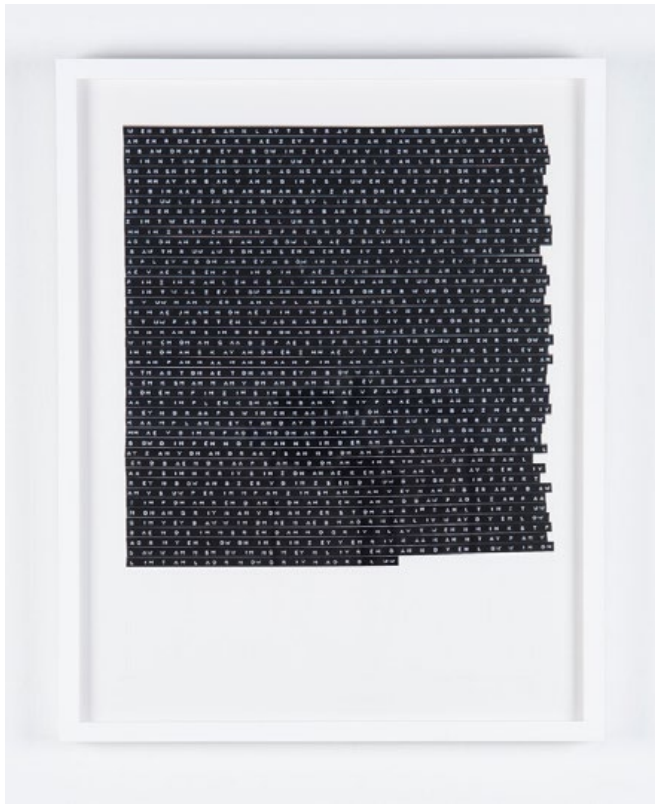


Hyperliterate Swollen Speech



RAINBOW PASSAGE, 2019, DYMO label tape on paper, 20 x 16 inches.

In primary oral cultures, there is no reason for the concept word to be consistent with our literate-culture idea of the word. Walter Ong explains: "If you cannot write, is 'textbased' one word or two? The sense of individual words as significantly discrete items is fostered by writing, which, here as elsewhere, is diaeretic, separative."

The issue of what exactly makes a word pervades Joel Swanson's work, and this, along with other aspects of speech and letter, are dealt with in particularly compelling ways in his four pieces executed on label tape, *Rainbow Passage* and the three *Marginalized Ways of Speaking* artworks.

Two obvious planes of existence for a poem, whatever that is, or a word, whatever that is, are those of speech/audition and grapheme/vision. In addition to pronouncing and listening to a text, or visually inscribing it and reading it with the eye, it is also possible to remember language (or devise it in the mind in the first place) and to then contemplate it. In his work with a standard labelmaker (one word or two?) Swanson exploits the strange and familiar materiality of this

inscription machine, provoking us to think further about all three of these ways of producing and encountering language.

What type of inscription has produced these works? Not writing of the sort done with a stylus; not typing in the conventional sense, with a keyboard; not even printing in the usual sense, which makes its inked impression into a surface that we view face on. The label produced in this act of inscription is made without ink, and is embossed.

Dymo Corporation was founded in 1958, with a patent for its first "hand operated embossing tool" being filed the next year and issued to David W. Souza in 1961. Several labelmaker designs have been produced under the Dymo name over the decades, and some are widely considered to be design classics. These days, a Dymo labelmaker is much more likely to be battery-operated and to print on thin, adhesive plastic, although embossing labelmakers are still made and used.

The embossing action of the labelmaker shares

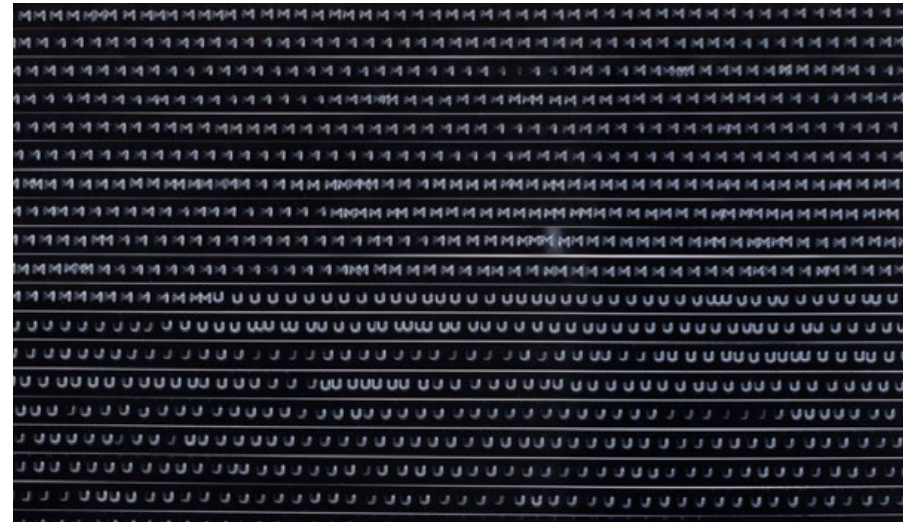


its name with the sort of embossing that artists, artisans, and craftspeople have done for centuries, but its action is regularized and industrialized. In the Oxford English Dictionary, for instance, definitions 2a and 2b of “emboss” seem as if they would be the most relevant ones, but also seem too elevated to apply to the action of this everyday product: “To carve or mould in relief; to cause (figures, part of a wrought surface) to stand out, project, or protrude.” “To adorn with figures or other ornamentation in relief; to represent (a subject) in relief.” The primary definition is not inapplicable, but is one used to describe parts of the body, initially, and only later things such as landscapes: “To cause to bulge or swell out, make convex or protuberant; to cover with protuberances.”

