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Faculty of Design
Department of Visual Communication

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u n f o l d i n g l a n g u a g e

Three books by Johanna Drucker

by Daniela Silvi

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In a period when many graduate programmes are trying to integrate serious research into design education without losing sight of practice, Drucker's career illustrates one way of uniting divergent disciplines. Though her example cannot necessarily be adopted by designers frustrated with the intellectual limitations of the marketplace, those with similar skills and inclinations may find it easier to map their own routes now she has preceded them.

Lupton, 1995, p. 77

Drucker can be described as an innovative figure in the contemporary art context. One of the most significant qualities of her work and career is the merging of theoretical research and creative activity. As an artist she works in the area of artists' books, a field which is significantly developing particularly in the U.S., but that still has not gained appropriate recognition and attention in terms of art-criticism.

The book as an artistic medium has always lacked an adequate art theory that could relate it to other forms of cultural and artistic production. This is probably due to the integration of different modes of expression involved in the making of artists' books. The merging of various media blurs the conventional disciplinary boundaries between the visual and literary arts. There is a need for contemporary artists who contribute to modifying the perception of those authorities in order to respond to the new and complex demands of today's society.

New demands continually reshape what we can do, growing out of what we must do. This emerging conception of the

artist includes the cultivation and invention of her or his own resources. (Piombino, 1995, p.54)

Johanna Drucker is an example of an artist whose work is the result of a constant process of rethinking and re-evaluation of her interests and concerns. She has been producing experimental artists' books since 1972. Her main area of interest lies in language and its visual representation in typographic form. Within the already experimental field of artists' books Drucker's work is highly innovative and original. She is one of very few working on typographic artists' books. As an art historian she combines teaching (Drucker is currently Associate Professor in the Department of History of Art at Yale University) with scholarly publications which are the result of several years of intense academic research. Although Drucker is gradually beginning to gain wider recognition in Europe, her work is still considerably difficult to get access to, and in terms of art criticism very little has been published on the subject.



The opportunity of meeting Drucker in the U.S. and of viewing all of her books, articles, transcripts of lectures, panels and performances, plus getting access to some secondary sources, represented the key to the undertaking of this project. A few reviews of her books and an article by Ellen Lupton in *Eye* magazine, are a signal of the growing interest in Drucker's work. What is still lacking is a contextualization of her work.

The principal aim of this discussion is the understanding of Drucker's books in the broad context of the development of her interests and concerns. It is aiming to unveil the role played by specific themes and mechanisms involved in the ideation process of the individual books in relation to the general context of Drucker's development as a book artist. After a careful analysis of Drucker's work, which involved the research and investigation of the several areas of knowledge involved in her work, both creative and theoretical, three books have been selected as embodying different significant stages of the visual and conceptual

growth of Drucker's book-art. The research involved the analysis of primary sources some of the few secondary sources available as well as material written by Drucker herself on her creative work. This has represented an extremely interesting aspect which allowed the research to take into consideration Drucker's ideas and approach and follow how and if they have been translated into material form.

Drucker's work is of invaluable significance both in an educational context, encouraging the interaction between different fields of work, and in an art and design practice context, merging the boundaries between theory and practice.

Drucker's work offers enormous possibilities of research in relation to the several fields connected to it. This project wants to be a first step, an attempt in creating a context from which further and more specific investigations can emerge.

u n f o l d i n g l a n g u a g e

nothing was being was made was easy
Drucker, Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's

Drucker describes *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* as:

... the first work in which I used letterpress as something more than a means of printing an already written text and in which I concentrated on the visual dimensions of written language.

(Drucker, *Leonardo*, 1984, p. 8)

Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's (1976) can be interpreted as the beginning of Drucker's typographic experimentation which will find its peak of visual intensity in *The Word Made Flesh* (1989), where typography is engaged in a "fleshy" conversation with Drucker's responses to theories about language. *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* is also a work where theory plays an important role but at the time of its production, Drucker was not aware that her approach and concerns found a parallel in the context of critical theories. Although *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* can be criticised in many ways for verging on the limits of obscurity in its over-structuralist approach and in the inaccessibility of the language employed, it is, on the other hand, one of Drucker's most significant pieces, which gains

importance once it is understood as marking a turning point in the broad context of Drucker's work and development as a book-artist. It is certainly a book in which some of the interests and concerns that still have an important role in her work emerged for the first time in solid form. A form that for many aspects is still unresolved and confusing, especially in its translation of a complex set of ideas into a visual presentation which does not succeed in terms of clarity and communication, not allowing the reader to fully understand the relations between the form and content of the book. However, *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* has to be considered in the context of Drucker's books and, therefore, the ideas that will be discussed in this chapter represent those interests which here made a first appearance and that Drucker further developed in her most recent work, as will be seen in Chapters 2 and 3.

Drucker was in her mid-twenties at the point when she started to work on *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* and this was also the time of her involvement with a group of poets from the San Francisco Bay area.

This group of poets had absolute ideas about poetry and maintained that prose and fiction were simply unacceptable forms of writing, not belonging to the realm of literature. Drucker worked out of a nineteenth century prose tradition and at that point realised that what she grew up thinking she was going to write was no longer considered a legitimate art form. This group of poets' ideas about literature and their rejection of prose writing deeply influenced Drucker, who came to perceive them as her audience. This influence is clearly exemplified in the way her use of language was radically transformed. Drucker's writing, before *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, was extremely dense, very rhythmical and almost hallucinatory in its escalation of fleshy expressions. An example can be found in *Dark*, a book written in 1972:

Dark, the bat-elf, dauphin to a leaf, our prince, licked his
leaden lips and spewed back to them the piecemeal come
of their misgivings . . .

On the other hand, the language of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* is bare and

minimal. It seems like only the bones of that intricate, intense and fleshy language survived the influence of a powerful sense of external scrutiny (fig. 1). *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* can therefore be interpreted as the extreme result of a sense of external scrutiny coupled with a desire to explore all the new issues she encountered in that particular poetic context.

After *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, Drucker was aware that there were aspects of her writing, especially in relation to fiction, that she was not able to explore in that context. In 1977 Drucker left California, went travelling, and in the years between 1977 and 1982 wrote *Against Fiction*, the result of dealing with the problematics of her identity as a writer in relation to fiction. Coming out of this context, the language of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* can be seen as the revealed structure of a language which is stripped down to leave only its constituent elements. Structure seems to be the key word to the understanding of the book. The role of structure is investigated in relation to the telling of an experience and in its potential to help or facilitate the construction of meaning in language.

(1)

language and experience

Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's

twenty-six

'76

LET HER'S

not a matter of permission

2: J&B

Fig. 1: Drucker, *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, 1976.

Although *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* shows a strong conceptual approach that in theoretical terms can be defined as structuralist, it is important to stress that at the time of the making of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* Drucker did not know of any kind of critical literary theory and was not aware of the work of Russian Constructivism, Avant Garde movements, Mallarme, Zdanovich. *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* is based upon the language of daily experience. It is mainly the look of the language of advertising that influenced Drucker in the visualisation of the book. Of course, this language from the world of advertising itself contains that tradition and history that comes directly out of Avant Garde typographic innovations, etc. This explains why, although Drucker produced *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* from an intuitive process, the influence of that history, of which she was not yet aware, is strongly present.

The main theme of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* is the relation between language and experience, an issue which is a fundamental aspect of Drucker's work, which recurs in several forms in her major

books, and which is also present in different ways in *The Word Made Flesh* and *The History of the / My Wor(l)d*, the two books which will be respectively the focus of discussion in Chapters 2 and 3.

Language has a powerful role in the experiencing of reality. Its qualities enable us not only to communicate with each other but also to describe and therefore to represent experiences. The investigation of the issue of language and experience which Drucker undertook following, as stated earlier, an intuitive process rather than a theoretically informed one, based on the daily experiencing of language in its many visual manifestations, can now be looked at in terms of its relation to issues in the philosophy of language.

There are two opposing positions in which language can be seen to relate to the representation of the world. The Universalist position maintains that language merely plays the role of a means of communicating a system of thoughts and concepts which existence is

previous to and independent from. The Relativist position maintains that concepts and language constitute an inseparable unit. The existence of thoughts and concepts depends on the existence of words which represent the only way in which concepts can take shape and be expressed. These positions entail a further dealing with the issue of the representational value of language and its social effect. The core of these theories seems to directly relate to the problematics and issues involved in the making of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*. Is language intrinsic or external to experience? Can an experience be reconstructed through several distinct thought and linguistic directions? These problematics directly relate to *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* and are a clear connection with the central issue of the philosophy of language, from which the Relativist and Universalist positions derive.

To further expand and clarify the theme of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, it is necessary to look at how Drucker visualised a structure that would have allowed her to communicate the complex relationship

between language and experience. The subject that was chosen as a focus of investigation into the issue, was a four-day trip to Los Angeles undertaken in 1976 with two artist colleagues to do some performance work. There was also a more specific and humourous motivation which clarifies the meaning of the title: *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*. Once they arrived in Los Angeles in the summer of 1976, the group met a book dealer who revealed the "secret" for the making of successful books, that is the production of alphabet, private letters or bicentennial books, all areas with a well established and secure market of book collectors. This is the motivation behind the construction of the title which indicates that *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* is a bicentennial book of private letters about a journey to Los Angeles. The main aim of the book, faithful to the language and experience theme, was of translating a real event into a visual configuration. Drucker describes the process involved in the analysis of the event in these terms:

Transforming the four-day trip into an event meant collapsing it and then viewing it from the perspective of a single plane on which every action had been flattened into one configuration. In order to do this I essentially used the language to stand for significant co-ordinate points in that image, thus removing it from real experience. (Drucker, *Leonardo*, 1984, p. 9)

These co-ordinate points are represented by several different kinds of language, some of them found directly in the real experience and some being external responses to it. There are four main languages present in the book and Drucker has described them as: found language, theoretical language, narrative language, and personal language.

This distinction and differentiation of voices denotes the major significance attributed by Drucker to language in the experiencing of reality and especially in the account of an experience. It also illustrates the process followed by Drucker in the analysis of the real event, where the experience had to be broken down into many different lines in order to identify its constituent elements and the role played by them in the creation of an experience. The significance of those constituent elements becomes even greater in the consideration of a written account,

a written representation of an experience, which is what *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* is. Here is where the distinction between different kinds of languages can become so significant. In relation to typography and especially to letterpress printing, this situation allows enormous possibilities of analysis. Drucker took a real experience and tried to give an account of it through its display of language. She used typography as a means to bring linguistic differentiation to the realm of the visual. The four main languages found in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* and which form the framework upon which the typographic account of the experience is based, emerge from the experience itself and also from the process of analysis of the experience. Found language comes from everything that was found along the experiencing of the trip to Los Angeles, from advertisements to overheard conversations. Theoretical language is the voice which describes the process of analysis of the experience and its relation to the making of the book. Narrative language provides a descriptive account of the taking place of events. Personal voice is the private language of Drucker which provides a more intimate, often cryptic account of the experience.

