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Between the Visible and the Legible: Raymond Pettibon's "I" Caught in Translation

Raymond Pettibon is a contemporary American artist whose practice is perhaps best described as writing-drawing. Both writing and drawing often collocate on the sheet of paper, acting as extensions, supplements, revisions, negotiations, in short: interlocutors, of each other. In fact, Pettibon does not seem to regard them with much difference, instead one is calling for the other. In a Derridean sense both *verbal* writing and *pictural*[1] writing are writing. In a graphic sense, which is ultimately not very different, both are forms of mark-making, traces and tracings on paper, signs and signings off on the page.

Pettibon's work has often borrowed from canonical literary writers, especially of the 19th century. In responding to Walter Pater, Marcel Proust, Henry James and others in his drawings he translates, transposes, transmutes them picturally and verbally. In the following, this shifting and on-going intersemiotic translation from verbal to pictural and vice versa will be investigated based on one letter, that refuses to be letter, in an untitled 1998 pen-and-ink drawing – or perhaps it should be called a writing. In exploring this singular stroke the problematic of the graphic qualities of writing is opened up to exploration. The persistent legibility-visibility dichotomy, in which writing is trapped between mere allographic trace, whose graphic appearance beyond readability is irrelevant, and sign, whose semantic value is constituted multiply through its verbal and pictural qualities, will be examined. Through this analysis, persistent notions of logos, the discursive desire to harness an image, and the primacy of speech are interrogated.

[1] The increasingly obsolete term 'pictural' is used to describe pictures as graphic depictions (i.e. literally 'of or relating to pictures') as a necessary differentiation from verbal images, which are ubiquitously evoked by 'pictorial' texts. This usage corresponds to the French and translations of Jacques Derrida's writings (*Truth, Memoirs*, "Spatial Arts"), as well as related commentary.

What do we see when we look at writing? Raymond Pettibon writes "I no man goes to the guillotine with greater apprehension than I sit down at my desk" (Fig. 1). More accurately, he does not type, he does not print, his hand draws brush and pen, he *leads* a line across the paper, marks it. Written and drawn. But even in saying that it is drawn, it remains written. And though remaining written we cannot say that he marks it with a giant I. For he may return and give us the remainders of his list:

II No man is more cauterized than I smoothing the page.

III No man plunges lower from the gallows than I from the end of my pen.

Figure 1. Raymond Pettibon, *Untitled (No man goes)*, pen and ink on paper, 27.9×20.3 cm, 1998

Pettibon's hefty I is then also the side-view of the guillotine's priapic post. The beam of a gibbet. The logogrammatic self-portrait of the artist. The homophonic eye looming large, looking at us. Hell's double doors opening after the guillotine. The graphic *cut* that separates head and trunk. It becomes difficult to continue calling it the letter I, or more precisely to even equate it to a (*12 pt Times New Roman*) typographic translation encapsulated in this I. Thus, do not read this sign as letter but as the translated mark of Pettibon's drawing; the I that signs itself as letter, numeral, post, organ, space between doors and so on.

When Tim Ingold observes that writing used to denote "a practice of inscription" leaving hardly any difference "between the craft of the draughtsman and that of the scribe" (Ingold 2007: 3), we see in Pettibon the author as (in)scribe(r), not the typist or wordsmith. Pettibon's pen is not simply a tool for neutral transcription of speech, or more specifically oral signs, into graphic marks of similar or even equivalent *sign*ification. This is not to say, that the pen is boundless or superior to the typewriter, word processor or printer; all remain mediators of writing. Nevertheless, acknowledging the graphic qualities of writing is to confirm that texts possess a material character, a physicality imbued by and in their production.

The materiality of texts is often denied by separating legibility from visibility. Jean-Gérard Lapacherie notes that the *visibility* of typography, in other words, to read (*legĕre*) typography as typography, is often seen to spell the end of reading the text.

> A page is meant to be read. It is not meant to be looked at. Printed words on a page are barely noticeable. As soon as reading begins, our perception of typography ends. Typographic artifices force the reader to look at the text. They make it visible as a thing and as a thing endowed with an existence of its own (Lapacherie 1994: 64).

