown earth and crush it between fingers, mumbling below her
> breath the way to use adjectives and verbs, she doesn't deny
> them but opens them widely, all wretched loss, falseness,
> misconception, and the illusions at which those with intelligence
> coldly sneer, she nurtures them, the insects, the saliva of
> earthworm and snail, the pile of red broken bricks against a wall,
> the banana leaf tattered by rain and the wounded heart
>
> of an afternoon sky, when a herd of bobbing sheep split off and
> away without warning
> —
> if you want, sit sometime, digging up the earth around you,
> the earth around you where for one moment no one else can sit,
> except you and the little bit of saliva dripped, from your mouth
>
> some nauseous words
>
> though we know those bobbing words split off and away
> spontaneously
>
> though we are the broken words spoken the kisses kissed
> the sympathy shattered the treasure lost of each poem that
> comes to life
>
> just a sketch of late afternoon decay, violent and patient[6]

6   Thuyên, Nhã. "sketch". *words breathe, creatures of elsewhere*, translated
    by Kaitlin Rees, Vagabond Press 2016, p. 33.

WAYS TO EXIST, AND TO EXIT

Reading with a roll of words at International Poetry Festival, Rotterdam 2022.

Public reading and performing (with) handwriting: the roll of paper gradually unfolds and withdraws into itself and eventually disappears into the space (of my pockets). I might romanticize or even fabricate the image of an oriental poet for my private comfort: a poet who appears light and idle and takes words with ease from her pockets, a human being with letters falling into and self-vanishing in concrete spaces. She scatters the letters around, the letters emerge and evaporate. She is able to hide in public, the words are publicly hidden. This practice resonates a swaying dilemma felt in my body: a poet who embraces a poetry to be read intimately in a circle of a handful of friends at times voices her poems on different stages among strangers. The words long to be heard and seen with their tangible sounds and materiality, and they are scared of being seen and heard. The words think of ways to exist, and to exit.

I am not at all a calligrapher, in the tradition of writing practices historically found among Eastern poets and artists. My personal practice of handwriting lays bare as an intimate manifestation of my poems. It is simply a medium, a means of confidential communication that sometimes acts as a necromancer to call back my dead words and for my private ritual. I've nurtured the desire to see the existence of my handwritings as signs in space, and I sustain this desire by generating significances for those signs and, nonetheless, accepting that the handwritings lose their representational meanings as no one has enough patience to read them as texts except for the writer herself or perhaps, by chance, some graphologists.

A roll of words embraces a tree, Rotterdam 2022.

In an un-practical sense, the luxurious slowness of handwriting practice works against the rising demand and the advantages of being productive as a modern-day writer. In a way, it is a procrastination with self-awareness. There is some form of fatuous hope in this practice, when it flourishes possibilities of deferring the seduction of lucrative powers and of bringing poetry back to the modest way of passing on words. The words are exposed on the pages and, at once, this exposure of words prevents

them from being read easily or exaggerated by the storms of media advertisement. Albeit being more and more dependent on the clicking sound of the keyboard and submitting to the conveniences of the cut and paste and delete and undo actions, for me personally, writing with a computer and the advance of printing technology reduces the acts of reading and writing to the mere function of production, while penning words and lines on papers offers a sense of being with a real space, as if seeing the tides of wavering lines crashing on the shore or receding. Cherishing the idea of creating a life for words, my idealistic and delusional self covertly harbors ancient fantasies of seeing and sensing the words with their physical beings in real spaces. I am desirous of what ancient poets everywhere used to do to bring their writings back to life, when they wrote letter-poems for their confidants, when they carved their poems on the mountains they visited, when they read aloud in a public square for people to gather around or to shoo them away.

To read, and, when possible, to read aloud, handwriting is to memorize: it was with the corns and calluses of fingers and palm that you learned how to write, and a task of being a lettered human being, particularly a writer, is to read these palimpsestic skins as a part of the process of deforming and transforming those scars of writing. It is when processing these remembrances of our childhood lessons and lesions that we can nourish the instinct of a curious child who can recognize and transform the signs of lights, of shadows, of winds, of sky, of plants… in the space and babble nonsensical sounds and retrace the signs mimetically as learning an alphabet of a writing system. This process of reading and writing conjures up the memories that then soak our bodies and, in the end, we are but the traces remaining with the residues of beauty and wounds. Those traces don't ever vanish: they only sometimes emerge as obscured until a reader comes and they are there with us, as long as we are still in the space, patiently learning.
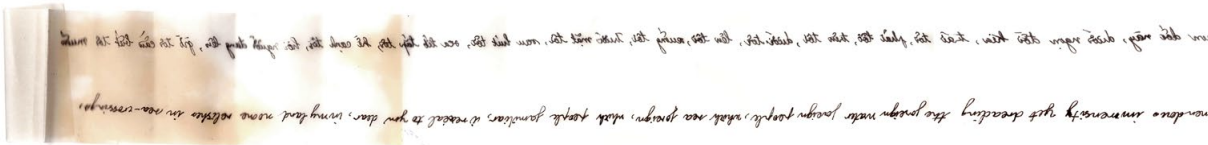
A transparent roll of handwritten words, exhibited in *Cabinet of Kaput*, Mauer, Cologne, 2024.
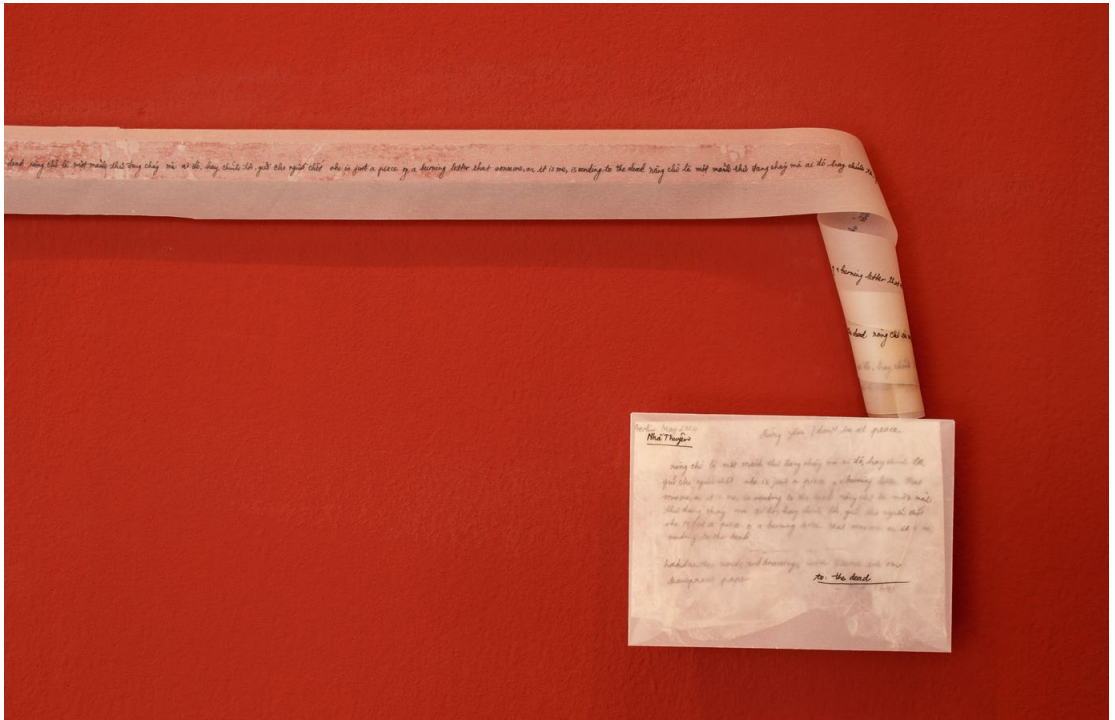
Transparent roll of handwritten words, exhibited in *Wor(l)ding Dreamers,* Galerie im Turm, Berlin, 2024.

Sarah Bro Trasmundi
Reading as Open-Ended Engagement

A CHILD'S WONDER AND AN ADULT'S FRUSTRATION

While conducting an ethnographic study of reading practices in family settings, I witnessed a telling scene: I watch a pre-literate young boy and his mother, a skilled reader, engaging with text. I observe how the child's gaze zigzags over the page. His fingers trace the strange, inked marks in various patterns. His lips whisper soft, arbitrary sounds as if the written marks were engaging him in a secret dialogue. He does not yet know what the marks *mean*—but this does not bother him. Instead, he smiles as if the page comes alive under his touch. The shapes and patterns offer endless possibilities. Crucially, the setting is just familiar enough to the boy, so he engages *as if* he can read: in fact, he enacts and embodies everything a skilled reader does, except deciphering the marks as known words. While the boy is constrained by the setting, he engages with text with a beginner's mind, approaching every page with wonder, which provides him with the freedom of limitless potential and multiple meanings. The text, for this boy, becomes a game to explore—not necessarily to solve or play by existing rules.

In contrast, the boy's mother picks up a book written in Sami that she needs for research. Her eyes do not zigzag in the same way the boy's eyes do. Instead, they fixate and refuse to move on when she encounters difficulty. Within seconds, her brow furrows and frustration is painted into every single muscle of her face. While she manages to articulate most of the written marks into sounds, the meaning of every word escapes her. She sighs and puts the book back onto the bookshelf. To her, the unreadable text represents a problem she cannot solve and as such a failure to read. Reading, to her, is linguistic meaning-making. It does not involve enjoying the novel sounds

or rhythms of a foreign language; it does not involve embracing a probing attitude where multiple attempts to articulate are present. In fact, she does not accept even the smallest degree of uncertainty.

This observation, which serves as the starting point for my considerations on types of engagement with potentially readable artefacts (like books, texts and signs), emphasises a significant difference in how the illegible is approached by the two family members. The pre-literate child thrives and grows in the ambiguity, enacting a playful space of multiple meanings by engaging with the text in multiple ways, while the mother seems to be controlled by the rules and norms of what she understands as 'reading'. She strongly prioritises the decoding of signs for content and meaning at the expense of more explorative and multilayered sensory engagement. The observed scene raises important questions not only about what reading is and what it comprises but also about what makes some individuals so comfortable with illegibility and uncertainty, while others are driven by the need for clarity and logic to the degree that they often lose the sense of wonder, the mysterious, and the enigmatic.[1]

This paper will explore these two differing attitudes towards the illegible as two (typecasted) poles of a spectrum of dealing with text. Drawing on principles from ecological psychology, I analyse how developmental, cognitive, and perceptual processes can shape responses to the unreadable. First, I examine the boy's playful, open-ended engagement with text as a pre-reader. Second, I contrast this exploration with the mother's rigid, meaning-driven approach to a text illegible to her. Through this comparison, I will highlight the perceptual and cognitive gaps that often widen with age and education.[2] Finally, I will discuss how a more adaptive approach can foster

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1   This qualitative example does not claim that the contrast between adult and child reading is representative. There are, of course, many adult readers — such as writers and those with a deep interest in literature — who (regardless of their gender) approach texts in highly playful and imaginative ways. However, there is also a notable tendency among proficient readers to prioritise content and meaning. See Toro, Juan and Sarah Bro Trasmundi. "The Aesthetic Dimension of Reading: An Embodied-Ecological Approach". *Ecological Psychology* 36 (1), 2024, pp. 3–16; Kukkonen, Karin and Sarah Bro Trasmundi. "Lesegebärden in freier Wildbahn: Ästhetik, Kognition und Praxis". *Lesegebärden*, edited by Irina Hron and Christian Benne, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2024, pp. 275–301.

2   This gap may also reflect broader dynamics of privilege, as an openness to ambiguity or difficulty can often be sustained by the cultural, social, or intellectual security that supports a more exploratory approach. Furthermore, our responses to the illegible are deeply shaped by context: it is often easier to embrace the unreadable in an artistic or aesthetic frame than in contexts where understanding is expected, such as reading a 'normal' book or academic paper.

learning while preserving the playful, exploratory nature of a child's curiosity to the unknown, aesthetic, and ambiguous.

PERCEIVING AFFORDANCE HETERARCHY

From the perspective of ecological psychology, all forms of human agency can be explained through the theory of affordances. According to James Gibson, all perception of the environment is direct and valuable for the perceiver. Affordances emerge from a person's inter-action with the environment. Gibson defines an affordance as "what it [the environment] *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill".[3] In this framework, the environment constrains the actions of an animal or person. People do not perceive objective information but values, due to invariant structures that they have learnt to treat as stable.

For instance, the invariant structures of a book afford holding, opening, and closing. If one had never interacted with such an arte-fact, these affordances would not be apparent. Now the book does not only afford holding and page-turning. Beyond these physical affor-dances, modern alphabetic texts also afford symbolic understanding. Reading, within the theory of affordances, is thus best understood as a 'compound invariance' because it integrates several affordances which constitute and enable the practice. This means that reading, at its core, is multi-actional. Gibson describes how this complexity is managed by perceiving nested properties of invariants, allowing us to consider invariants of invariants. He states:

> Nevertheless, a unique combination of invariants, a *compound* invariant, is just another invariant. It is a unit, and the components do not *have* to be combined or associated. […] [I]t could be argued that when a number of stimuli are completely covariant, when they *always* go together, they constitute a single 'stimulus.' If the visual system is capable of extracting invariants from a changing optic array, there is no reason why it should not extract invariants that seem to us highly complex.[4]

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3   Gibson, James. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception.* Houghton Mifflin, 1979, p. 127.

4   Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception,* p. 141.

This idea is illustrated in the boy's engagement. He perceives the invariant structure of the 'reading setting': he knows how to handle the book; he positions himself at the right distance to see the words; and he turns the pages at the right pace. The situation affords engagement with the book's physical properties. Yet he does not perceive the written marks as symbolic invariants. To him, they might simply be traces of black ink, appealing aesthetically, rather than symbols that need decoding. The boy interacts with the shapes and variant properties of the inked pages, while a literate reader would focus on the symbolic affordances of the inked words. That is, the boy knows and performs *some* of the actions that constitute reading.

What is fascinating here is how the child finds enough structure in the reading setting to make it valuable as a sustained practice, so that he handles the book almost as an idealised reader would. Yet the boy foregrounds affordances for playful, personal engagement over symbolic reading. The text, for the child, is arbitrary ink splashes, not something to decipher but a tool for sensory engagement and discovery. The child engages aesthetically, appreciating the visual and sensory qualities of the ink rather than the meaning of the letters. However, instead of perceiving the letters as affordances for other readers, he perceives the text as meaningful *for him*. Gibson underlines how children start by perceiving affordances for their own personal behaviour and only learn to take the other's perspective over time. He writes:

> I have described the invariants that [...] enable two or more children to perceive the same shape at different points of observation. These are the invariants that enable two children to perceive the common *affordance* of the solid shape despite the different perspectives, the affordance of a toy, for example. Only when each child perceives the value of things for others as well as for herself does she begin to be socialised.[5]

The boy is not yet a socialised reader, but he engages with the book in meaningful ways. He does perceive some of the crucial affordances involved in reading, but he does not fully grasp the compound invariant that allows a skilled reader to comprehend text in predictive ways. While this limits his social experience of reading—for instance, he knows his parents understand something he cannot—it also opens

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5   Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception,* p. 141.

sensitivity to other invariants in the text. The inked words, for the child, become affordances for imagination or aesthetic appreciation, dimensions that may be reduced for an adult reader focused only on symbolic meaning.

From this discussion, three key ideas emerge: (i) the boy enacts an 'affordance heterarchy', characterised by an open-ended perceptual engagement; (ii) with learning, the number of biased forms of attending increases; and (iii) the child embraces the variant environment (that is, uncertainty), whereas skilled readers mostly seek invariant structures (sometimes, as we will see, at all costs). According to these ideas, the child treats the situation as open, perceiving multiple affordances in the book. These affordances are not treated as a compound invariant but remain flexible, allowing new patterns and meanings to emerge.

