

One book . . . consisted of the letters *MCV* perversely repeated from the first line to the last. Another . . . is a mere labyrinth of letters whose penultimate page contains the phrase *O Time thy pyramids*. . . . There is no combination of characters one can make—*dhcmlrchtj*, for example—that the divine Library has not foreseen and that in one or more of its secret tongues does not hide a terrible significance.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel” (1941)<sup>1</sup>

### **Sequoyah and His Talking Leaves: A Way In**

Among those ancient scribes variously ascribed the invention of writing—the Egyptian deity Thoth; the legendary Chinese emperor Fu Xi; the Phoenician prince Cadmus, founder of the city of Thebes in Greek mythology; the Scythian king of Irish folklore, Fenius Farsa, who synthesized Gaelic and its Ogham alphabet from the Tower of Babel’s linguistic ruins; and the one-eyed Norse god Odin, to name just a few—few are available for historical verification and analysis through primary sources. However, certain culture heroes of premodernity and modernity alike emerge from mythological abstraction into the realms of contemporaneously recorded history to offer more tangible accounts of the actual process of visualizing language.<sup>2</sup> The Byzantine monk Saint Cyril (Constantine, 827–869) and King Sejong the Great of Korea (1397–1450), like the Roman deity and Greek language guide Evander before them, adapted other systems—Greek and Hebrew for the former and Chinese Hanja, Mongol, and Tibetan Buddhist writing for the latter—to forge the foundations of the Cyrillic and the Hangul (Korean) alphabets, respectively.<sup>3</sup> In fact, apart from the generally accepted independent development of scripts in Sumer and Mesoamerica, and also arguably in China, Egypt, and Easter Island, all written languages have followed similar diffusionist models.<sup>4</sup>

Around 1820, in present-day Polk County, Arkansas, the Cherokee silversmith, veteran of the War of 1812, and visionary linguist Sequoyah (c. 1770–1843),<sup>5</sup> despite his illiteracy in English, successfully modified that language’s Roman alphabet to arrive at a Cherokee

syllabary.<sup>6</sup> The first Cherokee writing system of any kind and the result of almost a decade's work, his syllabary employs directly appropriated and graphically ornamented Roman letters alongside additional expressly designed characters, eighty-five in all, each of which corresponds to a specific speech sound, or phoneme (**fig. G1**). After initially accusing Sequoyah, his daughter, and his "talking leaves" of witchcraft, Cherokees quickly recognized the value of adopting the system, and they still use a nearly identical script today. Sequoyah provides a particularly dramatic example of a relatively rare, and recent, originator of a writing system—a grammatogenist—whose life and work were adequately recorded by contemporaries. His story is not unique. Modern missionaries, colonial authorities, authors, artists, and enterprising dreamers have occasionally invented so-called constructed or artificial scripts from positions of altruistic (or invasive) literacy, cryptographic stealth, literary world-making (in the cases of fictional scripts and languages), or monolingual illiteracy (like Sequoyah). But Sequoyah remains rightly renowned for his impressive independent achievement, an especially aesthetic innovation almost out of thin air and with a widespread impact. Described as an "American Cadmus and modern Moses,"<sup>7</sup> Sequoyah attained celebrity at home and abroad, even granting interviews. A report of an interview by a Captain John Stuart of the U.S. Army in 1837 states that

being one day on a public road, [Sequoyah] found a piece of newspaper, which had been thrown aside by a traveler, which he took up, and, on examining it, found characters on it that would be more easily made than his own, and consequently picked out for that purpose the largest of them, which happened to be the Roman letters, and adopted [some] in lieu of so many of his own characters—and that, too, without knowing the English name or meaning of a single one of them.<sup>8</sup>

Whether true or apocryphal, this tidy little account illustrates a possible appropriative derivation of the Cherokee syllabary, one couched in the condition of modernity's proliferation of mechanically printed matter.<sup>9</sup> To continue the story for us, we are lucky enough to have the

firsthand 1829 testimony of an American man of letters, Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, who claims that, after drafting an efficient and suitable set of symbols, Sequoyah “then set to work *to make these characters more comely to the eye*, and succeeded” (italics mine).<sup>10</sup> And therein resides a wonderful and exciting detail. At some point—and this is key—Sequoyah consciously transcended the practical bounds of linguistics to consider visual verbal aesthetics, a move doubtlessly made by numerous grammatogenists—not to mention calligraphers, typeface designers, and handwriting standardizers—long before his time, but rarely so explicitly described. By first appropriating and reshaping the linguistic refuse—a discarded newspaper—of the dominant culture, and then evaluating the “artistic” nature of the text and implementing substantial aesthetic alterations, a monolingual Cherokee speaker customized a preexisting alphabet to suit his own language’s needs as well as his personal and cultural aesthetic criteria. Beyond the obvious total disjuncture in sound, grammar, and syntax (and even in semiotic purpose, since used in a syllabary, not in an alphabet) between Roman letters as they function in English and in Cherokee, in purely visual terms Sequoyah thereby activated an appropriative transformation, a shift in the contextual meanings of the same signs.<sup>11</sup>

Not so transparent are the runic inscriptions of the later American artist James Castle (1899–1977), which lack a legible lexicon. And yet a kinship, a kindred aesthetic aptitude, is clear. Both men devised their “comely characters” intuitively, regardless of their imputed illiteracy, and neither ever learned to speak English, though for different reasons. Both necessity and difference compelled them in their craft. As an unspeaking, profoundly deaf artist, Castle shared a marginal status with Sequoyah (the name literally means “Pig’s Foot”), whose reported “lameness”—a “white swelling” of the knee<sup>12</sup>—prevented him from physically demanding labor. Perhaps both these “disabilities” have been overstated or distorted by most historians. And yet

these two men independently achieved remarkable feats of linguistic artistry, in a sense performing their otherness through the appropriation and manipulation of the hegemonic language.

### **Myths and Marks: Biography, Practice, and a Preliminary Index**

Many mark the artist as a special(ized) avatar of culture. As a result, an artist's life story tends to accumulate a shroud of mythology. Prizing apart the person from the legend and from the art itself always presents a challenge, and particularly in the case of Castle (and Sequoyah), whose seeming "disadvantages" and subaltern status can cause even the most conscientious critic to stumble. James Castle's oft-cited life story harbors a number of misconceptions posing barriers to a fruitful foray into his prolific and diverse practice, biographical barriers endemic to the discourse of vernacular art. Born profoundly deaf in 1899 (not in 1900, as usually reported)<sup>13</sup> in rural Garden Valley, Idaho—an aptly named verdant dell nestled within desert sagebrush highlands—he spent his life making drawings, books, and constructions on his Catholic family's three successive farms. His parents served as the local postmasters, and their home as a regional post office and store, the source for the bulk of the artist's materials, particularly the found paper and cardboard that furnished both working surfaces ("canvases" for two-dimensional pieces and raw matter for constructions) and inspiration and resources for appropriations (here the specter of Sequoyah looms). The majority of Castle's works can be classified as drawings, rendered in his preferred mediums (chosen over conventional materials) of stove soot in saliva and mysterious "colors of an unknown origin"—possibly dissolved watercolor cakes or pigment extracted from colored paper or other sources (see pp. 000–000 below)—applied with swabs and a sharpened stick as stylus. Known initially for his expressionistic representational landscapes and interiors,

sensitively drawn from observed rural life and fantasy, Castle has come to be recognized in recent years for the full breadth of his work, which encompasses an important though perhaps less accessible body of almost abstract drawings, loosely representational constructions, collages, and text works. He garnered some local acclaim during his lifetime (including at the 1963 and 1976 exhibitions of his work at the Boise Gallery of Art, now the Boise Art Museum) but achieved international recognition only decades after his death in 1977. However, the Castle text corpus—a vast catalogue of hand-bound books, single-word and phrase pieces, calendar-structured code compositions, advertising and cartoon appropriations, and many, many more fuzzily-bounded, less tidily classifiable works—has remained underexplored and underexhibited.

The conventional wisdom about James Castle, repeated again and again with mantric insistence, usually within the first paragraph (or minute) of any discussion about his life and art, states that he “never learn[ed] to speak, read, or write more than his name,” instead working in isolation and disinclined to “shared communication with others.”<sup>14</sup> This doggedness in defining communicative norms belies the several accounts of his gregarious nature and eager willingness to show his work to family, friends, and visitors.<sup>15</sup> A desire to communicate on his own terms and to create social bonds through the vehicle of his art challenges portrayals of his “mute” reticence to convey information through signs (nor was he “mute” in any sense, since he could vocalize and produce sounds, though unable or unwilling to speak words). Castle’s family has insisted that James attended school only briefly and unsuccessfully and was ultimately deemed officially “uneducable” even in sign language,<sup>16</sup> though he did use a restricted repertoire of home signs.<sup>17</sup> However, Ann Percy’s recent research for this retrospective revealed records at the Idaho State School for the Deaf and the Blind in Gooding indicating that he may have attended regularly from at least March 1911 through April 1915, several more years than had previously

been reported.<sup>18</sup> Obviously, we have no way definitively to discern his level of conventional literacy or linguistic competency, but that is almost beside the point; our responsibility resides rather in the careful analytical evaluation of his extant art, without unduly resorting to pat (and unconfirmable) psychological hypotheses and medical diagnoses. Even a cursory examination of Castle's text works calls into question his presumed complete illiteracy, and a typological index of his text formats—and later, an investigation of the actual appropriated and invented characters that fill those formats—reveals the complexity of his poetic practice.

The painter Stephen Westfall's essay on what he calls Castle's "sign works" is the most perceptive and insightful examination of the text pieces, which he accurately observes "do not entirely constitute a separate body of work," just one "having a distinct claim to our attention."<sup>19</sup> It is important to remember that the vast balance of Castle's art is not inherently "original" (a specious designation, in any case) but rather is rooted in appropriation, the transmogrification of often banal commercial and clerical materials into extraordinary and poignant expressions of self-in-place. Westfall's eloquent unpacking of the work included in the New York gallery Knoedler & Company's landmark 2006 exhibition *James Castle / Walker Evans: Word-Play, Signs, and Symbols* helpfully provides five basic working categories, all of which overlap to some extent: the "reconstructed" or collaged drawings,<sup>20</sup> which involve either found, manipulated text or a rendered image of typographical text, bits of which have been cut out, puzzlelike, and then carefully reassembled in their proper places (**figs. 77, 88, 106, 115, 181, 182, 269, 304**); "pentangle and triadic radial arrangements" of collage or drawn appropriated text,<sup>21</sup> often from advertising logos, and possibly related to Castle's treasured kaleidoscope (see **figs. 7, 8, 16, 20, 31, 267, 327, 378**);<sup>22</sup> repetitive, serialistic letter and number drawings, incorporating preprinted material with primarily drawn material (**figs. B5, 34**); constructed

books, bound in found material and often including representational images (**figs. 23, 64, 193, 199**); and “lists, ledgers, and calendars,”<sup>23</sup> which order both recognizable text and invented characters, hieroglyphs, and pictographs into more systematic, charted arrangements (**figs. 9, 243**).<sup>24</sup>

To this rough catalogue of formats I would add the direct comic and cartoon appropriations, first exhibited in Philadelphia in the Fleisher/Ollman Gallery’s 2006 exhibition *Silent Satire*, wherein simulated “wavy-line” cursive text or blocky hieroglyphic symbols replace English text in the speech and thought bubbles (**figs. 10, 11, 358A**). Castle seemed fond of political cartoons—the Pulitzer Prize–winner Reg Manning was a favorite illustrator and source (**figs. 5, 358B**)—though he also made his own meditative versions of other, less didactic newspaper comic frames (such as *Henry, Mutt and Jeff*, and *Goofy*), printed images, and advertisements, sometimes in color washes (**see figs. 28, 29**). A few separate drawings conspicuously display his simulated calligraphic lines centrally, and a variety of appropriations—comics, the Challenge Butter series (**see figs. 3, 14, 15**), and others—introduce a key for reading the orientation of the pieces: blocky, discrete shapes simulate or supplant headline text on the upper edge of the piece, and wavy lines on the lower end simulate or supplant captions or a signature.<sup>25</sup> A compositionally prominent signature occurs occasionally as well (**see fig. 281**), proof of pressure from early dealers or collectors who insisted on a firmer provenance. Instead, Castle’s obviously reluctant, even recalcitrant signatures, rendered in the unsteady cursive of a child, tend to somehow diminish the bold effect of the typographical text works. These wobbly, obligatory signatures are often cited as evidence of Castle’s aping of writing systems, rather than as an inconsistency or incongruity. But it does not take a graphologist to recognize the peremptory and cursory nature of these brusque autographs, which

were clearly coached rather than spontaneous. The signatures are just not as aesthetically considered or resolved as the other writing; they bear the mark of self-consciousness under observation, a departure from his confident inscriptions elsewhere.

Castle's linguistic analysis seems to have required the mediation of type, and so he was less comfortable with handwriting, though there are a few interesting examples of brush or cursive-simulating typefaces that caught his eye enough to emulate exactly (**fig. G11**). And favorite motifs—"Purse ! Discusses," "sed," and "blaws," for example—sometimes show up in a more self-assured, carefully rendered cursive. The recognizable scripts and letters that he favored usually replicate Times New Roman, a standard newspaper font, though sporadic pieces resemble Blackletter, Rockwell, Saturday Evening Post, typewriter font, or more ornate scripts (**fig. 45A**). Of course, Castle's rendered typefaces themselves were handwritten, or rather drawn. And those scrawled signatures could not have been entirely an issue of modesty, or hesitancy to self-promote or announce artistic ownership, since signatures exist in more characteristically coded and less rudimentary manifestations: a typographical "Castle" (**fig. 304**) or "Jimmy" or "Jim," for instance (**see fig. [0751.10]**), or the occasional appearance of his initials in his letter lists. One soot-and-spit typographical book self-reflexively, and poignantly, reads "Calendar / Castle Jim / LEAVE" (**fig. 12**).

