Language as information and screen

Case Study: 13 Variations, Emmett Williams

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The image above is a detail from Emmett Williams' *13 Variations*
Taken from (Griffin)
“An experimental reading realises that that parts of the work can perform functions other than those assigned by the author, and that they function differently in conjunction with different elements.” (Baugh 45)

Emmett William’s work, *13 Variations* (1965) was created in the midst of the concrete poetry movement, alongside artists such as bill bissett, Michael Morris, and bpNichol. This movement spread vastly through architecture, literature, visual arts, and design. William’s work consists of an accordion-style book, presented on its side in a vitrine, displaying for the viewer, multi-coloured stamps on every page. The words: when, this, you, see, remember, and me, are stamped on the page in their respective colours: blue, brown, red, green, yellow, and orange. As the book progresses from left to right, stamps begin to multiply, taking over most of the page until the right-most page becomes almost material-like, with all the colours overlapping each other. Though when approaching the book from right to left, the pages become sparser, the colour of the paper shows through, until the page consists of simply six stamps, of six different words.

Bruce Baugh’s citation above demonstrates a manner in which to approach Williams’ work. Though the text is based around literature, and not standard works of art, when it comes to Williams’ work, one must receive it as a type of literature. This work in its nature of being apart of the concrete poetry movement is a visual interpretation of the written language. An argument can be made that any work utilizing text as a medium could no longer be looked at without the attention to how words are perceived. Baugh’s text is a reiteration of the way in which Deleuze and Guattari believe literature should be approached. In the explanation, there seems to be a strong tie with the way Laura Marks
approaches her theory on analyzing images. Both believe in disregarding what something means, and focusing on what it does and shows to the viewer.

Marks has adapted Deleuze’s theory of signs by changing his two-ply model of: infinite-image, to her three-ply model of: infinite-information-image. (Marks 6) The root of this theory lies in the idea that as viewers we perceive images that unfold from information. This information unfolds from the infinite. The infinite consists of, to follow Deleuze’s idea, both the virtual and actual. The images that we see are actualizations of the virtual. Yet what a viewer must do is try to understand what information is being unfolded by an image, and what information might be enfolded by that same image. It is by this method that this study will attempt to analyze the enfolding-unfolding aesthetics of William’s work, 13 Variations (1965).

First, it is important to understand the immensity that is the infinite. It consists of everything that has been, will be, and what will never be. For an image to come from the infinite, according to Deleuze, a screen is used to allow compossibles to be brought forward together. (Deleuze 77) In the case of 13 Variations, the screen bringing forth compossibles to create an event is Emmett Williams. The creation of this work is an event, an instance of something being created from the Many (Deleuze 76). Williams has brought together information in order to create a new image, which in turn has now been incorporated into the infinite. The work, 13 Variations, similar to O’Sullivan’s approach to Richter’s paintings, can be regarded as a subtraction from all the possibilities. The blank pages of the book are now filled with one possibility that was part of the virtual. Yet the end result becomes an addition to the artist’s point of view. (O'Sullivan, From
Possible Worlds to Future Folds) It now seems appropriate to undertake the task of performing Marks’ enfolding-unfolding aesthetics to understand how this work is seen.

While viewing this work as part of the exhibition, *Letters: Michael Morris and Concrete Poetry*, there is certain information that is already unfolded for the viewer. The didactic panel to the left of the vitrine contains a write up from Williams. In the writing he explains that he took inspiration and words from American poet, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946). What is intriguing about this pairing of Williams and Stein is the similar approach to treating word as objects. Concrete poetry was driven by the thought that words alone do not suffice in representing their full potential. Stein had the idea of

“the words on the page as objects in themselves which need not necessarily be related to one another… a slippage of meaning in words as signifiers which could bring them into new relations with one another.” (Daniel 34)

Both believe that words and their supposed meanings do nothing, and that it is their relation with the information around them, and the forms in which they are presented, that truly allow the reader to experience words. Therefore all one can do while looking at the work is understand what these words are doing.

The image given to the viewer is composed of six words. According to Leibniz, the viewer is a monad and has amplitude. The amplitude can grow based on our new perceptions of the universe. Alternatively, according to Bergson, instead of monads perceiving, there are zones of indetermination acting. Either way, what connects both thoughts is that we perceive or act upon things that are important to us. When faced with the words: when, this, you, see, remember, and me, an immediate reaction could be to arrange the words in the order in which makes the most sense to the viewer. An example
being: when this you see remember me. An alternative option could be: when you see this remember me. Yet there are still many more alternatives to the ways that these words can be combined. To be precise, by using the mathematical calculation for permutations without repetition, it has been deduced that there are 720 different ways of rearranging these words.

Figure 1

Above, figure 1, represents the way in which the words can be organized is a varying order, yet once a viewer decides on one way, the other options go right back into the infinite/virtual.

Another way that math seems to bring itself into Williams’ work is by the method of multiplication used while going from one page to the next. The first page (starting from left to right) consists, as stated before, of six words. The next page consists of six words, stamped twice. In total, then, we have twelve stamps. The following page contains twenty-four stamps, then forty-two, ninety-six, 192, 384, 768, 1536, 3072, 6144, 12288, and finally 24576 individual stamps. These numbers are based on the assumption that the
formula of multiplying each previous number by 2 was utilized the whole time. The book stops at the thirteenth page, thus ending the thirteen variations.