Ecological psychology helps us understand the child's expansive perception of affordances. Unlike skilled readers, who have learned to treat text as bound with symbolic meaning, pre-readers perceive a broader range of possibilities for interaction. Yet this openness is coupled with an absence of the social reading skills necessary for joint understanding and collaborative meaning-making. For the child, the textual artefact is an opening for imagination, a source of endless opportunities to explore and create on their own terms. The boy's engagement, using voice, gestures, and other behaviours, creates what can be described as an affordance heterarchy rather than a hierarchy.[6] This balance of perceptual engagement allows him to switch between different modes of attending, highlighting sound at one moment, visual patterns at another, and his embodied posture as a reader at yet another.

The ecological framework also provides insight into how this individualistic, creative involvement with text contrasts with the social dimensions of reading. While the child's creative sensitivity and willingness to explore ambiguity are strengths, they must eventually be balanced with social affordances. These affordances allow readers to discuss the themes of a text, critically engage with various written and mediated texts, and participate in shared cultural understandings. Yet this learning comes with a cost: gaining one way of seeing often means losing others. The challenge lies in preserving the beginner's

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6   See Pedersen, Sarah, B. "Towards dialogical health care practices: Human errors as a result of cultural affordances". *Signifying Bodies: Biosemiosis, Interaction and Health*, edited by Stephen J. Cowley et al., The Faculty of Philosophy of Braga, Portuguese Catholic University, 2010, pp. 245–76.

mind—open to ambiguity, imagination, and play—while developing the structured and socially informed ways of perceiving that come with acquiring reading as a cultural technique.

Some readers manage to maintain a balance between these modes. They remain open to both joint reading and creative sensitivity, enabling them to experience texts through the lens of shared understanding while still retaining the ability to perceive imaginative affordances. However, many, including the mother in the initial example, lack that openness.

THE PARADOX OF SKILLED READING

There do, then, exist readers who remain open-minded and receptive to different ways of engaging with texts even when faced with the illegible. Nevertheless, I would like to explore, at least briefly, the paradox of skilled reading. This paradox lies in the way that reading expertise grants us a linguistic worldview—a lens through which we perceive text even where it does not explicitly exist. A striking example of this phenomenon comes from Danish history, as illustrated by linguist Dorthe Duncker.[7] The case involves the Runamo stone, first mentioned around 1200, when King Harald Hildetand allegedly claimed it recorded his father's deeds. Despite ongoing debates about the stone's markings, the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters commissioned experts in 1833 to determine whether the marks were human-made. Antiquarian Magnussen attempted to read the marks, a task that perplexed him for some time. Eventually, Duncker reports, Magnussen had an 'epiphany', realising that the marks could be decoded from right to left. He stated: "I wrote down the words, and found immediately that they, apart from the very opening words, were composed in Old Norse".[8] However, later re-examinations revealed that the markings were not of human origin, ultimately destroying his reputation. This case illustrates the power of skilled agency. Humans are not just hardwired to perceive what is there but also to manipulate the environment to make life easier and subject to our power.[9]

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7   Duncker, Dorthe. "On the integrational approach to reading and writing in the works of Roy Harris". *Language Sciences* 84, No. 101366, 2021.

8   Duncker, "On the integrational approach to reading and writing", p. 14.

9   See Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception,* pp. 129–30; Frank, Adam, Marcelo Gleiser, and Evan Thompson. *The Blind Spot: Why Science Cannot Ignore Human Experience.* MIT Press, 2024; Ingold, Tim. *Imagining for Real: Essays on Creation, Attention and Correspondence.* Routledge, 2022.

There is an urgency to immediately 'tame' unfamiliar patterns, to take control of them, including in the written territory. When codes refuse to be cracked, meaning can easily be forced onto them regardless, and even when encountering something illegible, skilled readers' responses are constrained by learned habits of attending.[10]

In contrast to skilled readers, non-skilled readers (often children) do not seek to tame patterns—they build them anew. For them, the (unreadable) text is not necessarily a problem of meaning to be solved but an adventure of meanings, a substrate for imagination. Now, revisiting the mother's approach, the response is rather different. For her, the text fails to provide the expected affordance of readability. Instead of inviting playful interaction, against the backdrop that she is in fact able to read the signs and actualise the sound images of words but does not understand their meaning, the text ultimately represents a failure to decode.

Through the lens of ecological psychology, this difference in response is rooted in how expertise often correlates with perceiving affordances from a more fixed and hierarchical view, while non-experts perceive more fragile and adaptive affordances (creative and temporary patterns), in this case in textual material. A rigid focus on meaning extraction limits the ability to engage with the text in any other way, turning the unreadable into a source of frustration rather than curiosity. To break from this, we must be able to question our own assumptions and reevaluate how we engage with the act of reading: trying 'not to try' and allowing ourselves to embrace a beginner's mind. This means, first, being open to the text itself, appreciating its aesthetic aspects, or (thinking back to the Runamo stone) even questioning whether it is a text at all.

BEYOND A NARROW CONCEPTION OF READING

The approach observed in the pre-literate child's response to a text offers a powerful model for rethinking not only our engagement with text but also our relationship with unfamiliar experiences. While skilled readers often approach text with the expectation of being easily able to extract meaning, the non-skilled reader's willingness to engage

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10 Trasmundi, Sarah, B. and Stephen J. Cowley. "How Readers Beget Imagining". *Frontiers in Psychology* 11, No. 531682, 2020.

aesthetically and playfully demonstrates a different way of interacting with both text and the unfamiliar. The ecological framework highlights the dynamic interplay between personal creativity and social learning, emphasising the need for a nuanced approach that values both dimensions in the development of readers. The child's playful interaction with the unreadable text demonstrates cognitive flexibility and a willingness to explore ambiguity, offering a rich avenue for considering how adults can engage with affordances when they engage with texts, especially when faced with illegibility. This form of engagement may be linked to the plasticity of the child's brain, in contrast to the more rigid neural pathways that become ingrained in the adult brain.[11] Rather than seeing illegibility as a problem, it becomes an opportunity for creative exploration, allowing for a richer, more dynamic (reading) experience.

What might happen if education embraced such an attitude toward text—one that recognises reading not merely as a tool for deciphering meaning but as a multifaceted and dynamic practice of engagement? How could this view broaden our perspective, shifting from a rigid, meaning-driven approach to one that values aesthetic and sensory exploration, too? Such a broad view might allow us to keep or reclaim aspects of curiosity and play that are often lost when we learn to read, permitting us to sustain a mindset that resists the hardening of patterns and encourages continual self-observation and openness to new possibilities.

This reimagined approach to reading could also model a broader practice of attention and awareness, one that engages with the world and the unknown in a more fluid, adaptive way. Reading, in this sense, becomes not just a skill but a technique of the self—a practice that fosters curiosity, sustains playfulness, and allows us to navigate the sometimes frightening unfamiliar with creativity and receptiveness. It invites us to see reading as more than an act of extracting meaning from text: it becomes a way of dwelling, touching, and playing with ideas, forms, and (new) experiences.

If we were to teach reading as a bundle of practices rather than a singular skill—as a way of engaging with text in its full richness—maybe we could preserve the exploratory nature of a child's curiosity while equipping learners with a mindset for embracing complexity and

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11 Anderson, Michael L. *After Phrenology: Neural Reuse and the Interactive Brain.* MIT Press, 2014.

ambiguity. This perspective situates reading acquisition not only as an individual act but as a deeply political question: how do we want to engage with the unknown and what kind of readers — and people — do we want to be in a world that demands both critical understanding and openness to the unfamiliar?

Angélica Freitas
Dealing With the Illegible

1. I am at my desk and put on a sleeping mask. I want to write something deliberately illegible. My idea is to not see what I am writing and not intentionally form real words or sentences. So I begin with groups of what could be read as letters, separating them as if to form words. My hand—or maybe my brain—instinctively tries to form recognizable words. I quickly decide to include the letter 'T' in one of them.

I had set a timer for one minute on my phone, and it turned out to be an incredibly short amount of time. When I take off the mask, I see that I've written what could be interpreted as three lines of handwriting. I put the mask back on, and the next thing I know, I'm drawing something. It's not a word. It's vertical lines, and my hand—or again, my brain—wants them to be an onion or a birdcage. I leave them be and go back to writing more lines.

For a moment, I don't think about whether the outcome is poetry or prose, which is unusual for me. Then I draw again, this time two peaks, and my brain screams: Cat! Are those cat ears? My cat is on my lap. I stop there, resisting the urge to draw eyes, a nose, or whiskers, as that would betray my intention.

The next drawing (a decision I made very quickly, feeling compelled to draw something else) is curlier, perhaps a bush? Then come a series of signs that I think could be waves. I follow that with more text, adding rectangles that seem like they could accommodate timetables or scientific data. To the side, I place words that might explain these shapes.

I finish with arrows: first pointing upwards on the left-hand side, then downwards on the right. It seems I want to end this with some kind of balance. Even blindfolded, I want to control this piece.

I feel that, when I take off the sleeping mask, I will inevitably assign meaning to the writings and drawings, something I'm already

doing as I describe my process, glancing at the sheet of paper about a meter away. My nearsightedness keeps me from reading it just yet, but it's a strange feeling. Something inside me wants to read those lines, as if they carry hidden messages from my subconscious.
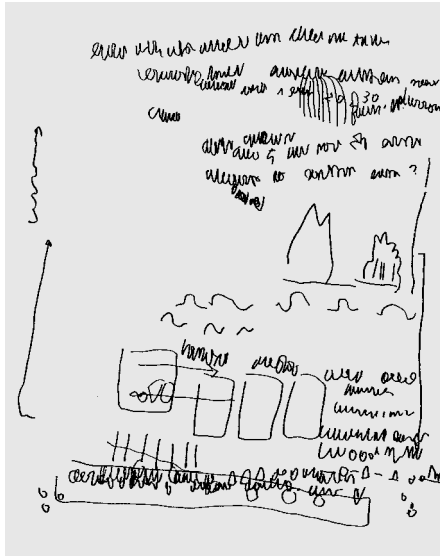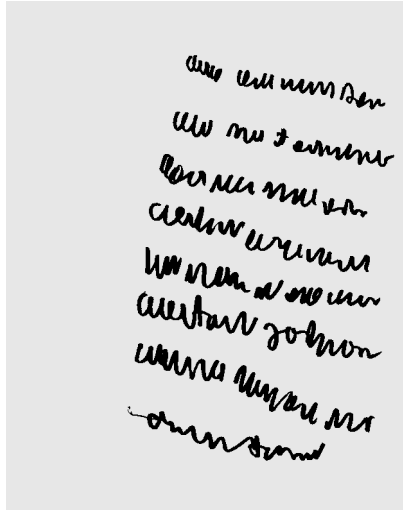

Legenda

When I paste the drawings into this document, I realize they carry the word 'Legenda' underneath them. It means 'subtitle' in Portuguese. The editing program wants me to write something about these images, and that is something I am not yet willing to do. I will leave the word though, as a reminder of how we are constantly asked to decipher or explain things.

2. I decide to create another page, this time using a brush pen. The procedure is the same: blindfolded, I 'write' a few sentences. When writing doesn't convey meaning, is it still writing? Children do this before they learn how to write.

When I look at the page, I'm initially surprised by how slanted the lines are, though they're roughly the same length. Writing with sight allows us to place lines more horizontally, even on a blank sheet of paper. I'm unsure what kind of text this is—it could be a poem, something scribbled down to remember later, or perhaps a note to someone.

Legenda

3. Next, I take another sheet of paper and rotate it. I use the brush pen again. The first result is that my handwriting becomes larger, perhaps because horizontal pages are typically used for signs—to warn or inform people. However, signs are almost always written in block letters and, on this sheet, I write in cursive. I make two large lines and, when I take off the sleeping mask, I decide there's too much blank space. I put it back on and write another line above the first two.

My mind says: haiku. It could very well be one. At this point, I haven't yet deciphered or made sense of it. But I can already feel my brain trying to assign meaning to these three lines. I decide to let them rest for a few days, allowing their illegibility to grow even stronger.
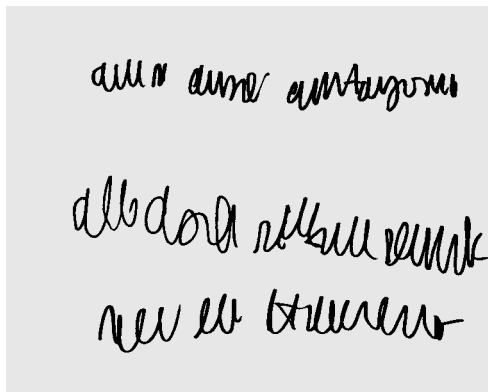
Legenda

4. Five days have passed since I wrote and drew the pages, which now sit on the windowsill next to my desk. I know the next step is to attempt a transcription and I wonder whether it will take place in Portuguese (my mother tongue) or in English (the second language I'm most fluent in). I'm writing this paragraph in English and I can't help but wonder if that will influence how I read the texts. I decide to give it even more time before I set about the task.

5. In a poem by the Portuguese poet Ana Hatherly, I read the verse "o assalto do ver/ler" (the assault of seeing/reading). The poem is in her book *O Pavão Negro* (*The Black Peacock*). A significant part of Hatherly's work is devoted to exploring how poems and drawings merge. Later in the text, she writes: "as escritas são reféns do olhar" (writings are hostages of [our] gaze). I think these two ideas are key to reading the illegible.

6. Approximately two months later, I lay out the three sheets of paper before me. And I can read nothing into them. The ideas that had popped up at the moment of writing are gone. Has my experiment failed? Or have I succeeded in being illegible?

7. When we are writing a poem, we might do so supposing there will be a reader at the other end. Some write to entertain, others to provoke, and many others do so to offer solace. Why should we offer illegibility to a reader?

8. I mentioned my subconscious at the beginning of this text, how the lines I was writing seemed to carry secret messages from it. The idea of accessing one's subconscious came up again during our colloquium at Freie Universität in Berlin, on 28 October 2024. Many of us were physically present; among the attendees online was the Hungarian poet Kinga Tóth, whom I have never met in person but who, like me, is an alumna of the DAAD Artists-In-Berlin Program.

As I explained my method for writing my poems at the time—keeping small notebooks in which I would draw with my glasses off and then write a poem based on the drawing—Kinga asked me from the screen in that Dahlem room if I had ever tried self-hypnosis for writing. I hadn't and I jotted it down in my notebook. Maybe self-hypnosis would help me decipher my illegible writing?

9. I decide to stay with the illegible. A further attempt, after postponing the reading for a couple of weeks, resulted in an irresistible urge to go for a walk, watch a video, or pet my cats. I come to the conclusion that the most meaningful part of this experiment, for me, as an artist, was already done: it was the process of creating something illegible.

10. What would these writings elicit from a reader? I would like to propose a short experiment, which involves self-hypnosis. I have tried self-hypnosis a couple of times, by the way, since Kinga mentioned it, but for another piece of writing (it worked very well).

Here are some instructions:

SELF-HYPNOSIS EXERCISE TO DEAL WITH THE ILLEGIBLE

- Go to a place where you cannot be disturbed.
- Take a pen and paper with you.
- Set an alarm for three minutes.
- Close your eyes. Take a deep breath, then exhale as if blowing out a candle. Repeat this three times.
- Focus on relaxing your eyes, the muscles around them, your eyebrows, your face, the top and back of your head, and your neck.
- Quietly tell yourself: *relax, relax, relax, relax.*
- Remind yourself that when the alarm rings, you will open your eyes, pick up the pen and paper, and look at one of the sheets of illegible writing in this article. Write down whatever you see there without correcting yourself, analyzing, or questioning its meaning.

