Asemic Writing. Homebound

Christine Kettaneh

Abstract. To free ourselves from the confinement of home, the artist proposes a journey of forgetting the limiting meaning of home. The journey starts with testing the elasticities of letterforms and signs, breaking them beyond legibility, while exploring spectrums between word and image, until it reaches the territories of asemiosis. Once freed from meaning, the search continues along the threads of asemic writing triggering questions and affects. A step deeper along the meaningless but remarkable traces takes the artist into nature, where she realizes that the escape from home has taken her back home, the original home.

1. Forgetting

During the Covid-19 pandemic, confinement made many of us question the notion of home and the limits of our space. Home is not just the physical space we inhabit. It is the domain of our intimate being. It is where we dream and make memories. So when that space is questioned or attacked, we become anxious. We fidget and become restless pacing the space back and forth, opening and closing windows and doors... until we realize that perhaps the only way out of that unrest is through forgetting language, the system or the beliefs that define and limit our notion of home. That way we are open of resetting and finding new meanings of home. We may then be open to dreaming differently and remembering differently. So maybe we need to forget the word Home, starting with the letter H.

With that intention in mind, I developed an artwork in the form of an animation called "Limits of H" (Fig. 1). In devising it, I ran visual digital tests on the letter H with code. I wanted to see how far I needed to change the basic segments of that letter until I no longer recognized it as H. As the animation runs, there is a growing understanding of a

Christine Kettaneh 0000-0003-4099-9990
Office GB 820, Floor 8, Gezairi Buiding, School of Architecture and Design Lebanese American University, Beirut Campus, Lebanon
E-mail: christinekettaneh@gmail.com

Y. Haralambous (Ed.), *Grapholinguistics in the 21st Century 2022. Proceedings*
Grapholinguistics and Its Applications (ISSN: 2681-8566, e-ISSN: 2534-5192), Vol. 9.
Fluxus Editions, Brest, 2024, pp. 111–134. https://doi.org/10.36824/2022-graf-kett
ISBN: 978-2-487055-04-9, e-ISBN: 978-2-487055-05-6

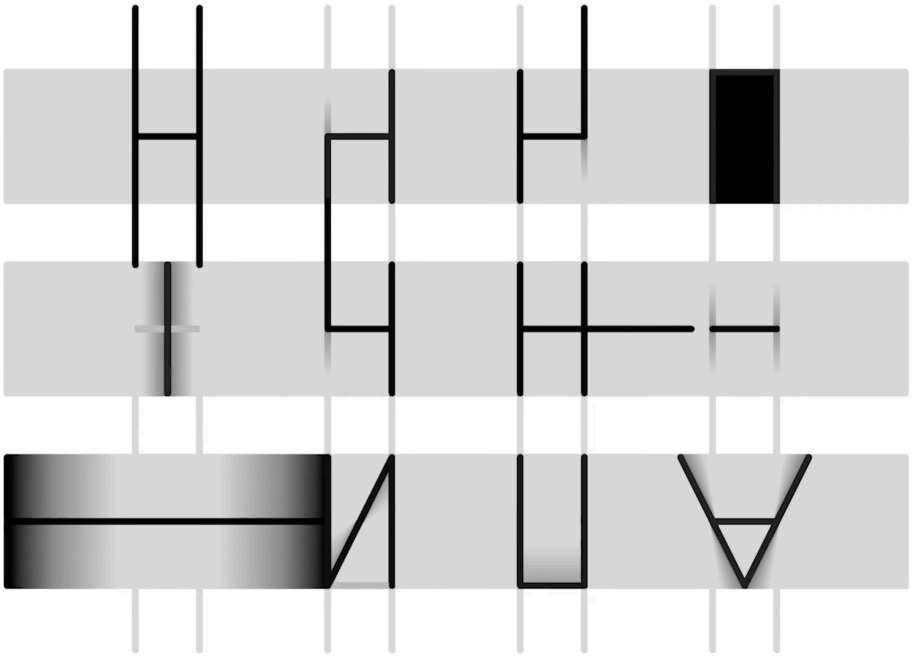

FIGURE 1. Still from "Limits of H," Christine Kettaneh, 2021, video, 9 mins

repetitive going from what we recognize as independent Hs, to something more visually abstract yet somehow more interconnected. However, one cannot help capturing random instances of alternative recognizable symbols like A, V or even ancient Phoenician letters (Kettaneh, 2021).

I wonder how many of Changizi's (2006) configuration types the letter H is touching upon as it transitions from its original verbal to its different more abstract final forms. In his study, Changizi identifies 36 different configuration types across 100 writing systems over human history, Chinese characters, and nonlinguistic symbols, (while confining the samples to characters of three or fewer strokes) (Fig. 9). Each configuration type captures a strong distinct topological identity that is invariant to various geometrical shape variations like variations in relative orientations, lengths, and shapes of the segments or the orientation of the overall character. As my set of Hs animate, I realize that some intermediate forms linger in one configuration as others jump into another one while still others jump outside of that catalogue of configurations all together. So I suppose, the animations of 'Limits of H' are most probably flickering in and out of that catalogue as our minds attempt to read alternating instances of legibility and illegibility. I then did a

similar test on the letter ب in Arabic developing "Limits of ب," where ب is the first letter of Beit ('Home' in Arabic) (Fig. 10).

2. Kineticism

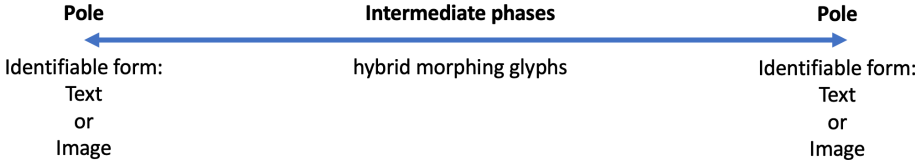

FIGURE 2. Diagram inspired from Barbara Brownie's continuum of fluidity

Reflecting on the limits of H and ب further and focusing on the elasticity of the letters that is expressed, led me to Barbara Brownie's recent studies on kinetic typography (2015). She says that most research in temporal media talk about motion or displacement of whole letters or words along the screen; but they overlook the instances where temporal media has allowed for exploring the malleability of the individual letter. The type designer's role is to create and transform letterforms. In print, such workout remains hidden and what we see or use is the end result. But temporal media has allowed for this work-out to be visible: we can see letters on the screen being created, sculpted and transformed. Brownie calls those changes local kineticism.

However, what Brownie is mostly interested in is 'fluidity,' the extremes of local kineticism, where deformations affect the identity of the letterform allowing for a transformation of nature and meaning. The verbal identity might transform into another verbal identity or into an entirely new pictorial or abstract identity. She calls the identities poles. Usually at every pole, we have a form that can be easily recognized as text or image. During the transformation one identity is lost and strange hybrid nonsemantic forms arise before the next pole is reached. However, the meaning of the artifact is not complete at any one pole and is not the sum of the two poles. The meaning is more complex and can only unravel gradually across time from text to image, text to text or pole to pole. My visualization of this fluidity can be seen in Fig. 2. For Brownie's examples, check Fig. 11 that draws a man transforming into the letter "x" and the letter "k" transforming into the letter "m."

