

Jason Hendrik Hansma
2019

INTRODUCTION

This text was written in the home of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg in Meudon, France, a house built in a hilly suburb on the periphery of Paris. I was fortunate enough to have spent four months in the house developing a new 'body' of work which includes this text. During my time in the house many architectural elements resonated in ways that I did not expect, some were soft and tender, there were mistakes, unintended positions embedded in the house, breaks from logic and order, from the so-called 'rational'. Originally I had reservations about the lines in the sand that modernism drew (which were constantly reminded to me before my arrival) lines between able and 'non' abled bodies, between histories, positions of intent, of a culture of differencing and othering. However what struck me as significant (and often not mentioned) is that the house was the home of early abstraction. Nelly van Moorsel and Peggy Guggenheim planned the exportation of European abstraction from the house. Growing up with a neurological disability I have always felt freedom in abstraction, and in some way feel indebted to these two previous residents of the home as individuals who were the forerunners of making abstraction possible for 'us' and in some way, providing that freedom from defined meaning within 'disability'.

This led me to consider the home, my work, and the studio, as a space of abstraction, away from definitive demands of 'meaning making'. As an artist dealing with the 'echos' of disability, I was curious to find where the echos of abstraction might overlap with that of disability. Where the peaks and troughs might overlap, where a space from demanded forms of articulation and intent might find room in the unassigning of meaning so often placed upon 'us'.

To support this overlap, I invited Joseph Grigely, Élisabeth Lebovici and Gordon Hall to respond to this text in ways they find fit through their own practices. Footnotes, images or words are found between these lines, supporting, undoing, unfixing, and repositioning. Each comment, footnote and image are here, not to strengthen arguments, but to provide a space to redefine the demands of meaning.

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Meudon, Paris.

J.G Annotations in red.

1. É.L Aphasie, according to famous language theorist Roman Jakobson, is a dissolution of "linguistic competence". I wonder sometimes what that means.
2. É.L Language is supposed to free us from the immediate temporal and spatial circumstances, to speak for instance of events which are far away from us in space and time, and mostly, which distance us from "us" as the person involved in that event. Aphasia would be the site specific time /specific place impairing of linguistic mobility. So one has to think here of immobility too, a precarious, flickering immobility.
3. É.L The same Roman Jakobson, while studying certain aspects of aphasia, "makes a distinction between the tropes of metaphor and metonymy. Assuming that language is predicated on modes of relation, he distinguishes between the relation of similarity (and contrast), which underlies metaphor, and the external relation of contiguity (and remoteness) which determines metonymy [...] Now Emily Dickinson's predilection for the metonymic divide is clear. That preference becomes significant when we note, in addition, that Jakobson's description of a contiguity disorder (the language impairment that affects the perception of context) offers a fairly accurate picture of many of Dickinson's problematic poems. Cameron, Sharon. "Naming as History: Dickinson's Poems of Definition." *Critical Inquiry* 5, no. 2 (1978): 223-51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343010>.
4. É.L "First" he writes, "the relational words are omitted..." then "The syntactical rules organising words into higher units are lost. This loss, called agrammatism, causes the degeneration of the sentence into a mere "word heap"... Word order becomes chaotic; the ties of grammatical coordination and subordination... are dissolved." Jakobson, Roman. *Selected Writings/ Word and Language*. De Gruyter Mouton. 2:251 cited in *ibidem*
5. G.H Interesting here the similarity between being trapped inside yourself, (unable to communicate) and floating outside yourself, as you describe. When else is being inside and outside so similar?
6. G.H I am asking myself about how institutions are structures, are containers, that provide standards that create legibility for one another. Do bodies work this way too? Who is the "I" that is in my body? Is this all too easy grammatical separation possible? Do we want it to be?

