Intermittent Conversations: A. F. Caldiero

Scott Abbott, Utah Valley University
Published in the Catalogue for the Salt Lake Art Center

The Unclosed Hand.

An Exhibition of Works by
Alex Bigney, A.F. Caldiero, Brent Gehring, Jean Lambert, and Kent Wing
1994
Intermittent Conversations  A.F. Caldiero

by Scott Abbott

I don’t know about his ideas, but he sure is a good cook.
—Ezra Pound on the mystic Gurdjieff

Revise is a common word. We use it often when we speak of writing. In fact, I used it tonight when I called Caldiero and told him I needed another day to revise this essay. What I meant was: to rewrite, to add to, to subtract, to rethink, to produce another draft, to polish, to get to the end of my writing so I could hand over the finished product. What I did not mean was what the word means literally — “to see again.” I didn’t want to see my scratches on the page. They were means to an end, crutches for a poor memory. Tools.

But I am a writer of abstractions. At most I paint with words. There are others, however, who paint words, there are paintings in which words are objects, subjects for the painter. When painters paint a word they make us see it differently. It has form and color. It no longer stands in exclusive relation with other words. Meaning is no longer limited to the sets of differences that make up our normal spoken and written languages. There are new differences, new relations — between words and stones, words and angels, words and marble columns, words and a bloody bathtub. Visual artists for whom words are objects and subjects revise one language and create another. They see differently. And what do they see?
Caldiero:

Several-day fast, sitting on roof of our house in Brooklyn, N.Y. from
running all late afternoon without seeing, eyes closed on the sun. Then
went down into the apartment; poured water on the center of the top of
my head. Head exploded. Extreme pain. Nearly blacked out. Went back to roof
and sat again. The sun looked me thru the head at the end of one of its
rays, and pulled me up out of the water like a fish.

Images seen: sun arm-ray hook fish water

These images turned into Hebrew letters:

These letters then became to transmute, transmute, shift, and
metamorphose into sound, which in turn gave new words. English
equivalents were added later. (from TEXT I OR, Book O’ Lights)

Images that become words. Words that become images. Caldiero
gardens a fruitful space between words and images.

As I have tried to make sense of Caldiero’s work over the last five years,
a key poem for me has been “This is not it.” His performance of the
poem begins with those words, matter-of-fact, simple: “This is not it.”
They are followed by a repeat: “This is not it.” Then a third “This is
different.” “This is different.” “This is not it” and a fourth and fifth and sixth and seventh and more. Accents vary. Rhythms change. The tempo quickens until articulation is no
longer possible. The performer shakes and jerks with sound. His lungs
and vocal cords and tongue and teeth work furiously to produce a
roaring, clicking, singing, breathing, spitting chaos. And then,
inexplicably, he is back in the articulated sentence: “This is not it.
This is not it. This is not it. This is different.”

Language is representation. Representations necessarily distort. The
sentence could not possibly be “it.” But the poet uses the sentence,
repetitions of the sentence, variations on the sentence to move toward
“it” until the sentence cracks under the strain, warps, and passes
beyond the sets of linguistic difference that are its meaning. This, now, is
its breath cut and shaped by teeth and tongue and cavity into
unimaginable and unintelligible sound. It is the body. It is the body’s
breath. It is sound. It is a non-language approached but not realized by
language.

By extreme effort Caldiero transports his audience outside of language,
or to another dimension of language. The extremity guarantees that the
trip will not last long. But on that border between what isn’t and what is,
lies insight, vision, revision. We are not sure what we saw; but we saw
differs. Spoken by language in our normal lives, we here witness one
who himself speaks and rescues us momentarily from what Nietzsche
called the prison-house of language.

Language enables much. It also inhibits. It is a powerful tool; and
because of its peculiar and specific shapes these are projects it can’t be
used for. Michel Foucault describes this paradox as well as anyone in
the preface to The Order of Things:

This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that
shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought —
our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography —
breaking up all of the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are
accustomed to turn the world in possession of existing things, and continuing long
afterwards to disintegrate and disperse with collapse all age-old distinction between
the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a “certain Chinese encyclopedia” in
which it is written that “animals are divided into (a) belonging to the
Emperor, (b) categorised, (c) tame, (d) hunting pigs, (e) crows, (f) fish, (g)
stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) unclassified, (j)
umclassifiable, (k) drawn with a very fine-pointed brush, (l) in cream, (m)
being just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies”.
(Vintage: New York, 1973.)

