The Object of the Verb: Aesthetic Exploration of Language

by

Amy Jo Modahl

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Abstract

One central question I have explored in graduate school is “What is language?” I decided to explore language through creative research, seeking a new understanding through research writing and art-making. I set out to investigate language visually, materially and conceptually. Using the medium of printmaking, I distilled basic concepts from Linguistics into abstract form. I started by thinking about structural properties of language such as patterns that form words (morphology) and sentences (syntax), those patterns used fluidly by speakers of a language. Visually, the basic mechanics of morphology seem to reveal themselves as colour, shape and line, establishing patterns or breaking into fragments. Syntax becomes parts combining into a whole, with some combinations legible, some not and some more visually engaging. My experience of these concepts has been affected by formal language learning from textbooks, where rules stress what is “correct” or not. Yet, language in use is experience; fluent speaking happens without conscious attention to form. It is using and feeling, sometimes following and sometimes defying “the rules.” Language is also the unspoken; meaning is communicated by gesture, facial expression, and even by physical proximity in space, also called proxemics. The result of my research is three works of art, Morphology, Syntax and Proxemics, which I exhibited at the Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art in Kelowna, BC in June of 2013.
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Dedication

To my parents

Sue Swendsen & John Bruggeman
Tom (Torkel) Modahl & Janet Modahl
Chapter I Introduction

I am fascinated by the simple question, “What is language?” Ferdinand de Saussure, a key figure in Linguistics, answered the question with this definition:

Language...is a self-contained whole and a principle of classification. As soon as we give language first place among the facts of speech, we introduce a natural order into a mass that lends itself to no other classification (Course in Gen. Ling. 9).

Here Saussure emphasizes order, particularly structural patterns that compel language to be analyzed as a system-object. Yet, focusing on order and pattern can mistakenly represent a language as if it were a static object one might observe and define simply.

Languages occur through active engagement between speakers resulting in greater complexity. Saussure expands to this point later in the same book Course in General Linguistics, “a language forms through time and through use by a community of speakers” (78). Time and use prevent language from being pinned down for analysis and definition.

As one example, the lexicon reveals how a language alters over time; new words are developed; once in use, they can shift meaning, function and pronunciation. This contrast between the potential to identify patterns and the variability and resistance to constraint cause me to continue pursuing an understanding of language.

I emerge in part from Applied Linguistics, a discipline that enjoys language and its creative potential; however the field also produces practitioners who sometimes narrow language to a set of basic skills and a series of steps to achieve fluency. This narrowing can result in
problematizing language, viewing language as progressive hurdles suspending intelligibility or fluency. In the fall of 2012, while teaching Linguistic Anthropology, I had the fortuitous opportunity to return to seeing language as an art in itself, something that had drawn me to linguistics initially. In this Linguistic Anthropology course, I worked with students on their language creation projects, wherein they made simple languages beginning with sounds, building to words and phrase patterns. While developing examples, I was compelled to see how developing a new language is a creative act similar to making a work of art or developing a voice or style in visual art.

I then recalled how in my first encounters with grammar, grace was revealed through diagramming a sentence. Some words supported other words. Some words were so general as to be almost meaningless without a descriptive phrase attached. Words emerged into sensical spaces. Through their arrangement, space itself was uncovered as contributing to meaning making. Diagramming went beyond understanding language as a reductive system. It caused me to develop awareness of structural tendencies, synchronic patterns in my native language and in other languages. On a visceral level, I connected to what I saw in these patterns. Language as system seemed to be one side of creativity; the other was use. As pattern falls into use, people actively engage in molding the language, consciously or unconsciously reflecting individual or group identity. Languages began to seem inherently creative or creative when enacted by the speaker or writer. Later, I began to see connections between these creative aspects of language and visual art. It seemed that some artists connect to language by making words their visual content.
Many artists articulate their process as creating a language\(^1\). These artists explored language in yet new ways, opening an avenue of research. Now it seemed time to contemplate language through the discipline of art. I wondered what I might learn about language by thinking about it with my hands and eyes, with colour, shape and line.

Crossing disciplinary boundaries offers the opportunity to contemplate a topic through a new lens for a more rounded understanding of a general concept. As Ananta Kumar Giri writes:

> The problem with modern disciplinary thinking is that it fails to realise that its claim to universality needs to be relativized by recognizing the significance of other disciplines in gaining multiple perspectives about the world to which both one’s as well as another’s discipline contribute (105-106).

To gain “multiple perspectives” and explore language, I first narrowed to three key topics from Linguistics: morphology, syntax, and proxemics. I then expanded within each topic through written research and through creative research. I began by delving into example with the goal of exploring base concepts in morphology, syntax and proxemics. As I read and wrote, my thoughts wound to visual manifestation. Within each topic I contemplate parallels to other artists’ work. Thinking through examples in language and art ignited ideas. I considered how I might connect to each linguistics topic through colour, shape, line and other imagery, reaching a visual analogy. In making the final works of art, I

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\(^1\) David Altmejd is among many artists who articulate their art practice as creating a language. Discussing his process, sculptor Altmejd said, “I wasn't interested in learning a new language, I was interested in inventing language” (Boundaries, video). In a second example, Artist Ming Wong describes his audio and performance piece Homophonia as “exploring language.” Homophonia was created while Wong was in residency at the British Library, where his artist statement is currently posted online. From viewing videos and other digital reproductions of his work online, I find that Wong employs visual signifiers of spoken language, such as large grammaphone-like funnels, which he attached to the heads of performers who spoke “nonsense” he gathered from the library archives.
explored syntax with moving squares, morphology with repetition of shapes on textbook pages and proxemics through an installation of prints. In this paper the three topics are ordered by progression from the most abstract contemplation of language as system within Morphology, to the more concrete, direct link to language in Syntax where word becomes image. The final Proxemics section expands from the mind and mouth through the body, stretching beyond words to feeling and sense.
Chapter 2 Morphology

Introduction

Morphology, in Linguistics, is a study of word mechanics, identifying the smallest units, morphemes, and analyzing how these units combine and recombine at the level of langue\(^2\). Morphemes move around, attaching and reattaching, creating new forms. “Re-” for example, just caused “attaching” to become “reattaching,” altering meaning, developing a new word. Three morphemes construct “reattaching:” the prefix “re”, the root or base “attach,” and the suffix “-ing.” In my accent, “re-” catches emphasis; it stands out when spoken, covering over the sound represented by the letter <a>, which was prominent in the word “attaching.” Like “re-,” “-ing” alters the final sound of /tʒ/ represented by the letters <ch> in “attach.” “-Ing” separated out may seem to have no meaning, yet it alters “attach,” causing its action to continue through space and time.

“-Ing” further activates a chain of verbs from “walking” to “calling,” creating what Saussure calls a “syntagmatic grouping” (Course in Gen. Ling. 129). A syntagmatic grouping is a web of words leading off from affix and root. Saussure illustrates the concept with the French word défaire. Beginning with the prefix “dé-” meaning “un,” or “not” in French, “dé ...dé-faire, branches out into décoller, déplacer, découdre” (129). Then Saussure links from the root “faire” to “refaire, contrefaire” and so on like a

\(^2\) Langue is the term used by Ferdinand de Saussure to refer to the synchronic study of language as system, as opposed to language in use parole or language situated historically. The term is recorded in Course in General Linguistics and referred to in “The Object of Linguistics.”
“horizontal ribbon of associations” with a “bond of interdependence” (129). From this interdependence, Saussure explains, the words “mutually condition each other” because speakers create associations between the words (129). This also reveals the opportunity for creation where speakers can readily employ the chain from a syntagm, abstracting the pattern to produce a new word or combination of morphemes, adding dé- to a new root.