In the three *Marginalized Ways of Speaking* works and in *Rainbow Passage*, it seems odd to claim anything has been adorned, ornamented, carved, or molded. But letters have been caused to bulge or swell out. The label tape is covered with protuberances, the black of the tape stretched into white glyphs. The embossing action is a bodily one, itself a signature, providing

specific traces of the hand that worked the wheel and handle, most apparent in the *Marginalized Ways of Speaking* works. Even when a few letters are produced in a way that seems visually perfect (and anyone who has used an embossing labelmaker, however carefully, knows this is the exception to the rule) they have been formed by this inexact process of bulging, swelling, and distortion.

One perspective on Swanson’s tape works views them as texts. Some viewers may approach them (particularly the challenging *Rainbow Passage*) without really reading, considering them as one of those “walls of text” that so many online readers refuse to climb. I find it more provocative to see these texts as lineated language, as verse. But the three *Marginalized Ways of Speaking* pieces are not only divided into many lines; they are also quite evidently one-word artworks, the sort of one-word writings that Paul Stephens has recently examined in depth in his book *absence of clutter: minimal writing as art and literature*. What Stephens writes regarding the one-word poems of Aarom Saroyan applies to Swanson’s one-



word artworks as well: They have the effect of “jolting us from a passivity in which we suppress the mysteriousness of language.”

The label tape works, being made of letters, can be transcribed, and it is interesting to consider what gets lost in transcription. Here, for instance, is a transcription of the first two lines of *Marginalized Ways of Speaking* (Mumbling):

M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M
 M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M
 M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M
 M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M M.....

Transcribing this artwork may be a meditative exercise, but perhaps it does not need to be undertaken exhaustively. Even beginning the process reveals that the work, seen as a text, is compelling because it is a material text, because of its materiality, because of the imperfections in embossing and the way that letters overlap one another and are not evenly spaced. A transcript will not help us figure out this work’s particular grip on language.

Attending to this work letter by letter is productive, however. The letters used, each of which are repeated many times, are MUMBLING. This is of course a conventional, dictionary spelling. But spelling out the word letter by letter, even in this oddly extended way, is the opposite of mumbling. How can one mumble and pronounce the sound corresponding to each letter in MUMBLING? Wouldn’t a person who is actually mumbling have to say, at the very least, something more closely corresponding to MUMBLIN or perhaps even MUMLIN? Similarly, since the speech impediment colloquially called a lisp involves difficulty in pronouncing /s/, if the pronunciation of the word by someone lisping were to be imitated orthographically, we would expect the letters LITHPING to be used. We could also expect stuttering, characterized by repeating and lengthening speech sounds, to operate by repeating consonant clusters such as ST rather than repeating each letter or phoneme. So Swanson’s marginalized way of producing visual language is not a direct record of speech sounds via text; its relationship is more complex. It is a literate representation of a category of marginalized speech. And rather than being a

degraded or diminished representation of that word, it is extended and insistent. It is not an illiterate scribble or semi-literate attempt at producing a text, but a hyperliterate and effortful inscription.

While *Marginalized Ways of Speaking* extends the traditional way that words are spelled out, *Rainbow Passage* presents a different sort of text. There, the letters are providing one sort of close record of speech — a phonetic transcription, using the ARPABET codes developed in the 1970s. The text represented here is the earliest one used to gather recordings in the International Dialects of English Archive (IDEA). Because the pronunciation of this text is shown phoneme by phoneme, without any other division, if we take the perspective of an oral culture, this entire text is also, like “textbased,” actually one word.

Spaces do separate the phoneme codes, but the sequence of them is otherwise uninterrupted. That makes this text similar to those early manuscripts written in the scripto continua style, entirely without spaces. The obvious way to figure out where one word ends and another begins — here, I mean “word” in our literate-culture sense, the divided word that we cannot help but seize upon as a concept — is by giving voice to such a text. So, why not read it aloud? For this step a partial transcription is of help:

