An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting.

EDITED BY TIM GAZE
AND MICHAEL JACOBSON.
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An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting presents a mixture of handwriting styles, from many corners of the world, dating from the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) to the present day. The tendency toward illegibility exists in many cultural traditions, and in this anthology we intend to offer a representative overview of the different styles, and, more specifically, the contemporary developments in asemic handwriting. We deliberately avoided the adjectives “unreadable” and “illegible” in the title of this anthology, because the question of legibility and possible transference of meaning is precisely what is at stake in these writing traditions. These writings are not completely “meaningless” or “illegible,” but challenge our common notions of reading, writing, and the meaningfulness of language. Therefore we prefer the adjective “asemic.” In the late 20th century, this word was handed down from the poet John Byrum to another poet named Jim Leftwich to one of the editors of this anthology.

Western people are often unfamiliar with the fact that the term calligraphy, which literally means “beautiful writing,” can also be applied to wild, noisy examples of handwriting. For example, the famous Chinese calligrapher “Crazy” Zhang Xu, who enjoyed copious amounts of wine to loosen his spirit, wrote exuberant, energetic cursive calligraphy, in a style which became known as “crazy grass style.” The morning af-
ter a writing session, Zhang often couldn’t read his own writing. A younger man from the same era, “Mad Monk” Huái Sù, perfected his own style of illegible cursive. Whereas China is considered to be the matrix for calligraphy in Eastern Asia, separate strong traditions have arisen in other countries such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Within these separate traditions, Zen Buddhism has been an influence away from legibility and toward power in brush writing.

Islamic calligraphy, whose origin is sometimes credited to the Bektashi dervishes, often distorts letters in fantastic ways toward being unreadable, even in the case of Qur’anic calligraphy. Ahmed Shibrain of Khartoum, known for his abstract renditions of Qur’anic suras, has a reputation as a graphic designer as well as an artist, whereas Rashid Koraishi, currently of Tunisia, includes Berber symbols and invented pictographs alongside his Arabic letters. The drive toward illegibility here is not so much influenced by the egoless flow of energy advocated in Zen Buddhism, but is rather informed by the extensive pictorial tradition within Islamic calligraphy, which itself is a result of the prohibition, in certain Islamic traditions, on depiction of human figures. Thus, even though different calligraphic traditions end up producing unreadable signs, the impetus toward illegibility varies widely.

Within Western handwriting traditions, asemic writing is – apart from a few singular exceptions, such as the Voynich manuscript – closely linked to a poetic practice that first liberated itself from the linearity of the verse, and subsequently from the conformity of the sign. Visual poetry, which plays with the forms of writing rather than concentrating solely on
words, includes a healthy number of handwritten poems, of which a smaller proportion is asemic. A few names to mention from the 20th century are Christian Dotremont, Carlfriedrich Claus, and Robert Corydon.

Under the influence of mescaline (we again find here the relation between a drug-induced state and asemic writing), Henri Michaux worked extensively with his own symbols, as well as writing poetry and prose with his own strange vocabulary of words, drawing, painting with a brush, and splattering ink to create abstract paintings. This brings us to the second line of inquiry in the Western world which has led to illegible forms of writing, namely a tradition concerned with “mark making,” and a broader analysis of the function of (spontaneous) gesture in modern art. Thus, visual artists from movements as far apart as Dada, Russian Futurism, Surrealism, CoBrA, Tachisme, Fluxus, Abstract Expressionism, Gutai, and Lettrisme have created asemic handwritten forms.

The origins of *An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting* can be traced back to the last two decades. Since 1998, Tim Gaze has published a magazine for asemic writing and related art forms, titled *Asemic*, which has grown from a folded four-page pamphlet to a hundred-page paperback book. Through its extensive distribution by mail, this magazine has sown the seeds for an international community of contemporary asemic writers.

*Asemic* magazine included the contact details (both physical mail and email) of nearly all of the contributors, forming an open source community or network. Mail artists, along with experimental poetry magazines such as *Generator* and *Selby’s*
List were already using this free and open sharing of addresses as a means of speedily disseminating culture without editors or publishers acting as gatekeepers.

Asemic magazine’s sister website www.asemic.net has been online since 2000, and although the content hasn’t changed for years, it has acted as a piece of internet history, showing one stage of the evolution of the culture of asemic writing. The list of suggested search terms there, ranging from “abstract calligraphy” to “Zhang Xu Crazy Zhang wild cursive” (sic) continues to attract people with an interest in any of the artists or terms listed, before they know the word “asemic.” Probably more than the magazine, the website has helped to amalgamate a much wider confluence from a number of previously separate streams of culture.

In 2008 Michael Jacobson, with the help of Tim Gaze and Derek Beaulieu, started an online gallery for asemic writing, under the flag of Marshall McLuhan’s concept of the “post-literate.” Asemic writing demands a consciousness of writing that entails a break with (traditional forms of) literacy, hence the title: The New Post-Literate: A Gallery Of Asemic Writing. This gallery has been online since, and has acted as a galvanizing place for the makers already associated with Asemic, as well as a new generation of artists, poets, and writers who use it as a common platform. Its frequent updates suggest a flourishing global community of asemic writers. Moreover, the word “asemic” itself seems to have some traction, being used increasingly in the English internet, and translations of it having been published in various literary journals, art magazines and
opinion blogs, in languages such as French, Russian, Hungarian, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Danish and Finnish.