Although each type of language is supposed to have a specific visual identity, this is not often clear and it does not seem as though Drucker fully succeeded in making the individual languages recognisable, both in terms of visual treatment and frequency of appearance throughout the book.

The result is that in reading the book one has the impression of a pastiche of voices and languages which in some cases seem to have individual identities, but that most of the time overlap and influence each other, a result that although not planned, can be perceived as truly reflecting the relationship between language and experience. Drucker realised the obscurity of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* and produced a xeroxed version of it where she introduced a fifth language that was not inserted in the pages themselves, but kept on separate sheets. This fifth voice functioned almost like a narrative external voice, an element that actually adds interest to the idea of the book in the way it was thought of at the very beginning, that is also functioning in a performance context with a set of etchings accompanying and "performing" the develop-

ment of the experience. The fifth language positively improved the accessibility of the book and helped to re-create the context that was stripped down to the essential elements and of which only the bare remains were made apparent on the pages. On some occasions the voices/languages are identifiable. This happens on page P (fig. 2) where found language takes the form of a handscript typeface representing the language of a billboard advertising an Italian car, with the slogan 'only fifty grand . . . from Italy with passion'. In this case, found language also assumes a second more critical and humourous meaning when considered within the context of the rest of the page where the text 'Environmental appearing' suggests the fake appearance of a place where 'fifty grand' for a car can be accompanied by the word 'only'. This handscript type does not appear again in the pages of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* and it is not clear if the found language itself does appear again in different forms.

ENVIRONMENTAL

*ap***P**earing:

points of focus:

Only fifty grand . . . from Italy with passion!

The vegetables delivered door to in the quite well-tended afternoon.

(sick scene

Fig. 2: Drucker, *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, 1976.

INTERPRE T ATION

In regard to considering the process of--

where are all variables reaching a conclusion in the immediate.

By what turbulence does the motion of the clouds maintain the notion of a rapid circulation?

(went he

Fig. 3: Drucker, *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, 1976.

Page T (fig. 3) is an example of the display of theoretical language. The text speaks of interpretation, consideration of the process, and the role of the single elements ('variables') in the coherent account of the experience ('reaching a conclusion in the immediate'). The question appearing on page T in the smallest typeface: 'By what turbulence does the motion of the clouds maintain the notion of a rapid circulation?' can be interpreted, thanks to the illuminating version of the book with the fifth language, as a reference to the issue of the role played by structure in the construction of meaning/reality. Although the connection may seem forced, the question can be interpreted as asking, 'what is the structure, (force) that makes language produce meaning?' This actually seems to embody one of the issues derived from the general theme of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, of language and experience, and that nearly becomes the dominant theme of the book. Throughout the book one has the impression that there is an intricate transparent framework of lines and threads which supports the different typographic elements in a fluid interwoven relationship to each other. That structure is repre-

sented by the words themselves. Their arrangement on the pages almost looks as if the language spoken, written and thought was actually visibly material in the real event while all the images have been erased.

The language and experience theme represents the first and motivating issue that brought Drucker to the making of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*. The complexity of the subject led Drucker to investigating its through dealing with all its constituent issues. Language and experience is not a single unit; it is the result of the interaction of several other elements which, once considered together, can be seen as forming a set of relations. The other aspects which have a role in the relationship between language and experience and that are investigated in some forms in the book are, structure and meaning, spoken and written language, the questioned neutrality of the structural elements of the book, and the issue of the possibility of fixing a single definite meaning into words and sentences. These aspects can be seen as the constituent elements of the issue of language in relation to experience.

The narrative which provides a non-personal account of the taking place of events is exemplified in page P (fig.2) where as already seen, there also appears the found language of advertising. The longest line of type at the bottom of the page describes what was happening at the same time of the viewing of the advertisement, a delivery of vegetables to a shop. Personal language can be found on page D (fig.4) in the central area of text which describes a situation from Drucker's personal point of view. This text has almost inaccessible tones which do not allow one to understand the full meaning of the text, but that also, because of its obscurity, manages to convey a sense of private, secret and coded language.

When describing *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* as a typographic account of a real experience and as the beginning of Drucker's experimentation with letterpress printing, it is fundamental to underline that the visual dimensions of meaning which she creates, and that always parallel a textual one, never happens on the level of the word only.

The visual representation of meaning in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* exists from the level of the single word to the level of sentences and pages. This is an extremely significant point which is one of the constant elements of Drucker's work and which is also evident in *The Word Made Flesh*, where meaning is communicated both on the level of form and content. This aspect can be considered one of the keys to the understanding of the significance of Drucker's work both in practical as well as theoretical terms in the area of relations between visual and textual construction of meaning. The visual construction of meaning is achieved in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* by exploiting the possibilities offered by what Drucker later defined as polymorphous language, in which several layers of reading and interpretation interact with each other through the emphasis on the visualisation of double meanings, phonetics of words, and so on.

BACKGROUND:

D*sire*

All good vibes full and ease until the to spit the mood.

Lush the foliage (guard in) creeps immunity breaking down,

Veiling: **Prevalent:**

Familial information fronts casual causal antecedent for the presence, tense.

Concur to be persuaded quick from some select particular

behind before what's missed screens into shade.

(for

Fig. 4: Drucker, *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, 1976.

The concept of polymorphousness of language represents an important point in Drucker's work and it will be seen to be exploited in more depth and in its several forms in some of her later books, such as *From A to Z* (1977), *Through Light and The Alphabet* (1986), *The Word Made Flesh* (1989), and *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* (1990). In *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, this "interactive" notion of language is found on the level of single words as well as sentences and pages. Drucker constructs meaning on the level of the words through playing with the relations between written and spoken language. For example, the pages of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* are organised in alphabetical as well as numerical order. Every page is associated with a letter of the alphabet which is part of a word of the page. The positioning of a particular letter in a word is not randomly chosen. The letter finds its place in a word which holds within itself, once it is spoken, the sound of that particular letter. This can be seen in pages Access, Bgins, ProCdure, Dsire (figs. 5, 6, 7, 4) and so on. In this way, Drucker achieves a self-representation of language which manages to communicate a meaning that relates to

experience and to the nature of language at the same time. This self-representation of language puts the emphasis on the letters seen as the basic elements of written language with individual identities and characteristics. It also involves the claiming of individuality of written language in relation to spoken language. Letters do not only function as a visual translation of verbal language into written form, they also have independent and highly individual characteristics which do not depend from their phonetic sound. In this way, the idea of the materiality of written language emerges. Again, it is a concept which comes out of an intuitive process instead of a theoretically informed one and that Drucker investigates in more theoretical terms in the years following the making of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* and that is in fact the main theme of *The Word Made Flesh*.

Access to:

L --the indefinite article==
meant soft configuration

of the to the and the around it

*--like Jewels,
bite foul--*

want)

Fig. 5: Drucker, *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, 1976.

B gins

just where left off

(yet not there, that's what's that's

In pondering, some process of digestion.

Coming into past points of references:

INITIATORY

was **Nothing** was **being** was **made** was **easy**

(Bear it

(too

Fig. 6: Drucker, *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, 1976.

PROCEDURE

Going there,
things occur.

(incidental)

don't hold on, necessarily

free)

Fig. 7: Drucker, *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, 1976.

The same concept applied to alphabetical order is also applied to the numerical organisation of the pages, identified in the lower right or left of each page. Page 1 becomes "want", page 2 "too", page 3 "free", page 5 "if I've", etc. In the same way as the alphabetical order was exploited in order to emphasise the relations between written and spoken language, the numerical order is here played with in a way which also questions the neutrality of the structural elements of the book. The page organisation in a book is conventionally thought of as a neutral element independent from the actual content or meaning of the book. Here that neutrality is questioned by its turning it into an integral part of the meaning. This treatment of language present throughout the book is never applied merely in a systematic way. The journey through the several layers of meanings of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* is also full of unexpected and personal references. Drucker gives an example of these intimate suggestions in her description of numbering used in page 1:

"want" used as the page number also blatantly expressed my desire to write, to print, and come into a relation with the public through private language.

(Drucker, *Leonardo* 1984, p. 9)

It is not clear if this aspect is carried through in every page but it is surely an indication of the high level of personal abstraction of Drucker's language. Despite the effort made by Drucker to make all these aspects relatively identifiable, the book in its totality can definitely be defined as belonging to the realm of a private, coded language. The languages and their complex set of relations to each other merge into what becomes a highly cryptic text which unfortunately excludes the reader from the possibility of understanding the most interesting aspects of the book. The polymorphousness applied to words is also extended to sentences. The following sentence appears on page B (fig. 6):

was nothing was being was made was easy

This sentence holds within it several layers of reading and interpretation. It is simply achieved by the differentiation of two weights of the same size typeface. This stratification and alternation of meaning once again emphasises the individuality of written language in relation to spoken language and questions the notion of meaning being permanently embodied and fixed in signs (language). The rhythmical interweaving of

(1)

language and experience

Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's

meanings and interpretations stresses the flexible and malleable nature of language and the actual impossibility of defining meaning in the first place. In the same way as the notion of neutrality of the organisation of each page in the book was questioned and challenged by turning a supposed neutral element into a subject of the content, the assumed notion of meaning being permanently placed and defined in one single word or sentence is challenged. The sentence in question holds several interpretations and all of them relate in some way to the situation of the beginning of the journey to Los Angeles which was also the beginning of analysis of experience, the beginning of the making of the book, of the setting of the type, etc. The same stratification of meaning is found in the construction of *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* where it takes the form of the questioning of the fixed meanings of official history in relation to personal history/memory. In *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, the creation of meaning on the level of the page takes the form of what can be seen as a visual projection of the structural lines which guide the happenings in the real experience onto the field of the page.

The layout of the page and the positioning of type reflects the taking place of events as they happened in reality. This is made clearer when looking at page L (fig. 8) which is about the events that took place at a particular time in the theatre where Drucker and her colleagues went to perform. Specific typefaces are made to correspond to the personalities of the two people involved in that particular event. What is even more interesting is the structure behind the layout of the page. It in fact corresponds to the actual arrangement of the rooms occupied by the people represented.

reLative: COMPARATIVE

SHOWING UP TOO TIGHT AS HER BLOUSE,
MOUSTACHES MADE BASTED DOWN, NOT SERENE.
GLOSS, WITHOUT ANY REAL INFORMATION

TO

professional kindness charming lazy too smooth employ tease
use not deep but submerged: In a manner of disposing the
equipment, a practiced functioning:

directs

THICK-SKINNED
what feeds back &
mentions

THE OTHER's styled grasp of pace,
taking slow time, gone down

beside

what's loud.

(tell

Fig. 8: Drucker, *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, 1976.

The analysis of the complex issue of the relationship between language and experience is approached by Drucker with the taking of a real experience and turning it into a visual configuration through the process of identification of its constituent elements. Parallel to the language and experience theme and emerging from it, the role of structure in the construction of meaning both on a visual and textual plane is also investigated.

Through dealing with these two dominant aspects, Drucker encounters and confronts several issues:

- The relationship between spoken and written language
- The materiality of written language
- The questioning of the neutrality of the structural elements of the book
- The questioning of the possibility of permanently fixing one single and definite meaning into single words or sentences.