So the asemiosis during the transformation is significant because it resembles two things:

1. A learning experience: The unidentifiable glyphs in the intermediate stages create discomfort because the spectator experiences a phase

of unsettling illiteracy. So those glyphs provoke the spectator's anticipation for the emergence of more familiar signs. So in a way the intermediate phases of transformation prepare the viewer to become a reader and vice versa. When the meaning emerges at the next pole there is a moment of relief and satisfaction of newly acquired knowledge. So fluid typography is like learning: "As asemic signs become legible, new knowledge and understanding is granted to the reader, as if he or she has just learned to read." (Brownie, 2015, p. 57)
A great example showing how asemiosis can support the learning experience is Colleen Ellis's work in ABCing (Ellis, 2010). She breaks down the alphabet by breaking down not the letter itself but the space around it. She then moves and rearranges the pieces so they form a new sign reflecting the meaning of a word that starts with the original letter. It reminds us of the experience of a child learning the alphabet, yet now taken at a second level: our adult eyes already trained to see the alphabet, Colleen guides us to find meaning outside it. The learning is facilitated through her animations that accompany the book. The animations show the process of unlearning to relearning as the meaning disappears with the letter and reemerges in a new form.
In Fig. 12, O breaks down into an organic shape: "a shape relating to, or suggestive of, the natural world or living organisms. [<Latin *organicus* <Greek *ὀργανικός*, "of or pertaining to an organ" + < Old English *gesceap*, "creation, form, destiny.]

2. A live experience: Most of our human experiences are analogue "involving graded relationships on a continuum." So when we try to express it in words we fall short because words do not operate in a continuum. By naming things "we reduce the continuous to the discrete" and we end up perceiving our experiences as binary. On the other hand, fluid artifacts and their transformations give as much importance to the poles as the variations happening in between them allowing for a continuous experience.
Fig. 13 shows a good example: one of Dan Waber's strings called "Argument" (2005). It presents a single string which repeatedly reforms itself between two words: yes and no. The clear yes becomes uncertain before it becomes a clear no and vice versa. Yes and no are binary opposites but "Argument" bounds them across time with the string and hence "presents them on an analogue continuum." (Brownie, 2015, pp. 87–88)

3. Asemiosis

The intermediate unidentifiable glyphs in the kinetic works arise as a consequence of fluidity. However, signs which function in similar ways appear in static media, and have been named by Tim Gaze and Jim Left-

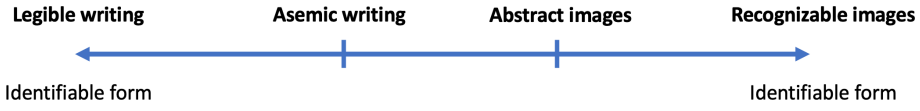

FIGURE 3. Diagram inspired from Tim Gaze's spectrum between text and image

wich, two visual poets, as 'asemic writing.' They coined this name in the 1990s when there was a surge of asemic works being shared over the internet. But asemic writing actually started long before it was named as such like in the poetry of Henri Michaux, writings of Roland Barthes and paintings of Cy Twombly.

At its simplest, asemic writing is, according to Tim Gaze, anything which looks like writing through their shape or organization, but in which the person viewing can't read any words. It is a kind of "writing without Language." Leftwich explained in a letter to Gaze written on January 27, 1998: "A seme is a unit of meaning, or the smallest unit of meaning (also known as a sememe, analogous with phoneme). An asemic text, then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning." (Schwenger, 2019, p. 1)

In his reflections on asemiosis,[1] Gaze (2011) suggests a continuum that exists between image and legible writing or between image and text. At one end of the continuum lies legible writing; at the other end lies recognizable images; and in between the two ends, closer to the legible writing, lies asemic writing and then abstract images. Gaze's spectrum might look as depicted in Fig. 3 and might resemble the continuum that fluid artifacts perform. However in fluid artifacts, asemiosis is temporary and hence the uncomfortable phase of illegibility is temporary. But in asemic writing in static media, the illegibility is given fixed and does not promise a solution. So if asemic writing leaves us frustrated, then why does it still appeal to us and why do we still produce it?

Interviewed by Asymptote, Michael Jacobson says that "asemic writing offers meaning by way of aesthetic intuition, and not by verbal expression." Even if it is illegible, it is still attractive to the eye because it has an open semantic form that can relate to all words, colors and music. More importantly, it can relate to emotions that cannot be expressed with words. So asemic writing fills in a need and is also international in its mission. It is active beyond the language of the author or reader.

Michael Jacobson is known for his asemic works and his online gallery, The New Post-Literate, a weblog that "explores asemic writing in relation to post-literate culture." There is an interesting letter in his

1. *Note by the Editor:* Brownie (2014b) uses the term "asemisis" in the title and abstract of her paper. This term is not a neoclassical compound since the form *semisis does not exist. We will use the term "asemiosis" (privative ἀ- and σημείωσις) instead to designate the same concept.

weblog. It is from Cecil Touchon, also one of the main contemporary names in asemic writing, addressing Peter Schwenger. In his letter, he agrees with Schwenger that legible writing disappears physically upon reading it, and is experienced more as a mental dialog. In that way, he adds, words act more like a 'delivery system.' So one of the reasons why Touchon does asemic works "is to present the actual writing itself as its own concrete, unique reality rather than being representative of something else." He explains that this argument is the same "that stems from abstract or concrete art." (The New Post-literate n.d.)

Touchon then reflects on the experience of reading asemic works. He says that words are signposts that direct the eyes to read the text sequentially word by word, line by line, in order to understand the idea or narrative. So when writing loses its words, the eyes are left wandering around at their own whim. The focus is lost and that might look like disengagement. However, the reality is perhaps that the reading is just different. Devoid of words, we are now looking for patterns, energies and textures enjoying the work as a whole, discovering new things or layers at every reading. This reading experience resembles the reading of an abstract artwork or the appreciation of a musical piece allowing us the liberty to flow in and out of focus with every reading, while encouraging multiple readings.

According to Gaze, reading—and not writing—determines whether a piece of writing is asemic or not. Gaze implies that asemiosis is subjective; if a reader is not able to read a text, then the text is considered at that point in time, as asemic. But it might not be asemic to somebody else who is able to read it. Asemiosis proves also to be subjective along his suggested continuum between image and text.

> One person sees a picture of a house (recognizable image); another sees a bundle of lines (abstract image). One person can read a piece of graffiti (legible writing); another can't (asemic writing). One person sees an unknown species of writing (asemic writing); another sees spaghetti (abstract image). (Gaze, 2011)

Schwenger (2019) discusses another aspect involved in the reading experience of asemic writing. When faced with an asemic piece, we might notice our first impression: an expectation that the text is legible. Upon our failure to read it, some of us might take the piece lightly and impatiently disengage. Others might resist its illegibility and try relentlessly to decode it or translate it desiring that the text rewards them with meaning. Either way, both reactions may reflect to us our addiction to verbalizing and our dependency on logical orders.

Athough there is a lot of asemic work being produced and circulated, and an increasing interest in it, yet there is not much written about it. One of my main references was Peter Schwenger's book: Asemic. The Art of Writing (2019) which can be considered as the first map

and critical study of this fascinating field. Schwenger discusses the works of three asemic ancestors: Henri Michaux, Roland Barthes and Cy Twombly. Understanding their approaches lays ground to most asemic works.