In English, the simple sign <s>, leads through a chain of count nouns pluralizing as it moves along. Although visually <s> is one, phonetically it has three forms. The final written letter <s> unfolds into three sounds, also known as allomorphs or variants of a morpheme. An example of this complex pattern is illustrated by Linguist Leonard Bloomfield (210):

- glass: glasses [-ez]
- pen : pens [-z]
- book: books [-s]

Which of the three sounds appears is dependent on the root or free morpheme. As Bloomfield explains, “the shape of the bound form is determined by the last phoneme of the accompanying form: [-ez] appears after sibilants and affricates” (211). I place the tip of my tongue on the alveolar ridge to make the [s] sound at the end of “glass.” To continue on, forming the plural “glasses,” I open my mouth slightly, producing a sound further back; then I round forward to another [s]; this action causes my vocal chords to vibrate into [z]. The resulting shape and tone of this bound morpheme is affected by the final texture of the free morpheme; yet the three sounds continue to evoke one concept, pluralization, and be represented by one letter <s>. This pluralizing morpheme is something like a chameleon, altering within patterned limitations, to suit myriad nouns.
In this example, the letter as visual representation is exposed as abstraction; the simple meaning link is broken and \(<s>\) may be replaced by another abstract image that when repeated and shared could function just the same.

The chameleon abilities of morphemes can also manifest through accent marking. A verb can become noun in English simply by moving the accent from the first syllable, as in “object,” to the second syllable, “object.” The visual accent is dropped in English; instead, word order and function cues which syllable to stress when speaking. I continue through a study of word units and how they combine to find more shifting and altering of sound and form, producing or affecting the meaning and function of words. The slightest change from the expected sound can be heard as right or wrong, as one or many, as a different part of speech, as intelligible or not. Similarly, altered and fragmented images can be seen as intelligible or considered complete abstraction; such images can be labeled good or bad, right or wrong.

From the old saying “good, better, best, never let it rest, til’ the good is better and the better best” falls a more complex trail of morphological inflection where the comparative and superlative forms of “good” differ in visual appearance and sound. The word “good” is inflected into an entirely different form “better” and yet again into another form “best.” “Better” and “best” seem unwilling to conform to “good.” They defy expectation. They refer to another paradigm. Bloomfield refers to this type of morphological trail as “suppletion” and the “suppletive alternant” (215). These differing sets of sounds are
heard as linking to “good” as their base in meaning, although they do not link back to a common root, as do regular adjectives such as “big,” “bigger” and “biggest.” “Good,” “better,” and “best” lack repetition of letters and sounds. These examples reveal how language defies strict patterning. With this variety I attempt to avoid simple visual patterning, injecting new visual elements into my work that seem to have no precedence in form, but may link in colour or line quality.

By understanding morphology, both the obedient and unruly, I can create new ideas and words with morphemes. In English, many adjectives can become nouns with the simple addition of the prefix “ness.” Giving the abstract a sense of concrete form, “sad” becomes “sadness,” “light” becomes “lightness.” But it is more rare for a tangible object to become an adjective. The abstract noun “beauty” may become “beautiful;” The already tactile “fur” may become “furry,” but the simple chair is left with only the option to become many “chairs” and never the qualities related to its form, like “chairful” or “chairy.” The chair is stuck; it lacks generative power until it meets more productive morphemes such as “-like” or “-esque.” “Like” and “esque” readily glob onto a noun allowing it to grow in function and meaning. In image, a productive form might bond easily with another image, seeming to suit it fluidly.

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4 A productive morpheme is an affix that can attach freely to many roots, for example, the plural [-s] can attach to many nouns in English to indicate multiple. More broadly, “productivity” was defined by Charles Hockett in his article “Origins of Speech” as a feature that defines human language. “Language is open, or ‘productive,’ in the sense that one can coin new utterances by putting together pieces familiar from old utterances, assembling them by patterns of arrangement also familiar in old utterances” (Hockett 90).
Visually, bound morphemes like “ful” and “ness” seem like small shapes, bits and pieces clipped from larger images. These bits seek out opportunities to attach to larger, more dominant forms, acting as free morphemes like “chair” and “happy.” The small shapes repeat, attaching to new dominant forms; each new pairing slightly alters how the shapes are perceived. At times the small shapes break free and combine together. New rules and patterns are then established by subtraction, leading to new ideas that counter the standard, or expectations of how the language should be used. What can happen visually might be analogous to this example from words. Where “happy” can become a noun and the antonym of itself by attaching “un” to the front and “ness” to the back, “unness” can result by removing the root. I am dipping into nonsense. But, this rule breaking opens a space for contemplation of “un” and “ness.” “Un” now becomes a thing in itself. It comes into being, invoked by language. By heightening form, I begin to see the ideas as hybrids created by abstraction, a strong, clear link between word and image.

Artists and Morphology

Countering the rules of clarity to merge and alter forms is central to abstract art-making. Jessica Stockholder and Kara Walker visually, viscerally capture objects morphing. Their abstraction is a type of hybridization. Jessica Stockholder’s everyday objects grow bulbous forms, fall into abstraction or emerge from abstraction. She causes me to pay attention to ordinary things, seeing in new ways, slightly altering my worldview. Stockholder merges common furniture and household objects with organic forms constructed with papier maché. She then layers on vibrant colour applied in a painterly style, as if a colour field
painter who attacked the furniture with gusto. The result is not easily described. Her new forms are not easily translated into words. For example in *Two red plastic laundry baskets*, brightly coloured laundry baskets, one upended, sandwich a pillow. In *Madonna and Child*, an end table, lamppost, box and molded newspaper link into one solid object (Schwabsky, Tillman and Cooke, 75). The objects are cut and fused together, similar to the example of “unness” or “chairful;” something new is created by countering the standard way objects are combined. A gap has been opened by this newness in which I begin to wander and explore meaning. Stockholder moves common objects from the periphery into central focus, breaking the rules of reality and direct communication, opening contemplation with abstraction.

The permeability of the field we have invented in some ways parallels the abstract space inside of the head of our physical body. We need that abstract space in our heads - our minds. The abstract structures we build posit a reality that is firmer than our swimming internal lives. The abstract structures we invent transcend the moment. The inventions of the frame, the pedestal, and the field create circumstances where we can make things that mirror this duality of our being back to us (Stockholder *Swiss Cheese Field 5*).

With household objects and thick blobs of paint as her morphemes, Stockholder builds a unique lexicon and visual language. The forms she creates are familiar; yet their combinations can be so unexpected that the viewer is compelled to see and contemplate the meaning of these objects linked in a new way. These hybrid forms form a pattern and style that become familiar and comfortable after viewing multiple of her works. By countering the standard visual relationship between domestic objects and paint, Stockholder creates a gap or space from which new meaning emerges.
The notion of fragmenting and merging forms to create a personal, visual vocabulary can also be seen in the work of Kara Walker who revisions narratives from slavery in silhouette. Walker’s white and black cut paper figures spread across and up walls, juxtaposing abstracted and simplified scenes from personal, yet sadly common, experiences of slaves. In Walker’s murals and small drawings, figures, land and sky are fragmented (Walker). In Burn from 1998, a girl appears to fall into or emerge from a fire, the cloud of smoke to her right forms into a cemetery at top (Walker 105). InUntitled from 1996, a woman holds a figure who is child in head and lizard or alligator in body (Walker 95). Depicted in one uniform texture and colour, forms become one. Viewers are confronted with the simple beauty of the silhouette form conveying the bare brutality of the antebellum state; yet her figures refuse to be situated in the past. Walker’s personal abstract language causes the images to leap forward into the present reflecting tales of horror and survival in the face of present-day violence and disaster. The fragmenting and merging compels contemplation and wonder. The fused and fragmented forms, and silhouette genre create an abstraction that represents brutality more generally causing the theme to reflect on then and now.

