

# Text Messages

On Joel Swanson's Text-Based Artworks

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Joel Swanson's ongoing body of text-based art invites us to enter a space where the visual representation of language reveals a deeper understanding of how our thoughts and worldviews are influenced. He uses a range of linguistic devices such as alliteration, puns, or contrasting meanings, which he often pairs with signage materials such as neon or road signs. This combination of common language with the repetitive cycle of signage media is the essential part of these works. Through defamiliarization, Swanson's text-based artworks ask viewers to consider how words create worlds; and furthermore, how the English language sets a foundation for our perspectives. His pointed use of text is often informative and expansive, exploring the invisible spaces between human communication and how the interaction of language structures society.

Swanson's method of playfully revealing gaps in the English language can be seen in many of his neon works such as *S/HE*, *T/HERE*, or *Y/OURS*. In these works, the artist depicts two common words merged together through the oscillation of a single blinking letter. Other works, like *Conjugation of Being*, take on a more brooding approach due to its placement in the public sphere, use of large-scale signage, and conjugation of verbs. Collectively, both of these approaches to text transmit shared and stored meanings implied in the English language that relate specifically to gender, identity, possession, and otherness. To illustrate the depth of this investigation in Swanson's art practice, it's important to highlight the two differing approaches—the fabricated neon works versus the readymade sculptures.

## Neon Flickers

Many systems of meaning, such as the English language, are based on binary structures like masculine/feminine or natural/artificial. These binary structures can help better relay concepts, making information seem clear and graspable. However, they also elicit simplistic, black-and-white thinking. Swanson's semiotically subversive neon sculptures combine two related words that share letters such as "HE" and "SHE," or "HERE" and "THERE." In employing these particular words, these works refer to thinking in a dualistic manner, where reality is reductively defined by two mutually exclusive categories.

In *S/HE*, the "S" flickers between two pronouns, linking the words into one and suggesting an interconnection. In doing so, the work explores a space to contemplate a more fluid understanding of gender. The backwards "S" in the sculpture furthers the ambiguity between the space of "HE" and "SHE," implying there is an in-between space for difference and ambiguity. Symbolic images, like this, compensate for language's shortcomings. Similarly, Swanson's neon work *T/HERE* proposes that opposing ideas are one in the same; that "there" is innately part of "here." In other words, suggesting that distance is relational. Both of these works take root in opposing concepts that are connected by the structure of the English language. In Deleuzian terms, these works create spaces where deterritorialization occurs by opening up sociocultural fields of possibility and challenging norms.

The dichotomy in Swanson's works represent an age-old pattern of how we, the audience, perceive the world. Many cultures speak about the contrast between day and night, male and female, body and mind, and good and evil. The cyclical blinking estranges the alternating antonyms he uses, making the

words meaningless and bringing opposite meanings close together. In doing to these works unveil much of what studies have suggested, which is that our tendency towards binary thinking is connected to basic survival instincts—fight or flight. Swanson’s works go beyond the polarity of opposites by exploring the in-between spaces of binaries in relation to each other, ranging from gender norms to personal identity. Works such as *S/HE*, *Y/OURS*, or *T/HERE* are statements about how our world is structured by the undercurrents of language, hidden in plain sight. In this way, these works advocate for marginalized groups who come to realize that the embodiment of their oppression is the result of binary norms.

### **Signs as Signs**

Other works in Swanson’s practice move beyond just the use of signage materials, to the direct appropriation of existing commercial signage. Advertising signs are objects that convey meaning and evoke reactions or interpretations from viewers, all with the motive of facilitating a desired outcome—for instance, buying a product. Contrastingly, road signs are often public service messages, which can be directional or alert to a change in traffic. In his outdoor, site-specific work *Conjugation of Being*, Swanson appropriated a large-scale LED traffic message board. In relation to the site, *Conjugation of Being* was positioned in a parking lot outside of a contemporary art center located in a neighborhood undergoing rapid development. Lit up with scrolling text, the sign conjugated the verb “to be” in present, past, and future tense. The work stood as an open provocation, “I am.... You are... She is... He is... We are... They are...”

Although these message signs are often used to provide information to the public on large legible, LED displays; in this case, the road sign was coopted for the use of an artwork that reveals tensions in a historically Black neighborhood going through gentrification. Through the use of verb conjugation, this work acts as a questioning prompt or public service message for the public and surrounding community.

Through modifying a traffic board by inserting pronouns such as “I” and “We,” Swanson is calling viewers to think about themselves and others around them. The further conjugation of the verbs in past and future tenses are particularly provocative in the context of an urban neighborhood in the midst of transformation. The work is seductively confrontational, as we are trained to heed traffic signs as pedestrians or drivers. In confronting passersby, the work raises public awareness about the identity and ownership of a neighborhood experiencing rapid change in population, architecture, and sense of place.

### **Art Historical Connections**

Words and phrases have been a key aspect of Swanson’s practice for over a decade. His work derives from a subset of art history that utilizes language as a medium. You can find language-based works from twentieth-century Analytic Cubist painters to conceptualists like Lawrence Weiner. More specifically, Swanson’s interest in structuralist concepts relates to historic works like twentieth-century artist Rene Magritte’s famous painting *The Treachery of Images*. This artwork is historically important as it highlights the gap between language and meaning. By painting the French phrase “this is not a pipe” with a depiction of a pipe, Magritte’s painting solicits viewers to question the truths of representation seen in image or text. Swanson’s work also connects to concepts of truths represented in words. A more direct connection to how Swanson uses language can be seen in Joseph Kosuth’s balancing of image, text, and reality in his 1965 installation *One and Three Chairs*. In this work, Kosuth represents one chair three ways: as a manufactured chair, as a photograph, and as a copy of a dictionary entry for the word “chair.” The installation is composed of an object, an image, and words that collectively question which representation of the chair is most “accurate.”

Building on the history of revealing text artworks, Swanson's use of language in all of these works focuses on a social and formational relation to the English language. He looks at words and structures that have not changed drastically over time, regardless of their history. Language is many things—a system of communication, a medium for thought, a vehicle for expression, a social institution, a matter for political controversy, a factor in nation building, and so forth. As a whole, Swanson's text-based artworks are poignantly and simply powerful in that they hold a mirror to the English language—a mirror that reflects, or distorts, our perception of the world. Thus, Swanson's investigation encourages viewers to question the in-between spaces of our main mode of communication, in order to better understand its core, and at times complex, meaning.