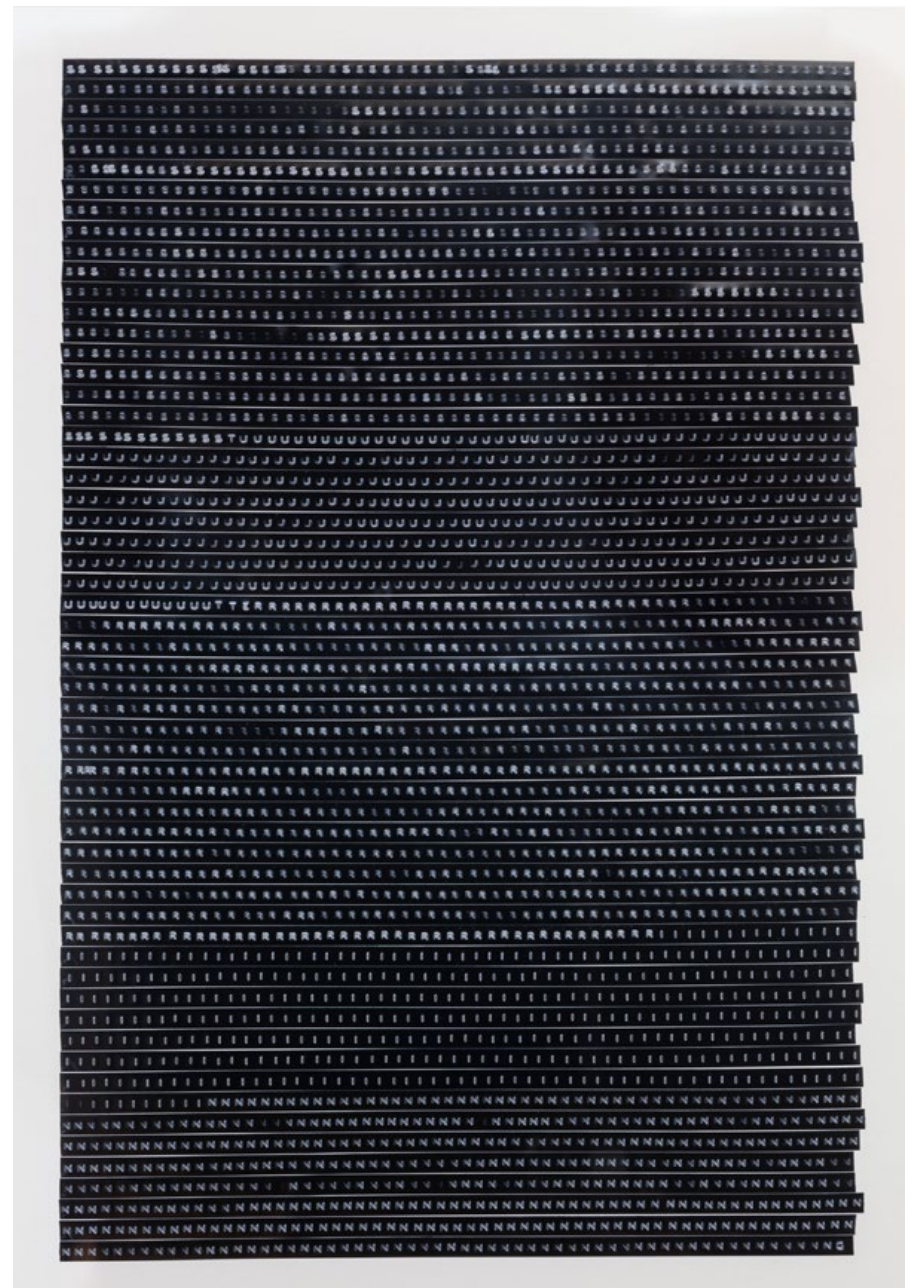
W EH N DH AH S AH N L AY T S ...

The text begins with “when,” straightforwardly enough, but the Carnegie Mellon Pronouncing Dictionary lists four ways of pronouncing the word, not only W EH N but also HH W EH N, W IH N, and HH W IH N. Swenson has chosen one, the first listed. Leaving aside the question of lexical stress, there are two ways to pronounce

the next word, “the,” and while DH AH is listed first, someone striving to enunciate clearly might well choose to say DH IY — using the same phonemes as in “thee,” but without the lexical stress. Since this text was taken from Grant Fairbanks’s *Voice and Articulation Drillbook*, it would not be unusual for someone to read it in this way. So this phonetic transcript is not the way (however one wishes to pronounce “the”) of giving voice to this passage of text; it is one particular way. It makes for a striking black-and-white representation of a discussion of the rainbow.

Marginalized Ways of Speaking and *Rainbow Passage* invite the viewer to be a reader, and not only a silent reader. They invite a transformed viewing and reading experience, as well as sustained thought about language. In their material nature, they give the lie to the regular, uninteresting, digitally-produced facsimiles of embossed labels, meant to point backwards in time but produced without any human touch. They show that even within the framework of industrial and regularity, even within an everyday activity such as labeling, there is expression and many signs of the body that was at work. By choosing extremely constrained means of inscribing a text and stretching that text production process to extremes, Swenson has produced material texts that shine on the visual word, resonate with the spoken word, and leave us with new ways of thinking about language when we pause from viewing.

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MARGINALIZED WAYS OF SPEAKING, 2017, DYMO label tape on paper, 30 x 22 inches.