

Acknowledgements

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Images:

Front: Louise Haselton, *Veto Group 1*, courtesy Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia (CACSA) Michael Klivanek, photographer.
Centre: John Barbour, *Untitled Objects*, (installation view) 2006, gouache on lead, cotton, silk, wool, cotton voile, approx 215 x 280cm.
Courtesy Yuill Crowley, Sydney

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Art, Architecture
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Lost for words

SASA GALLERY

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ARBITRARY TO NON-ARBITRARY IN 13 STEPS.

Alex Selenitsch

Yoko Tawada writes in Japanese, German and English. At a talk by her in Melbourne recently, Frank Ostowski asks her about the arbitrary nature of the sign – does her multi-lingual practice give any insight into this linguistic given?¹ Tawada replies, if a little hesitantly, that, yes, she knows that this is a given, but it is the business of writers to bring the sign and its referent closer, to make it less arbitrary. At this moment, I hear a poet's job description, and then also a formula that might give some insights into the work of all creative workers. The following notes outline the territory glimpsed:

1.
The sign and what it refers to, or the object/thing and its name, are paired in an arbitrary way fixed by consensus or custom². New words are invented for new things and experiences, either by edict or consensus, but these new words are not imitations of the things they refer to. This assumption feels true for written languages with phonetic alphabets, even if onomatopoeia, that is, naming by imitation of the sound of the thing, is there to make a nuisance of itself. But it feels less true for pictograph languages such as Chinese or Japanese, where the graphic image is derived from a mix of calligraphic images, associated sounds and graphic methods of combining concepts. Compared to pictographic systems, phonetic alphabets also encourage a conceptual split between writing and picturing, with words tending towards the arbitrary and images somewhat less so or not at all.

2.
'Arbitrary' means that the material qualities of the sign, or its structural properties, are not to be read as representations of what it refers to, and that for a deeper reading one must chase and round up the concepts and associations of the sign. One must not look at the sign at all, but look away. This imperative to ignore the sign easily leads to the idea that language is transparent or invisible, or at least, is so when it is at its best. But the limbo of arbitrariness is only there if language is atomized, that is, considered as being made of non-reducible and distinct particles such as letters, words or some other tiny unit of meaning such as a 'meme'. In use, language is a rolling circus of gestures, sounds, formats and occasions, never a simple isolated unit, or even just a

collection of simple units. This complexity provides the arena for closing the arbitrary divide.

3.
A 'STOP' sign (to already use the word in a different way), for example, requires knowledge of road rules, a road intersection, a white line, an octagonal sheet on a stick, and white letters on a red ground. So, a sign (to go back to the generic term for this text) is never spoken, read or examined on its own. A sign is also subject to modification, alteration, error and play. Again, many 'things' have alternative signs for them. These could be just synonyms, but this multiplicity flows into cross-modal symbols, objects and other representations. And lastly, because signs are materially formed, they already have non-arbitrary qualities through sound, appearance, method of making, and so on.

Thus, for creative work as well as instrumental language use, four strategies are immediately apparent:

- a) a sign is part of, or perhaps IS a composition of diverse elements which can be increased or reduced according to circumstance;
- b) a sign can be tweaked or dramatically altered as needs be;
- c) alternatives can be found so that the best sign is there for the job;
- d) a sign's structural properties, even if they are weak ones, can be foregrounded and developed.

4.
Consider a small but cosmic example, or in the spirit of 3(b) above, a comic example. When translated into English, Matsuo Basho's famous frog haiku is normally tortured into the right number of syllables or into the most correct literal meaning. English poet dsh offers this instead (Houedard 1965, unpaginated):

f r o g
p o n d
p l o p

In this, the circular repeating o is non-arbitrary, ie it is analogous. Its repetition not only unifies the three words, but mimics, very faintly through sequence, the expanding rings of waves spreading after the frog's jump. A pond might be diagrammed as a circular form. There is also the zen-related

idea of zero and centredness in its form. All of these circular overtones resonate in the letters g, p and d. This semantic play is somewhere between arbitrary and structural, but visual. Acoustically, the words start with a breathy 'f', then each word ends and begins with a percussive sound. The three nouns provide one image after another as an event, with the three words working visually and phonetically. It's in these realms, not the arbitrarily-set semantic one, that the poem continually engages us. The work is a composition, with arbitrary and non-arbitrary sign:thing relationships working at the same time³.

5. While the haiku and its derivatives are attributable to a known group of Japanese poets, there are many non-art linguistic types or forms that share this level of complexity. The MAP is one of these kinds of complexes. Over its long history of developments, the common map is made possible by a number of interwoven linguistic tactics. A map is always much smaller than the terrain it represents. The question of scale often identifies a specific map, but scale itself is not a map's strangest feature - change in scale, after all, occurs through modelling in many different disciplines. But being flat is one of the map's most aggressive properties. The flat surface derives from the planar data systems of both writing and picturing. Word and image have both been developed with reference to a flat plane, whether wall, slab, tablet or page. Even scrolls and bands use this convention – their curvature is for storage, not inscription or interpretation.

6. Modelling a ragged surface with accuracy, and in the case of geological maps, modelling what lies beneath such a surface, is a problem that is solved by combining a measurable analogue with instructions to imagine. These instructions don't appear in full on the map itself, but are brought to it by the viewer/reader through such concepts as cardinal directions, contours, political boundaries, or longitude and latitude. These concepts rarely exist as physical objects in real space, and where they do, they are recognised as novelties, such as the place where the Tropic of Capricorn passes across a road, or the lawn at Greenwich where the longitude of zero can be straddled.