All these issues are investigated through the consideration of the visual dimension of language and its relation to the construction of meaning. The real significance of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* lies in its representing an intriguing "pastiche" of some of the main aspects which will be the focus of Drucker's later investigations. The real value of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* does not lie in the book itself, which almost seems to deal with too many issues at the same time which make it obscure and inaccessible. Its significance is in the ideas that made the book develop and take shape in the first place. Because of this, it is legitimate to consider *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, despite its unresolved aspects, one of the most significant books in the broad context of Drucker's work and development as a book artist.

u n f o l d i n g l a n g u a g e

The tongue lies on the table writing, writhing, spelling out the breath of its effort
in an unseemly desire to be seen.

Drucker, *The Word Made Flesh*, 1989.

What can be identified as the main theme of *The Word Made Flesh* (1989) is the attention to the physical and material qualities of written language in the construction/production of meaning. This complex issue was first explored by Drucker, as seen in Chapter 1, in the process of analysis of the issue of language and experience of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* and in her experimental approach to the visual dimension of letters and their relation to the production of meaning. The issue is now given major significance in *The Word Made Flesh* and appears in a much more extensive and further developed form.

The theme of language and experience of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* is still present in *The Word Made Flesh* but the relationship is dealt with through the issue of the materiality of written language. In this way, meaning in *The Word Made Flesh* can be seen as assuming the role of experience, and the physical qualities of letterforms the one of language. The idea at the base of the relationship between language and experience is still that of representation. In *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, the

question of representation of reality was analysed from the point of view of language in more general terms, as the process of identification of different languages throughout the book exemplifies. In *The Word Made Flesh*, the same question of representation of experience (meaning) focuses on written languages and its "denied" material qualities.

There are thirteen years between *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* and *The Word Made Flesh*. In this period of time Drucker had gone back to University, did a Masters degree in Visual Studies with an MA thesis titled Alphabet Symbolism and completed a Doctorate in "Ecriture: Writing as the Visual Representation of Language" with specialisation in the areas of History of Written forms of language, theories of Visual Representation, Semiotics and Signification (Structuralism, Psychoanalysis, Post-Structuralism), both at the University of California, Berkley. Her doctoral dissertation was entitled *Experimental typography 1909-1924 and the Visual Representation of Language*, in which she examined Dadaist and Futurist typographic work in relation to critical theoretical

approaches about the role of materiality in the construction of meaning in modern art practice. The work of her doctoral dissertation formed the basis of the scholarly book published in 1994, *The Visible Word*, in which Drucker explores the theoretical issues and approaches behind the typographic experimentation of the Avant-Garde movements. The *Alphabetic Labyrinth*, published in 1995, is based on her Masters thesis and is a fascinating journey into the history of the fantastic, intellectual, logical, and religious "histories" of the origin of western letterforms. This reveals the extent of depth and investigation into the issue of the materiality of written language that preceded Drucker's undertaking of *The Word Made Flesh*. If *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* was an exciting first experiment with the visual qualities of language, coming mainly out of an intuitive process, *The Word Made Flesh* is an experiment deriving from in-depth studies of critical theories relating to language and representation, and is also an informed critique of them.

The Word Made Flesh questions a concept in which the materi-

ality of letterforms/written language is not considered to influence in any way the production of meaning. Meaning is interpreted as being independent and external to the visual form of language. The questioning of this issue in *The Word Made Flesh* takes shape with the idea of writing a book that is theoretically and at the same time visually about the materiality of language. So, once the text is read and the meaning is understood, the meaning itself would refer back to the materiality of language. In this way there is no possibility of transcendence. It is not possible to get out of materiality by getting to meaning because meaning is the materiality.

In this way, the investigation of the role of the physical qualities of written language is carried out simultaneously on two levels, of form and content. On the level of form, Drucker focuses attention on the materiality of the page. Looking at the pages of *The Word Made Flesh*, there is instantly an awareness of the physical space occupied by letters. The way the letters are organised on the page resists an easy and

linear reading of the text. In so doing, the eye is obliged to become aware, first of all, of the solid quality of individual letters, their size, shape, and visual form, therefore, acknowledging their significance as individual elements and not reducing their role merely to a mechanical conveyor of meaning.

The visual structure of *The Word Made Flesh*, draws on the idea of the Carmina figurata of the Renaissance, (fig. 9) where a sacred image was incorporated into a field of black letters, and was meant to help the meditation on that text through the reading process. In *The Word Made Flesh*, Drucker reverses the process of Carmina figurata and has a field of small red type as a background, from which emerge large black woodblock letters (fig. 10). In this way, the foreground text represents "the word made flesh" and the background text "the flesh made word". The layering levels of reading and interpretation focuses in *The Word Made Flesh* more on the level of the single pages and of the book considered as a whole than on single words and sentences as seen in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*. The title of *The Word Made Flesh* represents a

structure that runs through the book and unites. As well as appearing on the front page, the title also appears "spelled out" in large block wooden letters, one on each page, throughout the book. Within this uniting structure, each page represents an event. The black woodblock letters of the title, embedded within the happenings of those pages, serve two functions at the same time, of uniting structure and forming the dominant visual subject of individual pages. The consideration of the book as a unit, a progression of sequences and events in constant relation to each other can be seen as a development from *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*. A suggestion of this uniting progression in the earlier book was the treatment of the numerical and alphabetical order of the pages where by questioning their neutrality they became an integral part of the content of the book. But the extent to which this concept is extended in *The Word Made Flesh* is far greater. This aspect will be encountered later, again in a different form, in *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, where the consideration of the book as a unit of events is looked at in terms of its relationship to the tradition of narratives.

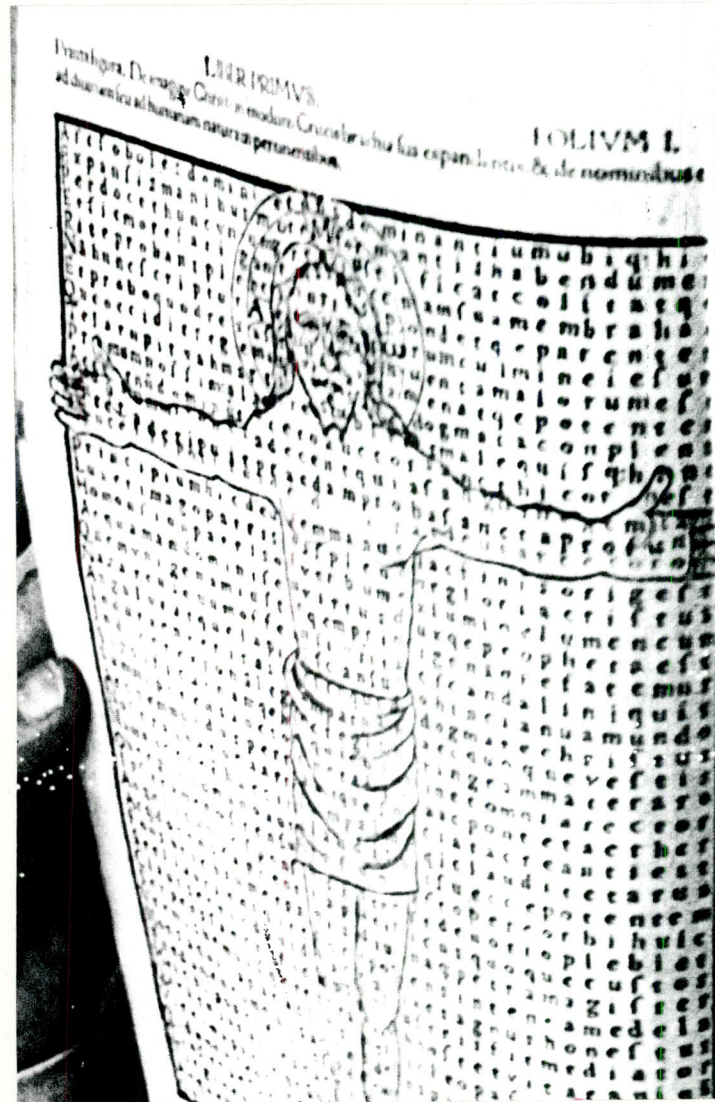


Fig. 9: Carmina figurata by Hrabanus Maurus,(16th Century circa).

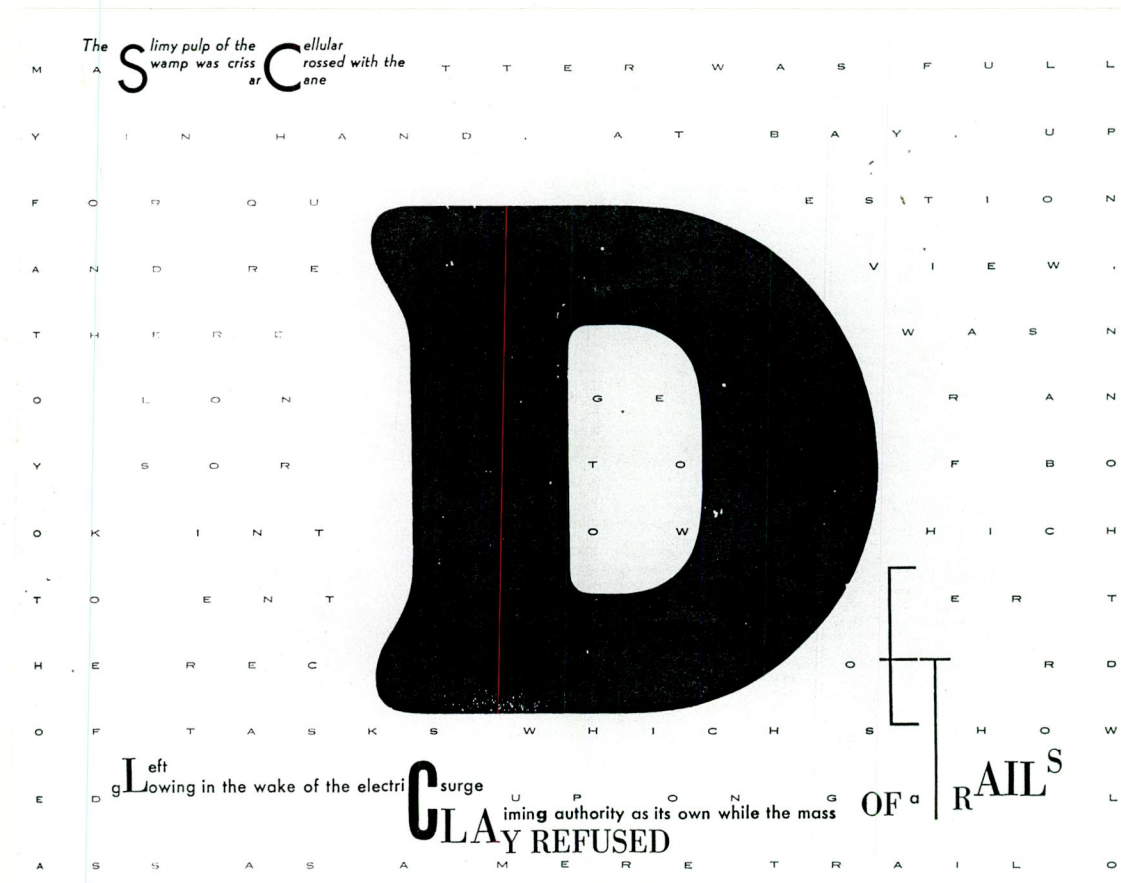


Fig. 10: Drucker, *The Word Made Flesh*, 1989.