From a historical perspective, visibility and legibility are usually regarded as irreconcilable oppositions (Leenhardt 1994: 82). Lapacherie's puzzling 19th century example, according to which some psychiatrists had shown an interest in writers who displayed an overenthusiastic use of typographic marks characterizing them as "'fous littéraires'" (literary madmen), illustrates the perception of the relationship between typography and writing (Queneau qtd. in Lapacherie 1994: 63). Similarly today, literature, textbooks, almost any printed publication, is dominated by the word as text alone, graphic considerations are applied afterwards. Apart from rare exceptions of artists' books and concrete poetry, the spatial dimension of script is "normally backgrounded" and the physical characteristics of a text are usually determined by means of production, economic considerations or marketing (Mitchell 1980: 550).

We can be acutely perceptive of the visibility of script in graphic design products when typographic forms are used to enhance messages, produce memorable *Schriftzüge*,[2] create typo-pictographic brand associations, subvert or supplement images etc. Nonetheless, at other times we look *through*

[2] Schriftzug (German) is usually translated as logo, in the sense of lettering, however it also designates the particular and characteristic manner in which a word, group of words or script (typeface or longhand) is executed. It literally indicates the "pull", "draw", "attraction" of "writing" or "script". It is perhaps closest to ductus in English, although it

texts, perhaps taking note whether a particular typographic arrangement is eye-pleasing or not, yet hardly considering if the justified layout of the text contributes or distracts from its apparent meaning, or if a particular typeface undermines the message. Furthermore, to whom, amongst (literary) writers, can we turn for a use of script that is irrevocably bound up with the production and experience of the text? The typographic experiments of Dada, Futurism, Lettrism, Situationists International, Fluxus and concrete poetry receive occasional if, however, marginalized interest, but there is a hesitance amongst contemporary writers and perhaps a hostility amongst editors and publishers towards typographically experimental work (Drucker 1991: 232–33).

Differentiating texts according to their relationship between visible form and content, Leon Roudiez describes texts which do not point at their own material make-up as readable or *transparent*, and contrasts them with those that are *opaque* and show themselves materially (Roudiez 1978: 232–33). This understanding is interwoven with and a deliberate distortion of Roland Barthes' *readable* and *writable* texts. The former are restrictive, authoritarian and closed; they have a determined set of possible, predictable readings. The latter are open and fluctuating, irreducible to a single meaning (Barthes 1974: 10–12). Roudiez adapts this notion to include opacity, the quality of texts which point at their own material visibility, and fullness, the quality of writing which affirms its own audibility (Roudiez 1978: 233). In this conception, writing's visibility is consequential beyond its necessity for a text's legibility; an understanding that differs strikingly from a transcriptural idea of writing as a form of recorded speech.

Perceived as transcribed speech, writing acts as a storage vessel for a language whose chief purpose is vocal articulation and aural perception. Such implicit vocal primacy is reinforced by observations such as by Carol P. James, who notes that written words "have no visual worth [and] reading is generally a visual experience only physiologically" (James 1985: 439). Underlying this presumption is an assumed neutrality of the graphic trace, a *transparency* of the mark which allows unmediated access to a signification, meaning or substance that is located somewhere behind it, or in it, but not bound up with it. Johanna Drucker conjectures that the disregard for typographic materiality is indicative of a continued belief in a higher linguistic transparency, which grants unmediated access to an underlying *truth*. She suggests that employing the visibility of texts productively and experientially works "toward negating the transcendent character of logos by refusing to

is reserved only for writing, with Linienführung ("leading of the line") used for drawing (and occasionally for writing) and Duktus applied similarly to both.

allow the linguistic sign to be represented in a supposedly transparent visual mode" (Drucker 1991: 254).

Furthermore, a double paradox is identifiable in a transcriptual understanding that renders writing transparent (Roudiez 1975: 75). Firstly, reading texts must acknowledge the visibility of the sign but also equally disavow the selfsame visibility. "[N]o sooner do those black signs become visible, if the text is transparent they almost at once become invisible again, having been replaced with mental images of various kinds" (Roudiez 1978: 233). Secondly, because the purpose of (transcriptural) texts is a meaning wholly outside of their graphic make-up, their substance is not in their materiality; their "materiality could be termed immaterial" (Roudiez 1978: 233).

