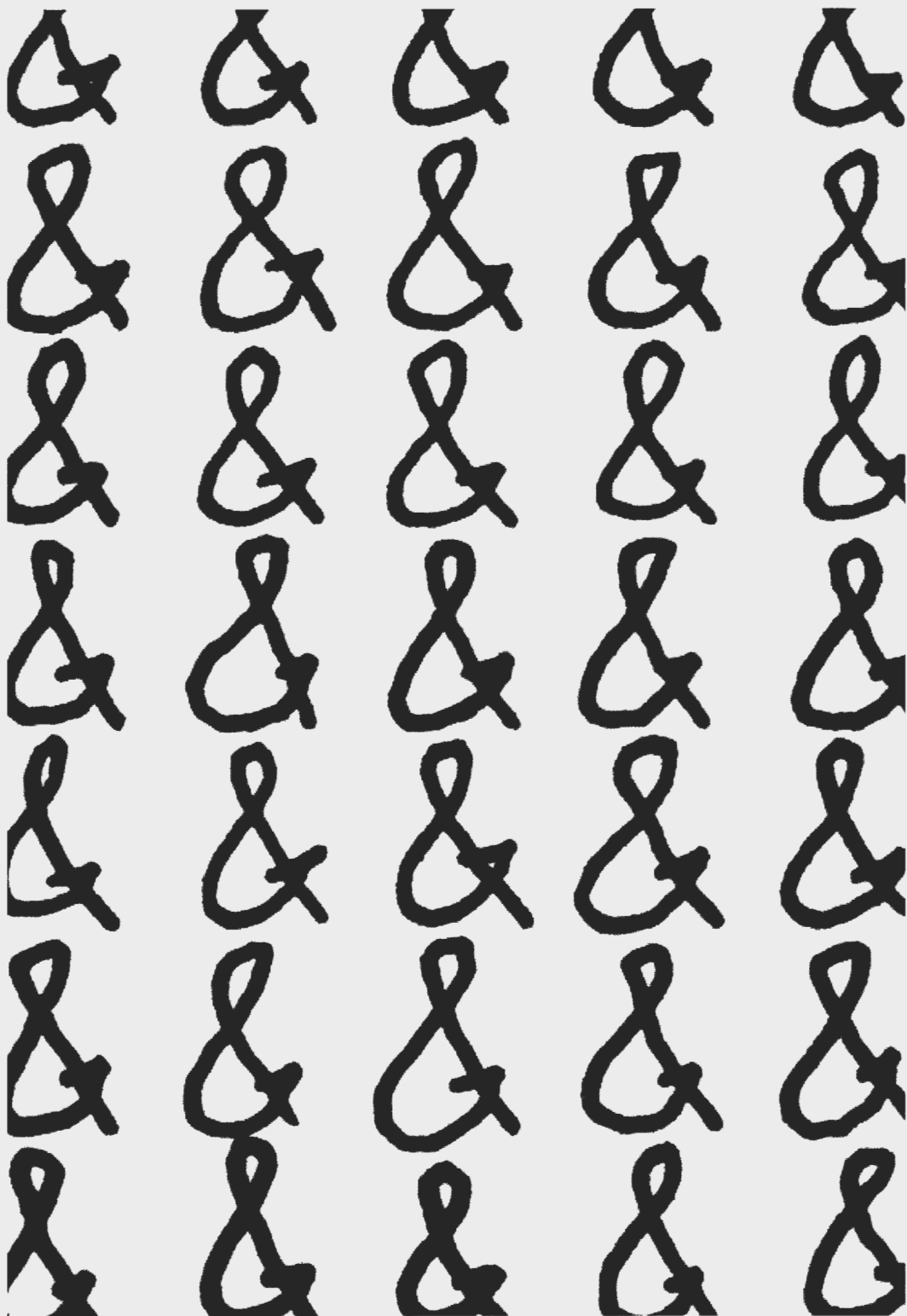


# JOEL SWANSON

LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM



Joel Swanson explores language in its literal and physical forms, stretching words to become an image, or multiple images. His works reveal how language is a dynamic system to be pushed, pulled and kneaded.

Swanson takes a highly disciplined approach to art making, using the rigor of 1960s Conceptual art as a foundation and finding ways of making it relevant today. He uses the structures of grammar and composition as sources for creative production. Importantly, such constraints become enormously productive, allowing him to take subjects embedded in daily life and then scrutinize them in refreshing ways.

Swanson's work often renders the predictability of language unstable. In *Logic Only Works in 2-Dimensions* (2014) a large-scale symbol is shown to be relative rather than definitive. The sideways ">" is the greater than symbol; reversed, it is also the less than symbol. The sculpture registers how this symbol can function as both. In such a work, Swanson plays with a duality within our linguistic system such that one thing can refer to its very opposite, and how an alternate reading of this work is entirely dependent upon the placement of the viewer. Swanson places full responsibility for the reading of the work—it definitely means one or the other—according to the location of the viewer. Pointing out the relative meaning of such a symbol is at the core of Swanson's practice and in this effort, he enables a fresh scrutiny of those subjects or ideas fundamental to how we communicate and connect with others.

