Final Notes on Formal Culture
2006 - 2007

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Understanding early on that my performance in Concordia University's 2006/2007 Computation and Design Arts graduate certificate program would be evaluated exclusively through written assignments, I questioned the effects of a textual predominance in design education: first on my creative process as an artist, second on my physical, embodied experience, and third, on my relationship with colleagues.

These concerns with purely literary translations of creativity were influenced by concurrent social science research, primarily in reaction to the 'textual turn;' crisis in representation;[1] and study in the rapport between contemporary art and art institutions — and an underlying desire for an interdisciplinary approach to understanding imagination. Throughout the year my goal was to combine methods borrowed from social sciences and contemporary fine arts, in order to demonstrate both the constraints and possibilities inherent in equating creativity with text.

The resulting design research project, *Formal Culture,* explored the dialectic between writing and creativity through a series of private and collaborative explorations. At base, the program's writing-intensive curriculum was particularly conducive to conceptually based work and practices. Through stressing questions of embodiment, however, the project arrived at a performative focus.

Current institutional rhetoric embraces a diversified and holistic community, while in actuality, contemporary design curricula maintain centuries old exclusionary, and mind/body dualisms. This, the fundamental elitism of education, may be too banal. *Formal Culture* addresses the subtle conditions of that elitism: its literal and conceptual reductionism.

First, if we collapse writing and creativity we must address issues of language. International students speaking in a tongue foreign to the official language of an institution will always be seriously handicapped where course participation is grounded in theoretical readings and presentations. Again, this is an obvious statement. When confronted with texts in a foreign language we may be inspired by their form, but we are, until fluent, separated from their content.

A dramatic demonstration of this is found in Chinese artist Xu Bing's famously misinterpreted installation, *Book from the Sky*[2] (Figure 1). The project, composed of great swaths of woodcut calligraphic text billowing from the museum's ceiling and imposing a similar grandeur — when installed in North America seemed to suggest the incomprehensible vastness of the Four Tigers. In fact, the text was gibberish to the Chinese as well, and pointed to the more universal gravity of language itself. "As a result, within this fabricated cultural space, every reader is made illiterate. Even the artist himself is unable to read the works he has printed"[3].

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[1] James Clifford and George Marcus *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California, 1986).

[2] See Julian Stallabrass, *Art Incorporated* (London: Oxford University Press, 2004)

[3] See brooklyn.org, *Xu Bing*, accessed Sept. 16, 2007.
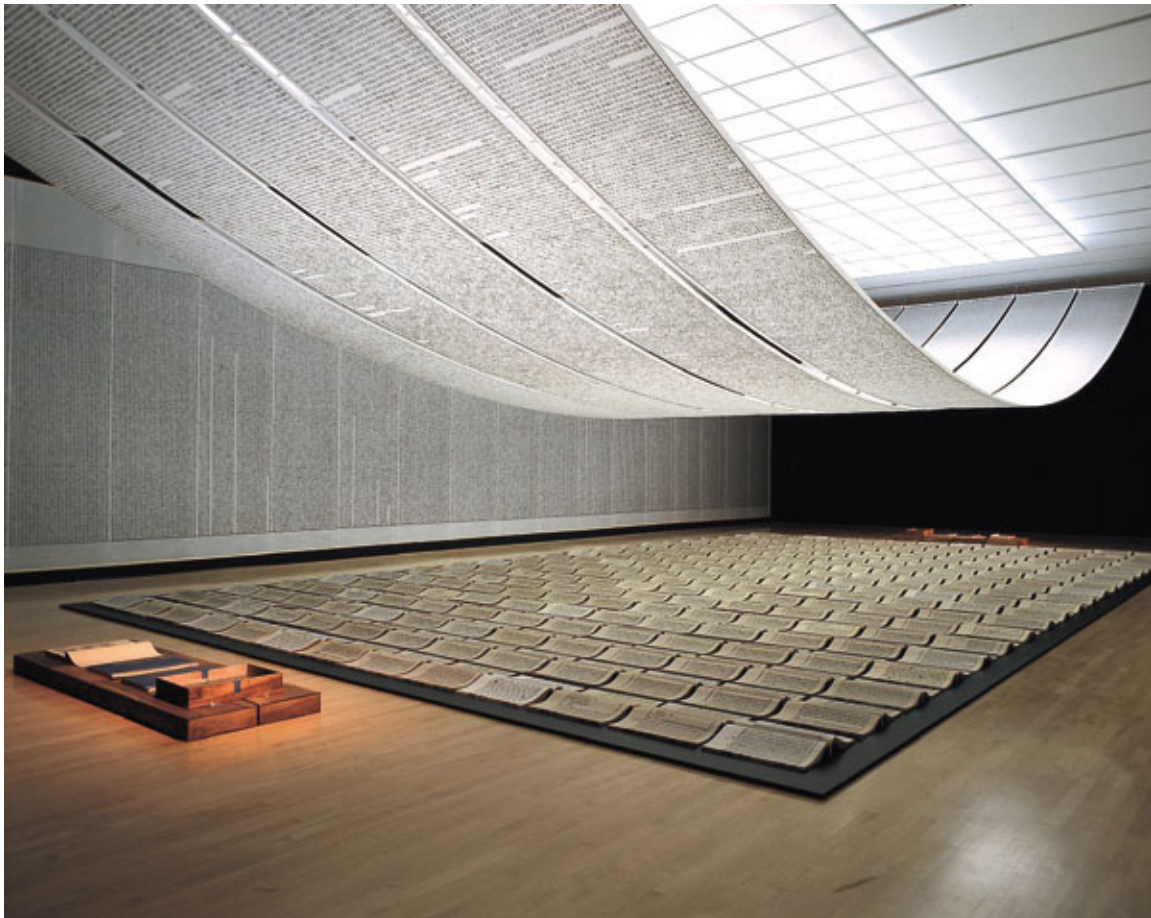
Figure 1. *Book from the Sky*, **Xu Bing, 1987-1991, image: Jeff Morgan/Artes Mundi**