The Chinese encyclopedia, Borges, and Foucault make us aware of the
limits of our language. Caldiero is acutely aware of those limits. And he
storms the gates.
IN TONGUES

Caldiero:
I thought of this as a “mute book”—an alchemical term for a book of images rather than words.

I am seeking the origin of sound, that point where breath becomes sound, where breath is guided into audibility, where sound rises and meets breath and becomes audible. I want to localize the sound in the body. In the second drawing, for instance, you see the “y” in the throat, the “a” in the mouth, and the “m” on the lips. Together they form the archetypal sound, “ram,” the name of God.

The words are subsumed, imbedded within us, language is part of our physical being.

God created matter by saying it. The word was made flesh or matter. I feel like a little child imitating its parent. I’m not actually doing any of this, giving birth through speaking. But playing is part of the creative process. Playing God.

(The phone rings. Caldiero picks it up and says “Hello.” He listens for a moment and then smiles: “Eh, Papa!” I hear one half of an animated Sicilian conversation.)

“In Tongues” plays on the idea of glossolalia, defined by The American Heritage Dictionary as “fabricated and nonmeaningful speech, especially such speech associated with a trance state or certain schizophrenic synapses,” Greek glossa, tongue + Greek lasia, to babble.” “To define” means, literally, to put fences up around, and that’s what this definition feels like. Caldiero’s drawings are certainly fabrications, as is the pseudo-scientific language of the definition. And they are closer to trance states and creative schizophrenia than the pedantic definer will ever get. But “nonsenseful”?

I have had the nine drawings up on my wall for two weeks and have conversed with them, questioned them, interpreted them.

Faces in profile. Most of them face upward. Gravity impedes the words. The gravity of body. Impediment that requires transformation. How does breath become sound? Thought become word? Flames burn deep (#s. 3 and 4), but we are no dragons and these flames will never escape untransformed. They are blocked by what look like two oysters and silence ensues (#5). They are represented and thus distorted: “Revolt” finding itself upside down and backwards as “flower” (#6). They seek impossible articulation through two opposing tongues and remain unspoken (#7). Or they slip out as words because the lower, confining half of the jaw is missing: but what lets them out also fails to articulate them well and they are frustrating fragments (#8).

But this is a gloomy reading, the work of an academic language skeptic. What about the second head that pronounces the name of God from above the earth? Or the ninth drawing, the figure whose long beard and flowing hair are the stuff of a successfully expressed sensuous, poetic religion: “neither female nor forever more... eternal now... sex... savor all... heaven never was so sweet”? The blockages, the double tongues, the representations may impede. But they also transform. They are images of process. They reveal process.

“You can’t talk with two tongues,” I tell Caldiero. “They would trip all over each other.”

That’s right, you can’t speak normally with two tongues, one black and one white. They are contradictory, paradoxical, opposite. It’s impossible to speak both sides of a paradox. But what if you could? What if you tried? You wouldn’t speak normally, but differently. If the tongue should find the answer before the word, the question becomes invisible and the questioner loses memory and the use of names becomes extinct and then the answer is found that cannot be questioned.

CORRENGENDA

Imagine an infinitely skilled cook who prepares a subtle and complicated meal, fine ingredients perfectly combined to play on learned and sensitive palates. The cook sets the meal aside and with
Life happens by chance, and yet is the most orchestrated and planned of all occurrences.

But, I ask, aren't you just pretending this is a matter of chance? You wrote each version, one after the other, and the computer is programmed to move from one to the next. Where is the independent organism?

Even God hasn't figured out how to make his creations completely independent.

The computer moves from version to version in hundreds of ways. It's a random process. The source code produces the text which is the interface.

The interface?

Yes, the interface between the source code and the audience. Out of a set, unforgiving, rigid, total order arises new and surprising life. I'm returning poetry to its source: numbers.