When you are finished, feel free to share your results with me.

Charlotte Coch
Reading — Seeing — Counting.
The Riddle as an (Un)Readable Artifact

Abb. 1: *sonett ouvert*, 1988

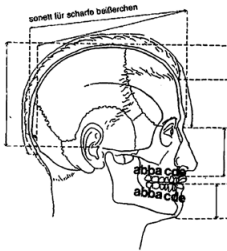Abb. 2: *portrait sonett* (o.J.)

Abb. 3. *sonett für scharfe beißerchen*, 1988

Abb. 4: *gourmet sonett*, 1988

Fig. 1: Karl Riha: Four Image Sonnets. From: Karl Riha. "Sonette — prämodern, modern, postmodern", *SONETT-KÜNSTE*, edited by Erika Greber and Evi Zemanek, 2012, pp. 27–38, here p. 37.

Pictorial sonnets, like the one to the left, combine letters, numbers, and images. In their riddle-like structure, they provoke two ways of interacting with print — reading and seeing — that the French poet and philosopher Paul Valéry described as the "two virtues of a book". In his short essay, Valéry writes that reading signs in a book means to suspend "the visual perception of signs and to substitute in their place memories and their combinations".[1] For Valéry, seeing is the opposite of reading. There is a way of receiving printed text that is not, like reading, process-oriented but, instead, instantaneous and spatial. When the temporal progression of reading — the linear decoding of text — fails or stalls, one begins to perceive the page as a whole, like an architectural structure, focusing only on the contrast between the white page and the black print.[2]

[1] Valéry, Paul. "Les deux vertus d'un livre". *Pièces sur l'art,* Libraire Gallimard, 1934, pp. 17–24, here pp. 17–18, my translation: "Il [le livre, CC] peut leur [les yeux] suggérer de s'engager dans un mouvement régulier qui se communique et se poursuit de mot en mot le long d'un ligne, renaît à la ligne suivante, après un bond qui ne compte pas, et provoque dans son progrès une quantité de réactions mentales successives dont l'effet commun est de détruire à chaque instant la perception visuelle des signes, pour lui substituer des souvenirs et des combinaisons de souvenirs. Chacun de ces effets est le premier terme de quelque développement infini possible. C'est là la *Lecture*. On lui pourrait donner pour symbole l'idée d'une flamme qui se propage, celle d'un fil qui brûle de bout en bout, avec de petites explosions et des scintillations de temps à autre."

[2] See Valéry, "Les deux vertus d'un livre", p. 18: "Une page est une image. Elle donne une impression totale, présente un bloc ou un système de blocs et

The text reveals itself as a pictorial form. Valéry here talks about texts in the 'traditional' sense, referring to an ordered sequence of written signs in the Latin, thus phonographic, alphabet. However, in the case of the pictorial sonnets, the affordance of the printed page turns Valéry's sequence of the first and primary way of interacting (reading) and the second and secondary way of interacting (seeing) with the page upside down. With regard to the examples of the pictorial sonnets, viewing the architectural quality of the poem does not result from a disturbance. Rather, it is the more obvious, more intuitive way of dealing with these printed artifacts.

This becomes especially clear in the following pictorial sonnet by the Portuguese poet and essayist Alberto Pimenta, entitled *wollust-chronik-sonett* (1991):
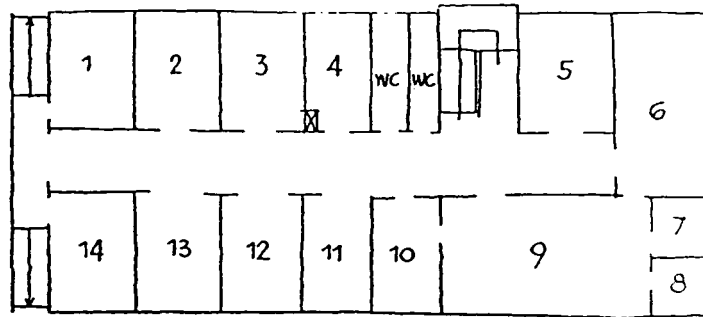

Fig. 2: Alberto Pimenta. "wollust-chronik-sonett". *visuelle poesie. anthologie von eugen gomringer*, Reclam, 1996, p. 103 [no pagination].

Here, the image presents itself as the layout of a specific building. Only when reading the title does one realise that this layout can also be interpreted as pertaining to a specific genre and thus be 'read' in a linear way, moving from 'room' 1 to 'room' 14 like moving from verse 1 to verse 14 in a sonnet. Like these extreme examples, the sonnet in general explores the border between seeing, reading, and counting. Its clear numeric definition (a sonnet consists of fourteen verses, typically divided into one octave or two quartets and one sestet or

des strates, de noirs et des blancs, une tache de figure et d'intensité plus ou moins heureuses. Cette deuxième manière de voir, non plus successive et linéaire et progressive comme la lecture, mais immédiate et simultanée, permet de rapprocher la typographie de l'architecture, comme la lecture aurait pu tout à l'heure faire songer à la musique mélodique et à tous les arts qui épousent le temps."

two tercets) can be grasped in one glance and yet it signals a linear order or development. Historically, it has been received both as an extremely artificial and 'closed' tectonic form and as an excellent way of conveying arguments. Thus, the sonnet oscillates between the spatial and the temporal arts, between text as a linear textual structure that is supposed to de-materialise into 'meaning' and a visual and numerically defined typographic architecture that is both more stable and more obscure.

One of the examples I find extremely fascinating is a seventeenth century sonnet: Ernst Beller's *Hieroglyfisches Sonett* (Fig. 3), a panegyric composed on the occasion of the name day of the future John George III, Elector of Saxony.[3]

The sonnet is a so-called *rebus* (Latin for 'through things'), a form of puzzle that replaces words with 'things', or rather: with non-linguistic but rather stereotypical and thus highly symbolic pictures. The rebus has been popular at least since the fifteenth century,[4] so right around the time when print changed social communication for good.

In a nineteenth-century anthology, the editor refers to so-called 'rebus writing' as the oldest writing on earth, arguing that it lies in the sensual nature of humankind to use pictures as stand-ins for 'real' things.[5] For me, the rebus demonstrates quite the opposite: what it documents is not the precedence of pictures, but the fundamental role that writing and thus reading play in society, at least since the fifteenth century. Writing and reading are models for a new and fundamentally different understanding of the world; the alleged continuance between 'natural' or 'pictorial' forms of writing and these rebuses is thus merely illusory, if not to say ideological. Rather, the highly symbolic value of the pictures, as well as the textual quality of the pictorial sonnets, points to the artificial and highly technical, coordinated ways in which seeing in the 'typographeum'[6] is grounded in reading.

From here, one is guided to the question that is central for this whole volume: what exactly constitutes an unreadable artifact in a

3   I discovered it in: Ernst, Ulrich. "Das Rebus-Sonett der frühen Neuzeit in diskursiven Kontexten. Kalligraphie — Kryptographie — Mnemonik — Hieroglyphik — Mystik". *SONETT-KÜNSTE: Mediale Transformationen einer klassischen Gattung*, edited by Erika Greber and Evi Zemanek, Signathur, 2012, pp. 283–314.

4   See Schenck, Eva-Maria. *Das Bilderrätsel*. Olms, 1973.

5   See Weber, J. J. *Rebus-Almanach*. Erster Jahrgang. Verlag J. J. Weber, 1843, online: https://archive.org.

6   See Giesecke, Michael. *Der Buchdruck in der frühen Neuzeit. Eine historische Fallstudie über die Durchsetzung neuer Informations- und Kommunikationstechnologien*. Suhrkamp, 1991.

Hieroglyfisches ...
Auff des Durchläuchtigsten Hochgebornen Fürsten und Herrn, Herrn ...
und Berg des Heyl. Röm. Reichs Ertzttarschalln und Kuhrfürsten, auch deßelben ...
reud, dieser zeit Vicarii, Landgrafen in Düringen, Markgrafen zu Meißen Ober ...
uensberg, Herrn zu Ravenstein, Kuh ...
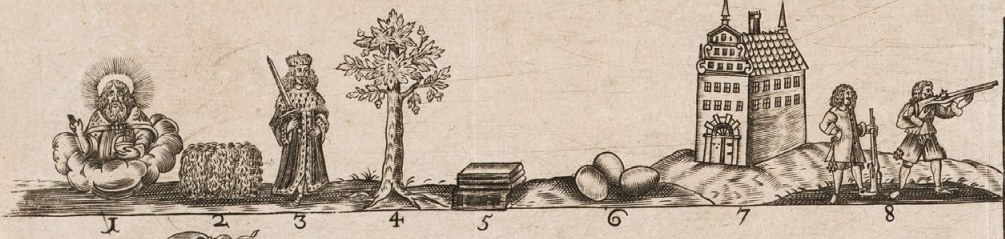
...hlt ... GEORGII des Andern, Herzogen zu Sachssen, Jülich Kleve
...eichs in denen Lan den Sächsischen Rechtes und an Enden in solch Vicariat gehö
...er und Nieder Lausitz Burggrafen zu Magdeburg, Grafen zu der Mark und Ra
...hrfürstl. Nahmenstag.

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8

1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8

Ernst Hellern Secr: Ann: 1 6 5 8.

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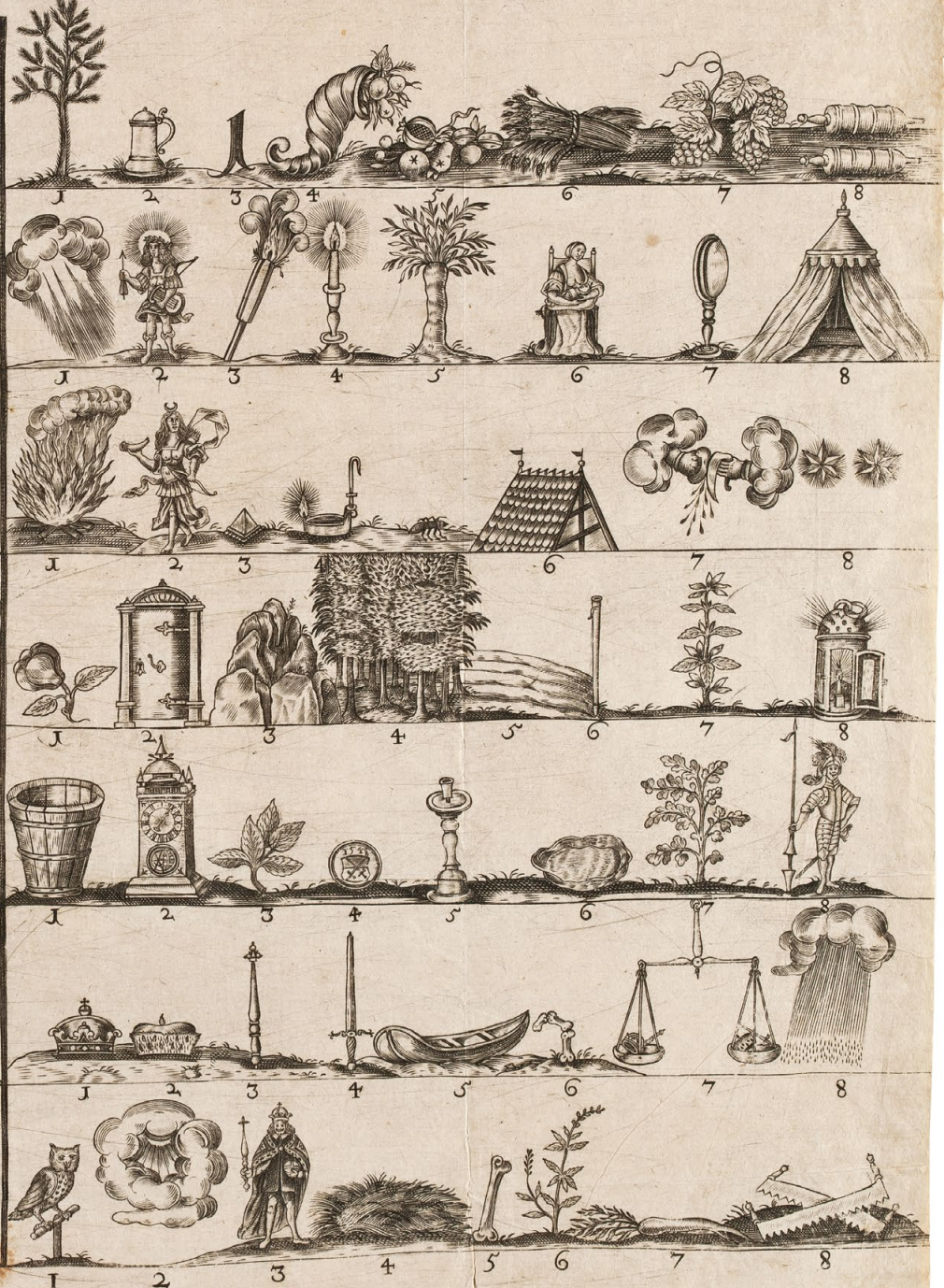
culture wherein practices of decoding signs are deeply embedded? One might assume that any non-textual phenomenon is unreadable. The amount of unreadable material would thus be infinitely larger than that of the readable and, strictly speaking, would lack any specificity. Yet I believe there is more to the concept of the unreadable than that. The category does not simply describe a state but rather an (unfulfilled) expectation. Something is unreadable because it raises the expectation of being read but—for various reasons—disappoints that expectation. The concept of unreadability, then, describes a process of discovering or realising non-recognition, or the failure of an attempted reading.[7]

This links the unreadable to another way of interpreting Erich Beller's rebus sonnet. When interpreting it not in the way of a literary scholar but rather in the way of a contemporary recipient, it is simply a riddle.[8] Comparable to the sonnet, the riddle is a much more varied form of oscillating between reading and seeing. This oscillation can be seen both in the tradition of the rebus, where pictorial 'things' are arranged like text on a page, and in the tradition of the riddle as a figure of thinking, especially in twentieth-century philosophy and sociology. When Karl Marx, in *Das Kapital*, discusses the "riddle of the equivalent form"[9] or, in Dahlmann's formulation, the "riddle of capital";[10] when Edmund Husserl, in *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften*, describes the increasingly riddle-like nature of the relationship between reason and being as "the *consciously* recognized world-problem of the deepest essential interrelation between reason and what is in general, *the enigma of all*

← Fig. 3: Ernst Beller. "Hieroglyfisches Sonnet". *Illustrierte Flugblätter aus den Jahrhunderten der Reformation und der Glaubenskämpfe,* edited by Wolfgang Harms. Kunstsammlungen der Veste Coburg 1983.

7   See also Polaschegg, Andrea. "Enigmatische Ästhetik. Zur Kulturgeschichte unlesbarer Schrift und ihrer künstlerischen Transformation". *Schreiben als Ereignis. Künste und Kulturen der Schrift*, edited by Jutta Müller-Tamm et al., Wilhelm Fink, 2018, pp. 173–97. Polaschegg describes hieroglyphs as signs that challenge us to read and yet simultaneously resist any readability (p. 176).

8   See Ernst, "Das Rebus-Sonett", *SONETT-KÜNSTE*, edited by Erika Greber and Evi Zemanek, p. 303.

9   Marx, Karl. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Vol. I.*, edited by Frederick Engels, translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, International Publishers, 1967, p. 63. This is how Marx puts it in the revised version of the first chapter from 1872. In the original: "Räthsel der Aequivalentform". Marx, Karl. *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Erster Band.*, edited by Michael Quante, Meiner, 2019, Supplement: Der Productionsproceß des Kapitals, p. 765–817, here p. 789.