With an influx of international and refugee students, the design classroom becomes a microcosm of global issues, whose significance is felt throughout the rise of cosmopolitan, multi-vocal states. Maintaining the use of an official language is not a problem — until half of the population expected to participate is dumb. Indeed, a singular language choice seems the most rational option when compared with the alternative of everyone learning several languages. However, if language is assumed to be the primary medium for expressing creativity, the results dilute —not only the foreign speakers' experience — but the natives' as well. Confusions and complexities increase in relation to the fragmentation of communication.

Examples of this fragmentation were plenty throughout the 2006/2007 graduate certificate program. Nearly half of 12 graduate students were international: Spanish, Chinese and Lebanese speaking —without fluent command of English. Again, if it had been one or two foreign students, the class community might not have been so greatly fractured. However, motley as it was, the group experienced great difficulty establishing any kind of creative affinity at all, much less discussing theoretical readings.

Second, emphasis on language in learning necessarily excludes visceral, intuited, or bodily knowledge. There is a deeper irony in attempting to *write* about this exclusion, however what I *can* write about embodied knowledge is reached through characterisation of what it is not: not representative, not simulated, not rational, but by definition — beyond words.

Contrary to knowledge passed through the direct interaction of, for example, craft apprenticeship — digital technologies, discourse and theory-based cultures are transferred virtually, across time and space. Related metaphors linking the mind and computer are plentiful and to a degree common sense, they continue a paradigm of language=thought ideology. We connect via email, network, and read each other — we maintain distance, "commuter" relationships more than ever before.

This realises an exaggeration of Heidegger's theories of presence and Being. Where Heidegger explains thrown presence[4], (describing how an individual is more "present" to a caller miles away, than to a neighbour), in its contemporary manifestation brings on a multiplying, kaleidoscopic presence.

In place of here/not here, I experience both: here *and* here. For example, I am mentally present to friends on the other side of the globe, (in the future and hypothetical time of their reading of my message), while physically shoulder-to-shoulder with perfect strangers.

We're at a point were we need to ask about the knowledge embedded in our meaty selves. What are the risks of ideologically reducing the knowing of the body to its basic necessities? Surely the human knows more than needs for food, water, clothing, and sex? Perhaps these varieties of knowing are quintessentially elusive, indeed, beyond language and it is senseless to yearn for the communication of intuitive, visceral knowing. What's more, perhaps these wisdoms are simply incompatible with "education" in the institutionalised structures of North American and European histories.

Distanced evaluation of students is a persistent necessity since shifts away from apprenticeship and direct mater/pupil relationships throughout industrialisation. The number of students in the ken of each professor continues to grow with the democratisation of universities and the growth of information technologies. Expository writing aspires to allow teachers a comparative glimpse into the learning process of each

student. However, at this point, throughout the emergence of multi-lingual contexts, it is important to inquire into alternatives.

Studies in performance have begun the exploration of these questions. Bringing together the trajectories of theatre, social science, and psychology, performance art frames the being. Within design and other creative programs, there is surely room for architectural modelling, hands-on training, dramaturgical techniques and play.

Over the year, *Formal Culture* experiments broadened from attempts to isolate conceptions reflecting the primacy of text, until coming face to face with its actuality – to where I could observe others' reactions to my work as the work itself.

Here, I describe the *Formal Culture* video installations – describing first why they failed and second, the avenues they opened. I conclude with description of my approach and intentions with the final, performative installation of the project, and reasons for its success.

