interview

Sean J. Patrick Carney and Joel Swanson

The works in Joel Swanson's "Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven" are all about the English language. But where another artist might rely on wordplay—the potentially startling implications of a misplaced homonym, for example—Swanson meditates upon more commonplace operations: how English gets taught, aestheticized, gendered, and propagated. So clearly related to the English language are Swanson's latest objects that it's easy to miss the collection's central paradox: there is essentially no text in the show.

Six months ago, I was in Swanson's studio in Denver, looking at several in-progress pieces that would later show up in "Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven". Our discussion turned to the nature of communication itself, and how he and I had individually learned to navigate reading and writing. It turned out that we'd both attended religious primary schools, where the language arts are taught with a mildly fascist flare. In several of Swanson's new works, there were signs and signifiers—lined paper, cheap pink erasers, correction fluid—that might get overlooked as innocuous, everyday even. But they had a strange energy to them, one that pulled me instantly back into those classroom spaces. I felt a peculiar combination of nostalgic excitement and academic anxiety. The panicky stress of properly forming an upper case S or Q in cursive. Trying to recall, under pressure, the correct order of the e and the i in ceiling. The exhilaration of totally winging it on a spelling test—but somehow coming out okay in the end. Years had gone by since I'd even thought about the actual process of learning to read and write—and I call myself a writer.

We'd been talking for nearly an hour when I got stuck staring at an abstracted, black cutout wall piece, trying to figure out from where exactly I recognized its familiar shape. Eventually, it clicked: it depicted the letter forms of the Trix cereal logo, albeit reversed, in silhouette. This gave me pause, prompting me to look around the studio again. And that was when I realized that this entire suite of language-based artwork was otherwise devoid of actual text.

Quiet, unfolding rhythms are central to Swanson's latest work. Instead of designed-out typography tables, cheeky word lists, or blinking neons, "Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven" endeavors to articulate the unremarkable, anti-spectacular taxonomies quietly governing our communications. Here, Swanson subtly makes the invisible visible. What's really quite extraordinary is just how prominent these discreet systems are once someone shows us where to look.

Q **Contemporary American artists associated with text-based work—I'm thinking Kruger, Ligon, Holzer, Ruscha—typically employ culture jamming, double entendres, or poetics. Your most recent exhibition concerns itself similarly with language, but points to something less esoteric: the formal, institutionalized method by which English is taught. What prompted you to start mining institutional English language pedagogies for artistic content?**

A Several years ago someone asked me about the roots of my interest in language and I was surprised that I couldn't offer a satisfying response. This prompted me to start thinking about my formative experiences learning the systems—the rules, really—of English. I visited school supply stores and pored over grammar textbooks. Aesthetically, these educational materials seem juvenile and overly simplified, but they are filled with deep ideological norms and biases. These materials, and my early experiences with them, became the foundation for this body of work.

Were you finding yourself less interested in what a given text-based work, singularly, might be able to communicate?

In a sense, yes. During a studio visit, a friend identified a conundrum with text-based art. "As soon as you've finished reading the text," they said, "it feels like you're finished with the piece."

I think there is a lot of truth in that, and that's why you see contemporary text-based artists deploying various strategies to extend the viewer's experience beyond the purely semantic meaning of words. Ligon, for example, frequently uses illegibility. Kruger juxtaposes disjunctive images and texts. Holzer plays with timing, actively manipulating the very duration of reading. And they're not just extending experience, they're complicating our very expectations of reading.

"Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven" also complicated expectations. You produced an exhibition of language-based sculptures and wall works that was essentially devoid of language.

I've always wanted to create a body of work that is about language but doesn't rely upon words. Some might call this an interest in the paratextual aspect of language. This exhibition explored the materials, structures, and methods that form the support or background of language. And through the process, I realized just how tricky text was. How can you be critical of language without using it?

Many of the exhibition's works borrow formal aesthetics from conceptual art and American modernism. Your sculpture *How Many Pink Pearl Erasers would it Take to Create a Perfect Cube?* can hardly escape comparisons to Judd. *College Ruled* and *Wide Ruled*, your intersecting wall drawing pieces, clearly owe a debt to LeWitt. Are you influenced by these artists?

This body of work is deeply influenced by artists like Judd, LeWitt, even Agnes Martin. But at the same time I hope that my work comes across as playfully critical of modernist and conceptual art. Since graduate school I have struggled with the aesthetics of both conceptual art and modernism. What irks me about conceptual art, in particular, is that it presents itself as some intentionally-reductive non-aesthetic. And it is anything but that!

It can definitely be cold and clinical, I'll give it that.

Exactly, which is, in actuality, a very calculated aesthetic. Thereby, the claims of objectivity or a "non-aesthetic" in conceptual art are inherently problematic. Further, it's synonymous with a specifically straight white male history of conceptual art. I've always been critical of that lineage, and of that posturing. That's why I'm playful with those standards. In my work, you'll often find aspects that are absurd—stupid even—that I hope upend the stranglehold that the canon has on artists working today.

Which parts of your process feel the most absurd to you?

I think my work is conceptually absurd. For example: figuring out how many erasers it would take to create a perfect cube, and then actually making it; or, creating lead casts out of unrecognizable, aberrated pieces of Alpha-Bits cereal. And other works were, practically speaking, inordinate wastes of time. Consider *Composition Notebook Pattern*—it is practically absurd to spend dozens of hours enlarging and retracing a pattern that was originally produced digitally and industrially. I'd call it stupid, even. Sometimes it doesn't even take artistic skill!

Ha! Don't be so hard on yourself, Joel!

Of course, I'm half-joking.

What are your working definitions of "absurd" or "stupid"?

