

THE AESTHETICS OF LANGUAGE By Mari Aarre. 2004

The surrealist René Magritte is well-known for his investigations of the relationship between word and image, between signifier and signified. In his celebrated work *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* (*The Treachery of Images*) of 1929, we see a realistically painted representation of a pipe, while the picture's title – written in elegant handwriting beneath the pipe – informs us that this is not in fact a pipe. The work thus negates the relationship between the signifier and the signified.

In 1966 the American concept artist Joseph Kosuth presented his work *One and Three Chairs*. This piece consists of three manifestations of the entity “chair”: a real chair, a photographic image of that chair, and a text containing the lexical definition of “chair”. Three forms of presentation that refer to one and the same thing, but on different levels of abstraction.

Semiotic tangles

It is almost impossible to mention these artists without mentioning semiotics. Semiotics – the science of signs – is almost a hundred years old. It was developed in the belief that it should be possible to define and delimit the significance of signs. But the older semiotics becomes, the more difficult this ambition appears to be. Postmodernism and deconstruction have shown the impossibility of an absolutely reliable semiotic analysis – both signifiers and what they signify are variable and uncertain, as demonstrated by the works just mentioned of Magritte and Kosuth. Both works play with semiotic patterns of language: Magritte points out that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is unclear, while Kosuth shows that for any term or concept there is an infinite number of representational forms. No representation is more real than any other; all of them are representations, signs that refer to something else.

The same concern with signification is apparent in the works of Randi Strand. But in her case the relation between signifier and signified, between terms and representational forms, has broken down. Since graduating from the College of Applied Arts and Design in Bergen in 1992, she has explored and dissected various forms of language in a variety of ways and materials. But Randi Strand does not discuss the signification relationship; she offers a new approach to this complex of issues by dwelling on the visual aspect of language. In other words, she is concerned with what languages look like. She investigates the aesthetics of languages. To this end Strand isolates the signifier from the signified – her art explores the signifier alone.

Linguistic paradoxes

Throughout her artistic career Randi Strand has worked with artists' books. This is a form of art in which books take on the form of autonomous artistic expressions. Such books are not just vehicles for texts and images but are viewed as an entire field of experience. Artists' books have an experimental relationship to the book form. Randi Strand has explored the book from the angles of both form and development, and has worked with texts as well as abstract forms and other visual elements.

In 1994 she published the book *Ordakt* (*Wordact*) in collaboration with the author Ivar Orvedal. The book is composed of black, white and transparent pages. A word is printed on each transparent page, and that is all. At first sight the words seem familiar, but on closer reading one notices dissonances. For what the book contains is transformations of familiar words. Transformations that alter the content of the words, giving them different if not contrary meanings, as in “*virkelikhet*” (*virkelighet* = reality, *likhet* = similarity), “*estetisk*” (*estetisk* = aesthetic, *eterisk* = ethereal) and “*obskjønn*” (*obskøn* = obscene, *skjønn* = beautiful). *Ordakt* consists of a kind of word game that relies on the visual nature of writing. A text is not read letter by letter but word by word. We recognise a word in terms of its visual appearance. In typography this is referred to as the aspect of the “word-picture”. By means of misspellings or newly constructed word arrangements, new and hitherto unknown word-pictures are constructed. Even the book's title is a combination of the terms *ord* (word) and *akt* – which in Norwegian carries the very different meanings of “action” and “nude image”. Thus *Ordakt* conveys the visuality of language rather than the language itself.

The visibility of narrative

For the work *Tekst-Tur* (Text-Tour) (2000) Randi Strand collaborated with the writer Hilde Bøyum. The project consisted of a literary challenge located along a ramblers' trail that runs through the hills behind the town of Bergen. Small wooden signs were set up along the trail, each bearing a single letter. During one's walk one passed letter after letter. Together they added up to the poetic text *PASSERERVIDÅPENJORDOMSLUTTETAVLANGSOMMEVINNESLAGFRAHIMMELHVELVINGEN* (which translates as: *PASSINGWIDEOPENEARTHEMBRACEDBYSLOWWINGBEATSOFTHEAVENSVault*). Here again Randi Strand plays with word-pictures, which the rambler never gets to see in their entirety. New letters repeatedly give rise to new words so that the word-pictures are constantly changing in the course of one's walk. Collecting the letters together is like leafing through an imaginary book. The text lends the trail a poetic dimension, yet the message of the text is subsidiary to its presentational form. This work emphasises – and plays with – reading as a visual activity.

In the video *Tegn-språk-dikt* (Sign-language-poem) (1999), Randi Strand works with the visibility of deaf language. The work presents us with nine different language signs. A screen is divided into nine fields so that the individual signs are separated from one another. Only the hands can be seen against a dark background. Facial expression and gaze are vital components of traditional deaf language. And since many words use the same signs, the meaning of those signs depends on the context in which they occur. Thus the signs as presented on the video are incomplete. They lack reference and are therefore confusing as communications. But at the same time this permits them to be read symbolically, which renders them communicative on another level; they become symbols for language, rather than a language of symbols. As in *Ordakt*, the signification relationship is disturbed, and as in *Tekst-Tur* the issue of linguistic acquisition is brought to the fore. Once again the communicative aspect of language is questioned and challenged by means of isolating and visually focussing on the linguistic sign.

Polyphonic language images

Hitherto Randi Strand had concentrated on visual languages, languages that presuppose the decoding of a message by means of the gaze. But in her latest project, the *Memoria* series, it is the braille system used by the blind that she uses to create a semiotic tangle. Braille is a tactile form of language, and here it is presented as a pattern on the surface of photographs. "*Memoria*" means memory, and the photographs show images of various places and situations. Yet the pictures do not seem to represent memorable moments. Many of them are unclear, seemingly arbitrary shots, and their situations and moods therefore strike us as neither very special nor particularly deserving of further interest. Like a kind of overlay, the photographs are perforated with braille signs – laid out either in clear lines or more random arrangements. Thus the pictures are doubly encoded. One imagines that the story behind the images is being retold in the tactile language, that the braille signs explain what is memorable about the picture's content. Yet the pictures are addressed exclusively to one language group – the sighted. For the way in which the braille is applied, and the gallery space in which the pictures are displayed, do not suggest that a tactile approach is intended here. The works are at one and the same time images of language and inaccessible language images. They conceal their message and convert communication into decoration. One language decorates another. Once again we find Randi Strand playing with word-pictures. She complicates them, takes them apart and reassembles them in new ways. She challenges us to ignore the meaning of signs and draws our attention to the signs as such, in other words, to the visibility of language – as form, movement, image. In this way the signs are emptied of their original meanings. But still the signs do not become meaningless in the process.

Any language has a form, and any form is inevitably open to interpretation – either intellectual or emotional, conscious or intuitive. What Randi Strand does is to break down our habitual understanding of language. She allows us to rediscover language, but as a form of autonomous expression rather than as something limited and conventional. This dimension is rendered apparent through the isolation of the linguistic signs, thus giving the language a new meaning – a visual meaning. A visibility that is a part of the language, but which cannot be conveyed through language. For the ways in which art speaks assume other premises than those of traditional rule-bound languages; art says things that only art can say.

In her works Randi Strand dissolves the relationship between signifier and signified and encourages us to focus exclusively on the visibility of the sign. In this sense, Randi Strand's art does not transport a message – it is the message. A message that probes the nature of communication – but which speaks to all.