3.1. Henri Michaux, *Mouvement*

> To make visible the interior sentence, the sentence without words, the cord that unrolls itself infinitely, sinuously, and deep within accompanies everything that presents itself, outside as well as inside. (Henri Michaux)

Henri Michaux is known for both his literary and art works. He aims in both fields to push beyond conventions towards what he calls "the space within, or beyond." He feels that words are limiting because they are kind of images but restrictive ones. So he desires to build "sentences without words," sentences that escape translation. This leads him to an asemic practice that focuses on movement. He wants continuity and change devoid of the stop signs of words. Not surprisingly, he is very much influenced by dance and the language of the body.

Fig. 14 is a work by Henri Michaux. It is from his book *Mouvements* (1951/1982) which is a book of markings that was created by improvised impulses: movements of the hand and accidents of ink. He calls his asemic forms not as shapes but as interior gestures. These gestures do not convey thoughts or stable signs but rather reflect an interior tempo. This interior tempo is emotion, which is part of our response to sensation or perception. Our emotions accompany our first vague forms of our ideas. So his gestures reflect not thought but what precedes thought: an expression of our primal desire. (ibid.)

3.2. Roland Barthes, *Contre-écriture*

Roland Barthes is influenced by Henri Michaux and several others when he also tries to avoid meaning in order to unlock the power of the asemic. Fig. 7 is a selection from Barthes's "contre-écriture," published in 1976 in a journal (Barthes 1976, and Onnen 2008, p. 27). His author's note reads: "If my graphisms are illegible, it is precisely in order to say No to commentary." This is not a reflection of insecurity about his work but rather a hint about commentary's fundamental nature: "For commentary endlessly extends language; it is in the service of an impossible quest to extract the last, the final, drop of meaning." (Schwenger, 2019, p. 32)

He has an "almost obsessive relation to writing instruments." For Barthes, writing is a sensual act; he is very much interested about the

muscular act of tracing letters, its physicality, its scription, and the resulting materiality of accidental ink blots, gesture painting or unconscious doodling. He is also interested in the speed of writing and how it conveys the author's style. He suggests that speedy writing can reveal a "kinetic relationship between the head and the hand." "In this relationship the head does not automatically have priority: it may be dictated to by the hand quite as readily as the other way around." (Schwenger, 2019, p. 37)

He chooses to experiment with asemic writing as an anti-mythological action. He wants to overturn the old myth that assumes thought precedes language and that language is only an instrument to transmit those thoughts, ideas or information. He is in line with Saussure's proposition that "without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language." Hence the sign or writing is the condition of thought, not its instrument, medium, or expression. (Badmington, 2008, p. 89)

All the materials and material act of writing that he is interested in: the hand, the pen, the paper are usually overlooked because we are conditioned to prioritize meaning in our reading. So to make writing visible in its truth, Barthes suggests that writing needs to be illegible. It is the only way that the graphic element would reclaim its primacy. He calls his asemic writing graphism in order to bridge the gap between writing and painting which he believes are not fundamentally different.

3.3. Cy Twombly, *Letter of Resignation*

> The line is the feeling, from a soft thing, a dreamy thing, to something hard, something arid, something lonely, something ending, something beginning. It's like I'm experiencing something frightening, I'm experiencing the thing and I have to be at that state because I'm also going. (Cy Twombly)

We can see those lines of feelings at work in Cy Twombly's "Letter of Resignation," which is a series of thirty-eight drawings, probably done in response to the hostile reviews his works received a year earlier (Fig. 8). Those reviews affected him so much that he takes a break from painting for almost a year. Yet that resignation from art is only a temporary one because just by performing the letter of resignation he is also returning boldly back to art. (Schwenger, 2019)

The emotions he felt must have been of frustration and anger; emotions that were beyond words. So his letters are written with agitation without control, without articulation, without words. Through the violent and agitated markings we can feel the physical venting of the pencil on the page. The writings devoid of verbal meaning return to their primal form as drawing. Only the forward intensity, the leaning, the

cursivity of writing remain. The fact that he has written multiple drafts reinforces the idea that the words come after the feeling. In each attempt, the writer tries to fit words ever more closely to the shape and quality of the feeling.

4. Eco-asemiosis

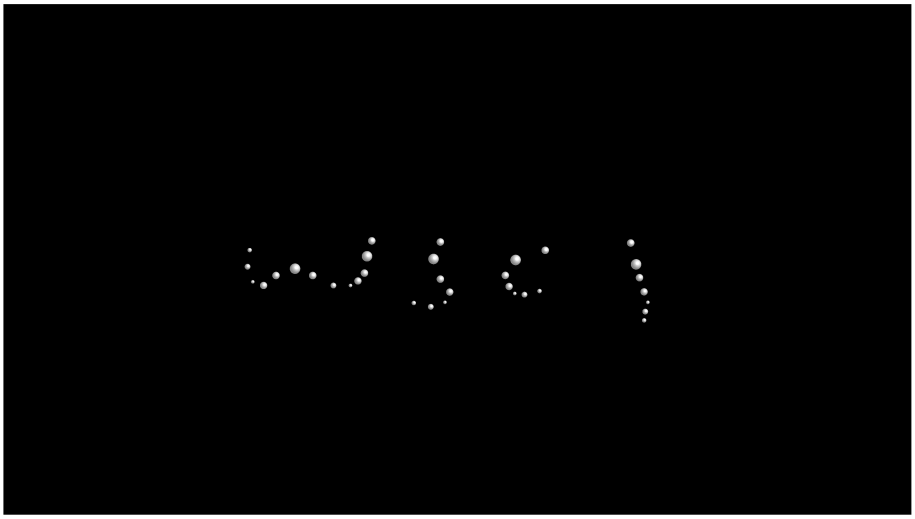

FIGURE 4. Still from an animation depicting wormlike movements, from the art film "The Hindwing" (2018) by Christine Kettaneh

"Despite his own artistic ability, Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) believed that humans could never create anything "more beautiful, simple, or direct than nature."" That's how Robert M. Peck starts his essay "Asemic Writing from the Mouth of a Snail," in the Natural History magazine. In his essay, Peck draws on the artistry in the traveling and eating trails of snails and likens those ethereal patterns to asemic writing. He refers to a photograph (Fig. 15) which he has taken to show the paths created by a common land snail as it feeds on algae off a nutritious surface. He gives a detailed description of the feeding habit that leaves fan-like trails of thin strips that have similarities with the ink drawings of Henri Michaux and Norman Lewis, and the abstract paintings of Cy Twombly. (Peck, 2022)

According to Gaze, "You could say that nature, since time began, has been manifesting asemic writing. It just needs a human to see the writ-

ing, & recognize it". De Villo Sloan named those asemic markings in nature as 'eco-asemics.' (Schwenger, 2019)

I was intrigued myself by trails left by a bark beetle infestation under the barks of my family's historic pine tree (Fig. 16) .When a bark beetle overcomes a weak pine tree, I learnt, it makes a nursery inside the bark. The offspring, once hatched, feeds on the soft tissue in the tree making tunnels through the bark. Those tunnels further disrupt the circulation of water and sap of the tree causing its eventual death. I made a short art film called "The Hindwing," (2018) documenting the felling of our family pine tree, while exploring, in parallel, the infestation process. In my studies of the bark beetle, I traced the movement of the body of a larva, the worm stage in the life cycle of the beetle. I took the tracing and used it to animate an abstraction of a larva. I put four of those larvae aligned next to each other unraveling a kind of asemic—or eco-asemic—message through time (Fig. 4).

