

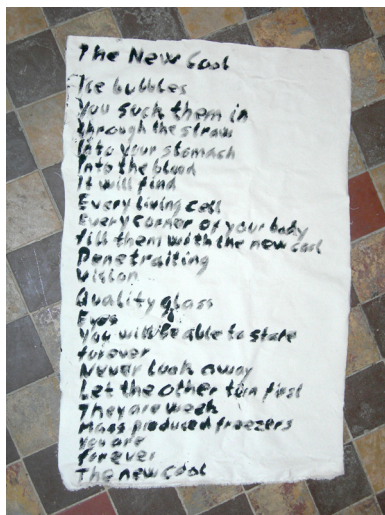
In the age of Postmodernist flux, where boundaries become blurred and may even disappear, we encounter an unexpected engagement with visual art by its long time nemesis - the phonographic word. In the work of the Danish poet Jan Hatt-Olsen who properly calls himself a cross media artist, we witness an uncanny morphogenesis of literary art into visual art. Typically the literary appears in visual art as appropriations of simple literary devices by visual artists, stimulated by the verbiage of their literate societies. For Mr. Olsen however, this repositioning of the literary into the current visual art world encounters several challenges, as he attempts to re-brand the space as a literary site. As the poet makes several appropriations of visual practices that stumble into the realm of visual art politics, there are a number of ideological viruses carried by the avant-garde into his project through these actions.

In Mr. Olsen's *The Exhibition as a Poetry Book*, at gallery *Dada Post* in Berlin, Germany in September 2011, the poet commandeered two rooms in which he created separate installations. Upon entering the galleries, experienced visual art eyes immediately synthesize the two layouts as text based conceptual art installations.

The installation in the first room titled *Came From the Sky* exhibits the acuity and visual hermeneutics of a tightly controlled Dennis Oppenheim installation, while also bringing to mind other visual artists who work largely with text, such as Lawrence Weiner and Louise Lawler. In this action an antique red DDR toy airplane sits landed amid the (poems) acrylic on canvas leaflets it seems



to have just strewed from the air before landing – like war propaganda. Text based art tends to limit itself to sparse phrases and slogans, but upon closer reading of these text you become immediately aware that you are reading a form of unadulterated poetry, albeit in an unfamiliar format and context.



The subject of the poems in both rooms were the artist's sights and encounters while on his daily treks around Berlin, during his month long residency at *Dada Post*. With the installation in the second room titled *Through The Mirror*, Kathryn Nussdorf a multidisciplinary artist from the United States who works with photography, painting, and architecture, contributed two pieces in collaboration, whereas the mixture of these disparate practices welcomes a kind of Postmodernist miscegenation that negates the purifying strategies of Modernist reductionism.

On the far wall of this larger gallery Ms. Nussdorf installed her large photograph of a full moon lighted above the radio tower at Alexander Platz, titled *Midnight Magic* above the "looking glass," through which are reflected the (poems) acrylic on canvas text, floating around the room on the floor like lily pads on a pond.





Installed at the other end of the room is Ms. Nussdorf's second piece, a sculpture titled *Smells Like Fish*, which consists of a tree branch dangling a plastic fish with a fully engulfed hook.



The life and death and fate message evoked by this sculpture gives this piece a stand-alone strength, even though the complexity created by the total installation magnifies upon repeated viewings.

The two artists do seem to work in unison, as the eeriness of the moon-mirror juxtaposition evokes a primeval foreboding.

Mr. Olsen studied history and philosophy at *Copenhagen University*. He understands the evolution, and the theoretical complications of the visual/phonogramatic language links; subsequently the conception of his own practice is theoretically complex. There are several literary practices that inspires his transgressions, including some works by Guillaume Apollinaire, the literary movement known as *Concretism*, and William Blake's *Illuminated books*. But for the purposes here we will remain within the purview of the visual art world.



