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Fugacious notations

Antoniella Grassi, *Babble (and other coded language)*, Galerie Lilian Rodriguez, Montreal. February 23 - March 2002

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[See table of contents](#)

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FUGACIOUS NOTATIONS

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language, in Walter Benjamin's understanding has magic (*Sprachmagie*), which was lost with the introduction of the sign system¹. Much emphasis has been given to this idea in the twentieth century as a result of the eruption of modernity that brought with it a shift in aesthetics and language. There is a loss of immediacy and the 'paradisiac language' of innocence and simplicity which are cognitive and denominative in equal measure². Words have come to be known as signs split into signifier (utterance or material deposition) and signified (meaning). Decades later Jacques Derrida argued that the sign would consist of a binarity of difference where half of it is always not there³ – which indicates loss and the sign's instability of meaning. Interestingly, Benjamin posited his thesis in relation to the visual. He regarded images in terms of their property as writing rather than representation, which demands a dialectic engagement that looks at the detail in relation to the whole. From his point of view, art can restore the loss of magic through moments of similitude, which are experienced in a constellation of cognition between artwork and beholder. In instances of similitude the viewing subject becomes vulnerable to the impact of the art object where the distance between reader and object is erased and magic experienced.

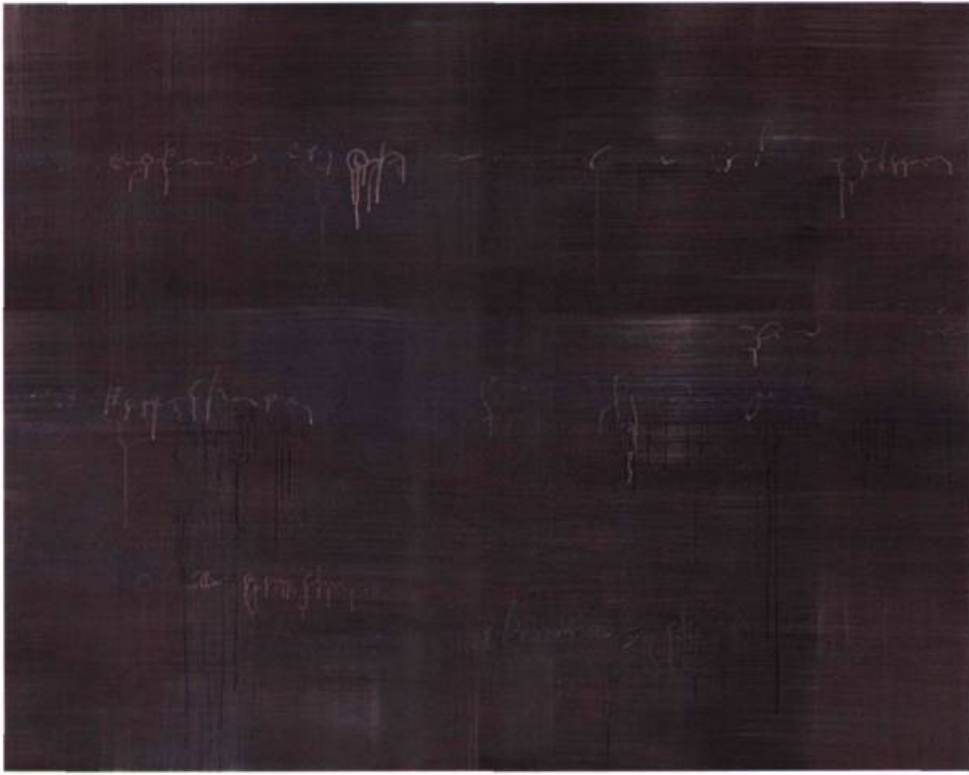
I use these theories as a means of locating and isolating important issues that are current in contemporary

culture and perception. For in contemporary art practice attempts have been made to conjure up similitude through complex distortions or excess, material presences, referential absences, figurative or abstract performatives by which the loss of magic is restaged, and melancholia transferred onto the beholder. Implicated in this argument is Julia Kristeva who, as a linguist, is interested in finding the states of the limits of language like "the moment when language doesn't yet exist, such as during a child's apprenticeship to language"⁴, where speech patterns appear blurred and fluctuating. Her pursuit is to chart the development from a non-differentiated infant to speaking subject, which is the distinction between the semiotic (magic) and the symbolic (sign).

Kristeva's chart is, uncannily, mirrored in Antonietta Grassi's recent painting series *Babble (and other coded language)*, 2001. But here notations are from the perspective of a painter and mother who, in observing her infant in the process of acquiring language – the child being also the creative force, produced a unique and intellectually challenging body of work. The child's utterances are situated as space, colour and shape in a tension of abstraction and script. The formation of speech is aestheticized while the temporal side of language is arrested and thus given duration and attention. For speech implies that we apply ourselves to the one who speaks and to the meaning of its (visual) articulation. "Semiotic", in Kristeva's understanding,



Antoniietta Grassi, *pah pah pah...*, ink and oil on canvas; 60 x 120 cm. Courtesy Galerie Lilian Rodriguez, Montréal.