Some artists hunt for these natural markings and present them directly in their work. Sometimes the artist intervention is minimal like taking a photograph of nature as is but in a specific frame, light or alignment (Fig. 17). Other interventions involve more process, like removing elements from nature and decontextualizing them (Fig. 18–19) or tracing over them (Fig. 20). Sometimes the traces or markings are taken only as studies to influence new works, like in the case of my larvae animation.

In the article "The Structures of Letters and Symbols throughout Human History Are Selected to Match Those Found in Objects in Natural Scenes," Changizi, Zhang, Ye, and Shimojo (2006) demonstrate first that there are empirical regularities governing the topological shapes of human visual signs. He does that by finding strong correlations among the relative frequency of the 36 configurations that were developed across the three classes of visual signs. The results suggest "that the configuration distribution for human visual signs tends to possess a characteristic signature." He then considers an ecological and visual hypothesis for that characteristic signature: that the more common configuration types among visual signs are the more common configuration types among natural scenes. He explains that cultural selection pressure favors configuration types found in natural scenes, because that's "what humans have evolved to be good at visually processing." To test this ecological hypothesis he measures configuration distributions from three classes of natural images: 1. "Ancestral," which consists of photographs of savannas and tribal life. 2. "National Geographic," which consists of photographs of rural and small-town life taken from the National Geographic website. 3. "CGI buildings," which consists of computer-generated realistic images of buildings. The results show that the distributions for the three kinds of environment correlate very highly with one another and more importantly and closely to the signature distri-

bution for human visual signs. The results hence provide evidence to support the ecological hypothesis.

If asemic writing is frustrating because it carries no meaning, eco-asemics is frustrating even more because of the absence of a human author. Without a human author, decoding those signs to satisfy our compulsion for finding a verbal meaning or intention becomes impossible. But just like asemic writing carries the invitation to encounter the physicality of mark making and reading our primal gestures cleared from human language's dictation, eco-asemic writing might be an invitation to consider a language that transcends the human. By offering markings akin to human writing, natural objects might be demanding that we pay attention to them. It might be an invitation to return to nature, the origin upon which we have built our language before we turned it into a human artifice.

5. Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius

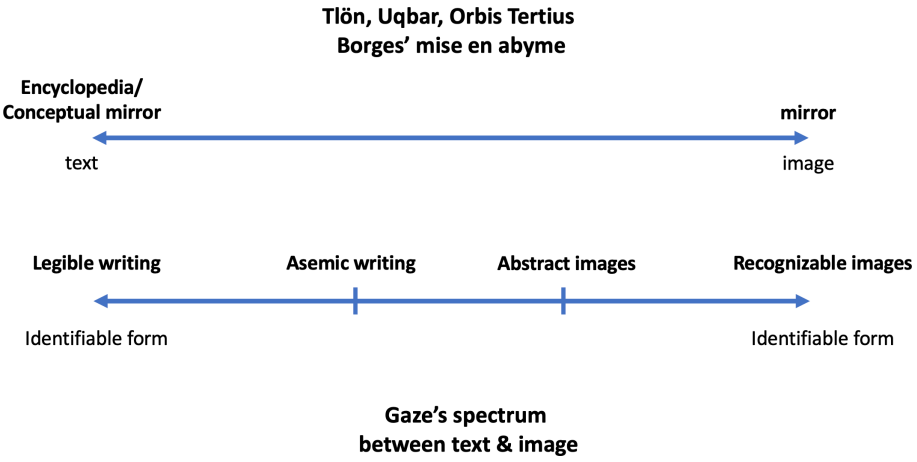

FIGURE 5. Diagram showing the similarity between Borges' mise en abîme and Gaze's continuum between text and image

"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," is the title of a short story written by Jorge Luis Borges in 1940. The story is as difficult as the title sounds. It requires several frustrating readings before you start making a little sense of things.

The story is about an encyclopedia that was written by a secret sect for an imaginary world called Tlön. Tlön is first introduced as a mythical region in a non-existent land called Uqbar. The narrative of the

story is a structure en abîme starting from a reality that matches Encyclopedia Britanica. Reality starts gradually changing as we discover new versions of the encyclopedia, each version having a bigger fictional component. Orbis Tertius is the encyclopedia of Tlön written in the Tlönian language with its own special alphabet. Tlönians are idealists that don't believe in the continuity of objects so their language has no nouns. They have two dialects, one that is based solely on adjectives and one that is based on verbs. Reality is finally threatened to become Tlönian if Orbis Tertius is discovered because that's when the Tlönian language would be adopted and all current languages would be forgotten.

If you read the story carefully you realize that Borges prepared his readers for this mise en abîme when he mentioned at the very start: "I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia." So if we think of the encyclopedia as a conceptual verbal mirror of the world, then two mirrors placed infront of each other would lead to a mise en abîme. I find this setup insightful; I think this mise en abîme resembles Tim Gaze's spectrum between image and legible writing. So perhaps asemiosis is a state in a mise en abîme between word and image (Fig. 5). It makes sense then that asemiosis is confusing and frustrating.

Another point from this story which I find significant to the discourse of this paper is the statement that Borges makes towards the end of the story: "How could one do other than submit to Tlön, to the minute and vast evidence of an orderly planet? It is useless to answer that reality is also orderly. Perhaps it is, but in accordance with divine laws—I translate: inhuman laws—which we never quite grasp. Tlön is surely a labyrinth, but it is a labyrinth devised by men, a labyrinth destined to be deciphered by men."

So we have built our languages akin to the original inhuman languages of the world and assigned meaning to them. Humans readily adopted them because they were decipherable. So perhaps Eco-asemic works remind us of the origins of language and asemic writings with their supposed failure to read remind us of our compulsion to assign human meaning.

5.1. *Codex Seraphinianus*

"Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" inspired many works including "Codex Seraphinianus." It is a 360 pages illustrated encyclopedia of an imaginary world, created by Italian artist, architect and industrial designer Luigi Serafini between 1976 and 1978. The codex is made up of hand-drawn surreal bizarre illustrations divided into two sections. The first section is characterized by the natural world of flora, fauna, anatomies, and physics. The second is characterized by the various aspects of hu-

man life like fashion, architecture, history and foods. The codex is also known for its false writing system. Serafini stated that the writing was asemic and that there was no meaning behind it; he said his experience in writing it was like automatic writing (Fig. 21). "What he wanted his alphabet to convey was the sensation children feel with books they cannot yet understand, although they see that the writing makes sense for adults." (Babkina, 2015)

Even after such statement, some people still believed the codex could be deciphered and the book's page-numbering system was decoded by Allan C. Wechsler and Bulgarian linguist Ivan Derzhanski.

