

Asemic writing

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Defining a genre as open and unrestricted as asemic writing is indeed difficult. Asemic writing does not employ conventional semantics or grammar, which means that a clear meaning or function cannot be assigned to it. It is an art form that relies on places of indeterminacy, creating a space that extends beyond the known and the familiar – beyond the system of conventions and cultural symbols. It is a type of writing that merges visual art and literature, and as such, as a hybrid form, eludes both literary and artistic categorizations. It rejects the logocentric form of writing, focusing on the exploration of what lies beyond words. It explores space, focusing on movement and gesture and not on communication.

The beginning and sources – An independent response to a crisis

In the 1990s, it became clear that a crisis of handwriting was imminent. At this time of impending crisis, many artists noticed that the potential of the “typed” was limited and discovered the potential of the handwritten. The connection between the writing subject and the text weakened or at least became more mediated. Maria Konnikova speaks of an intimate bond that is forged during handwriting: the artist is focused and thus more present in the moment.¹ Writing, Konnikova explains, is an extension of human thought, its materialized version. For the Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser, “writing is about setting ideas in lines, for un-

¹ Maria Konnikova, “What’s Lost as Handwriting Fades”, The New York Times, 2014.

written ideas, left to their own devices, run in circles.”² Writing, according to Flusser, begins when thoughts begin to overlap, churn, and therefore need to be organized and released. The resulting form is for him a translation of chaos – the deformed shape of thought – into a line. The process which begins with racing thoughts and ends with systematic notation should bring relief. At the same time, Flusser’s theory indicates that there is so much more to handwriting. It is a record of the writer’s cognitive process, character, movement, and behavior. Small factors such as the size of the letters, their arrangement on the page, the characters, the presence of errors, accidental ink marks, or deletions – all these minor features of handwriting influence reception. Handwritten texts seem natural, alive, and imperfect, and therefore human. In contrast, typed texts appear to be cleansed of all human interference. They are too perfect, too uniform – the relationship between the writer and the text is blurred. They thus seem neutral.

In response to the lost potential of handwriting, a new genre has emerged that combines visual art and poetry. This unusual art form significantly expanded both categories, allowing for the creation of new textual and visual structures and the reexamination of the creation process and the creator. In 1997, the visual poets Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich coined the term *asemic writing*, defined as the art of quasi-calligraphic gestures. The genre did not develop as a formal movement, preceded by a manifesto and the formation of an artistic group. Many artists worked independently, inspiring each other with their works along the way. Early *asemic* works drew from well-known avant-garde traditions, which also combined word and image, such as Dadaism, Lettrism, and concrete poetry. The editors of the first anthology of *asemic* works also identified another source of inspiration – Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Arabic calligraphy – explaining that “Western people are often unfamiliar with the fact that the term calligraphy, which literally means ‘beautiful writing,’ can also be applied to wild, noisy examples of handwriting.”³ The Polish *asemic* poet Grzegorz Wróblewski also points out that calligraphy is the most important source of inspiration for *asemic* writing: “Anyone who would like to take an interest in the subject would have to immediately take up calligraphy. Research its history. Wang Xizhi... The East! But not only that [...].”⁴ Wróblewski explains that one cannot study *asemic* writing without examining the sources and meanings of calligraphy. The inspirations and sources that this art form draws on have one thing in common – they all use letters. Combined with a meaningful arrangement, they create a unique artistic effect.

Between signs and gestures: The ontology and aesthetics of *asemic* writing

The innovative potential of this genre lies in the relations between the sign and the space. *Asemic* works of art also question the word as a carrier of meaning and reject the established cultural understandings of reading and interpretation. *Asemic* writing is literally “meaning-

² Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 6.

³ *An Anthology of Asemic Handwriting*, ed. Tim Gaze, Michael Jacobson (New York: Punctum Books, 2013), 5–6.

