



THE IDEA OF WRITING ON THINGS

In Glenn Gould's 1967 radio documentary, *The Idea of North*, what is most apparent is the cross-talk of voices in counterpoint to one another. Gould edited his interview subjects using a technique that he invented and described the result as contrapuntal radio. "For his purposes they were not people so much as disembodied voices representing points of view, and by abstracting them, by taking names and personalities [and hard data and topical references] out of the equation, he was underscoring the metaphorical and autobiographical import of the program."²

There is no such thing as a failure of language. Language is the primary mechanism by which we express knowledge and thought. If it has failed us we wouldn't even know it to be true. Language doesn't concern itself with content, politics, beliefs, tastes, status, authorities, and so on. Language doesn't discriminate between subject, object, and meaning. It's simply the tool we understand and use to correspond with. We know this and we know nothing else. Try proving this statement false without language.

Language translates the encounter into a description of a thing or phenomenon. In this deficiency a work of fiction is produced. Take for instance "Bear" Vasquez's encounter with the phenomenon of a double rainbow that is recorded in his widely viewed YouTube video. Our own encounter with the phenomenon of a double rainbow is mediated by the video and Vasquez's sincere enthusiasm with what could be described as the sublime. Our experience is not with the double rainbow itself, but with Vasquez's remarks and description. No matter how many times we view this video we will never know the double rainbow. What we do encounter is emotional contagion (16,515,664 views). We don't need, nor should we require, language for these kinds of encounters, but we can still be captivated by the use of language, its poetics, and ability to transmit knowledge and experience through the representation of directing our attention to a thing.

It's when language is used as an authority over the subject that it transfers the first-hand encounter into fiction.

We are often directed to the authority of the reference (footnotes, bibliographies). Things and phenomena become reduced not only in form but also by naming names.³ Naming is the diversion that leaves behind the thing being discussed or encountered. "The particular power of quotations arise, according to Benjamin, not from their ability to transmit that past and allow the reader to relive it but, on the contrary, from their capacity to "make a clean sweep, to expel from the context, to destroy."⁴ How many times can Donald Judd's work be referred to before it is no longer the work of Donald Judd? The referent is the commodity that gives value and outsources its authority to the thing being described. This use value is exchanged at any rate in order to maintain a false currency with that which is being traded at a higher rate (the quote or footnote).

We don't require a description of the text before we read it. We read the text and theoretically know its meaning. Can we not read the thing itself without firstly being directed to the text? The text may not synchronize with our experience or what we have known. When encountering the thing (especially in art), we are often directed to the text as a way of confirming and at times surpassing the thing itself. This ekphrasis is used as a means for validation and to prescribe potential meaning. The text denies the thing itself and it's thingness. If, however, the idea is the prioritizing fact over the thing then the thing becomes illustration and we can evaluate it for its illustrative powers (and this requires description and "liner notes.")

All writing on things and phenomenon should be rewritten. This Postscript should be rewritten as soon as it's been published and it should continue to be

Robert Arndt on Hannah Rickards¹

Hannah Rickards, *...a legend, it, it sounds like a legend...*, 2007 (installation view, 2010)
photo: Blaine Campbell

rewritten until it can no longer give voice or engage in analytical discourse with itself. As M.M. Bakhtin writes, "Being heard as such is already a dialogic relation. The word wants to be heard, understood, responded to, and again to respond to the response, and so forth ad infinitum."⁵ The dialogic relationships with a text have been lost (with practical causes). It seems there is only a monologue today and texts are judged primarily on their use value and not on the potential for entering into discourse (yes, dialogue exists outside of the text). If rewriting and responding to the past (this includes just yesterday) is undertaken, perhaps the use value of a text is put to genuine value and doesn't serve as a display copy.

An idea for writing – the idea of an encounter by the one encountering the thing – doesn't necessarily have to become descriptive analysis. The thing itself can point back at us and relate either meaning or encounter. The thing emanates the reading and multiple authors. Writing can function as multiple and within this a contrapuntal relation of form may operate and give way to a cacophony of meanings. Liner notes don't enhance the listening nor should one-liners enhance the reading of things (one-liners today are at least a paragraph long).⁶

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NOTES

¹ Hannah Rickards, *The sound I think it makes is, is that whispering sound, to me it sounds, it almost sounds, um, uh, what's the word I'm thinking? Um, like historic, not historic, but, um, oh: a legend, it, it sounds like a legend, you know, when you think of a legend or something way back in the past you get that, that, it sounds like that to me, like this legend or somebody's, this whispering sound: it's a legend.*, September 11 - October 30, 2010 at Artspeak.

² Kevin Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005): 299-300.

³ The use of naming names is in reference to McCarthyism. My usage is not as public accusation but more as inclusion for what names are named and the authority and status attributed them.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999): 104.

⁵ M.M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002): 127.

⁶ Lastly, how could I possibly write about Hannah Rickards' Artspeak exhibition *...a legend, it sounds like a legend...*? Rickards' work has allowed me the opportunity to write a variation on a theme and that is, and should be, the idea of writing on a thing.⁷

⁷ The use of variation is a formal technique that reforms the thing (usually music) in a number of differing sequences. The Goldberg Variations is a popular example of this form as famously recorded and re-recorded by Glenn Gould.