

UNIVERSIDADE DE SÃO PAULO ESCOLA DE COMUNICAÇÃO E ARTES

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Taking a line for a dance: asemic explorations

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original version

Thomas William Gabriel Wray

Work presented for the postgraduate program in visual arts, specialization in visual poetics of the School of Communication and Arts of the University of São Paulo to obtain the title of master. Mentored by Dr. Geraldo de Souza Dias.

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Abstract

Writing is a technology that has shaped human thinking since its invention and then widespread dissemination in the print age. Communication is going through radical changes in a new age but writing is still central to our every day reality. This body of research explores how elements of writing can be used to create art thereby subverting, remolding and giving new space to a means of codifying human experience fundamental to the civilized mind. It seeks to increase the dimensions occupied by what has become known as asemic writing and create connections with other art-forms. This study has a practical basis but aims to place this practice within the context of contemporary art.

Key words: asemic writing, urban art, visual poetry, installation, sculpture,

Resumo

A escrita é uma tecnologia que moldou o pensamento humano desde sua invenção e, em seguida, ampla disseminação na era da impressão. A comunicação está passando por mudanças radicais em uma nova era, mas a escrita ainda é central em nossa realidade cotidiana. Este corpo de pesquisa explora como os elementos da escrita podem ser usados para criar arte, subvertendo, remodelando e dando novo espaço a um meio de codificar a experiência humana fundamental para a mente civilizada. Procura aumentar as dimensões ocupadas pelo que se convencionou chamar de escrita assêmica e criar conexões com outras formas de arte. Este estudo tem uma base prática mas pretende situar esta prática no contexto da arte contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: escrita assêmica, arte urbana, poesia visual, instalação, escultura

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Introduction

Ever since the 'invention' of alphabetical writing (that is ever since Western thought began to articulate itself), written lines surrounded men in a way that demanded explanation. It was clear these lines meant the three-dimensional world in which we live act and suffer. But how did they mean it? (FLUSSER)

One thing that always stays in my mind from my first twenty and some years of life growing up in London are the shop signs, not the corporate chain stores, but the small businesses run by immigrant shopkeepers from all over the world, written in a cacophony of fonts, languages and scripts, serving the numerous different communities of the city. Reading Bengali or Chinese was an impossibility for me but I loved the shapes of the letters and how they moved from left to right, from top to bottom. They became aesthetic objects that spoke of worlds beyond a small island in the North of Europe. They were a multicultural backdrop strung up under the grey skies, companions to my globalized upbringing and signposts to later adventures. I have since become fascinated by all the scripts, scrawls, marks and jottings I see around me whether honed pieces of typography, flashing neon signs, scribbles on the wall that might or might not be writing or paint strokes on the side of a house perhaps made by a Moroccan house painter to remove excess paint from his brush that resembles the flow of Arabic.

In my early twenties, for various motives, a disappointment with the harshness of a Britain created in Thatcher's image, my personal circumstances and a wish to discover and learn more, I started out on a nomadic life that eventually led me, via many twists and turns, to São Paulo, another metropolis like London with its own ability to draw disparate people to it, myself included. More recently, the pandemic precipitated another big change just after I began to create the body of work to which this text relates: from the metropolis to small house with attached garden in the deep countryside of São Paulo state. Throughout my travels, wherever I may find myself, I have read in my surroundings and responded with my own visual language.

I have been 'writing' with my own invented alphabets for some time, making marks on paper and other surfaces that looks like it could be writing but is no known alphabet. I later discovered that there is a term for this: asemic writing. This is to say

the seemingly contradictory act of 'writing' without semantic content. The invented scripts I made in note books, which then led on to abstracted typographic pieces has functioned for me, like other asemic writers before me as a way to bypass the part of my mind trained into confined logical pathways and to play with line and form without feeling hindered, or as Klee put it, take “a line on a walk” (1953, p.16). It also helped me create a dialogue with my surroundings, which in my life, have been constantly changing.

Writing, of all mankind's creations, has the remarkable ability to describe the world into a series of simple marks and forms repeated in variations moving forward along a line. There is a directness, which is the beauty of writing. In its handwritten stage it evolved into a series of simple marks, ones which most logically and naturally come from the application of the physical technology, whether it be reed end, knife or pen. These marks are efficient and uniform enough to be understood by others but each writer adds his or her subtle variation and thereby creating something recognisable to all but unique. Writing is ubiquitous, a system of signs universal to a society, yet the manner in which it is produced, the way it flows from pen to paper, is deeply personal. Writing is an extension of the language of the body and can reveal much more than just its semantic content.

Writing started with pictures, but simplified pictures, ones which, with just a cluster of lines are able to describe an object or a concept. Then the Phoenicians tweaked hieroglyphics, invented the phonetic alphabet and abstracted sound into a visual code, it became more than a way to graphically store for information. It became capable, as the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) pointed out, of translating one experience to another; sound became transformed into a visual code. (1962) It is a versatile tool, which transformed humanity, a technology that is so ubiquitous we usually take it for granted despite the fact that it has shaped our world and our thoughts. It is an enabler but also by its essence encloses, and like every construct is there to be questioned, pried with, bent out of shape, transmuted and rebelled against.

Perhaps what I do cannot truly be called writing – I can only use the word in a very loose way. Asemic writing, as a term, is after all an oxymoron, as it does not fulfill the function of text but rather shares some space in common with writing. The

border between writing and drawing is very tenuous as is the border between many forms of human expression. Writing started as pictures and became an abstraction of sound, but it also has the tendency to want to become pictures again. My work incorporates a variety of different visual aspects and inspirations, but writing is nearly always, however, present in my work at least as a process, a metaphor, an allusion or a point of departure.

I spent many years painting the walls in streets, especially in São Paulo and immersing myself in the subculture of street art, with work sometimes more representational and sometimes purely abstract. At times an asemic script has been the main focus of the work, sometimes it has been a footnote or speech balloon. Sometimes, I have used it as part of the process, creating some writing like marks and then mirroring them to make a symmetrical form that looked like a figure. I have also created paintings, sculptures and even an asemic graphic novel.

This body of work is focused on the possibility of creating art based on aspects of writing. It examines existing ideas related to asemic writing and the border area between writing and image, and traces a personal trajectory through practice based in street art through to painting, sculpture, installation, and examines the possibilities of reading a piece of asemic writing by a third party and expressing it in another artistic sphere.



photo author's own

1. Asemic Writing and the Post-literate

The term asemic writing was coined by two visual poets – the American Jim Leftwich (1956-) and Australian Tim Gaze (1965-) in the late 1990s. The word *seme*, which refers to the smallest unit of meaning is preceded by a negative prefix. It is writing without the intention of imparting semantic significance. It comprises of abstract forms scribed onto a surface, but which still holds the possibility of being interpreted as writing.

Asemic writing is seemingly a contradiction, as it removes the one thing that fundamentally defines writing and differentiates it from drawing. By bypassing this semantic aspect, asemic writing presents various possibilities. As American the critic and author Peter Schwenger (1942-) points out, asemic writing draws focus to the visual and muscular. The movement of the body as it leaves its mark on the surface and the visual effect of those marks are what is highlighted. As we are left with no reliable way to discern if it has semantic content, we are forced to appreciate it as an aesthetic object and what meaning it imparts is on this level. Asemic writing occupies a space between image and text. The Russian Ekaterina Samigulina, one of the visual poets working with this medium writes: “Asemic writing attempts to view the text as visual art and also, more importantly, view the language as an image capable of transferring meaning without actual linguistic means involved.” (2015)

It wasn't until the end of the 1990s that the term asemic writing was used, a period coinciding with the growth of the world wide net. Schwenger asserts “there was a need for it...hundreds of artists began to produce asemic writing, self publishing and influencing each other through the internet” (2019, p. 3) . It is a movement which has been flourishing in the digital age and the age of globalization as the world comes to terms to a multiple linguistic reality, a world written in a multitude of ways and in a multitude of scripts. After the term asemic was coined, it was immediately questioned: It is not possible to have no meaning. Jim Leftwich suggested 'pansemic'. As the Italian artist Marco Giovenale (1969 -) writes, “It defies any attempt we try to put in practice in order to understand, decipher. But, in doing so, it makes some other opaque meaning arise.” (2015)

The Russian semiotician Yuri M Lotman speaks of the boundary of the semiosphere, a place at the periphery of the semiotic space that defines a culture. He argues that “this is an area of semiotic dynamism. This is the field of tension where new languages come into being.” (1990, p. 134) We can think of asemic writing as pertaining to that border, a multiple border existing on the internet and the poles of globalization, where numerous semiospheres are colliding and intersecting. Asemic writing, rather than being writing that lacks meaning, is arguably striving towards plurality of meaning.

The lack of defined semantic meaning presented by asemic writing is in fact not an empty space at all but a place full of possibilities. Reading is not a passive process but an active one as the French literary theorist and semiotician Roland Barthes (1915-1980) famously asserted in *The Death of the Author*. (1977) We read only by bringing to bear the semiotic knowledge we hold in our memories, and this differs from person to person and culture to culture. Asemic writing is a place of potential resonance between multiple counterparts.

The title that the American artist Michael Jacobson, one of the most important voices in the movement, gave to his blog on asemic writing *The New Post-literate* is a reference to the concept of a new communication age, a shift from a textually focused world. The term appeared in Marshall McLuhan's prophetic book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, in which he describes the dawning of a new era: “In the electronic age which succeeds the typographic and mechanical era of the past five hundred years, we encounter new shapes and structures of human interdependence which are "oral" in form even when the components of the situation may be non-verbal.” (1962, p. 3)

McLuhan traces mankind's movement from oral to literate and then into the electronic age. He argues that the birth of the phonetic alphabet and then the leap into widespread literacy due to the advent of printing precipitated a huge ontological shift. He is not alone in this assertion. The American philosopher Walter Ong (1912-2003) wrote in *Orality and Literacy*, “More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness.” (2012, p. 77) McLuhan sees phonetic writing, as an essential prerequisite for the shift from tribal to an urbanized machine age, one in which the senses are separated and amplified through mechanization. The invention

of phonetic writing 'reduced the use of all the senses at once, which is oral speech, to a merely visual code.' (MCLUHAN, 1962, p. 45)

Mere writing, however, has not the peculiar power of the phonetic technology to detribalize man. Given the phonetic alphabet with its abstraction of meaning from sound and the translation of sound into a visual code, and men were at grips with an experience that transformed them. No pictographic or ideogrammatic or hieroglyphic mode of writing has the detribalizing power of the phonetic alphabet (MACLUHAN, 1962, p. 22)

According to McLuhan during the written and print age, we have been conditioned into three powerful but reductive ways of thinking. The first is a historical point of view. The second is Cartesian thinking's "perfectly rigid and fixed framework where each physical event can, in principle, be rigorously localized independently of all the dynamic processes which are going on around it." (MCLUHAN, 1962, p. 240) Third is the tradition of Euclidean geometric tradition. All three together creating a "singleplane lineal, visual, and sequential codification of experience..[which] is quite conventional and limited." (1962, p. 54).

The anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss (1908 - 2009) notes major differences between the tribal thinking and the scientific mind. He writes of the tribal thought of having "totalitarian ambition" striving for total understanding...entirely contradictory to what scientific thinking does, which is to proceed step by step trying to give explanations for very limited phenomena and then going on to other kinds of phenomena." (1978, p. 13) Like McLuhan, he centres the thinking of urbanized man in the procedural and the tendency to separate and specialize, in contrast to the holistic nature of oral based tribal societies.

McLuhan believes that this state of perception is endemic to textual culture and is something that needs to be overcome in order to reach the next step in the evolution of human thinking as we move into a new age in which as "electricity creates conditions of extreme interdependence on a global scale, we move swiftly again into an auditory world of simultaneous events and over-all awareness" (1962, pp. 28-29)

The Brazilian-Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser (1920-1991) was only too aware of the channeling effect text has on thinking. He saw linearity as the defining

distinction between image and text. “We seize the totality of the picture at a glance” whereas “in reading lines, we follow a structure imposed on us. (FLUSSER, 1972, p. 101)

What McLuhan puts forward as an alternative to the linear and single point perspective is a mosaic organizational format with the ability to create multiple connections and viewpoints, in many ways very predictive of the windows format developed by Microsoft nineteen years later in 1981, a creation that has since taken over our world.

Viewed within the context of Macluhan's theory of the post literate, asemic writing can be viewed as part of a broader movement which is breaking down the hegemony of traditional text centric thought and formats. Jacobson includes asemic writing with a long list of forms that create a “tension between traditional literacy and post-literacy”: cryptography, visual poetry, rebuses, hypergraphic superwriting, xenolinguistics, graffiti and comics. “Post-literate is the next stage in the evolution of writing. In the same way that Dada gave birth to Surrealism, asemic writing will create a viable, self sustaining post-literate culture.” (JACOBSON, 2019, p.142)

Schwenger writes about the decline of cursive which he calls “the familiar act” in the digital age, an act that “creates an intimate bond between the writer and the words written.” (2019, pp. 3-4) As the vast majority of asemic writing bases itself in the handwritten, this suggests a nostalgia for past ways of communicating and perhaps a latent individualism, which would seem contradictory, to an extent, to the idea of a nascent post-literate culture.

Jacobson's range of genres, however, presents a broader front and is more suitably representative of my own aims as an artist and what I have wished to develop out of the concept of asemic writing. Points of interest, for myself, are the possibilities not only of subverting text and its linear logical aspect by drawing attention to its visual aspect, but also escaping the single point perspective in the painting tradition through the sequencing aspect and sign interrelationship of text.

When Gaze and Leftwich conceived of the term asemic writing, they were not creating something entirely new but putting a name to a form of expression that

already existed for some time. In the work of other artists practicing what can be termed asemic writing or related work, there are a number aspects which I have found relevant to my own practice.

Henri Michaux (1899-1984) Belgian-French poet and visual artist is considered by many to be the modern father of asemic writing and an understanding of his work is fundamental a comprehension of asemic writing, and what fascinated him is very similar to what underpins my own practice. He was able, in his practice, to open up many of the possibilities of asemic writing that have been continued and developed by other artists.

For critics and art historians, he has been hard to place within the movements of the twentieth century. He was “linked to but not of surrealists” writes the American scholar David Ball (1994, p. ix) The American author Gilliam Conoly in an interview with the poet Andrew Joron talks of Michaux's “desire to delve into the unconscious” (CONOLY apud JORON, 2014) but he found disagreement with principal techniques writers of the surrealist movement were using, automatic writing:

Michaux, who wrote a critique of Breton's *Poisson soluble* in 1925, had two problems with automatic writing. One was that he didn't believe the human hand could move fast enough to capture human thought, and in particular, the speed or accelerations of whatever might be going on in the unconscious. The other was that he didn't think language as a construct or system was quick enough to access thought either. (CONOLY apud JORON, 2014)

Michaux was a writer as well as a visual artist. His frustrations with the limitations of writing, “which he found himself straining against” (SCHWENGER, 2019 p. 19) led him to a kind of art with the aim, at least in part, of striving towards a form of expression which was neither writing nor drawing. As the British critic Rigaud Drayton puts it, his aim was to find “a natural sign where word and image would be one.” (2005, pp. 137-138)

Rigaud Drayton describes Michaux's writing/drawings as “primordial natural signs.” (2005, p. 137) This suggests a desire to create something fundamental and universal, which would seem very typical of the modernist age. The American critic Laurie Edson writes of Michaux's “aversion to representational art and his desire to paint a hidden. interior reality.”(2022, p. 55) There is a suggestion of a striving for some kind of universal communication, a desire often echoed by early pioneers of

abstraction. However, within his criticism of automatic writing lies an implicit recognition of language as construct.

Michaux was strongly influenced by Chinese writing. He traveled in the far East and his book *Ideograms in China* focuses on Chinese culture and writing. Michaux's fascination with Chinese Logographic script has to do with it being seen as a visual script, imparting meaning more through pictographic means and therefore contrasting with the systematized abstraction of the Latin alphabet. The US born philosopher Ernest Fenellosa (1853-1908), who profoundly influenced Michaux's contemporary and fellow poet Ezra Pound (1885-1972) proclaimed, "Chinese notation is something much more than arbitrary vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature."(FENELLOSA apud SIEBURTH, 2022, p. 18) The critic Richard Sieburth (1949-) writes in his article on Michaux and Pound "If one wanted to translate Fenellosa's analysis in Jakobsonian terms, one could say that according to this account of Chinese is foregrounded by the visual signifier." (2022, p. 18) This would place it into Jakobson's paradigmatic parole together with literary devices such as metaphor, which the structural linguist's theories set up in opposition to the linear syntagmatic aspects of language. Although, it has to be said that his view was of Chinese as being based mostly or purely image focused, as Sieburth points out, is in many ways a misconception as ninety percent of Chinese signs are phonetic.

There is also a playful element to Michaux's work. It is about enjoyment. "The pleasure of abstraction won out. The brush freed the way, and paper made the going easier." (MICHAUX, 2002, p. 10) He takes the line for a walk in Klee style. In fact Michaux was great admirer of Paul Klee, as Edson relates, he wrote the preface for a book on Klee entitled *Aventures de Lignes*. He was drawn to "the playfulness and abandon of Klee's lines and why he wrote about them with such affection. 'Passage', 'trajet', 'approcher', and 'parcourir' are some of Michaux's favourite words." (2022, pp. 47- 48) She insists that Klee's "wandering line embodies Michaux's philosophy of exploration." (EDSON, 2022, p. 47) A wandering line is what writing is all about. The line of writing must go forward if it is to trace the unfolding events of a story. "Michaux emphasizes the movement of words through time and space and playfully parodies writing as a means of self-expression." (EDSON, 2022, p. 48) It is this feeling of moving forward in time and space that writing gives us that Michaux transposed into the physical and graphic through the movement of brush on the

paper and his ambiguous dancing figure-like annotations.

Movement is embodied in all of Michaux's work. According to Edson, he developed an “ideology of perpetual movement as the basis of human existence, and 'self' as a momentary position of equilibrium in an ever-changing reality.” (2022, p. 46) His 1952 book *Mouvements* consists of glyphs reminiscent of the human body in movement placed in a way they invite being read as a text. In 2011, the choreographer Marie Chouinard (1955-) created a thirty five minute dance piece based on the book, which followed the contents as if it were dance annotation. Ball writes “His writing is not aesthetic (in his view) but performative.” (1994, p. xii) By creating writing that cannot be deciphered he was able to highlight the performative aspect of writing. His writing becomes a kind of dance written onto the pages of a book.

Michaux, by his own admission, tried to circumvent the verbal: “born, raised, educated in an environment and culture uniquely given over to the 'verbal', I painted to decondition myself “ (MICHAX apud SCHWENGER, 2019, p.19) His work is not, however, an attempt to escape the verbal totally; writing is after all about movement. His work is “verbal/visual” (CONOLLY apud JORON, 2014) The fundamental part of any sentence is a verb; it is the component that cannot be left out under any circumstance. When we remove the semantic focus of writing, what we are left with is movement. Writing is a line that must move forward. In rendering drawing in a way that it is invited to be read as writing, movement is accentuated. The British critic Nina Parish writes, “the idea of movement is central to Michaux’s creative impetus.” (2007, p. 183) It is the idea of movement that necessitates Michaux's linear format as much as any connection to writing.

Michaux's work is a kind of choreography of the hand which moves forward, every gesture leaving a mark on the paper. Michaux had a love for music. He held it in an elevated level of esteem much like the father of Western abstraction Kandinsky, who devoted long sections of *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* to it. “Although the textual and visual rhythms formed in his poetic texts and signs cannot be described as the same as musical rhythm, Michaux still considered music as the ideal art form for rendering the pulsations of the inner self” writes Parish (2007, p. 265).

Michaux's visual work was neither dance, music, writing, nor drawing in a conventional sense, but wished to approximate all of these. This cross boundary, cross disciplinary approach, especially the connection with music is an important part of my own attraction to asemic writing.



Henri Michaux from *Mouvements* 1950-1951 source: artsy.net

Roland Barthes also practiced something which could also be termed asemic writing. He used the term 'counter-scripts'. He moved in the same circles as Michaux. Schwenger suggests that the influence to create asemic writing, however, came from the Argentine artist Mirtha Dermisache, to whom he wrote a letter encouraging her to publish her notebooks containing “a certain number of shapes, neither figurative nor abstract, that could be defined as illegible writing.” (BARTHES apud SCHWENGER, 2019, p. 34) Schwenger asserts that for Barthes, writing was a “sensual act” (2019, p. 34) Certainly, to a man employed writing down his vast output of thought, writing without any word content perhaps almost a kind of relaxation. What this comment suggests is a distinction between the physical practice of writing and writing as an expression of intellectual process.

Fernstermaker describes exhibitions of Dermisache's work in the 2000s, “Dermisache’s asemic writings were simply pinned to walls or laid across tables in the top floor of the brownstone. Guests were invited to sit, read, and rearrange them according to their own internal sense of their meaning “(2018, p. 5) This way of presenting her works prioritizes the reader in the process of meaning creation. It

implies a certain democratization, perhaps unsurprising for an artist who produced under Argentina's military junta. Some of the works resemble newspaper pages, ones in which the content is not controlled. Dermisache denied any political content in her work, “ I never wanted to give a political meaning to my work. What I did and continue to do is to develop graphic ideas with respect to writing, which in the end, I think, have little to do with political events but with structures and forms of language” (DERMISACHE apud FERNSTERMAKER, 2018) The idea that the reader or viewer is at the centre of the process of meaning creation is a central concept in asemic writing and something that I also wish to prioritize in my own work.

Another artist considered to be influential to later asemic writers is the surrealist Max Ernst. He created what the art historian Lesle Ross (1951-) refers to as “cipher writings” (2014, p.91) most notably in the 1964 book, which he produced with Iliaszd, *Maximiliana or The Illegal Practice of Astronomy: Hommage à Dorothea Tanning*. The word 'cipher' implies some kind of intention meaning obscured by a code and therefore not asemic. However, the book would seem more focussed on blurring distinctions between writing and painting. Ross, herself, writes “text and image [have] become inseparable. Their dual nature has made them immune to decoding, for they have become removed from the sphere of language.” (2014, p. 91) Many of the pages organize the script into shapes and even superimpose. Ross describes the writing thus: “Many of the little shapes are completely abstract, whereas others bear some resemblance to fish, bird, and human (stick figure) forms.” (2014, p. 91).

Ernst's book references the astronomy of Ernst Wilhelm Leberecht Tempel. The American art historian M. E. Warlick (1946-), who focuses on alchemical themes in Ernst's work in her book *Max Ernst and Alchemy* describes *Maximilia* as containing “Ernst’s cipher writings and small illustrations in differing scales as a key motif to indicate points of microcosmic-macrocosmic correspondence.” (2001, p. 211) Ernst himself talked about links to alchemy in a number of essays. “Ernst clarified his indebtedness to hermetic traditions, citing alchemy as a model for his working processes and claiming Cologne’s occult past as his artistic heritage.” (WARLICK, 2001, p. 2) The secretive nature of alchemical study invites the use of cipher-like glyphs. The principal search of alchemy for primordial matter also invites a comparison with Michaux's search for a language of primary signs.

Ernst was primarily a disruptor of the perceived order. As the German author and critic Renee Reise Hubert (1916-2005) writes of his work:

The collages are composed of fragmented representation borrowed from scientific or technological treatises. The arbitrary quality of his juxtapositions: for instance, the diminutive pine tree, though not rooted in the ground, asserts its nature; a man with a bird's head proclaims his bourgeois identity. By giving the same spatial importance to a thimble, a bucket constellation, the artist suppresses all hierarchy and therefore eliminates normal relationships. (1984, p. 578)

For Hubert this juxtaposition is primary to Ernst's work and his further comments are very telling in relation to *Maximillia*, when he speaks of the artist "juxtaposing text and image in such a way that it becomes impossible to define either a graphic or a textual origin." (1984, p. 575) In *Maximillia*, Ernst constantly challenges the border between image and text, breaking down the reader's preconditioned ways of seeing and reading. We are forced, by this, out of the logical pathways conditioned by textual ways of thinking.

Like many of his contemporaries, Ernst was uprooted by the second world war. As a German living in Paris, he was placed in an internment camp, released and then briefly arrested by The Gestapo during the German occupation. He managed to escape France and came to the US. His multilingual exile life is possibly another factor that may have influenced his asemic creations. His was the life of an exile, such a life as the Palestinian critic and philosopher wrote in his essay on Exile a "life led outside the habitual order...nomadic, decentered." (SAID, 2000, p.149) forced to constantly confront the cultural interspace that Lotman referred to as the 'boundary'. This changing of cultural space offers the exile or immigrant artist an immediate first hand experience of shedding off the conditioned ways of thought brought by one culture and language in order to assimilate another. The writing of the new culture starts as an opaque mystery and reveals itself slowly.

As an immigrant myself and a person accustomed to linguistic shifts, it is no surprise to me that the medium of asemic writing should present itself to an expatriate artist like Ernst. Michaux was brought up in a bilingual French Flemish household. The contemporary Brazilian artist of indigenous extraction Gil Duarte, known as Binário Armada as a way to connect through the imagination with an ancestral origin wiped out by the process of colonization. He wrote:

Desenvolvimento do Codex de uma Aldeia Imaginária se deu por conta desse processo de apagamento de minha história, onde não consigo acessar as minhas origens indígenas. Uma vez tendo esse acesso resolvi criar através de um processo artístico. (DUARTE, 2023)¹

Instrumental in rethinking the relationship between image and word in poetry was the concrete poetry movement, perhaps most notably in Brazil, the Frente group from Rio de Janeiro, which included Ferreira Gullar, Waldemir Dias- Pino and Ronaldo Azeredo and the Noigandres group, formed in São Paulo in 1952 by Haroldo de Campos, Augusto de Campos and Decio Pignatari. In the Noigandres slogan *verbivocovisual* there are definite echoes of Michaux's verbal visual. These concrete poets created a relationship between poetry and visual art.

Concrete poetry was very much a product of print culture and new technology with emphasis on the visual and the material, as were many aspects of Concretism . As The British art historian Zanna Gilbert asks, “what happens to the love poem then, when shifted from cursive to type to layout?” (2021, p. 202) The blurring of distinctions between text and image involved in concrete poetry places it within MacLuhan's vision of the post-literate. Unlike asemic writing, concrete poetry, for the most part focuses on semantic content, but it relies on visual information rather than spoken performance for communication, “simultaneity of verbal and nonverbal communication.” (FIAMINGHI apud GILBERT, 2021, p. 205) Augusto de Campos (1931-) used a number of visual devices: colour and spacing as in *Lygia Fingers*, in which, inspired by the tone colour melody of the Austrian composer Anton Webern (1883-1945), the colours have sound equivalents (1953); spacing and layout -splitting words and placing them one above the other as in *Tensão* (1956); Superimposition in *Greve* (1962) The series *Poemóviles* (1974) and *Caixa Preta* (1975) took the poem into three dimensions. The poet and author Mary Ellen Solt (1920-2007) writes:

Having freed itself from the requirements of the "formal rhythmical unit," the concrete poem was said to begin with the awareness of graphic space as a structural agent...The Brazilian concrete poets have been able to discern that "parallel to form-subject isomorphism . (1968, p. 12)

Augusto de Campos's 1964 poem *Olho por Olho* - based on the theory of the semiotic poem developed by Decio Pignatari and Luiz Angelo Pinto - abandoned words altogether and was composed, appropriately, of images of eyes cut from

1 Interview with Gil Duarte available in apendices

various printed sources. Having removed linguistic aspects entirely, it became pure visual poetry. *Olho por Olho* is a poem that sets itself firmly in the visuality of the mass media print age but by referencing the body language of the face acknowledges and celebrates the performative elements of poetry. The development of visual poetry prompted the poet and author Kenneth Goldsmith (1961-) to describe it as a “a visual Esperanto that would ultimately dissolve linguistic—and thereby political—barriers between nations.” (2020, p. 219) This global aspiration of visual poetry - and indeed implied in the visuality of concrete poetry and also the geometricity of concrete art- is one that has been carried through to contemporary asemic writing as they both carry the idea that by shaking off the constraints any specific national language, but in quite different ways.

Moving on to contemporary work related to asemic writing and the post-literate, many of the current directions incorporate ideas espoused by other movements within the visual arts. Eco-aseemics is one of these current directions that owes much to land art. Eco-aseemics is a term used to describe natural occurring marks that have a semblance of writing an idea that would seem to be the very opposite of the digital world and multimedia world referred to by champions of the post-literate but in practice is heavily reliant on technology, provoking this protest from Jim Leftwich: “We look at the sand on a beach, or the bark of a tree or the ripples in a stream, and we can say that we are reading what we are looking at...but it does not become writing if we take a photograph of it, it only becomes a photograph.” (LEFTWICH apud SCHWENGER, 2019, p. 68) Leftwich, in saying this, prioritizes the agency of the author, which might seem a logical position from the perspective of a poet writing on uniform sheets of blank paper. However, in the act of photographing, that natural mark is framed and the page is created, thereby, to contain it. The work of the human in this process is creating the page and not the writing.

Writing is writing because it can be read by others and the act of perceiving these marks to be writing creates the possibility of interpretation. Despite its reliance on photography, its practitioners see eco-aseemic writing as connecting with the origins of writing and dialogue with the natural world. Mink Ranch, writes in the blog *Asemic Front* “Many who investigate Eco-Aseemics have said they gain insight into the primal origins of language and sign-making.” (2017) The desire to create an

intimate dialogue with nature and limit the agency of human beings in this process is eminently understandable in these times of environmental uncertainty.

Eco-asemic writing has grown like contemporary asemic writing as a whole through the ease of sharing digital images on the web. The American artist and writer Michael Jacobson has positioned himself very firmly through his blog *Asemic writing the New Post-literate* as a curator as well as an artist. Blogs and digital magazines in addition to platforms focused on visual poetry such as *Vispo*, which uses a physical publishing format, are where contemporary asemic writing is found. In keeping with its pansemic ambitions, it is very much a democratic and pluralistic cultural scene.

It is important to add that this vision of multiple voices and multiple readings is an important ideological difference between the main bulk of contemporary asemic writing and the primordial searchings of Michaux or any other search for a single universal language. Jacobson is probably most well known for his extended asemic work *The Giant's Fence* (2006), which extended to eighty three pages. His style is reminiscent of hieroglyphics or Mayan glyphs. It tempts also a direct comparison to a graphic novel. In his own words, it “is an evolving asemic visual narrative, written in a trans-symbolic script that can be read aesthetically. Any meaning the reader constructs from the text is a correct translation.” (2019, p. 5) Jacobson, typically of contemporary artists working with asemic writing is not trying to channel multiple viewers/readers to one message but presents a message which can be interpreted and responded to in an infinite number of ways. Jacobson cites influences as diverse as graffiti, sci-fi alien writing and sigils. He has a postmodern ease in referencing the past whilst pointing at the future – at home with pop culture as with the ancient beginnings of writing.

Jacobson's mention of graffiti is unsurprising. It is a movement that centres itself in the visual, muscular and sometimes performative aspects of writing. Graffiti writing involves the repeated writing of a word or name, which is associated with the writer or crew. This writing must have visual impact to compete with other writers and stand out its surroundings. Due to the frequently large expanse of surface covered by the paint (usually applied by spray but sometimes roller) graffiti writing frequently requires whole body movement. The corporal action of the painting of the piece itself is reminiscent of dance and it is also as an art form with strong roots in the hip hop

movement, it connects itself to and the movement's other elements, music and dance.

One contemporary artist whose work creates strong links between graffiti and asemic writing is Jason Revok (1977-). Revok started his practice with more conventional graffiti writing: writing his name in various styles on walls and trains, and then transition his practice into a more abstract examination of writing. This later body of work would be more properly described as post-graffiti. His work has experimented with a number of approaches and techniques. He creates assemblages from old signs, cut and reassembled to create image objects. For the last period he has been working with a specially constructed machine that enables the use of a number of spray can at once to create gestural pieces that allude to cursive but are asemic and like Michaux's *Mouvements* highlight the physical and performative aspects of writing. The utilization of 'the machine' requires more body movement than a single spray can. It produces parallel lines reminiscent of lines of joined up cursive text, which follow movement of the artist's body and together also creates a single gestural mark like the graphic recording of a dance.



Jason Revok *Fullerton* 2013 assemblage source: www.widewalls.ch



Jason Revok 2023 source: www.miniegalerie.nl

It is this idea of a visual dance that runs through asemic writing from Michaux to Revok – many hands scribing a beat, and many voices and many ears. It speaks to me as a traveler and immigrant, and speaks to a vision of the world held by much of the generation with whom I grew into adulthood in a new globalized reality, dancing in abandoned warehouses or in open fields to electronic beats. This was the rave era, whose music sampled rhythms from all over the world, which embraced but the ancestral and the futuristic, dancing in a space which sought to be open to all. It was a reality that seemed to exist, at least for an instant. Asemic writing brings the idea that barriers can be crossed- between word and image, languages and cultures and between aesthetic spheres.

2. Asemic Graffiti

Aboriginal Creation myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who had wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path – birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes – and so singing the world into existence.
(BRUCE CHATWIN)

The primordial story of the Australian aboriginals is both an act of reading and language creation. The land is read but also in this process, there is naming. It is a physical, linguistic and musical journey, both individual and collective. It is a process of mapping and of personal and collective ontology and self affirmation. Aboriginals periodically recreate the 'song-line' journeys of their totemic ancestor, covering vast distances guided by their song across the landscape, their feet tracing memories of footprints, the original marks written on the land by the ancestors. The paintings produced by aboriginals for tourists and collectors have their origins in mnemonic devices used to teach these paths. They are simultaneously pictographic compositions, maps and transcriptions of language and music. They are productions of an oral culture with implicit "biological unity" (POPPER apud MCLUHAN, 1962, p. 8)

In the British travel writer Bruce Chatwin's (1940-1989) ultimate book before his death, there are inevitably tensions between this process of endlessly repeating the same journey/story/song- an act designed to reaffirm an unchanging nature and landscape - with both the constant change in Chatwin's own life as professional traveler and the intrusions on the landscape created by the colonial project and resulting contemporary phenomenas like roads, railways and cities interrupting those lines.

As contemporary urban humans we are not able to sing an unchanging song of our ancestors. The British Land artist Richard Long's 1968 *A Ten Mile Walk* in England starts as a simple line drawn between two points on the paper surface of a map, one of the simplest marks the human hand can make, a symbol, however, with multiple possible meanings. The artwork is the journey that he attempts in walking that line across the landscape of Exmoor represented by that map. In order to complete this journey exactly as planned, he has to traverse not only geographical boundaries but the lines drawn by the enclosures of private property. "It is evident

that the ten-mile line would have meant crossing some sixty fences, hedges, banks or other obstacles.” (ALFREY, 2012) The British critic Nicholas Alfrey adds further information in his article pertaining to large tracts of land that the walk traverses that belong to the Knight family, who bought them after the Inclosure Act of 1815. An act of parliament that took common land and put it into the hands of private owners. “By 1820 Knight had acquired more than fifteen thousand acres on Exmoor and set out to reclaim it by draining, enclosing, planting, prospecting, stocking and fertilizing, and by building roads and farms.” (ALFREY, 2012) The walking of the line tells a story, one of layers of history, of the appropriation of common lands by the elite and through his trespass of class struggle.

Fast forward to the present day and there are correlations between the aboriginal song-lines, Richard Long's line and the work of artists like Jason Revok brought up in the urban contemporary school of graffiti writing. Graffiti writing also has a connection with movement, with naming, with an act akin to mapping in that like the Aboriginal song lines, it registers geographical space through the occupation of physical space. Furthermore, graffiti is part of hip hop culture, which, similar to oral traditions like that of the Australian Aboriginals, does not seek to separate art forms but sees various forms of expression as interconnected. Graffiti is one of the four principle elements of the hip hop movement with rapping, dj-ing and dance, a movement that is one the main roots of the DJ culture that I grew up with. This grouping of the elements of hip hop is often attributed to Afrika Bambaata (1957-), considered to be founder of the movement.

Graffiti certainly existed before the music and the proclamation of Hip Hop. In reaction to this many have dismissed the connection as a marketing ploy, including by early graffiti artists working within the scene at the time: “something I guess they thought they could market.” (BLADE apud EDWARDS, 2015, p. 21) Another artist Pink pointed out “many of the white people who write graffiti listen to rock’n’roll and don’t know anything about hip-hop.”(BLADE apud EDWARDS, 2015, p. 25) However conveniently graffiti may have been grouped with rap by the music industry to sell a neat package, that grouping has stayed. It is arguable that hip hop's links with African matrix oral based culture make this cross-disciplinary view point of art very natural.

This interaction between art forms in the hip hop scene was nothing new especially in American jazz culture from which many elements of hip hop grew and which inspired artists, including the abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock (1912-1956) who was said to have immersed himself in bebop jazz, and whose drips are echoed in graffiti aesthetic. Another American artist Mark Tobey (1890-1976) whose work described by art historian William Seitz as "linear movements in space" and like Michaux's scripts were inspired by Chinese and Japanese calligraphy (1962, p.22) studied piano and musical theory with the American experimental composer John Cage (1912-1992).

For myself, as an artist whose work has been shaped by working in the street over many years, the long lasting effect and legacy of this culture has been important in the development of my work as has the music I have listened to: jazz, hip hop, dub and the electronic music of the rave era.

Graffiti also has a connection with landscape, not the never changing landscape of unhindered paths encapsulated in the mythic collective of Australian Aboriginals but a rapidly changing one full of barriers and full of the constantly changing semiotic production of our contemporary multi-media capitalist society, provoking a multi layered and fragmented reading writing relationship.

The act involved in graffiti of writing a name - a personal or collective brand in multiple places in the landscape is an act of naming. The author and critic Cedar Lewisohn talks about a personal brand, self assertion and even makes the accusation of solipsism. It is an act of personal/collective affirmation and has something of the totemic: a totem competing with the brand logos and other graphic manifestations created by the marketing machine of capitalism.

My own work on walls started with inspiration from graffiti writing on trains and walls in New York I saw in books as a teenager, and which had begun to appear on London walls in the 1980s, but developed later into something which had a resemblance to lettering but was not readable in any normal way. My practice, rather than simply imposing a graphic identity on a wall or other object in the urban environment, became more involved in a reader/writer relationship. I became excited with the possibilities of creating open-ended graphic work in which I improvised

forms and asemic writing reacting to what was around me using a vocabulary that was taken from my surroundings – a mish mash of marks scrawls, shapes taken from the city itself.

My works of asemic graffiti writing pieces draw inspiration from a number of non-semantic sources such as architecture, graphic design and geometric abstraction. I continue to classify them, on the whole, however, as writing for a number of reasons: They come from that ancient tradition of the 'writing on the wall', in which the common man is given voice by writing in a public place. They are largely sequential in execution and can be 'read' linearly, and thus presenting themselves as scripts with the possibility to be decoded. They involve repeated basic graphic elements in varying configurations like an alphabet. They also insert themselves into the semiotic matrix of the city. They play with the intelligibility of graffiti and the non semantic visual aspects of logos and graphic design. They are pieces of lettering that are to be read on a purely aesthetic level.