Walker and Stockholder play with and against the rules, developing unique patterns for how objects, colour and people combine visually. These artists cause me to feel the subtlety of texture, sensual contrast of colour and the emotive quality of shape and line. I parallel their methods with morphology where sound units merge or pull apart, forming and breaking patterns that can be read and understood by speakers and in this case
viewers. When I look at their work, I recognize individual objects working in new ways, following new patterns, spinoffs of what I would expect from a genre, object or subject. The artists reveal how in memory and perception, sounds meld, objects come together, and snippets of events seem to repeat in the mind. Events and their stories overlap throughout time. Visual fragments converge in a space.

**Project Details**

For my own creative process, I extract methods from Walker and Stockholder and concepts from morphology, the rules and the broken rules, and apply them to creating interconnected prints on successive Spanish-language textbook pages. I begin with the notion of syntagmatic grouping, to create chains of visual forms. One visual unit, acting like a morpheme, fills the first page. As the pages progress, smaller forms act as affixes, attaching to dominant shape after dominant shape. At times the forms recall words for objects, such as *falda* (skirt) or *sofá* (couch), nouns that the textbook stressed as basic content of the household and daily life. I clipped these images from old magazines, extracting evocative sections to recreate in print. Other images are complete abstractions, very basic geometric or organic shapes, like a solid black square or a mass of blue colour. Together the shapes merge forming anew with each combination.

Through the series, the affix and root shapes repeat, altering in each new context. As the pages progress through the book, this repeating continues, always with a new form carrying the chain forward. Forms shift and change in new compositions.
Screen-printing is essential to my creative process. With this method, I can repeat forms exactly or with slight alteration. Thus, I can set the shapes near, falling against, tipping out of and peeking through the root shape. I can alter the colour from one print to the next. I can paint out a section of the image on the screen and print a portion, echoing the whole with just a fragment of the original shape. As I do this, I think about how the root changes as the new forms compete with it, cover over parts of it and link to it. I read a light tint of blue differently when orange jauntily rides on it. I see new shapes where red peeks from behind a black grid of circles. I might break the pattern suddenly, removing the root form, leaving behind the extras (Figure 1). Such shapes have the power to associate themselves with each other or with related forms, to draw from the meaning of like-imagery.

Figure 1: Morphology series 1
If I am establishing patterns, they shouldn’t be firm. Across the series of pages, simple patterns establish then break. A short red skirt appears and then shifts its placement on the page. It then shifts again, appearing as a longer skirt in a darker warmer colour. Both the shape and tone have shifted, like the manifestations of the plural <s> appearing as three different sounds. The successive pages mimic the read forward implied by a book, a progression and addition. Displayed in a grid pattern up a gallery wall, the pages might continue to compel viewers to read in order, from first to last, top to bottom, left to right. The imagery repeated might begin to interfere with this simple read, causing viewers to jump from like shape to like shape, following one pattern, then catching and leading off onto another.

Based on the concept I developed and the plan I mapped out with collage and using Photoshop, I printed 45 interconnected, yet individual prints. Yet, I realized that aesthetics trumps concept. In the end, I wasn’t happy with the prints as a whole. Although they did just what I planned, the prints weren’t dynamic as a series. Some of the individual compositions simply weren’t strong or compelling; thus, I choose 20 of the strongest pieces from the bunch and continued contemplating morphology, allowing the concepts to unfold in a new way.
I began to cut a large shape from paper, which I exposed onto a screen. I gathered together 8 textbook pages again with most of the text covered with white out. I combined the pages, forming a rectangle and printed the large shape in a warm tone across the eight pages. When I separated the pages and arranged them in a line according to progressive page numbers, the positive shapes created in the warm tone and the negative shapes formed by the yellowed page unified strongly, much more strongly than previous prints I had made. I realized that the first page established a form and tone. On the next page the tone was the same, yet the form had shifted slightly (Figure 2). The simplicity of the shapes and shared line quality further exemplified the relationship between the forms. These pages better explored the notion of a syntagmatic grouping, where an element (a sound, a tone, a shape) coheres multiple words or in this case, images, into a whole. The images seem to establish a pattern that is gently altered throughout the chain.
Chapter 3 Syntax

Introduction

Morphology is just one level of language as a system. Words function in larger groupings, interacting to create meaning. In a sentence, words gain part of their meaning from structure or syntax. The order of words in an English sentence is not random, instead it is bound by a prescribed order that is shared and understood between speakers. Words are intelligible when placed in their correct spaces, which indicate information like the initiator and receiver of an action for example, “The order of words contributes to meaning-making.” When shuffled, the example sentence becomes unintelligible, “To meaning-making words order the of contributes.” Because of syntax, I can also substitute words that serve the same function, such as nouns, while still maintaining a sense of correctness even if the meaning seems absurd: “The order of frogs contributes to meaning-making.” The order of words is not the sole tool of syntax. In some languages an added affix can indicate whether the word is playing the role of actor or receiver of an action, which allows for variability in word order.

From linguist/anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss to linguists Ferdinand de Saussure and Noam Chomsky, a dominant school in linguistics has analyzed language focusing on

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5 Levi-Strauss presents language as system in many publications including in his argument “Language and the Analysis of Social Laws” where he creates an analogy with mathematics noting, “With knowledge of the phonological structure of a language and the laws which govern the grouping of consonants and vowels, a student could easily use a machine to compute all the combinations of phonemes…” (157).

6 Noam Chomsky is considered the creator of Universal Grammar theory, a view of language as innate structure. Chomsky’s theory was founded in the work of many linguists and philosophers who predated his
structural properties such as word order. In this research, language is viewed as a system-object where a finite set of parts can combine into a pattern for infinite results. Such linguists focus on the interrelationship of parts within the sentence, the syntax, abstracted across all languages, with little reference to historical development, context or use.

Similarly, Formalism, also called the elements of design, has been used to analyze the interplay of elements within a work of art. Formalism connects meaning to visual composition, claiming the existence of a universal base structure, or grammar, for how elements in a two or three-dimensional work of art communicate. Associated with Formalism, grammars have been defined in specific visual fields, such as the decorative arts. In her essay connecting a contemporary drawing to nineteenth century ornament in architecture and interior design, Laura Hoptman summarizes the influential work of architect Owen Jones, who in 1856 published a guide to “the characteristic shapes, patterns and rhythms” of “all ornament, internationally and throughout the ages” (31). Jones claimed to have isolated an international grammar of ornament, even going so far as to link to the idealistically universal comprehensibility of Esperanto (Hoptman 31). In her summary and quotes, Hoptman exposes a key point that does not link to her thesis, but links to mine. Jones reveals a problem with identifying visual syntax, particularly the claim to objectivism and universality, which is often culturally biased.

