Suddenly this Overview, Reading the Literal
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Abstract:
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What does it mean when one speaks in an opaque language? The construction of ‘experience’ in art has been closely explored through the concepts of ‘rasa’, ‘sensation’, ‘affect’ etc. in philosophical enquiry across the globe which have given rise to the question that informs my current research - the role of the ‘literal’ object and the objectified ‘letter’ in contemporary art practices. The ‘literal’ somehow finds itself at this strange crossroads of explicit and implicit communication. The Dhvani theory (dhvani can be loosely translated as ‘resonance’) or the theory of Suggestion, one of the several linguistic theories in Indian aesthetic philosophy, emphasizes on reading and receiving language through multiple levels of interpretation. At the same time it puts emphasis on expressing emotions through material symbolism i.e referring to concrete objects in the world to convey an abstract expression. The landscape poetry in Tamil Sangam Literature is an example of highly charged symbolism where the landscape becomes the expression of the state of mind. Swiss Concrete poet Eugene Gomringer (Constellations, 1953) and artist groups like the Noigandres group of poets in Brazil – Haroldo de Campos, Décio Pignatari and Augusto de Campos invested entirely in the word, trying to shed its semantic weight and construct new ways of reading materially. Words turn into materials to make visual/sensorial experiences out of them - an inversion of linguistic role-play and a tendency towards a more universal poetry where form and content collapse into each other. What happens when one is confronted by an opaque material? How is meaning constructed out of a literal work. The paper will explore the conditions of the ‘literal object’ and the ‘object letter’ in contemporary art practices and engage with the two contrapuntal impulses of clarity and obscurity which frame a contemporary condition where-in art vocabulary takes recourse to the ‘material’ language once again.

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**Constellations**

In a letter to Swiss-Bolivian poet Eugen Gomringer one of the earliest concrete poets, his translator Jerome Rothenberg wrote, "You speak of constellations, you speak of corners, I speak elsewhere of combinations – but always, it is a question of making the words cohere in a given space, the poem’s force or strength related to the weight and value of the words within it, the way they pull and act on each other” (Gomringer, The Book of Hourse and Constellations 1968). In reply, Gomringer wrote, “The constellation is a system, it is also a playground with definite boundaries. The poet sets it all up. He designs the playground as a field-of-force & suggests its possible workings. The reader, the new reader, accepts it in the spirit of play, then plays with it” (Gomringer, The Book of Hourse and Constellations 1968).

Gomringer can be considered as one of the earliest proponents of Concrete poetry in Europe who emerged parallel alongside many others across the world for instance almost simultaneously in Brazil by the Noigandres group--Haroldo de Campos, Decio Pignatari and Augusto de Campos in Brazil or Oyvind Fahlström of Sweden who was writing concrete poetry by 1952 (Solt 1970). Gomringer's book was titled ‘Constellations’ - a title he borrowed from Mallarme and which found echo in his later manifesto which was titled 'From line to constellation' (Gomringer n.d.). Mary Ellen Solt, who was herself an American concrete poet observes how concrete poetry had the thrust towards a universal poetry – ‘international , supranational’ (Solt 1970). She further notes how this very impulse underlining the concrete poetry’s radical revolt against grammatical syntax and logic behind language making and move towards a new way of relating and finding linkages between single words and their spatial existences, was an address to the very foundations of meaning-making in language. One can also recognise certain undertones of tension between the rational and the irrational self in the larger cultural discourse that these poets were emerging from – one of war and dictatorial regimes. Thus, concrete poetry along with other forms such as visual, phonetic, kinetic and electronic poetry emerged as counter-currents to the larger sentimental subtext of language.

The immediate question that follows then is what is the experience of encountering these concrete poems? How different are these from the reading of a text strung together with present syntax? What turns the word into an image and how then do we ‘read’ this visual poem?

These questions seem to be relevant not only to concrete poets but also to the larger discourse of experiencing contemporary art. The fact that the experience is largely mediated through the act of reading a work as much as encountering it bodily presents us with the tough task of trying to articulate the realm of experience of a contemporary...
art work within a discourse that exists in the blurred crossover between phenomenology, hermeneutics and epistemology.