What is apparent from Castle's text work is that he certainly understood the *idea* of language. The incredible physical evidence of his practice demonstrates that he comprehended the communicative power of the written character and word, if not always their standard lexical, syntactical, and orthographical uses. Clearly, he was capable of precisely copying (or memorizing) text, but often he chose to transform, dismantle, invent, or even ignore it instead. The poetic aspects of James Castle's text art, as elucidated through the lens of linguistics,

contradict the claim that “when Castle was drawing letters he was rendering typographic shapes rather than symbols of an understood language.”<sup>26</sup> Likewise, Cornelia Butler’s description of Castle’s attempts “to concretize a life that was otherwise elusive and unquantifiable in linguistic terms”<sup>27</sup> avoids a linguistic reading of what is essentially aestheticized language; and as language that is simultaneously visually and linguistically poeticized, the text drawings represent a kind of compound poetry that demands a linguistic reading. A certain objectivity is required for this kind of analysis, but shouldn’t we at least begin with the supposition that letters and words imply language, and not just the nonsense and noise of a “disabled,” furiously mimetic mind?<sup>28</sup> Whether re-creating permutations of incomprehensible patterns found on the pages he copied and cut or, as I believe, consciously attempting to decode and deconstruct those shapes as visual symbols, James Castle was *writing*.

I do not want to push my case too far. I do not mean to claim outright that Castle could read and write English in any orthodox way. Other scholars’ assessments of his limited semiotic knowledge could be correct in terms of conventional literacy, but, as we have seen with Sequoyah’s experimental recoding of the Roman alphabet, it can prove a mistaken assumption automatically to conflate the appearance of an alternative, customized writing system with aphasia or total linguistic dysfunction. And it is a further mistake to praise only the visual elements of an art engaged in both poetry and pictures, and to disregard or deny the poetic reconfiguration of a writing system by a singular creative mind credited with such visual innovation. The poetry permeates the pictures like the interweaving of warp and weft. Upon any open-minded scrutiny of his text work, the notion that Castle was definitively illiterate appears preposterous. Segregation from standardized English literacy as indoctrinated in hearing elementary schools is a thing distinct from illiteracy as a communicative concept. Castle, like

Sequoyah, simply developed his own system. Maybe no one was listening (or rather looking). Maybe that's our job.

### **On Intentionality, Authenticity, and Vernacular Modernism(s)**

I have drawn the admittedly attenuated metaphorical link between Castle and Sequoyah not to mystify or suppose some secret linguistic or historiographical knowledge of Sequoyah by Castle, but instead to elicit a chin-scratching response, to challenge the vernacular artist's allegedly compromised or inchoate intentionality, and to propose a direct parallel to the encoding processes and *bricoleur's* impulse evident in Castle's work. (The graphic correspondences between Sequoyah's and Castle's characters are, however, extraordinarily striking [figs. 306A, 375C, 391B].)<sup>29</sup> It is here, with these references to the vernacular, its potential resistance to the hegemony, and to anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's influential concept of bricolage, that we run headlong into dread dichotomies James Castle inevitably conjures.<sup>30</sup> Castle has been called an "outsider." That epithet is a threat. The game of inventing isms and other labels to categorize artists may be primarily visually descriptive, theoretical, or historical—Cubism, Minimalism, or Post-Impressionism, for instance. But it can also hinge more on the supposed social or cultural otherness of the artist than on the formal qualities of the art itself, as is the case with "outsider," "folk," "self-taught," "*art brut*," "naive," or "visionary" art. These categories of commercial convenience describe the artist's imagined difference or deviance, not the art he or she makes.

A number of major American artists—Castle himself, Henry Darger, William Edmondson, Martín Ramírez, and Bill Traylor, for example—have been dumped into these porous euphemistic categories, often without sufficient regard to their actual practice. Arcane taxonomies have been advanced to separate "folk" from "outsider" from "self-taught," and to

keep all three species safely distinct from “high” (and dry) “fine” or “academic” art. But who are “the folk” anyway? If we accept a classic, broad definition of folklore as “artistic communication in small groups,”<sup>31</sup> then I would suggest that the New York art world, to choose the most notoriously rarefied example, is itself the ultimate folk realm in many respects. The artists listed above do not exhibit any lucid lineage with community folk forms either past or present, if we mean to emphasize the traditional nature of a body of work as transmitted through, say, apprenticeship or orality. In fact, the “canon” fodder of the Western European atelier system bears a closer resemblance to the folk model of transmission. But aren’t all innovative or otherwise accomplished artists—remembered artists—to some extent both taught *and* self-taught?<sup>32</sup> If an artist’s creative idiosyncrasies and formal eccentricities indicate “outsider” status, what or whom is he or she outside? Aren’t the art world and academia—the columned museums, galleries, universities, and cultural institutions—the social exceptions, the outsiders to the vast balance of expressive social milieus? Just as in the schoolyard, it seems players are often chosen for shadowy reasons beyond the quality of the art—or even the fact of the art.

This art-that-cannot-be-named has suffered both from its semantic elusiveness—words seem to fail us when describing it—and a marked lack of cooperative, interdisciplinary attention from scholars.<sup>33</sup> Despite these artists’ considerable achievements, their work has suffered from the relative lack of critical theoretical and formal analysis endemic to the vexed condition of the vernacular. “Vernacular” is perhaps itself an unsatisfactory term, but in its easy, already established application to language, music, and architecture, and its less judgmental accentuation of the everyday and domestic over the official and the immediately commercial, it is arguably less ambiguous and problematic than the labels espoused elsewhere. Hopefully “vernacular” can

designate a fluid artistic process—the ways in which art and ordinary experience and communication are inherently enmeshed<sup>34</sup>—rather than assigning a fixed identity to the artist.

The troubling dearth of academic discourse on subaltern artists (those artists marginalized or “classed” outside the normative financial and institutional networks) privileges “academic,” “elite,” or “fine” art practices (all equally fraught terms), tending to ghettoize vernacular art into a handful of limited discursive realms. Those who wish to appraise an artist’s “authenticity” often confine their dubious calculations to investigations of an artist’s biography, ethnicity or race, socioeconomic class, belief system, psychology, education, and community or creative tradition.<sup>35</sup> All these represent potentially valid and valuable frameworks for looking at art, of course, but none should stand apart from aesthetic considerations. Art historians and folklorists alike would be wise to follow Roger Abrahams’s “four basic ways” to approach an artwork: as a product of a specific artist’s hand; as an object, divorced from artist and audience; as a function of the way the object affects the audience; and as a function of the way the audience affects the object.<sup>36</sup> Each of these approaches depends at least partially on the other three, and all four are entangled aspects of our response to the visual, just as those constructed binaries between high and low, fine and folk, insider and outsider are themselves braided strands.<sup>37</sup>

James Castle’s creations, including the text appropriation he practiced in drawings, books, and collages, occurred within the context of what we might call vernacular modernism.<sup>38</sup> Since the concept of folk (or vernacular) production can really only be delineated in opposition to or segregation from the modern (or the official), some might perceive “vernacular modernism” as an oxymoron, as if Castle, by virtue of his deafness or alleged agrarian isolation, was somehow excluded from the sweeping phenomenon of twentieth-century American modernity.<sup>39</sup> Sidelined as an outsider to our (hearing) sense universe and indeed to our very (hearing)

history—so this reasoning goes—Castle’s mind could not possibly comprehend and respond to modernity’s shining pledge of technology, shrinking distances, and new mediated modes of communication. But the evidence of his work, beyond the stories told to counter that testimony, claims otherwise. Along with appropriation, Castle eagerly explored at least two other modernist preoccupations. Parallax, or synchronous perspectives, a trope that spans James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Sergei Eisenstein’s film montage theory, and of course Cubism, offers a metaphor for Castle’s dynamic text works, which deconstruct and reassemble fonts and logos, organically re-rendering and rearranging inert type. And abstraction in its broadest sense, as in the divorce between signifier and signified, suffuses Castle’s word works much more thoroughly than his other drawings and constructions. But appropriation—and its corollary, allusion—imparts the clearest clues to Castle’s textual core.

Appropriation, that civil word for stealing, was central to the modernist mission at least since Marcel Duchamp, even if obviously borrowed from traditional (folk?) compositional practices of incorporating available materials, both traditional and novel. Here again the entwined nature of “folk” and “fine,” their common kinship with bricolage, outshines any dissonance between the two. Maybe, as many contemporary scholars have suggested, modernity and modernism were not uniform, unilateral, and monolithic phenomena relegated to metropolitan centers and “academic” artists but more democratic, multiplex, pervasive trends of tangled “modernities” and “modernisms.” Castle shared several creative concerns with contemporaneous modernists, if not their company (and we have no way of knowing exactly how aware he was of other art and artists). While his work should be assessed in the same historical light as modernism, the pragmatic “vernacular” qualifier admits both the solitary domesticity of his art and his lack of affiliation with other artists, both during his lifetime and,

more tellingly, in subsequent criticism. (The fact remains that he *was* different from most artists granted major museum retrospectives.) Although Castle was working toward drastically divergent formal and conceptual ends, his diverse work exhibits a profound understanding of poetics and the aesthetic power of graphic entextualization, an approach shared with contemporaneous (and more celebrated) visual and verbal modernists from Wyndham Lewis and El Lissitzky to Mark Tobey and Cy Twombly. Like Sequoyah, Castle reconfigured and customized the dominant culture's text system, likewise drawing from mechanically printed matter—ephemeral commercial materials and “junk” mail—in accordance with idiosyncratic and often radical aesthetic decisions. In adjusting language to the contours of his marginality, Castle negotiated his imposed (though almost definitely perceived) outsider status, as an unspeaking deaf man, through bricolage and visual linguistic aestheticization.

Yet if we heed the critics and the textbooks, language in visual art is largely the domain of academic art, not vernacular art—another case of double standards. Text, despite its important role in the manufacture of art throughout history, from ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian stelae through contemporary stars like Anthony Campuzano, Jenny Holzer, Richard Prince, and Ed Ruscha, seldom enters discussions of work by vernacular artists.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, examples abound: formulaic or prominent signatures (William Hawkins, for example); narrative or contextual text accompanying illustrative and cartographic works (Henry Darger and Joseph Yoakum, respectively); signage expounding political views, aphorisms, musings, and other pronouncements (Jesse Howard); evangelical signage or religious explication (Howard Finster, Jesse Howard again, Sister Gertrude Morgan); text related to more arcane or idiosyncratic mystical or fantasy systems (J. B. Murry, Royal Robertson, Geneviève Seillé, P. M. Wentworth); diaristic dreaming and wish fulfillment (Mingering Mike); syntactical, highly politicized

appropriations of collaged commercial text (Felipe Jesus Consalvos);<sup>41</sup> book-length texts of expressionistic, abstract calligraphy (Charles Crumb); and, in the case of the artist in question, direct appropriation and manipulation of basic textual units, resulting in striking reconfigurations and recontextualizations. Text, then, is wholly within the scope of the vernacular artist's practice. Text appropriation, which we should approach from both visual and conceptual valences, represents just one facet of this admittedly unwieldy and wildly heterogeneous body of word-work.<sup>42</sup> In his embrace of appropriation as a principal communicative channel—a channel widened with his invented characters—Castle demonstrates both the limits of traditional notions of literacy and the necessity of forging a “synthesis of social and aesthetic values”<sup>43</sup> in analyzing vernacular art, or any art.

James Castle did not exist beyond artistic precedent or outside the stream of history, but rather stood steadily, if unwittingly, within the swift currents of modernist poetry, bookmaking, and linguistics. He navigated the same shoals as those museum-enshrined arbiters of isms, and ultimately derived the same visual and verbal conclusions as others on similar if more manifestly—and manifesto—articulated quests for universal language. Can we situate Castle at a crossroads with the controversial deaf educator Alexander Melville Bell, the Russian Futurist *zaumniki* and other avant-garde visual poets, and the linguist Noam Chomsky, all pilgrims on a Babel reunification mission, in search of some (probably hallucinatory) holy grail of universal linguistic knowledge? What are we to think when a supposedly uneducable and illiterate (and certainly untraveled) deaf man from Idaho produces visual poetry homologous to that of academic, political, and artistic radicals thousands of miles away in Europe? Might not that artist's art defy all that too-tidy categorization? It is a speculative enterprise at best, of course,

but James Castle's legacy demands a reassessment of his difficult text work without leaning so heavily on the excuses of accident, coincidence, and so-called illiteracy.<sup>45</sup>

First we require a tentative, more detailed taxonomy of Castle's text, followed by a detour into the history of deaf education and language, hopefully without reducing Castle's art to a mere case study or a symptom. And since I have invoked "vernacular modernism" as a convenient handle for Castle's text practice, I would be remiss not to discuss Castle in counterpoise to textbook modernism, particularly those periodic efforts at eliding visual and literary art, condensing two mediums into one atmospheric element. The erratic history and mercurial tenets of visual poetry and sound poetry—curiously parallel to attempts at resolving issues of deaf speech and writing—reveal a correspondence that helps locate and illuminate the text work within the broader context of modernism and modernity. Finally, a few studies in the making of expressive culture and the function of language, all roughly contemporaneous to Castle—Lévi-Strauss's definition of bricolage, Roman Jakobson's "Linguistics and Poetics," and Chomsky's theory of universal grammar—help provide theoretical sociolinguistic underpinnings for this remarkable artist's use of text, one largely absent from the vexed art-historical and folkloristic discourses on vernacular art.