Antonietta Grassi, *gach gach... no. 2*, ink and oil on canvas; 120 x 150 cm. Courtesy Galerie Lilian Rodriguez, Montréal.

are “the prelinguistic states of childhood where the child *babbles* the sounds s/he hears, or where s/he articulates rhythms, alliterations as s/he is trying to imitate her/his surroundings.”⁵ These states are playfully transcribed in the two oil paintings *bla bla bla 1* and *bla bla bla 2* which are filled with writing. In each, the letters are painted in the chromatics of crayons on a terracotta coloured ground that looks like sand. But the writing appears to go beyond the surface of the canvas, both visually and conceptually. The now scripted babble form chains of nonsensical words that capture magic the infant is soon to lose. In this early phase, the child does not possess the necessary linguistic signs and there is no meaning in the strict sense of the word, as Kristeva puts it. However “nonsensical” such babble is within a linguistic context, it carries enormous emotional weight for a mother/father/parent. It becomes precious as well for the beholder who, in looking at the paintings, is made to both treasure and recall the loss of childhood innocence. Similarly, two other canvases are filled with *no no no*

where the letters are layered so as to provide space for the delightful melodies that come with such repetitions. Here, the two works are kept small in relative proportion to the child, which s/he also soon outgrows. This implied melancholia of impending loss is comparable to Benjamin’s distorted similitude, which is referenced in these works as residing outside the aesthetic field, in the mnemonic and epistemic realm of the beholder. In a parallel to Benjamin’s loss or Derrida’s “missing half”, however, there is the communicative side of language – the material traces of paint, gesture, colour and patterns – which conjure up an experience of magic through sensual perception. Benjamin argued that the magic side of language requires communication in order to become visible⁶. Indeed, language becomes a visible experience in Grassi’s work. The artist concedes : “In a time when our experiences are being increasingly mediated, painting is about actual experience. Painting is messy, slow, impractical”. But painting, as I contend, can be fresh and spontaneous for a beholder especially when

the artist is able to facilitate the messy medium and the demand of painting's long history, and take it further. "The greatest challenge that painting probably faces now", Grassi adds, "is not the endgames of its own demise and self referentiality, but the overwhelming presence and allure of technology in our every day lives", to which these paintings are neither "manual" reactionaries nor genealogical claimants. Although a genealogy could be established with Mary Cassatt and Mary Kelly, whose art relates childhood experience, with Nancy Spero who explores language, and through abstraction to the *grande dame* of painting, Agnes Martin, the paintings of the *Babble* series can stand by themselves. Their strength comes from the daring transcription of "speech" into painting, and from the surplus of the attempt of capturing language and meaning which can neither be fully contained nor rendered in paint yet is visualized and made immediate. Immediacy is magic, claimed Benjamin. But strength comes also from a technical facility with paint that derives in part from the artist's study with the late painter Yves Gaucher and from her training in textile design, both of which inform her compositions in subtlety, nuance and scope. As a result, any technical reproduction of the paintings falls short in providing the reader with the visual and magical experience that comes from a direct, unmediated engagement.

The aesthetic strategies that result from this unique background combined with the creative force that a child brings to it can be further gauged in the other tableaux of the *Babble* series. The semiotic stage is a short one. For as soon as the child enters the mirror phase – the state in which identification of the self as image takes place – s/he becomes subjectively capable of taking on the signs of language, of articulation, as it has been prescribed by the symbolic order.⁷ S/he separates from the mother while also being under her influence, being drawn to her while exploring distance. This is what Kristeva calls the symbolic state. In this second phase of "language and meaning" interpretation enters the stage of attention. From now on nothing remains stable. A word cannot fully express what a speaker intends or wants to say, nor is meaning ever fixed. Writing like any other rhetori-

cal and visual utterance becomes subject to analysis and scrutiny. Grassi's work plays on the instabilities of language and meaning, and foregrounds the second state of language with a "mature" and somber palette of grays, greens and ochres. Absent are the crayon-coloured letters that were applied with paint and brush. The letters and words in these paintings are written in ink, the traditional medium of a scribe. When considering the painterly traces and ink, both of which are applied by the artist's hand, these images turn into manuscripts. The babble of the child is less visible but remains in the titles, and it appears that the artist increasingly approaches her art as text, with the ink disintegrating into the painting so that it resembles an encrypted language or code. The letters and words are now in subordination to the visual as is exemplified in the three tableaux *gach gach ... no. 2*, *agah agah ...* and *pah pah pah...* While the letters appear at first to be carriers of verbal information in their "mature" and abstract settings, they, like the other painted babble defy a clear reading, a stable meaning or interpretation. The paintings point toward recognition of the visual nature of words, and furthermore invite us to look closely, and see through the material signifier of the scripted compositions to the magical side of painting/life.

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NOTES

- 1 Walter Benjamin arguments on language can be found in his writings of the 1930's, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1972. Benjamin's understanding of language and image is explored by Sigrid Weigel, *Body-Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, New York and London, Routledge, 1996, p. 72. Thanks go to Dr. Nina Roy for helpful editorial suggestions.
- 2 Weigel, p. 75.
- 3 Madan Sarup, "Deleuze and Deconstruction", in his *Post-structuralism and Postmodernism* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press), 1993, p. 33.
- 4 Julia Kristeva, "A Question of Subjectivity: An Interview", Mary Eagleton ed., *Feminist Literary Theory*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, p. 351-352.
- 5 Kristeva, p. 351.
- 6 Weigel, p. 75.
- 7 Kristeva, p. 352.