The emphasis on the materiality of language is also present on the level of content. *The Word Made Flesh* is all about the physical, visceral quality of language as the title clearly announces, and the text expresses:

The tongue lies on the table writing, writhing, spelling out the breath of its effort in an unseemly desire to be seen.
(fig. 11)

It seems like Drucker's use of language has evolved from the bare minimalism of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* to the language of *The Word Made Flesh* which has gained some of the richness and body that was previously excluded. Here Drucker's writing is rich, visceral and extremely suggestive without losing, as happened in *Twenty-Six Let Her's*, its communicative qualities:

The body returns to language in a rush,
taking its teeth out of the rain, and
washing the infant in tears of recognition

which were never based on life lived elsewhere.
(fig. 12)

and again:

Nothing remains to be seen without having first responded to the touch of the moment and the handshake of breath, brought back into the lungs of the corps from which it took its original flight.
(fig. 13)

The concept of polymorphous text, whose beginnings were seen in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, and its treatment of typography in order to emphasise its influence in the production of meaning, reaches its peak of visual intensity in *The Word Made Flesh*. The use of letterpress printing was significant in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* also, but here it assumes an even greater importance in consideration of the theme of the book.

u n f o l d i n g l a n g u a g e

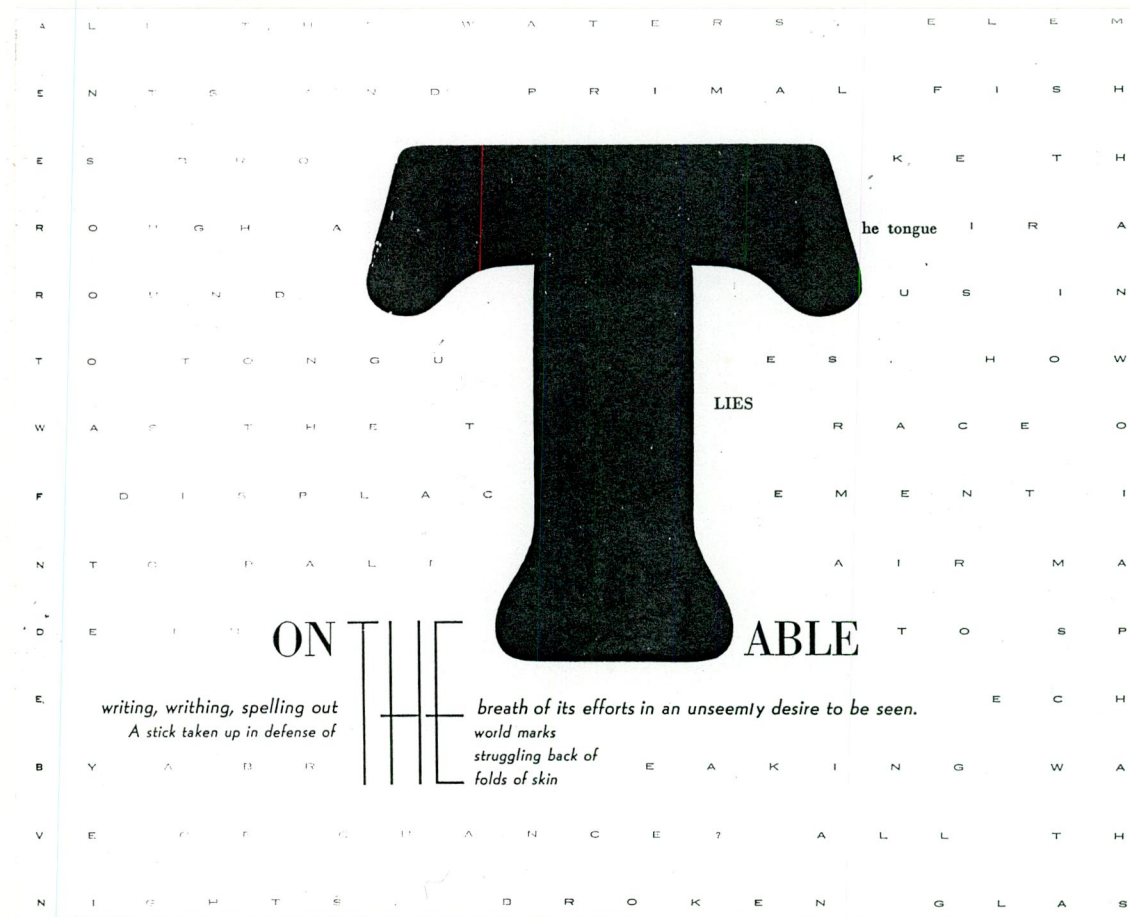


Fig. 11: Drucker, *The Word Made Flesh*, 1989.

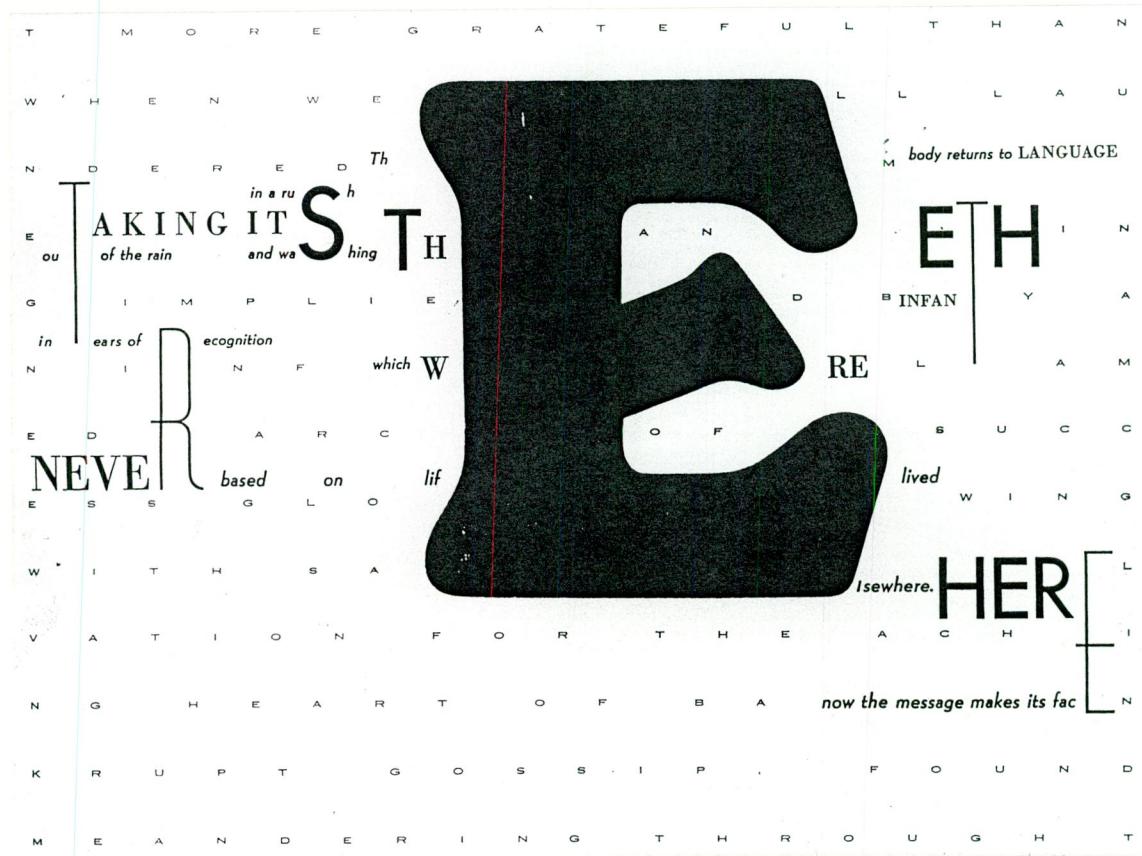


Fig. 12: Drucker, *The Word Made Flesh*, 1989.

u n f o l d i n g l a n g u a g e

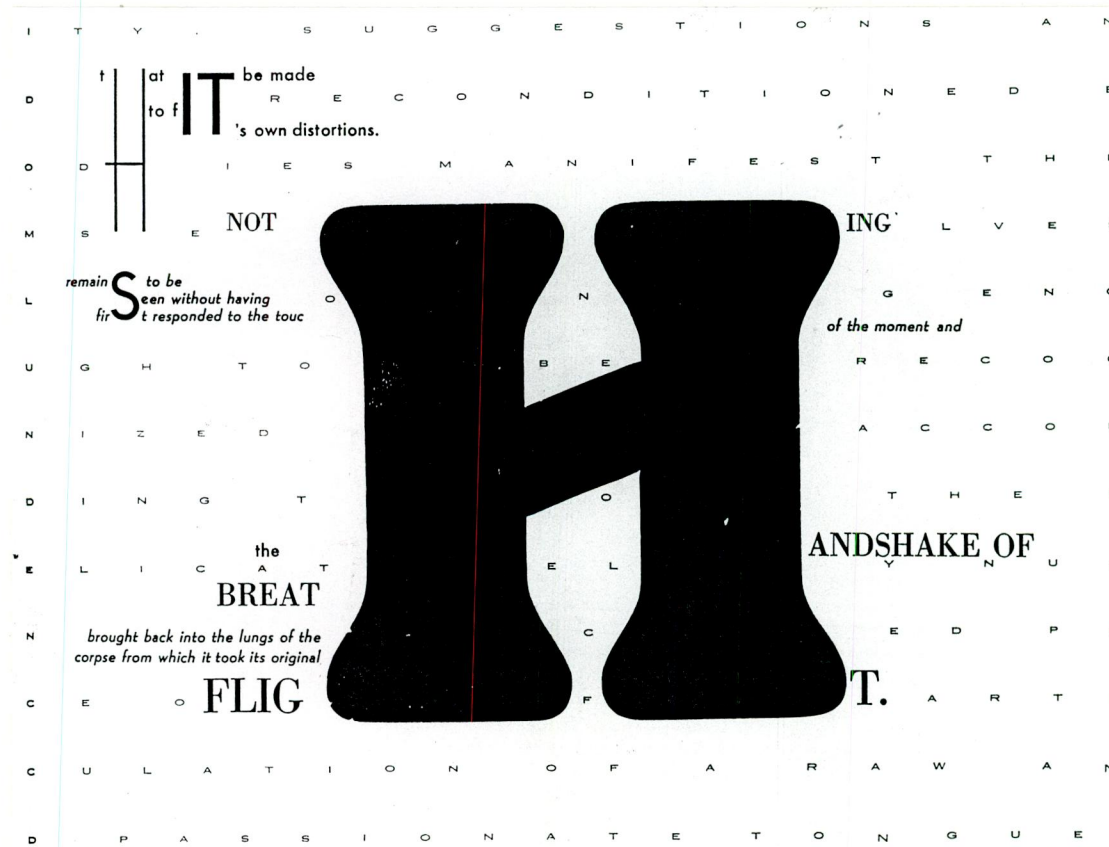


Fig. 13: Drucker, *The Word Made Flesh*, 1989.