10 Dahlmann, Manfred. *Das Rätsel des Kapitals. Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, edited by David Hellbrück and Gerhard Scheit, ça ira, 2020, my translation.

enigmas";[11] when the French feminists writing from a post-structuralist and Lacanian psychoanalytic perspective, like Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, define the feminine as an eternal riddle; or when Michel Foucault, in his recently published and translated manuscript on the discourse of philosophy, places the riddle at the centre of philosophical discourse since the seventeenth century: it always seems to be about a relationship between readability and unreadability negotiated through the concept of the riddle. The framing of societal or material phenomena like the market, goods, the body, etc. as riddles implies their readability and thus even the possibility of 'solving' them like a mathematical problem. The described societal phenomenon is staged as a text, as a sequence of signs with grammatical logic, although this logic is, due to temporal, spatial, or other obstacles, not immediately recognisable. The riddle is about transferring the unspecific overall impression (capital, economy, reason, etc.) into a structural, linear sequence that first appears to be unreadable but can be made readable through the interpretation of a reading genius. The concept of the riddle here marks both the disruption of readability and the fundamental possibility of reading. The unreadability of the phenomenon, which is pointed out by framing it as a riddle, is not a fundamental unreadability: it is incidental and temporary and can be overcome. Of course, the authors who use the concept of the riddle in this way themselves provide instructions on how to turn the unreadable (the riddle) into something readable, or at least how the unreadability itself can be made readable, as when the feminine is figured as an eternal riddle outside hegemonic discourses.

In this sense, Ernst Beller's *Hieroglyphisches Sonnet* functions as a riddle; more precisely, as a pictorial riddle. The meaning of the images, their reference to empirical facts of the real world, and the associated statements present themselves as linear and solvable and thus readable after the process of deciphering. However, in practice,

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11 Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy.* Translated by David Carr, Northwestern University Press, 1970, p. 13. In the German original, Husserl uses the word Rätsel ('riddle, enigma'): Husserl, Edmund. *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, edited by Elisabeth Ströker, Meiner, 2019 (first published 1954), p. 14: "Immer mehr wird die Vernunft selbst und ihr 'Seiendes' rätselhaft, oder wird die Vernunft — als die der seienden Welt von sich aus Sinn | gebende — und von der Gegenseite gesehen — Welt als aus der Vernunft her seiende —, bis schließlich das bewußt zutage gekommene Weltproblem der tiefsten Wesensverbundenheit von Vernunft und Seiendem überhaupt, das Rätsel aller Rätsel, zum eigentlichen Thema werden mußte."

this path to readability is blocked: as Ulrich Ernst reports, the key to the riddle has been lost or simply not archived, in contrast to the sonnet itself. While the fundamental possibility of solving the riddle—and thus reading the sonnet—has not been eliminated, its decoding has become very difficult.

Another notable use of the concept of the riddle can be found in a text that, at first glance, seems very far removed from the riddle: the lecture entitled "The Law of Genre" that Jacques Derrida delivered in 1979 at a colloquium on genre organised by Jean-Luc Nancy and others. Derrida here conceives of the problem of genre as a problem of "exemplarity and its whole *enigma*".[12] Derrida uses the concept of the riddle in the sense outlined: the riddle indicates a processing (as narrative) that promises readability but initially appears as unreadability. If genre, described in this way, is a riddle, then it also maintains a relationship to unreadability.

Due to its visual compactness, the sonnet is a particularly beautiful example of a literary genre. There is an innumerable amount of literature on the sonnet as a genre, all of which emphasises the form's unique and impressive consistency. Twice four, twice three lines—this combinatorial beauty, as August Wilhelm Schlegel expressed it in his enthusiastic ode to the sonnet, was an ideal synthesis of unity and division, making it the incarnation of lyric poetry or rhyme itself.[13] The sonnet's special relationship to the oscillation between reading and seeing might only be a particularly striking illustration of decoding genres in general. Can genres be 'read' in the way one reads texts? Is it necessarily the result, or even an inherent part of reading, to categorise a text as a bourgeois tragedy or a Bildungsroman? What kind of interaction takes place between the reading of paratextual genre designations and the reading of the 'actual' text? In his considerations on the law of genre, Derrida suggests reading genre terms as floodgates (*écluses* in French). What turns a genre—in relation to

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12 Derrida, Jacques. "La loi de genre/The Law of Genre". Translated by Avital Ronell. *Glyph* 7, 1980, pp. 176–232, here p. 206; French original on p. 179: "Il y va en effet de l'exemplarité avec toute l'*énigme*—autrement dit, comme l'indique le mot d'énigme, le récit—qui travaille la logique de l'exemple. Avant d'en venir à l'épreuve d'un certain exemple, je tenterai de formuler, de manière aussi elliptique, économique et formelle que possible, ce que j'appellerai la loi de la loi du genre. C'est précisément un principe de contamination, une loi d'impureté, une économie du parasite."

13 See Schlegel, August Wilhelm. *Vorlesung über Ästhetik. 1803–1827. Dritter Teil: Vorlesungen über die romantische Literatur*, edited by Ernst Behler, Schöningh, 2007, p. 161.

the question of readability or unreadability—into a sluice? 'Reading' the genre of a text, e.g. as a peritextual statement or frame, belongs to the reading of a text insofar as it shapes the expectations we have while reading it. However, it does not fully belong to the text: it enables the reading of a text within the context of other texts as part of a group, yet simultaneously shows the incompleteness of the group to which the genre designation, as a text on another level, does not belong. Here again, the distinction Valéry made between perceiving a whole and engaging in a process comes into play. What is obvious in the case of the sonnet—its genre character, which can be seen in one glance—is also valid for other, 'longer' genre formats. Reading a text as representative for a specific genre requires an overview that is necessarily different from the process of reading and more comparable to seeing the whole image as a unified element. Both approaches to texts are mutually dependent yet also antagonistic.

In the case of the sonnet mentioned above, this becomes very clear. The title *Hieroglyfisches Sonett* (*Hieroglyphic Sonnet*) is, aside from the dedication, the only truly readable part, and yet once one has read this title, the work's genre affiliation can really only be seen. By seeing, one—at least contemporary recipients—immediately grasps the numerical structure of the sonnet. It is established here by the mirror line: twice three and twice four verses. Once you turn to the 'text'—once you attempt to read the hieroglyphs according to the line logic, to decipher them and solve the riddle—you distance yourself from the genre and from the overall image.

So, once again, we arrive at the transition, at the relationship or perhaps (with Valéry) the competition between reading and seeing. The genre of the sonnet, whose origin can be determined in another media break, namely the break from oral communication of power to written bureaucracy in the twelfth century,[14] and especially the rebus sonnet is an interesting object for reflecting on this relationship, as it links reading and seeing. But in the case of all my examples, reading and seeing are grounded in a third operation that has only been touched upon so far: the operation of counting, which is closely linked to riddles and the technique of solving them. The sonnets discussed above show the impossibility of defining one of these forms of interactions with signs as primary, the others as secondary. On the contrary, these different ways of dealing with signs prove not to be

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14 See Borgstedt, Thomas. "Die Zahl im Sonett". *SONETT-KÜNSTE*, edited by Erika Greber and Evi Zemanek, pp. 41–59.

exclusive and sharply discerned modes, but reciprocal and interconnected ones. The unreadable rebus sonnet by Ernst Beller keeps these different approaches to a printed page in play. This makes it a form highly suitable for reflecting on reading in our contemporary post-digital media environment, where both reading and seeing are merely human ways of interacting with interfaces whose actual, material structures work in an exclusively numeric, binary way. Here, counting operations are no longer part of a play that connects numbers with words and things—rather, they occur at such a high speed that they inevitably elude any form of meaningful attention from the outset. Against this backdrop, both reading and seeing prove highly limited, insofar as they only scratch the surface of an invisible structure. The riddle and its specific, playful way of connecting counting, seeing, and reading reveals itself as a specific form of constructing the world, making sense of it in a specific ally human way. Thus, it not only points towards the not-yet-readable unreadable, but also towards the much larger realm of an unreadable that will not be deciphered or solved, since it surpasses the capabilities of human perception.

Karolin Meunier
Reading a Code

Dear Reader,

Addressing you seems the most suitable way of introducing a
textual artefact that is barely decipherable to me and to assemble
different kinds of thoughts around it. It also allows me to
acknowledge that you have the same role as the one I'm taking on,
reading. I don't expect a direct answer and yet the very chance
of being read will keep me going in the labyrinth of the illegible and
its many possible threads. I already know that it will take time
and more than one letter to unravel the task that I have set up for
this occasion: to enter into dialogue with a code and to see where
it takes me.

    It's no coincidence that this first led me to the letter form.
Letters are often accompanied by the fear of not reaching their
addressee, of getting lost, or, even worse, of falling into the wrong
hands. Your words, intended for a specific person, can be read
by someone who may use the content for their own purposes and
put you at risk or just invade the intimate space of your confidential
correspondence by reading it. On the other hand, letters can be
written in a private manner, using words that have a meaning only
to the sender and receiver, one that a random reader could never
guess. The invention of secret languages, sign systems, or ways
of making the writing itself invisible has always accompanied the
form of the letter, as have attempts to decipher such coded texts,
rendered temporarily illegible for some.

    These anxieties around written messages haven't diminished
with their transition to the digital world. On the contrary,
encryption has remained an integral part of the act of sending and
storing messages, using code to prevent content from being read,

even if the work of concealing and revealing is now often provided by companies that also host the messaging tool. This also means a letter can take on a form that even its sender can't read or open unless they have been specifically authorized to do so.

   More generally, it could be said that everything that is written, sent, and published in digital form is always based on a different text, on a different language. For most people, a programming language looks like an unknown code, even if the sign system used is generally known. The programmed text that underlies the visible interface is not a secret but can easily be made visible, explained, and its language potentially learned by anyone. The code functions as both translator and facilitator for the words that I am typing. And yet, the fact that underneath each readable digital text there is another text that is different and obscure to me is unsettling. It is also common knowledge by now that the work of programming is not neutral but influenced by the people doing it and thus reproduces biases. In one of the many articles in which Lori Emerson advocates for networks that existed before and outside of what is now called the Internet, she writes: "one might reasonably ask: what does it really matter if we don't know the technical specifications of the Internet? As long as it continues to work, what difference does it make whether we understand it or not? It matters because we've become so used to the usual narrative about how the Internet is an American invention and (sometimes, therefore) one that is inherently 'free,' 'open,' and 'empowering' that we are immune to seeing how this network of networks is working on us rather than us on it."[1]

I want to take a short detour and tell you something about another encounter with a legible and yet unreadable item. I have just completed the undertaking of reading and translating a book written in a sign system I am familiar with but in a language that I don't understand, Italian. The method I developed consisted of inviting Italian-speaking friends and colleagues to each read, comment, and translate live one or several sections of that text into English in dialogue with me. I recorded all of our conversations, transcribed and edited them, trying to do justice to both the original text and the comments of its readers/translators today.

1   Emerson, Lori. "The Net Has Never Been Neutral". *loriemerson dot net*,
    14 August 2021, online: loriemerson.net.

The book that we traversed in this way is also a dialogue, four days of conversation between the art critic and feminist Carla Lonzi and her partner, the artist Pietro Consagra.[2] Lonzi documented and published this testimony of their relationship in 1980 and added a short but precise preface. In it, she declares that the publishing of this dialogue is "a gesture of intervention that breaks with the code of silence of the relationship between two."[3] What we translated as "code of silence" is a periphrasis of the Italian term *omertà*. In Italy, its use in the sense of an expected obligation of secrecy (even as an unspoken concept) often accompanies and protects violent structures. By placing it prominently in the preface and applying it to the intimate sphere of the relationship, Lonzi refers to the shared experience of the violence of silence—and of the silence about violence. Her perspective is that of women, for whom the speechlessness and the silence/concealment in public is evident and intensified in two ways: on the one hand, in the lack of places to speak on their own terms, and on the other, in the lack of discourse about the effects of power relations in private.

With these various implications of code in mind—its use as a language, a method of encryption as well as a set of principles, whether visible or invisible, whether agreed upon by its users or imposed by its makers—I would like to approach the unreadable object I have chosen: the programming code of a survey. The survey and the code are both parts of a work by artist Anike Joyce Sadiq called *Utopian Institutions*.[4] The survey is accessible via a website and addressed to art institutions. On the landing page, one can choose the language, select "survey", and get the following information: "Member Login | To participate in the survey enter your login code here, which you received by email." Or one could select "evaluation", but I haven't done that yet. I have been avoiding gathering too much information in advance. I want to see what the code itself will reveal to me—as someone who is not used to reading programming languages—and how this information connects to the bits and pieces that I know about its context.

2   Lonzi, Carla. *Vai pure. Dialogo con Pietro Consagra*. Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1980.

3   Meunier, Karolin. *A Commentary on* Vai pure *by Carla Lonzi*. b_books (forthcoming).

4   Sadiq, Anike Joyce. *Utopian Institutions*. 2022–ongoing, online: www.utopianinstitutions.de.

For example, I'm not sure that it's always particular people who are asked to participate, but I think there have been different iterations and each one has been connected to a specific art institution and the people affiliated with it. The artist not only hired a programmer to provide the technical tool for her survey, but also made the code itself visible in a video that scrolls through the text. This fact makes all the difference. The code is a conceptual and visual element of her artwork and it is as such that I am about to approach it. Anike sent it to me in the form of a simple .txt file, along with pictures of how it was installed in exhibitions.

It will take another letter to tell you about my attempts to read this file, which you will find online. For now, I conclude by drawing a connection: although I don't yet know the specific questions that were posed in Anike's survey, I understand the whole body of work as an effort to address the various codes active in art institutions — codes of silence, bias, or rules; to ask how networks work on us and how we can work on them instead.

Warmly,
Karolin

Michael T. Taussig
Reading Aloud.
Making Knowledge Festive

Early on in Jessica Barr's divine *Lectio non-divina* she tells us that medieval readers are likely to be monks or nuns guided by God in their reading and that reading aloud or softly under one's breath could well occur. At the same time, she notes that medieval reading could be considered an embodying activity, like eating. All this is the prelude to her thinking about her attempt to read a text written (or should I say pictorialized?) in what to her are unknown signs. Her self-declared ignorance is what tests and illuminates this act of reading and hence reading *per se*. Thus, we learn about what we, or at least I, take for granted and how strange reading actually is.

Looking back, it now seems a pity that we did not do some reading aloud in our meeting about reading at the Freie Universität in Berlin. Listening to the voice rising and falling to accompany words and thoughts, we would, I think, become aware in different ways of what reading entails. In this regard, we could have learnt from the cloistered and from others whom I will get to shortly.

As for reading, there is a 'reading out loud' akin to what we expect when we go to a 'reading' by a poet or what we recall from our grade school years — the humiliation of having to read in front of the class (something I often had to do, along with being caned). And there is 'reading' in the sense of an 'interpretation' of a text, which is different. How this second meaning came into being is strange and remains a mystery. Maybe it was born of monastic practice?

Can the two meanings of 'reading' be combined, even though the expectations and rules for each mode are different? Yes, I think so. Because we commonly refer to 'voice' in written texts, I think that they not only can be combined but that the combination is baked in. Therein lies our hope for writing that "makes knowledge festive", as Roland Barthes urged long ago in his inaugural lecture to the Collège

de France. This would be a writing that no longer conceives of words simply as instruments, he says, but as "projections, explosions, vibrations, devices, flavors".[1]

Flavors connect with Jessica Barr's reminder about reading as embodiment, even if Barthes celebrates the festive and not the solitude of the cloistered in their cells reading holy script, in effect presencing the divine through reading in the same way the priest might light a candle on the altar or a pilgrim by the statue of a saint.

Barthes' delicacy and light-heartedness, his erudition, anarchy, and Brechtian undertow, aim not only to invigorate academic practices—which are not all that distinct from the monastery—but also to invigorate our sensibility to reading as writing and vice versa, practices enlivened by if not demanding such border-crossings as suggested by what we call 'voice' in texts.