Aphasia moved suddenly and silently into my childhood. To write beside or below or within Jason's text? It's not easy. It was powerful, forceful and severe, leaving me unable to understand language, speak, write, read or talk. When I decided how to do this, reading is such a private activity, and to annotate his text exposes the hesitancy of thoughts I might later retract after reading it again. But this vulnerability, but the effort to reach them was exhausting. *It's, and's, the's* and *that's* were removed entirely from my capacity, the bodies that are imperfect, unstable, and vague - even, as Jason suggests, abstract. The words I write might be regarded from context was impossible. Without a direct reference to an object, I could not speak to it, everything that was not in front of me was an abstraction². Context was everything. *An imbricitext. It's a transitive form. Readable, but imperfectly so. Most writing is implicitly an entanglement like this, only not always in a material form. Sometimes the words touch other words, sometimes they touch people, sometimes they touch hope in an effort to make sense out of the senselessness of who and what we are.* In many ways, according to the perception of others I had floated outside of myself.⁵ The inability to speak in a society of verbal contracts is in some regards the near inability to exist, to be acknowledged, to respond as a 'full' member of society. To have your ability to respond removed is the erasure of responsibility for one's own agency. When learning to speak again, (and as one enters into socially recognised language) life is filled with the judgment of your capacity to understand, to have thoughts. Legibility is so often connected to perceptions of value, of how 'clear' we make our ideas, how transferrable they are, how they fit into the key performance indicators of a structure, a standard, a container, an institution or perception of a body.⁶

For me, aphasia extended itself into a life-long practice of studio making, through unpacking questions of what it means to be a person and how forms of togetherness and community could come from the dismissal.⁷ The dismissal comes from keeping certain bodies at a distance by insisting their communication adapts to standard norms, making sure they remain outside the 'powers' of authority, by forcing them to adapt, to bend to structures impossible for them to bend to. The studio might be a refusal for standard articulations, a space for re-thinking the democratic notions of agency often taken for granted. To not immediately give into a demand for meaning as stipulated by recognised bodies that speak on the behalf of others⁸, often over the top of others, as care, and as doing good. The driving force should not only be making visible through only care and representation, but also through the blurring the lines of tyrannical standardisation, the removal of the frameworks that put bodies outside of language in the first place.⁹

Ideally the studio, the exhibition, the surface, the support and art-making are themselves spaces of slurred forms of articulation, of those blurred lines, abstracted and tender spaces of vulnerability, of requests to engage before articulation, the slowing down to move with that slurred voice you might not be used to. These spaces can be muddy, and precise at once, enacting *with* bodies and not *for* bodies.¹⁰ What I wanted in moments of inarticulateness and paralysis were not forms of articulation provided for me. I wanted surfaces of warmth, tenderness and proximity. In the impossibility of words, everything outside of the standard feels unfixed; these are spaces of disorientation¹¹ followed by fundamental reconfigurations of who we are to each other, of how we might embody each other onto our surfaces in new configurations.

A cuff, a sleeve, a collar, an exit, a way out.

There are two notable periods in the history of the term 'articulation'. The first and earliest is from 1580, it means to divide speech into separate parts and make clear through an understanding of how each word is an article of language, distinct and precise. Skipping only 30 years ahead, in 1610 the definition becomes something more akin to uniting by means of joints. The word expands to involve the mechanisation of the body, movement of an elbow, a thumb, a jaw. When thinking of aphasia, both these definitions are problematic. On one hand, the separating and dividing and on the other hand the unifying back to a whole. Such a major shift in meaning between the periods might help us think that perhaps the meaning of articulation is an oscillation between the two poles, a proposal for a middle space, between splitting and unifying, between fixing and unfixing specific to each body, each word, or material that is in front of us. To move *with* who and what presents to us—moments of your daily lives. Finding the space to exist—like those smooth and glassy and reflective surfaces you like so much.

7. G.H I relate to this way of thinking about the studio, as a place where I can build up a world around me, and can sculpt modes of perception that I wish would replace so many of the ways we have been taught to see and feel, especially regarding non-legible or less-legible bodies, our own and one another's.

8. É.L In French, you basically deal with working 'upon' something (Travailler sur). You work upon poverty, upon migrants, upon AIDS. Poverty, migration and AIDS become your subjects, subjected in their existence to your work. You work 'upon', instead of working in, amongst, within. Within language, in language and amongst language.

9. G.H As a teacher, I struggle with how to teach writing in a way that rejects "tyrannical standardisation" while still teaching them how to write clearly and, yes, according to some standards of sense-making. For me this is one of the fundamental tensions of being in the position of 'instructor'.