Swanson continues to explore the ambiguities or tricks inherent to the English language. Studies of homophones—words that sounds alike but are spelled differently and carry different meanings—form the basis of his lenticular image *Homophone* (2014). Here, he encourages the viewer to move around the work to discover the different words "Right," "Write," "Rite" embedded



image: Joel Swanson. *Lady Gaga's Twitter Feed Translated into Morse Code* (detail), 2011. LED, electronics, software, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

within the holographic surface. The work is as much about reading as looking, and, more generally, about the multi-sensory experience of viewing art today.

Swanson is also unafraid to invite humor into his practice. In *Lady Gaga's Twitter Feed Translated into Morse Code* (2011), a small bulb flashes incessantly as it renders the language of the pop singer's tweets into the language of Morse code. While the premise might seem irreverent or flippant, it is in fact demonstrative of another key aspect of Swanson's effort: to find ways of enabling the abstract logic of linguistic systems to be relevant to contemporary life. This quiet work speaks to the ubiquity of codes that underpin present-day communications from emails to blogs, posts, chats, tweets and numerous other methods for instant

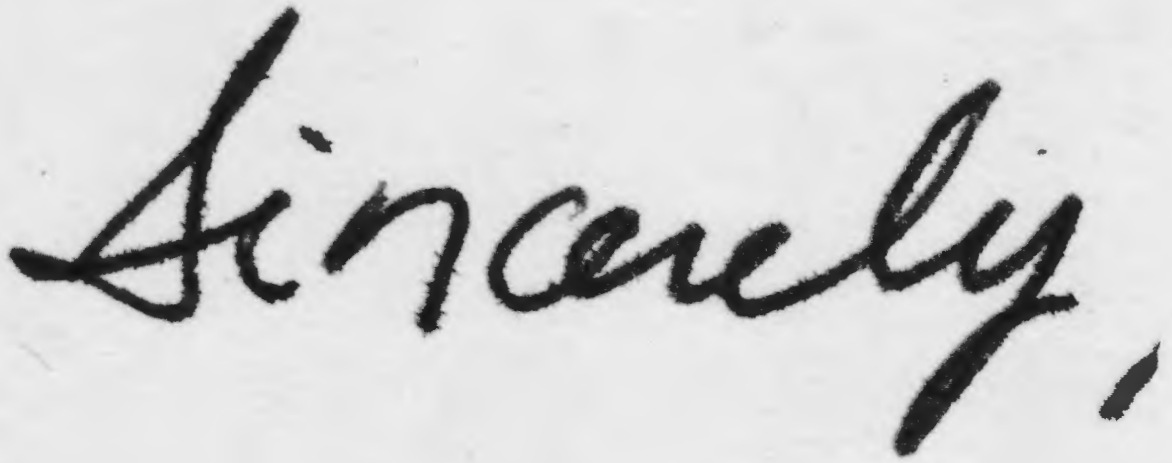


image: Joel Swanson. *Sincerely* (detail), 2014. Vinyl on wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.

information-sharing. Transforming the ones and zeroes of contemporary technology into the dots and dashes of Morse code brings the two languages together and indicates how similar the two are, when broken down into their component parts.

*Joel Swanson: Left to Right, Top to Bottom* also encourages viewers to think expansively about the relationship between text and image. Beyond simply reading words that are commonplace and familiar, the exhibition reconfigures these brief texts so that we must rethink their meaning. For example, Swanson's *Sincerely* (2014), written on a monumental scale, suggests that there is something deeply impersonal about a word defined as a conveyor of genuine emotion. As well, in moving our bodies along the wall in front

of the work, rather than simply letting our eyes roam across the page, the written word shifts to become something to be grappled with visually and physically.

Rather than passively observing these sculptures, photographs and installations, viewers are invited to participate actively and, in doing so, discover new meanings in these all-too-familiar phrases, signs and symbols.

- Nora Burnett Abrams

**MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART DENVER**

**JOEL SWANSON**

LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM  
JANUARY 17-MARCH 30, 2014

Joel Swanson was born in 1978 in Chicago, Illinois. He lives and works in Denver. Swanson is an artist and writer who is currently the Director of the Technology, Arts & Media Program at the University of Colorado Boulder. He received his MFA in digital art at the University of California, San Diego. This is his first solo museum exhibition.

MCA Denver thanks Silo Workshop, Eye Candy Graphics, Morry's Neon Signs and Mile High Graphics for assisting in the production of the works in this exhibition.

This exhibition is supported in part by the Director's Vision Society, Colorado Creative Industries, the ATLAS Institute at the University of Colorado Boulder and the Center for Humanities and the Arts at the University of Colorado Boulder. MCA Denver also thanks the Citizens of the Scientific and Cultural Facilities District.

*Joel Swanson: Left to Right, Top to Bottom* is presented in the David & Laura Merage Foundation Photography Gallery and the Luisa & Chris Law Gallery.



Cover and back images: Joel Swanson. *Ampersand* (detail), 2014. Ink on wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist.