

Writing on the surface of borderless terrain

To say that text's intention and integrity are invisible is to say that the text hides something, which also means that the text implies, perhaps also states, embodies, represents, but does not immediately disclose something. (Edward. W.Said)¹

Exergue: This work is dedicated to the ordinary object. To the common thing, to the common experience disseminated in the circulation of meaning. An exercise book. An exercise book about learning to write. The alphabet from where writing became an instrument for many activities, communication and information. The interesting thing is, of course, the common experience of being programmed through the alphabet.

In modern art the alphabet has been in many ways: as an art object in formalist, expressionistic and conceptual contexts. Trying to communicate with the viewer through the common object is an important project. But the question is in the ambiguity of the alphabet. This gives a particular cultural shape to everyday reality. The role of the alphabet in the interference of the electronic and other advanced technologies has been questioned by many artists and theorists of our century. For example, Moholy-Nagy's use of the alphabet, a 1970's turned into the notion of indexicality of cultural experience, database culture in our days (to name but a three). In 1923

Moholy-Nagy was working on a project which consisted of transforming a gramophone from a reproductive to a productive technology through the development of a groove-script alphabet that would be physically incised onto record. Jasper John's *alphabet paintings*, 1960 and 70's artists use of the alphabet for many different concepts as did Mary Kelly's *postpartum Document*, where a feminist critique of the 'Oedipus Complex' is given through her son's exercise books on the alphabet.

My work on the exercise book is partly informed by these facts together with the ubiquitous use of the alphabet. One of the functions of my work is to show that art in general does not exist and that artwork is a special affair, which is only possible, because the objects it uses have lost their function¹. Contemporary art itself has lost its function because of the deprivation of critique, which made it so prominent through the century. It has become the *postponement of meaning* that can be discovered by representation. Representation is something which produces meaning. Two questions are interesting for me in this relation:

- 1) Is the discovery of meaning in artwork possible or is it completely frozen at the surface (Baudrillard) or is it discovered through the discourse (Foucault)?
- 2) If the discovery of meaning is possible, why not try to find a meaningful strata for critical and other activities?

Taking these issues and seeing in them the potential for critical reasoning I have decided to use my school book on learning the alphabet as a birthplace for the alphabetic ordering, classifying, schooling and punctuating behaviors and leading to the control of consciousness. These basic principles lead to the making of the contemporary artist along with any other contemporary

person through complicated economical, political and ideological classifications. The process is dramatized by complicated events, which receive this shape according to the cultural reality.

Structuralism and semiotics stressed the role the language plays in society, in individual lives and in socio-ideological affairs. Following Saussure's notion of the binary function of the linguistic entity (*parole/langue*), have tried to discover the structure built according to this principle. Saussure embedded a particular concrete world in language. Durkheim suggested looking at social classifications outside the individual human mind (collective representations). For Lacan the unconscious is structured like language; the unconscious is neither primordial nor instinctual; what it knows about the elementary is no more than the elements of the signifier. Derrida's general economy united meaning and force through the notion of *dissemination*, because the centrifugal movement of any single word ultimately spreads out across every other word in the whole language. And in Lacan's theory the society is inscribed into each person through a *cut*, as opposed to some kind of identification and that we communicate with others precisely because we cannot communicate with ourselves. The other is already in our split, because *we are split*. Our discourse is already the discourse of the other. It is also interesting to think of Foucault's notion of technique of the self which includes the visual dimension only to the extent that it involves a "*certain manner of acting visible to others*". Derrida shows something similar in his notion of *postponement*. Things could be done at any time, by all means. But later, instead of doing what has been postponed, one is interpreting the delay. Interpretation goes not from memory, but from time-tables and diaries where things are planned. In this process there is the

loss of the function and this loss gives to the object restricted and at the same time *plentitude substantiality*. Derrida's idea of *difference* has made possible the breakout from the binary fix into more multiplied strata of meaning². These theories opened up possible ways for considering enunciations and agency in the form of language as they are the means of ideological representation. In the representational effect of the language and media Stuart Hall sees the possible space for the production of *meaning*.