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Research. My understanding of Chomsky’s Universal Grammar is in part common knowledge and in part from Simon Clark’s critique in *The Foundations of Structuralism*.  

This definition refers to Charles Hockett’s “Duality of Patterning” as a factor in distinguishing human language from more general communication by living beings (Hockett 91). Further, this definition is repeated in many sources by researchers within the school of Noam Chomsky’s Universal Grammar.
Artists and Visual Syntax

European Surrealist artist René Magritte defied established norms regarding the size and order of objects within his paintings causing structure to confront viewers as a key element of content. In *Personal Values*, from 1951-52, Magritte depicts the interior of a studio apartment with very high ceilings. He then carefully painted objects commonly found in that space; yet, he counters the normal scale of objects in this context. The comb is larger than the bed on which it sits, upright, leaning against the back wall. A drinking glass, also as large as the bed, dominates the centre of the room. In scale the objects defy simple representation. The comb and drinking glass in relation to the bed are not meant as a realistic two-dimensional copy in paint; instead Magritte’s depiction is what Foucault terms *similitude*, which he opposes with a second concept *resemblance* (*This is not a Pipe* 44). Foucault reflects on Magritte’s work in a small book titled after a painting that is the focus of Foucault’s discussion. In *This is not a Pipe*, Foucault explains similitude as revealing the obvious, exposing the familiar in a new way. Similitude is causing the common to be noticed, something that seems to be the basis of Magritte’s methods. In the introduction to *This is not a Pipe*, translator James Harkness draws a connection between Foucault’s similitude and a term Foucault coined “heterotopia” (excerpted by Harkness from *The Order of Things* 4). In *Of Other Spaces*, Foucault defines heterotopia as a real object that reflects and acts as a representation, contestation or inversion of the real (24). Considering heterotopia in relation to Magritte's painting *Personal Values*, the painting might contest or critique the reality it mirrors, and this critique may not simply be about the objects in a bedroom, but about seeing and paying attention to the simple, the
familiar, which because of its familiarity the simple goes largely unnoticed. Magritte’s visual critique or contestation might be on a fundamental, linguistic level. Magritte expects his viewers to share a common syntax regarding how a bedroom and its contents might appear in reality and in re-representation within a realistic painting; then he counters that syntax causing the simple structures to be noticed; structural elements thus become part of the content and meaning of the painting. Magritte intentionally speaks to an audience who shares a common visual syntax, both of how a room is ordered and how a painting represents that order. Magritte plays with and against structures, visual and linguistic, a method that became common during the Modernist period.

Words and imagery can seem unintelligible, nonsense even, when employed counter to the expected syntax. Modernist author Gertrude Stein shuffles article, adjective, noun, verb, object into the spaces of a sentence. She allows chains of words to unfold out of syntagmatic groupings. She repeats a word or syntactic structure defying the expected progression in a sentence or a story, causing structure to foreground and become content. In “Sentences,” Stein writes: “An adverb is appointing. Disappointing. Reappointing. Calling. Ferrying” (Stein, 122). First “appointing” carries forward emerging as new words with each added morpheme. The prefix, “dis” then “re” are added. Then “ing” carries on to form the final two words. Thus the primary driving force in Stein’s “sentences” is first the simple sentence form in English, subject, verb and object, a form that lays in the background. Then she counters that standard structure by trailing off along syntagmatic

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8 My descriptions of Stein’s writing come from reading Stein’s books Look at me now and Here I am: Writings and Lectures 1909-45 and How to Write.
chains causing prefixes and suffixes to stand out. The form is emphasized and becomes part of the meaning; negotiating through her play with and against standard syntax becomes part of the experience of the work.

Influenced by Gertrude Stein’s techniques and the performances of Bert Williams, visual artist Ellen Gallagher employs repetition in many of her works. Gallagher is particularly interested in how Stein and Williams heighten form causing it to become an element of content. “They both used repetition to alter the familiar into something inscrutable and uncontainable. They constructed a precise nonsense based on real words” (Gallagher interviewed in Marcoci, 60). Gallagher alters visual extracts from magazines such as Ebony, small elements that may have gone unnoticed within a complete picture. She then repeats those elements, bringing attention to them. In Bling Bling she pastes down rows of penmanship paper onto a canvas (Goodeve, 2001). On the penmanship paper she draws moustaches removed from the original context where they seem correct and make simple sense. Then, Gallagher “revisit[s] and repeat[s] them with slight changes” (Gallagher interviewed in Marcoci, 60). The repeated elements recall the original context while pushing off into new meaning.

Magritte, Stein and Gallagher create nonsense by altering or countering expected visual or written syntax. While the heightening or isolating of form can disturb viewers who detect the form through incorrect usage, such nonsense takes on a life of its own, spiraling in new directions, opening the potential meaning and read of the work. In my work I intend
to alter what viewers would expect from a genre, both altering context and form to bring structural elements into the foreground.

**Learning Structure: A Critical Analysis**

Language is more than the mechanics of morphemes forming into words and words falling into syntactic line. We perceive the world through language.\(^9\) In turn, language is infused with our experiences, thoughts and feelings. We understand this first as children, before formal instruction. American philosopher and performance artist, David Abram\(^{10}\) reflects on his notions of child language learning to recall, for adults, the physical, playful experience of language:

> We do not, as children, first enter into language by consciously studying the formalities of syntax and grammar or by memorizing the dictionary definitions of words, but rather by actively making sounds-by crying in pain and laughing in joy, by squealing and babbling and playfully mimicking the surrounding soundscape, gradually entering through such mimicry into the specific melodies of the local language, our resonant bodies slowly coming to echo the inflections and accents common to our locale and community (75).

We do not, as children, pour over books of lists to begin learning our mother tongue. As Abrams reveals, we learn by doing, hearing, feeling. We mimic and absorb; we invent worlds; we feel out the rules, pushing boundaries, creating new “languages,” like Pig Latin,

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\(^9\) Here I allude to a central concept from the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis as discussed in Henry Hoijer’s essay on that topic. My understanding of Sapir and Whorf’s theories regarding language and culture also derive from publications by Edward Sapir and by Benjamin Lee Whorf as listed in the Works Cited page at the end of this document.

\(^{10}\) I choose to quote David Abram largely because he is often cited by my peers in visual and performing arts as connecting art to language and perception. In his book, The Spell of the Sensuous, Abrams contemplates how artists and viewers perceive language. David Abram writing builds on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a French phenomenological philosopher. Abram’s frequently quotes Merleau-Ponty, discussing the connection Merleau-Ponty makes between Linguistics and perception.
to share among friends. But early childhood experience and understanding of language is expanded in a world of book and computer-aided learning. Studying “formalities of language” can lead to critical reflection on the complex form of a mother tongue. Knowing the mechanics of a language opens avenues for further creation, like that of Gertrude Stein who played with structure. Similarly, I can defy the directions dictated in grammar exercises in the textbook, choosing to use the language to heighten form as part of my content.

As I began to contemplate my Syntax artwork, I decided to start with a critique of a language-learning textbook that I intend to use as the basis for this piece. The piece might act both as a mirror of syntax and a critique of how syntax is presented in such a book. In general, the language-learning textbook is a tool that illustrates language structures and shapes cultural and linguistic standards. To varying degrees, textbooks prescribe how language should be used, rather than reflecting how it is used. Furthermore, such textbooks can seem to reduce language to narrow, repetitive exercises that convey the lexicon and the grammar as tedious.

Often language-learning books don’t seem to engage with the beauty of linguistic properties, such as syntax; instead, they seem to treat language and life as a product to be packaged and consumed. Researchers in Second Language Acquisition theory attempt to quantify child language acquisition in order to extract natural learning processing and content to be applied in curriculum and textbook writing. Language molded for a
textbook is further manufactured, cut into thematic units that, for example, reduce Canadian or American life into quantifiable bits. The home is isolated into rooms with distinct contents (e.g. the living room). Each room is explained with sentences employing one verb tense (e.g. simple past tense). Even if based on “real world” data, these scenes, vocabulary and sample sentences fabricate an idealized notion of the home and cultural norms. The whole prescribes a syntax for how spaces, the life and language within them, should be ordered, rather than describing a variety of homes. These lessons shape what Bourdieu terms the “habitus” of a community within a culture.

In a language-learning textbook, the chair is revealed in its many conjugations: narrow or wide, stiff or soft, in wood or with fabric and cushion. The soft chair juxtaposes in a list with other items taxonomically related. The sofa, table, lamp and even a cat encounter the chair, spread vertically up a page. Together they connote a common living room, the contents of a standard home in a language in a culture. Flipping the pages, the structure expands to the animals in the hobby farm, father’s work, mother’s shopping and the children’s school. This is the way life should be.

The group of images on each page, and the sentences which follow, reveal the syntax of this world. “Billy sits on the chair.” “The dog sits on the floor.” “A man leads a horse to

11 My interest in Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” comes from his book Language and Symbolic Power. Here he argues that what is deemed the standard or official form of a language can be set, normalized and imposed by use of educational tools such as the dictionary and by cries of "mispronunciations by schoolmasters." In this way habitus is the process and result that decides which forms of a language are correct, generally those of the politically more powerful groups, and which are "quaint or vulgar jargons," generally those of politically less powerful groups (47-54).
water.” “The baby lies in a cradle.” Any variation from this seems “other” “unusual.” If instead mother and father sit on pillows on the floor; if the dog sits on the table; if man and horse collide with a blob of paint, the forms break away from their structures and fail to communicate their simple prescriptive function at turns suspending meaning and evoking broader associations of other cultures or imaginary worlds.

The lists and more lists of sample sentences situated in an exercise repeat and stress “correct” syntactic structures. The sentences are developed by combining a list of vocabulary terms (e.g. words for objects in the house, words related to work) into target sentences (e.g. simple sentences with present-tense verbs). The resulting sentences are disjointed and highly fabricated, functioning mostly to teach vocabulary, verb form and word order. The meaning of each becomes secondary to the structural pattern. Each exercise is framed with directions that guide the learner to find that pattern, “underline the verb” or “conjugate the verb to suit the subject.” Yet, if I ignore the directions and read down a list of numbered sentences in an exercise, the sentences connect and a story forms. The repeated, simple subject-verb-object structure seems to create an echo that spreads from sentence to sentence, unintentionally cohering the whole into a paragraph. Simple vocabulary terms begin to emerge as evocative metaphors that evoke broader associations. A narrative is suggested, yet each sentence is still a tight unit, meant to contain an isolated event in service of subject, verb and object structure. I carry these ideas forth in my Syntax project.
Project Details

I’m both intrigued by and highly critical of the textbook. I’m interested in exploring what the author didn’t intend in the sentences and images within such books. As an artist, I want to heighten the forms and structures that repeat and prescribe, claiming authority over language and its use in reconstructions presented as correct and as “real world situations.” I want to defy and obey this textbook view of language by bringing the words and images off the page and allowing viewers to negotiate them through art. I hope the piece might create a mental and physical interaction analogous to syntax.

Onto a grid of one-foot by one-foot wood squares, arranged five high and five wide, I screen-printed ten sentences from a 1950s English language textbook lesson, titled “The Object of the Verb.” All of the verbs are in simple past tense (twined, rocked, led) and the sentences repeat simple vocabulary, at times unlike present-day word choice “The vine winds its tendrils...” The goal of the textbook lesson was for learners to identify the object in each active voice sentence, a common exercise performed similarly in contemporary textbooks.

Before printing, I decided to play with the sentences by repeating prepositional phrases and adjectives to emphasize ideas and create subtle links from sentence to sentence. Otherwise, I maintained the appearance of the numbered sentences, falling in parallel rows to keep a visual link to source material. The number at the start of each sentence attempts to define it as one isolated unit, yet printed on a grid of wood squares, the first
three words of one sentence combine with the starting words of two others, for example “stable / to the stable” and “growing grain / stable.” These words can now be read within the square or linearly across each sentence (Figure 3). The physical structure works with and against the intent of the textbook exercise. The piece maintains the stress on simple structure (subject, verb, then object), while subtly pushing the words and sentences to interact in new ways, outside prescribed form.

Figure 3: Syntax sentences

The squares are movable; thus the sentences can be fragmented by moving squares to new places in the grid or by turning a square from its upright position. Visitors are invited to reorder the squares. They might complete the sentences; they might break up the sentences, using the words as shapes in a design. Here I play with and against what is
subconsciously thought of as correct word order and correct visual unfolding of an English sentence from left to right. I allow visitors to physically experience syntax by participating in creating or defying order, yet this order is always confined within the grid.

Before printing the sentences, I screen-printed a layer of coloured silhouettes of a woman leading a horse (Figure 4); this choice was influenced by the sentence content and textbook illustrations. The woman and horse repeat, each time depicted in a different colour, drawn out, pooling into organic, abstract forms. Woman and horse go nowhere in particular, as if their sole purpose were to give visual representation to the nouns “woman” and “horse” and the verb “to lead.” In the textbook context, the woman would not be meant to represent an individual, a named character; instead, she would represent the idea of woman within the culture of that language. With repetition and silhouette, I further heighten this lack of individuality; yet because she is repeated, she is emphasized. She is confusingly a character going somewhere, while also being a very general visual noun and verb bouncing around in a wooden puzzle, referring to little other than woman and horse.
Figure 4: Syntax image

Like the sentences, the woman and horse spread across more than one square, yet the sentences and images cannot be viewed together as a whole in one combination of squares. The images were printed with the blocks in a different order. When a square is moved or turned, the sentences or images are fragmented and abstracted. The viewer might seek to complete the picture or the sentences; yet due to the repetition in the sentences and due to the abstract nature of the silhouettes, completing either picture will not be easy. Yet, the goal of the piece is not simple completion of an exercise; I am using the sentences to contemplate syntax on a deeper level than the proper order of words. The wood grid acts as a physical syntax. The grid structure must be maintained, but the order and orientation of the squares can be changed within the structure, allowing for
many possible combinations while always maintaining the grid. Unlike a spoken language, there is a limitation to the amount of combinations that can be formed. Yet, like language, there are boundaries that define what might be read as intelligible, nonsensical or imaginative. Overall, I hope the experience of the viewer is to notice what is contained within each square and what new visual ideas can occur when squares are combined in different ways.