<div align="center">*</div>

How do these border crossings fare when you read out loud (giving 'voice to voice', as we might say)?

As speech, reading aloud is likely to bring forth more strongly than writing the performative qualities of music and poetry otherwise concealed but energizing writing and language from within, 'so to speak'. But what does that mean, 'music and poetry'.

To me, it suggests (*pace* Derrida and "grammatology") writing's humoral but only implicit affinity with song, dance, and emotion, as well as with what I want to call life, in which sensuous domains and societal registers other than the textual and the semiotic are set to work.

Here, I think of Walter Benjamin's work on the mimetic and storytelling, as well as his many radio stories for children. It is a tribute to Barbara Bausch having brought us together to discuss reading that we can no longer regard storytelling apart from its being listened to—its being read—almost always en masse or in groups, radio being listened to by individuals connected by an imagined community.

This opens up new ways of thinking. Not of the storyteller per se but of her or his listeners. Read Benjamin's text and ask yourself

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1   Barthes, Roland. "Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, January 7, 1977". Translated by Richard Howard. *October* 8 (Spring), 1979, pp. 3–18, here p. 7. Thanks to Moritz Klenk of Mannheim for inspiring me to go back and read more of Barthes.

where and how the listener features. Not much, you might say. But then, is not the listener (our 'reader') presupposed in the storyteller's practice and art? How can you separate this yin and yang, this organic dialectic? As someone who listened only to radio as a child (I was born in Sydney in 1940), this question arises forcefully for me when thinking about Benjamin's radio stories for children and according to my concept of the adult's imagination of the child's imagination of the adult's.

In my case, as a six-year-old, I would loll on the carpet in front of the radio and its glowing dial, listening to (i.e., reading) "The Children's Hour", my imagination aflame. Rarely could a written text achieve that, nor the TV that came later, which seemed to actually flatten and kidnap the imagination of the viewer (i.e., reader).

Today, it seems that, far from dead, as Benjamin stated in his essay written in Paris in the mid-1930s, the storyteller in both the Global North and the Global South is alive and well, perhaps too much so. The readers (i.e., the listeners) demand that this be so, taking their place in the endless chains and webworks of storytelling and listening (i.e., reading), infusing reality minute by minute. Let it be noted that these 'readers' form the principal transmission belt of ideological warfare via the radar of social media, neighborly gossip, and political spectacle.

Trump's listeners, for example, may not have the same god and reading practices that Jessica Barr tells us the cloistered of the Middle Ages have, but many of them are passionate readers of End Ages, tied to the new messiah in their midst, a potent storyteller deploying the warp of his 'weave' (as he calls it) in conjunction with the woof of their reading. To the chagrin of his advisers, Trump notoriously weaves away from reading the teleprompter to tell his stories, act out his petulance, and display transgression, wallowing in what Durkheim and Bataille called the negative sacred and today is called 'dark', involving threats of violence splattered with reference to male and female genitalia. He reads his audience reading him while refusing to read the teleprompter, as billionaires like Elon Musk form his cabinet in joyful anticipation of further largesse and rockets to the moon.

Could it be that this refusal to read—and Trump is famous for his not being able to read more than a page—is the secret to much of his appeal and that our endeavors in this seminar on reading miss the point or, alternatively, are prescient? Could it be that reading is dead or dying, just as the resistance to reading anything other than social

media on the part of oncoming generations is the *sine qua non* of the new world that claims us into the future?

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Is that a problem?

First of all, people do read a heck of a lot now that is neither books nor print matter at all but emails and social media. What's more, they read as ardent Modernists of the European Avant-garde, mixing image with text in tapestries of montage.

Second, we should note that so called 'primitive societies' have been illiterate for millennia and reading there is preeminently interpretation of signs (in all the variation and ambiguity of that term), ranging from the stars to visitations by dreams, natural catastrophes, wars, and unnatural synchronicities.

So, here's an irony: a book that took many of us by storm in Australia in 1984 was called *Reading the Country*.[2] It consisted of conversations in pidgin English between an indigenous Australian countryman named Paddy Roe and a white linguist, taking place while an immigrant North African watercolorist painted the surrounding desert, waterholes, and scrub of northwestern Australia. 'Reading' here enveloped colonial histories of that region, French post-structuralist reading, visual art rendering the terrain, along with black and white photos and the stories — the readings — told along the way by Paddy Roe and a friend, Butcher Joe, reading his dream as an emu set forth in human guise — or is it the other way around? As for 'pidgin English', is it not the most marvelous reading of 'standard' English?

You have to wonder what good literacy and hence reading has brought, especially in today's world when most news, whether oral or written, is deemed fake. Even this is a destructive claim virtually impossible to refute because rebuttal is automatically deemed fake, too. The spiral cannibalizes itself until you are forced to ask: what is left, if anything? What is reading in such circumstances?

This takes me back to the 1990s, to a Jesuit seminar room in Bogotá, where a group of Colombian anthropologists and myself were discussing violence in that violent land. I suggested we have one person read aloud a text that I had first read as a three-page quote in Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power*, which he in turn took from the

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2 Muecke, Stephen, Paddy Roe, and Krim Benterrak. *Reading the Country: Introduction to Nomadology.* Freemantle Arts Press, 1984.

1927 book *A Black Civilization* by the University of Chicago anthropologist Lloyd Warner, which is about the Murngin (now Yolngu) of Northeast Australia.

The quote concerned the way the soul or 'being' of a slain person entered into the body of the slayer, changing his body, its size, and its sensory acuity. The ethnographic account is like a story, detailed, vibrant, and slow, as if the indigenous storyteller was right there on the page being read. Its unbelievability to a Western readership was slowly transformed into a reality, devouring us all in that seminar room.

Why was that? It was because the violence we heard and read about hour by hour in Colombia at that time resonated deeply with what was being read out in that enclosed Jesuit seminar room. Reading aloud in a group of twenty or so people in that room gave the text tremendous heft. And, because of this, the seminar and our fears took flight, bringing two extraordinarily different worlds together, albeit with great friction, building on the fact that, sometimes, if rarely, a seminar takes you far away like science fiction.

We broke out of ourselves and broke back in newly born. We experienced estranged estrangement. The reading aloud made theater, fantastic in its reach, psychic and cosmic in its depth. We heard accustomed words newly and we reacted newly. Words had become projections, explosions, vibrations, devices, and flavors.

I cannot but think back to Jessica Barr's monks and nuns reading aloud to themselves as the traffic roared past our Jesuit seminar room up there in the mountains of Columbia.

Kinga Tóth
How to Sing an Image?
'Singalone' and Collective Reading
in Practice

READALONE-SINGALONE

In 2022, I temporarily lost my ability to read due to a COVID-induced heart attack and nerve damage. I was doing my PhD in German Studies and stared at the paper: I recognised the letters but was unable to read the words. During my rehabilitation—to finance my medical expenses—I still performed, 'reading' my poems and other texts with music and singing. During this phase, however, an interesting thing happened: lines of my poems emerged from the page, became colourful, their materiality changed, they floated above the page, they shone, and their shine had a sound effect. This illusory perception accompanied my recovery for months. I still couldn't read, but I managed to apply these highlights to choral works in my performances by some kind of sonic decoding.

It was this experience that led me to continue to present my visual poems or graphic 'scores' to others and to discover that it is possible to encode a complex system of signs that at first sight seems illegible together. I have led similar workshops at various institutions, often with students and artists of different nationalities. I have a background in education, organising sessions of musical art where groups drew or wrote to music. Therein, students' forms of expression were taught and reinforced. It's a long-established method of teaching and skill development, but how do we get from there to singing pictures and how can we even call a picture readable?

My experience and practice since 2022 is grounded in artistic development that goes further back. In 2013, I wrote my book *All Machine*, which I accompanied with a CD of graphics, video, and sound poems, and I started my first solo performances, where I practically 'sang' videos made from images by reacting to projected visual poetry and

drawings with vocal gestures.[1] Since then, I have been engaging in all my projects in a similar way: interpreting my visual poetry as three-dimensional 'living text bodies', understanding my performances as simple 'readings'.[2]

In many of my graphics, the absence is already very much present. Alongside the machines, constructions, graphic and linguistic codes, the empty space becomes more prominent and can even be filled with sound in the act of reading. The question is, of course: how can such an individual practice become collective? How can we read images in a group, decode a drawing and then sing it, creating a collective experience through reading pictures?

The basis for my ideas is Roland Barthes' notion of contours, writing, and creation.[3] According to Barthes, the act of writing is the same as the act of drawing: they embody the same gesture of contour-making. The world and/or the text is thus a system of contours: realisable with contour systems. Performance is nothing other than the creation of a contour system. And reading is a performance.

During the making of the graphics for my latest book *MariaMachina*, I visited several monasteries. I was very impressed by the Benedictine monastery in Tutzing, where I worked in silence, drawing the contours of herbs and of holy places, churches, sites of prayer, and then slowly the subsequent layers: colours, letters, shapes, building the score of the 'living text body'. In my *MariaMachina* live performances, I 'sing' these scores according to my own rules, leaving room for improvisation, of course. But how can one step outside this self-enclosed unity and open up to a group? How can an image create a collective experience and—I go further—how far can the

← Kinga Toth. "tube". *All Machine*, Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, 2013.

← Kinga Tóth. "Elba". *All Machine*, Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart, 2013.

1   The project, developed at Akademie Schloss Solitude 2013–2014, was invited to the conference *Audioliterary Poetry between Performance and Mediatization* in Hamburg, 2023. For a video of *All Machine*, see: lecture2go.uni-hamburg.de. For a description of the performance, see also: Wehmeier, Henrik and Clara Cosima Wolff. "Audioliterary Poetry between Performance and Mediatization: An Introduction". *Audioliterary Poetry between Performance and Mediatization. Audioliterale Lyrik zwischen Performance und Mediatisierung*, edited by Marc Matter et al., De Gruyter, 2024, pp. 1–22, here pp. 3–4.

2   On the 'living text body', the term I have used since the beginning of my artistic practice, see: Tóth, Kinga. "Living Text Bodies". Interview and documentation in the context of the WimmelResearch-Fellowship at 'Platform 12', a joint project between Robert Bosch GmbH, Akademie Schloss Solitude and Wimmelforschung, online: vimeo.com/222684550.

3   See Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller, Hill and Wang, 1975 (first published in French, 1973).

autocracy of the creator disappear and a song based on democratic decisions be born?

A PICTURE AS A SCORE?

"Phenomena [...] are also sign systems—always multilayered, and allowing for different interpretations that are valid simultaneously and in parallel. Notations can be communicative tools or ends in themselves, depending on the context in which they are viewed."[4] So begins György Ligeti's 1965 speech at the conference *Notation Neuer Musik* in Darmstadt, in which he discusses, among other things, the multi-layeredness and poetic function of writings, languages, and musical notations. According to Ligeti, all musical notation is graphic, including traditional notation, insofar as it uses visual signs. If musical notation is primarily graphic, it has no musical meaning but can represent musical content. It can depict movements, and the execution of movements can result in the creation of a musical composition.

A form of writing that does not fit into the system of traditional notation is called musical graphics. Musical graphics are, following Ligeti, not a system of signs. They do not represent musical relationships but processes that lead to the creation of music, or can be used associatively to stimulate musical ideas and their realisation.

I have examined the graphic poetic works of my *MariaMachina* series in terms of the regularities of the category of musical graphics, based on Ligeti's definition: free to use but readable. I even presented (and will further present) the works to listeners as a work that can be sung. The 'music' produced by reading the works is associative, but there are regularities to 'interpretive reading'. The graphic works contain colours, contours, distinct surfaces, and Arabic letters: they have shapes that appear to the reader to be meaningful, legible and others that appear meaningless. So, a more traditional reading is possible in part, although the set of letters is also multi-layered, allowing for the simultaneous occurrence of sound, or polyphony. Is it conceivable, then, that my visual work can be interpreted as notation and thus be transcoded, rendered readable, and—following Ligeti—transformed into music? Can we maybe even find a common reading in which we can find pleasure, which we can feel as our own, as common?

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4   Ligeti, György: "Új notáció — kommunikációs eszköz vagy öncél?" *Ligeti György válogatott írásai*, edited by Márton Kerkékfy, Rózsavölgyi és Társa, 2010, 197–209, here p. 197, my translation.

I have held several workshops for groups of young children, students, and artists in sound poetry and performance, where we worked with sounds, images, text as equal contour systems to create different artistic units: sound performance, live poetry, video poetry, even choral work. On my journey towards giving my own workshops, I have been inspired a lot by the work of the Slovak composer Miroslav Tóth, in whose project entitled 33 *Astral Bodies* I participated in 2012 in Bratislava, where Tóth conducted a choir with kung-fu movements. Each movement had a 'voice', but each person could scream, shout, whisper, not in the voice given but in their own unique voice. In this way, we had the signs of the conducting, which the conductor gave us, and we followed them to 'read the score': Miroslav Tóth's score and his movements.

The aim of my workshops in reading visual works as scores is to create our own shared reading or 'song' of a graphic work with the participants in the most democratic way possible. But this requires a set of communal reading rules. As an intermedia creator and performer, I have sung my own graphic scores and poems on numerous occasions over the past fifteen years, creating new readings of a visual poem based on my own set of rules. I use multiphonality and polyphony in my performances, creating a chorus by myself by composing live loops, creating the illusion of collectivity. However, for a group work, I attempt to create a choral work by setting aside the rules I have used for many years, by creating a group decision system where the reading rules are made individually.

I reported more on my methods via one concrete implementation example, namely a lecture and seminar at the Central European University in early 2025, where I tried to present students and colleagues with more reading suggestions while avoiding to influence them, in a sequel of this essay.[5]

The image from *MariaMachina* that we worked with can be interpreted in many different ways: we can put a chessboard on it and sing in a horse jump, we can determine the tones of the colours, the strength of the line (singing), we can move from left to right and from top to bottom or start from the middle in concentric circles. Perhaps we can cut up and splice together new music in a different order, or — if we are talking about collective reading as a political gesture — we can use the censored text technique and cross out lines

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5   Available online under the title *Readtogether-Singtogether* on
    temporal-communities.de.

and sing only the gaps. In a game, there are endless possibilities, provided we are given the freedom to make the rules and sing together as a group.

The goal of this collective reading is more the process itself than the creation of a choral work: how can a multilingual group of participants from different countries with different mother tongues make common decisions and read a visual work into music? What does this process do to a group? Will reading become a communal experience?

If we collaborate well, a graphic work can become, in Ligeti's words, a map for us, offering the possibility for many different excursions together.