We travel from place to place in the city reading. As we travel through the city, we read from our phones, the adverts on public transports, the signs, the names of shops, we even read the architecture – we know what kind of place we are in and what to expect there. In an act that parallels our nomadic ancestors, we are reading and constructing a text from the parade of semiotic events that comprise the city. In inserting asemic elements on the walls, I have hoped to bring an element of surprise and disruption to the semiotic flow but most of all I want to create a kind of free flowing improvised visual music.

There is always a blurring of artistic delineations inherent in the use of the word writing. We write a poem, a piece of music, we write in the air gesturing with our bodies. There is something very profound and natural about Bambaataa's vision of a unity between word, music, dance and visual art. A term that crops up often in hip hop culture is 'flow' a word more generally used to describe the movement of water. In terms of hip hop, the word is most commonly associated with rap. The musicologist Oliver Kautny defines it as "“using the vowels and consonants to form a mostly rapid and rhythmical highly organized flow of syllables.” (2015, p. 350) This aspect is of high importance in the music. He goes on to state that "the meanings of many rap lyrics are far less important than their pure sonorities...the semantics of rap

lyrics cannot be reduced to mere storytelling.” (2015, p. 351) The flow of the rap has a direct interaction with the music, as Kautny defines in his three elements of flow: “production, texture, and reception” (2015, p. 358)

The word flow can be applied to both dance and graffiti writing. Dance involves the flow of movement interacting with the music – production, reception and the visual texture of the physicality and visual resonance of the dancers. Equally, graffiti writing values the fluidity of the gesture and the rhythm of the marking as well as the texture of those marks on the wall. Perhaps the most fluid gestural movement we are accustomed to making is joined up cursive; we train our hands to imprint our thoughts in letter form on the page in the most direct and uninterrupted manner possible.

The written content of graffiti, like rap, does not rely on story, ie. semantic content, as it is usually a name only often written in a way that renders it unreadable to many. Lewisohn describes graffiti writing as an “inward looking” art form with lettering “intended to be indecipherable to the general public” (LEWISOHN, 2008, p. 31) Certainly, there is an element of it being intended for a certain group in the know, but more importantly, it prioritizes a kind of visual sonority- a visual flow over readable content. This is true of both tagging, which is a style which celebrates the cursive aspect of writing and more elaborated pieces that involve elements of graphic design and therefore more related to print culture.

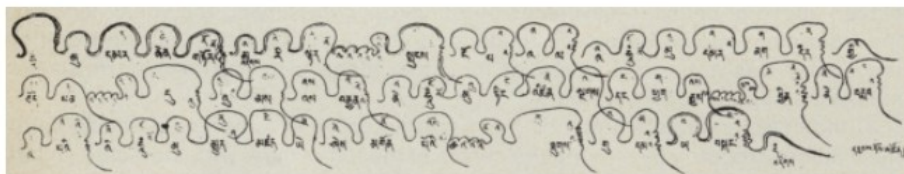
Hip hop and other break based music in its use of sections of the rhythms and sounds of previously recorded records along with digitally produced rhythms marked the start of the culture of dance music with repetitive beats and the era of turntablism.

James Daichendt points out, “at its heart, graffiti is about writing one's name over and over.” (2015) This repetition reflecting the rhythms of the music. Goldie, a British producer, musician and DJ, one of the most important pioneers of drum and bass - a musical form also based on breaks, seen by many as the British equivalent of hip hop - is also a graffiti artist and drew parallels between his musical production and perfecting the letter form. “If I didn't learn graffiti the way I did letter forms and outlines – I don't think I could do music the way I do now. It wouldn't be the same. In

that sense of purist graffiti, it was always about moving forward with the letter form.”
(GOLDIE apud LEWISOHN, 2008, p. 44)

Jason Revok's work with 'the machine' presents a paired down version of visual flow. His apparatus creates a continuous set of parallel lines controlled by the movement of the whole body, like a dance, moving from one side to another along the line predetermined by the surface. The spray creates texture on the line, which is clean in places and rough with speckles of paint in others. The work references writing and the tradition of graffiti writing without being readable in the usual sense whilst also being a choreographic performance. Such a shift towards dispensing of any semantic content is in many ways a logical development of graffiti's emphasis on flow.

Neither Revok's work, and nor my own, is a response necessarily to any specific tune or song but it is deeply rooted in a response to music. It is something that I have become more and more conscious of and deliberate about. This connection between music, dance, writing and painting has a long history. Yves Klein's blue women performed and pressed inked bodies to paper to music. Kandinsky dreamed of creating harmonies with colours. Buddhist monks create mnemonic annotations to aid in the learning of chants, which, unlike Western musical scores are not designed to be universal but instead are individualized affective responses to music. (VANDOR, 1975)



Source: World of Music vol. 17 no. 2 1975

The connections between writing systems and abstraction are fairly evident. As McLuhan points out, phonetic writing is an abstraction of sound and once that has been established, the concern with pictorial representation present in hieroglyphics makes way to a simple letter shapes that suit the physical technology being used. The necessity for speed and efficiency of communication in writing means that characters have a tendency towards simplification as can be seen in the evolution of

the letter A below. Put in architectural terms: form follows function.



Egyptian
3,000 BC



Sinai
1,850 BC



Phoenician aleph
1,200 BC



Greek alpha
600 BC



Roman A
114 AD

source: www.how-ocr-works.com

Using repeated paired down simple geometric elements has allowed me to do two things: focus on the rhythmic flow of the piece, and in terms of urban art, respond to the surroundings in which the piece is being produced. To use the word 'writing' implies also reading. Graffiti writing has always incorporated the graphic communication styles, which are everywhere in the multimedia print culture of the contemporary capitalist urban environment. Graffiti writers play with typography and appropriated popular culture. The aesthetic of generic print culture is turned into a unique piece through the hand of the artist. There is also a conversation with the architecture of the city itself. In using that term, I imply every aspect including signage, street furniture, etc. Very different to writing or painting on a blank paper or canvas, the graffiti writer or urban artist inserts semiotic production into a space that is already replete with such information of various kinds, as if inserting a word into a text with multiple authors.

The awareness of preexisting context and the appropriation of ready made material to be chopped and changed is an important aspect of both rap music and graffiti and street art. Revok's earlier forays into the abstract were assemblages created from fragments of signs collected in Detroit. They evoke the building blocks of turntable and digital driven music: the sample. In Revok's work, the typographic elements in the signs were broken down into elements no longer recognizable as letters and words and reconstructed to create artworks. An element of juxtaposition, accidental ordering or rearrangement of elements is frequently evident in the aesthetics of graffiti, even the order of the painted subway cars that left the yard, and therefore the order in which the pieces would be read, was always a random whim of whoever assembled the train. Graffiti does not live in the controlled environment of the gallery with blank white walls. But in the street where it coexists with a lot of other visual information. Individual pieces of graffiti or street art are placed next to or over

layered on what is already there. Even the texture of walls adds patina to a piece created on the street.

Jean Michel Basquiat (1960-1988), an artist whose artistic journey began tagging the New York streets as Samo, bring to mind this building up of textures and over-layering. His cluttering of visual elements also carry a street aesthetic reminiscent of the proliferation of images found in urban environments. The American critic Marc Mayer lists: "He used body parts, machine parts, parts of speech, figures, groups, cartoons, exclamatory symbols, declarations, official seals, farmyard animals, trailing lines, graphs, numbers, scientific diagrams, formulas and countless orphaned words." (MAYER apud LDK, 2005)

The musical aesthetic of hip hop and digital musical genres also based on samples and breaks is similar. The American musicologist Murray Forman writes:

"Apart from constructing a bridge between musical antecedents and the present, digital sampling can imbue an element of authenticity on newer tracks as the patina of the past seeps into the new mix. The hiss or pop of old vinyl records provides a sonic link to the original recording by referencing its age and wear through what are, in most conventional recording contexts, deemed as imperfections." (2004, p. 390)

The British musicologist Justin Williams echoes this, "A heavily saturated intertextuality is part and parcel of the hip-hop aesthetic." (2009, p. 90)

In my own work on the street -as well as in the studio- sampling and overlaying are key elements. Works are often made over the top of vestiges of existing visual marking on walls, such as painted advertisements, of which portions of are left visible, as in the example below. All times when painting on the streets, unless the wall is newly painted, there is always a vestige of human or natural activity on the surface that cannot help but reveal itself in the work. I also go through a process of 'reading' whilst walking the streets, noting shapes marks and textures to be reused in works.

My pieces are done using spray paint, some freehand and some with stencil to allow for repetition, with the occasional use of emulsion paint and rollers. Other

tools are pieces of sheet wood or cardboard to use as a ruler or to mask, a large board compass for circles and masking tape. Apart from when the wall has been specifically covered with a paint base, I prefer to paint directly onto the surface as it is.



Santa Rita do Passa Quatro 2021 photo author's own

When I arrived at this wall to paint this piece, the numbers were there already, part of an old advertisement that had been painted in the past. I used two stencils to create forms that interlocked with the numbers and blocked off the portion in blue. Lastly, I added a black shadow form that gave the illusion that the geometric form created by the interlocking abstract forms reminiscent of letter forms were floating in front of the wall. The linear forms of the stencil contrast with the rounded hand painted numbers in the background. The heavy texture created by the numerous

applications of base colour on the bricks and the erosion caused by weather adds a further dimension rather like the background crackle of a sampled record. My painting was not merely applied to the surface, there is an interaction with that surface.



Santa Rita do Passa Quatro 2021 photo author's own

This piece was made using freehand to paint in the curves and a compass to draw the circles before painting. I wanted the shapes to have the feeling of a rounded font. I masked off areas with tape and added more cursive elements with freehand spray. The black shadow again gives a three dimensional illusion reminiscent of a shop sign. The patina of the wall is minimal but it still adds depth to the piece.



Santa Rita do Passa Quatro 2022 photo author's own

In this piece there is a dialogue with both the flower forms in the Portuguese style pavement and the straight lines and ninety degree angles in the wall. The mixture of straight lines and circles echo the shapes in the Latin alphabet but the form they take is as much dictated by the existent features in the street as by artistic intention. As with all my street pieces, I started only with some general vestiges of ideas – I often carry a sketchbook with a number of graphic possibilities on the pages drawn very roughly in pencil and pen. The piece itself is executed in a very improvised manner. This improvisation is common and necessary in street art and is analogous in some ways to a jazz musician coming armed with certain ideas and progressions and improvising in order to complement and extend and develop an

existing piece of music. This is one of the big differences between street art and muralism as the artist usually arrives at the place that will act as a support for his or her artwork without any previous knowledge and therefore will have to tailor the work to the place.

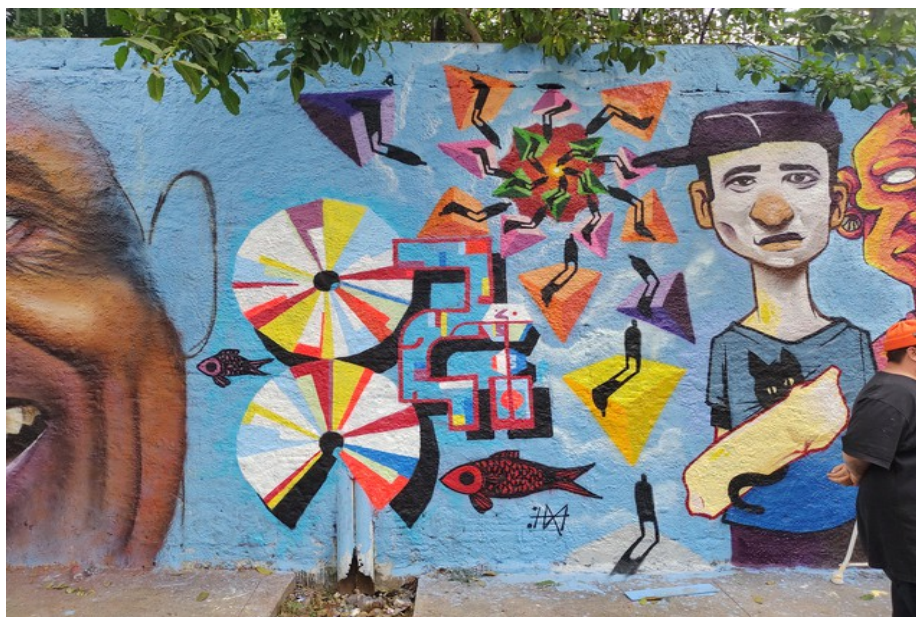


São Mateus 2022 photo author's own

In this piece in São Mateus, there is a relationship between the forms created by the blue lines and the structure of the playground. The painting converses with the architectural elements around it in terms of form and colour.



Vila Pompeia, São Paulo 2022 photo author's own ²



a larger section of the wall in Vila Pompeia showing complete or partially complete work by other artists. photo author's own

Street art is frequently a collective and collaborative art form, and walls are painted either synchronically, as in the case of this wall in Vila Pompeia, or more gradually by groups of artists. This involves dialogue between each artist. When

² Top and right by Sapiens

viewing the wall, there is no longer an isolated single point perspective as an artist working on a canvas in the studio might have but instead, each artist is contributing to a communal visual mosaic. Sometimes the collaboration is more planned but more often than not, there are accidental or subconscious placings of graphic elements like the fish faced in the direction of what will be the ear of face on the left, for example.



Anhangabau, São Paulo 2023 photo author's own ³

This piece was done simultaneously with another artist. who painted the figurative work on the right. It was not a pre-planned collaboration and my part was completely improvised. The green shape is suggestive of a comic book speech bubble. This then turns into a cube shape with a circle beside it filled with freehand asemic writing. My 'letters' are contained in a box, which mirrors the shapes of the buildings in the street, which also act as containing space for the other artworks and writings. The wall of the building in the background is filled with *pixação* a kind of lettering style with origins in São Paulo. With all these elements grouped together, it is not hard to imagine it as a page from an illustrated book.

³ Figure on right by A Folego

The street like many others in São Paulo is filled with writing and pictures, which together become a book written by numerous hands. This book is then 'read' by passers by. It is a book that can be read with varying sequences and with different beginnings and ends depending on each individual 'reader'.

3. Paintings and Visual Poems

What constitutes writing, ultimately, is not the sign (analytic abstraction), but much more paradoxically, the cursivity of the discontinuous...Make a loop: you produce a sign; but shift it forward, your hand resting there on the receptive surface; you generate writing. (ROLAND BARTHES)

Transposing a practice developed in the street onto canvas or other support in the studio is a challenge. Gone is the information already existent on the wall, it's surrounding environmental and architectural context. The artist is instead confronted with a blank page. The artist is no longer inserting a creation into an already semiotically and visually rich environment but bringing something to be in an empty and isolated space.

Although they are different practices in many ways, there has always been a dialogue between my work done on the street and work done in the studio. The different contexts require different solutions, precipitating change and development. I want to bring things that have interested me in my street work to the studio: the flow and rhythm of the line, the tension dialogue between elements, texture, the freedom of improvisation and a 'musicality'.

In the street, I always have so much to interact with, whether it be the architecture, random marks on the wall or the work of other artists. In order to maintain an element of this dialogue. I have found two solutions: either to create objects that are able to converse with each other and other things in the space around them or create work that contains a dialogue of elements within it. As asemic writing has its roots firmly in visual poetry, I have found it useful to keep the idea of the poem in mind whilst producing paintings.

Poetry, when performed, brings alive not only the words but also the rhythms and sound effects such as alliteration, assonance and repetition. It comes off the page and becomes an event more akin to a musical performance. The fact that we often think of poetry and song as separate entities at all is a testament to the separation of the senses brought by the typographic age, that separation which is

central to McLuhan's argument - what he refers to as “the divorce of reading and verbalizing.” (1962, p. 43) Asemic writing foregrounds the muscular and visual aspects of writing and by bypassing the semantic also invites a more synesthetic reading approach. I have also kept in mind the intimate links, which I have felt to be so important in the culture within which I have worked in street art, between visual art, music and dance. The movement of the hand along the surface is a kind of dance. If words can describe spoken language, marks on a surface can also be the visual signifier of music.

It is with music that the Italian philosopher Umberto Eco (1932-2016) begins his seminal book *The Open Work*:

“A number of recent pieces of instrumental music are linked by a common feature: the considerable autonomy left to the individual performer in the way he chooses to play the work. Thus, he is not merely free to interpret the composer's instructions following his own discretion (which in fact happens in traditional music), but he must impose his judgment on the form of the piece, as when he decides how long to hold a note or in what order to group the sounds: all this amounts to an act of improvised creation.” (1989, I)

Eco contrasts these pieces with traditional “finite works” They are “open works,” in which the “form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood.” (1989, I) For Eco, this is a fundamental and defining difference between a traditional format that seeks to limit interpretation and a modern one that seeks to be open to multiplicity. This position is one that is echoed in asemic writing's openness to interpretation and in McLuhan's mosaic post literate. Eco, referring to visual art, talks of a “constellation of elements that lend themselves to all sorts of reciprocal relationships” (1989, IV)

The Brazilian artist Lygia Pape (1927-2004) used the word book in the titles of a number of works, *Livro do Tempo* and *Livro Noite e Dia*, for example that comprise of a number of separate geometrical constructions, which add the temporal element fundamental to Neoconcretism and, importantly, allow the observer to choose the order of sequencing. This temporal aspect much related to the 'movement' (1989, IV) Eco speaks of is suggested also by the use of the word *livro*, book in the title. Traditionally, in Occidental art, it has been the function of text to describe temporality and painting to depict a static frozen moment.

Dialogue and this principle of movement, which is temporal, in terms of reading, and, in terms of process, physical is central to what I do. The term 'verbal' is synonymous with language and also denotes activity. The verb is essential to the formation of a sentence. Spoken and written language, through signifying action via the verb, becomes an abstraction of time. In my own work, I have wanted, for the most part, to steer clear of a single fixed viewpoint and therefore fixed temporal moment, and instead develop work that has multiple elements that could be read either linearly like text - following an order suggested by the sequencing of written language or any other sequence chosen by the observer, or grouped in a looser modular mosaic type of organization, which can be manipulated and changed by person experiencing the work. The multiple elements create the possibility of multiple relationships between them.

My intention has not been to just mimic text, but to create painting as well. I wanted to play with the ambiguity between word and image and produce something that was simultaneously writing-like but that also can be viewed in its entirety as a single art piece. My work should have the possibility of being read as a text but be also open to other possible ways to be viewed and interpreted.

I am interested in both cursive writing and printed text formats. For the more gestural elements I used paint rollers, spray or a flat edged brush, and for the repetitive graphic elements, I developed a kind of block print using wood and EVA. As a support, I mostly used either wood or canvas although some preliminary work was done on paper. The advantages of wood is the possibility to cut and rearrange pieces to create new configurations as well as possibility to sand layers to create textures and over-layering and the creation of varied more three dimensional shapes. I used raw canvas and canvas with a primer, stretching some onto a frame and leaving others without.

My use of colour- although occasionally using dark to light or cold to warm background to foreground schemes - like my wish to avoid single point perspective has been far more concerned with a sequence of hues for harmonic effect than with depth. Similar in some ways to Augusto de Campos's use of tone colour, in that it is my intention is to use colours to interact with each other in either a complementary manner or to clash for effect, creating melodic undulations of colour with some

breaks and discordancies. Kandinsky, who was synesthetic, saw colour as music, and my own intention has been to use it for similar purposes.

For Hélio Oiticica, colour was not a way to create an illusion of space as in a landscape but an element that could change the viewer's experience of space. As the Brazilian art historian Luiz Camillo Osorio puts it. “liberating color in space, the insertion of time, and the incorporation of the spectator into the experience of the work” (2021, p. 173) In *Penetráveis* (1960) the individual is invited to enter a space which is filled with a certain hue. The person progresses from one space to another in the installation, interacting with the element of colour. I have wanted colours to have a dynamic interaction between them in the same way as the graphic elements do. They are grouped sequenced patterns. The eye follows them along, grouping elements within the same tone together.