⁴ Grzegorz Wróblewski, “Asemic writing?”, *Biblioteka. Magazyn Literacki*, 8 Dec. 2014, online: <https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/cykle/asemic-writing/>.

less writing.” It does not use culturally established symbols, such as letters or numbers. Signs which appear in an asemic work of art differ from the conventional letters of the alphabet. They often have little to do with reading, understood as searching for and interpreting information. Jacques Derrida used the adjective “asemic” to refer to blanks between words. The term “asemic” also refers to the medical condition of *asemia*, which describes patients who are unable to use or understand signs or symbols. In one of his letters to Gaze, Leftwich states, “an asemic text, then, might be involved with units of language for reasons other than that of producing meaning.”⁵ An asemic work of art gives rise to a unique, ephemeral, system of signs, or more broadly, gestures, which is idiosyncratic of a given piece and artist. These unique systems usually do not contain decipherable letters, words, or sentences. The meaning of an asemic work of art remains unclear, shrouded in mystery. The recipient thus feels as if they were entering the artist’s intimate writing space – this strengthens the sense of an immanent bond between the author and the text.

Handwriting allows the artist to play with the form. The author feels free; they are not limited by any rules. Handwriting endows texts with lightness and flexibility. It is seen as the embodiment of thought and also marks the author’s position in the world in an innovative manner. This genre of visual poetry also seems to embody the concepts of new materialism. The return to matter, the study of its agency, resonates with how the materiality of writing is explored in asemic writing. Writing is no longer meticulous, purposeful, aimed at revealing or conveying some truth or information. Many literary scholars who were not directly involved with asemic writing had noted that writing is a form of drawing human thoughts. Roman Ingarden in his phenomenological theory of art argued that when the reader first engages with a text, they must find a way to make sense of it. When the reader tries to make sense of the written page which at first seems to be covered with incomprehensible drawings, they enter into cognition of a work, Ingarden writes, and then make their way through the structures of the text:

At the beginning of our reading, we find ourselves confronted with a book, a volume in the real world consisting of a collection of pages covered with written or printed signs. Thus the first thing we experience is the visual perception of these “signs.” However, as soon as we “see” printed signs and not drawings, we perform something more than, or rather something different from, a mere visual perception.⁶

This approach significantly expands the boundaries of handwriting – drawing is an art, not a form of recording information. Tim Ingold also commented on drawn signs and the differences he noticed between the drawn and the written:

First, writing is a notation; drawing is not. Secondly, drawing is an art; writing is not. Thirdly, writing is a technology; drawing is not. Fourthly, writing is linear; drawing is not. None of these distinctions, as it turns out, is entirely trustworthy. Writing is still drawing. But it is the special case of drawing in which what is drawn comprises the elements of a notation.⁷

⁵ Peter Schwenger, *Asemic. The Art of Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 108.

⁶ Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. R. A. Crowley & K. R. Olson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 19.

⁷ Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 120–122.

Asemic writing as drawing signs, and not notation, evokes associations with a child's attempts to imitate adult writing. Gaze, speaking of writing, refers to childhood memories – a child who is learning to write almost always begins by drawing “pretend” letters. Children's pseudo-writing is a record of their uncoordinated hand movements and corrections. It is extremely important to also notice movement in asemic texts, to look at the work as a living organism co-existing with the author at the moment of its creation, and not to limit it only to the final version, because the entire creative process is asemic. Steven Skaggs in his article “The highly semic processes of asemic writing”⁸ points out how important all that extends beyond the finished product is. He believes that “[w]riting is never truly asemic, but the increasing popularity of artworks labeled as asemic writing help us to become aware of the semiotic functions of the non-verbal aspects of scripts, typography, calligraphy and other graphical written forms.”⁹ To bring handwriting to life, the mind must be slowed down so that it focuses on finding specific information as quickly as possible. In contact with the text, the reader should focus on their sensory reactions, sensually following the trace of the author's hand. Although this movement often makes the work overwhelming to the recipient, that is the intended effect. It is like Borges' Library of Babel where chaos, confusion, and excess are used deliberately, and overstimulation is intentional.