Letterpress printing is used and understood by Drucker as a mechanical system whose rules and limitations can be exploited in order to broaden the possibilities of investigation into the physical qualities of printed language.

... the norm of language representation is completely reinforced by the techniques of letterpress. Its mechanical design is intended to maintain even lines in a single typeface. But the very rigidity of these norms also permits the use of that technology as a language itself, as a system of possibilities and constraints.

(Drucker, *Leonardo*, 1984, p.8)

The use of the mechanical process of letterpress printing as a language itself is what adds and makes *The Word Made Flesh* an embodiment of the materiality of written language both on a level of form and of content. The textual content of the book is not disembodied from its formal one. The materiality of language is what allows meaning to come to the surface and refer back to its materiality. The letters are the unquestion-

able subject of *The Word Made Flesh*. The visual power in the production of meaning, conventionally denied to written language and normally attributed to images, is emphasised. This leads into the discussion of an idea that refers to the *The Word Made Flesh* but that also and especially, characterises all of Drucker's creative and scholarly work.

In stating the significance of the materiality of language in the production of meaning through evidencing the power of letters as visual identities, Drucker also questions a tradition of authority which established the notion of visual and verbal arts as separate and independent disciplines. Drucker's typographic experimentation questions the authority of visuality and that of the literary text. There is obviously a clear connection between Drucker's work and the typographic experimentation of the Avant-Garde poet-typographers. In her article *Typographic Manipulation of the Poetic Text in the Early Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde*, Drucker states:

(2)

visceral language

The Word Made Flesh

... a relatively small amount of critical and historical attention has accrued to these works by comparison with the volumes of material produced on the experimental practices which are more readily identified as belonging to either the category of strictly defined visual art or literary production. It is arguable ... that the reasons for the relatively minor place of these typo-graphic experiments in retrospective critical literature can be explained in terms of the threat which such an immodest display of visual manipulation poses to the presumed authority of the literary text and by the equally threatening invasion of the domain of pure visibility posed by the literary content of the typographic poem.

(Drucker, 1992, p. 232)

This statement, referring to the work of the avant-garde poet typographers seems to parallel the following one from Drucker's introduction to *The Visible World* where she attempts to contextualize her own work:

As a printer and artist I had become actively involved in making use of page format, type style, and graphic design considerations in the structure of experimental prose works. These works incurred a highly negative attack on the part of the circle of poets with whom I was involved in the late 70s and early 80s in California, though they found positive

reception elsewhere and later. The need both to validate my own work and to inquire into the strong prejudice against acknowledgement of the visual component in literary work put an emotional spin on the intellectual project.
(Drucker, 1994, p. 2)

The connection is clear and evidently shown in Drucker's interest in the visual representation of language and in her use of typographic forms in the same context. The issue of the materiality of written language in *The Word Made Flesh* and Drucker's treatment of typographic letter-forms are a clear reference to the general aesthetic of the Avant-Garde work. However, her treatment of materiality in relation to the production of meaning shows the specific legacy of the work of Stephane Mallarme and Ilia Zdanevich (fig. 14-15).

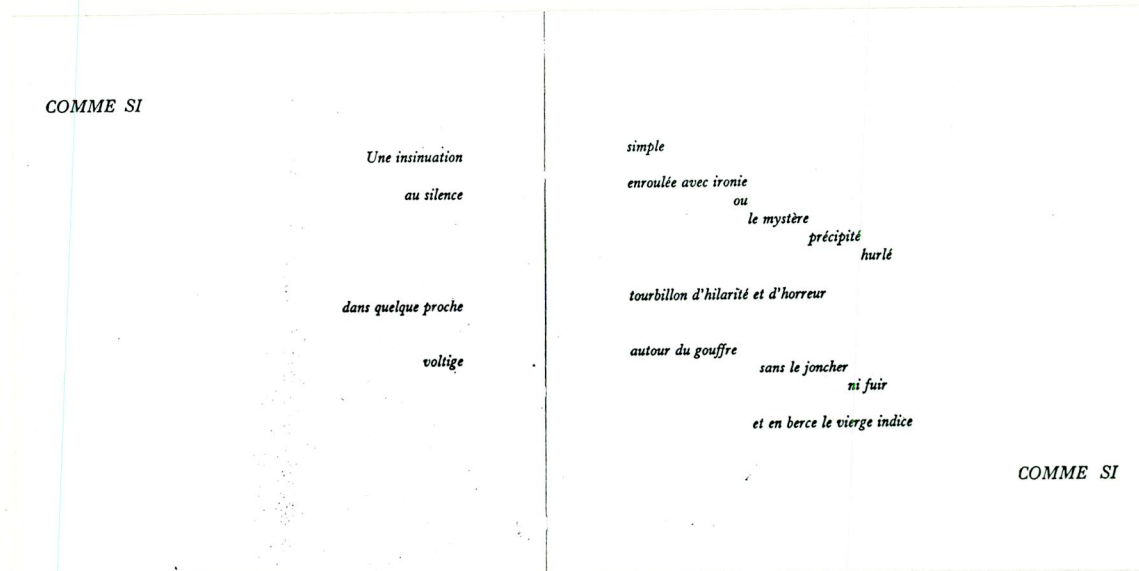


Fig. 14: S. Mallarmé, *Un Coup de Des*, 1914.

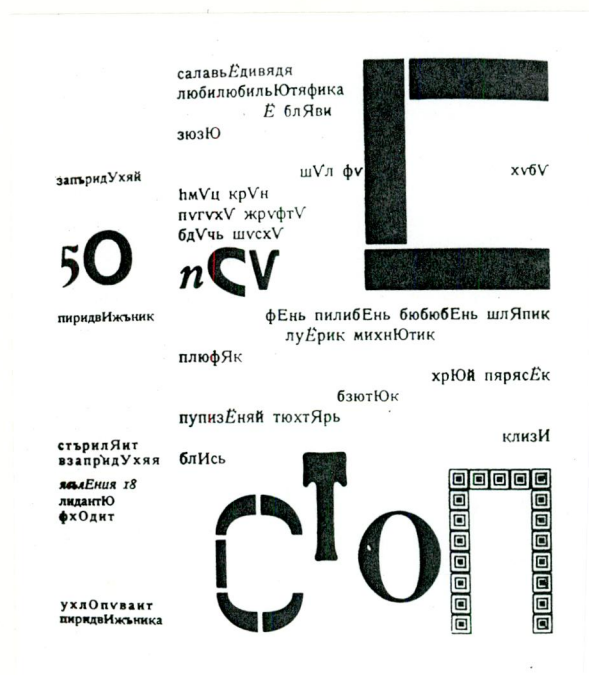


Fig. 15: I. Zdanevich, *Ledentu*.

The following passage illustrates the notion of the "word" which differentiates the work of Mallarme and Zdanevich from the rest of the Avant-Garde:

The symbolist word neither represents nor expresses. It signifies. Unlike representation and expression, which turn the word into a conventional signal for something external to itself, this "signification" preserves the concrete material fullness of the word, at the same time raising its semantic meaning to the highest degree.

(Medvedev in Drucker, *The Visible Word* 1994, p. 69)

The relation to the concept of materiality as approached in *The Word Made Flesh* is evident. Visual language and meaning are embodied in the pages of *The Word Made Flesh* in a way that does not allow the turning of language into a process of representation of external meanings. Drucker does not reduce her experimental treatment of typography to a mode of pictorial image making. *The Word Made Flesh* is full of references to physical parts of the body in relation to the physical

qualities of language. Words like "flesh", "tongue", "blood", are constantly referred to, but Drucker does not represent them through type.

The word "flesh" is not turned into a pictorial representation using the "descriptive" qualities of letterforms. The word "blood" does not become red, and "tongue" does not assume the shape of a tongue. Drucker does not use the materiality of language to let it become, once again, a representation of something else. The only thing that is represented in *The Word Made Flesh* is language and this "signification" is achieved through the use of language only. In these terms, Drucker's work differs from the typographic expressions of some of the avant-garde artists-poets such as Marinetti and Apollinaire which, as she puts forward in *The Visible Word*, although being extremely significant and innovative in an historical and artistic context, still refer in different ways and extents to a representational mode of expression. *Zang Tumb Tuum* by Marinetti (fig. 16) and *Il Pleut* by Apollinaire (fig. 17) illustrate this, representing in pictorial terms, respectively, an aereostatic balloon and the falling of rain.

imboscata di T. S. F. bulgarl
vibbbrrrrrrrrrrrrrre
arrrrrruffarrrre comunicazioni turche
Sciukri Pascià - Costantinopoli

T S F
vibbbrrrrrrrrrrrrrre
PALLONE
altezza
400 m.
TURCO
vibbbrrrrrrrrrrrrrre
FRENATO
T S F
Tsarigrad
T S F
SCOPRIRE
CHE
vibbbrrrrrrrrrrrrrre
T S F
assalto contro Seyloglou mascherare assalto

Fig. 16: F. T. Marinetti, *Zang Tumb Tuum*.

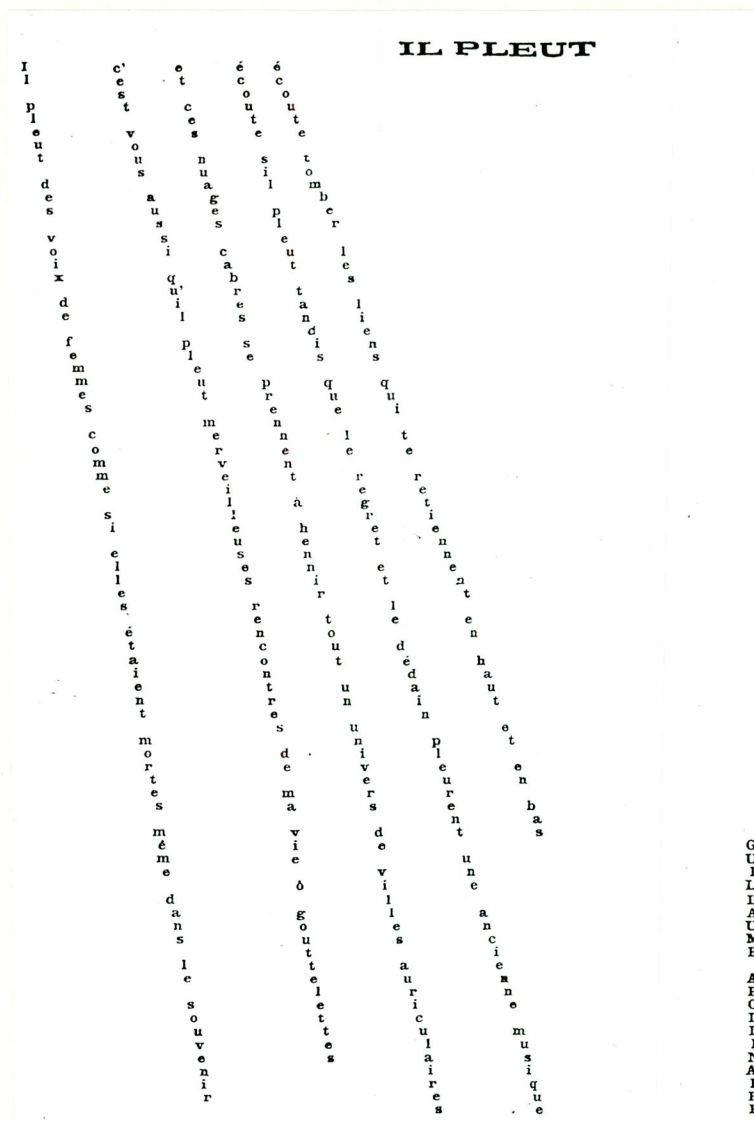


Fig. 17: G. Apollinaire, *Il Pleut*.