**Language and opacity**

Gomringer (*Constellations, 1953*) and the Noigandres invested entirely in the word, trying to shred its semantic weight and construct new ways of reading materially. Words turned into materials to make visual/sensorial experiences out of them, and ‘they became beautiful simply because they are what they are’; an inversion of linguistic role-play and a tendency towards a more universal poetry where form and content collapse into each other. It was anticipated following the First World War in the second DE STIJL manifesto of 1920:

THE WORD IS DEAD...
THE WORD IS IMPOTENT
asthmatic and sentimental poetry the "me" and "it"
which is still in common use everywhere...
is influenced by an individualism fearful of space
the dregs of an exhausted era...
psychological analysis
and clumsy rhetoric
have KILLED THE MEANING OF THE WORD...

The Noigandres group claimed to be influenced by two seminal literary figures – Ezra Pound and Mallarmé; two poets who took contrasting styles and ideologies in their thinking about the function of poetry, but with the same intention – of charging language with meaning. Pound turned towards concrete images and Mallarme towards the immaterial and the obscure. E. Pound as a figure perhaps embodies the ideological risk that comes with object centric/materialist/reified perception – a risk that was voiced with substantial criticism by philosophers like Hannah Arendt. Through his Imagist manifesto in poetry he seemed to demand a ‘prose kinema’ – a condensed precise moment of expression with ‘no loss of time’, like the sentence-image.

‘The "age demanded" chiefly a mould in plaster,
Made with no loss of time,
A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster
Or the "sculpture" of rhyme.’

- Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, Ezra Pound, 1920

Pound’s thesis on ‘How to Read’ and his fascination with Chinese ideograms and minimal poetry influenced his literary move towards Imagism, which he would later in his life be disillusioned with. It is telling of certain limitation of these super-structuralist

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1 V.K Chari in his book Sanskrit Criticism links the philosophy of *dhwani* with the Imagists and to the writing style of Hemingway which developed by way of descriptions and details of the material world.
manifestoes in the fact that these movements hit a dead end after a while and seemed to morph into other forms of experimentation. But the question still remains. What does it mean when one reads an opaque language?

The script of the Bengali language has always been an object of fascination for me despite the fact that I do not understand it nor do I speak it. But it is possible for me to follow its contours and indulge in an act of following the script such that I am reading it and yet not ‘reading’ it. This indulgence, however, is often ruptured by a subtitle that accompanies to explicate and clarify an otherwise opaque text. Similarly, I cannot read my grandfather’s handwriting mainly because it is largely illegible (There was only one publisher in the whole of that district who could decipher his handwriting!) Nevertheless, I still profess to ‘read’ the lines and if I proclaim in distress that ‘I can’t read this!’ then does the word in that moment turn into an image?

This personal encounter with opacity has been articulated by many authors, one of the most poignant of which is by French literary theorist Maurice Blanchot, who in the opening passage of *Thomas the Obscure* (Blanchot 1988) talks about a fog that engulfs the protagonist on the shore,

‘The fog hid the shore. A cloud had come down upon the sea and the surface was lost in a glow which seemed the only truly real thing. Currents shook him, thought without giving him the feeling of being in the midst of the waves and of rolling in familiar elements. The conviction that there was, in fact, no water at all made even his his effort to swim into a frivolous exercise from which he drew nothing but discouragement Perhaps he should only have had to get control of himself to drive away such thoughts, but his eye found nothing to cling to, and it seemed like he was staring in to the void with the intention of finding help there.’

(Blanchot 1988, 7)

Opacity as a quality perhaps is best understood through material – that which is opaque obstructs vision, light, understanding yet it is the most eligible material for articulation of any form or idea. In the case of the concrete poets, the word ‘concrete’ can be traced to its architectural usage, that of a definitive tangible material with ‘endless expressive possibilities’ (Solt 1970). Here it is a known fact that the Noigandres were inevitably influenced by the architectural structuralism and high modernist concrete architecture that was taking shape in Brazil at the moment which will be elaborated later in the paper.