7. In maps, roads are shown as an abstraction - as lines - with relationships between the roads suggested by thickness and line colour. Brighter, thicker lines mean more important or better roads. Dotted lines may show unmade roads or walking paths, in which case the line mimics footsteps or strides. Railway lines are nearly always shown as a single rail on sleepers: a little more than 50% of the system in analogue, while also comfortably being a sign. The same kind of liminal representation takes place for cities and towns. While a road can be experienced as a uniform line rolled out across terrain, a city is never circular. The first city of Bagdad was circular, and there are a number of stellar-shaped towns left over from baroque Europe, but generally, dot = city is a case of an arbitrary sign. Or perhaps it is nearly so, because we also think of a city as having a centre. But in maps that show different cities as differently sized dots and colours, these are non-arbitrary modifications. Bigger dots mean bigger cities and so on.

8. Cities and roads are also labelled. Here, the map-maker's spatial skills are brought in, not only in the placing of words so that they fit, but sometimes so that they conform to the feature being labelled or to show its extent. Thus lettering will wobble along a road or river, or be stretched across a plain or mountain range. This can happen with nested scales with say, country, region, locale and feature being labelled with different typefaces and sizes or colours. If the lettering on a map is taken off its ground (in all senses of that word), it will look like an interlocked field of words and letters, with the arbitrary and non-arbitrary sharing the same space.

9. Although the widespread use of the map by contemporary artists might be attributed to its linguistic and spatial potential, to make a map is not necessarily to make art. Artists make compositions (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, 163-199). These are made by the artist in that artist's way, and in the spirit of these notes, one might say that how an artist negotiates or removes the arbitrariness may constitute that artist's style. To identify this, we have to find how the artwork sets up relationships on its own terms, and then how these might be read as parallels, indexes or images of things exterior to the composition. Of course, some artworks will resist reading, or

at least, their makers may claim that there is no reading to be done. But even the most arcane work will be cracked open, once it is made public.

10.

The artwork has to provide relationships which can be used against the viewer's experiences. In such a reading, the inherent qualities of the sign are examined first, and then applied to a 'thing', or rather a 'thing' is found or even created for it. The relationship of sign/'thing' moves primarily from the sign to its 'thing'. This is the opposite of the conventional idea of reading, but highlights the creative role of the reader - or viewer, or listener or occupier.

11.

It also turns the sign into a thing, but not a thing as it is in language. If a word is proposed as a thing, as an objective fact, or as a reality - to borrow the sense of 20th century Objective Art terms - it is still a word. The same goes for presenting a colour as an objective fact. It is still a colour. But there is a gain from this intermediary or hybrid state. As well as being somewhere between arbitrary and structural, it is also somewhere between representation and replica. Occasionally, a composition may seem to slip into the world of non-art to become just another object. Much of avant-garde and experimental art wanders around this border zone. We might note how in the 20th century, this border zone has changed often, with new kinds of compositions being accepted as art rather than being denied⁴.

12.

The visual realm's equivalent of the defined but arbitrary sign is iconography, where meaning is given through conceptual attachments to the sign (or object, if it is sculpture, or actions, if it is theatre), and not to its structural attributes (Panofsky 1939/1962, 3-17). With iconography, it seems easy and natural to have a semantic program to control art making. Such programs are easily allied to power, to the Church, the State, the City, the Revolution, the Corporation. Advertising and propaganda are the polar outcomes of iconography. Illustration and documentation belong here as well. But the latter two disciplines move towards the non-arbitrary. For example, from an illustration of a plant, one can imagine and then identify the plant being represented without having seen it before; whereas even a scientific name

will only reveal its botanic family, perhaps the size of its leaves and maybe the name of its discoverer.

13.

In ordinary speech, writing, and picturing, the relationship of the sign to thing is not so much arbitrary as generally ignored. Even when mistakes occur, these tend to be considered a failure of the sign, of its legibility, not its relationship to the thing being referred to. In art, however, the relationship is crucial, and the task of the artist may be to jolt our usual inattention as well as offering us a field of play, of interrogation, of puzzle-solving (Elkins 1999, 57-85). The job of the artist might then be thought of as removing the fixed meaning attached to a sign, and then to float this sign into potential. But just as the totally arbitrary condition is rare, so is the totally structural. Art fluctuates between these two conditions, sometimes occupying different positions at the same time. The difference between the instrumental use of this condition in language and the situation with art, is that, in art, we become aware of this through the composition itself. A composition draws attention to its use of signs, their occasional arbitrary status and their new structural state, and shows how this is done, which is then also part of the signage.

Notes:

1. *Writing between languages and cultures: Ms Yoko Tawada*, 1st September 2011, Sidney Myer Asia Centre, Melbourne. The talk was hosted by the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, in association with the Melbourne Writer's Festival. Frank Ostowski is a Melbourne theoretician and maker of artists' books.

2. 'Sign' is a technical term which varies significantly (!) according to which semiotic or semiological theory is pursued. For Saussurians, for instance, the 'sign' is the total result of negotiations between a *signifier* and its *signified* (Barthes 1967, 35-57). The signifier in such a negotiation is what this essay refers to as 'sign'. It is closer to the word's vernacular use, closer to what the Tawada/Ostowski interchange understood, and appropriate to use in this essay, because this is not a linguistic explication, but a look at creative practice.

3. And we might continue: the original is typed, so that the letters emerge from a grid, a potent sign which is at home in arbitrary and non-arbitrary situations; the first edition of the translated poem has Basho's text below it in *Romanji*, with English equivalents below...

4. This is a somewhat positive outlook. The question of what is acceptable as art has been - and still is - a conflict rather than discussion, with various Nationalisms, Totalitarian regimes, religious censorship and Fundamentalisms providing powerful and continuing resistance to innovation.