### **The Man of Signs: On Castle and His Codes**

Castle's text works are anything but accident or anomaly. The sheer quantity of his text drawings and collages—many hundreds—confirms that text was not a sideline to his more conventional representational practice, but rather an integral, regular aspect of his art. And perhaps an organic aspect, too. Illustrating many of Castle's codices, lexicons, and alphabets is an image apparently related to the "Man of Signs," a staple of almanacs since at least the eighteenth century.<sup>46</sup>

(Sometimes a stylized shoulders-up portrait, sometimes with a crosshatched background and sometimes in profile, accompanies or substitutes for the almanac man in Castle's work. Is the Man of Signs a sort of self-portrait?) Castle's usual version (**figs. 23A, 69, 98B, 273, 356B**) is an abridged distillation of an anatomical diagram dating to the Renaissance that links zodiac signs to the internal organs they govern (**see fig. 67B**), prescribing scheduled monthly maintenance of the humors. Castle often organized his alphabets and pictographic charts in a calendar format—usually with a generous surplus of days, up to forty (more time than fits in time)—and the Man of Signs seems to enhance this temporal tie. Castle's association of the alphabetical with the temporal and astral, connecting the cosmos to his codes, implies some understanding of language's power to shape our lived experience, perception, and ontological speculation. We navigate by the stars, but also by our words. Linking language to the almanac man's guts implies a relationship between linguistic and corporeal consciousnesses, a direct bond between body and sign. These drawings entail a systematic investigation of writing.

And what of those runic letters? Their individual forms are as significant as the conglomerate formats in which they appear. In addition to Castle's frequent use of Roman, Greek, and Cyrillic letters, certain other types directly recall Sequoyah's syllabary and even more arcane, fictional alphabetical hybrid systems like Thomas More's Utopian alphabet, first published in 1516.<sup>47</sup> (The similarities between the latter system, never used, as far as I know, outside the context of More's *Utopia* itself, and Castle's letters, may lie in their common resemblance to and liberal borrowing from Greek letters, or in the partial superimposition and deconstruction of extant Roman, Greek, and Cyrillic characters.) Some have identified local cultural and scenic tropes of Castle's landscape—cattle brands, miner's gravestones<sup>48</sup>—in his “totems,” “friends,”<sup>49</sup> and pictographs. Perhaps, although the small size and density of many of

the pictographs makes such details difficult to distinguish. Certainly there are structural similarities to Egyptian hieroglyphs and Maya pictographs, but the deterioration between pictographic symbol and signified subject is usually impenetrable. More enticing still is the visual correspondence of certain of Castle's characters to those of Visible Speech (**fig. G12**),<sup>50</sup> a phonetic notation invented by Alexander Melville Bell (Alexander Graham's father) in 1867. Bell and son tirelessly (some might say, misguidedly) taught their system to the deaf to help them speak competently, and as one of the first writing systems devised outside the bounds of any one dialect, language, or linguistic family, Visible Speech also served as a tool to "standardize" regional accents. Is it possible that Castle was exposed to Visible Speech notation during his years at the Gooding school? There exist many such stabs at universal language or writing, many of them abortive and now forgotten, but the alphabet-customizing concept carries over to Castle, offering us another entrée into his penetrating mind.

Castle developed several different varieties of alphabets, syllabaries, pictographic systems, and syntheses, some seemingly interchangeable or equivalent and others apparently mutually exclusive and distinct. Favorite words, sequences, and patterns—"SOLD" (**fig. 106**), "Polishing" (**fig. 89**), "taxes" (**figs. 114, 115**), "P.O. drawer J / Hallowell / Maine," "REGISTEREDg MAILg" or "REGIstered MAil" (**figs. 311, 391B**), "Purse ! Discusses" or "P!D" (**figs. 69, 98A, 273, 356**), and so on—recur in slightly altered or even abbreviated forms and in different fonts. Hand-rendered and appropriated versions of a single word, such as "CASTLE" (**fig. 304**), are spliced and reassembled in nearly identical ways. Most revelatory of these repetitions is the common recto-verso rendering of entire calendar and code-based chart drawings, letter lists, and word works in uppercase on one side of a sheet or page and in lowercase on the obverse or facing page (**figs. 375C, 375E**). This lucid evidence of Castle's

comprehension of script and typeface variation is not limited to alphabet transcriptions, which could easily have been lifted from a schoolbook, but extends to words, phrases, and even longer texts, as well as to Greek and Cyrillic letters and ostensibly to invented characters too (**fig. 24**). (It is telling also that, according to his family, he worked primarily from memory, rarely directly copying source material.) One unusual blue-ballpoint-pen work even stacks Roman, Greek, and Cyrillic alphabets on one page, as if posed in comparison (**fig. G14**). So we know, if nothing else, that James Castle learned his ABCs, and the script lessons and typographic laws and conventions they contain. From that linguistic foundation he was able to utilize the following sets of glyphs and graphemes:<sup>51</sup>

**Identifiable Systems** (featuring extensive integration within individual works):

- Roman letters and numerals (upper and lowercase; standard, reversed, mirrored, and rotated);
- Greek letters, favoring Α, Γ, Δ, Θ, Λ, Ξ, Π, Σ, Φ, Ψ, Ω (upper and lowercase, plus overlaps with Roman, Cyrillic, Coptic, and other alphabets);
- Cyrillic letters (predominantly uppercase);
- Altered, augmented, and trimmed Roman, Greek, and Cyrillic letters (predominantly Roman);
- Korean, Chinese, and Japanese characters (relatively rare);<sup>52</sup>
- Arabic numerals (standard, reversed, mirrored, rotated);
- Altered, augmented, and trimmed Arabic numerals;
- Visible Speech notation (ambiguous).

**Pictographs and Consistent Invented Alphanumeric Systems** (often mutually exclusive but occasionally with recurring combinatory elements like heads, geometrical forms and shards, and letters; frequently charted in calendar formats):

—*I*s and *0*s (often roughly sketched);

—Invented or reimagined Cyrillic-like script (recurring characters include elaborate *S*s and ornamented *C*s; slight resemblance to Visible Speech notation);

—“Contained” pictographs (generally rectilinear blocks containing geometrical figures of pronounced volume, or occasionally representational fragments, even renderings of Castle’s own artwork or “friends”);

—“Scarab”-shaped abstract pictographs (often combined with Blackletter—or “Gothic”—Roman letters);

—Abstract geometric/iconic pictographs (less dense, more simply geometric—rectilinear, circular, triangular, star-shaped—with resemblances to picture frames, balls, coins, crosses, keyholes, chess pieces, dominoes, and so on);

—Clearly representational pictographs (faces, heads, “misty” or haloed heads, angels, flags, stamps, ankhs);

—Representational “scenic” pictographs (resembling film storyboards, comic strips, or compressed Castle photo albums, often including images of his art);

—Larger representational images gridded into discrete sections;

—Collaged comic frames or archetypes (sometimes as lexicons, with associated letters).

This multifarious inventory of text types—mostly drawn from models of mechanical typefaces—implies a vast library of appropriative sources. But Castle’s art and poetry combine a

highly exacting use of appropriated standard letters and vocabulary, affectively selected, with the baroque embellishment and even invention of scripts and numerals. When symbols did not yet exist to represent the different scope and sensibility of his individual, alternative literacy, he simply willed them into being and onto the page. To the hearing, written language serves primarily as a buttress to a spoken foundation, and so Castle's "broken" or conjured scripts register as unpronounceable or even counterfeit. In order to edge closer to his comely characters, we must wrestle with the illusory notion of writing as speech made visible.

### **On Deafness, Literacy, and "Natural Language"**

Invoking Visible Speech resurrects the troubling question of Castle's deafness and his aversion to standard language models. Thirty years after his death, the matter still lurks stubbornly in the shadows, refusing to recede. Too often framed as a problem, the question itself regards deafness as a conclusive disability, an obviously insurmountable impediment to "normal" or sophisticated language acquisition, and a lonesome exile from the fullness of human experience. Hopefully today no one would agree with Immanuel Kant that "mutes" can only obtain an "analogy of Reason,"<sup>53</sup> but casting deafness (or language) as in any way a normative or monolithic condition is the real problem here. So, too, is reducing Castle (or any deaf artist) to a novelty or human oddity deserving amazement and sympathy over independent analysis. Deafness is neither a predicament nor an absolute but simply another human faculty. As the deaf poet David Wright has written, "No one inhabits a world of total silence," since "it is not necessary to be able to hear in order to hear."<sup>54</sup> Degrees of deafness (and big-D Deaf cultural self-identity)<sup>55</sup> vary considerably, and even lacking any auditory perception, vibrations transmit a certain sound-sense through the skin, via a kind of sensate touch-transliteration.

So the question of Castle's deafness is at once a historical question about the halting, oblique development of deaf education and a philosophical question about the nature of language, speech, and writing. The history of deaf education and literacy is full of fractious and still-sensitive issues. Some of these do not apply to the current discussion, since Castle could not identify as culturally Deaf—he preferred art and writing to signing, only employing a few home signs—and during his school years he apparently resisted the temporary interaction with a Deaf community. But any interpretation of Castle's text art begs a philosophical plumbing of those fiery disputes over language, writing, sign, speech, and sound surrounding the deaf, disputes usually instigated and perpetuated by anxious hearing educators. The recent revelation that Castle might have spent much longer than initially thought at the Idaho State School for the Deaf and Blind, compounded with the deaf myths that dog Castle criticism, together demand an analysis of that history.

At the core of deaf communication is the great debate over oralism versus gesturalism, or speech versus sign language, which, although always a matter of concern for educators, reached a fever pitch in the decades before Castle's birth, under the influence of Alexander Melville Bell. The argument historically revolved around high-minded evaluative notions of "natural language," concerning the relative merits of sign language's potential simultaneity and immediacy and spoken and written language's necessary sequentiality and rhetorical remove; spiritual worth, as measured by the capacity for generative or prayerful speech and the comprehension of scripture and spiritual abstractions (after all, speech reflected both divine inspiration and the power of the Holy Spirit);<sup>56</sup> and even eugenics, as Bell and others feared that sign language encouraged deaf isolation and inbreeding, resulting in an insidious hereditary persistence of the "affliction." Most American educators, borrowing imported French ideas,

agreed on the importance of literacy for the deaf—another corollary of Christian concerns about salvation and mutism’s “atrophy and death of the soul”<sup>57</sup>—but few agreed on how best to forge the proper relationships between scripts, whether standard or novel, and either speech or sign. James Castle lived during a great transition (and reversal) from the oral method to sign language in deaf education, which explains how he could have been exposed to both Visible Speech and sign-language instruction—if not formally for the latter, then illicitly, a students’ secret—as part of the Gooding school’s curriculum. By the time Castle attended Gooding, oralism had been entrenched in American schools for more than thirty years, although American Sign Language (ASL) still had its advocates, who awaited the cultural swing back to signing. We know that Castle’s sister Nellie, who was also deaf, though not from birth, tried to teach a disinterested James ASL—his surviving alphabet chart is inscribed by her (**fig. G16b**)—but he refused to engage in communication on anyone’s terms but his own. The ponderous “uneducable” verdict was probably delivered on the dual judgment of Castle’s “oral failure” and his denial of standard ASL. Was Castle a kind of Bartleby, who simply “would prefer not to”?<sup>58</sup>

As if in opposition to all those thinkers—Denis Diderot, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Jean-Jacques Rousseau—who demanded that the deaf were primally tied to a mythical natural sign language of simultaneity uncorrupted by clumsy speech and written syntax, Castle freely flushed his letters and words out into open, non-linear space by using them as atomic aesthetic elements in visual composition. He cheerfully confounded and conflated the old sequentiality versus simultaneity dichotomy by eliding language and image. Sound and vision alike—and signs, speech, and scripts, too—unfold into both time and space. We can recognize the spatial as well as temporal aspects of Castle’s comic collages, which, like scores, are almost musical in their patterned, thematic progression and dilation (**figs. 64A, 64B, 125A**). He seemingly

understood that just as writing analyzes speech rather than reflecting it, so too does visual art analyze experience rather than merely dimly registering its optical qualities.<sup>59</sup> But what kind of language might Castle have been encircling with his artwork? What might he have understood about speech or the symbolic nature of letters? What sorts of scripts might he have been emulating or altering? So many of his text works resemble grammar-school exercises. Did he take it upon himself simply to invent a new language from scraps of extant alphabets? In short, in what way did he—could he—understand language?

Long before James Castle came along to complicate matters, Plato's dialogue *Cratylus* sparked the long-standing, and possibly spurious, argument about natural language versus artificial language that has continued through Noam Chomsky, whose provocative theory of an innate language organ, a "universal grammar," is very distantly related to Cratylus's long-since discredited claim that words have a "natural" basis in human vocal imitation.<sup>60</sup> The question conjures Castle: What correlation exists between his representational works and his text works? Was he channeling Cratylus's conviction that linguistic form and meaning are somehow entwined, as in signing or art? Or, more basically, what do Castle's "comely characters" mean, and *how* do they mean? Are they evidence of an innate linguistic function in his brain, or are they strictly arbitrary or aesthetic appropriations? To what writing systems was Castle exposed during those long Idaho days? If he was able to locate sources for Cyrillic and Greek (and maybe Egyptian or Maya)—scripts that none of his immediate family understood—then might he just as easily have familiarized himself with Visible Speech? A further linguistic reading follows later on in this essay, but for now it might suffice to trace the lineage of the latter, the first widely used oralist script system designed to "demutize" the deaf. After all, Castle's literacy, if we may venture to call it such, was specifically a print literacy, a language attuned to typography above

all else. Some poets choose words according to sound. Castle had to choose letters for how they looked, according to aesthetics and affect. But that does not mean that they held no specific communicative or experiential meaning for him. The barrier between the body's supposedly "natural" language of signs and the brain's supposedly acculturated set of arbitrary phonemes and artificial writing symbols is much blurrier than we might think, and sign-language notations bear the scars of this struggle over meaning and form.<sup>61</sup>

Turning for a moment from signing to speech, modified Roman and Greek letters and invented characters alike have long been used for phonetic notation. Benjamin Franklin, George Bernard Shaw, and Henry Sweet (in a revision of Visible Speech), among others, all devised precursors to the International Phonetic Alphabet (**fig. G00**), the first version of which was published in 1888 and came to include standard, modified, and rotated Roman letters and punctuation, Greek letters, Anglo-Saxon/Scandinavian letters, Hungarian letters, mathematical symbols, and a few invented diacritics and characters.<sup>62</sup> The idea behind Visible Speech was an idealistic one, predating Esperanto dreams: to devise a universal writing system that would allow easy communication between all peoples. Of course, not everyone agreed that the goal was desirable or even linguistically viable. Many deaf people railed against Alexander Melville and Alexander Graham Bell's paternalistic and patrician insistence that sign language could not possibly suffice as a natural language. The Bells' dedication to "curing" deafness and muteness sometimes lapsed into the obsessive or even the grotesque, despite the fact that they both married deaf women.<sup>63</sup>

But Visible Speech differs from other phonetic alphabets in that it is an iconic notation: the characters that Bell contrived are not entirely abstract and arbitrary but correspond to tongue and mouth positions used to pronounce them (**fig. G12b**). The system had philosophical roots in

the seventeenth century, in Francis Mercury van Helmont's writing about the spiritual virtues of the so-called natural alphabet and the divine generative power of speech. Van Helmont's idea was that the ancient Hebrew characters actually describe the various shapes the human speech organs strike in the inspiratory articulation of a given phoneme.<sup>64</sup> Bell latched onto the same idea, more or less, and so too perhaps did Castle by proxy, if he was indeed taught the system in his school days. Were Castle's more organic letter inventions dreams of those unhappy days of Visible Speech instruction, when teachers forced his fingertips onto their speaking throats and made him mimic the vibrations in his own and match them to strange black bugs on the page? Was he matching his marks to the shape of his mouth in the mirror, as he would have been required to do at school? Or was he just attracted to the sinuous curves and symmetry of Visible Speech characters and the other scripts he lifted? If so, he certainly was disciplined in his attraction. The question with which we began, it seems, only breeds more.

### **Home and Horizon: More on Materiality, Modernism, and Appropriation**

Castle's text work is difficult to unravel, and with reason. But we can turn to process and then to form and content for theoretical inroads. We can essentially parse his text practice in twain: manipulated and collaged source material; and (manipulated) soot-and-spit renderings of source material (sometimes the self-same material). John Yau has obliquely implied a bricoleur's impulse in Castle's work by suggesting that "drawing (and art) was where he put together, as well as took apart, the structures he inhabited, as well as those that occupied his surroundings."<sup>65</sup> The French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss defined bricolage as a kind of resourceful itch to combine existing materials in order to create something new. However limited that strict structuralist term may sound today in the context of the dissolving cultural dichotomies

we have already discussed, the word has outpaced its anthropological coinage to make itself more universal. In an art-historical context, the term is closely related to the more familiar and user-friendly “collage” or “assemblage,” but for Lévi-Strauss, bricolage was something far broader and more diffuse, fundamentally useful in explaining the patterns of mythological thought.<sup>66</sup> For us, bricolage offers a way to understand the appropriative elements of James Castle’s text works and how he coded and combined the jetsam of print-bound sentences into communications. Castle, like Sequoyah, summoned new meanings from the trashed or fugitive remains of fuller, rounder sentences, such that the remixed parts became a new whole, an amalgam of visual and linguistic meanings. Both men blurred the porous boundaries between public and private, between art and everyday life.

As singular as it stands, Castle’s oeuvre incorporates a constellation of incidental influences, threading its own quiet path through the thicket of twentieth-century material culture. Mass culture can yield private vernacular effects, either through deliberate appropriation or the osmosis accompanying constant exposure. Popular print culture provided Castle with a template for scrutinizing the mysteries of language. His art thus sounds at two distinct registers: home and horizon. A paper polyphony knits his private whispers about domestic spaces and rituals with public messages meant to sell or standardize. The text works function not only as unilateral statements but as a tender, dialogic counterpoint—now harmonious, now dissonant—that reuses and redeems the castaway glut of printed matter endemic to his (or any) modern generation: administrative postal forms, local church mailers and calendars, envelopes, Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalogues, Bon-Ton Modern Miss sanitary napkin wrappers (**fig. 45**), Carl Anderson’s *Henry* and the Reg Manning cartoons (**figs. 5, 28–30, 358B**), packs of Lucky Strike cigarettes (**fig. 000**), ice-cream boxes or other food packaging (**figs. 269v, 000**), derelict business cards,

circular mailer recipes and coupons, nieces' and nephews' spelling homework. These banal backgrounds of published (and occasionally handwritten) text and image—sometimes disjunctive, sometimes hilariously or eerily apt—serve as experimental fields, testing-grounds on which Castle could arrange additional strata of his own potential text systems, consisting of appropriated and invented characters, ideograms, and pictograms. His invented languages and manipulated letters replicate advertising aesthetics while destroying or obfuscating the slogans and the hard sell. “Ripped from the Headlines!” they decidedly are not. The result is a palimpsest of rendered superimpositions, pasted sedimentation, and excisions at once personal and public. Through accumulation, the accretion of text on text, the pieces accrue a double resonance. The completed work both underscores and obscures the hijacked and transfigured source material.

When they appear as books, as is often the case, Castle's recondite codes become codices. Although executed on and out of mass-printed material, and mimicking typography, all his books are editions of one, despite similarities and consistently repeated motifs, such as calendar reconfigurations and alphabets. Not only are we faced with an increase in sheer volume from the single text works, but viewing (or reading) the bound document suddenly assumes an extended sequentiality, linearity, and serialization as the pages turn. Constructed from his characteristic palette of salvaged paper dregs and dross, Castle's books formally and structurally echo familiar sources at his disposal—family photo albums, shopping catalogues, calendars, and school geometry books—sources that furnished both material and models. Castle was a voracious peruser and collector as well as an expert bookmaker. He habitually pored over the daily newspaper before carefully refolding it and passing it on to his brother-in-law, paying special attention to the funny pages, which elicited hilarious laughter. Comics provided both fodder for appropriation and a structure for multiframe compositions. Comic fragments appear

frequently in collaged form in his work, sometimes associated with a Roman-letter or an invented character caption, as in a key or lexicon (**fig. G15b**). At other times, appropriated comics—or actual soot drawings—were segmented into ragged sectors and gridded out, as in a drawing-instruction guide. (Art education literature fascinated Castle, who devoted an entire series to a “Draw Me!” matchbook challenge and once re-rendered the entirety of a 1954–55 course brochure from the Museum Art School, Portland, Oregon [now the Pacific Northwest College of Art].)

Among his vast collections of source material, or so-called scholar boxes—a kind of reference library of clippings, scraps, and his own transformations, often bundled in discrete piles in gunny sacks bound with twine—comic compendiums are notably frequent. One stack includes a “Little Country Doctor” eye-exam chart dating to the 1940s (**fig. G16a**) and a “Single and Double Hand Alphabets” manual inscribed to James from his sister Nellie (**fig. G16b**); both reverberate in his letter lists and occasional drawn hand signs (**fig. 375E**). The rhythms of Castle’s text books, the way the various characters, words, symbols, and images unfold and recur in measured cadences page by page, seem inspired by his beloved cartoons. If they are not exactly (or coherently) narrative, then they at least seem related to the comic-frame form. (He likewise seems to have understood the captioning and speech-bubble conventions, despite not speaking himself.) Or perhaps storyboards or animation, the moving-picture equivalent to comics, influenced him. Films, particularly before 1927, when “talkies” de-democratized the cinematic experience for the deaf, allowed an inclusive entertainment experience for the stigmatized and besieged deaf community. Castle might have viewed silent films at the Gooding school or on trips to town,<sup>67</sup> and we know that as an adult he enjoyed television.<sup>68</sup>

In the most superficial sense, Castle was a symbolic heir to the master bookbinder Pierre Desloges, who, with his 1779 pamphlet defending sign-language education and the deaf-education pioneer Abbé de l'Épée, became one of the first deaf writers ever to publish.<sup>69</sup> But a further art-historical archaeology reveals a stronger affinity with a very different direction in bookmaking: the “transrational” book experiments of the Russian avant-garde and, more broadly, the modernist phenomena of visual poetry and sound poetry. After all, Castle’s books are not only or even essentially literary, but wholly visual. The very density, palpable materiality, and surface texture touched on above have a specific term in modernist criticism—*faktura*. The Russian linguist and critic Viktor Shklovsky coined the word, which refers to an artist’s choice of material and its appropriate treatment, to describe the key quality of the exciting experiments in art and poetry enacted by the Russian Futurists and other modernist rabble-rousers.

### ***Ut Pictura Poesis: On Sound Poetry, Visual Poetry, and the Grand Elision***

It is a long way from Boise to Berlin, further still to Tbilisi. But despite no direct connection or exchange with European art or artists hailing from these and other faraway cities—or with any other artists, for that matter—Castle’s drawings and books especially resonate with those exploratory projects claiming property on the twin axes of sound poetry and visual poetry. Often colliding or coalescing, these two somewhat indistinct strains of avant-garde literature hinged on efforts to divorce the referential relationship between signifier and signified, to unloose language from its codified phonetic and textual moorings. In that sense, the severing strategies of visual poets might meet Castle’s text pieces halfway, coinciding with his provisional, and opposite, attempts to imagine and fashion his own personal linguistic links—to articulate alphabetical fragments and pictographic imagery to his affective perceptions of reality. Sound and visual

poets insisted (and insist still) that the abstract sonic or optical qualities of language are as significant as the arbitrary meanings assigned words and letters, that words and characters have accreted symbolic sound and visual value beyond their (artificial) literal meanings. As optically and acoustically seductive as the products can be, it is a tricky premise to wrap one's head around. But reading Castle's texts as visual poetry enables our critical and contextual analysis to disarticulate his linguistic gestures from the fetishism of grammatical intelligibility and positivist "sense."

Variouly described as pattern poetry, *parole in libertà* (words at liberty), Lettrisme, or concrete poetry, the eliding of visual and poetic effects was not a new idea, but it found one of its first full, international flowerings in Futurism, of the discrete Italian and Russian varieties and voices. From the *carmina figurata*, or shaped poems,<sup>70</sup> of the early Middle Ages through the various Futurisms to Fluxus and beyond, the visual poetic effort suffused much of early modernism, and perhaps vernacular modernism as well, although the normative historical record excludes much of vernacular expressive culture. Following in the footsteps of Guillaume Apollinaire's typographically and spatially constructed *calligrammes*, avant-garde poets impudently extrapolated Horace's ancient equation *ut pictura poesis* (in poetry as in painting) to its most basic literal level, employing invented languages, indeterminacy, and "spatial syntax"<sup>71</sup> to spin verse onto exciting new linguistic and artistic planes. Visual poetry's imprecise painting-with-letters maxim quickly infiltrated an international arena, sustaining radical scenes in Spain and in France, where Surrealists and rival Lettrists eventually took up the torch.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps most famously, Dadaists in Germany and Switzerland (Raoul Hausmann, Hugo Ball, Kurt Schwitters, Tristan Tzara) enhanced the hilarity and absurdity quotients of the more militaristic Italian Futurists following Filippo Tommaso Marinetti.<sup>73</sup>

Not exactly simple onomatopoeia or ecstatic glossolalia either, Dada sound poetry's mutterings were meant for performance but often found their way into print first, thereby aligning with the efforts of visual poets, including Castle. The result was a fusion, evident in the "optophonetic" poster poems of the self-described "Dadasopher" Raoul Hausmann (among others), which notate sound poetry with typographical and compositional tactics. How different, really, are Hausmann's 1918 "OFFEAHBDC" (**fig. G17**) and "fmsbwtözäu"<sup>74</sup> and Castle's recurring nonsensical neologisms and homespun typographic-phonetic patterns—for instance, "Blaws," "Leyse," "L.S.," "COIVUS,"<sup>75</sup> "ONHBYD," "DRWLYL," "M-OD," and "CTAR"? Without any background knowledge of the artists in question, one would be hard-pressed to distinguish these transatlantic "literary" and "illiterate" assaults on sense and grammar. Both poets, regardless of literacy polarity and intention, employ Roman letter forms and punctuation marks expressionistically and (to us) irrationally. Hausmann's pointing finger curiously evokes both sandwich-board signs and sign language. Castle also occasionally included hand signs as pictographic elements in his drawings, seemingly interchangeably with other characters (**figs. 375E, G2**). Pictographs and ideograms themselves indicate the ascendancy of visual over sound poetics, which of course describes Castle's actual working method. Since he could not hear, any retrospective sonic insights remain ours alone.