This ‘concrete’ has an allusion to corporeality – a body of substance – a ‘corpus’. If we are to therefore consider the process of reading and writing as corporeal actions, then Nancy’s definition of ‘writing as exscribing’ (Nancy 2008) helps us in making sense of the material of language. Nancy speaks of writing as an act where one ‘documents the body’ through one’s mind and back again through the body. Thus one does not write through or ‘on the body but ‘writes the body’ itself. Thus Nancy notes how in acts of reading and writing almost always entail the process of touching. Thus there is a limit
situation being attributed to the material of the readable object, where faculties of thought, touch, words and the self are brought into action in one field.

'The space of the page – is a ‘touching’ of my hand while it writes and yours while they hold the book.[..] In the end, here and now, your own gaze touches the same traces of characters as mine, and you read me, and I write you.’ (Nancy 2008)

Thus, perhaps in one way or another, the estrangement of a language is every bit an opportunity to meet the language again with a new ‘foothold’. This estrangement enables an experience of the encounter not strictly in the literary domain but more in the sensorial domain. Here we see the first possibility of abstraction in the most definitive form - an abstraction that is possible only through the fact that the most obscure is articulated through the most concrete gesture.

In the words of Gomringer (Gomringer 1968) – ‘The new poem will be simple & perceivable both as a whole & in its parts. It will be something to be seen & used but also something to be thought of : object of thought in a play of ideas. It will work through brevity & compression. It will be memorable & (as image) easy-to-remember.’

**Dhvani – the theory of suggestion**

'To name an object, this means suppressing three-fourths of the enjoyment of the poem, which involves working it out little by little: to suggest, that is the dream.' – Umberto Eco posits in on of his reflections on Mallarme’s works.

The *Dhvani* theory, translated as a Theory of Suggestion, was essentially a semantic theory, an extension of the elaborate theorizing about language being pursued by early Sanskrit grammarians and logicians (Chari 1977, 391). It was first elaborated in Ānandavardhana’s classic text *Dhvanyāloka* (The light of suggestion) in the ninth century with a commentary by Abhinavagupta. The theory of interpretation has two broad divisions, the first being the primary or one that can be loosely referred to as the literal meaning (*abhidhā*) and the other being the secondary meaning or the transferred metaphor (*lakṣaṇā*). The *Dhvani* theory posed a third category of interpretative theory, that of the suggestion of meaning (*vyañjana*), which was proposed as the key function of poetic language (ibid. 391).

Chari (1990) in his elaboration on the Theory of Suggestion, states clearly how the *Dhvani* theory is essentially about levels of interpretation. The *Dhvani* theorists invested the word with a special semantic function, which they claimed to be exclusive to the province of poetry. In this light, I propose that *Dhvani* has an obvious scope beyond the

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2 There are several translations of the original text, the translation referred to here is edited by Ingalls, translated by Ingalls and Co. (The Dhvanyaloka of Anandavardhana with the Locana of Abhinavagupta 1990)
linguistic grounds of its origin and thereby can be extended into the field of visual
interpretation.

Suggestion could be with reference to a conceptual idea; suggestion can also be
figurative. In Western criticism, a free or a floating metaphor, owing to the pressure of
the context, could acquire the status of a symbol. However, the Dhvani school
emphatically stayed away from confusing the metaphoric expression with the symbolic,
thereby marking a break between the kind of theory developed by the Romantic-
Illuminist doctrines of Blake, Poe, Mallarme to Yeats, which held in them a certain
mysticism of the conception of the phenomenal world (Chari 1990). The Dhvani theory
was essentially embedded in object-hood and the materially perceptible world. The
Tamil Sangam poets are a classic example of poetry that is entirely codified in the
material world, where landscape and seasons take on the role of different emotions³.

Literal objects and the politics of the 'literary'

Fischli and Weiss’ ‘Rock on Top of Another Rock’ is a work which is essentially that – a
Rock on Top of Another Rock – one boulder balancing precariously on another boulder
on the ground. The work strikes the nail on its head and is a performance of
precariousness in its most explicit material form. At the same time, it also confronts the
art ‘reader’ with the challenge of trying to see the subtlety and humour of the work over
and beyond the explicit without falling prey to an urge to over-interpret..