In practice, my use of colour has been very improvised, starting with a certain tone and proceeding seeing what other colours converse, cause dissonance or interact in a way that will produce a certain tension between them. Colour is not a signifier in any symbolic sense as in the relationships between colours and words in Augusto de Campos's *Lygia Fingers*. The choice of tones is more about how they relate to each other in the closed system of the work.

I began creating paintings by combining graphic elements reminiscent of typography as I had on the street and over-layering to make new forms. In many of these pieces, I also wanted to create textures and the patina of overwriting found on urban walls. For this phase in my work I chose object-type supports with a geometric and architectural feel. I often grouped these objects together so that they could be rearranged to create varying configurations much like letters of an alphabet, words or phrases.

I owe a debt to Concretism for the development of this kind of object painting and more. There are similarities to be found between the Concretist artists' processes of carefully hand-making works to have the look of the machine industrial age and graffiti artists spray painting work inspired by graphics produced using mass media technology. The art historian Niko Vicario writes, “attention to surface aligned the work of Argentinean concrete artists with that of industrial fabrication, even if the

painstakingly handmade character of their paintings somewhat belies this posture.” (2021, p. 21) Augusto de Campos's 1972 poem *Viva Vaia*, reworked as a sculpture in 2016, with a Concretist aesthetic utilizes the geometricity of the letters to create a poem, which at first does not look like writing at all but piece of geometric abstraction. It is this geometric nature of writing that likewise has inspired much of my work

True to the spirit of the Uruguayan artist whose ideas of breaking the frame the British art historian Zanna Gilbert sees as fundamental to the development of South American Concretism, Rhod Rufus (1920-1969), none of my paintings are enclosed by a frame and their overall shape is dictated by compositional elements or the way in which they were to interact with the surrounding space or other paintings. (2021) Likewise, the kind of support chosen reflects their materiality: This material aspect is part of how they function aesthetically- the solidity of wood or more ephemeral cloth.



Runes of a Tropical Viking #2 acrylic on wood 20cmx20cm 2021 photo author's own



Runes of a Tropical Viking #1 #2 #3 acrylic on wood 20 x 20cm(each) 2021 photo author's own

In the three painting series *Runes of a Tropical Viking* painted on wooden box forms I created a series of glyphs using combinations and superimpositions of mainly one form, a half hexagon shape with 120 degree angles. This repetition of the same angles is reminiscent of runic alphabets, which use straight lines with different combinations of the same angles to create different letters. The tradition of bind runes comes out of ancient Scandinavian magical traditions, in which two or more runes, utilizing their idiographic meaning, are combined to create a new meaning. They can be superimposed or connected linearly or even built up into more complex matrices.⁴

So as to replicate the over-layering and texture found frequently on the street that were very much part of the aesthetic, I had to build up these layers myself by putting in graphic elements onto the surface of the wood and sanding it back, and then creating another layer on top. This technique also, in keeping with the theme of bind runes, helped to create possibilities of new forms by combinations. Forms that had been sanded out kept a vestige showing and could be painted back in. I used

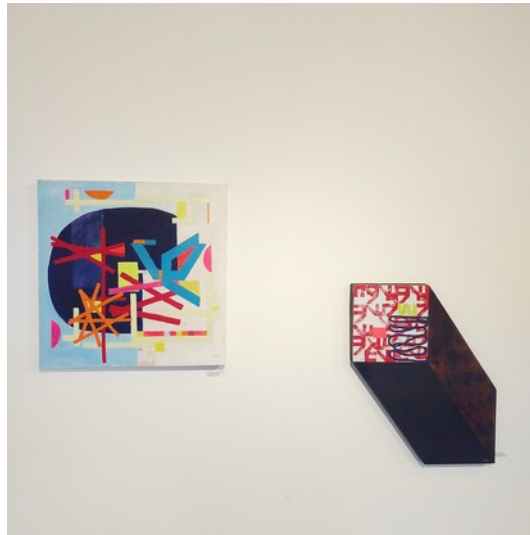
4 Olafur Davidsson provides information on this subject in his essay *Icelandic Magic Symbols and Spell Books*

warmer tones to bring elements forward and colder ones to send them back helped to create movement and dynamics.



Cuboid acrylic and spray on wood 50 x 60cm 2022 photo author's own

With *Cuboid* I brought some optical trickery used by sign makers that give flat objects the appearance of three dimensions using perspective and light and shade. These techniques, I have used a lot on the street to stand out and subvert architecture. In this way the flat painting on a wooden frame reads as an object that visually juts out of the wall it is hung on interrupting the flatness. Especially when combined with other objects, it begins to structure the space around it.



Oximoro exhibition at Galeria Plexi 2022 photo author's own ⁵

Many of the paintings were created using separate sections of wood that could be cut, arranged and rearranged during the process of creation allowing new dynamics of elements. Some of the sections I fixed together with glue and dowel and others I left separate to allow for multiple configurations when hanging.



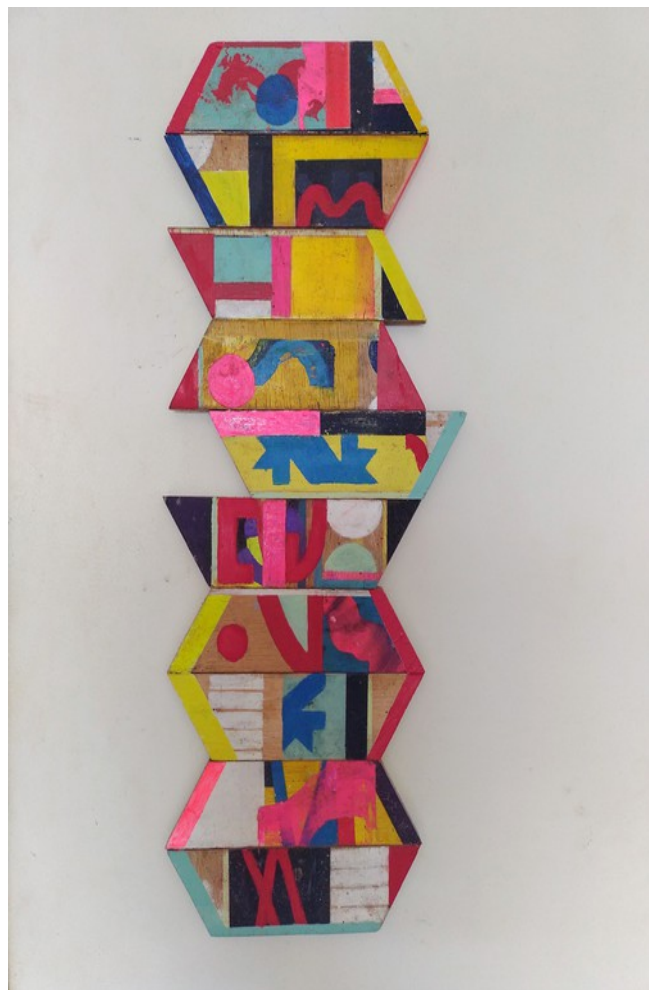
Lozenge Object Paintings acrylic and spray on wood 13.5x 23 cm each 2022 photo author's own

This pair of paintings combine a number of different types of mark and texture. They were painted using both matte and gloss spray as well as more than one type of acrylic paint. I used masking tape and cut stencils for the spray paint as well as

⁵ Expography by Luiz Menenez

applying it freehand. The acrylic paint was applied by brush, spatula and using EVA block print. I wanted to combine a number of writing-like elements together with flat geometric forms in order to build up a unity of disparate graphic elements, approximating the kind of accidental and otherwise combinations of elements found on the street.

The first stage was to paint basic shapes onto a sheet of plywood, which was then cut into strips and subsequently into same size lengths, each cut at 30 degrees with a plunge saw. These pieces were used for more than one work. Like my street work, the process involved little specific pre-planning apart from having a mental stock of graphic elements that can be combined in different ways. Typically pieces would build up over time and might be left the months or longer before being worked on again. This slow build up of marks again mirrored the slow build up of forms and texture on the surfaces in the street. Any permanent fixing with dowels would be towards the later stages to allow for changes in dynamic by swapping pieces around.



Urban Totem acrylic and spray on wood 69x 26cm 2023 photo author's own

Urban Totem was another painting which was created modularly over a period of time. The format is long and thin, a shape inspired by native American totem poles, objects that recount stories that are connected with families, clans or individuals. A native American totem pole serves some of the functions of a text or more accurately, serves, amongst other things, as a mnemonic device to support an orally held tradition. The lines of the joins act in a similar way to lines on a ruled page to separate each line of 'text' and as a reference to textual language.



Modular Poem acrylic, spray and enamel paint on wood variable size 2023 photo author's own

With much of my work a modular element is a very important aspect. I work through a process which incorporates multiple cycles of configuration, cutting and rearrangement of elements, which mirrors both the process of forming signs in languages, like bind runes, for example and the formation of words and phrases through the grouping of letters. Language itself is modular, allowing for the constant arrangement and rearrangement of signs. Therefore, by using a number of independent elements in a piece, it allows for a number of configurations. Using a lozenge or hexagon shape, a form found frequently in nature due to its strength and packing efficiency, allows for a higher number of possible configurations.

Another reason to work using a modular format is its interactivity: the possibility of the person appreciating the work to also have the ability to change its configuration. I make a piece that has various elements that relate to each other as part of a whole. Like language, the order in which they are placed and the spacing affects what it 'says' in its entirety. As with Dermisache's loose sheets of paper, this leaves the piece open to rearrangement. By allowing another person to manipulate and arrange the different elements, it allows a type of conversation and the opportunity to share a little of the authorship. It is an open kind of work, which, like language itself, can be rearranged constantly.

Aesthetically, the process entails an ongoing process of disruption and reharmonization. At each stage, the composition of the elements is complete: that is to say, there is, to my mind, a harmonious dynamism between the parts. It is the same for the balance of colours, shapes and textures. This arrangement is then broken and rearranged. A new aesthetic solution must be found.

I have always thought this process very analogous to the way cultures and languages intersect and interact in a globalized world, and especially in cosmopolitan places like London or São Paulo. In these places, due to a fast changing dynamic resulting from the constant in flux of new people, bringing with them always something new to the cultural and semiotic mix, there are constant changes occurring, every time creating a new hybrid. These are the places where that semiotic boundary area which Lotman wrote of is most felt. I have spent my entire life in these places, and this fast shifting dynamic is a factor that is reflected in my work and processes.

Zanna Gilbert makes much of Gestalt theory in establishing links between concrete art and concrete poetry, especially in the work of Wyllis de Castro, who worked with both painting and poetry. She highlights the parallels between the *Cartaz poema (deep down)* made in 1958 which stacks the words on top of each other in a column in the middle of the page drawing the eye down sharply in the process of reading, and *Projeto Objeto Ativo* (1958) which creates the same eye movement visually. “ It conflates two visual perceptual processes, reading and seeing.” (GILBERT 2021, p. 2016) According to Gestalt theory, our minds are hardwired to order the elements we see in certain ways – group like shapes or colours, complete fragmented directional movement, arrange elements with the same directional movement together, amongst other things. In arranging graphic elements in a certain way in my paintings, I create certain movements and tensions. When the paintings are cut and rearranged, the continuity is broken. Mental processes, which are posited by Gestalt theory go into the process of aesthetically resolving the discordancies created by the new rearrangements. In this way, through painting using this process, I build up flows of balanced groupings of shapes and colours, which the eye of the observer can follow. The paintings are, however, never still nor entirely resolved as they hold the potential for new dynamics and new meaning.

With studio work rooted in a street practice nurtured in a subculture intimately connected with music, it follows that there should be a parallel with processes of music making, especially the process of making digital or turntable based music. Each individual element used in building up the works in a modular manner functions much in the way a sample functions in contemporary music production. A producer or DJ takes musical fragments of existing music (samples) and places them together to make a new musical whole. In the same way, I cut a segment of a painting with a saw and join it together with other segments to make a whole, or alternatively, use block print in a similar way to build up the painting from numerous, often repetitive, segments.



Words Sometimes Fail Me but the Music Never Does 100cm x 100cm 2022 photo author's own

Words Sometimes Fail Me but the Music Never Does is a painting which very much came out of my work on the street. It uses bold typographic-like elements in layers. These layers work in a similar way to how, in digital production, music is built up from layers of samples and recorded instruments.

The painting has a very typographic feel. Where, in the street, I would have used black to create the effect of shadow, in this painting like many others, I used a deep Prussian blue. Work in the street usually needs very bold contrasts to stand out amongst so much competing information around it, whereas in the studio I preferred to use a blue as it holds more vibrancy. Each element has the appearance of fragments of writing or some other writing related item. They are superimposed one over another. Each element can be read separately or in conjunction with the others. Forms are created through the process of the marks created by brush or roller

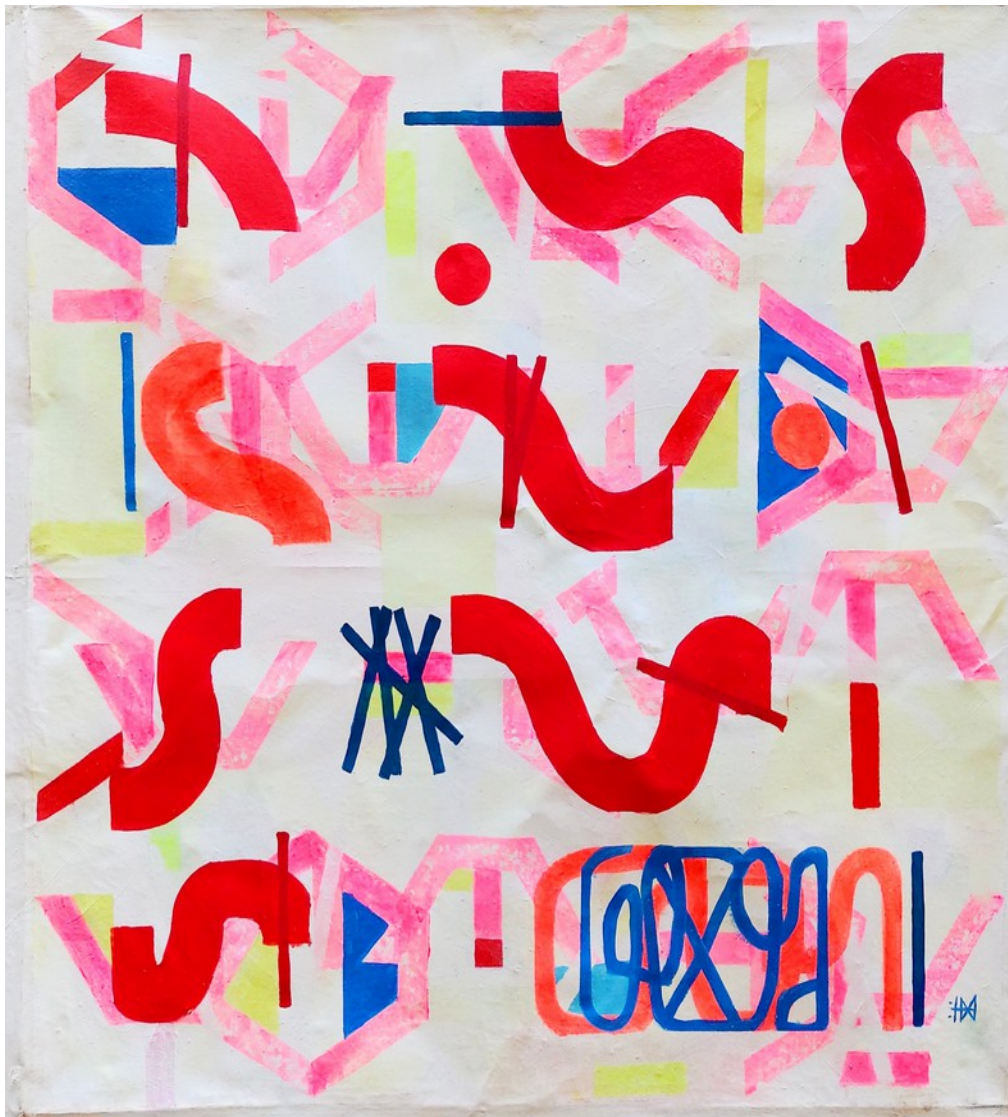
blocking out the surface on the wood and the conjunctions formed through successive layers covering parts of the preceding ones.



Blue Bass Undertones acrylic on Canvas 100cm x 100 cm 2022 photo author's own

Blue Bass Undertones was a painting which was created with very with specific types of music in mind, namely dub and drum and bass. In these genres, the emphasis is on the bass. In dub, and more broadly in reggae, the melody is carried by the bass, and other instruments like guitar are mainly used rhythmically. Drum and percussion patterns are often complex and play to the bass. Drum and bass is electronic music which has parts of its roots in reggae sound system culture and again is bass driven. The blue line in the painting carries the main movement of painting. It is thick and heavy making a visual representation of a bass line. It has peaks and troughs rather like a vinyl record. Dub plates - as the instrumental

versions of reggae songs made for the sound systems are called – are heavy with deep grooves to give a heavy bass sound. The line is broken in places to give spaces in the flow and also gives the impression of writing. They were created with a paint roller and parts were painted in to give a more saturated even blue and others were left textured. The red lines and other marks were put on top percussively using block print.



Loop acrylic on canvas 100cm x 100cm 2022 photo author's own

The title *Loop* refers to the practice in electronic music production of taking part of a piece of existing music and turning it into a repeating loop. This loop can then be combined with other loops and the producer will put other instruments, textures and sounds on top in layers. Repetition of motifs and layers were the means through which the piece was built up. Some forms were created with block

prints and others freehand. The painting mixes repetitive elements with fluid fluctuating freehand ones.



During my isolation in the São Paulo interior from 2021 on, I noticed a gradual change happening in my work. Whereas in the city I was reacting to a place with a huge amount of information, in the countryside, I had a feeling of space around me although socially more isolated due to quarantine restrictions. On a practical level, I had the possibility to work on a larger scale. I began to use more uncluttered simplified basic graphic elements and my work began to emphasize space more.

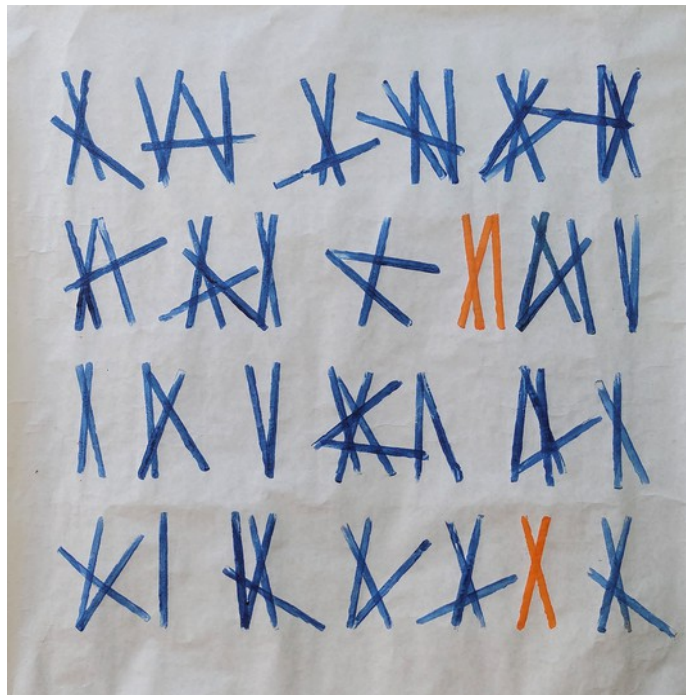
In my research about writing systems, I became very inspired by the world's earliest known alphabetic writing system cunieform which developed in the Middle East just as urban civilisation was taking root. The symbols of cuneiform were created by pressing a cut straight reed into a clay tablet. The American linguist Peter T Daniels (1951-) writes: “ The earliest signs (3100 BC) were linear – that is they were drawn with a pointed stylus – but it was quickly realized that impressing the stylus in short quick strokes was both more efficient and more aesthetic.” (1996, p. 40) Both reeds and clay were materials readily available in the Mesopotamian basin. It was a basic readily available tool that created a simple mark, which could be repeated and superimposed to create a variety of signs varying in complexity. There is something primordial about a mark made by impression in clay, like a footprint – probably mankind's first mark- yet something modern in cunieform's efficient method and ease of reproduction has many similarities with printing.

The beauty of cuneiform lies in that simplicity; a rudimentary line form repeated in different configurations. Daniels charts its process of evolution as a language system and it is one of scaling down for ease of use not addition. There was a reduction in the number of lines and of signs from 1200 to about 600. (1996, p. 40) It has all the hallmarks of a successful writing system: it was created with easily accessible tools and its paired down simplicity makes it produce quickly and with clarity so that it can easily be read.

Daniels recounts how cunieiform has its origins in pictographic writing but this

aspect reduces gradually as the language changes and goes through a process of minimalization. The pictures are paired down to a kind of shorthand. The script develops aspects which are less related to image and more related to mathematics. It seems to have evolved in many ways due the nascent Sumerian civilization's need for accountancy. Daniels states that the writing system evolved to the "necessary to record beurocratic transactions." (1996, p. 41) the Swedish mathematician Jöran Friberg confirms: "generally the proto-cunieform texts seem to be stereotyped accounts receipts or lists" (1999, p.109). Daniels describes the evolution of compound signs, which brings an additive aspect to the nearly pictographic in order to create meaning in an efficient manner. For example, the sign for mouth was added to that for food to create a sign for the verb eat. (1996, p. 41). This conjunction of picture and counting arrived at a novel form of codification, in which pictures are added together to arrive at a sum meaning. The Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (1896-1982) writes of the two paroles of language: the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic, in simple terms, image associative versus linear codification. These two aspects of language equvalate very well withinthe dual nature of cunieform.

Cuneiform, aesthetically, reflects its history as a language. It holds vestiges of pictorial register while, simultaneously, it counts time with percussive repetition of that simple line being added to line along a line.



Sticks acrylic block-print on paper 100cm x100cm 2022 photo author's own

Sticks was inspired by the simplicity of cuneiform and also ogham writing, an

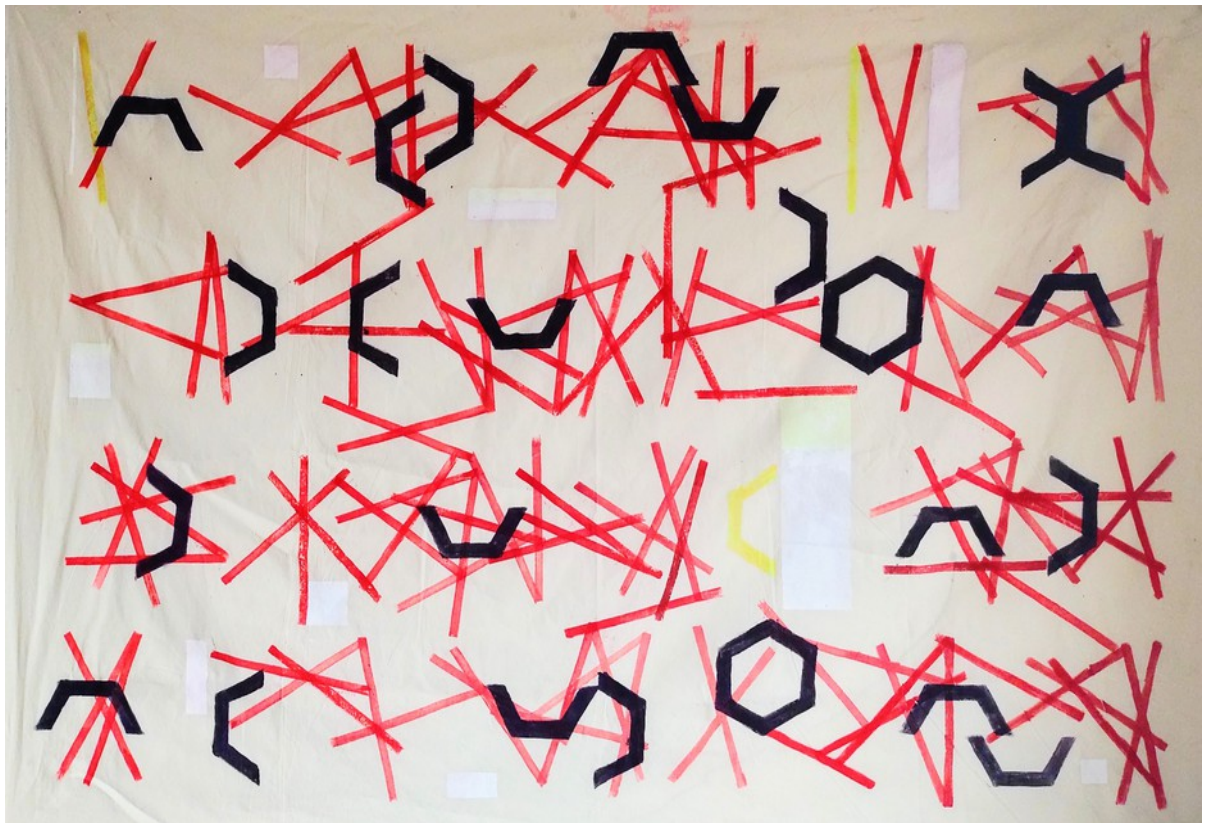
Early Medieval Irish script which uses the number and position of lines, normally scored into stone, to annotate different letters of the alphabet. What both scripts have in common is the ability to describe the world using a simple line repeated. It is minimalistic, efficient and yet at the same time so expressive. Both scripts also have a highly percussive feel that held potential for me to develop the muscular aspect of writing that interests me.

I wanted to explore the visual possibilities of combinations of uniform lines set in rows on the paper and using two colours only. The stripped back simplicity of using only these marks is a far cry from the sumptuousness and possibilities for detailed depiction presented by painting. Although it remains to be said that it is precisely the processual linear stroke of the brush across the surface of the canvas that greatly distinguishes even the most realistic painting from photography. Umberto Eco writes of the line in art: “movement has accompanied the evolution of the visual arts for quite some time, and can already be detected in early petroglyphs as well as in the Nike of Samothrace, in the way the fixed line tries to represent the mobility of real objects.” (1989, IV)

It is only a very simple line which is presented in *Sticks*, the same line, repeated again and again counting time across the paper in rows. This repeated line presents itself as a code, which is the essence of writing, but as it is unreadable in a normal way so we are forced to view it as a piece of visual art and focus on the rhythms and the forms created by the combinations of the lines. Furthermore, despite the simplicity of forms, there still exists the possibility also of a pictorial representation. We start to see the possibilities of images in the clusters of lines.



Cunieform source: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cszjwd>



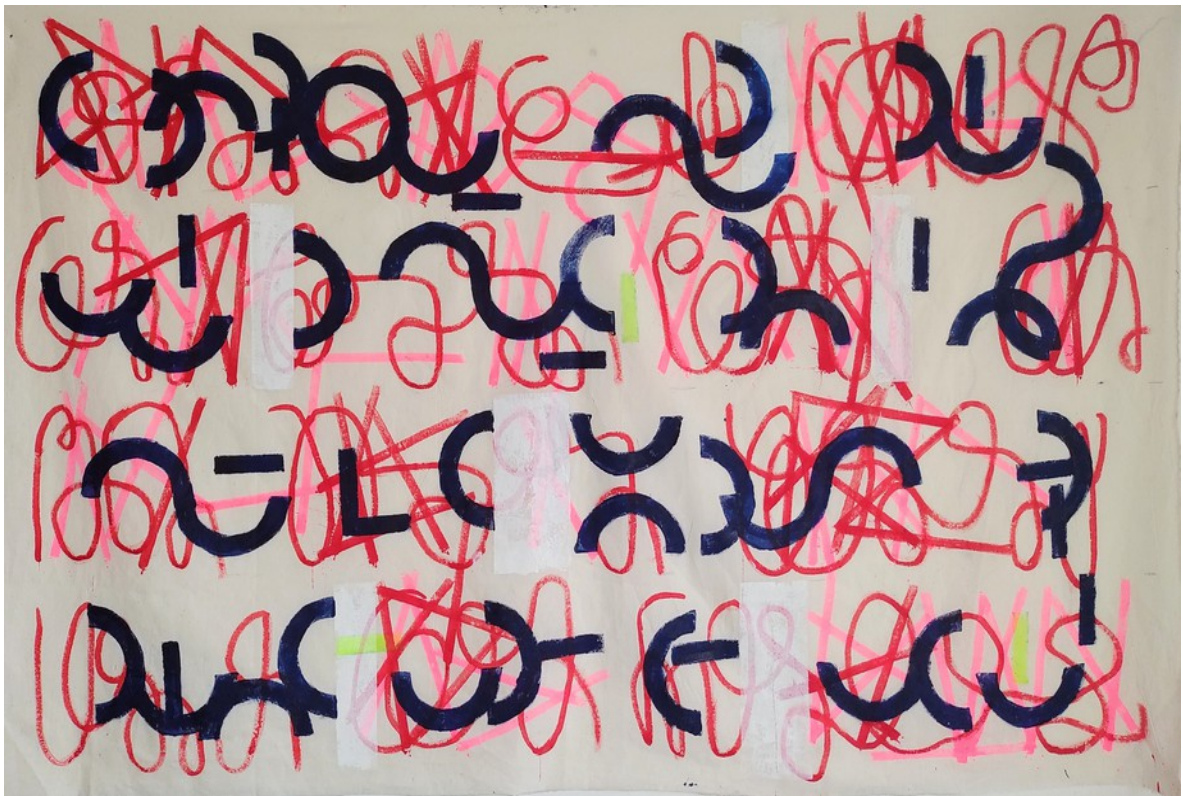
Line Poem 1 acrylic block-print on raw canvas 100cm x 165cm 2023 photo author's own

I revisited the same line block later in *Line Poem 1*. This time, I added a half hexagon and some areas blocked off in white. The size of the surface is much larger than the earlier work and it was painted and nailed to a wall. This allowed me the freedom of movement to focus on the muscular aspects. I put in the rows of red lines first going from left to right, pressing the line stamp onto the textile in a rhythmic manner. The dark purple hexagons were done in another layer in the same way. I kept the same four line 'stanza' format as in *Sticks* and grouped the elements in word or phrase-like configurations mimicking the type of graphic organization that might be found in a poem.

The Spaces in a text work to separate signs and groups of signs that represent thoughts, and with punctuation, to allow the reader to rest. In poetry, spaces prescribe the rhythm of the utterance, separating line from line. In music, the spaces mark rhythm and separate sections of melody. I added patches of white to add depth to the spaces – the pieces are, after all, also paintings, which this extra dimension pertains to. I still allowed some of the red lines to cross between rows. The overall composition is important, and the flows and tensions are not just restricted to a progression from left to right. Despite the format of the poem in lines,

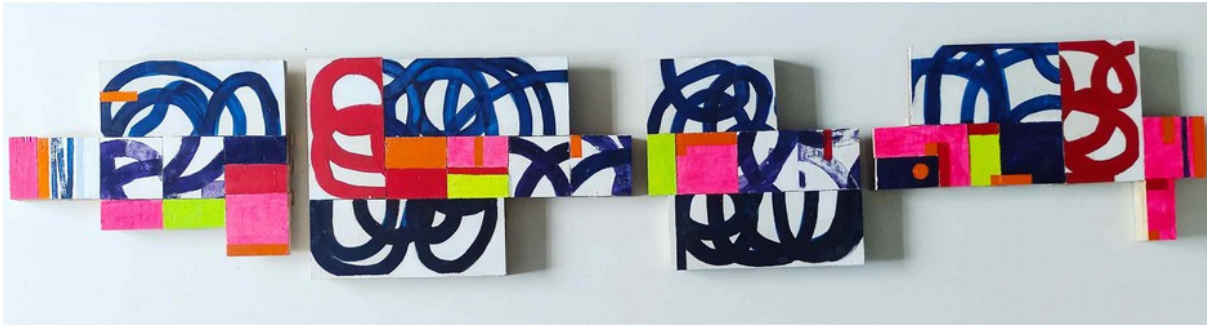
there is an invitation to escape from the bounds of that constrained uni-directional progression.

The raw canvas on which the asemic visual poem is painted is not stretched onto any kind of frame like a traditional canvas would be. The choice for this and a series of other works creates a different kind of object. It is more fluid and can be moved by the air and easily hung in the middle of a space as much as on a wall. The word text comes from the same root as textile.



This Tangled Web We Weave acrylic on raw canvas 100 x 165 cm 2023 photo author's own

This Tangled Web We Weave has the same simple lines in the background but also long continuous lines creating knotted forms as well as the thicker curving and straight lines in dark purple. To use block print, at least within the Western world, is to refer to a post Gutenberg tradition. Previous to the invention of the printing press, the word was written by hand. In this piece, I wanted to add, also, a cursive element. The free flowing line was created with a brush in one continuous movement, knotting back and forth on itself with gaps either masked off or painted in with white paint like the separation of words. The title is from the English writer Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and refers to the fabrication of stories. Joined up cursive hand looks very much like a thread. Weaving is a common metaphor for story telling.



The Cut Line, acrylic on wood variable size 2023 photo author's own

In *The Cut Line* I brought tangled scribble-like brush lines to the modular format, painting them onto plywood and then cutting them in pieces and rearranging them together with cuboid and rectangular wooden sections painted in flat colours, resulting in a mix of regular and more chaotic cut lines. The regular forms and the spaces provide a regular rhythm alongside the looping melodies of the curving, looping hand brush lines.



The Way acrylic on primed canvas 160 x 100 cm 2022 photo author's own

With *the Way* I started with a continuous yellow line with the roller, which was drawn from the top left to bottom right in one continuous movement. I added in spacing representing the line spacings either by masking it off or adding white paint after, some of which left traces of the yellow still visible drawing attention to the imposition of that space. I then added the block printed elements. I wanted to recreate the tension between freedom of movement of line and the necessity of spacing prescribed by text, as well as that between the freehand line and the printed elements.

There is a certain ambiguity to the forms in the piece. Dividing it into strict uniform lines invites it to be read as a text but the division is to a certain extent artificial. The yellow line was originally one continuous line filling the space of the canvas creating a composition that fills the entire space. The piece could be representative of an element of a landscape or be a map like a river or road and the block prints architectural constructions.

A story, especially in the mythic tradition, is often a description of a physical journey, which accompanies personal change the protagonist undergoes. The first lines that mankind etched onto the surface of the planet would probably have been migratory lines. The connection between mark making, travel, story and writing are intimate.

The blocks I used in *the Way* had been made for an artwork based on Japanese *Emakimoni* scrolls, from 13th century Japan. I was fascinated by how illustration can take over much of the function of text with a high level of efficiency. *Emakimoni* are picture scrolls used to tell stories, most frequently of journeys, which first appeared in Japan in the eighth century. Of great interest to me in my work are the continuous scrolls developed during this period, which contain long illustrations mostly uninterrupted by text as they used pictorial rather than textual means to tell an extended story.

These scrolls are figurative depictions of humans, animals and landscape elements but with important differences to the Western pictorial tradition. The Japanese scholar Ken-ichi Sasaki points out, "In modern Western paintings, either a natural landscape or an urban landscape was introduced as the scenery in which

human activities should be portrayed.” He relates this to a an urban sensibility: “the viewpoint is placed in front of the picture and his eye is a scientific one watching the scene objectively.” This, he contrasts with the viewpoint of the Japanese *keshiki* landscape painter, which hovers over the scene. Ken-Ichi Sasaki argues that Japanese painting has a “poet's viewpoint...conveying (*watasu*) his feeling and thought vaguely far away” The middle range is usually removed or obscured in Japanese painting. The artist is concerned with setting the scene and on the important action, which remains at the forefront rather than an accurate depth of field. (2013)

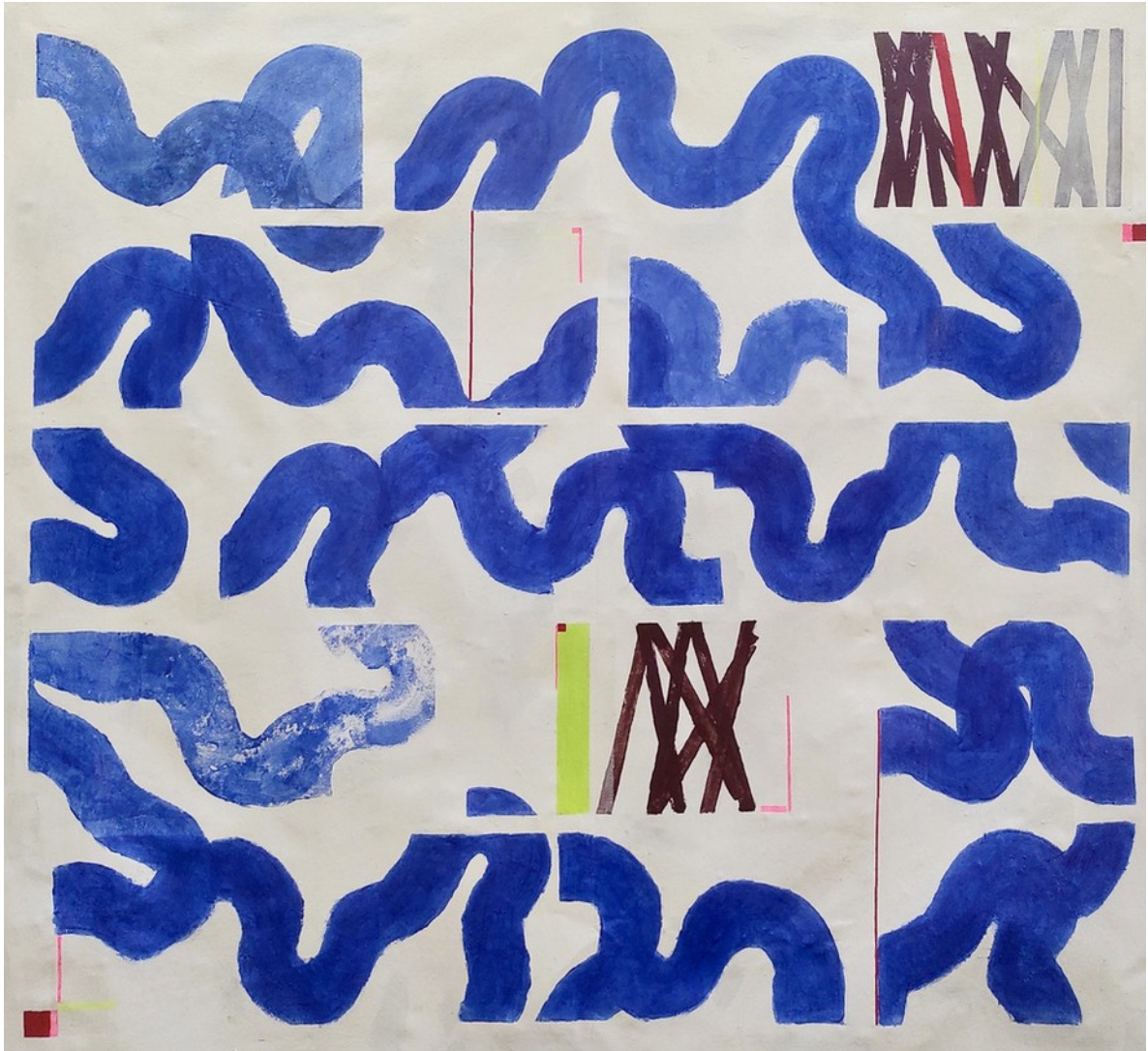
What was fascinating for me was the way in which pictorial elements were used in a manner in some ways similar to signs in a written language. The pictorial/linguistic elements that Michaux had searched for in oriental culture could, perhaps, be found in these scrolls. The Japanese artist Masako Watanabe describes a number of devices which are used in *the Illustrated Legends of Kitano Shrine*, which depicts a journey and the landscape that it passes through, which as he points out, is “perfectly suited to the handscroll format” The manipulation of the “spatial and temporal sequence of the narrative” is achieved by “repetition of key motifs.” It is not a conventional landscape painting as its focus is temporal rather than purely physical. She describes how main characters as well as locations appear multiple times “challenging rational notions of time and space.” (WATANABE, 2011, p. 33) The logic of the linear visual progression as the scroll unfolds is one firmly centered in the manipulations of the storyteller. Landscape elements are used to set the scene, not to present realistic distances but are used to separate events, “The various episodes are both delineated and connected by the landscape and architecture, as well as by distinctive bands of mist and clouds.” (WATANABE, 2011, p. 33) In other words, they are used as equivalents to punctuation and line breaks in a text. The space contained in separate rooms also is used as a means to separate different parts of the action, which the viewer is able to see using the device, known as *fukinuki yatai*, of portraying interior scenes without the roof. (WATANABE 2011, p. 42)



Architectural Poem in the Floating World acrylic on primed canvas 100cmx100cm 2022 photo author's own

I used this idea of marks that could represent architecture or scenic elements from an elevated view- which is neither from the front or completely from above like a map. They could also function as structural elements of a language, much as each room in Emakimoni scrolls functions as a paragraph or section in the narrative or language elements themselves. In *Architectural Poem in the Floating World*, the brown and red marks could be representing buildings or be text arranged along a

bottom line, much in the way Sanskrit or Hindi uses a continuous line along the top. The lines also contain within and between them other graphic elements that could be geographical in nature or have a codified meaning.