By the time Castle had his first hometown exhibition, at the Boise Gallery of Art in 1963, visual poetry had again, following a World War II dormancy, resurfaced worldwide in the updated guise of the concrete poetry movement, spearheaded roughly simultaneously by Öyvind Fahlström in Stockholm, Eugen Gomringer in Berne, and the Noigandres group in São Paulo. Perhaps more rigorously abstract and theoretical than earlier modernist groups—and, with substantial North and South American contingents, also more international in scope—

“concretism,” as it was sometimes called, championed asemic writing (script without any semantic content), haptic poetry (sculptural or otherwise off-the-page poems),<sup>76</sup> and the Fluxus “intermedia” aesthetic.<sup>77</sup> However, the primary focus, if there was one, remained on typographical and script-based verse patterns and permutations, sometimes associated with chance operations and event notation.<sup>78</sup> Within this second generation of modern visual poets, similarities to Castle abound. Castle’s unfathomable letter charts are reminiscent of the compositional scatter, shape, and sprawl of the “constellations” and ideograms of Eugen Gomringer, for example, one of the movement’s early practitioners; his staccato twinnings (**figs. 22A, 375A**) find echoes in Gomringer’s “Das Haus” poems (“I GING–transkriptionen 1–8”), with their spare lists of paired letters. Gomringer’s commercial appropriation “Roads 68” records an inventory of highway gas companies, enumerated like old married couples or dinner party guests, or like Castle’s months and advertising slogans (**figs. 104, G2 [months]**).<sup>79</sup> The Los Angeles poet, novelist, and playwright Aram Saroyan tinkered with invented typographical characters (a triple-hump *m*, for instance) much as Castle grafted and extracted extra serifs and strokes onto and from his transformed typefaces and added and subtracted letters (or letter-shrapnel) from words—“urself,” half-Ns and half-Ms (**fig. 000**), and the weird, recurrent “REGIstered MAil” or “REGISTEREDg MAILg” (**figs. 311, 391B**). Likewise, Saroyan’s symmetrical neologisms, forged from collisions and elisions (“lighght,” “eyeye”), do not fall far from Castle’s “lealabyrinth” (**fig. G22**), “Inbishopin,” “sylvα” and “Pishortioϕtishowen” (both of which appear in upper and lower cases, Greek characters and all; **fig. G13b**), “SAisatKAsfactio” (**fig. 311**), and an unusually monumental stitched “place” construction that cleaves *p* from “lace” (**fig. 88**). Sympathetic analogues to Castle’s text can also be found in the two-sided, multipage poems and homely newspaper-collage books of the Swiss-German guru Dieter Roth (formerly

Diter Rot), and in the letter and punctuation clusters and overlays within them. In fact, Roth's wild, woolly, and astonishingly prolific practice—a rangy, messy mix of all media, from monumental assemblage to sloppily sublime music to dull archives of quotidian trash and minutiae to disciplined monosymbolic poems—provides a rare kinship to Castle's in its dizzying omnivorousness, its thrifty scavenging aesthetic, and its plainspoken oracles.<sup>80</sup>

Castle was as systematic and productive as any of these artists, but his signature style of hand-rendering type—his calligraphic typography, if you will—ranks as *rara avis* among them. With one possible exception. The group that shared most in common with Castle, theoretically and formally, crested the first wave of visual poetry hundreds of miles east of most others but concurrently with the Italian Futurists and the Dadaists. The Russian avant-garde—Cubo-Futurists and Futurists alike—nurtured perhaps the most extreme school of modernist poetry, known as *zaum*, which more closely resembled Dada's aims than those of their accidental Italian counterparts. The word itself is an elision in Russian—“beyondsense” probably approximates its meaning most closely in English.<sup>81</sup> The primary practitioners of *zaum*, the chief *zaumniki*, were also its founding formulators and frequent collaborators, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov, but their influence on other artists, poets, and linguists was substantial. They proposed a “transrational” use of poetic language through both sound (performance) and visual (compositional) devices, encouraging the dissection of Cyrillic vocabulary, syntax, and individual phonemes, and even advancing their own ideas for a universal hieroglyphics, echoing Alexander Melville Bell and other Babelian reconstructionists.<sup>82</sup>

The consonant and vowel clusters of *zaum*'s more abstract articulations reflect a musical understanding of language, wherein notation takes precedence over inscription and phonemes resemble tone clusters or seriality. Significantly, for *zaumniki* the very shapes of script and type

could broadcast historical, aesthetic, and spatial concepts without forming words.<sup>83</sup> Although potent in theater and visual art in addition to literature, zaum blossomed most convincingly in book form. If Hausmann and Saroyan sent a teasing volley of new typeface forms toward the austere history of typography, then Kruchenykh—more in keeping with Castle—waged a complete “assault on Gutenberg.”<sup>84</sup> The concept of the artist’s book—Roth’s, for example—could not have existed without their mutiny, which incorporated indeterminacy in page order of a single run, a scrappy handmade bricolage aesthetic in construction, hand-drawn characters accompanying (or replacing) typography, and text that evaporates into illustration. Like Castle, Kruchenykh used any and all paper he could get his hands on, even appropriating office supplies from his workplace. The books extrapolated the transrational (il)logic of zaum to the more sustained, sequential format of multipage multiples.

Castle is in some sense an unwitting zaum poster boy. Not only was he fond of deconstructing and augmenting Cyrillic letters, but his catalogue is full of one-word text pieces (and many pairs as well) that parallel and even predate more ornamental one-words by Ed Ruscha<sup>85</sup> or haptic sign works by Jack Pierson. Castle’s lone word works were prophesied by the zaumniki back in 1913, when Castle was fourteen: “Henceforth a work of art could consist of a *single word*, and simply by skillful alteration of that word the fullness and expressivity of artistic form might be attained.”<sup>86</sup> A startling and direct analogue for Castle’s text work lies in *Zamaul III* (**fig. G19**), a book collaboration between Kruchenykh and company (Vladimir Burliuk, Pavel Filonov, and Nikolai Rogovin). Typography and handwriting coexist here, with some Castle-esque inbreeding between the two evident in the headline’s serifs. Kruchenykh and Castle shared an affection for inverted and reversed letters, the ungrammatical use of capitals and lowercase letters, and spliced, smashed, and split words and letters. The image at the bottom of the

illustrated page could be a kissing cousin to the blank-faced geometric portraits illustrating so many of Castle's text works (**figs. 34, 107, 272**). These two artists, the one from Boise and the other from Tbilisi, tunneled through their inherited vocabularies and alphabets to excavate some more elemental, granite aspect of "beyonsense" language.

### **"Words Without Thoughts" and Other Gibberish: On the Linguistic Lens**<sup>87</sup>

Lest the yoking of Castle to the Russian poets seem too tenuous, modern linguistics fashions another connective tissue between them. The early career of the linguist Roman Jakobson was heavily influenced by Russian Futurism and zaum's concept of "The Word as Such."<sup>88</sup> Jakobson's 1919 essay "Futurism," and his involvement with Khlebnikov and other experimental artists, helped to lay the foundations for his structuralist reimagining of linguistic science after Ferdinand de Saussure.<sup>89</sup> Jakobson's ideas may be out of vogue today, but his work on poetics—what makes certain kinds of language essentially "poetic," or more potent than everyday speech—remains relevant, especially in Castle's (coeval) case. Imbricated as Lévi-Strauss's application of bricolage was within outmoded ideas of "'raw' or 'naïve' art"<sup>90</sup> and the "savage mind," perhaps poetics, as defined by Jakobson, offers the Castle critic a more flexible, unbounded interpretive system, one more adaptable to the artist's extraordinary textual gestures.

Jakobson's claims are counterintuitive but powerful. Sandy Harthorn's conjecture that the "irony" of Castle's "nonsensical verbiage . . . [and] juxtapositions is more likely due to the reader's associations rather than Castle's insight"<sup>91</sup> sounds a common—and perfectly understandable—response to the work. Here we butt into the thorny issue of intentionality again, but Jakobson's poetics provides an escape route from that unnavigable labyrinth, since "poeticalness is not a supplementation of discourse with rhetorical adornment but a total re-

evaluation of the discourse and of all its components whatsoever.”<sup>92</sup> Likewise, “when dealing with poetic function, linguistics cannot limit itself to the field of poetry,”<sup>93</sup> as “it is evident that many devices studied by poetics are not confined to verbal art.”<sup>94</sup> That is, any genre of language can contain poetic elements. Jakobson provides us with a lens and a license for looking at all speech and writing, from the plainest passing utterance to a blunt traffic sign to Shakespeare. (He proposes the political slogan “I Like Ike” as a simple example.)<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the poetic function resides everywhere language patterns itself through rhyme, alliteration, parallelism, meter, metonym and metaphor, and other aesthetic effects, whether in visual art, music, or even advertising.<sup>96</sup> (Castle finds these functions everywhere, rerouting and orchestrating them into art.) In a sense, Jakobson’s landmark 1960 essay “Linguistics and Poetics” allows us to overleap the question of explicit intentionality by positing that all utterances, text-bound and oral alike, are coded, a supposition that I argue applies to Castle’s graphic use of language, even when divorced from an easily decodable semantic referent or known lexicon.<sup>97</sup>

Certainly, according to those criteria, Castle’s text pieces display a pronounced, and pervasive, poetic impulse. By emphasizing the visual aesthetics of letters and words, which bear the signature mark of the artist’s hand—like a palimpsest, reinscribed alongside the original source text, or over its mere typographical and contextual meaning—his text works call attention to the form of the message over its referential content (the meaning, or literal message, of the language).<sup>98</sup> In order to apply Jakobson’s pioneering notions of poetics, which he found chiefly in spoken and written language, to the text creations of a deaf and unspeaking artist that involve both optical and linguistic communicative processes, we must take some liberties with a canonical text of linguistics. But by so doing, perhaps we can effect, or at least provoke, a change in the consideration of Castle’s text work.

Metonym, the figure of speech in which an attribute or portion of something stands for the thing itself, figures essentially in Westfall's first category of Castle's text work, his collaged drawings. These feature several shards or wedges (serifs, strokes, and other variously-sized slices) of either collaged or rendered letters, single words, or short phrases—"LEARN LIVING," "Could Be Worse," "CASTLE," "taxes," "*STILL SMALL VOICE*," "Last Call!" "SOLD," and "REAL" all furnish memorable examples (**figs. 181, 48, 304, 115, 182, 77, 106, 323**)—meticulously extracted and then reaffixed in the exact spot from which they were excised.<sup>99</sup> These isolated words, phrases, and pieces of letters, mined from their syntactical or symbolic contexts, function as metonyms in their own right, as decontextualized parts of some mysterious, more expansive or fleshed-out sign, headline, or sentence. (Generally they appear on a brief shred of worried, wrinkled paper, as if torn directly from their context.) But the fact that Castle has ruptured and reassembled these words and letters, or portions thereof, points to a more enigmatic purpose. The surgical dissection and reinsertive transplant seemingly indicates that, for Castle, each letter or character was composed of smaller discrete (visual) components, linguistic elements (almost in the atomic or chemical sense) available for metonymic contemplation, removal, and potential recycling, recombination, or recontextualization.<sup>100</sup> At first glance, the viewer may barely perceive these tiny extractions. But if our basic unit of language is the letter, for Castle (as for Sequoyah), this was not necessarily the case. He could go further and deeper.<sup>101</sup>

And yet he also worked at a more complex level than the constitutive, arranging compositions not only from typographical fragments but also from their graphic contexts. Word-playing drawings that inscribe text as a caption to or in conjunction with a compositionally dominant image, as in the "HOMES / HOUSE" (see **fig. 237**) and "OREGON" pieces that

Westfall cites,<sup>102</sup> can be read as either compatible metaphors or disassociated signs—words with no clear referential correlation. Sometimes Castle reproduced month names exactly (**figs. 12A, 49A, 67A**); elsewhere he invented new months (**figs. 73A, 73B, 434b**). The extent to which these captions were intended as such, as names for the illustrated image, of course remains unknowable. Similarly, Castle’s constructions of abstracted everyday objects like jackets, chairs, and pitchers (and even human beings and animals) function almost as sculptural surrogates (or familiars, in the magical sense) for words or Platonic ideals.<sup>103</sup> Certain subjects seemingly held for him a metaphorical weight substantial enough to tug into three dimensions; in those cases, the sign for an object or entity became a sculptural object or entity itself, a physical manifestation of the word, a totem or “friend” (**see fig. 27**).

But Jakobson’s essay does not stop at metonym and metaphor, and neither should we. The visual parallelism of James Castle’s kaleidoscopic and redrawn collages (see figs. 000–000), with their symmetrically arranged translations of logos, slogans, or commercial heraldry,<sup>104</sup> echoes Jakobson’s parallelism, a balanced repetition that represents “the empirical linguistic criterion of the poetic function.”<sup>105</sup> These mandalaesque drawings seem derived from the marked repetition of various favorite letters in other alphanumeric list works. Many drawings pair *E* or another vowel with various consonants as if to suss out graphically their phonetic permutations (**figs. 22, 273**). It may seem counterintuitive to try to sound out Castle’s evidently obtuse lexical twinings and lists of letters, real and invented, but what appears as gibberish often *sounds* like music (or sound poetry), in spite of the artist’s inability to hear his own entextualizations. It may be that Castle chose groupings of characters—again, typically pairs within more complex systems—according only to their graphic relationships or visual rhymes, and that sheer luck

alone determined repeated patterns apparently signifying the sound of speech. But I am not so sure.

Certainly, a deaf poetics must approach traditional aural poetic devices like rhyme, meter, and alliteration—effects essentially keyed to the ear—in a sidelong manner or through another medium. Rhyming dictionaries, syllable counting, sign-language poetry, or just sight—visual poetic devices like those used by the zaumnikis and analyzed by Jakobson—have been options for some deaf poets.<sup>106</sup> Are visual rhymes, particularly those involving typography, so different from verbal rhymes in their communicative aim? Might not these alleged coincidences involve a kind of pattern recognition related to lexical and syntactical systems Castle found in those mountains of mail through which he may have sifted on a daily basis as a child or young man? Postal messages reappear as motifs throughout his work: his relative Guy Wade’s handwritten address, the unknown address “P.O. drawer J / Hallowell / Maine,” and the lopsided “REGIstered MAil (**fig. 391B**).” Is it out of the question—especially in light of our new knowledge of the artist’s extended education at a school for the deaf, where Visible Speech might have been in the curriculum—to imagine a process like Sequoyah’s, by which initial bafflement at these organized shapes, fueled by an understanding of their purpose and an incisive creativity, somehow resulted in an attempted recoding through habitual reinscription, selection, ornamentation, and invention?