5.2. The Voynich Manuscript

Maybe the most debated and studied codex of all times—which may have inspired the writing of both "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius" and "Codex Seraphinianus"—remains the enigmatic medieval script, the Voynich Manuscript, that has been carbon-dated to the early 1400s. The Voynich has an interesting history, having been passed through the hands of many scientists, emperors, and collectors. Though the author still remains unknown, studies of its illustrations have hinted that its original purpose is probably medical, including sections akin to "medieval herbals, astrology guides, and bathing manuals." However, the illustrations look crude and amateurish unlike the more professionally and faithfully drawn plants of the time. More importantly, the illustrations depict botanical impossibilities and surreal imagery which way surpass the little quirks of the medieval herbals. (Hochelaga, 2022)

Adding to the manuscript's mystery, its 240 pages have been written by hand in an unknown language, referred to as 'Voynichese' (Fig. 22). It looks like a European language, reading from left to right, having a 22 letter alphabet combining together to form words. Some tests have shown that the word distribution demonstrates a logic; the spelling reveals some predictable patterns; and some cluster of unique words might hint at keywords belonging to the theme of plants. The presence of an order suggests that the Voynichese behaves like a language; however it is not behaving like any language we know of. Many theories have been developed about the Voynichese. One theory suggests that it is a cipher, a known language in disguise. It has been studied by many cryptographers including codebreakers from both World War I and World War II, but the original language has not been definitely deciphered yet. Another theory suggests that it is a natural language, perhaps a European language that has long been forgotten. But unless we find a Rosetta Stone with the Voynichese writing on it, this line of thought too remains inconclusive. Still another theory suggests that the Voynichese is a constructed language. Many ancient languages were constructed in

an attempt to develop a universal language, one that made information more accessible. But this theory contradicts the theory of the cipher and its purpose of hiding information.

Other theories on the meanings of the Voynich manusicript and its origins abound, but as long as the text remains illegible, and is in the context of this paper, the Voynich fits as a perfect example of early asemiosis. Perhaps I can go a step further and entertain the idea of it being an eco-asemic work with its treatise on nature, drawing its universal script from nature itself: floating without a human author or human meaning.

6. Remembering

I recently attended "Nanocosmic Investigations—Artists in Conversation with ESS" an artist residency at Inter Arts Center in Malmö, Sweden. The residency was a collaboration between Malmö Museer, The European Spallation Source (ESS) and Inter Arts Center at Lund University. ESS was building a proton accelerator and the discussions with the ESS scientists helped me understand the different forces that were exerted and controlled in order to focus and accelerate the beam of protons. What really stayed with me at the end of the discussions was the idea of a horizontal path, a horizontal travel, and all the efforts needed to make it happen. That transverse magnetism to the horizontal made me think of the positive sign '+' which has both directions, the vertical and horizontal. It is also the symbol that the proton carries. I was inspired to explore ways that the vertical could go into horizontal and eventually worked out a code to visualize it. The outcome turned out to look like an active asemic script, as you can see from a still of the animation in the top section of Fig. 6.

I was then interested to explore the different ways our bodies could go horizontal while we imagined ourselves preparing for a horizontal travel along the beam (Fig. 6). For us humans, we are very familiar with the horizontal. We have evolved from it to stand upright on our legs. Yet we still go back to it when we rest and sleep or pass away. Horizontal is home. Even our text and writing are linearly horizontal in reminiscence to our original reference of home. So perhaps through that accelerator we are traveling home and through our asemiosis we are writing home. We are perhaps writing home and traveling in time while being still—at home.

I think asemic writing implies energy. As Tim Gaze puts it: "Asemic writing is a visual stimulus." Devoid of words, it directs us towards the physicality of the trace casting light on the primal desires, feelings or energies that precede thought. Asemic writing is always active, even in its static form, either triggering our compulsions for meaning or inviting

us to play, learn or solve. Moreover, asemic writing creates the opportunity to question: what is writing? And what is reading? Trying to answer these questions will take us ultimately back to where it all started, before the seme, before the meaning, to the flat ground that holds all other forms on it, below it or above it. As Schwenger adequately puts it: Asemic writing "may be without meaning; but it is not without significance."

References

Babkina, Katerina (2015). "Luigi Serafini on How and Why He Created an Encyclopedia of an Imaginary World." Bird in Flight. https://