Rio Stix*- acrylic on canvas 125 x 140 cm 2022 photo author's own

Inevitably, in the kind of work I am doing, there are grey areas between creating a painting and creating an asemic script. This becomes, perhaps, especially evident when the piece is predominantly a response to a visual experience.

*Rio Stix** was created after a visit to a waterfall near Santa Rita do Passa Quatro,. I brought a little of the place away with me but also some of my other life to it. I created four different stamps, three with flowing lines and one with a straight line and divided the canvas into five linear sections with breaks at intervals using making tape to create a layout with the semblance of a five line poem. I began with the flowing line stamps in blue trying to join the flowing line stamps as much as possible

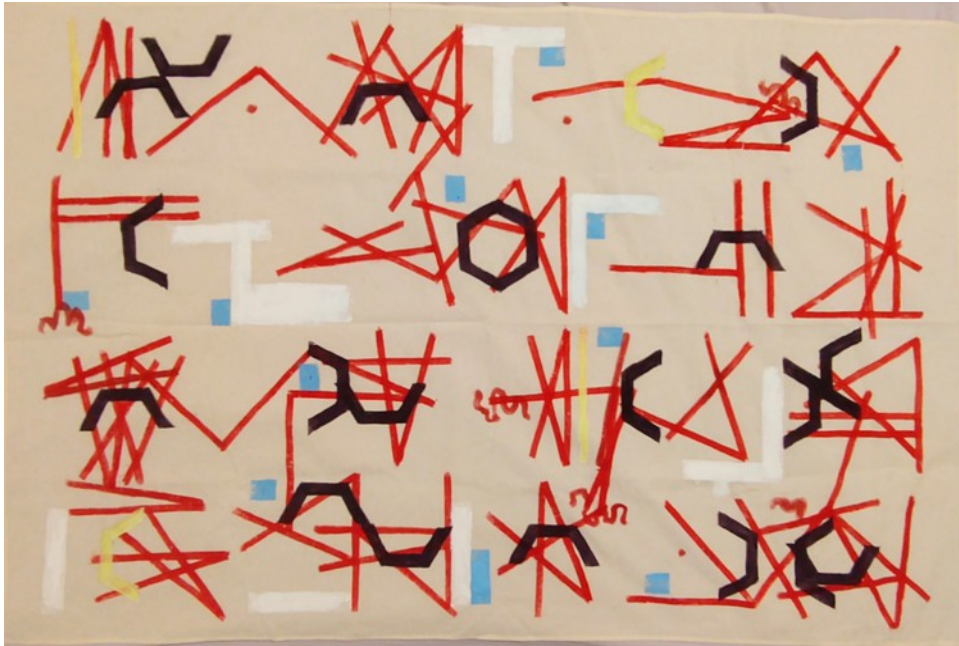
to create a continuous line but the natural course of this meandering line intersected often with the masking tape breaks, causing me to have to restart in order to keep to the rigid structure imposed by the layout. I then added sections of the straight line stamp in brown and red to create interactions as if between fluid and rigid matter. The last step was to fill some of the remaining spaces with quadrilateral and linear glitch looking forms in red and artificial fluorescent pigments.

The flowing line is reminiscent of the flows of joined up writing but is also visually reminiscent of water. The lines can be interpreted visually as pieces of branch or sticks but are also printed elements with possibilities for some kind of codified meaning. The blocks of fluorescent colour are digital glitch-like. They create a reference to a virtual world well beyond the realm of the waterfall but also present in the hand held devices we carry to such a place. They disrupt the more natural shapes and colours of the painting but at the same time augment.



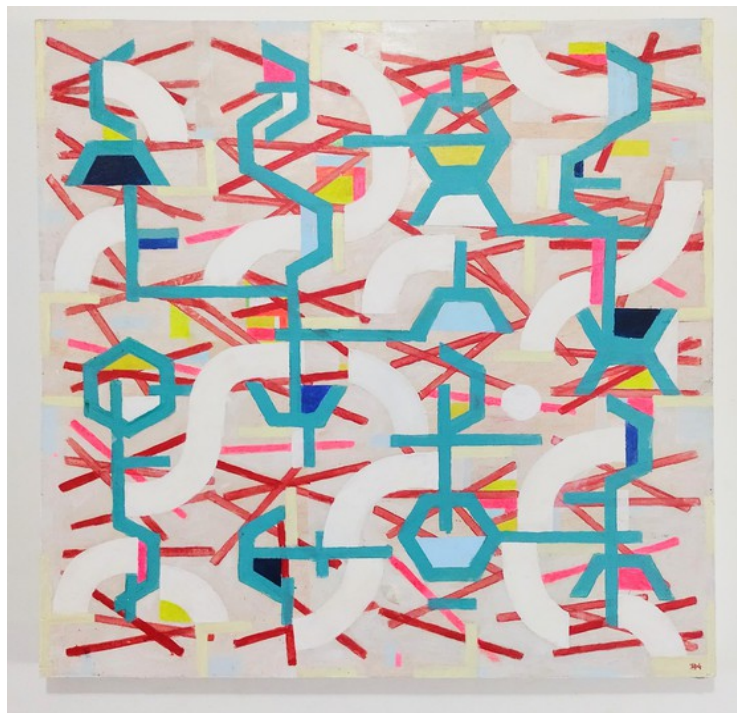
I had always dreamed of making music as a child, and dreamed of owning a home studio and learning musical instruments. Those ambitions never came to be as I never had the money for the equipment and never took music lessons. As an adult, I bought a guitar only to discover I had little talent for it. Painting became for me a substitute for making music. The rhythms and melodies I wanted to play come out visually and the music I listen to bleeds into the artwork.

I wanted to see if the works I was making could be read by someone else and put into music. Obviously, what I have been making is not sheet music. It is not a script that has a direct relationship with anything external to itself; it is asemic writing. However, if it is a script, there is a possibility of it being read. The works consist of a sequence of visual events spaced at certain intervals, They present information that can be interpreted, like shape, colour and texture. Kandinsky could hear music in colours, I also feel music in what I am painting. My hope was that others could too, so I decided to send works to some producers of electronic music.



Line Poem 2 acrylic painting and block-print on raw canvas 2023 photo author's own

Line Poem 2 was the third of a series of asemic visual poems painted on raw canvas. Like the others, I started with the line stamp, being in a rhythmic succession of marks left to right and up to down. I added oblong shapes in blue that acted like punctuation and small amounts of gestural brush-work adding a cursive element to the work. A photograph of this piece was sent to the musician and Brazilian artist and musician Rogério Salatini de Almeida.



Snare Script Beats 100cm x 100cm acrylic on wood 2022 photo author's own

Snare Scripts Beats refers to music in its title and was the second piece selected by Rogério. In this piece the flow of the first lines was from up to down but as more elements were added, there became more movements also from left to right also. There was more over-layering. The piece was painted listening to a future jazz soundtrack, and is very much a response to the music. I wanted the red lines to create a percussive element in the background. The turquoise half hexagon blocks came next with the filling in done in brush and last the white curves with a foam roller, adding different kinds of movements as well acting as negative space.

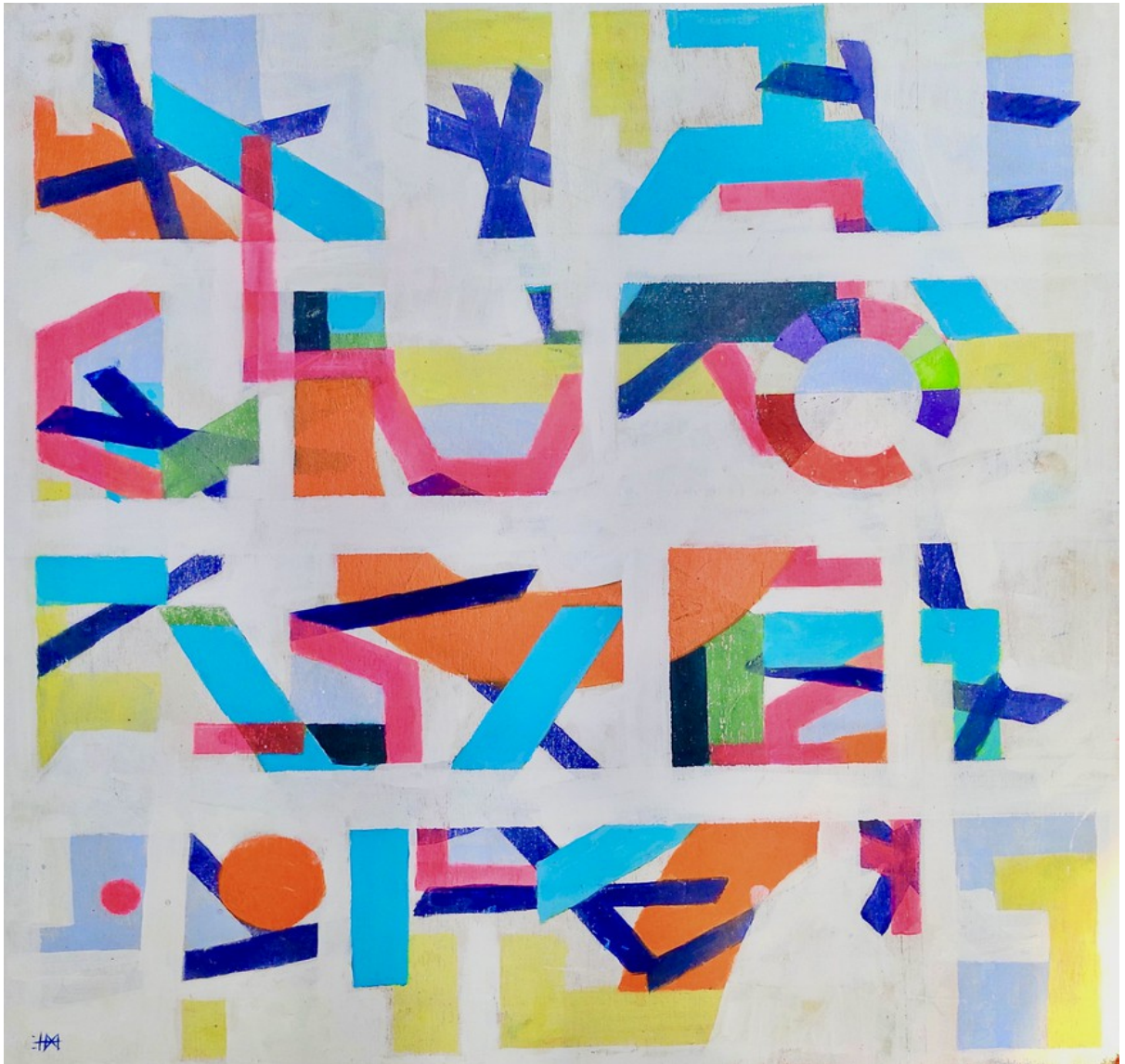
Rogério's approach to reading the pieces was intuitive, In his own words:

Importante explicitar que como metodologia foi empregado o tateamento, ou seja, não havia uma composição idealizada, mesmo que como uma interpretação do poema, a ser alcançada na produção sonora. Esta interpretação, se havia, era pela sensação que o poema visual me despertou.(SALATINI DE ALMEIDA, 2023) ⁶

He did not feel obliged to follow the sequencing that would normally be prescribed by text or sheet music. He observed the layers, textures and colours and created samples based on sound textures, over-layering the samples. Despite Rogério seeing the work as one of free translation, I was struck by how close the music he produces was to the style of music and feeling I had been listening to and imagined whilst creating the visual poem.

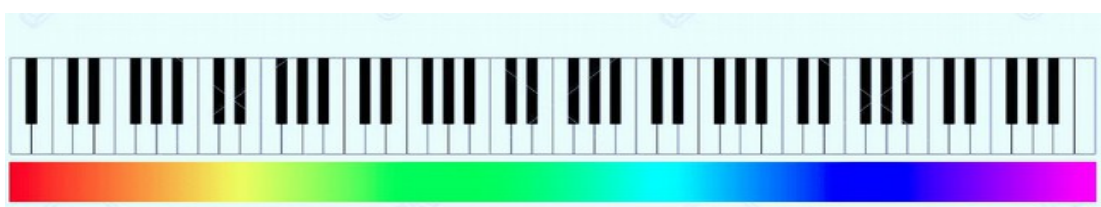
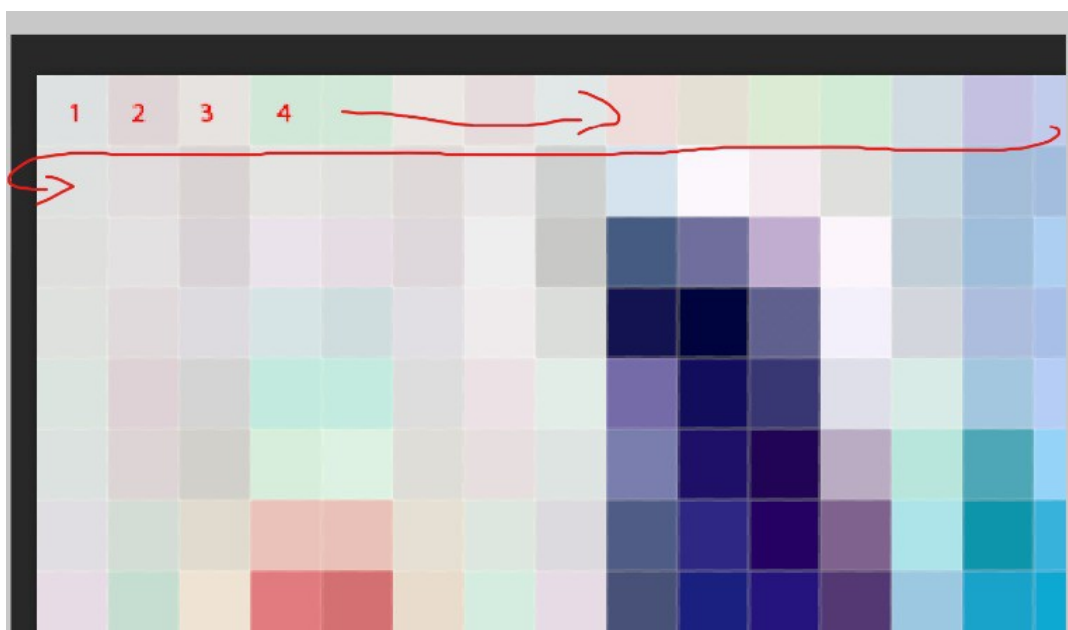
My idea had never been to create a detailed system to communicate the music in detail. Nor did the painting follow any particular piece of music in exact sequence but instead attempted to convey the feeling that it conveyed to me and the physical actions prompted by it. My painting was a visual dance provoked by music, and Salatini's composition a response to that.

⁶ Interview with Rogério Salatini available in apendices



Shape Poem Acrylic on wood 60cm x 60cm 2022 photo author's own

I sent a photograph of *Shape Poem* to the São Paulo based musician and producer Marcelo Mandaji. He approached the task in quite a different way from Salatini. His first musical reading was achieved through programming the computer to follow certain rules. The reading was based on colours and their arrangements and spacings. Attributes were applied to each colour and the resolution of the photo was reduced to ninety pixels by ninety pixels. It was then read in line, causing samples and change other musical attributes according to the colour of the pixel.



source: Marcelo Mandaji 2023

It was, however, important to me for the forms of the 'graphemes' that made up the lines of the visual poem to have a musical correspondence and not just the colours and spacings. Marcelo then produced a second piece in which the tones represented different instruments, for which he used a process of free association based on the forms. The structure of each grapheme controlled the behavior of each instrument, and the spacing controlled when each instrument came in and out.

Marcelo's second attempt brought in a combined human/program approach. He divided up the poem in grids, each representing a bar using 4/4 time. The hues were interpreted as instrument pitch (low, mid, high) shape and texture as timbre (more percussive or with more defined notes). A linear reading- taking into account spacings and fluctuations- indicated harmonic, rhythmic or melodic progressions. (MANDAJI 2023)⁷

⁷ Interview with Marcelo Mandaji available in appendices

In the experiments of both musicians, it became evident that aesthetic interpretation was necessary in order to interpret my marks as a musical language. Compared to a traditional music score there is considerable space for personal choices even in Marcelo's more mechanized methodology. Both musicians brought their own personal experiences and knowledge into the process of reading. The author (myself) was not able to dictate outcomes but only suggest.

The act of reading became one of collaboration. The graphic elements which compose the work relate to each other within the closed system of the piece, and can be read in the sequence they were painted or in a different order. Their interpretation, as regards to their relationship with the musical outcomes such as tone and timbre, is left to the reader to decide and the association he or she has in mind. For me, it was interesting how much of the feeling I had wished to communicate in the pieces, the imaginary music playing in my mind, was communicated at least in terms of a general feeling. The poems were successful in communicating visual aesthetic into temporal sound format of music in a way that also resonated with me.

Movement, whether physical, graphic or musical, has been one of the main themes and outcomes of the work. The line moves forward across the space of the page or canvas, punctured and broken in places by spaces and hemmed in by delineations or margins. The line is at times sinuous and at times percussive. It can form shapes and at times hint at pictographic possibilities. The eye makes its own way along the line categorizing and creating groupings, but may also take the short cuts presented by the composition or the grouping created by the mind of the observer. The pieces encourage a sequential way of reading/experiencing. The works also function as whole pieces viewed in entirety, and in this way fulfill criteria usually related to paintings.

