

The Accumulation of Sediment

by Benjamin Forster

‘Our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words have remained the same’.
— ‘Peter Stillman’¹

...

Writing is literally graphic. The ancient Greek word *graphie* refers both to ‘writing’ and to ‘drawing’, where ‘to write’ meant originally ‘to scrape’ or ‘to scratch’ (on a clay tablet with a stylus). In the beginning, as it were, it could have made no sense to say that a picture paints a thousand words.

And so it could be that these works of Benjamin Forster’s recall a certain beginning, a time when there was making (perhaps even the conscious attempt to communicate or express) but not (quite) yet writing and / or drawing. If the seemingly digital nature of these artworks, then, lends them the appearance or the illusion of ‘post’-art, no less than of ‘post’-writing, they are also utterly primordial.

They are *made*, but by what function?

If writing is a function we assign to authors, and art a function we assign to artists, what do we call the one who *writes* art? And what do we call a written work of art that is not (quite) a work of literature, at least not in the standard, specialised sense of that term?

...

Forster’s art is incisive, albeit its incisions are the effect of a virtual stylus in the form of computer code. Virtual incisions, in cyberspace—a place not found on any map. But these incisions, these graphic marks, do not differ fundamentally from those of Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* or Duchamp’s *Fountain*; to the extent that they call upon us *to think*, they recall the inescapably conceptual nature of art in general. ‘Art doesn’t express; it invents’.²

In art, then—though surely not in art exclusively?—ideas are neither tools nor objects; neither an intent to be enacted nor a meaning to be extracted, but rather the very *matter* of which the artwork is made. No less than paint or clay, light or ink, ideas are materials to be moulded and blended, carved and filtered, stretched and even broken, in the production of a work.

In Forster’s work, ideas are made to break, with even the ‘concrete’ materials put to altogether ‘wrong’ uses. Far from performing their ‘proper’ role in defining metre and giving style to syntax, punctuation marks paint images and combine with rocks to form sculptures; computer disks, meanwhile,

manifestly *fail* to archive the 'informational contents' that they contain, an already visible obsolescence belying their promised utility as infallible, prosthetic memory, reducing them instead to the simple memento they provide of a recent present already superseded by tomorrow.

...

When Jacques Derrida noted, more or less in passing, that 'there is nothing outside of the text',³ his observation produced a storm of controversy in philosophical circles, conjuring an image in the minds of his critics of a world constructed out of nothing but words. While Derrida undoubtedly had hoped to produce other, less 'outrageous' thoughts, this seemingly scandalous image returns in different guises across a number of Forster's pieces.

'Text' and 'writing', in Forster's work, come to claim their priority over subjects and objects. Not textual representations *of* the world, but textual markings *as* world. Signs as signage—orienting rather than communicating, receding into a background hum rather than interrupting a prior silence. Conveying something other or more than a semantic content, the *graphic* elements of our natural, urban habitat thus constitute an almost imperceptible horizon—within which and against which something like communication or representation may happen.

Accordingly, in Forster's inversion of the commonsense relation of text to world, words, language, information come to feature neither as abstract, symbolic media nor, strictly speaking, as discrete concrete objects, but instead as scratchings and scrapings in the very surface of existence.

Robert Briggs and Niall Lucy
Curtin University

Notes

1. Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*. London: Faber & Faber, p.77.
2. Niall Lucy, 'Introduction', *Vagabond Holes: David McComb and the Triffids*, ed. Chris Coughran and Niall Lucy, 2009. Fremantle: Fremantle Press, p.15.
3. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, p.158.