The ‘literal’ thus finds itself at this crossroads of explicit and implicit communication.
Thus, while the literal affronts us with the explicit, we are simultaneously accosted with
an opacity that often accompanies works that are extremely lucid and intelligible. This
limit condition – this definitive expression of art then provides the beginning point for
creative speculation and the active mental participation on part of the audience. Hyper-
resemblance, therefore is the original resemblance, not providing any replica of reality,
and slips into the gap that separates operations of art from techniques of reproduction.
This investment in the hyper-real, having germinated in Jean Baudrillard’s discourse on
the simulacra, which calls for the ‘liquidation of all referentials’ where the faith in the
object lies in the radical negation of sign as value and the death sentence of every
reference (Baudrillard 1983, 4). ⁴

This particular attribute of the ‘literal’ finds resonance with Ranciere’s engagement with
‘literariness’ and its political import towards a more egalitarian aesthetics wherein the
excess of words is a move towards a more equal aesthetic regime where art practice is
emancipated from hierarchical notions of genres and style. Ranciere specifically makes
a point that art is first of all an “idea” of art and literarity as being a specific link

³ For more see (Ramanujan 1994)
⁴ Pg. 4, Simulations, Jean Baudrillard, translated by Paul Foss, Paul Patton, Phillip Beitchman, published by
Semiotext(e) Inc, 1983
between a system of meaning of words and a system of visibility of things is essentially what makes the literal in contemporary art also a political move towards an experience of art emancipated from the regimes of the knowledge project.

**Object letters and a case for artist-translator**

While poetic impulse has always been to charge language with meaning, steering to new experiences of the word, it has been a tense task to look at the charged object, since encounters with material are at the same time complex processes of translation both from the art maker as well as the art reader. What happens when one is confronted by an opaque material? How is meaning constructed out of a literalness of a work? Depending on the historical influences one derives from in the field of cultural production, different practices have different political potentials.

In his anthology *Seeing Things*, Irish poet Seamus Heaney rejects narrative and temporality, a rejection that is rooted in the poet’s past when he experienced in the presence of commonplace objects, the exhilarating sensation of intransitive motion, which gave him a feeling of timelessness[...]. Where the actual and the imagined collapse'(Cavanagh 2009), a condensed moment of 'suddenly having this overview' to quote Fischli and Weiss, emerges.

Oscillating away from a recognition of this sort of 'literary impossibility' (in the words of Mallarme), perhaps the material object could enter the picture with the purpose of providing wider 'experiential' access in a trans-cultural setting. As the artist Mira Schendel says about her Graphic Objects, “while pursuing transparency as an issue, I arrived at the object”. The two contrapuntal impulses of clarity and obscurity, frame our contemporary condition where art vocabulary takes a fearless recourse to the 'material' language once again. In the works of artists today like L.N.Tallur, whose recent installation at the Kochi Muziris Biennale 2012, *Veni, Vidi, Vici* can be seen as a form of concrete poem, where a process has been condensed into a sculptural and spatial encounter or in Adrian Villar Rojas where myth descends on earth.

The question remains around the experience of these works in travelling contexts, as works feed from a different tradition of craft, material and personal forms of expression and yet transcend into a wider conversation. There is something in here about the sincerity of the means, and material coming from a personal process including humour, wit and drama associated with these works. There seems to be an active translator within the artist who takes the task of translation as intrinsic to the task of artistic production. The phenomenon of the global artist therefore must be seen as indispensable to the medium and language of the work he chooses to set in play.
The context of globalization is an inevitable precursor for most cultural processes, the transcultural artist having emerged also as a cultural translator. Here one can invoke the concept of Weltliteratur as used by Goethe in many of his essays in early 19th century, where he said in an interview ‘I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind, revealing itself everywhere and at all times.’ Marx and Engels pick up on this market based understanding of literature to describe the “cosmopolitan character” of bourgeois literary production, but then also seek to exceed it. They hoped to create a new type of world literature, exemplified by the manifesto, which was to be published simultaneously in many languages and several locations. This text was supposed to inaugurate a new type of world literature.

These new object letters of contemporary art could be seen as just as well – through this lense of ‘circulating objects’ of communication – demanding certain vocabularies to be learnt and thereby taking recourse to materialist expression. This symbiotic understanding of the obscure alongside the clear could perhaps help in balancing the constellation forming by giving language its necessary impasse – a collapse in the possibility of suggestions, a directness that could either resonate with multiple possibility or turn completely opaque, thus sitting on a very fine divisive line.

**Works Cited**


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