In order to discuss the formal qualities of the linguistic sign, it is perhaps necessary to disentangle two different connections that language (written and oral) may have with any imaginable referent. To affirm the strictly arbitrary character of the linguistic sign to its referent is not the same as (or even a necessary condition for) demanding a unitary, dichotomous relationship between the form and content of a sign. Simply because a sign has an established conventional relationship to a referent does not preclude the selfsame sign from also having multiple other, even contradictory, reference values or being able to accrue them. A simple example based on the grapheme ‹x› may illustrate the point. As a character of the Latin alphabetic script, it has a conventional, representative function for a phoneme. Nevertheless, this does not prevent it from maintaining or accumulating additional and irrevocably linked values, for instance: Christ (through the nomina sacra: XP, XC, XPC), kiss, cross (verb, noun, adjective), map position, mistake or incorrect answer, indication of a vote, chiasmus, adult content rating, death or unconsciousness (if replacing eyes), signature of the illiterate, indication of a hybrid, abscissa, the unknown or variable, and so forth (cf. Green 2006). To read ‹x› henceforth is to read it within this expanded field of reference. It would be permissible to dismiss this example if ‹x›'s relation to the other referents was merely one of abbreviation, however, it is (also) one of picturality, phonetics, pictographics and ideographics. Precisely because ‹x› has a *visually* representative function for a phoneme – without being reducible to that phoneme – it also has other codified representative functions, which perhaps cannot be satisfactorily summed up but nonetheless inscribe the sign as text. Differently however to Pettibon's I, ‹x› operates as a letter, whilst I is irreducible to ‹i›. To insist therefore on the notion of transparency (or invisibility) of texts is also to re-assert some intrinsic antagonism and dichotomy between the form of the sign and its content. It appears to be a conflation of the arbitrary character of (readable) linguistic signs with the corollary expectation that a sign's (viewable) visual

appearance acts unitarily as a placeholder identical to a sound, disregarding that a transcription, in other words a medial translation, has taken place.

Pettibon's work is instructive here. Reading and looking at a text are usually represented as "mutually exclusive" and inevitably there is a conflict between the signs used in representation for language and the same signs in drawing with their own autonomous meaning (Lapacherie 1994: 65). Nonetheless, re-reading and re-viewing the untitled drawing enables us to observe the graphic (sc. legible and visible) multiplicity of its writing. The towering I neither remains a static character of legibility nor an invariable mark of visibility; it is neither and both. As a graphic mark, it remains both legible and visible numerically, hieroglyphically, pictographically, picturally, alphabetically, logogrammatically.

If we can both read and view a text, how ductile is this sign that can be repeated with the same legibility but differing visibility? How can a text remain legible and iterable as language whilst being differently visible? How can we reconcile this apparent gap in the graphic between visibility and readability of a text? Where do we locate this gap in the sign that has form yet also remains free from any particular form?

> Is it possible to subtract a materially inscribed mark from its context, from itself? Material language takes place within a field of inscriptions, exchanges and erasures, forever repeating itself—and also always differing from itself. It traces a path between itself and other, between form and formlessness, ultimately offering itself as a site of negotiation and transition between the receiver of language and the world (Armstrong, Mahon 2008: 12).

Through Nelson Goodman's germinal analysis of the notational character of different symbol systems in his *Languages of Art* we might be permitted to attempt to answer some of these questions. Discussing authenticity in art, Goodman differentiates autographic art, in which the distinction between forgery and original is significant, from allographic or non-autographic art, in which no copy of a text may be considered a fake and which "is amenable to notation" (Goodman 1976: 121). Painting, sculpture, printmaking and others fall into the category of autographic practice, whilst no musical performance, copy of a literary text or poetry, or enactment of a play can be considered a fake (unless it changes the source text) and are therefore allographic. The precise distinction shall not interest us here, what is however relevant is Goodman's terminology. One aim of his book is to delineate the semantic and syntactic rules governing notation. In very abbreviated form, notational systems are those symbol systems in which each symbol refers to only one characteristic of the world it describes, conversely, every single characteristic belongs to only one symbol in the system (Goodman 1976: 128–30). Musical scores are almost full notational systems because every note played may be associated with