Another important functional element of the works was is that they should actively involve the person experiencing them; there should be some kind of interaction. As asemic text, they invite an interpretation- a process of deciphering. The modular format of some of the pieces also encourages interaction through physical manipulation.

The musical interpretation of asemic visual poems was another type of interaction, and, furthermore, satisfies the function of text or poetry to be translatable into sound, but in a way, true to the spirit of asemic writing, it leaves ample space for an idiosyncratic interpretation; they are open works. This opportunity would be available to any person regardless of their cultural or linguistic background. Each of those possible responses would vary enormously depending on what that person brought to the process.



photo author's own

4. Sculpture and Installation

O quadro cresce como se fora uma planta, e faz a perfeita união de todas suas partes. A meu ver, chega ao limite da concepção do quadro, que atinge aqui uma dimensão infinita, incomensurável.(HELIO OITICICA)

Helio Oiticica's description of Mark Tobey's as a plant resonated a great deal with me. Oiticica uses the phrase “escritura plástica” (2006, p.91) to describe Tobey's work, used, as Oiticica writes, as a pretext to structure colour and space. This comment would be applicable to much of my work. The space I found myself with in the São Paulo countryside enabled me to develop further something I had already started on, namely transforming my work into three dimensions. My 'writing' was free to break the frame completely and grow beyond the confines of the painting edges.

Sculpture is different from painting, even ones which break the frame and become object-like in that it can be viewed from multiple points of view. Painting, on the other hand, is generally viewed from a fairly fixed position, or at least from a limited number of positions. Sculpture also has the ability to interact with the space around it in a greater number of ways. I was interested in creating single objects but also in creating groups that dialogued with the surroundings, or with other objects like words on a page.

Reflecting the two types of space I was inhabiting in the interior, inside the closed space of the house or in the open air, the works were sometimes a cluster of objects confined by an area of interaction or at times a free snaking linear growth – writing that was unbounded by margins and pages - that sought to expand exponentially, growing to match the potential of the open countryside. Where my street work had been about a conversation with the city architecture and the urban space, in general, my three dimensional work was itself a kind of architecture that created a dialogue with a space less touched by man and the natural forces at work in it.

The material I chose to work with mainly was one that was readily available in the countryside and one I had frequently scavenged in the city from skips: wood. In

the country I was able to get off cuts from the saw mill or pick up fallen branches from the surrounding countryside. It was an appropriate material for my work as by its nature wood is a metaphor for writing in that it grows in lines – branches and trunks like the free gesture of a pen or brush and these growths are cut and organized to create meaning as a structure.

In essence, writing is a line that moves forward, sometimes horizontal, sometimes vertical or at an angle. It loops -sometimes back on itself- but progresses onward until the final full stop, its flow broken by the negative spaces between words, paragraphs and chapters and hemmed in by other lines and pages or wall edges. Given the freedom of open space, however, a line can wander as it pleases.



Random Sigil acrylic and spray on wood variable size 2021 photo author's own



Sigil Installation Santa Rita do Passa Quatro 2023 photo author's own



Sigil Installation in cane field Santa Rita do Passa Quatro 2022 photo author's own

My initial sculptural works of this period were a continuation of work I had been doing in two dimensions based on bind runes. I loved how some Viking sigils formed of multiple runes frequently do not follow a unidirectional linear but grow in multiple directions.

I cut out shapes in wood with 60 and 90 degree angles like the simple geometry of runes and began joining them into different configurations. I would start with larger lengths of wood and add the smaller pieces already painted on top using glue and a pneumatic nailer. These structures would grow until they reached as size that felt right and then I would start another. The overall shapes were determined by my personal choices and by the path the angles suggested.

These constructions can be grouped together in different configurations and placed into different environments. Despite the angular forms and bright, often artificial looking colours painted with spray and acrylic, they managed to converse well with natural surroundings as well as man made ones. My intention was not to create ephemeral unobtrusive work in the tradition of British land artists like Andy Goldsworthy (1956-) but to continue a development of my urban work and create movable modular constructions that imposed themselves on the space but also dialogued with it. I was able to combine these pieces with tree roots and plants. The shapes echoed the tufts of cut crops in a field. The way that each piece had been built onto other pieces and allowed to follow a very loose geometric progression created something quite organic in many ways. They also functioned as stand alone sculptural pieces

Despite even allowing natural forces to have a part in manipulating the later pieces, I have not been tempted to go for the level of surrender to nature presented by Goldsworthy, what the British art historian Simon Schama asserts is a wish “to dissolve the artistic ego within natural process.” (1995, p.12) Goldsworthy's use only of found natural objects to create impermanent works seem to almost deny the hand of the artist and invoke the pure power of wild nature. However, as Schama also points out, “even the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product.” (1995, p. 9) He argues that “it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape.” (SCHAMA, 1995, p. 10) I myself am undeniably a product of an urban environment

but harbour a wish to commune with nature. My instinct, like humans before me, is to make my mark by creating constructions that are man-made additions but also create a reader/writer relationship with the landscape.



Random Sigil spray painted wood and perspex variable size 2021 photo author's own



Random Sigil 2 spray and acrylic on wood 29x 25 x10 cm 2021 photo author's own



Adaptação spray on wood Santa Rita do Passa Quatro 2022 photo author's own



Adaptação (detail) spray on wood Santa Rita do Passa Quatro 2022 photo author's own

Adaptação was a site specific installation based on what I had been exploring with the rune focused sculptural work but with some curved shapes and on a larger scale. It was placed in the main square in Santa Rita do Passa Quatro on a site with some rocks and a *jequitibá* tree. I wanted the forms cut from wood to have the look of writing but the whole work to give the impression of a plant growing over the rocks and up the tree.

The rocks are reminiscent of stones used for runic inscriptions. The stones like the one below from Bjäresjö in Sweden are inscribed following a looping line, like my installation, rather than the rigid horizontal lines we are used to seeing with writing.



Bjäresjö rune stone source: wikipedia

The installation was a challenge in practical terms as it needed to fit into the space. I measured the angles and calculated the lengths of wood I would need. I built it in sections, taking each part to the site to check the fit before taking everything there and bolting it together. Slight miscalculations required a certain amount of

improvisation when it came to installation. Despite a considerable amount of planning, the element of improvisation characteristic of my street work was still present to a certain extent.

Adaptação was a huge learning experience as regards working with site specific installations. The central idea of a string of writing-like shapes, in the subsequent works, became simpler, focusing more on a simple line.

A line is a very basic mark -the first mark that mankind etched into the surface of the planet as he went from place to place in search of food or shelter or later when settled man laid neat parallel furrows into his fields to plant his crops. In English the word 'sow', relating to the act of planting seeds, is pronounced the same as 'sew', when clothes are stitched together. My idea in *Adaptação* had been to represent the interaction of diverse cultures through the process of colonization and immigration in the interior of São Paulo through representation of fragments of writing fusing together in a crooked line. However, terms of how we create the story/history of a place is embedded most of all in the simplest marks we place on the landscape.

Cuneiform demonstrates the power of line in its ability to imbue a series of identical linear marks made with a reed end with the ability to relate the whole of mankind's experience. Richard Long's line tells a story of barriers, social inequity and class struggle. The Cuban land and performance artist Ana Mendieta, by lying in the earth, an act of impression in the ground similar to process of cuneiform writing, created an imprinted line that simultaneously spoke of the fragility of the human body whilst symbolizing and affirming the power of the feminine and the connection with the primordial mud: "omnipresent female force, the after-image of being encompassed within the womb, is a manifestation of my thirst for being." (Mendieta apud Perreault 1987, p.100) The American land artist Michael Heizer's line in the earth *Double Negative* couldn't have been more different - a deep scar of a line from the Moapa valley to created, in the American critic Brian Wallis's words, through "brute force and the sheer force of will." (2011, p. 29) A simple line can create a vast number of meanings.



Escrita no Ar spray on wood 2022 photo author's own



Escrita no Ar spray on wood 2022 photo author's own

With *Escrita no Ar* (air writing) I wanted to devise a way that I could easily write lines into space with a three dimensional form. I wanted something which could flexibly make different gestural marks and which was easily portable and could be installed in a space with reasonable ease. I cut wood into sections, drilled a hole and then cut facets. I then painted each one with different colours. When the wooden pieces were connected together, they became a line that veered at different angles due to the angle of the facets, and could be connected together in different combinations to create different forms. When suspended in the air, there was also a certain amount of movement caused by wind.

The idea of some kind a dialogue with nature has underpinned much of mankind's work, whether it be the somewhat artificial cropping of a photograph so that twigs strewn on the floor of a forest appear like writing or the precise alignment of ancient monuments such as Stonehenge to chart the passage of heavenly bodies. The work of artists such as Andy Goldsworthy's ephemeral works using materials taken from nature or the drama of Julie Brook's (1961-) fire stacks, which play out the brief interaction of tide, fire, sea and stone, use the forces of nature interacting

with human creation to create a poetic event.

In taking my work into three dimensions and into nature, these natural forces became a significant factor and a way in which I could relinquish some control over the process and engage in a partnership with my surroundings. Placing a mark into a living space is very different to placing a mark on paper or canvas.



River Writing, Santa Rita do Passa Quatro 2022 photo author's own

River Writing was one of these experiments. I wanted the flow of the river to interact with wooden forms I had cut out and strung together. The current of the water created changing shapes configurations of the pieces as well as a shifting curving line. I tied the piece so that there would be two parallel lines of forms curving down stream side by side. The flow of the river or journeys by water has been used to dictate the plot of many stories. The classic work of American fiction *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* follows Huckleberry and the escaped enslaved man

Jim as they float down the Mississippi on a raft. As the characters have limited ability to direct the vessel, it is the river itself that largely directs their fates.



Gestural Sculpture 1 acrylic on wood 64x40x5cm 2022 photo author's own

In other pieces, like *Gestural sculpture 1*, the flowing cursive line became a solid stationary object. Two looping lines connected together which create a movement which embodies the flourish of a pen on paper, perhaps a signature. They are made from identical sections of wood, cut at the same angle with a plunge saw and fixed together with dowels. The line has a weight and solidity but only the edges of each extremity are connected with the surface they are resting on making the piece feel lighter, more fluid and less connected with the surface beneath.

I broke up the solidity of the piece further with sections of colour, creating a linear harmonic development. The blocks of colour also create shapes of their own within the overall form of the sculpture in a similar way to how the individual pieces in *River Writing* combine to make configurations. These minor forms change not depending on movement of the piece but on the angle it is viewed from. That

movement of the position of the eye conjoining shapes to create new forms. Despite being a static piece, it has a lot of movement.



I initially started making sculptural works with multiple parts because I was interested in the interaction of sunlight with them. I wanted them to create shadows that looked like blocks of text and the shadows would change angles and become more italicized as the sun moved across the sky. The sculptural forms are stationary but there is movement in the shadows.



Frase acrylic on wood variable size 2022 photo author's own



Frase acrylic on wood variable size 2022 photo author's own

Frase, *Phrase* was originally composed of three elements only but later grew to seven. The forms were inspired by Japanese *kanji* but rather than use a brush I cut them using a band saw, a tool that creates curves very naturally due to the flexibility of the blade.

I was inspired by the American sculptor Mel Kendrick's (1949-) processes of cutting into wood and combining both the negative and the positive- both the inside and out. The Curator Kitty Macmanus Zurko describes his principle focus as that of to “re-imagine his primary material of wood, taking apart and reassembling its volumes and surfaces so that the resulting works reveal—and revel in—the very activity of their reconfiguration.” (2006) My process was very similar. Like Kendrick, I painted the wood first to then slicing, revealing the inside. I cut clapboard off cuts with the saw directly without sketching in lines, allowing a blade to move in a wavy motion in the wood, cutting mostly along the grain but at times cross grain. I then

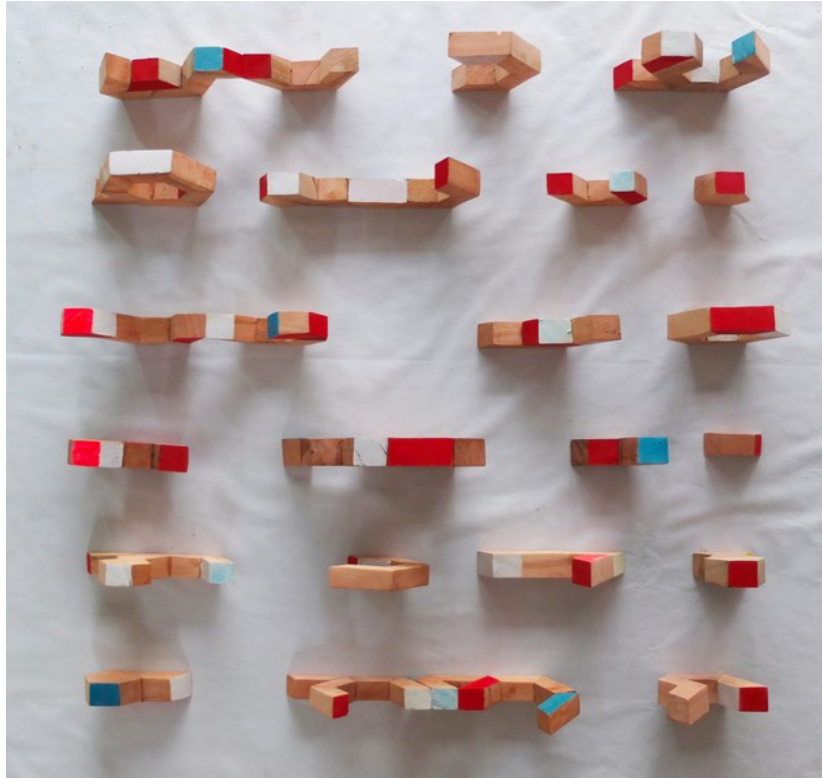
arranged the pieces, glueing and tacking the ends to a square of wood on both sides.

The clapboard had been painted a dark crimson before cutting, which created contrast with the bare wood. I then added some sections of fluorescent pink. The shadows that I wished the forms to cast had been the original focus of the piece but I also wanted to have a further dynamic with three dimension forms themselves and the configurations of the painted sections. As in my two dimensional work, I was interested in contrasts created between the artificial feel of fluorescent colour and the natural tone of the bare wood.

I had created sculptural forms which were reminiscent of written characters but also contained the essence of writing, namely a line cut into sections. In a piece of joined up handwriting, the line of the pen loops and curves forward, cut at the end of each word leaving a space. The same is equally true of any kind of writing; it is a line cut in pieces. I sawed the length of clapboard and used the lines I had cut and the spaces between them to create forms. These forms were then arranged into parallel lines with spaces in between to approximate the format of a body of text or a poem.



When the Tower Fell the Bees Wrote Poetry in The Sun acrylic on wood variable size 2023 photo author's own



When the Tower Fell the Bees Wrote Poetry in The Sun acrylic on wood variable size 2023 photo author's own

This idea of a cut line has continued on into the pieces I have begun to call sculptural visual poems. *When the Tower Fell the Bees Wrote Poetry in The Sun* was made from equal lengths of 2.5 x2.5 cm wood cut at 30 degrees with a plunge saw, which created sections, which when fixed together would make partial or whole hexagon shapes. The pieces were then glued together in various configurations, these objects could then be grouped together in various ways to form 'words' and 'phrases' The painted surfaces also created further compositions of broken lines.

An important principle in these sculptural poems as with my modular paintings is that it allows for a level interaction in experiencing the piece. The elements can be moved and reconfigured. Like elements of a language, they can be made to create new relationships with each other and therefore new meaning. The person experiencing the work becomes part of the creative process and is invited to 'write'. Unlike a flat painting, it can also be viewed from the front, from above or any other angle and this change of view point creates a new configuration of shapes.



Water Poem, Santa Rita do Passa Quatro spray, acrylic, wood and bamboo 2023 photo author's own

Water Poem also has the possibility to change depending on the angle of view. As importantly for me was the interaction with the water. The forms are made from lengths of 1.5 x 1.5cm wood, mostly cut straight with a table saw and connected at right angles. There are some curved pieces cut with a band saw and ball shape. The bamboos are more natural and create more organic and less rigid shapes, which also tilt the wooden forms. They form a transition between the cuboid shapes of the wood and the water, which allows for a distorted and curving reflected image, making a contrast between constructed form and the mirror image from the water. There is also a colour contrast between the artificial looking fluorescent pink and other bright hues of the wood and the natural muddy tones of the reflection.

In many ways, *Water Poem* is symbolic of my own personal transition from

city to countryside - from writing on walls to constructing writing in nature. This crossing of one space to another is an important recurring theme in much of the work.



Shadow Poem/The Line Cut acrylic on wood variable size 2023 photo author's own

Shadow Poem/A Line Cut was a sculpture, like *Fraser* with which I wanted to use three dimensional forms to create shadows. The idea came from seeing lengths of dried lemon balm which my partner had twisted and knotted and left hanging from a nail on the bedroom wall to repel mosquitos. The shadow cast by it had the look of joined up writing. It was then that I had the realization that joined up handwriting is basically a knotted looping line in graphic form.

I set about recreating it in wood. I cut lengths of to a 1.5 x 1,5 cm thickness and others to 2 x 2 cm and then cut them at random angles with a bandsaw apart from when making the last piece, which I cut to more deliberate 30 and 90 degree angles. These pieces were glued together and then had pins inserted with a pneumatic nailer. I fixed the pieces in twos and then joined the twos in four and so on until each section was completed. There was little preplanning apart from choosing combinations that would give a tight knotted feel at times and sometimes a smoother line. It became a three dimensional equivalent to a scrawl, cut in places, then, in the last piece, becoming a more controlled shape, more typographic and although improvised, more controlled in nature.

The shadow adds another dimension. It creates a changing imprint of the forms as the sun moves in the sky, sometimes the shadows of each element join and sometimes separate. The painted parts create a further set of broken lines along the sculpture.



Movement in Parallel spaces. Wood and enamel paint variable size 2023 photo author's own

Movement in Parallel Spaces was made concurrently with the painted visual poem *Line Cut*. It mixes cursive shapes with more typographic ones and natural

rough surfaced wooden branches with worked cut and polished hardwood. The gloss enamel paint in varying hues from white, textured white, through a visceral yellow to pale fluorescent yellow and pink with the natural and polished wood creates a range of contrasting surfaces. Looked at from the front on, a 2.5 cm band separates the top and bottom half of each piece of the sculpture, both of approximately 5.5 cm each. They comprise two sets of broken linear movements, one side comprised mostly of the natural branches and the other of mainly cut wooden pieces, separated by one continuous straight line. The line is broken into four separate independent sections, each one resembling a character in an alphabet or a word or perhaps a strange beast. It is a sculpture which contains the representation of two contrasting realities, the natural and the manmade running in parallel, one more crooked, rustic and worn, another cleaner, polished, shaped, urban looking to the future. They mingle at times swapping sides of the border space which separates them.

The transition of my practice into three dimensional form has been one focused on the occupation of and dialogue with space, and the traversing of borders into new territories. My work in the street inserted itself into a crowded place full of information, a space delineated by architectural and territorial barriers but sought to escape these bounds through dialogue with its surroundings. My painting sought to breach the limits of the frame and my writing breach the limit of the ruled line and also communicate with and move into the sphere of music. My sculptural work saw the opportunity to expand into space exponentially, explore and seek dialogue with its surroundings as well as with itself.

5. Final Thoughts

I embarked on this body of work with the theme of asemic writing – writing without meaning. It is, however, impossible not to have meaning- for a work not to be about anything. What I have, in fact, been doing is examining movement, I have been taking things apart and fixing them back together in new sequences, and I have been occupying, interacting with and moving in space, different kinds of space.