Human beings evolved a verbal language to communicate aural information, *as the act of trying to say something evolved vocal sounds into speech. But humans still needed word signs to express the clear sounds of speech, and it was a series of very natural steps that writing grew out of drawing.*<sup>(1)</sup> With the phonographic language, in wide use today, literacy has become a condition of evolved development. But, in literate societies the (alphabet) graphic system has lost its independence, and has become subordinated to the voice, through writing. The fracture between visual and verbal expression was and is unavoidable, as the verbiage tends to stop people in the Western world from thinking visually also. It is fascinating for example that Chinese calligraphy is both the image and the word. In the West, a strictly visual communication has remained within its primordial potency, that visual artists revel and specialize in. Still within the literate cultures, the word can be so strong the strange phenomenon of "Text Art" appears.

This recent incursion into visual art is the second to come from the literary world. In the West, the Renaissance stirred the beginnings of the fine art concept. This is the era that "art" began - with the marriage of studio practice with the liberal arts. *"Unlike in Italy, where by 1600 the connection between the arts and letters had become well established, in Spain the two had never been joined. The consequences of this failure were profound, because it was through the identification of painting with poetry that the former gained the status of a liberal art, as opposed to a craft. In practical terms this meant that the painters were regarded by the ruling class of Spanish society as the equals of blacksmiths, coopers, and carpenters. The reasons for the existence of this attitude are complex, but there can be no doubt that the most important was the deeply-ingrained aristocratic prejudice against commerce and manual labor. Painting in Spain was considered to be a handicraft and painters were therefore artisans whose work was essentially characterized by physical rather than mental activity."*<sup>(2)</sup> In Mr. Olsen's example the strategy for incursion was to make three major appropriations: the visual art venue, the materiality of visual art, and the collaboration strategies of visual art. And while the poet is staking out territory in visual art space the local ramifications extends to more questions about the appropriateness of the conditions of the "art world" as a literary site, because it contains and represents a number of fanatical ideologies that obfuscate what are at times desperate wanting, and immoral despotisms. It is not a gleaming intellectual space.

A signature of Mr. Olsen's art is his pointed appropriation of the materiality of visual art, whereas "literary" texts no longer enjoy a free or an incidental relation to its vehicle, i.e. a piece of paper, a book, a CD-Rom. The problematic here is that this position cannot tiptoe around avant-garde notions of "demateriality," and their attacks on art marketing prevalent among the conceptual art practices of the late 1960s and 1970s – which are among the models that Mr. Olsen plunders. The avant-garde "raided" Marxism for its explanatory instruments, and has remained a theory of social



and political change within art discourse. What it stands for is primarily and emphatically a totalizing approach to the study of societies that insists on the importance of antimaterialist critiques and the effects of materialism on the important structures of social development. Because words are weightless and immaterial, something you cannot hold in your hand, Mr. Olsen does relish the presence of the “object” in his actions (which mimic the commodity fetish of art marketing) while the seriously political avant-garde would take the opposite position – humorlessly. However, text artists within the avant-garde do expose real problems of their own within the (sometimes) lax constitutions of their material concepts. Mr. Weiner for example was a central figure in the formation of conceptual art in the 1960s. His work often takes the form of typographic texts, and since the early 1970s, wall installations of text have been his primary medium. In 1968, when he formulated his (text) “Declaration of Intent” – he made three points on creating the art object: 1. *The artist may construct the piece.* 2. *The piece may be fabricated.* 3. *The piece need not be built.* In terms of aesthetic philosophy all three of these positions together constitute a form of political syncretism. In addition to Mr. Oppenheim, among the best artists to exploit materiality in conceptual art is Ms. Lawler, who is known for ephemeral works that embody the temporal condition of certain kinds of objects, as expressly political. Examples of this work would be her “Drinking Glass” pieces, where cryptic texts are etched around the rim of the glass at the top.

