

“Writing on Water: Extensions of Text (and Teaching) onto Landscape”

—Clark Lunberry—

Once the rudiments of our language have been more or less learned, its users often forget the prolonged and arduous process that was involved in acquiring that language. Consequently, the internal complexities of language’s day-to-day maintenance and functioning go largely unexamined. In other words, like a reasonably well-tuned automobile, our language is frequently taken for granted, as it is used (and abused) without being considered closely, its “machinery” hidden from view, humming away, but without much scrutiny or second-guessing applied to it.

The creative writing courses that I have taught during the past two spring semesters have been designed to redress and partially remedy the complacency and neglect that often arises in our use of language. For, if language is a bit like the automobile evoked above, my classes have offered an opportunity for its users to slow down, pull over to the side of the road, look under the hood, examine up-close the very machinery that allows for the motion...the meaning...to occur.

Two recent poetry installations on the pond in front of UNF’s Thomas G. Carpenter Library, undertaken in conjunction with these courses, offer examples of this kind of “up-close” examination of language. In these classes, the students and I were together presented with the challenge of imagining alternative forms of text, alternative means and methods—other than upon paper or computer screen—of inscribing language onto the environment. The poetic and pedagogical repercussions from these projects proved illuminating, as language itself was materially and conceptually re-enlivened, re-imagined as liquid resonance, as floating form.

Writing on Water: A Slow-Growth Poem

“With words-in-freedom we will have: Condensed metaphors. Telegraphic images. Maximum vibrations. Nodes of thought. Closed or open fans of movement. Compressed analogies.

Color Balances. Dimensions, weights, measures, and the speed of sensations.

The plunge of the essential word into the water of sensibility...”

-Filippo Marinetti, *Futurist Manifesto*

To date, there have been three different “writing on water” installations completed on and around the pond of UNF’s Thomas G. Carpenter Library: “Water On Water” (2007); “Murmur of Words / Murmur of Wounds” (2008); and now, in 2009, the third installation which is currently in place. When first conceived, this project was largely hypothetical and theoretical, proposed—almost on a whim—as a part of a course that I was teaching on concrete and visual poetry, its history and applications. However, once the idea for such a project was presented, it seemed that its implementation had to be attempted, even if it were finally to fail.

What wasn’t realized at the time (nor could it have been) was that, with this first “writing on water” project, we—my students and I—had apparently begun something that would remain on-going and that the initial installation would be only the opening line of a continuing poem, one that would be added to incrementally and over a long period of time. Yes, this was to be the beginning of a poem written very, very slowly (and very, very largely—made of letters 7 ft. by 7 ft., cut from thick plastic sheeting and installed with a kayak), with just a few short lines composed each year. Its development and completion—if there was *to be* a completion—would thus remain essentially unknown, unforeseeable, to all involved, with perhaps a year or so separating—as if marked by tree rings—the added lines of language, ample time taken to conceive with care the words annually needed for the growing poem. Like empty space left on a page, empty time would be engaged for this poem’s emergence, long stretches when nothing would happen on the pond’s surface, when the water would be water—the previous line of language erased, the next not yet replacing it.

With the completion of this third multi-dimensional/multi-directional installation, the “writing on water” poem has slowly grown into its most recent fluid formation, its next lines now pending:

Water on water

**Murmur of words
Murmur of wounds**

**In liquid light
A violent sight
Remembrance
Floating formless**

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