Castle seems to answer us by incorporating metalinguistic clues into his art, words that describe language itself. The phrase “Purse! Discusses” and its contraction or abbreviation “P!D” turn up with notable regularity (**figs. 69, 98A, 273, 356**). The capacity for abbreviating a favorite phrase with an acronym smacks of a linguistic or coding reflex. For Westfall, this juxtaposition “raises the recurring question of how much Castle knew. Together, the words are nonsensical,

but is their shared sibilance a fluke?”<sup>107</sup> The sheer repetition of the alliterative words furnishes one possible answer, but so too does the choice of the word “Discusses.” Jakobson might reply that “whenever the addresser and/or the addressee need to check up whether they use the same code, speech is focused on the code; it performs a metalingual (i.e., glossing) function.”<sup>108</sup> Was Castle focusing on “the code” of his own arcane writing system?<sup>109</sup> Metacommunication through special codes encompasses a number of Castle’s techniques, including collage.<sup>110</sup> His dissection and reassemblage of words and single letters, as well as his translation from found text into a rendered drawing of the same text, easily ties in with both bricolage and poetic coding. And his invented letters, in particular the hieroglyphs and pictographs, for Westfall function “both by being sign and by edging into blurry phenomenological description”—a very special code indeed.<sup>111</sup> Castle’s wavy-line text and captions, and the speech and thought bubbles in the cartoon appropriations, represent metalinguistic features that feel formulaic by virtue of their regularity (**figs. 18A, 97A, 117B, 118, 125B, 193, 199, 341 and 5, 11, 358A, 358B**). The speech and thought bubbles never, as far as I have seen, contain actual words or characters, but only the simulation thereof. In a poignant linguistic gesture toward self-portraiture, Castle hangs them above figures “without [heard, referential] words.”<sup>112</sup>

Elsewhere in Castle’s work, the frequency of exclamation points, question marks, and other punctuation symbols speaks to emphases, interrogative statements, and other paralinguistic (non-verbal) attributes of speech (**fig. 107A**). The agitated recurrence of punctuation marks connotes paralinguistic features, though in a sense Castle’s entire practice entails paralanguage, in its reliance on typographical formulas, the ornamentation and invention of letters, calendars and other codexical charting systems that organize characters, and the careful compositional placement and spacing of characters in pairs or other groupings to create pattern and meaning.<sup>113</sup>

The poetic function assumes an audience, and communicative cues reside in these paralinguistic aspects of language. When a known or specific addressee is absent, as in the case of Castle's text works, these functions are still implied. The communicative structure of his sign works therefore ultimately constitutes a communicative artifact, if an ambivalent communicator. With some tinkering, we can reframe the linguistic concept of poetics to include Castle's text art. If, as Westfall asserts, "everything Castle did could be read as an attempt to lay hold physically of what the sign points to and to inhabit bodily the conceptual space of the sign,"<sup>114</sup> I will venture to call this "transfiguring animism" literacy.<sup>115</sup> Castle's enthusiasm in sharing his visual poems with visitors presumes specific communicative occasions, but since the vast majority of his works cannot be reliably dated except by placing their creation (or completion) after the first publication of any appropriated printed materials, his art exists both in and out of time.

Yet how could Castle convey poetic information through a vehicle—a vocabulary and grammar—he likely could not entirely grasp? Again, the unresolved question of intention looms, begging the overlay of a more recent linguistic lens, this time from the perspective of evolutionary biology, physiology, and cognition. Noam Chomsky's innovative and influential ideas about how language functions may help to illuminate Castle's processual text compositions. Chomsky's controversial notion of a universal grammar, or a set of rules common to all languages, stems from his elegant theory of a mysterious "language organ," an inborn linguistic potential hardwired into the structure of the human brain.<sup>116</sup> He famously illustrated his premise by composing the meaningless but perfectly grammatical (and Dada-esque) sentence "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously."<sup>117</sup> Since children experience a "poverty of the stimulus,"<sup>118</sup> or constraints on egregiously incorrect examples of language use—that is, adults teach grammar with positive examples, not nonsense—they must possess an innate language

capacity in order to acquire proper grammar and use it in rich and complex ways. (Castle epitomizes the stimulus-poverty scenario more than most.) At the heart of Chomsky’s cognitive model, his “Minimalist Program,”<sup>119</sup> is recursion, the potential for creating infinitely varied expressions from finite linguistic units. Chomskyans suggest recursion as the one linguistic faculty unique to human beings, the language organ’s most distinctive operation and the *sine qua non* of human language.<sup>120</sup> Recursive language contains nested grammatical units, embedded sentences or phrases that can theoretically spiral out from “deep structure” into infinity. Visually exemplified by the vertiginous repetition of reflections in two facing mirrors, linguistic recursion can multiply the following statements—James Castle was an artist; James Castle lived in Idaho; James Castle made text art; James Castle is the subject of this essay—into a statement of “discrete infinity”:<sup>121</sup>

James Castle, who lived in Idaho, in a rural area known as Garden Valley and then in Boise, where the urban landscape has changed significantly since then, and who was an artist—though he would remain unrecognized for much of his lifetime—known for his cryptic text art that is not unlike the books described in Jorge Luis Borges’s *The Garden of Forking Path*’s short story “The Library of Babel” (which was published in 1941, when James Castle was forty-two years old), and also not unlike the visual poetry of certain Russian Futurist artists, such as Aleksei Kruchenykh’s work’s typographical and syntactical experimentation, is the subject of this essay.

This is abysmal English by any standard, but Chomsky’s point is that I am able to construct such a sentence, and that your brain is able to comprehend it.<sup>122</sup> In Castle, recursion occurs—if indeed it does occur—at a more minute level, within the substructure of spliced and reassembled individual letters, as well as embedded within his letter lists and pairs. Castle’s recursive operations are inherently writing-based, typographic, and mathematical rather than strictly grammatical. In his calendars and codes he seems to be testing all possible permutations of fonts and letters snatched from various languages as well as his own invented characters, pictographs, and numerals. Grammar on a complex, integrated level (at least as we understand it)

is almost entirely missing, except in his appropriated backgrounds. Very seldom does one see non-gerund verbs, for instance. Perhaps they were too abstract, not sufficiently concrete for Castle's sensibility or linguistic comprehension. The large-typeface headlines that attracted him, however, and which constitute the primary source material for his appropriations and transformations, would likely have included fewer verbs than nouns and adjectives, just as in today's newspaper and advertising headlines. (Castle would have been introduced to nouns before verbs at Gooding.) Recursion offers more a metaphor than a verifiable formula for assessing Castle's text art, but one keenly compatible with an interdisciplinary endeavor to take seriously the context of vernacular modernism, the creative context of everydayness.

In the too-often bloodless gallery and museum environments in which we now encounter them, James Castle's text works accrue monetary value and the prestige of capital, but it is all too easy to lose sight of their articulation of visual poetics. With the linguistic lens, however, we may discern the continuity between public communicative events, however unintended (that is, the gallery exhibitions that the artist was so proud of during his lifetime), and the spontaneous communicative contexts of everyday life. As the folklorist Richard Bauman has written, "Art is commonly conceived as an all-or-nothing phenomenon."<sup>123</sup> It either is or is not; it is either picture or poetry, vernacular or academic. Castle's compositions confound these distinctions and urges to "genrefy." As both picture and poem, painting and drawing, communication, commodity, and artifact, public and private, mute and speaking, his work calls us to consider it from a variety of perspectives, necessitating a kind of analytical parallax that can combine sociolinguistics, performance theory, folkloristics, cultural anthropology, cultural studies, art history, literary theory, deaf studies, and hopefully other, heretofore untapped approaches fruitful for the examination of the phenomenology of everyday expressive life.<sup>124</sup>

As representative of an alternate multivalent modernity, the modernism of the vernacular artist, Castle's art deserves our thorough attention. His exceptional text works, as collages, in a sense dissociate themselves from the work of other artists, vernacular or otherwise, as aesthetically radical. As communicative records in the absence of standard speech and writing, they exist at an even further remove from categorical practice. Castle helps demonstrate that modernism—and one of its defining characteristics, appropriation—involves not just a “trickling down” or “trickling up” (as Dave Hickey suggests regarding the influence of jazz and rock on the American modernists Stan Brakhage and Andy Warhol),<sup>125</sup> but rather a fluid, eddying back-and-forth flow of visual and linguistic information and influence. In engaging the flexible poetics of vernacular modernism and entextualizing his performance, Castle's “characters more comely to the eye”<sup>126</sup> recall nothing less than a line from the New Testament: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).<sup>127</sup>

### **The Library of Babel: A Way Out?**

One more concrete poet clamors for consideration, in epilogue. Among John Furnival's poems, great tidal masses of screen-printed letters, is “The Tower of Babel,” one of his many works on the Babel theme.<sup>128</sup> Ribbons of tattered words whirl; architectonic slabs of quotations heave and crumble. Furnival, foremost a graphic artist, foregrounded the kinetic aspect of the Babel myth and motif. Linguistic disarray and disintegration—glossolalia and aphasia—reign, and language moves, sashaying and shuffling and finally collapsing, spent and sputtering. Formally, Furnival is miles from Castle, but the principle—the metaphor and the myth—remains salient. And so we end up back where we started. This essay began with a passage from the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges's luminous short story “The Library of Babel,” in which a world of librarians

explore, and lament, the boundless *biblioteca* in which they live, a hivelike universe composed of infinite, identical hexagonal rooms rife with books.<sup>129</sup> Every possible permutation of letters exists on those teeming shelves, and then repeats, ad infinitum: “For every rational line or forthright statement there are leagues of senseless cacophony, verbal nonsense, and incoherency.”<sup>130</sup> Sound familiar? And yet “there is no syllable one can speak that is not filled with tenderness and terror, that is not, in one of those languages, the mighty name of a god.”<sup>131</sup>

With the zeal of crusaders, Borges’s denizens and drifters—“readers” all—ascribe significance or inconsequence to books, always (re)searching for answers. Some readers defend their treasured tomes with their lives; others destroy countless volumes of apparent gibberish, pitching them like dead birds into oubliettes. Still others simply despair: “I know of one semibarbarous zone,” reports the narrator, “whose librarians repudiate the ‘vain and superstitious habit’ of trying to find sense in books, equating such a quest with attempting to find meaning in dreams or in the chaotic lines of the palm of one’s hand.”<sup>132</sup> Somewhere there sits the true catalogue of the library’s holdings, and the true story of your life and death too, along with every possible apocryphal one. But of course it could be anywhere, or long since blown away in tatters or ashes. The library is inescapable; there is no egress, because the library *is* the universe, just as language is, in some fundamental, melancholy way, our totality. Castle, like Borges,<sup>133</sup> appreciated a good labyrinth—literally, as in his “lealabyrinth” drawing (**fig. G22**), or figuratively, within the cryptic puzzles of his codes. Castle gave us plenty of ways to wander into his orphic world, but no way out. And who again is the outsider?

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 113–14, 117.

<sup>2</sup> Obviously, the distinction between mythology and history is a slippery and artificial one, particularly when discussing the origin of writing, which helps define and validate history, or at least the official Western variety.

<sup>3</sup> Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: E. E. Norton and Company, 1999), p. 228. The Cyrillic alphabet actually developed out of the earlier Glagolitic script, which Cyril/Constantine supposedly invented. “Hanja” refers to a Korean adaptation of Chinese characters.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224. Thousands of years separated these independent inventions: writing developed in Sumer in the fourth millennium B.C.E. and in Mesoamerica in the first millennium B.C.E.

<sup>5</sup> Also known as George Guess or Gist, Sequoyah is said to have been born near Echota, the old Tennessee capital of the Cherokee Nation. He lived in Indian Territories throughout the mid-South and died in Mexico.

<sup>6</sup> Theoretically, a “syllabary” encompasses a set of symbols representing complex syllables rather than the more discrete vowel and consonant “phonemes” indicated by a true alphabet’s characters. Practically, the distinction between syllabary and alphabet can prove porous.

<sup>7</sup> George E. Foster, *Se-quo-yah: The American Cadmus and Modern Moses* (Philadelphia: Office of the Indian Rights Association, 1885).

<sup>8</sup> Willard Walker and James Sarbaugh, “The Early History of the Cherokee Syllabary,” *Ethnohistory*, vol. 40, no. 1 (Winter 1993), p. 83; citing John A. Stuart, *A Sketch of the Cherokee and Choctaw Indians* (Little Rock, Ark.: Woodruff and Pew, 1837), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> As described by Walter Benjamin in his 1935/36 essay “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction); see Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968).

<sup>10</sup> See Walker and Sarbaugh, “The Early History of the Cherokee Syllabary,” p. 83; citing Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, *Lectures on American Literature, with Remarks on Some Passages of American History* (New York: Elam Bliss, 1829), p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Folklorist Richard Bauman, by way of Mary Hufford, might describe this script parallax as contextual “double-grounding.” See Hufford, “Context,” in *Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture*, ed. Burt Feintuch (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 148. If the character *R*, taken from the Roman alphabet but meaningless to Sequoyah except as an attractive shape associated with the power of literacy, assumes a newly assigned sound-meaning within the context of his Cherokee writing system, we can speak of *R* as “double-grounded,” that is, partially transformed through appropriation from another source. On a more macroscopic public or cultural scale, Raymond Williams has termed such affective transformations changes in “structures of feeling.” See Williams, *The Long Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 132. Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “habitus” is also relevant here, as are computer science and cognitive psychology studies on the symbol grounding problem.

