the

distance
between

words

Joel Swanson

NEW

Exhibition Statement

In 2020, New Collection invited Joel Swanson to produce a series of experimental works in response to a 1929 edition of Webster's dictionary. The content within the dictionary's pages acted as a catalyst for the artworks showcased in *The Distance Between Words*.

Dictionaries are linguistic time capsules that reflect the standards and norms of language from a specific era. The advent of online dictionaries has made print dictionaries obsolete, but historical dictionaries still feel special as they offer glimpses into how language was used in the past. The works in this exhibition derive from this source as they explore the physical, durational, and semantic distance found within the text. Behind Swanson's inquiries are processes that unfold in various forms: large format digital prints, digital animations, a sound-based work, and a large-scale neon installation.

Swanson's practice is driven by a desire to make the familiar unfamiliar and the ordinary extraordinary as he works to reveal the power dynamics embedded within language structures. His systematic, obsessive, and at times absurd examination of this dictionary uncovers and highlights language's profound influence on how we see our world.

The Meaning of Lines Series

What does a line mean; what do lines signify? This series is a visual representation of the semantic distance between pairs of headwords typically found on the top of dictionary pages. To create this series, the artist used word vectors* to measure and map the difference in meaning between the two words, plotting the difference in meaning as a simple line connecting two words in 3-dimensional space. To work properly, word vectors require vast amounts of text to use as training data, but these vectors were unconventionally trained on the dictionary itself. The large print and video animation contain all the headword pairs; the smaller prints contain headwords separated by their initial letter, A–Z.

The Meaning of Lines (All Headword Pairs)
2022
48 x 67 inches
digital print on aluminum

The Meaning of Lines (A Headword Pairs)–(Z Headword Pairs)
series of 26
2022
8 x 11 inches
digital prints on aluminum

*A word vector is an attempt to mathematically represent the meaning of a word. Word vectors are commonly used in text-to-speech applications, spelling and grammar checking applications, and predictive text. They are based on the idea that words that relate to each other are often found near each other in a text. To find a word vector, a computer goes through a vast amount of text and calculates how often a given word is found next to every other word. These frequencies are represented with numbers making it possible to plot and perform mathematical operations on the semantic relationship between words.

Frequency Adverbs

This work began as a sketch that the artist made over a decade ago. He was interested in the relationship between natural language, which is messy and subjective, and mathematical language, which is precise and discrete. This monumental neon installation contrasts the subjectiveness of natural language with numerical specificity. The eleven words are arranged vertically in alphabetical order and horizontally according to frequency. Each word is programmed to be illuminated for a specific percentage of time: 100%, 90%, 80%, and so on. The artist then chose words to match those percentages, highlighting the idiosyncrasies of communication.

Frequency Adverbs
2022
156 x 336 x 4 inches
neon, electronics

Frequency Adverbs
2022
14 x 11 inches
graphite on paper

The Definition of Dictionary
2022
60 x 23 inches
found dictionary definition, vinyl

An homage to Joseph Kosuth's work with definitions, this vinyl floor text is the definition of the word "dictionary" from the Webster's Dictionary from 1929. This work highlights the tautological nature of a thing containing its own definition.

All the Silence
2022
20 hours, 2 minutes, 42 seconds
Digitally processed audio

The multi-layered process to create this durational sound work began with the artist using optical character recognition to convert every dictionary page into machine-readable text. Next, a recording of a computer "reading" the entirety of the dictionary created an audio file that was over 100 hours in length. Finally, in the last layer, the artist removed the spoken words from this file, leaving only the remaining silence. This silence, the space between words, is immense and full of meaning. It conveys intention and gives form to spoken language.

Appendices Series

This series of prints and animations explore the nuances of the codex book and antiquated supplementary additions found within Webster's Dictionary from 1929. The unique and curious additions include census data, radio antenna diagrams, and other oddities reflecting the times in which the dictionary was published.

Leading Dots (1920 Census)
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital print on paper

Initial Letters, Merged
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital print on paper

Radio Antenna Diagrams
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital print on paper

Radio Symbols
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital print on paper

States (1920 Census)
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital print on paper

Charts, Merged
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital print on paper

Punctuation, Words Removed
2022
9 x 8 inches
digital print on paper

Initial Letters (Revolved)
2022
00:01:00
digital animation

Initial Letters (Rotated)
2022
00:03:00
digital animation

Initial Letters (Stacked)
2022
00:03:00
digital animation

Recto/Verso (Rotated)
2022
00:03:00
digital animation

All Page Numbers (Layered)
2022:
00:00:45
digital animation

Christian Names (Men, Women)
2022
00:02:00
digital animation

Aerial Antenna Diagrams (Revolved)
2022
00:01:00
digital animation

Initial Letters (Synonyms and Antonyms)
2022
00:03:00
digital animation

Leading Dots from the 1920 Census
2022
00:03:00
digital animation

Every Page Series

This series was created by layering all the recto (front side) and verso (back side) pages of a scanned dictionary, rendering the text unreadable. By removing the space between the words and pages, this artwork highlights the importance of space within written language.

Every Page (Recto)
2022
56 x 40 inches
digital print on paper

Every Page (Verso)
2022
56 x 40 inches
digital print on paper

Every Page (Separated by Letter, Recto and Verso)
2022
dimensions variable
slide projector digitally printed slides

Artist Statement

Words are power(ful); my artwork illuminates the subtle but powerful ways that language shapes perception. My medium is text, but my artwork takes many forms including blinking neon signs, interactive digital works, and meticulous hand-made works on paper. Thematically I explore how language structures our world through standards such as spelling and grammar, digital character encoding, and even alphabetization. As tools of language I am interested in erasers, highlighters, and correctional fluid but also typography, spell-check algorithms, and machine learning. Through dimensionality, repetition, and decontextualization my work makes the familiar unfamiliar and the ordinary strange; I want my artwork to make people perceive words from new and unconventional perspectives.

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Bio

Born in Chicago, Illinois.

Swanson is an Associate Professor in the ATLAS Institute and the Herbst Program for Engineering, Ethics & Society at the University of Colorado Boulder where he works and teaches at the intersection of language and technology. He is the director of TYPO Lab, a speculative design lab exploring the intersections of creativity, text, and technology. He holds a courtesy appointment in the Intermedia Arts Writing and Performance Ph.D. Program. He received his Masters of Fine Art at the University of California, San Diego with a focus in Computing and the Arts.

His artwork has been exhibited nationally and internationally at institutions including The Banff Centre for the Arts, The Broad Museum in Lansing, The Power Plant in Toronto, the 57th Venice Biennale at the European Cultural Center, the Glucksman Museum in Cork Ireland, the North Miami Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver. He is a Black Cube Fellow and his work is included in the Electronic Literature Organization's 4th Anthology.

He is represented by David B. Smith Gallery in Denver.

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