Exercise book: This exercise book was saved by my father in his library. The date when I discovered this book is connected to my father's death. My father saved anything that was written; despite his interest in any manuscripts, as he was a philologist and part of his daily activity was working with texts. The book itself became interesting for me not because of the nostalgia for the past or a fetishist attitude towards it, but because of my interest in questions through the possible enunciations this object provided.

Firstly it is an attempt to see the link between the (artistic) knowledge and learning (to write), which is recorded and documented on the pages of this school book. The first thing that should be noted about this book is the experience of coping with the enormous task of learning made possible by copying teachers' writing on the blackboard. Letters laid down at one's own choice are corrected by the teacher again Letters are laid down at ones own choice are corrected by the teacher again. On the last pages appear whole words; these words arbitrarily demonstrate for the child the 'game' of combining words from letters. As an adult one still finds familiar 'games' in the pages of encyclopedias, dictionaries and directories and guides like *Yellow Pages*, or the *Thompson Directory*. If to open the page under, let's

say *E*, one finds a list of the people of very different interests, intellects and professions, like Eisenstein, Elagin, Elliot and so on. The sense of these directories with a combination of alphabetical order and the letters of the alphabet is to bring the chaotic space of differences into order.

The alphabetical order is the register of the memory of pre-semiotic space, spatial relations spread in all directions. It is a space of the knowledge background and the surface of it. Letters which are almost subconsciously laid down in the space of an exercise book are codes of knowledge, vitamins of regional brain circulation. Used as a legitimization of the reality of writing and reading they were invented as means of the transmission of culture, but they became used as a form of social control. The alphabet plays an important role in technologization of the world. The alphabet is an ordering system of the last resort for almost all language bound data, from customer lists and telephone books to encyclopedias, library catalogues and dictionaries that are electronic nowadays.

The letters of the alphabet together combine a monadic structure in Leibniz's sense and these monadic structures are transformed into life. We are not speaking of Derrida's 'metaphysics of closure', but of the point more interestingly made in Foucault's 'minor pedagogies'. It is interesting to see how the alphabet carries on being active without almost any changes in its form, but the use of it causes endless changes. Knowledge performs upon this structure by transforming an exchange based on production into the production regulated by exchange.

The alphabetical order depends not on A-Z of writing that we see, but on the organizational framework on which we place it. The organizational framework itself is the economy. The prize for the alphabet is too often focused on the fact that it is a set of symbols of tremendous combinatory power and not frequently enough on what a universal precedence system the absolutely tight order of the alphabet provides, together with the gift of naming. Naming determines our understanding of space and this understanding seems impossible without the understanding of writing and space, as writing on the ground. Writing, as Lefebvre puts it, prescribed and signified power. The alphabet's link to space is represented only by the subsidiary aspects of its habitus. In our societies the alphabet is signified also for its power of punctuating the space and through that programming consciousness.

The letters of the alphabet are iconic symbols of encoding and decoding relationships and a first principle of the production of information which is reduced to other dimensions. If to put the finger on the button of the remote control we find out how the information transmits through the semiconductor devices of the teletext page from letters. Letters are 'secret agents'³. They have played a major role in the organization of divisions of information, communication, education, and knowledge labors. The alphabet is the birthplace of these programs, informing us what is going to happen in the next few days as a mechanical management of education. The alphabet which we learn in primary school is an instrument of reading and writing and its frame of reference is the administration of knowledge which is linked to its organization. The alphabet guarantees endless codes.

Total Recall⁴: The thing is not to interpret the alphabet at the level of the alphabet itself, but on the different level of the annotation of the manifestations of states of being. The alphabet is a working mechanism, generating meta-level. The alphabet doesn't think or judge at all, it restricts itself to giving things a new form. It is appropriate to say that the alphabet is a memory machine. Nowadays the real is defined through the underestimated space of machines and the alphabet is the supplement of machine programmes and the origin of their memories. In contemporary societies social control has been replaced by a new system based on 'invisible' rather than visible surveillance. Machines now work as the human did but machines have no sclerosis, because one day someone put ones brain circulations into them and the memory space is transmitted into the alphabetical order. Alphabetical order or orthography is considered with phonologies, where the letter's function is to compose sounds. Machines like humans have a direct relation to these morphemes and phonemes. The work of all telematic and digital systems is based on the binary opposition of such a combination. Any given letter coincides with the given sound through the information units: bits.