The avant-garde promoted dematerialization or anticommodity strategies – and collaboration art, which was also a practice identified with Marxism. However, collaborative efforts do take on multiple forms. The design and manufacture of today’s giant passenger jet airplanes (Airbus A380) require the talents and labor of thousands of individuals. Rock n’ Roll groups and jazz ensembles may require the efforts of a smaller number of people, whereas large orchestras are used to perform a symphony written by one person. And the visual artist Jeff Koons is said to employ as many as forty studio assistants to produce his art. The Marxists acknowledged the relationship between capital and labor, as forming the central structural dynamic in capitalist societies, which the avant-garde took as an underlying cause to which all other aspects of the social order must be related, including art making and selling. Around this time, art was frequently described in the Marxist term “artwork.” The goal of collaboration art was to consolidate individual labor into collectives of the “socially conscious” – to uproot the custom of private enterprise. The means of production (art making) were to be totally “socialized”, i.e. removed from the control of the individual. In this sense, you could say that a Marxist interpretation of art practice dismisses the inspiration and innate drive to create, while prioritizing the hard realities of art-labor and art-commodity. With the example of Mr. Olsen and Ms. Nussdorf, when you think “collaboration,” it is something they are doing together, as in a dance or social interaction. This kind of collaboration is a form others are experimenting with as well, most notably is the jazz saxophonist Ornette Colman, who is distinguished for his unusual and sometime strange ensembles that emphasized collaboration as an interface

with friendship. The theoretical complications of collaboration necessarily enter Mr. Olsen's project from the Modernist era - as a virus carried in the stratagem of the avant-garde. He receives these cerebral convolutions as unavoidable historicisms into his artwork, while exulting his actions into visual art practice.

In the words of the philosopher/critic Author C. Danto: *"The ascent to philosophical self-reflection, is to be liberated from the burden of history"*<sup>(3)</sup>. While Postmodernist theory is certainly concerned with historical issues, it is fundamentally opposed to the "totalizing" ambitions of the Marxist project. Postmodernism has been widely observed to license a cognitive miscegenation quite antithetical to the scientific aspirations of Marxism. Postmodern incongruousness which may seem unsuitable, strange, or out of place in a particular context, are not in accord or consistent with Modernist reductionism or any other doctrines of purity. Within the Postmodern condition, and its expanding chaos of dangerously coded and recoded signs, the visual is no longer married to the empirically understood world. The continuous manipulation of extant reality forces one to maintain a dizzying level of mental dexterity, simply to cope with constantly shifting meaning. Mr. Olsen inters this fray with his neurons firing, as it is within this untidiness that he is able to pose his own ambitions amongst the multiple and colliding forms of representation.

The variation in the discourse of visual art practice from one generational stratum to the next, occur because the formal and iconographic content (style) of the art changes - as from mimesis to signifier. Hegel's doctrine asserts that a culture's arrival at a new synthesis, exemplified by its art, is the result of opposition to the previous model and prior ideas. Marxist ideology continues to infect art discourse, even if their original force seems to have dissipated. Artists produce work in and for a world with all its imperfections, injustices and inequities, whether they have worked within a Marxist critical sensibility or not. Diversity of responses to art objects, both within particular contexts and across time, requires a kind of explanation attentive to the complex forms that the realm of the aesthetic involves, and the particular ideological and cognitive effects it produces. The artists keep mining the world and themselves for material by looking outward while working from within. The cross media art of Jan Hatt-Olsen is a reflective residue of the current permutation of his artistic mind, and acute sensitivity to his epoch.

Howard McCaleb - October 2011, Berlin, Germany

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Notes:

(1) **The Outline of History** (Volume One)  
by H.G. Wells  
Copyright © 1961 by Doubleday & Company, Inc

(2) **Valazquez, Painter and Courtier**  
by Jonathan Brown

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(3) **After The End of Art: Contemporary Art and The Pale of History**

By Arthur C. Danto

Princeton University Press

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**After The End of Art: Contemporary Art and The Pale of History**

By Arthur C. Danto

Princeton University Press

**Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia**

by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari

University Of Minnesota Press (December 15, 1983)

**Encyclopedia of Aesthetics**

Michael Kelly, Editor in Chief

Oxford University Press.