only one symbol and vice versa. There are however certain aspects of volume, tempo and choice of cadenza which are imprecise and therefore not notation (Giovannelli 2012). Crucially for Goodman, poetry and literature are not full notational systems because of certain semantic characteristics of language, though they may qualify syntactically (Goodman 1976: 210–11). Importantly, Goodman conflates language, speech and writing – through its implicit comparison with the musical score. The only time that Goodman comes to consider the visibility of writing as distinct from language, he comments on the need for clearly differentiated alphabetic characters (1976: 148). He does not, however, consider writing's materiality, such as extra-alphabetic characters or the variability of writing's visibility through typefaces, sizes, font styles (italics, bold, underlined) etc. These are characteristics, which cannot easily be encircled under the header of language – not to mention speech – yet are inevitable considerations within writing. Their semiological relationship to language is thus not uniform but heterogeneous.

In noting the syntactic necessity for alphabetic characters to be clearly differentiated, Goodman manifests that writing is neither transparent nor invisible to him. Yet, how does he arrive at a position in which writing has again lost its visibility? He probably does not arrive there, but sets out from there. In terming literature and poetry allographic, he marks them as linguistic events. Sentences, clauses, words and, more closely, letters are units of writing, mere characters of and in language. Again, writing is legible alphabetic language, not visibly written. Allographs are all possible forms and alternatives (graphs or glyphs) of a letter or other grapheme (Fig. 2):

Figure 2. A number of glyphs or graphs that function as allographs of the letter ‹a›

Hence, all possible graphs of the letter ‹a› indicate but one character and are interchangeable, whether minuscule, majuscule, uncial, cursive, italicized, superscript, subscript, black letter, Gothic, single story, double story, with exit strokes, without, calligraphed, cacographed, drawn, typed, printed and so forth. Goodman observes that in a notational symbol scheme all marks of a character are interchangeable, viz. there is "character-indifference" between the graphs of a character (1976: 132). Consequently, as long as graphs remain legibly assigned to a specific grapheme, Goodman is indifferent to their visibility. To assign literary writing (that does not also purport to be a drawing or painting) the category of allographic art is therefore not a deductive conclusion, but predetermined by Goodman's application of the linguistic principle, which rules out a priori, not only any possible significance in the graphic qualities of texts, and any heterogeneity between language, speech and writing, but also that any verbal text could ever have been considered for the autographic category. This prearranged *conclusion* may perhaps be abbreviated to its implicit tautology: writing, which is allographic, is also a non-autographic art.

This analysis permits us to understand that any linguistic or literary approach to writing that disregards the graphic qualities of a text is concerned with *allographic writing* that recognizes texts as language events but conversely cannot account for the visibility and legibility of writing inside and outside of language. To satisfactorily address the multiple motions which Pettibon's writing – as script and text – offers, requires a reading-viewing that considers the graphic visibility of texts beyond an allographic notion of legibility. *Allographic reading*, a seemingly translatory practice that transliterates all graphs of corresponding allographs into the unitary value of one resultant grapheme, is visually only concerned with a(llographic) legibility that does not account for graphic qualities. This should not be misunderstood as advocacy for a revitalisation of graphology or the establishment of a new typology but to acknowledge the irreducibility of writing to linguistic events. Similarly, the difficulty of reading and seeing writing, which assumes contingencies and characteristics similar to *other graphic* practices, is an insufficient reason to ignore the impact of visible *traits*. Whilst writing has allographic characteristics, which make it legible as language, it is irreducible to these. The differential quality of the *graph*ic mark *mark*s writing both inside and outside of language. In *regard*ing the visibility of writing with indifference, or more precisely by not *regard*ing the visibility of writing, we are dis*regard*ing its semantic and syntactical import and are thus not fully reading the text. The aurality or orality of reading this kind of

writing could be similarly investigated. Had Pettibon inscribed his page with a lowercase we would have found him decapitated. i beheaded I. Capital punishment. Prone on the ground. A little head a little ahead. The microcephalic toppling the phallic.