“Writing destroyed memory”-Plato said. The alphabet translated things heard into things seen. What was destroyed was the oral world, mnemonic thought was antiquated and entirely based on clichés. In recent cyberpunk films like ‘Total Recall’ we find a world which reaches the threshold of catastrophe and miraculously saves itself. The world finds itself renewed, as a function of alphabetically and numerically structured activities. The natural disaster could flip-flop into the redemption of the mind.

Fredrich Kittler expresses his not surprising in symbolic relocation beyond the alphabetical and numerical: “then one could say that symbolic covers all the signifying batteries that can process what lies beyond letters or chippers”⁵. The list of going beyond the alphabetical and numerical could be endless and the reason is simple. It is the machine, which gives life to all the following machines. And it is this machine which is controlled by ideology and made for ideology.

In prealphabetical periods, for instance in Egypt, a pictorial system played the same function. The ideological religious systems were transformed into hieroglyphics and all writing in the form of pictorial alphabet was an implication of the ideological knowledge. Or in the Middle Persia the movement called ‘*Hurufism*’ (harf-from Arabic for letter) philosophy suggested a research program on the Arabic alphabetical system reopening Allah’s face and body in 32 letters. The notion of the use of writing and ideology can also be discovered in contemporary theories, for instance Lacan’s ‘invasion of real’ and his manifestation of the ‘unconsciousness structured as a letter’⁶.

Instrument for control and domination of the ‘other’⁷: Since the new society of control is based on computerised rather than visual surveillance-at least as Deleuze suggested, the role of ordering, classification, indexing, packaging is even more clearly based on alphabetisation⁸. This makes possible a state of trying to draw together the parts that have gone missing, rediscover everything left out, everything that has been subtracted in order to be able to see the nature of writing as an ideological construct. Such manipulation and domination through writing is interesting when we try to

understand the nature of power, which controls the first steps to knowledge. This is what Lacan means, when he says that society is inscribed into each person through the *cut* by birth. Derrida also speaks of the ‘violence of the letter’. Once Hegel said that ‘the alphabet is in-itself and for-itself already the big intelligence’⁹.

Eric Hobsbawm speaks of the domination of thither through the written language which has replaced other alphabets by force. For example, one of the results of making English the official language of Wales and the “prohibition of Welsh, or some local language or patios in the classroom, which left such traumatic traces in the memories of local scholars and intellectuals, was due not to some kind of totalitarian claims by the dominant nation-state, but almost certainly to the sincere belief that no adequate education was possible except in the state language, and that the person remained a monoglot would inevitably be handicapped as a citizen and his or her own professional prospects”¹⁰. Exercising a language policy began from the writing system which popularises any language in the first place. Hobsbawm also pays attention to primary education and its role in developments: “*Mass*, i.e. primary education was a crucial development, since it was possible only in a language which the bulk of the population could be expected to understand”¹¹.

Instead of referring to history and discovering facts, such exercises could be found in our times. Today in many former republics of the former USSR the Russian is not only the leading language, but the Cyrillic is the writing system as it was adopted after the October revolution. There are many

examples which can be seen in countries like Wales, Scotland or Basque, but also in the Indian subcontinent, in Vietnam, Korea, etc.

Zeigam Azizov,

London, 1993

Notes:

¹ Two sides, two sites, Lisson gallery, 1995, July. This work consists of a primary school book (an exercise book on the alphabet). I am trying to problematise the question of time as it has been recorded on the pages of this exercise book. According to recent cultural theories the writing has been introduced as a code of space. In other words, writing is recording the memory of actions played out in space. However, its first signs are modified on the pages of the first school books during the process of learning to write. As soon as letters are written down they announce the birth of each thing and preside over it.. According to recent cultural theories the writing has been introduced as a code of space. In other words, writing is recording of the memory of actions played out in space. However, its first signs are modified on the pages first school books during the process of learning to write. As soon as letters are written down they announce the birth of each thing and preside over it.