Screen-printing onto wood results in smooth, fine layers of colour that are slightly transparent showing some of the wood grain through the figures. The second layer of words lays over the images without impeding word clarity and line quality. The two layers easily merge as if one. To create a puzzle required printing one-foot square segments of a twenty-five foot square image. Alone, each segment resembled an isolated word that in some instances cued a name-able object. On some blocks, I printed small organic forms that were just a small part of a girl and horse image. These forms resembled isolated words that serve a function, but have little meaning, such as articles (e.g. “a” and “the”). Extracting the individual parts and carefully printing each onto squares was unexpectedly like pulling apart larger units of language and reassembling them for clarity. When the squares were assembled, an intelligible whole emerged.

None of this textbook language is quite how people would use it in real life. Language in

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12 Here I refer back to a concept introduced at the start of this section. A defining feature of language is that a finite set of parts (e.g. words) can combine into a pattern (e.g. subject-verb-object order) for infinite results. What Hockett labeled “Duality of Patterning.”
practice has greater variation, but the textbook language reflects prescriptive grammar lessons, the method through which many people learned the mechanics of their first or other language. The sentences are an example of the underlying structure, or base structure, each containing the mechanical parts essential for constructing a complete sentence in English. Oddly, although many people learn a language through these form-focused methods, with fluency in a language becomes a disconnection with form. As Anthropologist and Linguist Claude Levi-Strauss explains, "much of linguistic behaviour lies on the level of unconscious thought. When we speak, we are not conscious of the syntactic and morphological laws of our language" (156). While the sentences seem highly fabricated and form-focused, their structure reveals a pattern so simple as to be graceful. I transfer this fabricated language from textbook into art and into a gallery context, further withholding it from the test of “real life” application. Viewers are allowed to manipulate the work, playing with the textbook content, manipulating it at a deeply structural level, yet using it as I did, against the directions.

In my Syntax project, I want to heighten what Umberto Eco asserts occurs in even the most static work of art. Although an artist might intend to infuse the work with meaning, to construct a one-way communication or message, the viewer brings unique experiences to the work that contribute to meaning-making. In Eco’s words:

As he reacts to the play of stimuli and his own response to their patterning, the individual addressee is bound to supply his own existential credentials, the sense conditioning which is peculiarly his own, a defined culture, a set of tastes, personal inclinations and prejudices (Open Work 22).
Mostly Eco was referring to written and visual texts that the artist or viewer is not invited to manipulate. Yet, Eco’s ideas of an “open work” can be impetus for artwork released to the audience for further creation. Language may be a tool for the social construction of reality, but that reality is not static or uniform. As Markus and Cameron reveal, “reality and knowledge are ongoingly constructed by social actors thru the various practices they engage in.” Thus viewing the artwork is not static, not one-sided, but active, dialogic. As an artist, I may create a visual lexicon, but in this Syntax piece, I ask the viewer to use those parts to construct a response, to begin to communicate within this personal, visual language. In this way, the piece may operate both on the structural level and beyond to performance in the sense of physical movement and the act of language in use. As John Searle notes:

All linguistic communication involves linguistic acts. The unit of linguistic communication is not, as has generally been supposed, the symbol, word, or sentence, or even the token of the symbol, word, or sentence, but rather the production or issuance of the symbol or word or sentence in the performance of a speech act (14).

While reordering the squares of the Syntax piece, viewers might see something new, something that might not have been noticed when standing back to view the whole as a static piece.

13 “Language as a tool for the social construction of reality” is my phrasing of a notion expressed often in Anthropology and Socio-Linguistics using similar language; thus it seems to have fallen into common knowledge. The idea sources to the writing of Sapir and Whorf and to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis discussed by many authors (e.g. Hoijer mentioned earlier in this paper). Markus and Cameron, who I connect to later in this paragraph, refer to the notion in similar words but without reference to Sapir or Whorf.
In the Morphology and Syntax section I considered language in its spoken and written form, mostly focusing on *langue* or language as system. Yet by attempting to inject interactivity, the work moves from looking at language as a rule-governed system; to the language as performed\(^{14}\). Words and sentences are not only patterns of sounds; they construct meaning. This meaning is informed by many factors including the distance between interlocutors. A word or sentence spoken from across the room can be quite different from that whispered into the ear. Standing close, almost touching, communicates information without words. Thus, for the final section of this paper, I alter my tone as a means to move into the body and experience this final concept, proxemics, viscerally, with all senses.

\(^{14}\) Saussure terms this element *parole*, the performance of language and the essential pair to *langue*, the language system. I’m familiar with Sassaure’s term and usage from many publications in Linguistics, including Saussure’s books *Course in General Linguistics* and *The Object of Linguistics*. Also, commonly cited within discussions of language as performed is J.L. Austin’s Speech Act Theory, Dell Hyme’s notion of Communicative Competence, and Noam Chomsky’s Performance – Competence dichotomy.
Chapter 4 Proxemics

Introduction

We occupy separate spaces, and one space. I have the sense that you are near and if I reach out my hand I will touch your side. This makes me feel comforted, uncomfortable, like moving nearer, like running away, like saying I am sorry. There is a space between us and around us; we do not refer to it, but it is always there. The size of this space varies if we are waiting in this line, if we are at a party, if we are familiar, if we are strangers, if you are from here and I am from there. When I step closer, decreasing the invisible boundary that surrounds you, that surrounds me, I am telling you something. It might be subtle, this telling, but I feel it. You begin to occupy my conscious wonderings.

I can see my breath, a white cloud extending up before my eyes. At one moment it stretches out slightly, then almost straight up. At another moment it extends horizontally. From this angle, you are part of the cloud of my breath. Through this transparent cloud I see the colour of your hair change slightly, the curve of your head alters, the shapes constructing the line waiver. The forms are not static, but shift in the atmosphere.

We read with our bodies. Spatial messages are sent and received viscerally. These messages pass in the blink of an eye. We learn the patterns and how to read the signs by watching, sensing, doing, through condition and response. Our bodies have memory of this physical language; yet how I read you and you read me in space may not match. Your
language and my language may differ. If I stand close, I may be following the unconscious patterns of my culture. I may feel this closeness is normal. You may feel me brush your backpack with my arm and respond by moving. For you this closeness might elicit discomfort.

In this line, I stand near enough to see the hair on the back of your neck. The hairs react to a cool breeze. You shiver and pull up your collar. Through your shiver I sense the cold. The breeze carries the scent of your soap and your voice, soft, as you whisper to your friend who stands, grazing your side. There is such poignancy in human interaction, in the coming together in space, with words, without words. In *The Hidden Dimension*, anthropologist Edward T. Hall labeled the analysis of space in culture “proxemics” (50). His observations and theory extended across the senses. Hall wrote that the transfer of body heat and sound guides interlocutors to moderate content and volume. Hall reveals how the many senses intermingle to form messages:

> The body’s chemical messages are so complete and specific that they can be said to far exceed in organization and complexity any of the communication systems man has yet created as extensions. This includes language of all forms – spoken, written, or mathematical (45).

Hall expands the notion of language, revealing the whole body as participating in elaborate patterns of communication. The senses combine - feeling, hearing, smelling, seeing, saying - to form and exchange ideas and make meaning. In attempts to understand the cause of instances of non-verbal miscommunication experienced by American foreign workers, Hall carefully observed human use of space in many cultures in three fundamental areas of study: space, distance, and territory. Hall then mapped
tendencies into diagrams defining boundaries and meaning of four types of distances: intimate, personal, social and public distance. In his books *Beyond Culture* and *The Hidden Dimension*, Hall describes cultural tendencies such as a comfortable distance for people to stand in public in a given country. These tendencies are often unconscious patterns that when countered can produce unexpected response. Hall notes that unconscious patterns are rarely revealed until two cultures intersect:

Until the two different groups meet, they will not pay close attention to the cues needed either to keep out of each other’s way or to make contact in order to keep oriented. Paradoxically the cues will become known only in a situation in which they won’t work. (*Beyond Culture* 50)

Hall encourages careful observation to notice such patterns and avoid conflict: “slow down and become acutely aware of signals being emitted and received so they can be consciously read and controlled” (*Beyond Culture* 50).