→ Kinga Tóth. Ohne
Titel. *MariaMachina,*
Matthes & Seitz, 2025.
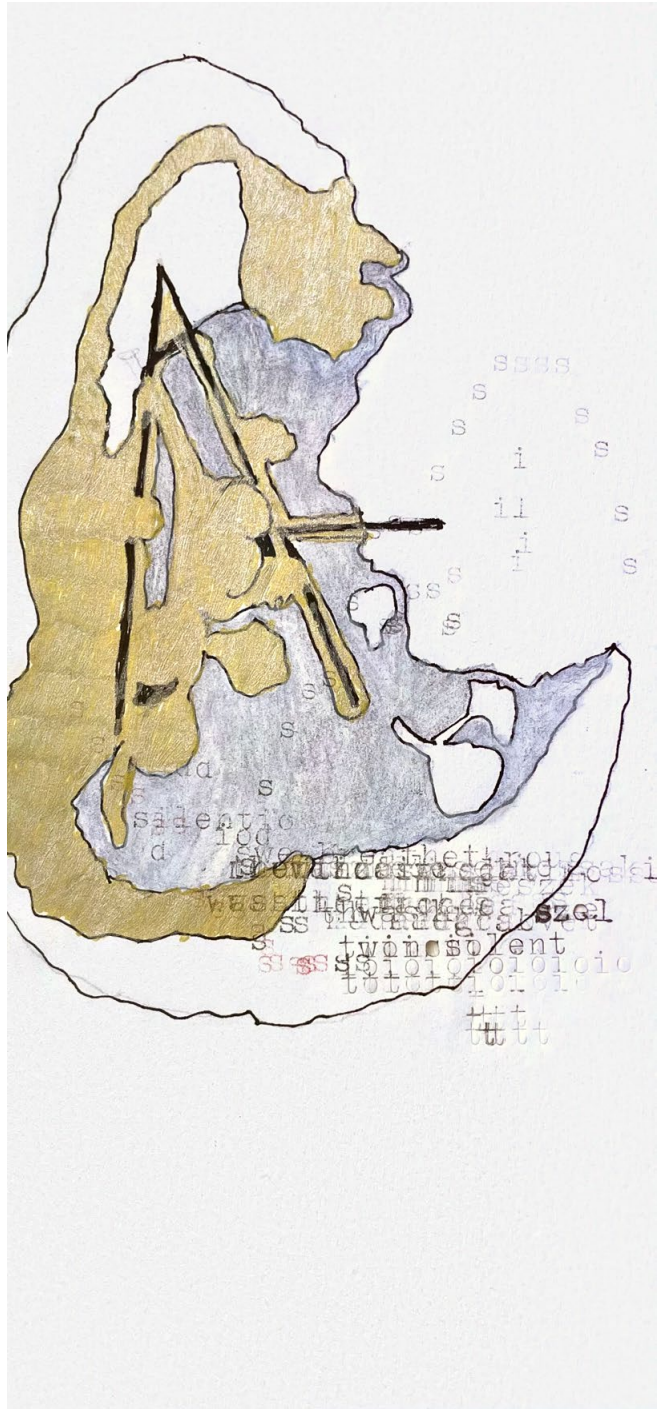
Raisa Inocêncio Ferreira Lima
Reading Listening.
A Prelude to the God Exu and
Orality in Afro-Brazilian Expression

In this essay, I aim to present preliminary findings from an ongoing project, which involves translating and transposing Afro-Brazilian literary and theoretical sources into written English. The motivation for this work is that Brazil has a large literary production rooted in its cultural expressions. My ultimate objective is to share these resources with a Western scholarly audience, recognising the limitations inherent in this project—some elements may prove impossible to fully capture in translation, particularly those related to existential and political realities. Thus, before engaging with the literary sources at focus in this essay, which, here, can only be addressed in written form, we must recognise that Brazilian literature is deeply rooted in lived experiences and that oral, performative, and spiritual tradition serve as the foundation of its existence and transmission.

I will delve into the intricate relationship between language, culture, and spirituality in Afro-Brazilian literature by shedding light on a group of concepts that carry great cultural significance. I will highlight *escrevivência*, a literary genre pioneered by the renowned author Conceição Evaristo; *ginga*, a term that embodies rhythm, perseverance and resilience in everyday life; and *oraliture,* a concept introduced by the scholar Leda Maria Martins. To illustrate *oraliture*, I will focus on Exu, the god of messages and crossroads. I will tell two stories about Exu, highlighting his role as a mediator and communicator in the tradition of the Brazilian Nagô/Yoruba cosmogony, which can be used as a guide for understanding the fluid boundaries between oral and written communication in the context of colonisation.

The concepts introduced not only represent specific (literary) traditions but also embody whole ways of being, acting, and relating to the world. Embarking on the venture of 'reading' oral traditions closely connected to lived experiences widens the conception of reading

itself and questions the relationship between reading and orality. Reading here expands far beyond decoding written signs towards an immersive, physical experience that encompasses cyclical patterns of time and space. In this essay, a unified voice, a 'we', arises as we interact with the text, in a spiralling movement. Words, rituals, and performative expressions intertwine, challenging traditional literary frameworks. This approach demands an ethical interaction with texts as dynamic cultural artefacts.

ESCREVIVÊNCIA AND GINGA

Firstly, I would like to introduce the idea of *escrevivência*, a literary genre rooted in the lived experiences of the Black community. *Escrevivência* is deeply influenced by oral storytelling traditions. The term, which was coined by the author Conceição Evaristo, fuses the Portuguese words for writing (*escrever*) and lived experience (*vivência*), since the literary style gives voice to Black experiences, particularly those of Black women, in a fictionalised form. According to Evaristo, *escrevivência* captures their pain, hardships, and resistance, transforming their experiences into narratives to preserve memories and enhance identities.[1] Reading *escrevivência* becomes an act that requires us to imagine life in its raw historical context: slavery, the social chasms it created, and the racism that continues to kill based on skin color. *Escrevivência* is thus grounded in oral forms of storytelling, using techniques such as rhythm and communal voice, which echo the oral transmission of knowledge in the midst of terror. To survive and create their own culture, Black people had to navigate linguistic barriers and transmit knowledge orally and secretly—an act of resistance against colonial prohibitions. By writing down these narratives, *escrevivência* carries on this tradition of defiance.

In the context of *escrevivência*, we can incorporate the term *ginga*, a concept from the Afro-Brazilian vernacular that embodies the interplay between lived experience and the transmission of memory. It reveals how Afro-Brazilian cultural expressions often communicate modes of being through music, physical practices, and spoken language. *Ginga* means 'the art of moving' or 'the flow' and it captures the essential flexibility and adaptability of Afro-Brazilian life.[2] It is

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1 See Evaristo, Conceição. *Olhos d'água*. Pallas, 2014.
2 Luiz Ruffino views *ginga* as a philosophy of movement and transformation that embodies the ingenuity and resilience of Afro-Brazilian culture. See Ruffino, Luiz. *Pedagogia das encruzilhadas*. Mórula, 2019.

both spoken language and embodied performance, as seen in dance, capoeira, and everyday gestures. As such, *ginga* serves as a living narrative of resilience and creativity, illustrating how Afro-Brazilian traditions shape language, identity, and the shared memory of a community. *Ginga* is a dance of meeting, change, and empowerment.

According to Luiz Ruffino, the idea of *ginga* shares a profound connection with the oral history of African-Brazilian cultures, specifically within the Candomblé faith. Candomblé developed in Brazil and is rooted in the worship of *orixás*, *voduns*, and *inquices* — deities associated with natural forces and ancestral spirits. This religion is characterised by rituals involving music, dance, chants, and offerings, creating a direct connection with the sacred through the embodiment of these entities by initiated practitioners. The practices of Candomblé are deeply intertwined with African oral cultural traditions,[3] particularly those of the Yoruba, Bantu, and Fon ethnic groups, preserving and adapting this knowledge within the Brazilian context. It connects forms of communication that are both sacred and political and it is directly connected to the resistance movements of the past. Its expressions, despite facing adversity, continue to thrive, evolving and shaping the collective consciousness of those who engage with or are influenced by Afro-Brazilian cultural heritage.

In the following, we will delve into the concept of *oraliture*, specifically as it relates to Afro-Brazilian spirituality, with a focus on Exu, the deity of speech and eloquence in Nagô/Yoruba cosmogony. This examination features two narratives, or 'itans', that highlight the connection between narrative art, religious rituals, and political discourse in Brazil's Afro-influenced culture. The tangled web of these realms demonstrates the potent impact of action and verbal expression, key tenets of Exu's philosophy and oral tradition.

ORALITURE AND EXU

Similar to Conceição Evaristo, who fictionalises oral experiences in her aesthetic practice of literary writing under the genre term *escrevivência*, Leda Maria Martins, poet, essayist and pioneer in the study of Afro-Brazilian culture, discusses oral traditions on a theoretical level. She seeks a term that embeds oral traditions in literary theory and proposes the term *oraliture*. Martins' artistic and theoretical

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3   On the *orixás*, the deities, and the religion of Ifá, see the seminal work of
    the Nigerian philosopher Wande Abimbola: Abimbola, Wande. *Ifá: An Exposition
    of Ifá Literary Corpus.* Oxford University Press Nigeria, 1976.

focus on the idea of *oraliture* aims to critically examine the primacy of vision, which dominates Western epistemologies. She states that there is an intimate connection between the act of reading and the process of memory and remembrance:

> In this order, the realm of literary creation serves as a symbolic representation of a particular conception of knowledge, where visual acuity, embodied through the act of reading, takes centre stage. The mind's capacity for retention, etched into our memory, intertwines intimately with the world of sight, illuminated by the all-seeing eye. This mental faculty functions like a gateway, granting access to a vast trove of wisdom.[4]

After Martins, in Western societies, writing functions as a site "of memory recognition", while oral communication is often perceived as "ex-otic" and positioned as "other".[5] In contrast to the Western idea of knowledge and memory being contained and passed on primarily in and by *texts*, Martins offers a concept that encompasses both writing and diverse performative practices of voice and body and thus can capture the realities of oral traditions—*oraliture:*

> To these gestures, to these inscriptions and performative palimpsests, inscribed by voice and body, I have given the name *oraliture*, highlighting in this notion the singular cultural inscription that, as *littera*, cleaves the enunciation of the subject and their collectivity, while also underscoring its value as *litura*, the erasure of language. This significant alteration constitutes the otherness of subjects, cultures, and their symbolic representations. The signifier *oraliture*, as I present it, does not univocally refer to the repertoire of forms and cultural procedures of verbal tradition. Rather, it specifically refers to what, in its

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4 Martins, Leda. "Performances da oralitura: corpo, lugar da memória". *Letras* 26, 2003, pp. 63–81, here p. 64, my translation: "Nessa ordem, o domínio da escrita torna-se metáfora de uma idéia quase exclusiva da natureza do conhecimento, centrada no alçamento da visão, impressa no campo ótico pela percepção da letra. A memória, inscrita como grafia pela letra escrita, articula-se assim ao campo e processo da visão mapeada pelo olhar, princípio privilegiado de cognição, ou que nele não se circunscreve, nos é ex-ótico, ou seja, fora de nosso campo de percepção, distante de nossa ótica de compreensão, exilado e alijado de nossa contemplação, de nossos saberes."
5 Martins, "Performances da oralitura", p. 63, my translation: "lugares de reconhecimento da memória".

> performance, indicates the presence of a residual, stylistic, mnemonic trace, culturally constitutive, inscribed in the writing of the body in movement and in vitality. Like an etching tool, this kinetic trace inscribes knowledge, values, concepts, worldviews, and styles. Oraliture is a performance art form, serving as its foundation. It is a form of expression, encompassing the written word as well as the movements of the body.[6]

The act of remembering involves more than just thinking—it also involves speaking about events, stories, people, and even connecting to ancestors. These ancestral transmissions, which were disrupted and targeted for erasure by slavery and dominating cultures, find continuity in oral literature. In this sense, the act of remembering becomes a practice that can heal, reflect, intellectualise, and sensitise. This viewpoint highlights the inherent constraints of Western scholarship in understanding Afro-Brazilian knowledge structures, philosophies, and literary traditions. In a colonised territory like Brazil, the dominance of Western writing cultures often leads to the erasure of oral traditions in favour of an 'official' narrative—one that is written down and thus prioritised for readability. Against the backdrop of this colonial dynamic, we can approach the concept of *oraliture* in Afro-Brazilian culture through its ability to facilitate communication, both in conveying one's thoughts and in being understood.

   The divine entity responsible for initiating thought and interpersonal connections through the spoken word in the Nagô/Yoruba cosmogony is undoubtedly Exu.[7] The figure of Exu, the god of communication and transformation, illustrates the dynamic and profound

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6   Martins, "Performances da oralitura", p. 77, my translation: "A esses gestos, a essas inscrições e palimpsestos performáticos, grafados pela voz e pelo corpo, denominei oralitura, matizando a noção deste termo a singular inscrição cultural que, como letra (*litera*) cliva a enunciação do sujeito e de sua coletividade, sublinhando ainda no termo seu valor de *litura*, rasura da linguagem, alteração significante, constitutiva da alteridade dos sujeitos, das culturas e de suas representações simbólicas. O significante oralitura, da forma como o apresento, não nos remete univocamente ao repertório de formas e procedimentos culturais da tradição verbal, mas especificamente, ao que em sua performance indica a presença de um traço residual, estilístico, mnemônico, culturalmente constituinte, inscrito na grafia do corpo em movimento e na vocalidade. Como um estilete, esse traço cinético inscreve saberes, valores, conceitos, visões de mundo e estilos. A oralitura é do âmbito da performance, sua âncora; uma grafia, uma linguagem, seja ela desenhada na letra performática da palavra ou nos volejos do corpo."

7   On the influence of Exu and Nagô thinking on Brazilian culture, see Sodré, Muniz. *Pensar Nagô.* Editora Vozes, 2017.

relationship between language, memory, embodiment, and performance in African and diasporic philosophy and Afro-Brazilian literature in particular. Exu's role highlights the fluidity and adaptability of *oraliture*. As a form of expression that transcends the written text and embodies an ethical and transformative power, *oraliture* challenges notions of linear storytelling and fixed narratives. It positions orality as a space for the enactment and renegotiation of identity, community, and ancestral knowledge. Just as Exu not only connects different realms but also metamorphoses them, African diasporic practices of storytelling function as sites where history, resistance, and ancestral wisdom are continuously enacted and reimagined:

> Much like a jazz musician who reimagines traditional rhythms in
> a continuous dialogue with the past and the future, Black cultures
> engage with the archives and legacies of African, European,
> and Indigenous traditions. They navigate these influences through
> linguistic creativity, ritual practices, and a variety of performative
> acts, asserting their presence in a transformative and
> interconnected exchange.[8]

The text discusses the persistence of African religious practices among enslaved people who were transported to the Americas. These deities had already been venerated in Africa, and they were brought along with the people who continued to honour them in secret. Therefore, it is not the gods themselves who were enslaved, but rather the people who worshiped them. Exu and other persecuted deities' stories, as told from the perspective of *escrevivência* and *ginga*, reflect both resistance and adaptation during the era of slavery. Those that are told or performed, e.g. in songs or *oraliture,* are not merely stories; they are acts of survival, tools for reshaping reality, and frameworks that challenge and expand the very definitions of knowledge itself. Our Brazilian source for these expressions of oral memory that have emerged within Afro-Brazilian religious practices is Reginaldo Prandi's *Mitologia dos Orixás (Mythology of the Deities).* It is a compilation of stories or *itans* that have been transcribed and revised

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8   Martins, "Performances da oralitura", p. 70: "Assim como o jazzista retece os ritmos seculares, transcriando-os dialeticamente numa relação dinâmica, retrospectiva e prospectiva, as culturas negras, em seus variados modos de asserção, fundam-se dialogicamente, em relação aos arquivos e repertorios das tradições africanas, européias e indigenas, nos voltejos das linguagens, nos ritos e em muitas outras práticas performáticas que instauram."

from oral traditions into written form.[9] In Yoruba-based religions like Candomblé and Ifá, *itan* refers not only to common stories but also to mythological narratives that explain the origins of the gods, the creation of the world, and the interactions between deities and human beings. These stories are passed down orally through the generations and play a crucial role in preserving Yoruba culture, morality, and traditional wisdom.[10] When Prandi writes about these *itans*, he presents one of the many possible versions. The *itans* are not a unified or universal canon but have become popular through the practices of Candomblé and other Brazilian spiritualities like Umbanda. Each tale is moulded and reworked by its setting, acquiring distinct boundaries based on who tells it, when, and where. This is similar to Greek mythology, where various interpretations of the same story can exist, adapting to the storyteller and audience's requirements and viewpoints.