Formal Culture attempted to foreground the form of writing over its content through focus on the embodied act of writing, and the obliteration of literal meanings in DVD documentation. (see Figure 2). These segments of the project were — fortuitously — the most problematic. While some elements of writing become more apparent when remediated through video (in particular accentuating that writing never emerges at once, or linearly, as it appears before the reader) — visual representations of handwriting reduced it to an image, rather than a practice[5].
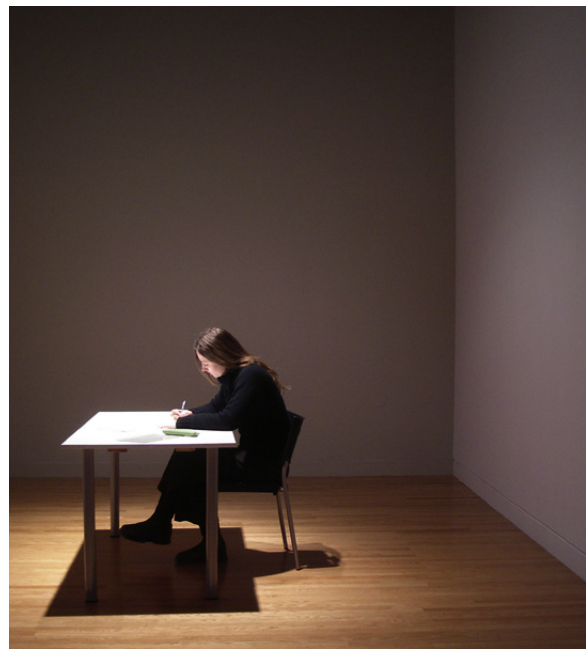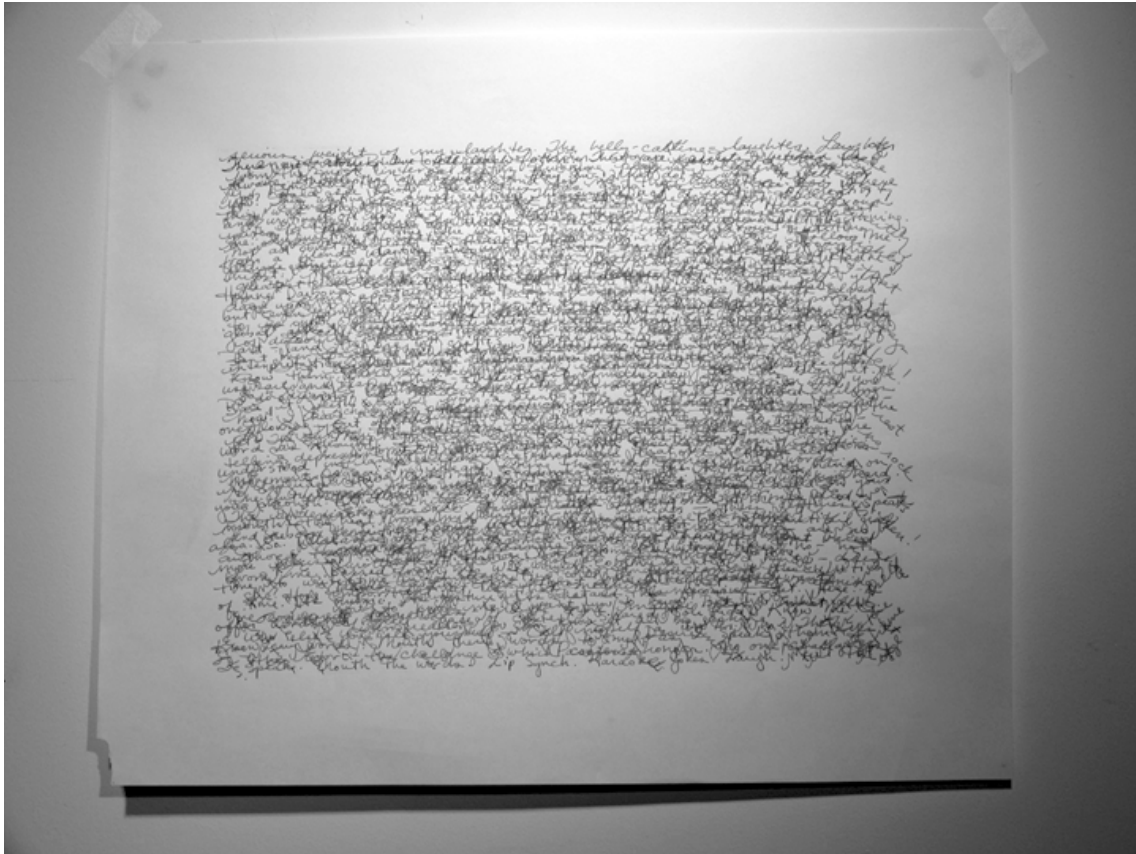

Figure 2. *Formal Culture*, 2006/2007
image: author's own

I was frustrated with results highlighting my individual identity rather than the neutral effect of "man writing". Given my knowledge of the sensitivity of issues of representation in ethnography, and critiques of attempts towards God's eye or universalist

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[5] See Sonja Neef and José van Dijck, *Sign Here! Handwriting in the Age of Technical Reproduction* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

visions, I felt as though I'd made a hypocritical move. I should have known better. This conceptual shift (from using my body to represent "the" body), lead me to focus on the manuscript *traces* of writing.