In this work we are dealing with this fact by bringing it to its basics: i.e. the first experience of **writing (school book)** and the **basic space (the ground)**. But it also continues to be in a paradoxical relationship with the outside environment of the gallery

(**the school play-ground**). Two very important functions or sides of the alphabet are played out here: the alphabetical power of ordering items (**school book, dates, perspex as traditional support for pictures, label of artwork on the wall, as well as the artists name in** the list of participants of the show) and the encouragement of the observation of this subject in it's potential to become an encyclopaedia. Two sides: the outside space (school playground) and the inside space (gallery) are connected to a clear-cut beginning (1970, school book) and a precise end (1995 Lisson show). Time as a phantom exists within the boundaries of these dates as a **thumb index** at the same time making all its surroundings more abstract. Connecting it to my exhibition at the ICA at the same time (**Viewpoint**, ICA, London, 1995) I hoped to create a network. **Viewpoint**: The video(in a style of **teletext**) and slides in this piece are taken from the Scientific American archives 1976-1986. They are used as an example to show the progression from **alphabet to pixel dots**. I have been interested in the question: What happens to the letters of the alphabet when they lose connections with the sounds that they represent? I have been investigating different cultural attitudes towards communication by looking at the origins of alphabets and how these have been translated into computer languages. I am fascinated by the way spacing and punctuation give meaning to letters and symbols play a role determining our behavior. I am not interested in making images on the computer but in the ways in which computer technology will have an impact on our lives. (September, 1995, ICA, London)

² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997

³ Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Indiana University press, 1984

⁴ **I will always be on time**: This work develops my Viewpoint project which I have shown in the ICA. This project is linked to questions of institutional pedagogy, which I started with examination of my school book and lessons on writing (Lisson gallery). *I will always be on time* is an attempt to present the issue of punctuality and destabilization of mental coordinates on a daily basis. To do so I would like to use time-tables, alphabetical ordering and elements of punctuation and to present them through the juxtaposition of various medias such as teletext, sound recorder, slide projection and 7

‘paintings’(time tables). The list printed on the floor in alphabetical order would be a ground on which all these media are based. 2 videos made in the style of **the teletext** would demonstrate historical amalgamation of the ideas from the very beginning of modern philosophy (Descartes) to its developments into the technological space of the modern machines (passages from the dictionary of computers). This machinality accompanied by the recorded memory *I will always be on time* and 7 paintings or time tables. Slide projections installed on the entrance consist of the scientific materials I have investigated and taken from the “Scientific American” archives. (January 11, 1997)

⁵ Frerich Kittler, *Spooky Electricity: An Interview with Fredrich Kittler*, Artforum, December, 1992

⁶Jacques Lacan, The instance of letter of the consciousness, in *Ecrits*, Norton and Co. 2007, p. 493

⁷ **Evening college**. Watermans art centre, London, 1993. One week site specific project took place in the occasion of Russian Theatre festival ‘Hard Currency’ organised by Emi Slater. I organised **a slide** show in the hall of the Arts Centre which is also meeting place for ‘minority groups’, specifically for immigrants from the Indian subcontinent living in this area. Watermans art centre, London, 1993. One week site specific project took place on the occasion of Russian Theatre festival ‘Hard Currency’ organised by Emi Slater. I organised a slide show in the hall of the Arts Centre which is also a meeting place for ‘minority groups’, specifically for immigrants from the Indian subcontinent living in this area. Evening colleges are very common in England, arrogantly teaching immigrants how to ‘integrate’ into a new society. The slide show demonstrated a list consisting of chronologies, inventories, genealogies and notes related to migrants. Terminologies are selected from the British Cultural Studies. The show took place one week starting from 6 p.m.

⁸ Giles Deleuze, Postscript on the Societies of Control, October, vol59, 1992, pp.3-7

⁹ Hegel, *Enzyklopadie die philosophischen Wissenschaften in Grundreisse*, p.273, quoted in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, p.24

¹⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, Cambridge University Press, 1991

¹¹ *Ibid.*