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- <sup>12</sup> See Samuel C. Williams, “The Father of Sequoyah, Nathaniel Gist,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma*, vol. 15, no. 1 (March 1937), p. 10, at <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/chronicles/v015/v015p003.html> (accessed October 2007). Richard Bauman points out the “persistent association between performers and marginality or deviance,” or a certain fear in which we hold those with communicative power or poetic tricks-up-the-sleeve. See Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance* (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1984), p. 45.
- <sup>13</sup> See Ann Percy’s essay in this volume, pp. 000–000 above.
- <sup>14</sup> Sandy Harthorn, “James Castle,” in *James Castle: Drawings, Constructions, and Books*, exh. cat. (Boise, Idaho: Boise Art Museum, 2005), p. 10.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- <sup>16</sup> John Yau, “Invention and Discovery: The Art of James Castle,” in *James Castle: The Common Place*, exh. cat. (New York: Knoedler and Company, 2000), pp. 12, 19; Chris Schnoor, *James Castle: Art and Existence*, exh. cat. (Boise, Idaho: J Crist Gallery, 2004), p. 9; Harthorn, “James Castle,” p. 13.
- <sup>17</sup> An undiagnosed form of autism has been retroactively suggested for Castle as an alternate explanation for symptoms ranging from difficulty in signing to his pronounced interest in “pattern and puzzles.” See Harthorn, “James Castle,” p. 22, and Tom Trusky, “Autism, Physiognomy, and Letter Forms: The Faces of James Castle,” *Journal of Artists’ Books*, no. 18 (Fall 2002), pp. 2–20.
- <sup>18</sup> See Percy’s essay, pp. 000–000 above.
- <sup>19</sup> Stephen Westfall, “Signs and Wonders,” in *James Castle/Walker Evans: Word-Play, Signs and Symbols*, exh. cat. (New York: Knoedler and Company, 2006), p. 6. One of the keenest of Castle commentators, Westfall has called him “a kind of genius” (*ibid.*, p. 12), a prickly and laden word, to be sure, but I wonder, what kind? “Genius” is a word too carelessly invoked in the art world, and one often applied to the artist in question. Kant’s notion of the non-imitative, autochthonous genius able to achieve knowledge independently of instruction—almost through sympathetic magic, it has always seemed to me—might just fit. Or is that too starry-eyed an assessment? See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (Amherst, Mass.: Prometheus Books, 2000), SS46–50.
- <sup>20</sup> Westfall, “Signs and Wonders,” p. 8.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> Harthorn, “James Castle,” p. 12.
- <sup>23</sup> Westfall, “Signs and Wonders,” p. 10.
- <sup>24</sup> Of the latter, Westfall speculates (*ibid.*, p. 14) that “if a letter is a label, far removed from the star lore that informed the characters of the Phoenician alphabet, then it’s not too far a stretch to regard Castle’s little pictographic labels and the type characters as absolutely related.” Interesting that he makes a connection to ancient (or alternate) writing systems as well.
- <sup>25</sup> Andrea Merrell of the J Crist Gallery explained this orientation trick to me.
- <sup>26</sup> Westfall, “Signs and Wonders,” p. 8, discussing Yau, “Invention and Discovery,” p. 15, who writes that “however masterful his letters, they should not be mistaken for writing. He is drawing different typefaces.”
- <sup>27</sup> Cornelia Butler, “The Still Life of Objects,” in *A Silent Voice: Drawings and Constructions of James Castle*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, 1998), pp. 3–4. This is quite a heavy claim; the relationship between thought and language has been the subject of fierce—and still unresolved—debate over hundreds if not thousands of years.
- <sup>28</sup> On the subject of mimesis, it was Aristotle who inaugurated the longstanding debate about imitation in the arts. He believed that imitation was the natural basis of creativity—particularly poetry, the most refined art form—and a fundamental means of “gathering the meaning of things.” See Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 4. John Donne referred to poetry as “counterfeit Creation” (see *ibid.*, p. 9). Western (industrial) modernity ushered in an overriding obsession with originality and primacy, beginning with the Romantic emphasis on the “imagination.”
- <sup>29</sup> To add another, completely tangential, Native American correspondence, John Ollman has introduced me to the fascinating parallels between Castle’s constructions and Plains tribes’ parfleche bags. See, for example, the construction illustrated as the frontispiece to *James Castle: Structures*, exh. cat. (New York: Knoedler & Company, 2002) as compared to the works discussed by Kenneth Canfield in his article “Plains Abstractions,” *Art and Auction*, October 1988, pp. 196–201.

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<sup>30</sup> For now, we can simply define “hegemony” as the dominance of one class or culture over one or more others, and “bricolage” as the strategy of assembling something new from disparate available materials.

<sup>31</sup> Dan Ben-Amos, “Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context,” *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 84, no. 331–34 (January–March 1971), p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> Not all education is formal, not all pedagogy professorial. What about technically “self-taught” artists of that “elite” list, like Joseph Cornell or Paul Gauguin? See Henry Glassie, “The Idea of Folk Art,” in *Folk Art and Art Worlds*, ed. John Michael Vlach and Simon J. Bronner (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1983), p. 272.

<sup>33</sup> The sociologist Gary Alan Fine has succinctly identified this labeling problem as “term warfare.” See Fine, *Everyday Genius: Self-Taught Art and the Culture of Authenticity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 26. There persists an ironic prestige, market-wise at least, in biographical degradation and exoticism. The path toward “term peace” is well-trod, but we have yet to conquer the demeaning class-based connotations of all these brands.

<sup>34</sup> As Raymond Williams put it (*The Long Revolution*, p. 37), “Art is ratified, in the end, by the fact of creativity in all our living.” Similarly, the ethnographer Glenn Hinson speaks of the “artfulness of everyday life.” Williams’s vision of the essentially everyday communicative processes of all art—its inherent vernacular nature—is decidedly more appealing and less bombastic than Theodor Adorno’s scorn for the deceptively satisfying and sinister mirage of “official culture.”

<sup>35</sup> These disconcertingly skewed criteria too often lie in the interstices between normative art history, folklore or material culture, cultural studies, and institutional and economic interests. The most common domains of inquiry include biography and ethnography (the more “exotic” or troubled the artist’s story, the more salable the art); belief and psychology (the same equation pertains here, with ecstatic or mystical spirituality, psychological conditions, or just plain eccentricity seen as indications of “authenticity” and market value, hence the “visionary” species of self-taught artist); race, ethnicity, and class (in which oppression, impoverishment, and working-class labor are likewise seen to breed authenticity, and, in an ugly echo of cultural evolutionism’s foundational fallacy, more “primitive” cultures than ours supposedly exhibit evolutionary “survivals,” tracing the trajectory of our own alleged advancement); education (the lack of which, a “self-taught” standing, again bestows “authenticity”); and tradition (production tactics matter: assigning collective, or “folk,” versus autochthonous, or indigenous and individual, origin can determine whether an artist qualifies for “folk” or “outsider” status).

<sup>36</sup> I have paraphrased from Roger D. Abrahams, “Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore,” *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 81, no. 320 (April–June 1968), p. 144.

<sup>37</sup> Maintaining the old, polar opposition of these dubious and overdetermined categories inevitably results in the consecration of authenticity as a concrete, quantifiable quality residing in imaginary cultural stasis rather than in natural emergence, dynamism, and change. Since cultures (and individuals too) are constantly in flux—shifting, adjusting, and adapting, whether seismically or imperceptibly—how can we realistically measure the genuine authentic state? And who are we to do so, anyway? (See Bendix 1997.)

<sup>38</sup> I have been using the term “vernacular modernism” for at least two years now, thinking I had coined it myself. I have since discovered an entire book with that very title: Maiken Umbach and Bernd Hüppauf, eds., *Vernacular Modernism: Heimat, Globalization, and the Built Environment* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005). However, this text uses “vernacular” in its more standard and established architectural sense (others have used the term in film criticism and elsewhere), while I use it more broadly. A recent catalogue placing works by Bill Traylor and William Edmondson in thoughtful dialogue points to relationships between African American vernacular artists and modernism: Josef Helfenstein and Roxanne Stanulis, eds., *Bill Traylor, William Edmondson, and the Modernist Impulse* (Champaign, Ill.: Krannert Art Museum, 2004).

<sup>39</sup> I do not intend to imply an equivalence between “folk” and “vernacular” but rather a roughly similar definitional opposition between alleged folk versus modern and vernacular versus official or academic cultural formations.

<sup>40</sup> As an emerging field, material culture has dealt with text issues but not necessarily with text in or as visual art, if we accept “art” as what Henry Glassie deems “a special realm within material culture, its center and

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peak.” See Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> Brendan Greaves, “The Art of Being Disagreeable,” in *“Cigarmaker, Creator, Healer, & Man”*: The Artwork of Felipe Jesus Consalvos (Philadelphia: Fleisher/Ollman Gallery, 2005), and “A Paper Wedding: The Vernacular Modernism of Felipe Jesus Consalvos,” paper to be published in *The North Carolina Folklore Journal*, presented at the American Folklore Society Annual Conference, October 19, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Without attempting an apologia for Western historiography, we can perhaps (briefly) attribute this critical neglect of vernacular artists’ aesthetic deployment of text to the persistent Enlightenment dichotomizing disorder, that stubborn tendency to distinguish absolutely between form and function, “civilized” and “primitive,” literacy and illiteracy, innovation and imitation—in short, “high” and “low” cultural axes. In such an essentialist model, one to which many folklorists have fallen prey, official and aesthetic (that is, poetic, narrative, novelistic) linguistic literacy—even more so, I would argue, than visual or image-based (that is, art) literacy—was privileged as solely the province of the hegemony. More recently, through the lens of vernacular art’s unfortunate artist-as-patient paradigm, psychological damage, religious “fanaticism,” or other behavioralist concepts become metonyms for meaning, especially in terms of text content, and psychoanalytic biography and condescending therapeutic criteria assume ascendancy over style. Within such a boorish, binary-obsessed order, what critical corners can Castle (and let us not forget Sequoyah) possibly occupy as a visual and text artist wedded to those discredited, more slippery modes of language? I have settled on “vernacular,” but there has been no agreement even as to what to call his work. An examination of the full scope of the vernacular artist’s practice remains necessary to engage it at the same level as that of more established, mainstream artists.

<sup>43</sup> Hymes 1975, p. 346.

<sup>45</sup> In his writings on Castle, Tom Trusky is unique in gesturing toward the possibility that Castle may have understood at least the *idea* of language.

<sup>46</sup> Trusky, “Autism, Physiognomy, and Letter Forms,” p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Moore, *Utopia*, trans. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Trusky, “Autism, Physiognomy, and Letter Forms,” pp. 15–16, 18, on brands; Jacque Crist, in conversation, on local gravestones.

<sup>49</sup> Castle curators, dealers, and collectors have adopted some commonly accepted (but rather ambiguous and irregularly imposed) terminology to classify certain recurring phenomena. The term “totems” refers to tall totem-cum-telephone-pole shapes in his landscape drawings. “Friends” is a term that was first used by Castle’s family and usually refers to his animal or anthropomorphized sculptural constructions, which often appear in his drawings as well.

<sup>50</sup> I assume Tom Trusky means “Visible Speech” when he writes “Visible Language.” See Trusky, *Reputedly Illiterate: The Art Books of James Castle* (New York: AIGA National Design Center, 2000), n.p. The filmmaker and Castle documentarian Jeffrey Wolf has also noticed the possible links to Visible Speech.

<sup>51</sup> A “grapheme” consists of the smallest meaningful unit of written language or typography. The list of Castle’s appropriated and invented script systems provided here is only as exhaustive as proved possible given the currently catalogued work and the boxes of uncatalogued work I have examined thus far.

<sup>52</sup> Only a few examples exist, on signs, billboards, and captions within appropriated color-wash representational scenes, perhaps of World War II and Korean War photos. These are particularly interesting considering the naive historical conflation of sign language with Chinese characters. See Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice: A Philosophical History of Language, Deafness, and the Senses* (London: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 116.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93. Much of my work here on deafness and language—particularly the philosophical underpinnings of “natural language” and the oralism versus gesturalism debate—is deeply indebted to Rée’s reasoning in this excellent and highly recommended book *I See a Voice*. I thank David MacLagan for bringing it to my attention.

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<sup>54</sup> David Wright, *Deafness: A Personal Account* (London: Penguin, 1969), pp. 22, 104.

<sup>55</sup> Physiological, clinical, and audiological “lowercase-d” deafness does not necessarily coincide with an individual’s identification with Deaf culture, which the “uppercase-D” Deaf community articulates to the use of sign language and other shared understandings, traditions, and assumptions. A deaf person, particularly one who prefers speech or cochlear implants to sign-language communication or who lost his or her hearing later in life, might not associate with Deaf culture. Alternately, a hearing person—someone who has Deaf family members, for example—may identify to some extent with Deaf culture.

<sup>56</sup> And by extension, poetry was historically considered almost quasi-divine, a supernatural articulation of God speaking through man, “an energy of the soul which in discovering God is able to create beyond natural limits.” See Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 8.

<sup>57</sup> Rée, *I See a Voice*, p. 90.

<sup>58</sup> Herman Melville, *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (1853).

<sup>59</sup> Again, Rée, in *I See a Voice*, raises this point eloquently.

<sup>60</sup> The fifth-century B.C.E. skeptic Cratylus (roughly a contemporary of Zeno’s; see note 38 above) defined some of the weasely terms Castle and other deaf children of his generation would eventually inherit. “Sonus lucis simia” (Sound is light’s monkey) is how Athanasius Kircher put it in 1650, and a century later Jean-Jacques Rousseau would counter-observe that vision is unique as a communicative modality, since “we cannot give forth colors as we can sounds” (cited by Rée, *I See a Voice*, pp. 25, 55). Maybe not, but we can express ourselves—though perhaps more clumsily than human chameleons—through visual somatic signs, as well as through mark-making and writing, as Castle did.

<sup>61</sup> Before William Stokoe developed his eponymous system for sign-language notation in 1960, orators and rhetoricians mused over how to regularize and notate techniques of *chirologia* and *chironomia*, the ancient arts of gesticulation, body gesture, and hand signs that accompanied and electrified public speech. Roche-Ambroise Bébien’s *Mimography*, first published in the 1820s, was the first serious attempt at a standardized system for the notation of sign language, though its unwieldy complexity and Bébien’s conflicts with oralists conspired to sink the system (see Rée, *I See a Voice*, pp. 299–300). Still, could his books (or at least his ideas) have survived at the Idaho State School for the Deaf and the Blind? Certain of his invented characters do seem to overlap with Castle’s.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Passy, “Our Revised Alphabet,” *The Phonetic Teacher* (Neuilly-sur-Seine), August–September 1888, pp. 57–60.

<sup>63</sup> One macabre scheme that the younger Bell developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology involved a primitive sonograph machine that supposedly visualized acoustic waveforms transmitted through human ears severed from corpses. See Rée, *I See a Voice*, p. 222.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76–78.

<sup>65</sup> Yau, “Invention and Discovery,” p. 15.

<sup>66</sup> It is helpful here to remember that the etymological and artistic derivation of the word “collage” lies in the *papiers collés*, or “stuck papers,” that Picasso and Georges Braque fiddled with and fought over in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Collage provided a working method and metaphor for both visual artists and poets. While clearly not all of Castle’s art should be considered collage, much of it, as appropriation, shares a lineage and idiom with early modernist collage and text-art experiments. And all of Castle’s handmade books, as bricolage, are in a sense collages—“stuck papers”—by their very nature. Contiguity of found materials from renderings and other materials establishes associations, firing and splitting synapses between images and between texts.

<sup>67</sup> Might James Castle have seen the films of William Castle, a legendary schlock-shock filmmaker of no evident relation whose 1959 *The Tingler* included a “deaf-mute” character unable to scream? Vibrating buzzers installed beneath certain audience members’ seats encouraged viewers to scream on Vincent Price’s cue in order to destroy the Tingler, which in a deft (or perhaps dumb) diegetic move, escapes in the theater at the film’s climax. Only the sound of a bloodcurdling human scream can kill this parasitic (rubber) worm that lies dormant in our spines until paralyzing fear awakens it. Of course, the unspeaking (relics of silent cinema) are doomed to die.