In *The Word Made Flesh*, the attention is focused on the role of materiality of written language in the production of meaning. The issue which here is dealt with in relation to theories of language, first emerged in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* which marked Drucker's beginning with the representation of language through typographic forms. Several aspects encountered in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* appear again in a more developed form in *The Word Made Flesh*.

The most significant points emerging from the discussion of *The Word Made Flesh* are :

- The embodiment of the issue of materiality in both form and content, resulting in a self-representation of language;
- The questioning of the authorities of pure visuality and of the literary text;
- The consideration of the book as a whole, as a unit of events;

- The use of letterpress printing technique as a language
- The legacy of the work of early twentieth century Avant-Garde poet-artists and especially of Mallarme and Zdanevich on Drucker's approach to the representation of language through typographic forms (signification instead of representation).

The Word Made Flesh, seen in relation to *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* assumes great relevance both in terms of the context and development of Drucker's work and as a work itself. The progression and evolution of the issues of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* conveys to *The Word Made Flesh* a solid and mature sense of coherence in which a suggestive and sophisticated use of language is combined with a strong and "material" visual impact. *The Word Made Flesh* is an extremely significant achievement which manages to be innovative and experimental in practical and conceptual terms without losing in coherence and elegance.

u n f o l d i n g l a n g u a g e

Literacy and intimacy collapsed coupled in the quiet conversations stolen innocently from routine

Drucker, The History of The/My Wor(l)d

In *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* the voices of Johanna Drucker's language and their differences and similarities are unreservedly interacting in a way which seems to be quite different from *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* and *The Word Made Flesh*. *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* started dealing with language in relation to experience through an analysis of reality based upon the language it offered.

The Word Made Flesh continued the theme of language and experience, but focused attention on the materiality of language so that the language/experience relationship took the form of the relationship between materiality/meaning. The two books seen in a context of evolution also show the development of corollary issues such as the role of structure in the production of meaning, the role of structural elements of the book in relation to content, the possibility of the fixation of meaning on words and sentences, the issue of representation/signification of language through typographic forms and the relationship between written and spoken language, visual and verbal authorities, public and private

language. The uniting thread that seems to emerge from the analysis of the two books and to guide the evolution of Drucker's work towards *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, lies in the gradual development of a notion of the book seen as a metaphor for experience, language, and meaning.

In *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* this aspect was just suggested, but not considered in its whole complexity. The playing with structural elements and questioning of neutral elements of the book seen in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, progressed in *The Word Made Flesh* into a more conceptual, but physically expressed, consideration of the levels of form and content of the book. This is exemplified by the way *The Word Made Flesh* was structured. It was conceived as a unit of events in which a consistent line of thought runs through the book both in conceptual as well as physical terms, but in which the points that constitute that line do not lose their identities as individual elements. This perception of the book as a place of interaction assumes, in *The Word Made Flesh*, much

more solid and coherent connotations than seen in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, where the reader was totally excluded from the interaction happening within and between the aspects of the book itself. In *The Word Made Flesh* the book has opened a "window" and the reader travels through the episodes (pages) to the content (meaning), experiencing not only the physical qualities of language but also the materiality of the reading process. In *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* this concept is further developed, translating the initial relationship between language and experience into a relationship between master narrative of history and personal narrative of memory. This results in what can be considered as the overall theme of the book: writing one's self. In this way language becomes discourse, a discourse investigated through its own materiality. The progression once again becomes clearer and clearer. *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* dealt with social, every-day experiencing of language. *The Word Made Flesh* dealt with the materiality of written language in relation to meaning. In *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, material language becomes a metaphor for discourse or, more appropriately, discourses and their relationship to the construction of a self-identity.

In these terms Drucker's arrival at *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* and the issue of writing one's self can be followed and understood in a context of gradual development. Writing one's self has, in fact, always been present in Drucker's books in its being embodied within the issues of language and experience and the materiality of written language.

To understand this point, Drucker's books demand to be read and not merely looked at. The reading of her language embodies the experiencing of the book's visuality. As already stated throughout the discussion, form and content in Drucker's books do not only relate to each other but are the same, in the same way as her use of visual language achieves its self-representation. In the reading of *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* it is possible to detect the signs of the theme of writing one's self. Drucker's quote, referred to in chapter 1, where she explains the reason for "translating" the number page "one" into "want" as stating her desire to relate to the external (public) experience through her own (private) language, is a clear and unquestionable reference to writing one's self.

In *The Word Made Flesh* the critique of the denial of materiality of written language in the production of meaning can be interpreted as the denied right of the language of the self (memory) in the construction, creation of reality dominated by the language of official history. This is how *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*'s main theme can be read in relation to the general context of Drucker's work.

Now that the connection has been shown in its gradual evolution it is time to look at *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* in more detail by analysing the role of its constituent elements and the process of work from which Drucker achieves the embodiment of levels of form and content.

The title of the book clearly and effectively defines the area of enquiry from the beginning. It reads:

- The History of The World

- The History of The Word
- The History of My World
- The History of My Word.

(fig. 18)

The process of selecting, combining, and interpreting those first words in a changing relationship to each other, creates an introductory sensual experience with the several layers developing in the main body of the book. The same stratification and interlocking of interpretations has already been encountered in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* and in *The Word Made Flesh* also, where it is extended to the interaction of pages within the unity of the book. In *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* the polymorphousness is stated from the very beginning. The title, whose role in conventional books is normally thought to be capturing their meanings therefore fixing and defining their interpretations, in *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* becomes multiple, with each interpretation significantly differing from the others.

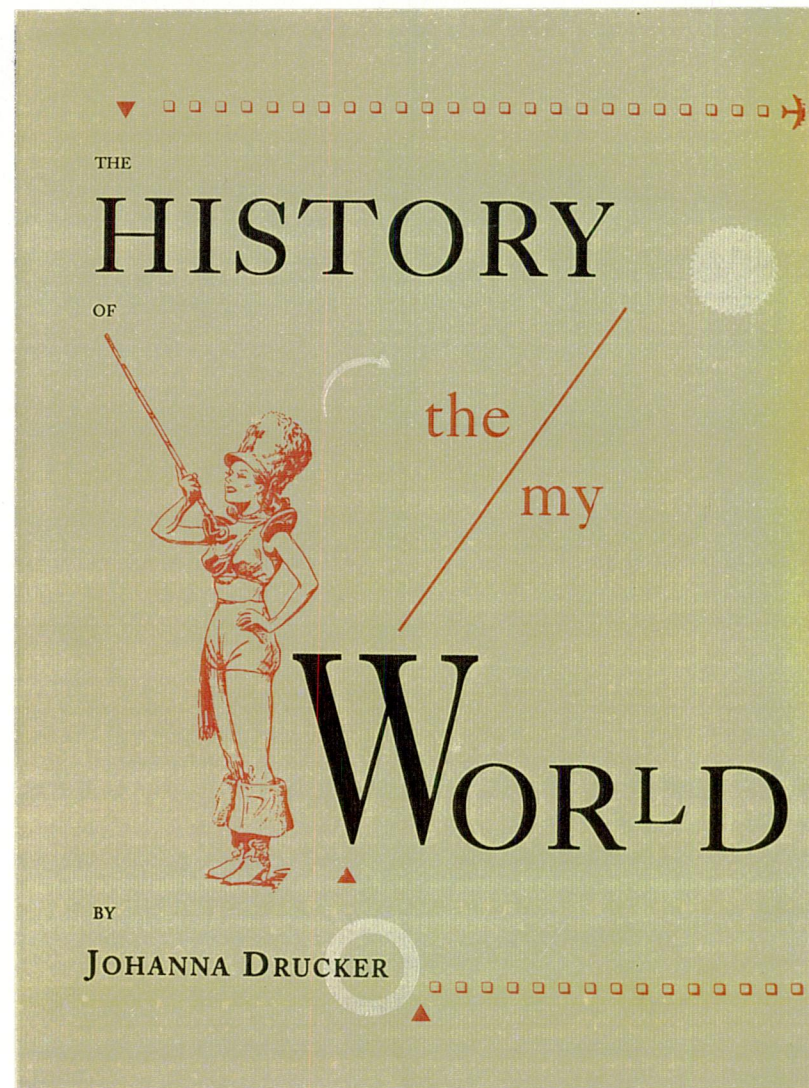


Fig. 18: Drucker, *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, cover from reprint of 1995.

The title, in these terms, is an element which deserves a particular emphasis since it is the embodiment of the essence of writing one's self. In this sense the title does not merely represent the content, it is that content. Language is here used to its full potential. Its structure is quite simple. Looking like an interesting play on words, it achieves much more than that. It manages to express and grasp and **be** that concept which cannot be pinned down (fixed) to specific words but that can only be embodied in the physicality involved in the process of simultaneously having to read, select, and leave out certain interpretations and words of the title in order to "choose" a meaning. The communication is not happening only on the level of individual words but tries to bring into light the whole composition of meaning which only exists in relation to the context of what lies in between the individuality of single words and letters. Writing one's self is a theme close to Drucker's experience since her formation as a writer and, first of all, as a woman has been modelled by a sensual and powerful relationship with language since her early childhood:

I began to be interested in books as a child because I wanted to write all of the time, and so wore a notebook around my neck, with a pen attached, in order to be inscribing the world as response, and that was sometime before age ten, I know. I remember because of the way the book hung down. I was still prepubescent, exempt from self-consciousness about the dangling items.

(Drucker in Alexander [ed.], 1995, p. 27-28).

A notebook around the neck and a pen attached to it, as the means of coming to a knowledge of the world: again, the emphasis on the solid, physical qualities of language emerges. Language becomes the body through which we do not merely function but feel and experience reality at the same time. Drucker's perception of language travels through its own materiality and through the materiality of the writing process which she describes as:

An exercise in writing one's self, writing my self into being, into form, into existence. The text was not surrogate, but real, its body, existence, dimension, came to be the thing I was making that was me.