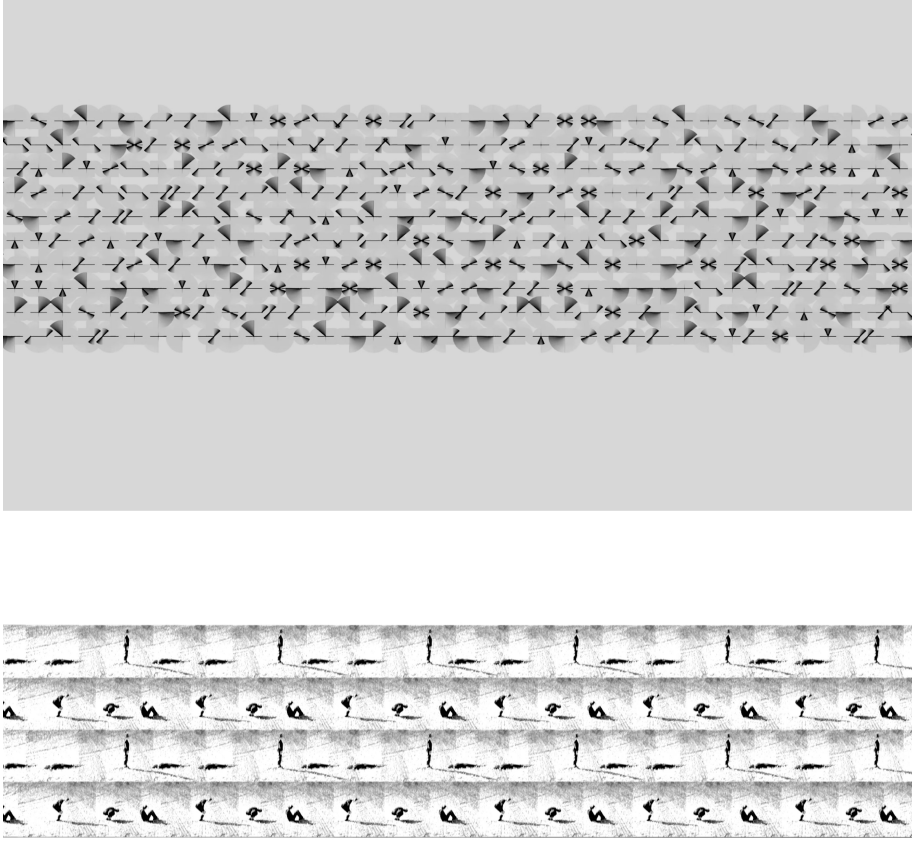

FIGURE 6. Stills from the video "Transverse" (2022) by Christine Kettaneh

birdinflight.com/media/luigi-serafini-on-how-and-why-he-created-an-encyclopedia-of-an-imaginary-world.html.
Badmington, Neil (2008). "The "Inkredible" Roland Barthes." In: *Paragraph* 31, pp. 84–94.
Barthes, Roland (1976). "Contre-écritures." In: *Graphies*. Ed. by Marc Dachy. Vol. 2. Luna-Park. Brussels: Transédition.
Borges, Jorge Luis (1961). "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius." In: *New World Writing*.
Brownie, Barbara (2014a). "A New History of Temporal Typography. Towards fluid letterforms." In: *Journal of Design History* 27.2, pp. 167–181.
———— (2014b). "Alien Scripts: Pseudo-Writing and Asemisis in Comics and Graphic Novels." In: *3rd Global Conference: The Graphic Novel, Oxford, UK, 3-5 September, 2014*, pp. 1–9.
———— (2015). *Transforming Type. New directions in kinetic typography*. London: Bloomsbury.
Changizi, Mark A. et al. (2006). "The Structures of Letters and Symbols throughout Human History Are Selected to Match Those Found in Objects in Natural Scenes." In: *The American Naturalist* 167, pp. 117–139.
Comerford, Colleen (n.d.). "Book and Interactive Website." http://www.colleencomerford.com/bookinteractive.html.
Ellis, Colleen (2010). *ABCing. Seeing the Alphabet Differently*. New York: Mark Betty Publisher.
European Spallation Source (2022). "ESS art residency programme. Nanocosmic Investigations exhibition." https://europeanspallationsource.se/article/2022/04/06/ess-art-residency-programme-nanocosmic-investigations-exhibition.
Gaze, Tim (2011). "Asemic Movement 1." https://issuu.com/eexxiitt/docs/asemicmovement1.
———— (2015). "Gaze. A few persistent thoughts about asemic writing." https://www.utsanga.it/gazea-few-persistent-thoughts-about-asemic-writing/.
Hochelaga (2022). "Secrets of the Voynich Manuscript." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csyxcbqgczo.
Inter Arts Center (2022). "Nanocosmic Investigations. The Exhibition." https://www.iac.lu.se/projects/nanocosmic-investigations/.
Jacobson, Michael (2022a). "A letter from Cecil Touchon to Peter Schwenger discussing asemic reading!" The New Post-literate. A Gallery of Asemic Writing, http://thenewpostliterate.blogspot.com/2020/01/a-letter-from-cecil-touchon-to-peter.html?m=1.
———— (2022b). "On Asemic Writing." In: *Asymptote*.
———— (2022c). "The New Post-literate. A Gallery of Asemic Writing." http://thenewpostliterate.blogspot.com/.
Kettaneh, Christine (2018). "The Hindwing." http://www.christinekettaneh.com/#/new-page-3/.

———— (n.d.[a]). "Limits of H." https://vimeo.com/673865141/2d0cec2859.
———— (n.d.[b]). "Limits of ب." https://vimeo.com/673865727/3fb8341de5.
Onnen, Serge (2008). *Drawings on Writing*. Atlanta, New York: J&L Books.
Peck, Robert M. (2022). "Asemic Writing From the Mouth of a Snail." In: *Natural History* 130.
Schwenger, Peter (2019). *Asemic. The art of writing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Waber, Dan (1999). "Argument." https://vispo.com/guests/DanWaber/argument.html.

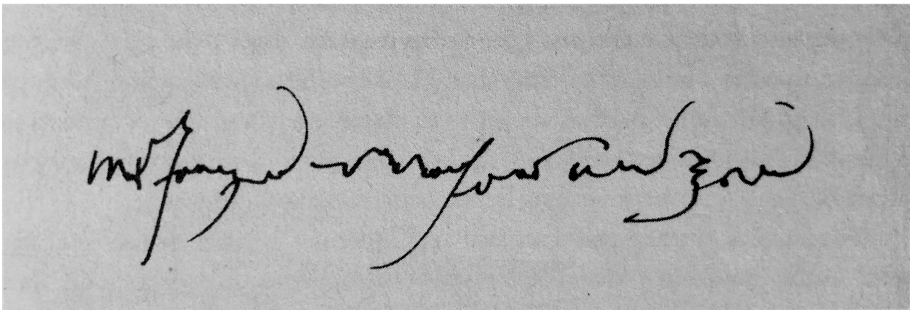

FIGURE 7. Roland Barthes, "Contre-écriture." (Schwenger, 2019, 33, Fig. 2.5)

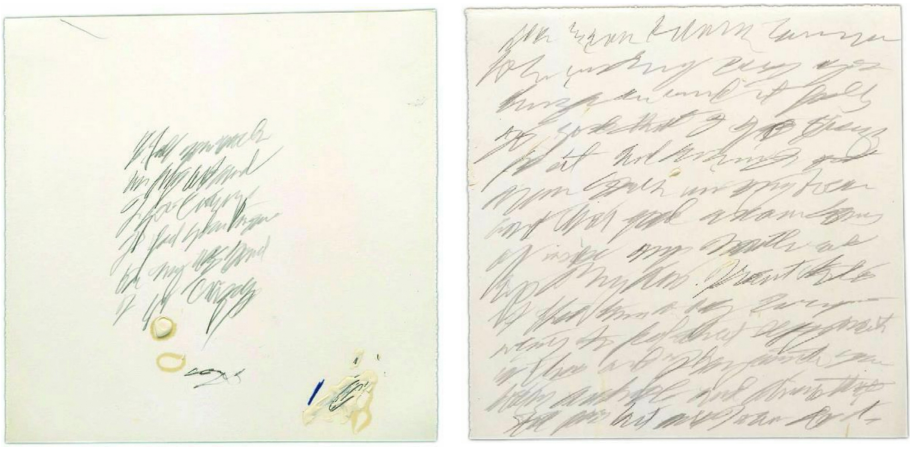

FIGURE 8. Cy Twombly, "Letter of Resignation XXV" & "Letter of Resignation XXXVI," 1967. Copyright Cy Twombly Foundation

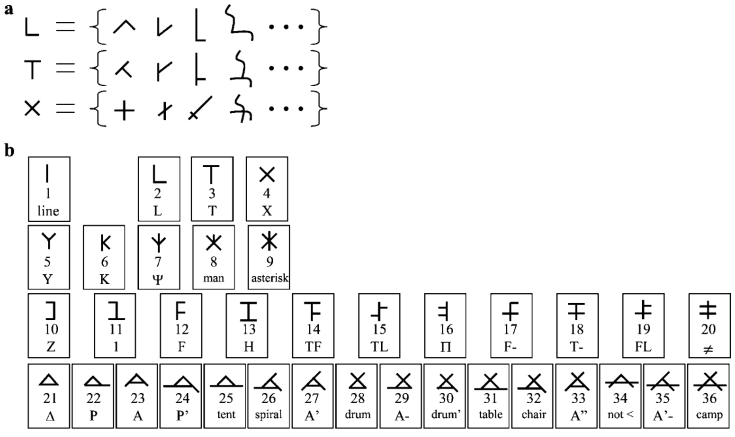

FIGURE 9. a. Illustration of the kinds of variation allowed within a configuration type. Each configuration shown stands for a large class of configurations of the same type, where the following features can vary independently: overall orientation of the configuration, relative orientation of the segments, relative lengths of the segments, and shapes of the segments. Example cases are shown for the three configuration types with a length of two. B. Catalog of all 36 distinct configuration types with three or fewer segments, with ID number and proper name. The catalog allows only configuration types where for any two distinct segments *x* and *y*, *x* can intersect *y* at most once and no segment can intersect itself." (Changizi, Zhang, Ye, and Shimojo, 2006, Fig. 1)