10. G.H I am recalling a very helpful distinction, as described by the art historian David Getsy, who described the difference between making art about one's identity and making art from one's identity. It makes me want to proclaim: Let's not treat ourselves as anthropologists, translating ourselves to be legible for others! Let us, instead, make work from within the slurred spaces we live in, for others in here with us, or who want to come in!

11. G.H In thinking about the possibilities in these moments of disorientation, I have to quote Sara Ahmed: "Phenomenology, after all, is full of queer moments, moments of disorientation, which involve not only "the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our own contingency and the horror with which it fills us." Maurice Merleau-Ponty gives an account of how these moments are overcome, as bodies are reoriented in the "becoming vertical" of perspective. A queer phenomenology might involve a different orientation toward such moments. It might even find joy and excitement in the horror." From Sara Ahmed, 'Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology' GLQ (Volume 12, No. 4, 2006) (Quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 1945/1962/2002.)

I work a lot with smooth glassy and reflective surfaces, surfaces that bounce light from their surface and towards the viewer, and vice-versa where the body of the viewer becomes temporarily apart of the surface of the work. These surfaces' abilities not only lure the eye, but also shift identity by encompassing other bodies onto their panes. These surfaces are partly inarticulate, through expanding beyond themselves to include their neighbours. When being unable to move and speak whilst laying in bed, I watched light beams slowly move across the room. I often wonder who the most astute viewers of light in our society might be¹³, and how those experiences (if given the chance) might move into the world, reconfiguring perceptions with a numb tongue or with the tingle of inarticulateness that moves from the cheek to the lips, that creeping stroke to the brain.

Strokes of light, strokes of words¹⁴

struck out. To strike is also to refuse to participate, organised as a form of protest. Strokes. A leg, an arm, a vein. thickened.

12. G.H Image of performance
Huddle by Simone Forti (1961). Photo
by Peter Moore.



13. É.L I'm thinking a lot about
Eileen Gray's architecture here (see
end of paragraph).

14. É.L Stroke of verse. This would
be the literal translation of Stéphane
Mallarmé's "crise de vers" (crisis
in verse), published in the volume
Divagations, 1897. Unfortunately
translated to "Crisis in Poetry".

15. G.H I am reminded of a pas-
sage from one of my favourite essays
ever, Jan Verwoert's 'Exhaustion
and Exuberance—Ways to Defy the
Pressures to Perform' published in
2008. "Again the I Can't implied in
the unwillingness to fully spell out the
meaning of something that cannot be
forced into the open (an idea,
a feeling, a motive etc.) must not be
understood as a denial of agency. On
the contrary, the insistence to speak—or
make work in any other way—about
that which is neither readily under-
standable nor immediately useful is in
itself a strong claim to agency: I Can
speak or make work about what I Can't
speak or make work about. While this
in a more general sense applies to any
form of art or writing, it may have a
special bearing on abstract work."

The glassy surface, also questions what the publics' responsibility towards the 'gaps' artworks on the edge of articulation might create, and how the viewer sits within that refractive space.¹⁵ I have always felt uncomfortable with direct and potentially systematised forms of meaning in art making. Where the boundaries of a work are defined and neatly compartmentalised before closing the drawer on a series of bodies that made the works. In this sense, I'm attracted to abstractions' approach to resist direct forms of meaning making, to keep living outside of a category. In many ways the work is found somewhere between the ocular and the bodily, between the thought and the unspoken, the slow unfolding of light over a surface, light that warms up a paralysed muscle, a limb or a cheek.

To be limpid
a water that is clear,
transparent.

I know that slow wait before having your body moved by someone else's, to wait to be picked up, taken to the bathroom, to be vulnerable, these actions are not about meaning, they are an embodiment, of surfaces coming together.¹⁶ In the same way as an artwork is an embodiment with you in the room, in memory together. A vulnerable surface is not about 'meaning' making for you as viewer, but there for you to grow with it. I have felt the very same sweaty clinging for meaning around works of abstraction as I saw in my parent's eyes in my aphasic slurred speech. What is intention, what are key performance indicators, what is success, what is legibility, how are you forced to 'mean' yourself, for them, for community?

mean
to intend, have in mind
menen to intend, indicate
the mean(s) to do something.