The discussion of handwriting in the context of asemic works emphasizes that the work is inseparable from the artist. A field of psychology called graphology posits the same. Similarly to the graphologist, the artist sees the handwritten as a personal “signature,” an expression of their individual features. In both cases, the focus is on the act of handwriting, on the contact between the “I,” individual expression, and corporeality. Thus, in asemic works one can see what has been erased in the schematic alphabet, that is, the expressiveness of the act of writing itself. Expression allows for the release of emotions; it distracts attention from rules and patterns. All this makes asemic writing more and more popular among psychologists. Christine N. Winston, Hemali Maher, and Nazneen Mogrelia, scholars at the Department of Psychology, Women's Christian College, Chennai, India, tested the therapeutic dimension of asemic writing among alexithymic-schizophrenic adults who have problems with communication, expressing emotions, and identifying their emotional states. The scientists formulated the following conclusion: “Asemic writing, similar to other expressive strategies, can be a beneficial technique in facilitating emotional expression because, unlike semantic writing, it does not place cognitive demands on the writer or warrant language skills.”¹⁰ Expressing oneself through asemic writing helped the subjects understand their affective experiences.

Although it uses abstract language, asemic art aims to communicate without boundaries. Every asemic reader can freely react to asemic art and is not limited in their interpretations. Still, this does not mean that engaging with asemic art is easy. Asemic works of art, despite their open and fluid form, require the recipient to be attentive and open-minded. At the same time, one must maintain distance and be sensitive to what is small and what is big. Perhaps, to penetrate through the successive layers of these works, one should, as Ingarden argued,

⁸ Steven Skaggs, “The highly semic processes of asemic writing”, *Cognitio* 2 (2020): 335–349.

⁹ Skaggs, 348.

¹⁰ Christine N. Winston, Nazneen Mogrelia, “The Therapeutic Value of Asemic Writing: A Qualitative Exploration”, *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 11 (2016).

find a place in the text that will allow one to enter into cognition. In the process of understanding or engaging with such asemic works one should not look for familiar symbols. The point is not to decipher, read, or identify a referent: “reading asemic texts means resisting the power of words, the voices in our heads that constantly translate what we experience into words.”¹¹ There is no code with which the reader can decipher the content. In *Asemic: The art of writing*, Peter Schwenger argues that not having that code with which one can decipher the text is a source of joy. He quotes the American visual artist Timothy Ely, for whom the symbols he draws/writes stand in a direct reaction to his cognitive process:

Language doesn’t have to be verbal or visual. It can be a sensation, it can be in the form of signals. My marks depart from meaning but they’re not meaningless. They just have a different internal matrix. They don’t necessarily correspond to a sound or a picture. Sometimes the marks are assigned to an emotional color or to a musical note. They are navigational. There is certainly a lot of background noise in these marks [...].¹²

Asemic writing gives rise to almost or openly anarchist works, which negate the power of language and writing. Asemic writing redirects the attention of the recipient from the laborious process of decoding to other ways of engaging with the work, such as movement or that which is visible at first glance. The recipient should engage with the entire complex creative process. Asemic writing is an infinite genre. As the horizons of the authors and recipients broaden so does asemic writing. It constantly explores new forms of expression.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

¹¹Schwenger, 146.

¹²Timothy C. Ely, “Access to a Book That Won’t Open. Interview by Steve Clay”, in: Timothy C. Ely, *The Flight into Egypt: Binding the Book* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995).

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KEYWORDS

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C A L L I G R A P H Y

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ABSTRACT:

Asemic writing is an art form that combines visual and poetic elements to create new textual and visual structures. The genre has been developed independently by many artists, drawing inspiration from the avant-garde, Dadaism, Lettrism, concrete poetry, and calligraphy. It challenges the traditional understanding of writing as a carrier of meaning, rejecting culturally established symbols such as letters and numbers. Instead, artists create unique systems of signs and gestures that are specific to a given work and individual. This art form is independent of content, emphasizing the role of the creative process, expression, and the materiality of writing. Asemic works embrace randomness, errors, and unique features of handwriting. Asemic writing is constantly growing as a genre. It continues to explore new forms of expression, ways of interacting with the recipient, and emotional development. Asemic writing experiments with form and content, crossing cultural and linguistic boundaries.

h a n d w r i t i n g

a s e m i c w r i t i n g

DECONSTRUCTION OF WRITING

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