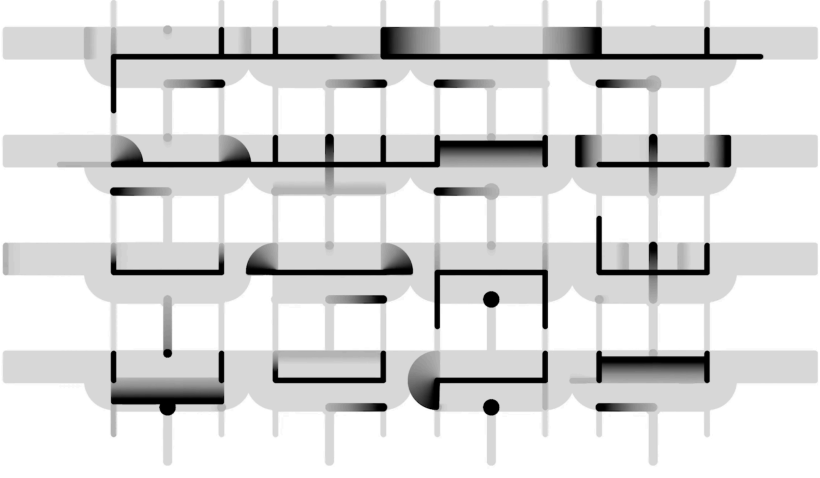

FIGURE 10. Still from "Limits of ب," Christine Kettaneh, 2021, video, 10 mins 14 sec.

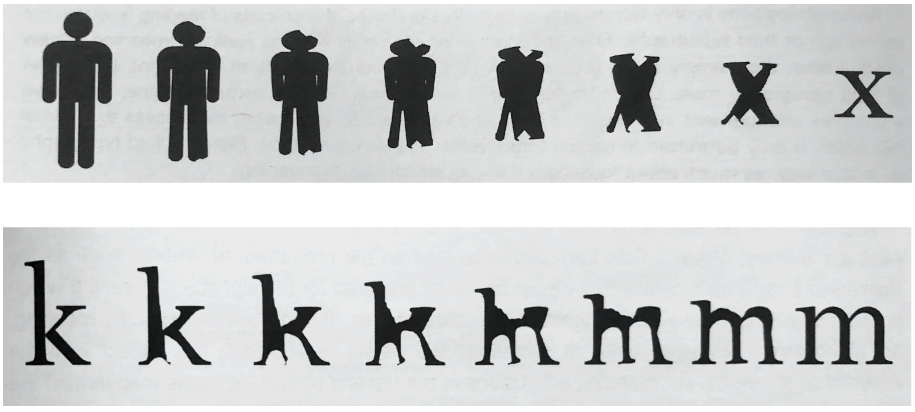

FIGURE 11. Top: "A figure of a man morphs into an "x." During the transformation, the form evolves into an amorphous shape before becoming identifiable as a letter. The shape appears to become meaningful before its precise meaning can be discerned. During this process, the viewer must cease to perceive the image as an image, and begin to read it as a letter. Both the "x" and the man are bound up in the same form, but revealed over time. The temporal connection between these two signs is also meaningful, as it prompts the viewer not to consider each message in isolation." © Barbara Brownie (Brownie, 2015, 52, Fig. 5.1). Bottom: "A "k" morphs into an "m." As it transforms, the "k" ceases to be recognizable, and becomes an abstract glyph, before it eventually resolved into an "m." At the midpoint, it is identifiable as a linguistic form of some kind, but its precise alphabetic value cannot be determined. It is at this point that it is "asemic." © Barbara Brownie (Brownie, 2015, 53, Fig. 5.2).

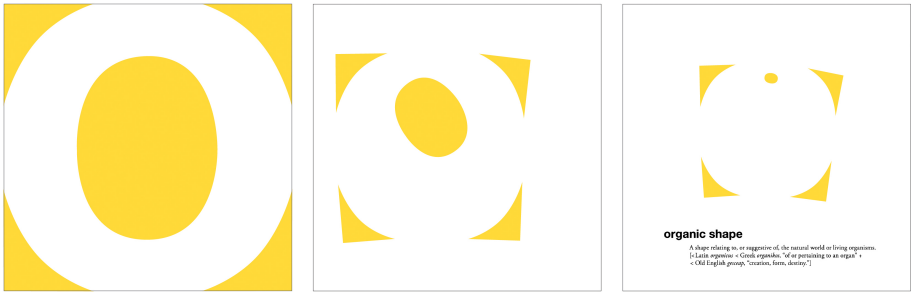

FIGURE 12. Stills from Colleen Comerford's animation of "O" in ABCing: Seeing the Alphabet Differently (2010). The stills show the first and final poles of the transformation along with an intermediate glyph. © Colleen Comerford

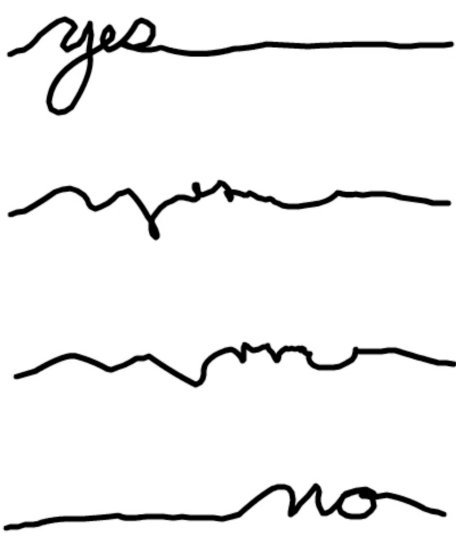

FIGURE 13. Stills from Dan Waber's animation "Argument" (2005) showing a string that alternates between a "yes" and a "no." © Dan Waber

FIGURE 14. Henri Michaux, from *Mouvements*, 1951/1982. Copyright Éditions Gallimard. (Schwenger, 2019, 26, Fig. 2.3)

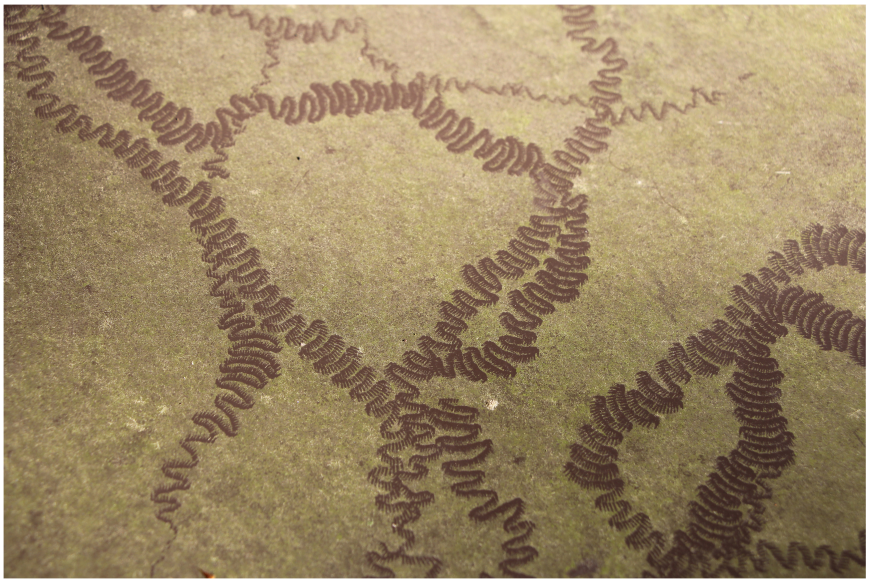

FIGURE 15. Feeding trails of a common land snail. Photo by Robert M. Peck

FIGURE 16. Trails left by a bark beetle infestation under the barks of a pine tree. Photo by Christine Kettaneh