I will share two *itans* featuring Exu alongside another deity, Oxalá.[11] These narratives highlight the significance of Exu's presence within Afro-Brazilian cultures:

> Exu had no wealth, no land, no river, no profession, no skills, no mission. He wandered the world without a destination. One day, he began visiting Oxalá's house every day, where he watched the elder orixá crafting human beings. Many came to visit Oxalá, staying briefly and learning little. They offered gifts, admired his work, and left. But Exu stayed for sixteen years, carefully observing how Oxalá shaped the hands, feet, eyes, mouths, and bodies of men and women.
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> Exu never asked questions; he simply watched and learned everything. One day, Oxalá tasked Exu to guard the crossroads, ensuring that only those who brought offerings could pass. As more humans needed to be created, Oxalá had no time for distractions. Exu took on the role of collecting offerings on Oxalá's behalf.
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> In recognition of his work, Oxalá granted Exu the right to receive a payment from everyone coming to or leaving his house.

9 In Yoruba, *itan* means 'story' or 'narrative'. Beniste, José. *Dicionário yorubá-português.* Bertrand Brasil, 2011, p. 402.

10 See Camargo, Kim and Naiara Paula Eugenio. "A estética iorubá nos itans e orikis de èṣù e sua relação de coexistência entre ser humano e divino". *Revista Problemata — Revista Internacional de Filosofia* 13 (1), 2022, pp. 223–38.

11 According to Beniste, Oxalá, also called Obatalá, is the deity credited with creating the world: Beniste, *Dicionário Yoruba-Português*, p. 604.

Exu, armed with his *ogó* (a powerful staff), guarded the crossroads, turning away the undesired and punishing those who tried to deceive him. Over time, Exu built his home at that very crossroads, gained wealth, and grew powerful. Now, no one can pass through the crossroads without paying tribute to Exu.[12]

Exu is the primary deity to whom offerings are made, as is commonly told in popular culture: "Exu, who clears the way, the path, and the message, Laroiê, Mojubá."[13] Whether it's for pleasure and success or even as a precursor to any activity, particularly verbal exchange, one must first give homage to Exu. Exu likes to drink and to dance, he represents the genesis and the devouring mouth. His domain lies at the intersection of multiple paths. As the domain of Exu, crossroads

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12 Prandi, Reginaldo. *Mitologia dos Orixás.* Companhia das Letras, 2001, p. 40–41, my translation: "Exu não tinha riqueza, não tinha fazenda, não tinha rio, não tinha profissão, nem artes, nem missão. Exu vagabundeava pelo mundo sem paradeiro. Então um dia, Exu passou a ir à casa de Oxalá. Ia à casa de Oxalá todos os dias. Na casa de Oxalá, Exu se distraía, vendo o velho fabricando os seres humanos. Muitos e muitos também vinham visitar Oxalá, mas ali ficavam pouco, quatro dias, oito dias, e nada aprendiam. Traziam oferendas, viam o velho orixá, apreciavam sua obra e partiam. Exu ficou na casa de Oxalá dezesseis anos. Exu prestava muita atenção na modelagem e aprendeu como Oxalá fabricava as mãos, os pés, a boca, os olhos, o pênis dos homens, as mãos, os pés, a boca, os olhos, a vagina das mulheres. Durante dezesseis anos ali ficou ajudando o velho orixá. Exu não perguntava. Exu observava.
Exu prestava atenção. Exu aprendeu tudo. Um dia Oxalá disse a Exu para ir postar-se na encruzilhada por onde passavam os que vinham à sua casa.
Para ficar ali e não deixar passar quem não trouxesse uma oferenda a Oxalá. Cada vez mais havia humanos para Oxalá fazer. Oxalá não queria perder tempo recolhendo os presentes que todos lhe ofereciam. Oxalá nem tinha tempo para as visitas. Exu tinha aprendido tudo e agora podia ajudar Oxalá. Exu coletava os ebós para Oxalá. Exu recebia as oferendas e as entregava a Oxalá. Exu fazia bem o seu trabalho e Oxalá decidiu recompensá-lo. Assim, quem viesse à casa de Oxalá teria que pagar também alguma coisa a Exu. Exu mantinha-se sempre a postos guardando a casa de Oxalá. Armado de um *ogó*, poderoso porrete, afastava os indesejáveis e punia quem tentasse burlar sua vigilância.
Exu trabalhava demais e fez ali a sua casa, ali na encruzilhada. Ganhou uma rendosa profissão, ganhou seu lugar, sua casa. Exu ficou rico e poderoso. Ninguém pode mais passar pela encruzilhada sem pagar alguma coisa a Exu."

13 *Laroiê* (or *laroye*) is a form of greeting and praise specifically directed at Exu. It can be understood as a way of calling upon him, acknowledging his presence, and inviting his energy into the space. It also expresses reverence and recognition of his role as the messenger and intermediary between the human and spiritual worlds. *Mojuba* (or *Mojubá*) means 'I pay homage' or 'I salute you'. It is a way to express respect, veneration, and submission to the *orixá*. In this context, it signifies humility and reverence, recognising Exu's power and wisdom. Together, "Laroiê mojubá Exu" can be translated as a phrase that means "Greetings, I honor you, Exu."

embody a dynamic, transformative space. It is at crossroads that the oppressive forces of colonisation intersect with possibilities for resistance and survival, offering both a site of struggle and a pathway to liberation and vitality. Crossroads also represent meeting places.[14] Their dynamic nature allows them to be a constantly evolving space of knowledge and expression. The notion of a fixed centre gradually dissolves in this shifting landscape and improvisation becomes the driving force. It reshapes the crossroads into a place where stability gives way to movement. Crossroads thus emerge as fertile ground for generating diverse signs and multiple meanings. These perspectives on Exu and crossroads encourage us to go beyond rigid notions of being and knowing, instead creating a space where imagination, spontaneity, and a multiplicity of meanings foster a more profound appreciation for life as an ever-evolving web of relationships and metamorphoses.

At crossroads, we exchange alcohol and tobacco, we sing and dance, we demand, and we thank. These seemingly ordinary interactions and relationships demonstrate otherness, exchange, and the ambivalence between 'us' and Exu. They recur as a motif, capturing a spirit of defiance. These rituals of exchange, homage, request, and gratitude are crucial for understanding the second *itan*. The narrative of the second tale flips expectations, demonstrating that Exu's character transcends conventional distinctions between good and evil. Allow me to rephrase, in my own words, the account presented in Prandi's work.

At the dawn of creation, Oxalá, the progenitor of mankind, was entrusted with moulding human skulls using an ash gourd. Unfortunately, he neglected or willfully disregarded paying tribute to Exu, thus dooming his mission. Enraged at this slight, Exu devised a cunning plan. He strategically positioned a bottle of fermented palm wine on Oxalá's path. Upon encountering it, Oxalá succumbed to temptation, imbibing its contents, and plunged into a profound slumber. Taking advantage of the situation, the astute Exu deftly swiped the precious gourd, concealing within it the secret formula for crafting a human head. Upon waking, Oxalá immediately confronted Olodumare, bewailing his misfortune. In reply, Olodumare, the God of the Gods, unambiguously stated that Oxalá's predicament stemmed directly from his failure to recognise and venerate Exu's crucial role. It was then, in that very instant, that Oxalá understood the true power

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14 See here and in the following: Martins, Leda. *Performances do tempos espiralar.* Cobogó, 2021, p. 73.

and importance of Exu, who stood watch over all paths and messengers. And so humanity begins.[15]

The figure of Exu underscores the transient nature of existence, while also emphasising the infinite possibilities within every day. "He is", as another common phrase in popular culture states, "the one who killed the bird yesterday with the stone that he threw today". He transcends conventional dichotomies such as good and evil or divine and infernal, anchoring himself in the complex realities of everyday life. Exu transcends mere revelry. He embodies the might of delight and gratification, free from culpability, a catharsis fostering a liberated way of life where festivity becomes a form of defiance and a tribute to the abundance of living.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the Nagô/Yoruba cosmogony to introduce these words and cosmovisions is not merely about understanding spiritual terms or African vocabulary in Brazilian literary practices. It is also about decolonising and decentralising our ways of understanding identity and practices of expression and challenging dominant narratives.[16] Focusing on the historical context of Afro-Brazilian *escrevivência*, *ginga*, *oraliture*, and spirituality cannot be conceptualised without their existential and political dimensions. Exu emerges in this context as a symbol of Black self-consciousness and a profound expression of being in the world. His presence is both technique and feeling, a direct challenge to systems of domination that rely on control and terror. Exu's joy is not an escape; it is a form of resistance that asserts the possibility of feeling, loving, and thriving even under oppressive conditions. It is crucial to recognise that emotions, movement, affection, and the joy of existence are all expressions of freedom. Remember when we talked about the *escrevivência* of *ginga*? These concepts are integral to the cultures that endured despite colonisation and slavery; they are the means through which our epistemologies and ways of life are transmitted. That's what this is really about.

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15 See Prandi, *Mitologia dos Orixás*, p. 503.

16 Grada Kilomba's storytelling, which blends Greek mythology with the realities of combating racism, serves as a prominent example of such an intersectional approach. See Kilomba, Grada. *Memórias Da Plantação: Episódios de Racismo Cotidiano.* Cobogó, 2019. First published in English as *Plantation Memories. Episodes of Everyday Racism.* Unrast Verlag, 2008.

Through the presentation of two *itans* of Exu and the integration of Afro-Brazilian concepts such as *ginga*, *escrevivência*, the crossroads, and *oraliture*, I aimed to illustrate how these storytelling traditions offer a vast and resilient language of expression, where the spheres of narration, spiritual practices, and politics cannot be separated but are inextricably intertwined. These concepts stand as acts of defiance against adversity, charged with energy and vitality, forming the basis of a way of life that passes on and translates Afro-Brazilian and Amefrican knowledge. To shape a new broad and inclusive perspective on the world that resists reductive views of the Other—a perspective grounded in how I envision *blackness*—, we must immerse ourselves in the expressive acts of individuals fighting for fairness and equity to protect memories and lineage, which might be passed on through activities such as dancing, breaking bread, speaking, and the art of capoeira's *gingado*—whether categorised as self-defence or dance. Such practices should not be overlooked as trivial. Instead, they should be embraced as powerful expressions of a living, transformative philosophy and as fundamental pillars of a fairer world. Let us honour Exu, the deity of communication and encounters at crossroads, the deity of transformation and possibilities. Exu, who stands at the nexus of existence, embodies the might of metamorphosis and the prospect of novel paths. We can say with awe and admiration: Laroiê Exu!

Elias Kreuzmair
The Orange Book.
On Illegibility and the Ideologies of Reading

The book's cover is orange, the symbols on the cover are white. Inside, the symbols are orange against a white background. They appear to be Asian, perhaps Chinese, though I am uncertain. The punctuation — what I interpret as commas and full stops — suggests that the symbols are read from left to right. While a translation of some combinations of symbols is provided on the final pages, allowing me to understand them, I am still unable to decipher the symbols. My first impulse is to describe what I see, as I cannot read the signs. I replace one act of reading for another — a reading of the small book's material qualities. In this way, the question of illegibility intersects with the question that most fascinates me when thinking about reading: do we ever not read? Or, put differently: where are the vanishing points between reading signs and reading the world? In asking this, the very meaning of reading begins to dissolve. Reading becomes a metaphor for interpreting the world and ultimately, for experience.

In the first chapter of *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, Hans Blumenberg presents the central ideas of his investigation into the metaphor of the world's readability or legibility within the history of science. This narrative frames nature as something legible that we aspire to read but that remains fundamentally illegible.[1] Blumenberg argues that the paradigm of readability represents a metaphorical complex that articulates the experiencability of the world. Over the centuries, the notion of nature as a readable text has evolved from Augustine to the interpretation of the genetic code. Blumenberg illustrates how the transformations of the metaphor reveal the limits

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1   Blumenberg, Hans. *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*. Suhrkamp, 2020 (first published 1979). Translated by Robert Savage and David Robert as *The Readability of the World*. CUP, 2022.

of experiencability and varying relations between experiencability and representability at different points in time.

Trying to read the orange book is especially frustrating because each page seems to contain only a single sentence—at least, that is what I infer from the punctuation. There are not many signs, yet I am still unable to read them. Sometimes I imagine that, given enough time, I could figure out their meaning by counting how often certain forms repeat and tracing the lines that compose them. If I stare at them long enough, perhaps their meaning will reveal itself. After all, it took Champollion 14 years to decipher the Egyptian hieroglyphs.

I am, in a sense, illiterate. I can decipher one system of signs, maybe two or three, but never all of them. There always will be systems of signs I cannot decode. I am not special in this regard; not being able to decipher all signs is part of the human condition. This holds true in the narrower sense, where one might read the Latin alphabet and Korean script but not Braille or Kannaḍa. Yet it also applies in a broader sense: certain life events—birth, moments of ecstasy, death—remain fundamentally illegible. This is why trauma is often linked to illegibility, as it resists being fully understood or articulated.

To read is to remember signs and words we have encountered before, whether on a screen, a page, or a billboard. Perhaps also words spoken to us, which makes a difference. Most of the words I know, I gathered through reading. For a long time, I thought *cognac* (I read: "coggnuck") and *cognac* (I heard: "conyak") were two different things. The more I read, the rarer it becomes to encounter new words in my first language. Even though my vocabulary will never be complete. Can you encounter all the words of your language? Etymologically, the German word *lesen* for 'to read' means 'to collect'. If we follow this etymological path, the metaphor does not move from the printed signs to the world but from the world to the book. Reading as in 'reading a book' becomes the metaphorical usage.

I bought the orange book at an independent book fair at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. The building was filled with little stalls from small publishing houses. I carried my one-year-old toddler on my arm as we wandered past tables laden with books, magazines, and posters. That day, the fair was especially crowded. We aimed to buy three books: one for my son, one for my partner, and one for myself. While I do not recall the titles of the other books, I still remember buying the orange one. Since bringing it home, it has found

a place on a shelf at my son's height in the large room we use for cooking, eating, and playing.

    I take the etymology of *lesen* from Émile Benvenistes *Dernières leçons*, which the French linguist gave in the years 1968 and 1969 at the Collège de France. The *Dernières leçons* are a collection of notes that Benveniste, an expert in Indo-European and Indo-Iranian languages and cultures, made for his lessons, augmented by the notes of some of his students. Some parts are, at least to me, incomprehensible, as I struggle to find connections between the paragraphs of notes. Shortly after delivering the lecture that would become his last, Benveniste suffered an apoplectic stroke that left him aphasic, unable to speak and, perhaps, even to read.

    As we moved from stall to stall at the book fair, it was the vibrant orange cover that caught my son's eye. Various editions of the book were displayed, each rendered in a different language, each language with its unique colour. It is by the artist David Horvitz: his name is given in Latin letters on the cover of the orange version. The title, *How to Shoplift Books*, appears in multiple languages: *Comment voler des livres*, *Cómo robar libros*, *Wie man Bücher klaut*, or *Come rubare i libri*. I know this because these titles are listed on one of the final pages of my orange edition. However, I cannot transcribe the title of the orange book here, even though I suspect it is yet another version of the titles mentioned above. I could easily look it up using Google Lens or similar apps. In fact, I did attempt this recently, only to discover that it is likely some form of westernised Chinese script, with the translation proving only partly comprehensible.

    In the concluding sentence of Walter Benjamin's short essay on the "Lesekasten" (a device akin to the Phonetic Object Boxes still utilised in Montessori schools today), he writes "Nun kann ich gehen; gehen lernen nicht mehr." At least that is how I remember it. This allegorical statement equates walking with reading: while I can walk, I cannot learn to walk anew. Benjamin emphasises that, with the acquisition of reading skills, we inevitably lose something. As adults, our ability to read prevents us from fully reconstructing the experience of being a non-reader; the capacity to perceive the world without the lens of literacy is lost.[2] Our brains may misread signs, but they do not revert to a state of non-reading.