The pervasive complexity of the inherent conflict between the need to read writing and the implicit, overlapping, and in part contradictory necessity to see it, is even perceptible in two earlier examples, although both authors had themselves drawn attention to the visual qualities of texts. Strictly speaking, Roudiez' notion that some signs can "point away from the material body of writing that they constitute" whilst others point towards it (Roudiez 1978: 232), cannot be upheld once we accept that writing is constituted both visibly and legibly. Rather than pointing away, signs can perhaps – to return to Goodman's term – be indifferent to the graphic materiality of writing and mark themselves as allographic writing by being open to any imaginable allographic visibility. Similarly, despite Lapacherie's attempt to remain a clinical observer of typographic history, he notes in the aforementioned quote, that it requires "typographic artifices" to awaken the reader to become a viewer (Lapacherie 1994: 64). What is a typographic artifice? When does non-artifice typography trail into artifice typography? If there is typographic artifice, whom should psychiatric professionals examine today? Is "italicisation" more or less of an artifice than *inverted commas*? Arguably, language as an arbitrary system is artifice full stop. It would therefore be difficult to determine what convention makes writing more or less artificial. Lapacherie is careful to analyse the chasm between legibility and visibility but even he cannot avoid wanting to read a text allographically. Notwithstanding, Lapacherie also notes that typography possesses the heterogeneity of a system that on the one hand replaces language by a sign, yet on the other exhibits signs that have no – or no clear – referent.

> Capitals A, B, or E, among others, do not have the same design as their corresponding lower cases: a, b, e […]. From a semiological point of view, punctuation marks, underlining, numbers, blanks (and other typographic devices) are very different from letters and stand at the opposite pole from the alphabet. They do not replace any unit of language. They have no value (in the sense that they do not stand for a unit), but they signal a meaning, a rupture, a hierarchy, an analysis. As a result, a printed text which retains punctuation marks, blanks, upper cases, etc. […], cannot be uniform because it is made up of heterogeneous signs (Lapacherie 1994: 69).

To understand graphic qualities as constituents of writing's signs is to recognize the physicality of writing which exists and asserts itself within, without, and despite of language. Indeed the language of typographic

signs is the language of drawing and graphic marks, after all, we talk of: dash, stroke, underline, ellipsis, hash, rule, asterisk, obelus, circumflex, highlight.[3]

Accordingly, there is a difference, however no clear distinction, even less an insurmountable border, between the visibility and legibility of writing. As Michel Butor reiterates, as soon as verbal text enters the rectangular frame of the page, it is inevitably also constituted as image (Butor 1994: 18). Therefore, any actual, existing difference between legibility and visibility of verbal signs should nevertheless, not be confused with any rigid permanence or impermeability (ibid.: 18). Visibility and legibility, like Derrida's *Riss und Zug*, are paralleling each other to meet in infinity.

> [They] confirm each other, notch each other and each signs in some way in the body of the other, the one in the place of the other. They sign there the contract without contract of their neighborhood (Derrida 2007: 74).

What separates and connects the two neighbours, Derrida calls the *trait*. In it is marked their difference, but rather than being just the cut between two "adversaries […] it attracts adversity toward the unity of a contour […] a frame, [and] framework" (Derrida 2007: 78). The adversity attracted between the legibility and visibility of writing concerns the shape and form – as well as the process of shaping and forming – and the combination of alphabetic (and typographic) character, the *ductus litterarum*. For visibility, the ductus (literally "leading") is semantically and syntactically significant. For strictly linguistic legibility however, ductus only decides on allographic assignation, ultimately between illegibility and legibility. Indeed, if writing is contingent on the faithful repro*duction* "of an established set of signs […] 'sanctioned' […] by various authorities, from school on", it always teeters on the edge of illegibility (Reid 1994: 6). Language, recognizable as writing, but allographically illegible, leaves visibility alone, redrawing the writing-drawing relation.

> Illegible writing indicates in fact that the sign has been remorsefully eaten away by its own figurative nature, and that it does indeed take almost nothing at all for the figure to resort back to its status as a mere drawing (Reid 1994: 6).

[3] Hatch is suggested as etymological origin for hash, circumflex translates the Greek perispōmenos "drawn around". Notable also is the physicality (although not necessarily related to drawing) that is bound up in letterpress terminology: type (from tuptein, "to strike"), font (from fondre "to melt"), leading (from the chemical element), strike(through), etc. More recent additions to the typographic toolbox display the same attachment to printmaking's and drawing's materiality: outline type, drop shadow, emboss type, engrave type etc.