I've settled on this framework: absurdity and stupidity are just labels for things that don't fit within the dominant ideological paradigm. Some of the most brilliant and challenging cultural works share this investment in absurdity. For me stupidity is the street version of absurdism.

Beyond the absurd, and perhaps in spite of the clinical, "Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven" felt subversively intimate, emotional even. What are your personal memories of learning how to properly use the English language?

I went to a small conservative Christian elementary school. Unsurprisingly, grammar and language arts were a focus. Formative early experiences included diagramming sentences, memorizing Bible verses, or hand-copying vocabulary words in detention—language as a form of punishment. This bred in me a real ambivalence towards language. While I love language, I grew up hating it. And in some ways, I still do. Language always seems to embody two incongruous things at once; it is powerful but incredibly fragile, expansive but also reductive. Mining those memories, and feeling them in the present moment, coalesced

UNTITLED (TRIX™), 2019, powder coated aluminum. 57.3 x 91.27 inches.
UNRECOGNIZABLE LETTER FORMS (ALPHABITS™), 2019, found cereal forms, lead, dimensions variable.

into what is absolutely the most autobiographical body of work I've ever made.

Tell me a little more about *Composition Notebook Pattern*. What is your relationship to those ubiquitous classroom objects?

Growing up, all my writing assignments were done in those Mead brand journals with the distinctive marbled, almost monochromatic camouflage pattern on the cover. Conceptually, I connect this distinctive visual pattern with the structural patterns of writing. Repeating vocabulary words, copying perfect letterforms, and crafting the perfect sentence are all a mimicry of given semantic and grammatical patterns.

The wall piece *Untitled* (*Trix*™) and the miniature sculptural collection *Unrecognizable Letter Forms* (*Alphabits*™) activated cereal-based memories from my own childhood: preparing for school, binging Saturday morning cartoons. But I'm also remembering pining for certain brands I either wasn't allowed to have because of the sugar content or that my family wouldn't buy because of the price tag. I hadn't previously considered how significantly those associations are imprinted in my mind.

Growing up my mom was very health conscious so getting to eat sugar cereal was rare. Every year for my birthday my parents would take me to the store and I could pick out any sugar cereal I wanted. They would then wrap up the cereal as a birthday present. To this day, eating sugar cereal feels like some taboo thing. I've likely fetishized it in some way which is why it seems to keep coming up in my work.

Trix was always one of my favorite cereals. For that piece, I was drawn to the dramatic dimensionality of the branded letterforms. Sugar cereals have amazingly strong brand identities, with characters complete with their own mythologies and catch phrases. "Silly rabbit, Trix are for kids". For me, it all comes back to the role of language on these boxes. I would sit there eating cereal while reading and re-reading every square inch of those boxes. Cereal boxes were a significant part of my linguistic education.

Is it important for viewers to understand just how personal in scope this body of work is?

Curiously, no; I don't actually consider these autobiographical back stories terribly integral to fully experiencing the work. Of course, the stories are my personal context for the pieces, the motivation driving their production. But I suppose that I am paradoxically modernist in a sense; I want the pieces to exist in their own time and space, to elicit discreet connections from individual viewers. If too much autobiographical information enters the exhibition space, I worry that it risks truncating potential interpretations embedded within the work. So, by using ubiquitous, familiar materials like pencils, erasers, and paper, it becomes more likely that a viewer will be able to connect personally with the works by considering their own histories using these pedagogical materials.

The English language derives heavily from Latin, the precursor to romance languages. But unlike romance languages, English is traditionally said to have few instances of grammatical gendering—save, obviously, for pronouns. Do you think of English as gender-neutral?

While it's true that English doesn't grammatically gender its nouns, every language always carries traces of the physical body. This includes our constructions and biases around our bodies, just like gender. Take, for example, fundamental binaries like *man* and *woman*. These belie a "default" or "normalized" term, which is often the unmarked word of the pair—in this case *man.* Unfolding from that is the vast number of English words—mankind, man-made, manpower—where man is the default for humans at-large.

You're saying that the gendering is hidden in plain sight.

Yes, exactly. Now, in a way, I'd actually prefer dealing with systems whose problematic elements are clearer, more apparent. Of the romance languages, I'm most familiar with French. And the French are extremely proud of their language; they protect it fiercely through institutions like the Académie Française, a formal council concerned specifically with matters pertaining to their language. As you might expect though, there are certainly movements to de-gender the French language. The systems of power—the gendering—are much more apparent in French and therefore easier to critique. In English, the structural inequities of the language are much more difficult to expose because they are so normalized, so hidden and buried.

One of the primary goals in my work is to unearth and expose the default systems of power in the English language. Those systems are so insidious that they've become omnipresent, and thereby normalized. Power disguises itself as normative, default. But there is always a history to uncover, one revealing that systems of power are anything but neutral.

If the power systems in the English language are already hidden through normalization, why not make work that's more direct, more explicitly critical?

The ideological power of language itself is potent and pervasive, but also rather quiet. I feel like my work needs to aesthetically consort with, and within, these more subtle forms of power. The objects I'm producing intentionally opt for the slow burn. Don't get me wrong, I do appreciate loud work, and at times I even wish my own work had a sharper edge. But what's always truly resonated with me is art that is quieter, that buries itself in your mind. I aspire to make work that a viewer could chew on for a couple of years, finding new meanings over and over again.

Do you think that text will eventually find its way back into the work?

Text will always be a primary aspect in my work, but at the moment I am still excited by these paratextual phenomena that are absent of literal text. I've been a bit obsessed with the edges of books, both as these formal indexes of a text and because of their physical construction. I've continued to play with rules, as in lines on paper. "Eight-and-a-Half-by-Eleven" absolutely opened up several new directions for my studio practice. It is curious how the absence of words can make the power of language more palpable and present.