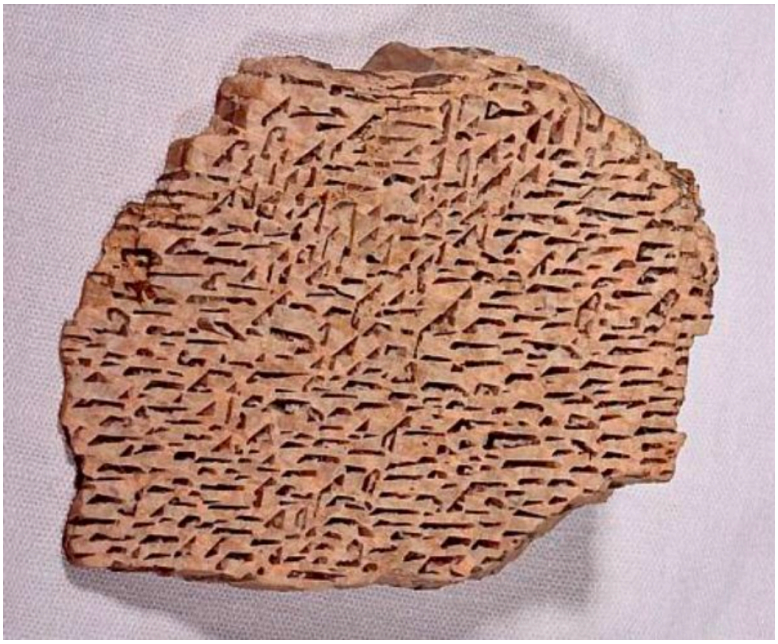

FIGURE 17. Photograph of graphic granite (NMNH 111123—1767) by Ken Larsen. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution (Schwenger, 2019, 65, Fig. 3.4)

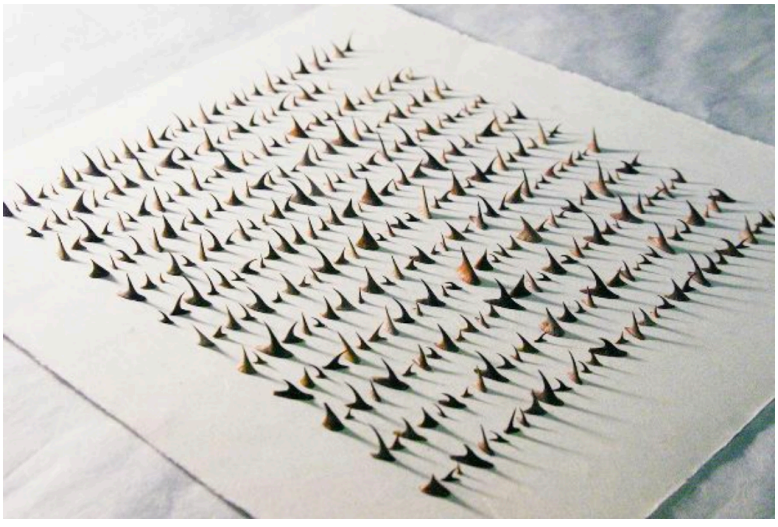

FIGURE 18. Cue Fei, "Read by Touch," 2005-6. Thorns on rice paper. Each page 9 ¼ × 10 ¾ inches; total 11 pages. Photograph by Zheng Lianjie (Schwenger, 2019, 76, Fig. 3.9)

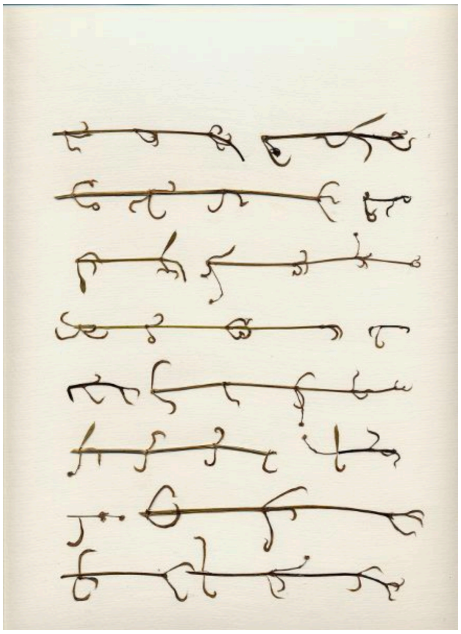

FIGURE 19. Marian Bijlenga, page from the book "Written Weed," no21, 2004. Catchweed on paper. Photograph by Marian Bijlenga (Schwenger, 2019, 77, Fig. 3.10)

FIGURE 20. Screenshot from "Asemic Writing in the Woods" (2011) by E.Samigulina/ Tae Ateh and Karen Kamak/ Yuli Ilyschanka (Schwenger, 2019, 80, Fig. 3.12)

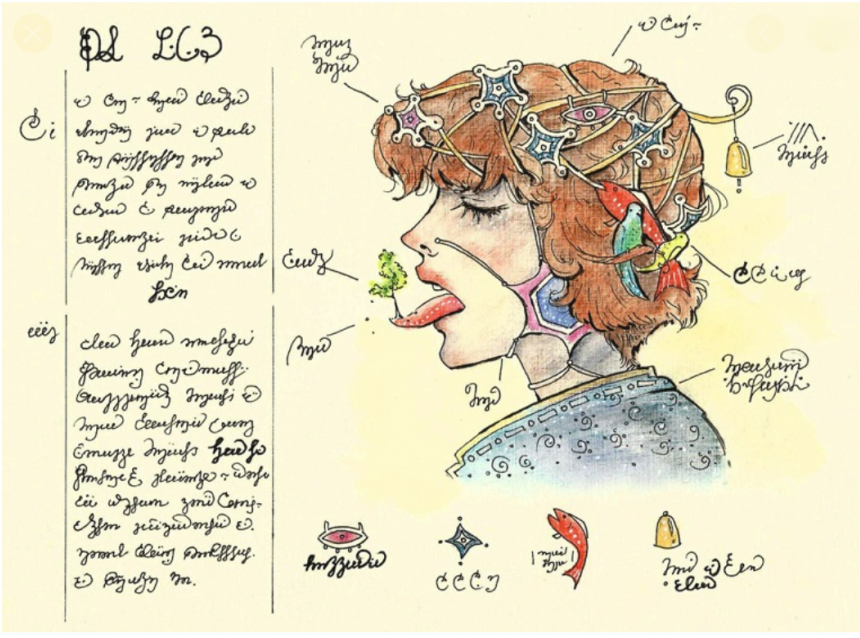

FIGURE 21. A page from Luigi Serafini's *Codex Seraphinianus*

FIGURE 22. A sample from The Voynich Manuscript