Art and image might capture those moments of people coming together in space. A picture of people standing near to each other can reveal something about the relationships between the people, but not nearly as much when present, inside that space now frozen in a photo. As an artist, I wanted to mix immobilized spacial representations with the expanded sensory experience of standing within and among, creating a space where people move within the artwork. I wanted visitors to experience these ideas through an installation where people might see each other through the layers and as integral to the work.
Project Details

To begin, I photographed students lined up at Tim Horton’s on the UBC Kelowna campus. I stood at a distance and captured the horizontal line stretching out for nearly a block. There seemed to be little movement. The spaces between students varied slightly. As I watched, one student moved forward to create a space for flow across the line. This movement caused a slight cascade through the line. One student stepped back; another stepped aside. Their physical communication was subtle, but clear.

Bodies follow rules, but they are unruly. They are changing in space, in atmosphere, in relation to one another, rapidly. A camera freezes these moments of sense-exchange. It flattens the space; where two figures overlap they merge. Bodies, and the space around them, become two-dimensional shapes, equal. Scents and sounds pair away. Alterations in atmosphere freeze in time.

In preparing to print, I focused on the negative spaces, the shapes seen between people as they shift in line and as the atmosphere changes. I simplified these negative spaces into flat shapes of colour, heightening two-dimensionality, erasing foreground and background, with simple abstraction. No longer is one person standing at a distance from another. I captured the space that folds into a person walking in the foreground stretching up, merging with a space that would have been further back. I abstracted atmospheric effects, such as a puff of smoke from a cigarette. I cut this negative space into vertical sections, and played further with the forms, creating strong and varied
shapes. Each was then printed in a different colour on a hanging sheet of acetate (Figures 5 and 6).

![Proxemics installation](image)

**Figure 5: Proxemics installation**

When these prints are hung in layers in the centre of the gallery, three deep, with thirty inches between each, visitors can walk within the prints. They can interact with the piece physically, seeing not only the printed abstract shapes; they will see other gallery visitors through the clear shapes that echo the forms of people in a line.
Figure 6: Proxemics installation

In this way I hope to create a visual proxemic study on two different dimensions. I have captured the spaces between people, making these tangible and measurable, as if in a more scientific study. Then I played with those spaces, bringing the drawing out into three-dimensions to be walked through and altered by the ever-changing forms of new people moving into and out of the piece. If people are looking at this work, it might change when viewed from different angles, when standing close or far away to the sheets and close and far away from other viewers. Depending on their relationship to each other, visitors to the gallery may step in together, passing close to each other, hearing, smelling, feeling each other. They may experience apologizing, trying to pass, refraining from passing, deciding how close is appropriate to stand, experiences of Proxemics that might occur among and because of the work. I created the sculpture, but I also leave
room for chance and circumstance. How visitors move in and between the images will continue to form and reform the piece.

In preparing this piece, I not only researched and contemplated Proxemics as a theory and in public practice, I decided to reflect on artwork I have seen or experienced which creates a relational experience and responds to unconscious patterns of human behaviour in a culture.

**Proxemics and Art Viewing/Experiencing**

In a Canadian or American gallery, patterns of human behaviour are explicitly rule-governed. A gallery visitor is usually reprimanded for touching artwork. Boundaries are clearly defined with ropes and lines, delineating where a visitor might stand in relation to a work of art. Once when visiting the Vancouver Art Gallery, I observed an installation by Liz Magor for over an hour. The piece was simple, a tattered rucksack tacked to the wall with *Cheesies* falling onto the floor through a hole. A guard was posted next to this piece with the explicit goal of countering desire, deterring visitors from touching the *Cheesies*. I had wished that the guard were a performative element of the work, but he was not. Whether the artist had intended it or not, the context, the guard and the viewers became a part of her work and what it communicated. The meaning of this piece included non-verbal interactions between humans and artwork in a gallery culture that is bound by conventions of proper behaviour.
Gallery visitors want to touch or get close to the work, but this desire is refused in most instances. This made me long for artwork that explicitly plays with or against rules of what is “correct” behaviour. Thus, I contemplated how I might allow visitors not only to touch the artwork but to move into it, becoming a part of it. I wanted the piece to be about human interaction. I wanted it to allow human interaction that might cause unconscious patterns of space use to become more evident.

I wanted to create an interactive piece that causes humans to become part of the work. In this way the work will be formed and reformed through chance and circumstance. In conceiving of this Proxemics piece, I took direct influence from the work of three artists, Richard Serra, Raphael Lozano-Hemmer and Ashok Mathur.

Describing *Promenade* (2008) Richard Serra considers the viewer’s physical relationship to and point of view of his large-scale sculpture: “As you walk in between the plates you see fragments, you see the work in part, you cannot grasp the whole. The plates appear and disappear, lean away or toward you depending on your location” (Interview with Richard Serra by Adrian Searle, NP). Serra’s sculptures interrupt human traffic in public spaces. *Tilted Arc (1981)*\(^{15}\) reaches across a city square, Federal Plaza in New York City. Like a massive metal wall, the sculpture causes viewers and residents to alter their course. These forms cannot be ignored; they alter and interrupt standard patterns of movement.

\(^{15}\) This date and location information come from PBS.org, Culture Shock blog, [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/tiltedarc_a.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/tiltedarc_a.html)

Tilted Arc was removed from Federal Plaza in 1989 after a public debate regarding its artistic merit and questions regarding whether it interfered with use of the plaza.
The interruptions must cause viewers to notice other people in relation to the metal form rising above and beyond their personal space.

In Ashok Mathur’s installation of his novel *A Little Distillery in Nowgong*, large acetate sheets printed with text emerge from book into a gallery space. The printed sheets hang in rows for visitors to walk among, leaning in, focusing, reading. In their concentration, each hardly notices the other, seen on the other side of or next to the words. All become a part of the piece, integral to it as a physical piece. At times I wonder, will the reading of the text, the meaning, also be affected by this physical and visual interaction/interruption. When the work is seen at a distance, these readers merge into the text, one cannot see the installation without seeing the people, the shifting and changing forms as they overlap, bend forward, hold hand to chin, and lean back.

In Raphael Lozano-Hemmer’s large-scale, public, interactive installations *Body Movies* (2002, 2003) and *Amodal Susension* (2003, 2004) and *People on People* (2011), visitors move into and become integral to the shadows of other visitors. Using time-lapsed surveillance cameras, Lozano-Hemmer causes the audience to move around the room, standing closer to the projection wall, further away, closer to each other, further away. The people begin reading themselves in relation to the media and to each other. Lozano-Hemmer causes the audience to move and play together, altering the norms of behaviour in that time and space. In viewing a film of the installation during a 2003 talk by Raphael Lozano-Hemmer at Emily Carr University, I could see that the audience became
participants in *Body Movies*, reacting playfully. They jumped around and moved closer to strangers than; they moved back and forth to tighten spaces between themselves and other participants or to the silhouettes recorded and recast by the cameras.