If abstraction made absences between meanings possible maybe those absences might be the glimmers of resistance from traditional forms of demanded and standardised articulation. Far from being hermetic these surfaces might move with viewers and those that care with the unspoken and inarticulate gaps. Just as my body was not hermetic and sealed when I couldn't speak, move or register language, it had agency and potential. The inarticulate space is not hermetic, it is a space co-constructed with tender participants not scared of inarticulate moments, but there to grow together with them. The space created by abstracted surfaces might not be a space to immediately fill with opinions and positions. It might just be the responsibility to slowly move into the how, where and when we *mean with* each other, as a space to reconfigure surfaces of each other onto ourselves.¹⁸

A vestibule, a doorway, a windowsill, that numb tongue.¹⁹

16. G.H "What if we refuse the convivial forms of care that deal in contracts of exchange? What if we approach care as an event? How are we to accept and coordinate our mutual and divergent forms of precarity and (physical) risk? Let us acknowledge that such precarity and risk are routine. Can the banality of care, its constant rehearsals and routine demands on buttons, joints, and coordinated movements, produce and sustain intimacy without becoming fixed? Can the intimate actions and bodily movements of care work coordinate themselves in terms of the event—simultaneously static and dynamic?" Quoted from "Other Forms of Conviviality: Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos," *Women & Performance*, October 30, 2013, accessed August 06, 2019, <https://www.womenandperformance.org/ampersand/ampersand-articles/other-forms-of-conviviality.html>.

17. J.H.H I'm using 'move' here to indicate the idea of closeness and not actual physical movement. I couldn't move in paralysis, but I could 'move' in other ways.

18. G.H Carrie Yamaoka, *Three*, 2011
Mixed media on reflective mylar
127cm in × 130cm in × 6.5cm
(Photo: Stephen Takacs)



19. É.L "Donne la transition, garde le mystere, les objets à voir tiens en haleine le plaisir" translated by Jasmine Rault as "Give the transition, keeps the mystery, the objects to be seen keep pleasure in suspense" Eileen Gray, notes in the Gray Archive, Collin Barracks, National Museum of Ireland, Dublin cited by Jasmine Rault. *Eileen Gray and the Design of Sapphic Modernity: Staying in*. Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2017.

Notes from within the former home and studio of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg, May to August, Paris, France, 2019.

The Table (*sitting with past bodies*).

The kitchen of the Doesburg house has a table permanently cast in concrete. I'm not sure if it is furniture, sculpture, architecture or a combination of all three. The table is at a height that feels 'too high' when one sits down to eat. With a little investigation in his passport, I found out that van Doesburg's height was a 167 cm. When a friend of a similar height visited me at the house we checked how the table worked for their body. The table is in fact a standing table, one specifically for the height of the architect.²⁰ Crucially that does not stop me from using it as a table like any other table, from having breakfast around it, to read, to write, spend time with friends and have conversations around it. Yes,

the table is at a different height than what I'm used to, but that does render away its function. It did not prevent Nelly van Doesburg painting it a happy yellow after Theo's death, nor did it prevent many hundreds of conversations around it. The table is a softer standard, one based on the position of a past individual, with a present request for how we can work with what is in the world, with different bodies, past present and future. It is not based on a logic that a standard must be improved for everyone, but rather that we develop and reconfigure past standards, to sit at tables with different bodies, to move with idiosyncrasies of life and each other.

Doors (*A moment to hide*).

Running along the hallway on the second floor of the house are two doors that appear as walls at first glance. They are painted black and are 130cm × 257cm in size and partially block a full view to the rooms that are adjacent from the hallways. When Theo and Nelly built the house, financial restrictions meant the heating was installed in only one of these adjacent rooms. To seal off the hallway, the entirety of these walls shift as large doors and close the hallway to become walls, shifting the space into one large room. The now previously adjacent rooms and the hallway, all merge to make up this new larger space. As an artist invested in transitory spaces, it is a nice reminder that how ever open we consider our position to be, there are times in which we need to tell the world to temporarily go away, to turn a hallway into a room, before again opening the doors to remerge back into the world. Well, yes, exactly: we too are transitory beings. Part of the problem that I see emerging here is how, culturally and otherwise, we treat bodies as nouns, rather than verbs. We are largely unstable forms, moving, changing, and being moved and changed. Language can't always describe our nuanced fragility-it's one of those times I too want the world to go away. Like Keats's Nightingale departing over the hills-"fled is that music;

