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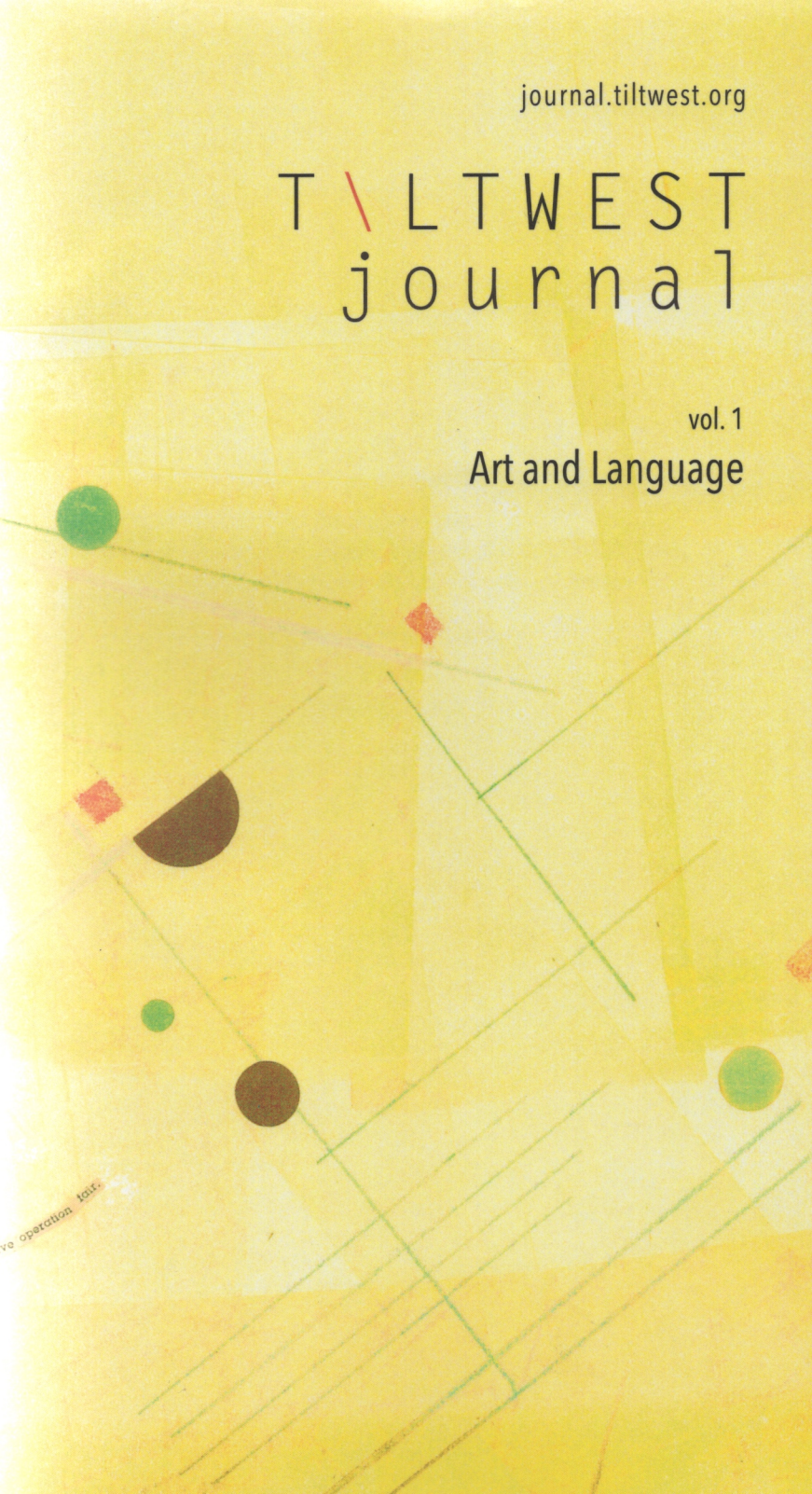

The Dys/functionality of Language: The Art of Joel Swanson

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Joel Swanson (American, b. 1978) explores language and its literal, at times even physical or material, forms. He stretches language to become an image or multiple images. Swanson continually makes clear how language is a constantly shifting, dynamic system to be pushed, pulled, and kneaded into meaning. His is a highly disciplined approach to art making, at times drawing upon the rigor of 1960s conceptual art as a foundation, finding ways of making it relevant to us today. He uses the structures of grammar and composition as sources for creative production. Importantly, such constraints become enormously productive and open up a range of possibilities for what he might do with them.

Swanson's work often renders the predictability of language unstable. In *Logic Only Works in 2-Dimensions*, 2014, a large-scale symbol is shown to be relative rather than definitive. The sideways ">" is the greater-than symbol, which when reversed, is also the less-than symbol. The freestanding, kinetic sculpture registers how this symbol can function as both, simultaneously. With this work and in other examples, such as

his ongoing series of lenticular drawings, Swanson plays with a duality within our linguistic system such that one thing can refer to or even be perceived as its very opposite. With *Logic Only Works in 2-Dimensions*, this type of dual reading is also entirely dependent upon the placement of the viewer. Pointing out the relative meaning of such a symbol is at the core of Swanson's practice, and in this effort he enables a fresh scrutiny of those subjects or ideas fundamental to and embedded in how we communicate and connect with others.

Swanson's continued exploration of the ambiguities or tricks inherent to the English language plays with the multiplicity of meaning. Studies of homonyms—words that sound alike but are spelled differently and carry different meanings—form the basis of his lenticular image *TRULY/RURAL*, 2019. Here, he encourages the viewer to move around the work to discover the different words embedded within the holographic surface. The work's title hints at the fact that this work requires the viewer's movement and investigates language and place. It is a work as much about reading as about looking and, more generally, the multivalent experience of viewing a work of art today.

Swanson is also unafraid to invite humor into his practice. In *Lady Gaga's Twitter Feed Translated into Morse Code,* 2011, a small bulb flashes incessantly as it channels the language of the pop singer into the language of Morse code. While the premise might seem irreverent or flippant, it is in fact demonstrative of another key aspect of Swanson's effort: to find ways of enabling the abstract logic of linguistic systems to be relevant to contemporary life. This quiet work speaks capaciously to the ubiquity of codes that underpin contemporary communications from emails to blogs, posts, chats, tweets, and numerous other methods for instant information-sharing. Transforming the ones and zeroes of contemporary technology into the dots and dashes of Morse brings the two languages together and indicates how similar the two are when broken down into their building blocks and component parts.

Swanson's works often act as prompts for viewer interaction, as they continually shift and move with our movements. Rather than passively observing his sculptures, photographs, and installations, viewers participate actively and, in doing so, discover new meanings in these all-too-familiar phrases, signs, and symbols. He finds dimensionality in language, bringing it out from the flatness of a screen or paper. His work helps us see, read, and experience this foundational system as the very opposite of its presumed rigor. When we see language as malleable, fluid, and active, we engage with it as relative rather than fixed. Swanson opens up the rigidity of our invented linguistic systems to reveal their porosity and, ultimately, their duplicity. The simplicity of Swanson's enterprise belies a sophisticated reassessment of language as a profoundly creative and flexible device that can be tweaked and played with, without end.