<sup>68</sup> See Jacque Crist’s essay in this volume, pp. 000–000 above.

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<sup>69</sup> Desloges's pamphlet followed an article by his soon-to-be-nemesis Saboureux de Fontenay in 1765, usually regarded as the first publication by a deaf writer.

<sup>70</sup> *Carmina figurata* is the Latin term for poems written to evoke visual shapes or patterns on the page. They can be traced back to the Hellenistic age and achieved a resurgent popularity during the Middle Ages.

<sup>71</sup> Rée, *I See a Voice* p. 317.

<sup>72</sup> Spain sustained radical poetic scenes in Catalonia (Josep-Maria Junoy and Joan Salvat-Papasseit in Barcelona) and in Madrid with the Castilian Ultraists (Rafael Cansinos-Asséns, Guillermo de Torre, and, operating in a different mode, Jorge Luis Borges). In Paris André Breton brashly declared that "words make love"—what would he and his Surrealist cohorts have thought of Castle's word works? In 1945 Isidore Isou founded Lettrisme as an outraged and outrageous reaction to Surrealist mysticism and complacency, and went about trumpeting the phoneme, the individual letter, and new forms of visually expressive writing he called metagraphy and hypergraphy as the necessary foundations of new poetry. Meanwhile the untamable Antonin Artaud, himself an outsider of sorts, sputtered glossolalic obscenities on stage and on tape, digging for a linguistic bedrock of performative truth-through-cruelty.

<sup>73</sup> Carlo Carrà and Ardengo Soffici, for example. As far as Dada links to Castle, Hugo Ball once wrote an entire play in Yiddish, a language he did not understand. I owe this anecdote to Roger Cardinal, personal conversation, New York, April 28, 2007.

<sup>74</sup> Apparently Hausmann composed these two early poster poems by instructing his printer to select letters from his letter case at random. See Cornelius Borck, "Sound Work and Visionary Prosthetics: Artistic Experiments in Raoul Hausmann," *Papers of Surrealism*, issue 4 (Winter 2005), p. 14, and Christian Scholz, "Relations Between Sound Poetry and Visual Poetry: The Path from the Optophonetic Poem to the Multimedia Text," *Visible Language*, vol. 35, no. 1 (2001), p. 49. Kurt Schwitters subsequently adapted Hausmann's "fmsbwtözäu" for the opening of his long-form poem "Ursonate."

<sup>75</sup> Incidentally, "coivus" is also an ornithological taxonomical genus.

<sup>76</sup> The term "haptic" refers to the sense of touch, which is considered just as important for these types of poems as sight or hearing.

<sup>77</sup> Poet and publisher Dick Higgins named the Fluxus "intermedia" aesthetic; he was also its most vocal champion. See Higgins, *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of the Intermedia* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984).

<sup>78</sup> Concrete poets who cultivated an association with Fluxus followed the path struck by midcentury visual poets like e. e. cummings and Carlo Belloli into the computer age.

<sup>79</sup> These poems all appear in Eugen Gomringer, with Helmut Heißenbüttel, Wilhelm Gössmann, and Dieter Kessler, *Konstellationen, Ideogramme, Stundenbuch* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1977). Öyvind Fahlström also stole gas-station signs—in one graphic piece, the "ESSO" logo sidles up to "LSD"—and incorporated mandala-like ideograms, as in his 1952–55 *Bord (Letterword)* poems, that recall Castle's kaleidoscopic ad logos and comic lexicons.

<sup>80</sup> On the subject of scavenging, the great Al Hansen, another incidental Fluxus poet, frequently filled curvy Venus silhouettes with cut-up Hershey wrappers, spliced to form new phonetic combinations, thereby combining collage and poetry via negative space pin-ups. His text-collage use of trashed product packaging is reminiscent of Castle's.

<sup>81</sup> Velimir Khlebnikov, *The King of Time: Selected Writings of the Russian Futurian*, ed. Charlotte Douglas, trans. Paul Schmidt (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146–47: "Every system of auditory currency claims supremacy, and so languages as such serve to disunite mankind and wage spectral wars. Let us hope that one single written language may henceforth accompany the long-term destinies of mankind and prove to be the new vortex that unites us, the new integrator of the human race. Mute graphic marks will reconcile the cacophony of languages."

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149: "It has become clear that the simple bodies of a language—the sounds of the alphabet—are the names of various aspects of space, an enumeration of the events of its life. The alphabet common to a multitude of peoples is in fact a short dictionary of the spatial world that is of such concern to your art, painters, and to your brushes."

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<sup>84</sup> Margit Rowell and Deborah Wye, eds., *The Russian Avant-Garde Book, 1910–1934* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), p. 45.

<sup>85</sup> Besides, Ed Ruscha's influential and seductive text paintings from the same era, while fascinating and undoubtedly falling somewhere within the concrete-poetry genus, seem too slick, ornamented, illusionistic, and self-consciously humorous to compare directly to Castle's.

<sup>86</sup> Khlebnikov, *The King of Time*, p. 119.

<sup>87</sup> "Words without thoughts never to heaven go": William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* (c. 1601).

<sup>88</sup> Khlebnikov, *The King of Time*, p. 119.

<sup>89</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure—Mr. Signifier-and-Signified—made one of many turn-of-the-century splashes by lending his ear to the glossolalia of the famous psychic Héléne Smith. Saussure confirmed that the Martian transmissions she claimed to intercept and transcribe, although utterly indecipherable, were in fact consistent with the sound and patterns of a legitimate language. The story, published in Théodore Flournoy's 1900 *Des Indes à la Planète Mars*, caused a sensation a few decades later with the Surrealists, who had already taken up the torch of automatic writing. See Théodore Flournoy, Mireille Cifali, and Sonu Shamdasani, *From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>90</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 17.

<sup>91</sup> Harthorn, "James Castle," p. 19.

<sup>92</sup> Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), p. 377. Lévi-Strauss (*The Savage Mind*, p. 25) also noted the implication of the complementary viewer in structuring and analyzing the work of art in order to bestow meaning: "The aesthetic emotion is the result of this union between the structural order and the order of events, which is brought about within a thing created by man and so also in effect by the observer who discovers the possibility of such a union through the work of art."

<sup>93</sup> Jakobson, "Closing Statement," p. 356.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 350.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 357.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 359: "The existence of versified, musical, and pictorial commercials does not separate the questions of verse or of musical and pictorial form from the study of poetry, music, and fine arts."

<sup>97</sup> Westfall writes ("Signs and Wonders," p. 6) that Castle's "sign-based work carries the allure of a riddle: a language system whose Rosetta stone, the artist himself, was inevitably gnomic while alive and has now vanished." Maybe so, but Jakobson presents clues for a linguistic reading, or at least a mapping.

<sup>98</sup> "As soon as poetic function ceases to be arbitrarily confined to the domain of poetry" (Jakobson, "Closing Statement," p. 359), we can make this intrepid leap, accepting that "many poetic features belong not only to the science of language but to the whole theory of signs, that is, to general semiotics" (*ibid.*, p. 351), which necessarily contains the visual world of images and visually emblematic language (i.e., the taxonomy of typefaces and scripts).

<sup>99</sup> Westfall ("Signs and Wonders," p. 8) speculates that "in this way [Castle] took bodily possession of the printing process in much the same manner that his mixtures of saliva and soot helped him take possessions of the forms he drew"—a valid point, though one that splits two frequently conterminous techniques, rendering and cutting text. Maybe we can dig deeper?

<sup>100</sup> Tom Trusky ("Autism, Physiognomy," p. 18) also employs the metaphor of "sub-atomic particles" in his discussion of Castle's text work.

<sup>101</sup> Roman Jakobson's fellow Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky deemed this tactic *ostrananie*, or "strange-making." Much earlier, Percy Shelley spoke of wiping away the "film of familiarity" (see Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 10). Castle took this defamiliarization technique a few fathoms deeper, by making a language strange to him, English, even stranger and more mysterious (at least to us).

<sup>102</sup> Westfall, "Signs and Wonders," p. 10.

<sup>103</sup> On this topic, Westfall (*ibid.*) extends an insightful comparison to Jasper Johns, a Castle collector himself.

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<sup>104</sup> I use “translations” in the sense of painter and collagist Jess’s “translations” of found images. Jess’s “Tricky Cad” cut-ups of *Dick Tracy* comics are reminiscent of both Max Ernst’s *Une Semaine de Bonté* collages and Castle’s comic appropriations.

<sup>105</sup> Jakobson, “Closing Statement,” p. 358. The seminal Manchester band The Fall put it another way in their song “Repetition,” which lauds “the three R’s”—the poetics?—of good rock music: “repetition, repetition, repetition.” Öyvind Fahlström has likewise cited the importance of repetition to *Opera*, a perfect example of Jakobson’s parallelism.

<sup>106</sup> In John Keats’s words, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter” (“Ode on a Grecian Urn,” 1819). John Lee Clark has written insightfully about Deaf poetics, and my statements here are largely culled from his ideas. See Clark, “Melodies Unheard: Deaf Poets and Their Subversion of the ‘Sound’ Theory of Poetry,” *Sign Language Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Fall 2006), pp. 6–7.

<sup>107</sup> Westfall, “Signs and Wonders,” p. 10.

<sup>108</sup> Jakobson, “Closing Statement,” p. 356.

<sup>109</sup> Obviously, we cannot know if Castle ever had a specific addressee in mind, but the fact remains that “Discusses,” like another favorite Castle-ism, “Sed,” is a word signifying the act of speech. “Sed,” of course, is phonetically equivalent to “said.” But what are we to make of “blaws”—as in “blah, blah, blah”?—or the even weirder “Leyse”? Certainly one can “purse” one’s lips as one “discusses” in speech or sign. I am exaggerating for effect here, but maybe it is worth considering these clues. So if “aphasia may often be defined as a loss of ability for metalingual operations,” as Jakobson has phrased it (“Closing Statement,” p. 356), what then does this say about Castle’s much-contested linguistic capacity?

<sup>110</sup> Perhaps we can consider Castle’s collage as the bricoleur’s restructuring of the “remains and debris of events” (Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 22) previously transmitted through mechanical type.

<sup>111</sup> Westfall, “Signs and Wonders,” p. 12.

<sup>112</sup> Harthorn, “James Castle,” pp. 22–23.

<sup>113</sup> Moreover, Castle rendered all his words in saliva, a medium from the (unspeaking) mouth, one without which speech would cease, but one that in itself contains no inherent semiotic meaning, sound, or pigment. The soot he employed is likewise a medium made in part by the very paper surfaces he preferred, sparking a recursive feedback loop of meaning (Castle’s main medium was stove soot, but coal and wood fires are often kindled with newspaper).

<sup>114</sup> Westfall, “Signs and Wonders,” p. 12.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>116</sup> See Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1994), p. 34.

<sup>117</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* 2nd ed. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>118</sup> Noam Chomsky, *Rules and Representations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 34.

<sup>119</sup> Noam Chomsky, *The Minimalist Program* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*.

<sup>120</sup> Marc D. Hauser, Noam Chomsky, and W. Tecumseh Fitch, “The Faculty of Language: What Is It, Who Has It, and How Did It Evolve?” *Science*, n.s. vol. 298, no. 5598 (November 22, 2002), pp. 1569–79.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1571.

<sup>122</sup> Chomsky acolytes tend to treat culture or learned behavior as a negligible or at least secondary force in language acquisition and linguistic difference. More anthropologically-inclined linguists have recently advanced examples that seemingly contradict Chomsky’s hypothesis, and Chomsky himself initially excluded sign language from his definition of natural language. Still, he and his cohorts helpfully point out that “only humans can lose one modality (e.g., hearing) and make up for this deficit by communicating with complete competence in a different modality (i.e., signing)”; see Rée, *I See a Voice*, p. 310 and Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch 2002, p. 1575. But does the Chomskyan program adequately address the cultural pressures on deafness and the vexed history of deaf education? Many contemporary scholars would say no. Even if some of his ideas have been discredited, we can apply the illuminating metaphor of recursion without becoming Chomsky apologists.

<sup>123</sup> Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, p. 24.

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<sup>124</sup> Henri Lefebvre made important inroads into the study of everyday life with his *Rhythmanalysis*.

<sup>125</sup> Dave Hickey, "The Delicacy of Rock-and-Roll," in Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997), p. 100.

<sup>126</sup> Walker and Sarbaugh, "The Early History of the Cherokee Syllabary," p. 83, citing Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, *Lectures on American Literature*, p. 26.

<sup>127</sup> On the topic of the word made flesh, Castle's single word pieces occasionally resemble tattoos (the one in my own collection even reads "ASHLEY," as if in tribute to the eponymous lady). The cheap brown paper, patched and inked with soot, serves as a kind of metaphorical skin to inscribe. When spliced and reassembled in bits, the viewer may barely perceive the tiny sub-letter extractions, but on closer inspection they call to mind scabs healing over scars, grown back after a fidgety picking.

<sup>128</sup> Furnival's poems are reproduced in the three most seminal concrete-poetry anthologies: Emmett Williams, ed., *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967); Eugene Wildman, ed., *The Chicago Review Anthology of Concretism* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1967); and Mary Ellen Solt, ed., *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1970.

<sup>129</sup> Years earlier, Khlebnikov (*The King of Time*, p. 141) had imagined a macroscopic inversion of Borges's library, a kind of monumental glass "book-building," an architecture of information, not unlike a supercomputer. Borges was a lifelong librarian himself and a preternaturally erudite bibliophile, so the library was his natural habitat.

<sup>130</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 114.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>133</sup> Borges's most widely read fiction collection in English translation is entitled *Labyrinths*, and his masterful story "The House of Asterion" gives voice to the lonesome, illiterate Cretan Minotaur, tragically misunderstood and imprisoned. Aside from the Minotaur's curse and the sacrifice he required, are Asterion and James Castle so different?