It is thus perhaps in writing's interest not only to be legible but also, threatened by illegibility, to impugn its own visibility. Ductus in writing, as in drawing, "*describe*[*s*] the movement of a gesture and *inscribe*[*s* it] in the trace it yields", its "quality, tone and dynamic" becomes part of the semantics and syntax of the *script* (Ingold 2007: 128, italics in original). The navigation of the pen across the page is then the description of its (own) journey along the edge of illegibility as inscription on the page. If *led* too close to the edge, ductus crosses the line to dys-scription, a *bad* writing in which writing has begun the description of its own dis-scription, it works towards an *un*-writing of writing. Crossing the edge to linguistic illegibility, the line however remains as description of a dis-scription of writing's legibility. Many genitives inscribe themselves in the line of writing. The line as inscription of its own description. Description of its inscription. Inscription of its dis-scription. Description of its dis-scription. Dis-scription of its inscription. However not, dis-scription of description. Neither will it ever be completely dis-scribed, for as long as it inscribes itself as dis-scription it will be the rem(a)inder of its own description. The *il*-legibility that cannot assign marks allographically to a particular letter is, therefore not a *without*-legibility or *not*-legibility, describing a lack of legibility, but rather the excess of too many contingent legibilities that inscribe themselves as a line traced between writing and drawing.

What we then recognize in Pettibon's I that refuses to be an ‹i› is a Derridean *trait*; the stroke, trace, feature that draws and writes but also graphic rem(a)inder that bridges and divides writing and drawing and cannot be contained by either of them (Derrida 1987: *passim*; 1993: *passim*; 2007: *passim*). It breaks the truce of the their co-mingling, their normally easily differentiated nature. Pettibon's I is Derrida's

> rebel to appeased commerce, to the regulated exchange of the two elements (lexical and pictural), close to piercing a hole in the *arthron* of discursive writing and representational painting, is this not a wild, almost unnarratable event? (Derrida 1987: 160)

This rebellious I remains unrepresentable to drawing's picturality because with every new glance the "glottic thrust of reading" (Derrida 1987: 160) wants to enunciate it, wants to pull it back into discourse, where it cannot remain either, being similarly irreducible to it. The trait that marks I, also marks the attraction (at-*trait*) and traction between legibility and visibility. "[T]he *trait*, it induces, precisely, *duction*, and even the 'ductus'" (ibid.: 192, italics in original). The duction that *leads* and *draws* (*dūcĕre*) the *untitled's* production, induction, seduction, conduction sooner or later its inevitable abduction and reduction by this not "ductile enough" discourse

(ibid.: 195). Notwithstanding, this will not have been the last attempt of discursivity to draw a bead at, draw in and then draw the line under an I that withdraws (re-*trait*) from being an ‹i›. The I's *silence* on the matter of its I-ness, although it is already

> full of virtual discourses, […] is all the more powerful because it is silent, and that carries within it, as does the aphorism, a discursive virtuality that is infinitely authoritarian […]. Thus it can be said that the greatest logocentric power resides in the work's silence, and liberation from this authority resides on the side of discourse, a discourse that is going to relativize things, emancipate itself, refuse to kneel in front of the authority represented […]. (Derrida 1994: 13)

Self-reflexively, this text itself is then also inevitably an attempt to capture the pictural of the I (and other texts) and to return it to a discursive centre, where it can be contained and silenced by speaking for it and about it. The logocentric desire to command and restrain the differential trait that draws on and describes the border of the verbal and the pictural also permeates every word on this page.

In Pettibon's hands, writing may be shown to possess pictural qualities, which are syntactically and semantically *sign*ificant for writing's *sign*ification; a conclusion, which bears import for our general understanding of writing. Although, any attempt to articulate the shifting effect that graphic characteristics of writing produce is bound to be persistently insufficient and incomplete, it is perhaps preferable to an allographic linguistics that conflates writing and speech, inevitably disregarding relevant traits of written texts. A belief in the transcendent value of logos, which seeks to locate meaning exclusively outside the materiality of the mark that signifies, is equally inconsistent with the observations made in and through Pettibon's work. And finally, by exploring the relationship between writing's legibility and visibility through Derrida's trait, it has been possible to propose a flexible, non-binary, non-exclusive reconsideration of the two terms and to highlight the graphic multiplicity and reciprocities of writing.

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