During this time, I have found new aesthetic solutions, I have shifted ideas from walls to paintings hung on walls and into three dimensional objects, and I have swapped urban space for a natural environment. I was also able to realize, through collaboration, an ambition to turn my artwork into music. As is the nature of artistic research, these experiences have only opened more doors and pointed to further possibilities in the future.

As I look to future possibilities, what must remain is this movement. It does not matter if Michaux's marks are writing or drawings of figures dancing. What matters is that they move. Movement, for me, can be the movement of an object through space or the translation of that movement into music. One thing, however I feel could be more present in the work is the human body. Dance and music are intertwined, and the human body is a canvas. The language of the body is as important as any written language. I would like to see my graphic movements combine with the movements of a dancing figure and be interpreted by the dancer.

I have already created wearable objects and combining these with the movement of the body would be very much a logical extension of my work and one that would combine well with future musical partnerships, ones which I hope will result in a collection of recordings packaged as an art-poetic object. It would be another chance to collaborate and expand my work further in the language of music and translate this into yet another language, that of dance.

The body needs space to move through, and what has been important for me during this time has been my ambitions for the occupation of space. I have seen my work grow three dimensionally and enter new territories and dialogue with those new environments. I would like to continue with the structuring of three dimensional space

and the idea of objects having a relationship with the place they occupy: art that thinks of space as architecture does. Combined with movement, this would mean work that is experienced temporally as well as physically.

In terms of materials, I have always enjoyed working with wood, and my experience and technical expertise with this medium has increased. I would like to add more materials to add not only more varied aesthetics but also varied tactile experience. Working with new processes also brings about new possibilities of forms, I have already experimented with recycled ceramic, perspex, aluminium sheet from cans, and stone. Furthermore, I have a current interest in constructing with bamboo wattle and daub - a technique used in bio-construction. The reason behind this eclectic mixture of this choice is threefold: firstly the purely practical motive of availability- these materials are often discarded after industrial or domestic use; secondly, as this or any process that involves reuse, means cutting and reassembling, which is one of the principle processes related to my work; and lastly it is a mix of modern and traditional materials perfect to combine the urban with the natural and ancient with the contemporary.

This varied array of materials links very much with the modular aspect of my work. I have long had an interest in combining and recombining different elements, often elements that have very different aesthetic appearances. I have the wish to find a way to achieve balance between contrasting qualities, to break something apart, rearrange in a different way and seek to find resolution again. This is in many ways analogous to the way I have lived my life and taking a little of one place and taking it to another. I wish to continue taking things apart and putting them back together. This principle can be applied equally to two dimensional or three dimension work and to both abstract and more representational outcomes. It is a principle that fits the temporal and cultural space we presently occupy currently.

I have avoided representing things overtly, as I have avoided writing with conscious semantic content. However, I have found that it is natural to look for and see pictures of things in the work. I have long been interested in myth and have used the process of mirroring asemic writing to create symmetrical figure-like paintings in the past, a process that opened the possibilities of tapping into a Jungian mythic subconscious. I feel the urge to allow my 'writings' to become figures and entities

again, ones that contain cut and pasted elements from different sources and materials. They would perhaps be, to borrow a term from the Herman Usener, 'momentary gods'. (USENER apud CASSIRER, 1953, p. 33)

The key concepts I would like to bring forward are movement, space, collaboration, dialogue and the cycle of deconstruction and reconstruction.

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Appendices

Interview Gil Duarte | Binário Armada. 27 June 2023

Como você desenvolveu sua escrita assêmica?

Desde criança eu tinha uma paixão por estudos de alfabetos e símbolos mágicos diversos. O primeiro alfabeto que eu aprendi foi o Fenício que tirei da Enciclopédia CONHECER que era da minha avó. A partir daí fui pesquisando, tentando aprender aqueles alfabetos criptografados das colegas da escola, estudei o que pude encontrar nos livros de história, de onde vinham essas fontes das tábuas de alfabetos de civilizações antigas. Com o tempo fui tentando construir algo para mim, totalmente influenciado por esses símbolos mágicos, alquímicos, dessas geometrias sagradas, etc. Tudo isso fez parte do ponto onde quero chegar sobre a escrita assêmica.

Ela se desenvolveu de um processo de estudos e trabalhos com penas de caligrafia e com uma espécie de simbiose com uma desconstrução de uma fonte que eu estava desenvolvendo para um disco. Eu tinha um conjunto de penas que eu comprei para estudar e nesses estudos comecei a ter algumas ideias baseadas no PIXO paulista, onde as escritas lembram muito símbolos de uma civilização há muito perdida. Na época fui convidado para auxiliar e ajudar nas ideias visuais do disco da Banda que eu participei, a banda Aláfia, mas acabou que essa fonte foi descartada e acabei tentando desenvolvê-la para tentar algo em cima delas. Num dado momento tive uma ideia de desconstruí-la até que não pudesse ser entendida como uma letra, mas que ainda obtivesse uma ideia de escrita. E foi a partir daí que nasceu a minha forma de escrita. A escrita Îagüatype.

Me fala um pouco sobre a aldeia imaginária e sua escrita asemic

Antes da Escrita Assêmica, existia a ideia da Aldeia Imáginária. Sou indígena urbano que sofreu um processo violento de apagamento histórico e por conta disso, não sei da minha raiz ancestral e por conta disso, resolvi desenvolver um projeto artístico sobre esse passado que me foi negado. Esse projeto é um conjunto de livros desenhados e escritos que remontam esse apagamento. Eu recriei essa aldeia de forma imaginária a partir de um caderno contendo várias latitudes,

longitudes e curvas de rio que acabou caindo no meu pé por acidente no Sebo Messias na Liberdade. Ao ver aquele documento me veio a ideia na hora de recriar essa aldeia, cujo o (sic) foco central seria o principal rio do Ceará - Rio Jaguaribe. Esse rio foi o principal ponto de migração indígena e palco de uma grande revolta contra a invasão portuguesa - A Guerra dos Bárbaros, que por décadas inviabilizava a colonização da região por conta desse dado histórico veio o ponto de partida para a minha Aldeia Imaginária. O nome dessa tribo imaginária é Mokōi Ygarussu que seria a tradução aproximada de Binário Armada. Mokōi Ygarussu na tradução mais correta significa "dois navios grandes" - Binário vem do Código binário 0 e 1 e Armada que vem da ideia dos antigos barcos que cruzavam os mares trazendo comércio, tecnologias, etc. Como não tem palavras para tal tradução, utilizei o mais aproximado possível.

Porque você usou nome Îagüarype?

"Jaguaribe" vem do termo tupi Îagüarype, que significa "no rio das onças" (Îagüara, onça + y, rio + pe, em). Por conta dessa ideia da minha aldeia ser os Mokōi Ygarussu, resolvi dar um nome que julguei interessante para a escrita que é uma homenagem a esse que é um dos rios principais do Ceará, minha terra natal.

Aqui nesse >>> [link](#) <<< tem algumas informações sobre o Rio Jaguaribe que começa como Banabuiú e depois vira Jaguaribe, que também tem uma grande importância, pois a ideia do meu trabalho sempre foi voltado a esse interior mágico que fica oculto das vistas das pessoas dos tempos atuais.

Interview Marcelo Mandaji 22 March 2023

Quais processos você usou para ler o poema visual e criar a música?

Travei um pouco mas vou tentar destravar.

No início estava indo para um caminho de tentar fazer tudo automatizado por programação, porém, não consegui trazer um resultado muito bem associado às formas como tínhamos conversado no início.

Ao final da semana passada entreguei as pontas mesmo e resolvi fazer diferente, sem ser automatizado mas eu mesmo interpretando e nesse caminho que to seguindo agora.

Como você entendeu os grafismos?

Passado o primeiro momento, o que estou seguindo agora é o seguinte:

Estou dividindo em um grid, cada um deles tem um padrão de grid e cada parte deste grid representa um compasso musical. Para simplificar as coisas, estou considerando o compasso 4/4 por ser o mais comum. Dessa forma consigo interpretar cada pedaço de uma vez.

Quais outros elementos você levou em consideração, por exemplo cor e textura?

Tenho alguns parâmetros estabelecidos que estou trabalhando.

Cor = altura do instrumento (grave, médio, agudo)

Forma e textura = timbre (mais percussivo ou com notas mais definidas)

Linearidade = tipo (harmônico, rítmico ou melódico)

Eu acho que funciona melhor pra conseguir acelerar esse processo final com uma data. Vamos conversar sobre isso na semana que vem?

Consegue fazer uma reunião no meet na terça a tarde?

Interview Rogério De Almeida Salatini 30 May 2023

Quais processos você usou para ler o poema visual e criar a música?

Na proposta de colaboração, despertou o meu interesse a possibilidade de experimentar um processo no qual estabelecer-se-ia um diálogo entre linguagens – sonora e visual. A proposta de interpretação do poema visual tal uma “partitura” para composição musical foi compreendida como um disparo para um breve processo de criação. Para lembrar Walter Benjamin, a tarefa do tradutor constitui-se como tarefa de um criador – tradução é co-criação.

O processo desenvolveu-se então para a construção de uma tradução intersemiótica da obra visual. Importante explicitar que como metodologia foi empregado o *tateamento*, ou seja, não havia uma composição idealizada, mesmo que como uma interpretação do poema, a ser alcançada na produção sonora. Esta interpretação, se havia, era pela sensação que o poema visual me despertou. Partindo daí, criei bancos de sons que foram explorados como *samples*, pequenas partes de uma construção dramática sonora – no tempo – que traduzissem o poema visual por meio de suas dimensões de textura, sobreposição, e materialidade.

Como você entendeu os grafismos?

Como conceito, já há algum tempo, desde o contato com as ideias apresentadas no livro *Produção de Presença* de Hans U. Gumbrecht, venho buscando em meu trabalho uma aplicação para a ideia de construção de presença e/ou ‘discursos da materialidade’. Trata-se de um conceito de discursos do sensível, sem correlação com possibilidades verbais. Também este ponto é interessante pois ao deparar-me com uma obra denominada ‘poema visual’ geraram-se reflexões sobre o que de um poema literário havia naquela imagem, o que parece ter força na escolha de apresentar os grafismos nem sequências lineares, como uma escrita.

Mas uma escrita não-verbal, portanto próxima ao que venho investigando da produção de presença dos corpos – sonoros, imagéticos, fonéticos, etc.

Mesmo que de antemão existisse o poema visual, e note-se que este apresentava algo semelhante as *timelines* de um software de produção musical – como o que fiz uso na produção do “poema sonoro” (para emprestar a expressão utilizada pelo artista Tom Wray); utilizei o programa *Reaper* – na “leitura” do mesmo procurei me desligar da ideia de uma linearidade típica da escrita, e observar as linhas também como imagem, observando texturas, intensidades e camadas de traços e cores, de modo que pude transitar mais livremente pela superfície do poema.

Quais outros elementos você levou em consideração, por exemplo cor e textura?

Nos poemas visuais observei que haviam camadas, planos de traços e formas sobrepostas. No primeiro, haviam formas que me remeteram a caixas, cubos, formas quadrangulares em primeiro plano, que compunham algo com uma coluna estrutural da obra, rítmica. Em camadas ao fundo formas mais sinuosas e de cores mais vivas estruturavam algo como harmonias, tonalidades. E nos intervalos entre as formas estruturais, nesta sobreposição escapavam estas sinuosidades das linhas estruturais o que me remeteram à ideia de “frases melódicas”. Deste modo utilizei os *samples* para também estruturar ritmos, harmonias e células melódicas que escapam ao campo harmônico e rítmico. Sempre tentando manter a proposta de compor com “texturas sonoras” como método de criação.

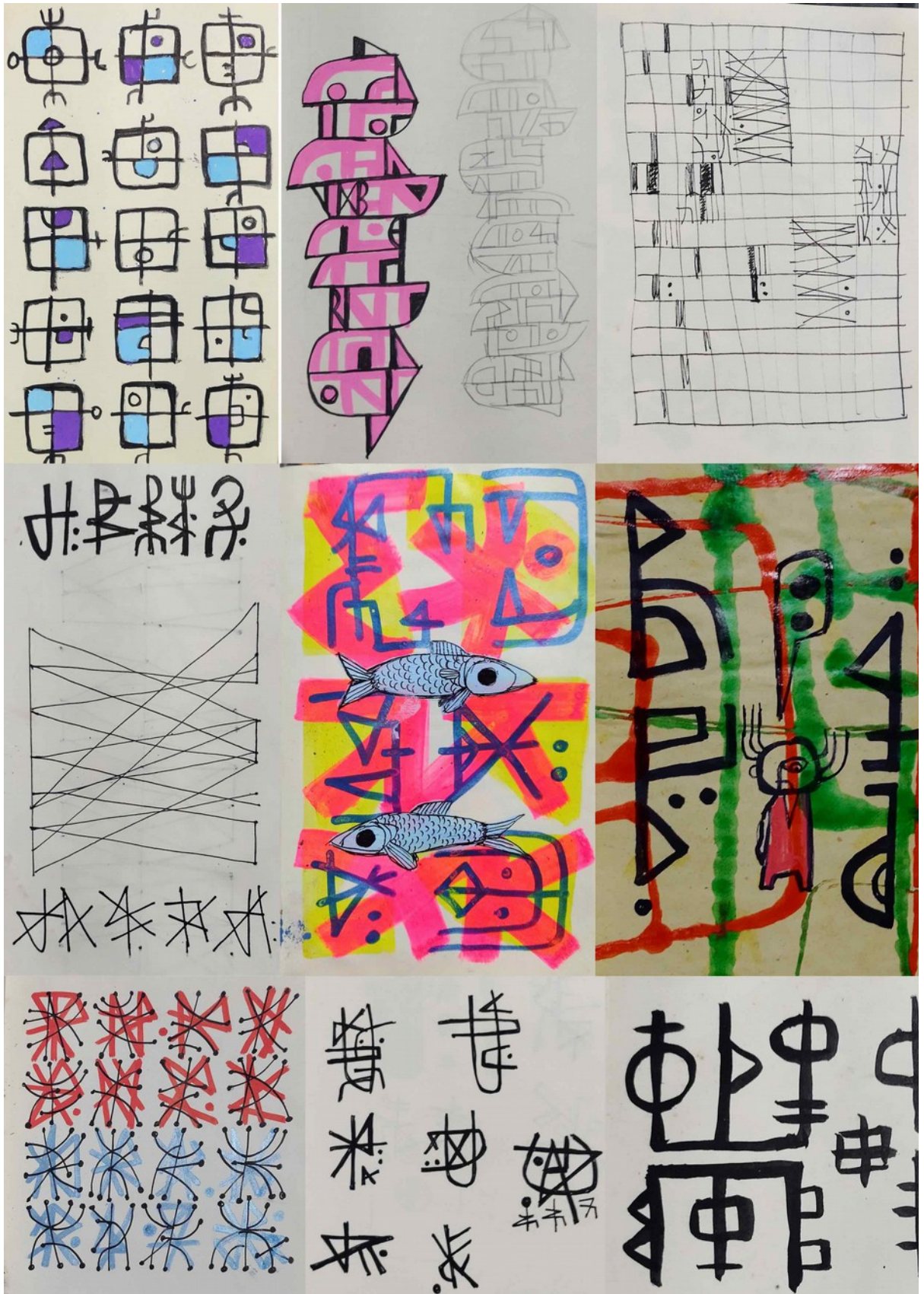
Por fim, no trabalho em software de produção de áudio também os sons são traduzidos para grafismos de ondas organizadas em *timelines*, como dito, de modo que a criação passa também por um processo visual, de blocos de sons que foram organizados também por este parâmetro na composição. Desta forma, de uma obra visual para uma obra sonora (organizada também de forma visual em parte de seu processo de criação) destacam-se então as escolhas por texturas sonoras, repetições, *loopings*, e dramaturgia da peça sonora.



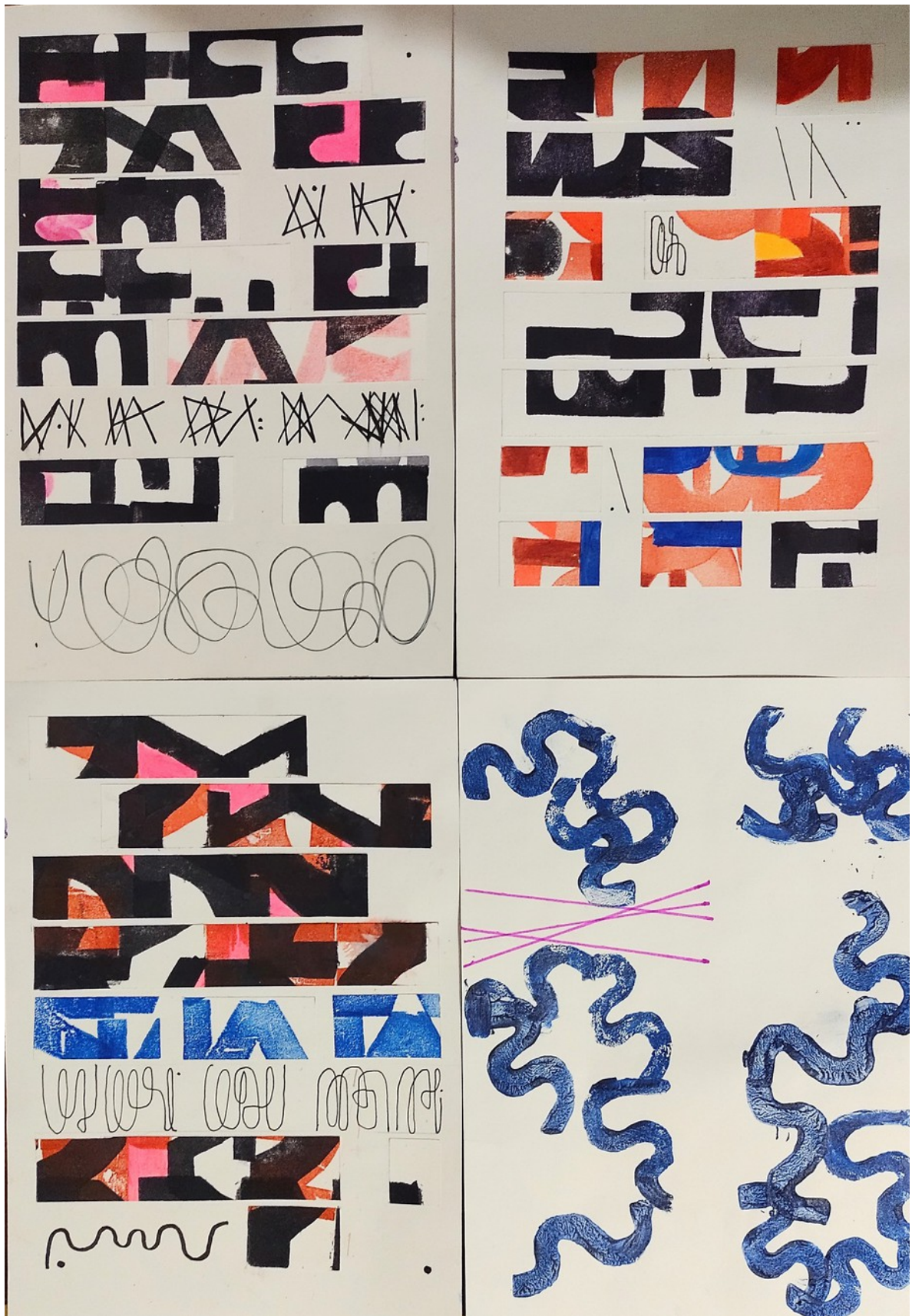
Minhocão, 2015 photo author's own



Avenida Paulista, 2017 photo author's own



sketch books photo author's own



sketchbook pages photo author's own



page from asemic graphic novel 2020 photo author's own