With *An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting*, we are at the peak of the snowy mountain. It is an international mountain where there are no borders, fences, or walls. People have contributed to it from around the world, and across time. It is an anthology that belongs to a global network of writers, readers, artists, and explorers; of which there are over one hundred represented in this book.

This anthology only features a subset of the wide variety of asemic works, namely those forms which are made by leaving a mark on a surface applied by movements of the hand. We thus momentarily step away from machines, to highlight the myriad of forms of asemic writing currently happening outside the reach of modern technology. This is a step backward and a step forward at the same time. Other methods for achieving asemic writing, such as the analogue art of collage or various digital means of composition, will no doubt be featured in future publications.

Tim Gaze, Editor
Michael Jacobson, Editor
Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, Publisher
ROBERT CORYDON
who tried to compose altered Worlds.
but none of them could equalst raise up, to the realms, for
because his instruction in poet heaven at the root, the most perfect.
not of all from man, nor above the word below, the Word of
aid every man, but every mankind,
divine inspiration and everlasting at last established
God that he received the
song. For that reason he was
able to compose poetry as when he arose from his sleep, and
nature, but it only the one kind he had sung while asleep he
pertained to music and was free in memory, and soon after-
taught to bodily sight and also the words once unto
his man had lived.

30 with the words and took to his steward came to the stoward
years, and had the steward his master and told of
man. For this reason men bis had received. The steward
whereas the door of the abbess and
which was ruled that they should he heard.
the bade
sang in turn at the sharp, wherall the wise and learned men

would see the harp approach him Caedmon to relate his dream
would arise from the company of music and to sing the song
shame and pestilence of his house might stand. At one occasion he
left the banquet hall and gone away an agent that was in
the stable to the cat, which it bestowed from his
the duty of that night. They explained to him a piece of
due time he lay down and slept, and and bade him if he
did God keep him in his drearm that into rhythmics
man now hailed him and greeted as he received the instace
and hailed him in this way: “Caed.
Queen Fedafe Crushed careful and out code history robot elegies carrying runts and itsy tiny acne
ISIDORE ISOU
NGUYỄN ĐỨC DỪNG
NGUYỄN QUANG THẢNG
PHẠM VĂN TUẤN

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We had asked for black
The cost of a black dress
The cost of red shoes
Artist's Statement: Peggy Schutze Shearn

I remember taking a bus ride as a child; across the aisle from me a lady sat reading a letter written in what I took to be Chinese characters. The letter itself was a thing of beauty – written on pale blue tissue-thin airmail stationary that crinkled gently as she held it in her hands. Across the delicate blue page were regular rows of characters rendered in blue ink, like a wall of tiny drawings across the paper. That an ordinary letter could be so beautiful, and such mysterious glyphs intelligible, thrilled and fascinated me. I went home and held handwritten sheets up to the light so I could see the writing through the back of the paper, transformed into unfamiliar abstractions of shape, line and angle.

Creative wandering has taken me through the study of typography and design, the practice of calligraphy and brush lettering, into painting and drawing, learning the Hebrew alphabet, photography, print making and graphic design. The scope and variety of the writing systems we humans have devised over the centuries continue to stimulate my imagination. I've struggled to put my finger on just why it is that alphabets and writing systems hold me so consistently in their sway as abstract visual systems. And then finally, in 2007, I came upon an online project by Golan Levin; a software program that generates abstract alphabets, called "The Alphabet Synthesis Machine." He explains that illusionistic "realm of semi-sense" I had been chasing after all this time:

I very clearly remember the first time that I encountered an unfamiliar alphabet: it was an event which occurred in my family's synagogue when I was very small, perhaps four years old. I had just learned to read English, but it had not yet been explained to me that there could exist other writing systems apart from the one I knew. One evening during a ceremony, I asked my father what the funny black squiggles were in the prayer books we were holding. "Sh!" he said: "that is how we talk with God." Astonished, I became transfixed by the black squiggles, which no longer seemed quite so funny; but although I stared at them until I was dizzy, I could find no way to render them intelligible. Only later did I learn that these marks were Hebrew. Since that time, I have been preoccupied by the possibility that abstract forms can connect us to a reality beyond language, and bridge the thin line between nonsense and the divine.

©Golan Levin, 2002, The Alphabet Synthesis Machine (http://www.alphabetsynthesis.com and http://www.flong.com/) These paintings and prints are meant to evoke that place between visual abstraction and verbal expression; a conversation in line, color and image with an illusive dimension of everyday life.
JIM WITTEMBERG

[Handwritten notes on lined paper]

[Text not clearly legible due to handwriting style]
YORDA YUAN
ZHĀNG XÙ

请自好自生而妖艳也

中条家逝世万长日

言谐了 今车车
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