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2 See also the experience of Tokyo for westerners as a place where they cannot read the signs — for example Barthes, Roland. *Empire of Signs*. Translated by Richard Howard, Anchor Books, 1983 (first published in French, 1970).

The first chapter of *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* also recounts the story of a book (and a man) that remained illegible for Blumenberg. In 1950, Erich Rothacker, a philosopher and admirer of Adolf Hitler who navigated a career during and after the Nazi era, published a bibliography of his works. Within this bibliography, he referenced an unpublished book titled *Das Buch der Natur* from 1946. Here, illegibility arises not from undecipherable signs but from lack of availability. Despite this, the book preoccupies Blumenberg for years, as he fears that Rothacker has already done what he plans to do in his own project, which would ultimately become *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*. In one text, he even includes a footnote alluding to Rothacker's unprinted—and perhaps unwritten—book. However, when he delivers Rothacker's obituary at the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Mainz, Blumenberg decides it is best not to mention this topic.

When confronted with something I cannot read, I instinctively turn to other texts. In my will to know, I try to conquer the illegible by exploring other books, websites or apps in an effort to decipher the orange book. Yet, in writing this essay, I must discipline myself to let the illegible remain illegible. I must shield my object of inquiry from my will to know. I am not alone in my desire to read. My son often asks me to read the orange book to him. Sometimes I tell him I cannot read it, other times I describe what I see. He has begun drawing in the book, something I've allowed, perhaps because I myself cannot read it. I think he draws in the book to make use of a book that is his. For him, it seems natural: books are meant to be read or coloured in. It's also a reflection of my reading practice, as I often read with a pencil in hand when engaging with printed texts.

A list of other books titled 'orange': *The Orange Book* by Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (Osho); *The Orange Book. Reclaiming Liberalism*, edited by Paul Marshall and David Laws; *The Orange Book* by Richard McGuire, a children's book described as "Fourteen oranges, fresh from their tree, make their way in the world and end up in various places including art school, vaudeville, and television". Yet even more books bear the title *Orange Book*: among others, the *Trusted Computer System Evaluation Criteria*, a computer security standard; the manifesto *We Can Conquer Unemployment* from 1929 by David Lloyd George and the Liberal Party; the *Approved Drug Products with Therapeutic Equivalence Evaluations*, published by the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research; the *Handbook of Directives and Permitted Conventions* for the English Bridge Union; and a book on OpenGL Shading Language, a programming language.

Blumenberg describes his "rivalry" with Rothacker as "partly ironic" and "partly painful".[3] Ironic, because it appears to exist only on Blumenberg's side. Rothacker never mentioned *Das Buch der Natur* to Blumenberg, even when the latter presented his project in front of a commission on which Rothacker sat. Nor did Rothacker object when Blumenberg published a book containing a footnote referencing *Das Buch der Natur* in a series that Rothacker himself edited. Perhaps Blumenberg experienced a frustration similar to my own with the unreadable orange book—unable to access the text Rothacker had promised but never published. The pain may also have stemmed from doubts: the fear that Rothacker had already accomplished what Blumenberg was attempting. Or perhaps there was a tinge of guilt, a sense that he had inadvertently 'stolen' a book—or at least its topic.

In his book *What We See When We Read,* Peter Mendelsund reflects on the experience of encountering Chinese characters as a non-speaker: "When I see the Chinese character that indicates 'tree', for example, I notice the shape of the character, and this shape encourages me to picture a certain kind of tree—of a certain thickness and shape. […] I am responding to the character as a picture." He adds, in parentheses: "But this is only because *I do not speak Chinese.*"[4] Mendelsund argues that familiarity with a sign system renders its signs transparent. It is only when we encounter an unfamiliar system that we become aware of the materiality of the signs themselves.

In the orange book, I see no trees—only dancers, cacti, and robots (and orange). This is a desperate attempt to extract some semblance of meaning, to at least misread the signs. Other signs, however, I can perceive only as arrangements of lines. Even so, I cannot quite experience their materiality as such. They remain lines, always leading my thoughts elsewhere. Mendelsund concludes his exploration of the mental images produced by reading by asserting that, while we often believe we are visualising what we read as if it were a film, we are actually only seeing reductions: "These reductions are the world as we see it—they are what we see when we read, and they are what we see when we read the world."[5] We never perceive the whole; instead, we extrapolate from blurry and fragmented images, convincing ourselves that we see the entirety. This applies equally to the reading of fiction and the reading of the world. The illegibility of the signs in

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3   Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*, p. 13, my translation.
4   Mendelsund, Peter. *What We See When We Read*. Vintage Books, 2014, p. 327.
5   Mendelsund, *What We See*, p. 416.

the orange book, however, renders the signs opaque. In calling them dancers, cacti, or robots, I attempt to create that film-like mental space and transcend their materiality. Yet, because I cannot decipher them properly and because many of them make no sense to me at all, the act of 'reading' them produces a flickering image. Still, the mental pictures remain inseparable from the materiality of the sign. The two dimensions are overlapping.

Maybe, when reading turns into writing, we acknowledge the partiality of what we perceive in reading and attempt to supplement those fragments by producing more text. Roland Barthes even uses writing as a metaphor for reading: "reading […] (that text we write in ourselves when we read)."[6] If we reverse this proposition, then I have, in a sense, already 'read' the orange book. If reading is writing, then writing about the book becomes an act of reading. Understanding the symbols is not a prerequisite for the act of reading (think of those moments when your mind wanders while your eyes continue to trace the words on a page). Viewed this way, Blumenberg's *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt* becomes his own reading of the illegible book that Rothacker once listed in his bibliography.

But the painfulness of the rivalry between Rothacker and Blumenberg extends beyond the question of an illegible book. Blumenberg had faced severe discrimination and the constant threat of deportation in Nazi Germany; the fact that his mother was Jewish had made it impossible for him to pursue philosophy until after the war. During the Nazi regime, he had even been forced into hiding for some time. To find his intellectual rival in Rothacker—a Nazi—must have been particularly agonising. Even more so as Rothacker adopted, in regard to *Das Buch der Natur*, what was a common practice among most Nazis in Germany after 1945: not saying anything about what they did in the years between 1933 and 1945. If Rothacker indeed completed *Das Buch der Natur* in 1946, as he claimed, it can be understood as the result of his work during the 1940s. During that time, he was part of the 'Arbeitsgemeinschaft für den Kriegseinsatz der Geisteswissenschaften' (Working Group for the War Deployment of the Humanities), which sought to legitimise Nazi racism and expansionism through its research. Perhaps Rothacker invented the book as a cipher for what he wanted neither to remember nor to be remembered. He is hiding in plain sight.

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6   Barthes, Roland. "Writing Reading". *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, University of California Press, 1989 (first published in French, 1984), pp. 29–32, here p. 30.

Reflecting on the illegibility of the orange book, I am struck by how male-dominated my thinking about reading is. The desire to 'conquer' signs—especially foreign ones—feels inherently masculine. Friedrich Kittler, in *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900,* theorises how, around 1800, the figure of the Mother who teaches male readers is essentialised in the German discourse on reading. Reading remains a deeply gendered concept. When I think of my son starting school, I imagine a female teacher—perhaps because my teachers were women, or because it was my mother who guided me when I struggled to learn to read. In a way, she was more qualified for this task: My mother is a reader, my father a buyer of books. I do not know of anyone in my family who ever stole a book.

I wonder why most of the figures I cite are Jewish (except for Friedrich Kittler, who came from a staunchly Nazi family and was given the middle name Adolf). The topos of a connection between illegibility and trauma seems bound up in this fact. Occasionally, I come across my grandfather's notes in the margins of his cheap editions of Thomas Mann and Friedrich Hölderlin, books he read in retirement. Instead of bookmarks, he would record the date he read a passage. He was an accountant and, like many Germans of his generation, had fought in World War II. How deeply he was involved with Nazi politics, I do not know: he developed Alzheimer's before I could ask him about his past. My father's mother, on the other hand, was an ardent supporter of Hitler. I do not know if she read much: she died the year I was born.

The association between illegibility and Jewishness recalls the fact that, like Christianity, Judaism is a profoundly book-centred religion. My parents, both baptised Roman Catholics, distanced themselves from the institutional church. My siblings and I are not baptised. Perhaps, I think, they replaced the book religion they had been part of with a religion of the book. For them, this shift was tied to a hope for a better life through university studies and reflection, a way to envision new modes of living. In this sense, they unconsciously repeated a broader cultural transformation typically dated around 1800: the shift from readers of religious texts to readers of novels. In this sense, belief in books and reading becomes a kind of faith. The idea of reading takes on an ideological dimension, shaping the very framework through which one reads—whether the object is signs or the world itself. It situates reading in a realm of ambition and dreams, envisioning a life removed from where you are now.

Neither experience nor reading are neutral concepts: both unfold within a framework inherently inscribed within them. There are ideological dimensions to the way I read the orange book: in framing the transparency of signs as a forgetting of their material dimension—the orange colour—I reinforce the notion that the material world and the body are absent when we read signs. What becomes visible in the attempts to read the illegible is a part of the framework I bring to reading. It contains books I've read (still predominantly by men, despite my efforts), things I've seen, movements, how I hold my body when reading to my son, memories of the other readers in my family, and their ideas of reading—the notion that illegibility is linked to trauma. It is not.

Reading is always already both, inhabiting a material, bodily world *and* engaging with a world of spectres. These dimensions of reading are inseparable. They do not exist in opposition but as layers and shifting relations between metaphors, bodies, and objects. No matter how hard I try not to read the illegible book, it will become something I will have read. However playful, there is always some degree of appropriation, some engagement with the resistance of the object and the signs. Stealing a book, from this perspective, feels as desperate an act as buying one. Both are attempts to appropriate what can never be fully appropriated—whether or not the signs can be read.

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Ulrike Draesner, Professor of Literary Writing at the German Institute for Literature in Leipzig since 2018, writes novels, short stories, essays, and poetry. She has received numerous awards for her literary work, including the German Prize for Nature Writing and the German Literature Fund Grand Prize. She is a member of the Akademie der Künste Berlin and the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung. Her next book, a re-reading of the character of Penelope, will be published in 2025.

Angélica Freitas is a Brazilian poet. She has published four poetry collections and a graphic novel. In her work, Freitas explores themes surrounding women and nationality and is also interested in connections between drawing and writing. In 2020, Freitas was a DAAD Artists-in-Berlin fellow. To share your experiences of reading the illegible, as she proposes in her contribution, you can reach her at angelicafe@gmail.com.

Sharon Howe is a writer and translator working from German into English. She specialises in literary translation and was both a shortlistee (2019) and winner (2021) of the Goethe-Institut Award for New Translation. Recent projects include working with a team of translators on Angela Merkel's memoir *Freedom*.

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Karolin Meunier is an artist and writer based in Berlin. Her performances, texts, and video works explore the significance of cultural techniques for social interaction. Her research focuses on feminist strategies in film and literature, translation processes, and the politics of dialogue. Meunier is part of the collective bookstore and publisher b_books; her artist's book on a work by Italian feminist Carla Lonzi is forthcoming.

Kinga Tóth is a writer, visual and sound poet, performer, and translator. She writes in Hungarian, German, and English and presents her work in performances, exhibitions, and international festivals. Tóth's publications include poetry collections, visual art catalogues, novels, and music records. She received the Hugo Ball Förderpreis for her intermedia literary work and the Bernard Heidsieck Prix by Centre Pompidou and Fondazione Bonotto for her performative literary work. In 2023/2024, she was a DAAD Artists-in-Berlin fellow.

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Michael T. Taussig is Class of 1933 Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Columbia University, NYC. He is known for his idiosyncratic books from 1980 onwards concerning *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America, The Nervous System, Mimesis and Alterity, The Magic of the State, Walter Benjamin's Grave, I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown, Postcards for Mia*. His latest book *And the Garden is You* considers fieldwork, writingwork, and readingwork.

Nhã Thuyên secludedly anchors herself to Hà Nội, Việt Nam and totters between languages as a writer, translator, and editor. She has authored several books in Vietnamese, some of which have appeared in English translation, including *viết* (*writing*)*, rìa vực* (*edge of the abyss*)*, từ thở, những người lạ* (*words breathe, creatures of elsewhere*), and *bất\ \tuẫn: những hiện diện [tự-] vắng trong thơ Việt* (*un\ \martyred: [self-]vanishing presences in Vietnamese poetry*). Her next book of poetry, *vị nước* (*taste of water*), is lying there waiting to see the moon. In 2023/2024, she was a DAAD Artists-in-Berlin fellow.

Raisa Inocêncio Ferreira Lima received her PhD in Philosophy from the University of Toulouse, France, for her first book on the history of violence against women. Currently, her research focuses on the future of ancestrality, specifically with regard to the narratives, aesthetic representations and religious practices of the Nagô/Yoruba cosmogony in Brazil's cultural heritage. In Brazil and Argentina, Raísa Inocêncio is affiliated with the research groups *Carolina Maria de Jesus*, *Lélia Gonzalez Network*, and *Escuela Artivismos del Sur*. In 2024, she was an Early Career Fellow at the Cluster of Excellence *Temporal Communities* at Freie Universität Berlin. She also conducts bath workshops as art-healing practices.

Editorial note

This publication is the product of a collaboration between the research project *READING READING* at the Cluster of Excellence *Temporal Communities. Doing Literature in a Global Perspective* (Freie Universität Berlin) and the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program. In the summer of 2024, a group of scholars and artists from various disciplines were invited to reflect on the practice of reading by focusing on its absolute limit, the illegible. By examining an unreadable artefact, each of them began to explore reading as a sensual, self-referential, affective, creative, experimental or political practice. The results of these explorations, in the form of essayistic reflections, visual works or concepts for workshops and performances, were discussed in a colloquium at Freie Universität Berlin in October 2024, eventually taking on the shape of the essays assembled in this volume.

The visual, participatory and performative contributions were presented under the title *READING READING ROOM* on 18 March 2025 at daadgalerie in Berlin. The event included a workshop by the design studio visual intelligence, which involved developing visual mappings of an asemic text by Jim Leftwich, and a performance workshop by the poet and performer Kinga Tóth on how to collectively read aloud a work of visual poetry. The products of these workshops, such as a manual for reading the unreadable by Robin Coenen, can be explored online on the *READING READING: IL/LEGIBLE* project site on the webpage of *Temporal Communities*. Also available online are other explorations still in progress at the time of publication, such as the continuation of Karolin Meunier's series of letters on reading code and a videowork on the Vietnamese alphabet by Nhã Thuyên.

Temporal Communities

The Cluster of Excellence 2020 *Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective* (EXC 2020) at Freie Universität Berlin fundamentally rethinks the concept of literature from a global perspective. We understand and study literature as a phenomenon that operates in and through time and creates its own temporalities. Literary practice, understood in a global sense, challenges received cultural and linguistic boundaries, making it necessary to transcend the Eurocentric notions of 'nation' and 'epoch' that have traditionally framed literary history. What matters for a concept of literature as a form of action that is always in exchange with other arts and cultural practices is the ability to create communities across time that transcend the idea of the literary as developed by Western modernity. *Temporal Communities* brings together researchers from the fields of literary studies and comparative literature, art history and art theory, film studies, theatre studies and philosophy. The Cluster's work is characterised by a collaborative, exploratory practice that fosters exchange between the humanities and artistic perspectives.

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"The question of illegibility intersects with the
question that most fascinates me when
thinking about reading: do we ever not read?
Where are the vanishing points between
reading signs and reading the world?
In asking this, the very meaning of reading
begins to dissolve. Reading becomes
a metaphor for interpreting the world and
ultimately, for experience."

"How one reads matters, and matters deeply."