(Drucker, 1990)

In the consideration of language as an integral part of our understanding of reality it is also implied the notion of its cruciality in the shaping of the concepts through which we articulate our thoughts and that also represent the base for the construction of our social identity. In these terms, if language represents the means through which we experience reality, it also represents the way in which we can understand how our identities are constructed. In order to do so, it is necessary to look at the authoritative powers of language and their relation to social behaviour. The connection becomes inevitable. Gender and its relation to language represents a fundamental aspect in the consideration of the issue of writing one's self and the construction of self-identity. How does one become a subject of history and of one's own language and cultural identity? This question subsequently leads us to ask, how do we write history? How does history write our lives? How do we write ourselves and the language we use to describe/inscribe reality? In *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* Drucker gives voice to a personal interpretation of the history of the world and of feminist critical theories

about the patriarchal nature of language, consisting in a rethinking of all the aspects related to gender and language based on an oppositional definition of gendered identities. *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* becomes in this way a feminist re-writing of the history of the world but also and at the same time, a critique of the feminist notion of language as patriarchal in which being female inevitably entails being defined in terms of opposition.

The construction of the content of the book reflects the structure of the title. There are three individual levels of narration interweaving throughout the forty pages. All of them refer to the history of the wor(l)d but in different forms and from different points of view. The voices are: the official narrative of history, the personal narrative of memory, and the level of images which can be seen as the one in which the two other narratives are merged to create intriguing and often playful contrasts.

Three levels of language are given individual visual identity and together they function in the same way as the elements of the title. The reading of the book is characterised by the multiplicity of interpretations and voices which can be understood in independent terms as well as being part of an interactive context. The official language of history is identified with the large black type which goes throughout the book and can be read first and quickly:

In the beginning was the world, nursed on the warm breast of chaos fast following a night of hard publicity. Genetics produced the fullness thereof and a new cosmology emerged as the flight from innocence locked them out of the garden. (fig. 19)

The law came down the mountain and up our heritage dictating transgressions we were subject to perform. (fig. 20)

This is the language of the history of the world which, in referring to biblical and historical clichés, uses them in order to emphasise its constructed authority, therefore undermining it and questioning it at the same time. Right from the opening line of the book the role of language

in the history of the world is established through the exploitation of the biblical formula 'In the beginning was the word' which in this case becomes 'In the beginning was the world'. In this way, it is reinforcing the notion of the extent to which our experiencing of reality only comes into being with language and the way in which the history of the word is inevitably the history of the world and vice-versa. The narrative of history is juxtaposed with a personal narrative of memory which is identified with the small red type which comes through, and breaks the continuity of the language of history:

Love was a question asked nightly to induce sleep,
insoluble conundrum dropped on the tongue or given
like a gift through ears to cheeks . . .
(fig. 21)

Literacy and intimacy collapsed coupled in the quiet
conversations stolen innocently from routine.
(fig. 20)

This voice is personal, sensual and intimate, and is based upon Drucker's

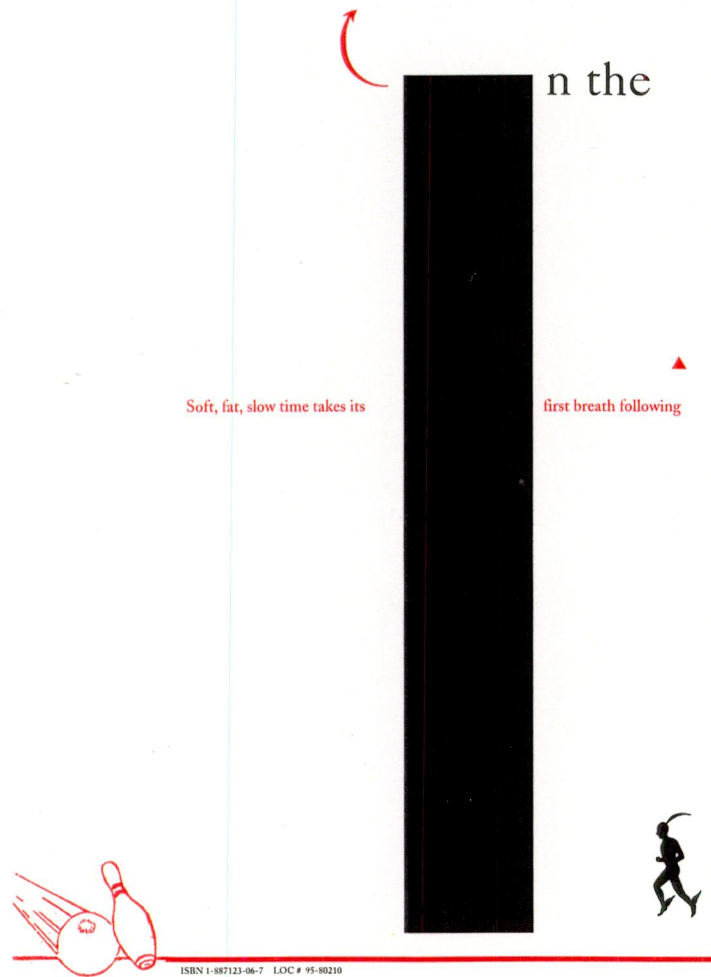
personal memory of the history of her wor(l)d through a very strong relationship to her mother. The two main levels of narration create a rhythmical relationship which is embodied in both content and visuality of the two languages. Switching from one to the other makes their individuality even more strongly felt. The reader is first drawn to the voice of history by the strength of the large black type. Its characteristics and generalised undertones are even more emphasised by the juxtaposition with the personal and sensual lines of small red type that emerge from and interweave with it. The layering of interpretations refers back to the notion of polymorphousness already encountered in the previously discussed books, but is in this context, applied to the level of narrative and discourse more than on the level of individual words and sentences. It seems like the polymorphousness of the narratives can be interpreted as the presence of a relationship instead of just an opposition. It is as if the two languages are actively "conversing" and creating their identities in response to each other's movements.

This is exemplified in the way the two narratives are visualised on the pages of *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, certainly and evidently stating a difference both in terms of content (generalised undertones opposed to private, intimate ones) and form (black and red, and small size typeface), but also establishing a relationship between them in terms of the sharing of the visual space and of synchronised sequence of events. It seems clear that the two narratives represent the different voices of the same language that therefore relate to each other and share a condition of coexistence. On the opening page the voice of history,

In the beginning was the world, nursed on the warm
breast of chaos . . .

is paralleled with the voice of memory:

Soft, fat, slow time takes its first breath following the
initial explosion, making light into a face swaddled in
warmth and letters.



beginning was the
world, nursed on
the warm breast
of chaos fast fol-
lowing a night of

the initial explosion, making light into a face swaddled in warmth and

hard publicity.
Genetics produc-
ed the fullness
thereof and a new



The all-American dream girl:
long-legged, blue-eyed, blonde
and a huntress, a muse, the
law, and the word adored.

1. Ideas take flight, fast and sloppy, winged with desire to make
their swift way in the world, hiding their strike capacity in the
secret moment of impact which rang in our ears as we ran
away confused by that first big bang.

letters. Our earth took us to heart and mind in the intellectual embrace of a cool companionship.

Fig. 19: Drucker, *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, 1990.



Words came easy and letters worried off the walls



7. Travel to foreign lands was recommended as a cure for ennui but writing home was harder than they imagined with a language invented for business, and the whole neighborhood looking on. The brother gave advice while the sisters filled up pages with what were indecipherable forms.

the order on the soft linoleum and scattering the language underfoot. Literacy and intimacy collapsed in conversations stolen from routine.



one, in a long
list of names
crossed out in a
major struggle
for survival.

and formed the hard won figures into a name scrambling

THE LAW
came down the
mountain & up
our heritage dic-
tating transgres-



8. Take aim little weapon of my heart and make the best possible use of the tools and targets of self-torture.



At school they were put through their paces, and the first swift thrill came from watching the man put his daughter on his knee and then out of sequence lightning strikes



Hand to glove, now abandoned, slipped into the pocket of repressed behavior, dressed up and ti



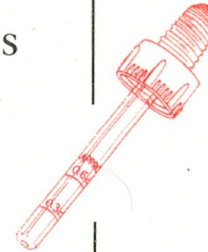
ions we were
subject to per-
form. Suckling
the calf until it
turned golden
exhausted their
piety. Banished
to the desert
the chosen ones



9. Persistence of memory, coaxed into view and flashing like a billboard advertisement for the virtues of rebellion against small town fundamen-
tation.

Fig. 20: Drucker, *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, 1990.

original humans
scattering their
seed across
the receding
waters of a
new earth.

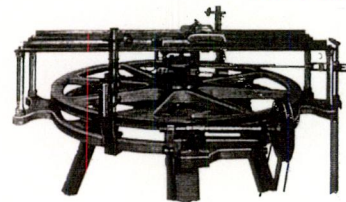


Love was a question asked night



5. Testing procedures: maternal mode of reason calibrated
the instruments with a mother's touch, measured out as law.

to induce sleep, insoluble conundrums dropped on



6. Cranking the machine, gener-
ating life forms, tears suspended:
a miracle: we held the tricky
device in our hands until they fled
seduced by the wind into believing
they were moisture; only traces
remained, bitter salt which we
licked from the wounds of time.

the tongue or given like a gift through ears and lips to cheeks and skin.

A WHOLE string of father
figures was displaced one by

2. First blow, the hand of god, by blow came skills so that we crept out of our holes
armed with the new technology and ready to have it make the world for us.

Fig. 21: Drucker, *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, 1990.

The description of the creation of the world is paralleled with the personal memory of the experiencing of the same world but identified with the world as the creation of a self-identity.

In these terms the narrative of history is public, generalised, and universal, whereas the narrative of memory is private, specific and individual. This also entails the consideration of history and memory, public/private as the relationship between other/self. This is also when the connection with gender issues is established. As already said, *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* is both a feminist re-writing of the history of the world and also a critique of certain feminist theories which are based on the notion of language as patriarchal, of the father as law, reason, order, and therefore, seen in terms of opposition. These two points of view are clearly shown and evident even just in the visual language of *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*. The awareness of two distinct narratives is instantly felt as it also is the realisation of their relationship based on their co-existing within each other. The intriguing and at the

same time "classical" use of typographic forms visualises a dialogue between the two narratives which is based on their differences as well as their complementary aspects. The space which they share cannot be defined as being harshly fragmented and broken up creating a sharp sense of tension between a dominating and a subordinate element. The space seems to be cohabited more than broken or divided. The differentiation of colour and size of typeface does not seem to refer to the external power of one narrative in relation to the other, but more to the embodiment of their essence and nature.

A notion of language as being by nature patriarchal implies a subsequent definition of gendered identities merely in terms of opposition. What Drucker puts forward in *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* is a notion of language based on plurality and flexibility which seen in the context of its relation to gender, unveils the relationship between definition and meaning as being much more based on relation than on opposition. Drucker maintains the significance of an approach to language

and gender based on plurality also in an article titled *Women and Language*:

... that is its real threat, because it does not destroy that order by attack, or allow itself to be defined by its opposition, but relegates it to the realm of the relative and plural. This in turn allows that system to be seen not as inevitable, extant order with a set of patriarchal structure guaranteeing its own authority, but as a discourse which is continually being structured by the formulation of expression, spoken, written and otherwise. To write, to speak, is to contribute to that symbolic discourse, to help give it a form, to choose what the form is and therefore to participate in it as a positive movement, gesture, of presence as expression.