One version gives way to the next. I listen to the spoken words. I watch the flowing forms, the shifting shapes, the poems that are here for me now. No one will ever see or hear them again. Caldiero's work borders on concrete poetry, that tradition that focuses on word shapes and the forms of stanzas, that makes pictures of words. "Concrete" hardly describes the shapes I see here. Better: Biotexts.

A final story:

Out of love a child is born. The father, a poet, attempts to learn the baby's language. He refuses to speak English or Sicilian with the baby. He is crazy for the freedom of the baby's language. He will do anything to keep his child from the fetters of the languages he speaks. The child learns English.

Love produces another child. Even more intensely the father immerses himself in the baby's pure babblings. Even more strictly he shields the
baby from the rigid walls of English and Sicilian. The child learns Sicilian.

The disconsolate father, translating his poetry from English to Sicilian for the one child and from Sicilian to English for the other, discovers in the transitional space between languages a door:

Caldiero:
*It is but a single figure. It begins as Alpha (uppercase A) and it ends as Alpha (lowercase a). At no instant is this figure wholly manifest. It is here segmented by Art to display the "jumps" by which it continually is. In its reality, these segments are simultaneous. We are looking thru a peep-hole at an enormous creature, seeing only that part of its body that is passing in front of the hole. After it has passed, we may piece together our glimpses and imagine how it must look and move. That we could but open the door!* (from TEXT XV, OR, Book O' Lights.)

Scott Abbott is professor of German at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. He is author of a book on Freemasonry and the German novel, and a forthcoming book on Peter Hauhke. He wishes he were a better cook.
A.E. Caldiero reVisions: a language performance installation

Floor plan, 1993
A.F. Caldiero reVisions, Section 1: IN TONGUES
Manuscript on bank cards 7.5 x 7.5 x 96.25
A.E. Caldiero reVisions. Section I: IX TONGUES
Monoprins on birch, each 15.875" x 23.375"
A.F. Caldiero reVisions, Section I: IN TONGUES
Monoprints on birch, each 15.875" x 23.875"
A.E. Caldiero reVisions Section II: CORREGENDA
Oil on transparency film mounted on paper under plexiglass, each 11" x 8.5"
A.E. Caldiero revisión Section II: CORRECENDA
Oil on transparency film mounted on paper under plexiglass, each 11" x 8.5"
A.F. Caldiero reVisions Section II: CORRENGENDA

Oil on transparency film mounted on paper under plexiglass, each 11" x 8.5"
Finding out how she
still affects me subtly
that I thought I had
when she was and
she was good and
not out level
I can live in the six and
that like my eyes
when I stop singing

Finding out how she
didn't start out to be
still affects me subtly
that I

I saw need
my facts
not out level
in her
not feeling
when I stop singing

Thanks to my anger &
my not playing games so I make us feel
uncomfortable make her nervous.

oh

that

been

Fall

& we

poetry.

A.E. Caldiero reVisions, Section III: BIOTEEXTS (excerpts)
Screen displays. VGA color monitors. sound boards. Windows 3.1. speakers. and headphones
In this problem, one of presenting some element other elements into a full discourse, that is, a talking involved with one's own memory. (Narrator) - mother of the Moon, voice of poetry. Talking texts and selecting elements that give birth to other discourses, as Cape has done.

On the other hand, instead of the text, I take a single word and from it generate, say, five words: from each of the five words generated, many words and so on, using lessons especially developed to do this, for example...

and so, but it's all too quickly and now for it to be discussed, so what's to be done to introduce newness of theoretical view. Bitmap, course - Bitmap will carry what Bitmap calls its own badge - Bitmap will help this making into life. Bitmap will bring along what language can present life and the future. Bitmap, or else the house genre must accept it. And that's the other problem, but only temporarily so as for all it spontaneity and there's no problem.

A.F. Caldiero reVisions, Section III: BIOTEXTS (excerpts)
Screen displays, VGA color monitors, sound boards, Windows 3.1, speakers, and headphones
A.E. Caldiero reVisions, Section III: BIOTEXTS (excerpts)

Screen displays. VGA color monitors, sound boards, Windows 3.1, speakers, and headphones.