20. É.L. It is also a way to envisage our activities, as you mention, while standing instead of sitting upon things. I like the idea of a standing criterion for all bodies, including non able bodies (Marcel Proust wrote while lying in his bed) Standing or leaning, the Roman way. I had a kind of epiphany when I saw a writer, that I didn't particularly like, but still, he was the social representation of a 'stylish writer' bordering on a 'campy writer'... anyways...when I saw he had a desk which was made for standing, I found it so cool. He told me that Roland Barthes, his mentor, also wrote while standing. I consequently looked to stand in such a position - found a chimney, which I still use. Or a kitchen's worktop, which I still use too. Or the counter of a café. It is also reconfiguring what you consider 'home', or at least, a homely space for you to interact safely with the world.

21. É.L. Heart, heart, heart.

Above the doors in the hallway is a seemingly weight bearing beam that runs against the length of the hallway, its dimensions are 20cm × 20cm × 120cm. Its purpose is to provide a stop to seal the doors and close the space between the door and the ceiling and thereby keeping the heat in. However this load bearing beam is not structural and is instead constructed of wood, (not concrete) it is placed entirely for the purpose of sealing in the warmth. There's something about the way in which it speaks a language of support for a roof, but instead supports the sealing of warmth for a room and the bodies in it. Where one's position of clear intent might result in support within another form, not immediately clear at first glance.²¹

Three columns (*Truitt's sculptures*).

In the backyard of the house is a 'built in' veranda, which is essentially a room without walls and windows, an inside and outside space. It is the only place in the house that you can see the supports of the home. These supports take the form of 3 columns measuring 30cm × 30cm × 250cm. Their forms are strikingly similar to Anne Truitt's sculpture *Morning Child* from 1973. measuring 30cm × 30cm × 182cm. The columns support the entire weight of north east-facing side of the house. At 5pm in the summer months of June, July and August the sun filters through the neighbours' trees and light dapples across the surface of the columned sculptures. It was not until coming to the house that I have thought of Anne's sculptures as supports²², supports for light, supports for surface, supports for those bodies who view and feel light, supported by surfaces of warmth and tenderness.²³

Like everything we do, it would not be possible without thanking those that support us in making our work possible. I would like to thank my partner Eloise Sweetman for being there in the frustrations of articulation. I'd like to thank my dear friend and poet K. Schippers who visited the house in the 1960's and befriended Nelly van Doesburg, and who first told me stories about the house. I felt like in someway I met Nelly and her ability to spearhead abstraction and belief in equal rights through him. I'd like to thank him also for teaching me how to find poems. I also want to thank those that supported this text through their annotations, who textually became the columns of those words, Joseph Grigely, Élisabeth Lebovici and Gordon Hall. Thank-you also to Christophe Clarijs who so kindly set these letters on the page. I'd like to thank those that provided me with warmth and tenderness as I grew up, who did not force words from a numb, in-articulate mouth but found other ways to communicate with me, my mother especially, I notice surfaces because of her, thank-you.

22. É.L Suddenly the polysemy of the word support comes to life. In a country where a group called 'Supports/ Surfaces' has ruled the world of art for a few years (around 1970), I'm reminded that the support, the material upon which a painted work is made, which holds the work together, is also what holds the work apart. It is the work's subjectile, the substance by which the color(s) find their attach [ment]. It is meant to hold, physically, emotionally, to endorse materially and spiritually. A foot note could be a support. Or a text could support a footnote.

23. G.H This passage reminds me of a section from Truitt's journal in which she describes being among her sculptures in the dark, experiencing them as they are when no one is there to see them: "Yet, for all the strains of retrospectives, I am most profoundly grateful to have had the opportunity to see my work. There were radiant moments. Like the night at the Corcoran Gallery of Art when Walter Hopps and I walked into the room in which we were preparing the exhibit. The sculptures stood in long rows, barely visible, lit only dimly by a skylight. We did not turn on the lights. I walked up and down the dark corridors between their massive forms, most of which towered over me, and held out both my hands to feel them, not touching them. They stood in their own space, in their own time, and I was glad in their presence" Truitt, Anne. *Daybook, the Journey of an Artist*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1984.