Lozano-Hemmer was keenly interested in designing installations for specific, public places and for an audience who is not “invited” but rather happens to pass that public space. Thus chance emerges as an essential part of the work. Further, Lozano Hemmer’s interactive media installations create what Umberto Eco calls a “rich kind of pleasure” from the audience experiencing the work (104).

How one interacts with the artwork often follows norms of how one should behave in a public art setting. Thus when artwork interferes with unconscious cultural patterns of behaviour, the art expands activating spaces between visitors and artwork. Visitors are caused to alter patterns, stop, notice and interact with each other and with the work.
Chapter 5 Conclusion

My goal in this project has been to investigate language visually and to use concepts from linguistics as impetus for artistic creation. As I made the work, I found myself seeking to cohere visual elements, creating a repetition of forms that might develop my own style or visual language. Further, because, language facilitates human communication, I sought ways for gallery visitors to interact with the work, to play with the parts of this visual language, and to physically and conceptually participate in the three Linguistic concepts that comprised my written and creative research: morphology, syntax and proxemics. I intended to create the starting point, or the tools for further creation. As Saussure writes, an interlocutor might intend a particular idea, but once a phrase, or in this case, a work of art, is released, meaning and use cannot be controlled:

Whoever creates a language controls it only so long as it is not in circulation; from the moment when it fulfills its mission and becomes the property of everyone, control is lost (Saussure, Course in Gen. Ling. 76).

Considering interactivity, and within that, release of control, as essential to language, this final section of my written thesis reflects on audience reception of the completed artwork from my observations opening night at the Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art, Kelowna.
Upon entering the gallery, a moveable wall impedes the view of the whole space, thus visitors must first move to the left, encountering *Syntax*. *Syntax* is a grid of printed wooden squares that form a puzzle. Before opening night, I arranged the squares randomly into a grid using Velcro to temporarily fix each piece to the wall (Figure 7). Pairs of gallery visitors intently formed the words into sentences then deconstructed the words into the drawing. From what I was told and from what I observed, the piece was sufficiently complex to require a bit of negotiation and teamwork. The puzzle seemed to bring people together in conversation in attempts to reach the goal of finding a correct answer. Nonetheless, once a correct combination was achieved (e.g. putting together the sentences) a new pair would intently take it apart to see the other image (e.g. the woman leading a horse to nowhere).

Figure 7: *Syntax*
When printing the puzzle pieces, I had to focus on one small section of the larger image, one square of the whole. While printing, I wondered how a fragment of a horse or a portion of the sentence might fit into the whole. Because the two images couldn’t be complete at the same time, one had to be out of order to view the other; this printing process was at times confusing. As a result, I laid out the squares and fit them together as they were printed to ensure that I was printing the right sections. Rarely did I admire each separately or in “incorrect” combinations. Thus, I wondered whether visitors might try to create their own, unexpected compositions, in a sense, playing with the forms I offered on the squares. On opening night, it seemed that visitors were more intrigued with correctness, with finding the answer, but there seemed to be some interest in certain colours and shapes. More than one person commented on the pink colour and shape. Throughout the exhibition, some visitors altered the order of the squares. One day I returned to find all of the squares with little or no printed image were lined up in the second row. At this point I felt like someone was communicating something new to me, a unique abstract message. I hoped that this might happen more often, as visitors were exchanging codes or as if different visitors were responding in conversation with me. In future I hope to create a related piece that would compel more people to create their own composition using the parts provided.

Because the gallery was bisected by a movable wall, the space controlled the movement of visitors. After Syntax, visitors encountered the Proxemics installation of prints on acetate hanging out from the wall. Spaced thirty inches apart, in two jagged rows, hung
three to four layers of clear plastic printed with vibrant shapes representing the negative space between people in public. My intent was for visitors to walk between the layers, viewing each other in relation to the piece. On opening night, most people didn’t hesitate to step into the installation. People walked freely among the layers, sometimes standing to converse within, sometimes photographing from within or from without. What I hadn’t expected was how visitor and artwork would intermingle visually, expanding the range of visual experience. For example, the colours and patterns of clothing reflected in the plastic, enhancing my printed colours and patterns. Also, the shadows cast by shapes and people interplayed dynamically.

Figure 8: Proxemics installation
Figure 9: *Proxemics* installation close-up

Figure 10: *Proxemics* installation close-up
When setting up a show, I reflected on how people move through space and view or move among artwork. I’ve noticed that gallery visitors generally move forward, stop and then turn to focus on the next work or they shuffle slowly to the side, inching over to see the next painting on the wall. When reading a book, I sit stationary, turning or flipping pages before focusing on one page. Bringing these actions together, the body might mimic the flipping, moving, turning, moving, turning, or shunting to the side repeatedly, especially when images are placed close together on the wall. Furthermore, images placed close together can be viewed as a set or whole, rather than as individual parts (Figure 11). Thus planned to hang the third, and final piece in this show, Morphology, into two sets, linking the multiple, small pages as if they were successive pages in a book carefully unfolded onto the wall.

Figure 11: Morphology series 2
I hung the *Morphology* pages in two groups, both within the back alcove. Once visitors reached this space, they were trapped, somewhat prevented from stepping back very far from the work. The first group of pages consisted of two sets of prints, interspersed, one set orange, one black. With just three inches of space between each print, I hoped that the images would be read in multiple ways, creating multiple associations between the works: as two interspersed sets of prints, as a series of related pages, and as pairs of prints. I attempted to emphasize the last point, pairs, by separating two of the prints at a 45-degree angle, around the corner (Figure 12). The second group of prints was similarly spaced, yet I hung prints together if they shared a related visual element. Again, I hoped to create the sense of a series, while also allowing the prints to be read as pairs.

*Figure 12: Morphology series 2*
I noticed that visitors tended to step close to the work, viewing each individually, especially due to the confined space; yet more than one person asked about relationships between the individual pieces, evidently having stepped away to view the groups overall. Many people asked how the prints were to read as a whole, if as a progression, for example. This kind of negotiating, both physically, through movement from print to print, and conceptually, considering how the prints might read, was part of my goal of allowing the individual print to open from being a discrete unit to having the potential to combine and vary.

For Syntax, Morphology and Proxemics, I intended visitors to interact with the artwork and with each other. I carefully controlled the environment with the goal of achieving predictable results; yet within control comes the unpredictability and release of the work to viewer engagement, the factor that hopefully allowed for the language to come alive and grow in the gallery. Through this research I discovered that exploring language on a deeply abstract level caused me to have to distil concepts to their most basic. I had to think about syntax not as words, but as shapes and as physical engagement with forms, something that resulted in new creative ideas as well as a deeper understanding, for me, of the concept. Printing the Morphology series, I refined the idea resulting in a simple play with establishing and breaking patterns. Creating Proxemics, I discovered ways to cause viewers to step into the artwork, and to see from multiple points of view. I left the process thinking that I didn’t necessarily teach the viewer about language or Linguistics, but this wasn’t something I intended to do. I didn’t explain to viewers about this research.
either, because all of my research and writing was intended to lay in the background. The goal of my creative research was for me to further understand concepts in Linguistics and explore the question “What is language?” not with more words, but through imagery and through the physical engagement with artwork while creating. My goal was to develop artwork that allowed visitors to step inside of these ideas and feel and see, experiencing language through another perspective, without explicit discussion of the concepts.
Works Cited