Figure 3. *Formal Culture*, 2006/2007, image: author's own

In order to emphasize the act of writing in these instalments of the project, I chose the nostalgic medium of a fountain pen. However, rather than focus interpretation on the written form — it ascribed again different values to the documents (Figure 3).

In his discussion of *The Hand of the Poet: The Magical Value of Manuscripts*, Dana Gioia observes, "The 'meaningful value' of manuscripts often transcends their purely verbal contents" [6](12). Many elements of a handwritten text escape transcription. We can refer to the texture of archival stock; the writer's fluctuating penmanship; marginalia and editorial notes; stains and creases — as attributes making an auratic *object* of written manuscripts. Contrasted with printed texts, which are *engineered* for reproduction, a handwritten text conveys a more immediate relationship between word and writer.

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[6] Dana Gioia, "The Hand of the Poet: The Magical Value of Manuscripts", *The Hudson Review*, 49 (1996): 9-29.

Again, neither was the object of *Formal Culture*.

Figure 4. *Das Jahr 1974*, Hanne Darboven, 1974, image: Galerie Crone

I link the aims of *Formal Culture* to the work of German artist Hanne Darboven, who offers this explanation: "With me, 'writing time', meaning-to-say-nothing is what says, no-longer-meaning-to-say in saying, and what I do previously and altogether, is the unsaid"(text photographed at Galerie Crone, 2006 Armory Show).

Installations of Darboven's work are dizzying and boundless. Due to the scale of the exhibitions, viewers' interpretations shift from the content of the passages to the passage of time. Wall space becomes a grid replete with large glass frames displaying neat rows of hand-traced pencil waves. In fact, Darboven "writes time" according to calculations derived from numerical notations of the date. For example: July 23, 1977 becomes 23/07/77, calculated according to 2+3+7+7+7, to equal 26K (K for Konstruktion) (Bobka).

Contemporary critic Lucy Lippard describes Darboven's work as a "process of continuation — a process which takes time to do, which takes time as one of its subjects, and which takes the form of time (the calendar) as its numerical foundations" (Bobka). Documents, as the traces of presence.

Despite the accumulation of great swaths of writing pages in Formal Culture, I was still unsatisfied. A jag continued to interrupt my intentions and viewer's reactions. While the

fountain pen and tomes of high quality pages lead to ever more romantic and flourishing evocations, they continued to inhibit my focus on the embodiment.

Gratefully, these vain attempts and flailing exasperations brought me to performance as the most adequate form of inquiry. The final iteration of *Formal Culture* achieved a direct interaction with installation "audiences", and a refusal to preserve any of the documental traces of the interaction. Here, I provide the statement for this instalment: *Writing Other*, and some notes regarding its process.

Participants of the project's final incarnation received this invitation:

> **Please accept this invitation to participate.**
>
> **Writing Other**
> *Writing Other* is a series of ten 20 minute writing sessions. In each session I sit with another and we have a conversation by passing one sheet of paper between us. As a participant you are requested to refrain from making audible gestures while within the performance space. You are also requested to provide a passport sized photograph (to be attached to transcripts of our communication), although this is optional. Please wear comfortable clothing.
>
> **Where:** Concordia University E.V. building, 11th floor
> **When:** Appointments are available from August 8 to August 15, 2007
>
> By signing this paper, you agree to participate in *Writing Other*.

So *Formal Culture*, in the end, became *Writing Other*, which could very appropriately have become *Silent Listening Chamber*, or *Soundless Hearing Booth*.

Reasons for the success of this final instalment of the project are,

These thoughts on the embodied act of writing lead me to question the history of office design, which I realise now is in effect a problematic related to the academy. Corporatised education makes a 'factory', a bureaucratic farce of 'knowledge'. …I initially imagined exploding the cubicle in order to concretise the relationship between the rationalised, standardised space of bureaucracy, against the kaleidoscope of thought, illuminated by design research writing….

Finally, form *is* content. The initial thesis of the project rested on observations of contemporary art industries – their education, exhibition and collections, as well as their products. So, it isn't a coincidence that these conceptual artists reflect bureaucratic forms

– they are self-conscious reflections of those contexts from without, as much as they are legitimated by those arbitrators from within.