**The Outline of History** (Volume One)

by H.G. Wells

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**Valazquez, Painter and Courtier**

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## **Howard McCalebb**

A Brief Biography 2011

Howard McCalebb received his M.F.A. in Sculpture from *Cornell University* in 1972, and his B.A. in Sculpture from *California State University, at Hayward* in 1970. In 1971, he participated in the *Hobart School of Welding Technology*, 5th Annual Sculpture Workshop in Troy, Ohio.

He has taught fine art at *San Jose State University*, in California; *the University of Massachusetts, Amherst*; *the University of North Carolina, Greensboro*; *Rutgers University, Newark*; *Hunter College, New York*; *Cornell University*; *Graduate School of Pratt Institute*; *Parsons School of Design*, in New York City, and *Amherst College*.

His international exhibitions include venues in Austria, Bulgaria, China, Denmark, Germany, Hong Kong, Lithuania, Poland, and the United Arab Emirates. Mr. McCalebb's art has also been exhibited in numerous galleries and museums in the United States. These venues include the *Stephen Wirtz Gallery*, San Francisco; *San Francisco Museum of Art*; the *San Jose Museum of Art*, San Jose, California; *Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth*, Texas; and the *Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art*, Ithaca, New York. In New York City he has exhibited at: *Momenta Art*, *Spencer Brownstone Gallery*, *Woodward Gallery*, *The New Museum*, *Exit Art*, *Artist Space*, *Art in General*, *Socrates Sculpture Park*, *Sculpture Now, Inc.*, and *The Studio Museum in Harlem*.



In 1993 he was a featured artist in the film: *"Manhattan City Scape,"* by Steen Møller Rasmussen, a *Plagiet Film*, produced in cooperation with the *Danish Film Institute Workshop*. And in 1981, he was invited by the artist to appear in the film *"Bearden Plays Bearden,"* produced by the *Philip Morris Corporation*.

In 2000, Mr. McCalebb's sculpture was featured in the historic *"Welded Sculpture of the Twentieth Century"* exhibition at the *Neuberger Museum of Art*, Purchase New York. This exhibition featured all the major contributors to the genre, including Julio González, Pablo Picasso, Anthony Caro, and David Smith. Also in 2000 he was honored as a *"Visiting Critic"* at the international artist colony Art/Omi, in Upstate New York, for which he wrote a paper and led a discussion on the topic: *"Vernacular Color: Reflections on National, Ethnic, and Gender Expression."*

In May, 2001, he traveled to The Peoples Republic of China, and lectured at the *China National Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou*, Hangzhou China, and at *Hangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Hangzhou University of Teaching*, Hangzhou China.

In April, 2003, Mr. McCalebb was one of the artists representing the United States at the *Sharjah International Arts Biennial*, in the United Arab Emirates. He also lectured at *American University of Sharjah, School of Architecture and Design*, Sharjah, United Arab Emirates.

In the summer of 2005, he did a series of public sculpture projects for: *"Process – Space" Festival 2005*. Balchik, Bulgaria, *Folk-05*, *Galleri Lista Fyr*, Borhaug, Norway, and *The First Alytus Biennial*, Alytus, Lithuania.

In 2008 he was commissioned for a large-scale public sculpture by the: *Shanghai Zendai Museum of Modern Art* for the *Intrude: Art and Life 366* exhibition.

In 2008 Howard McCalebb established a working studio and (*Kunstraum*) *Dada Post* in Berlin, Germany.

**Dada Post, Nordbahnstrasse 10, 13409 Berlin, Germany**  
**[www.dadapost.com](http://www.dadapost.com)**