What becomes a center of focus is the way in which repetition is working in Williams’ work. Through his repetition of stamping the same words over and over again, their formal qualities become entangled in each other, “remember”, blending into “me” creating an overlay of letters, and colours. A statement made by Clare Colebrook, in which Simon O’Sullivan reiterates and takes influence from Deleuze, explains that through repetition, the same thing is not made over and over again. With each repetition, a new object is made, and each time the original is being questioned and renewed. (O’Sullivan, From Possible Worlds to Future Folds 134) Therefor it is possible that each stamp is its own entity. Each time a new stamp is placed on the page, it means something else, something different than the one before.

13 Variations also enacts a performance of enfolding and unfolding for the viewer. Placed in a vitrine, the viewer can approach this work from two different ways. Following the discussion above, if approaching this work from the left, then as a viewer the original six words are being overlaid, being skewed and becoming illegible and less recognizable as words from the English language. We are left with a plaid-like image, where hints of yellow, red, and blue pop out from the sides. Yet when approaching the work from the right, the viewer walks along the vitrine and slowly things become clearer. The words begin to reveal themselves. The source for the mass of colour is revealed. The words from Stein are unfolded for the viewer.

Yet what still hasn’t been touched upon is what do these words do? Unintentionally it would seem, due to lack of chronological cohesion, Williams’ choice
of words reflect the biographic documentary on the life of Gertrude Stein. *Gertrude Stein: When this you see, remember me* (1970) directed by Perry Miller Adato and written by Marianna Norris. These words seem to hold a different sort of weight when put alongside a biography commemorating the life of a well-accomplished poet. Words that are seen as separate entities, forced to be together on one page, now fit together seamlessly and are inseparable as the title for a film. Both works, created after Stein’s death, create a sense of remembering, nostalgia, and romanticism. What Williams’ work has been able to do is allow the words to do exactly what Gertrude Stein was hoping to achieve. She wanted to allow words to do what they wanted to do, and what they had to do.

There is still an issue in how languages, and words, allow a viewer to interact with a work. Language as a tool is one that in certain instances hinders the ways of expression. This becomes verified by ways of different languages needing different words to express the same meaning, or for certain dialects to not have words that correlate with another language. It seems that with the use of language, the way we think can also be hindered. To resolve this issue it is clear that we needed to turn to new modes of representing our thoughts; arts, dance, and music to name a few. It seems that when non-verbal works are created, there is a liberation of expression. When being able to put marks on a canvas, or move around the stage, language has no place. Therefore the scope of expression that one can make is vastly larger than that of expression using language. So the question here is why incorporate language in a work of art that has to potentiality to not be blocked by words? This appears to be a way of narrowing the interactions the
viewer has with the work. Though the words, being applied with ink, become object in their placement in the work, there are still connotations that come particular words.

The words are now associated with the colour they have been stamped with. When is associated with the colour blue, this with brown, you with red, see with green, remember with yellow and me with orange. The colour selection seems to be a strange palette. This calls for a self-reflex moment of reliability in the ability to see the “right” colour. When looking at the choice of colour, the primary colours are there: when, you, remember. Then come the secondary colours: see and me. Finally there is brown. Brown is a combination of red, yellow and blue, with the majority of the combination being between red and yellow. Yet the brown could easily be looked at as purple. If it is purple than it is another secondary colour word: this. There are now two groupings of words: when, you, remember, and, this, see, and me. This goes back to the idea that though the object can be perceived by two monads, it does not mean that the two monads will see the same object.

Going forward with Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of looking at not what a word means, but what a word does, in literature, in terms of concrete poetry, and in particular, Williams’ work, we must look at what the word does as an object. “When”, “this”, “you”, “see”, “remember”, “me”, become the focus of the art object. They become confined on a page, never surpassing the limits of its dimensions. When these words have become objects, more than ever, there seems to be an outer level and inner meaning. In relation to the Arabic words bâtin and zâhir that Marks describes in her writing on unfolding enfolding aesthetics, are defined as such: bâtin being the inside, the vulnerable, and zâhir is the outer protective coating. The way to approach language with these two words in
mind is to look at the word as an object, placed on a page or said out loud as zâhir. These words are protecting the inner emotions, the bâtin. To protect emotions, words must be used to try to mask or explain them. Examples being a common answer, “I’m fine”, can now be seen as a zâhir of the by chance upset, or angry emotions inside. “When”, “this”, “you”, “see”, “remember”, “me” are zâhir protecting the bâtin. Through this analysis, the words become a block, limiting the viewer’s access to the works further meanings.

Approaching Emmett William’s work, *13 Variations*, with the process of enfolding unfolding aesthetics has proved to reveal much about the information utilized to create this image. The explicit connection with Gertrude Stein allows this work to surpass the art world, and connect with the world of modern literature. It connects back to the process Stein used to create her writings, and her struggle to put down words without creating meaning. As well this work unfolds the ideas of concrete poetry. Words are no longer sufficient on their own. Words require more formal qualities in the way that they are placed on the page, and how the viewer is able to read them. Yet by use of language, the work has been able to enfold its inner meanings. The limitations set by language are such that they serve as a screen not allowing more investigation.

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