
WORDS DON'T MEAN ANYTHING

ESSAY BY ANDREW MCQUALTER

FOR ANTONIA SELLBACH 'FORMS OF LIFE'

Imagine standing or sitting in a room with these paintings made by Antonia Sellbach and looking at them. Taking them in, thinking about them. You aren't analysing the content, or even thinking about whether the paintings have content, you are just looking at them. Someone comes to you and says 'what are you thinking?', or 'what do you think they mean?'. And all at once the experience of the work falls away and you only have words at your service.

Words are the tools we use to convey our experience. Sometimes, it's hard to find the right tool for the task of telling someone what you are thinking or feeling. You might say, 'I can't find the words for it.' Is this an expression of your inability to find the words, or to use the words properly?; or have you found the words and found them to be inadequate? If that's the case, then we are isolated, unable to communicate our experience to one another.

Perhaps *I can't find the words for it* is a way of saying, 'I'm not sure you will understand what I mean.' You may not trust that the words you use will mean the same thing to the other person as they do to you and how could you be certain, when your only guarantee that the words you speak do convey your specific experience will be spoken using the words you have suddenly found so untrustworthy?

Imagine, rather than fearing that the words you speak may not be understood, or fearing that you can't find the right ones, you speak. When we speak our thoughts to another person, it's rarely a simple transition of information, more like it's an entry into a process of arriving at a shared understanding. Our conversation is a way of seeking a shared way toward understanding a particular thing. Conversation, our shared understanding, is what builds the world we inhabit.

There are people who say that the world itself is language. It's a world built of circulation, transactions, exchanges; and tacit understanding acquired through innumerable other dialogues. Accepting this, to speak is to overcome the skepticism that haunts each effort at communication.

If being with your own unvoiced thoughts is a state of being abstracted from the world, away from the world, then it is the effort to speak those thoughts that leads us back to it, into community with another.

[...] *And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life*

Suppose, in answer to the question you were asked back then about these paintings, you said to your companion, 'I can't express what I'm feeling—maybe painters make paintings to express things that can't be said with language.'

- Is that a satisfying answer to their question? That also sounds like a refusal, an avoidance—not only of the act of expression, but a refusal to acknowledge that your companion may have similar unvoiced thoughts about what you are both looking at.

If a refusal to communicate is to abstract oneself from the world (the world created from the meaning we make with language, together), it follows that abstraction in art arises from a similar refusal of shared meaning.

We can interpret a line painted in that *specific place* on the surface of that painting, or a scumble of paint in *that* position on the painting, or two lines forming an 'x' as constituting a private language invented by the painter and intelligible only to her.

Imagine standing in front of one of these paintings and making a gesture. Hold your arms slightly forward of your body and to the side, your hands slightly extended, as if about to touch or grasp the edges. It's a measuring gesture, comparing the scale of your own body against the scale of the painting. It's an acknowledgement, like nodding at someone you know as you pass them on the street. A recognition of familiarity.

Imagine how the painting was made.

You might think about the experience of using a brush to make a particular mark that extends from one side of the canvas to the other or vertically from the top edge to the lower edge or, from one corner to the corner diagonally opposite it. We imagine the dimensions of the canvas, its texture, the resistance of the surface and the tool used to make the marks.

If we didn't know what a 'painting' was, would we understand what we are looking at now? It seems that since abstraction began in 'our' world, it has been the cause of an outpouring of language; language in the service of interpretation, theory, connoisseurship and manifesto. These words are a context inherited by any 'abstract' work of art, making it less a refusal of the world and more an active participant in a dialogue. In this context, an artist, a 'serious' artist, consciously situates themselves within such this dialogical context, participating in the process of making meaning, building, and maybe un-building, new worlds.

'Painting' is an accumulation of knowledge. Knowing how a material and a tool responds to an action we perform with them, an action chosen by a person in the context of all the other instances of painting they have encountered. Imagine pausing before you speak to consider all the instances in which you have encountered the words that are at the tip of your tongue. Do you speak or do you remain silent? It's a question of trust—not in language, but in the ability of another to enter the world of your thought, to acknowledge you as a fellow speaker.

A painting, like this, is as imperfect as language. It conceals as much as it is able to give away. A painting acknowledges us, our shape and scale, our specific senses, our culture. Paintings are our companions, asking for our thoughts, a response, an opportunity to make meaning.