(Drucker, *Poetics Journal*, 1984, p.66)

The History of The/My Wor(l)d surely represents the reflection of that plural discourse of language that Drucker describes and in which history and memory, as well as the public and the private, the other and the self, are not relegated to inevitable definitions but relate and converse. It would be extremely interesting to concentrate as a focus for further research on the analysis of Drucker's work in relation to the context of

french theories of women's writing which since the 1970s emerged from responses to Lacanian psychoanalysis and theories of deconstruction and which in fact, based their theories upon women's exclusion as subjects from all discourses of power. However, this is beyond the scope of this present research.

There is a third level of narration in *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* which is attached to the use of images; small engraved stock images that Drucker found at the press where she worked. They are clichéd images which were generally used as conventional imagery in a variety of circumstances. Majorettes, hammers, arches, lobster, chemistry formulas, telephones, fashion plates, shoes, hats, telescopes, pigs, cows, fishes, bowlers are only some of the many images appearing through the forty pages of the book. Drucker employs them in a way that can be interpreted as simultaneously emphasising the existing differences between the language of history and the one of memory, and their relationship. Because they are being placed in the context of the first

parallel history/memory, these images contribute to bringing a further level of plurality to the conversation in the book, both in visual and conceptual terms. In a sense this level of narration which is the place where the other two merge and overlap creating intriguing contrasts of interpretation. As for the words of the title, the images interpretation extends, retracts and moves according to the context in which we decide to read them. In doing so the awareness of the process of interpretation does not exclude one narrative in favour of the other, but rather implies the existence of both. Drucker's positions these images with text that relates to her family and history reinforcing in this way the interweaving of layers of language and adding to the relationship history/memory a third complementary aspect which also involves issues of popular culture and visual communication. An image of the Last Supper appears with the caption:

Everybody who was invited came, I think, but it was not my party and I cried waiting for the supper to redeem us from the awkward social situation. (fig. 22)

Here the extent to which the level of history and memory are related to each other is clearly expressed in the contrast between historical language, which is embodied in the Last Supper image, and the personal voice of memory, which makes the interpretation of the image assume personal and individual connotations. An image of an old telescope, symbolising history, research of the origins of the world, science, etc., is paired with the following words:

This must be the Renaissance: we looked at the stars and I saw my face. I'm a pig, I cried. My dear, he said, the whole of the animal kingdom has passed this way. I looked down and saw by the trail of footsteps that it was true. I looked again and the stars were marching off to have their baths and we were all stuck on the ground without them. (fig. 23)

Once again the relationship between a personal, intimate language embodied in the text and the language of history represented by the image of the telescope creates a bizarre juxtaposition. The captions which accompany the images speak a language that is suggestive and evocative.



15. Everybody who was invited came, I think, but it was not my party and I cried waiting for the supper to redeem us from the awkward social situation.

WHOLE TRIBES became involved in the naming of elements as forces acting out their own revenge in the quotidian mythology of humanoid actions. Cities sprang up and lent the goddesses a

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16. Some lamb: Bittersweet and poignant memory, the sacrifice made as a ritual the night before death, real death.

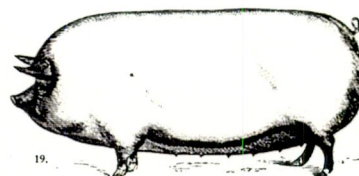
untranslatable into the daylight sj



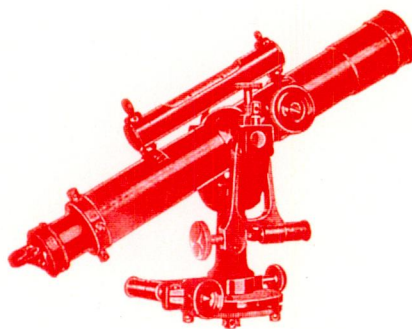
Fig. 22: Drucker, *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, 1990.

19. There was talk of a barbeque and there were strenuous objections in some -- hind -- quarters.

Writing returned from a trip and mapped



by a horse and lost while Alex climbed over the mountains and set his seal on the wide plains he surveyed with his gaze. There were still no trains.



20. This must be the Renaissance: we looked at the stars and I saw my face. I'm a pig. I cried. My dear, he said, the whole of the animal kingdom has passed this way. I looked down and saw by the trail of footsteps that it was true. I looked again and the stars were marching off to have their baths and we were all stuck on the ground without them.

Fig. 23: Drucker, *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, 1990.

Its private connotations are not revealed to the reader in detail, nor to what episodes or facts they refer. This notion of personal language is very different from the one encountered in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's*, where the communication of a private level of language was too obscure to allow the reader to become involved with it, even just in terms of construction of sentences or passages. In *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* the different kinds of languages are very clearly identifiable both in terms of content and visual treatment. It is interesting to see the handling of images in relation to the other two books in which the visuality and materiality of language was emphasised. In *The History of The/My Wor(l)d* there is a strong combination of text that becomes image and images that become text.

The History of The/My Wor(l)d can be seen as the culmination of the evolution of Drucker's work in which several of the aspects which were investigated in her previous books come together and which embodies in a direct way a complex and difficult system of relations.

Although *The Word Made Flesh*'s visuality can be defined as being more intriguing and aesthetically sophisticated than *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, it has to be considered that the form and content of Drucker's book cannot be judged separately. *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*'s visual treatment embodies its content which is, in general terms, about a system of relations between elements with individual characteristics and identities but that through their differences relate to each other creating an ever changing, multiple unit. The impression, looking through *The Word Made Flesh*, is that the subject matter is language in its most material, physical way. In *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*, the subject is still language and it is still dealing with its materiality, but the emphasis is shifted on language as narrative and discourse.

Perhaps the hardest thing to do in connection with the artist's book is to find the right language for discussing it. Most of our criticism in art is based on the concept of a work with separable meaning, content, style. 'This is what it says' and 'this is how it says what it says'. But the language of normative criticism is not geared towards the discussion of an experience, which is the main focus of most artist's books.

(Higgins in Lyon's, 1985, p.12)

Johanna Drucker's books are, in fact, experiences. This discussion has been unveiling how these experiences can come together in a way that is powerful and coherent, considering all the different individual elements/areas which constitute them. This discussion has not developed in a way that tries to point out exactly 'this is what Drucker's books say' and 'this is how they say what they say'. Rather, it has been an analysis of the mechanisms which allow the experience of the book to happen.

It is fundamental and necessary to value the significance of artists and work which is the result of a constant revaluation and

invention of resources. Drucker's books' major significance lies in their merging and bringing together what we are conventionally used to and educated to perceive as divergent disciplines. What this discussion has shown is how this process of uniting these normally distinct aspects manages to create a coherent and solid experience which finds its power in its multiplicity, but also in the individual identities of each of the areas which constitute it.

What must be appreciated in Drucker's work, despite what one might think about its visual presentation, is not merely the fact of merging divergent disciplines, but of managing to do so in a way which enhances their relationship to each other and exploits their individual potential. This is the reason why the discussion has developed in a way which might seem slightly 'structuralist'. It is aiming to unveil the mechanisms and processes which are at the base of Drucker's books. What emerges from the analysis of the development of Drucker's work through looking at three books which represent progressive stages of

her career is clearly and quite obviously a fascination for language in its different forms. This fascination has been shown in its stages of growth, from an intuitive one in *Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's* to a more theoretically informed one in *The Word Made Flesh*, and finally to a mature and highly personal one in *The History of The/My Wor(l)d*. The latter represents a stage in which all the aspects which have progressively evolved merge and are, once again, re-interpreted. This discussion has also shown that the structure/process of work behind the creation of Drucker's books is based on several points which recur and are investigated throughout the different stages of her books. These points are the emphasis on:

- The structure of the page and the visual presentation in relation to how they interact with the reading experience,

- How format and structure influence the construction/production of meaning,
- The notion of the inseparable nature of format and meaning so that format and visual presentation are an integral part of the meaning and, indeed, vice versa.

The book in Drucker's hands remains "book". Its identity is reinforced through the use of its own resources. By working within (and not merely in between) the parameters of the book, Drucker communicates a great sense of respect for the book's language. A sense of respect which obviously does not grow from intimidation but rather from intimacy and familiarity with what the book is and represents. Drucker manages to bring back into light what we have become used to forgetting about the book, its embodying our relationship with reality within the unfolding of its own language.

Sequence . . . is the great structural instrument of the book, its method, its madness, its order, its progression, writhing into a serpentine trail of mixed messages and interlocking narratives, the browsing method of the tabloid, the reliable order of the alphabetic sequence, the dependable linearity of normative prose, the irrepressible experience of images forging their connections through the fact of following, one after another, in the fixed determination of a regulated encounter. We lift off, from the flat platform of the program, into the flight from the finitude of pages in the places and our own unpredictable encounter. Their order against our whim, their fixity against our interference, their sense against our disregard for it.

(Drucker, in Alexander [ed.], 1995, p. 30)

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- Drucker Johanna, "Self as a Trope of Genre Fiction", performance transcript, Biblios Books, NYC, June, 27, 1993;
- Lupton Ellen, "Words Made Flesh" *Eye*, 18/95 pp. 67-77;
- Lyons Joan, (ed.) *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, Rochester, NYC, Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1985;
- Mengham Rod, *Language*, Fontana Press, London, 1995;
- Plombino Nick, "The visual-Verbal World of Johanna Drucker", *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, Winter 1995, pp. 30-42;
- Polkinhorn Harry, "From Book to Anti-Book", *Visible Language*, Vol. 25, No. 2-3, 1992,, pp. 138-149;
- Riese Hubert Renee, "An Introduction to the Artists's Book: The Text and its Rivals", *Visible Language*, Vol. 25, No. 2-3, 1992, pp. 117-136.

Primary sources (artist's books by Drucker):

Twenty-Six '76 Let Her's, 1976

edition of 30 copies, letterpress on etching paper, from mixed fonts on a Vandercook press, Thirty sheets, 8.5"x11" in hand sewn cotton covered carton with ivory ring and shoe lace closing.

The Word Made Flesh, 1989

Drucker, edition of 50 copies, letterpress from many handset types, wood and metal, tiny copperplate in the red field, on Mohawk superfine, with red Moriki endsheets and metallic cover, Twenty-three pages, 10.5"x12.5", bound with rivets.

The History of The/My Wor(l)d, 1990

Druckwerk, edition 70 copies, letterpress in black and red from handset Caslon, illustrated with found line cuts, on Warren's lustro dull with Bagasse cover and Fabriano endsheets, handsewn, forty pages, 10"x13".

In Addition, the whole body of books made by Drucker was viewed and researched in order to understand the context in which the three selected books were created.

