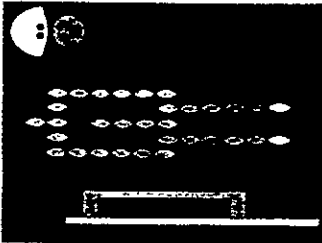


Vilém Flusser on an Unspeakable Future

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* concludes with the statement, "Whatever cannot be spoken about must be silenced." A few paragraphs earlier Wittgenstein writes, "It is true that some matters are unspeakable. These show, they are what is mystical." (I have translated these statements from the German to suit my purpose.) I want to suggest that these ideas are wrong, and that we have to show them to be wrong if we are to understand what is going on right now. For an increasing body of thought that cannot be put into words may now be expressed in other ways,



Tom Radeff, 223, 1987, acrylic on paper, plaster, and wood, 48 x 36".

without anything mystical attached: we are simply learning to use a new type of image to express the thoughts we have that fall into those regions where words fail us.

An early example of this is the nuclear physicist's use of signs that mean atom particles. These signs can be considered images of concepts—"ideograms." We may invent words for them—the word *quark*, for instance—but to use these words is to speak not so much about the concepts of particle atomics as about the signs that mean those concepts. To grasp the

concepts demands learning the signs, and the rules by which they are processed. To talk about them in language is to end up asking questions like, "Are quarks real or are they fictions?" and these are meaningless questions. The concepts, then, are strictly unspeakable. Yet there is obviously nothing mystical about them; they can be submitted to observation and experiment, and may have practical applications in technology.

Apparently complex phenomena may often be reduced to simple structures. Over time, for instance, stones on a mountainside may gradually drift downhill, as if of their own will, but this unpredictable motion can be explained simply as a consequence of the law of gravity. Other phenomena, though, cannot be so reduced, keeping the same degree of complexity however we want to analyze them. The line between sea and shore, whether of a continent or of a tiny island, is as complex on the scale of miles as it is on the scale of millimeters. The same is true of meteorological phenomena, and, in the end, of most of the phenomena of the objective world—including the slow downward movement of stones on a hillside. Today we have found a way to express such phenomena in mathematical equations, and these equations may be fed into computers and shown on video screens as images.

We can invent words to speak about these images, like the word *fractal*, or the words *Mandelbrot monster*. But such terms refer only to the equations and to the pictures; they cannot convey the concepts that the equations and pictures convey. If we want to get at those concepts, we have to learn the mathematical and computer

codes. If not, we end up asking questions like "Does this fractal image look like the Alps because the Alps too have a fractal structure, or because fractal images are able to simulate the structure of the Alps?" Such questions are meaningless. And there is nothing mystical about a fractal image. If it looks like nothing at all, it does so not because it means some mysterious sublime, but because it means an equation.

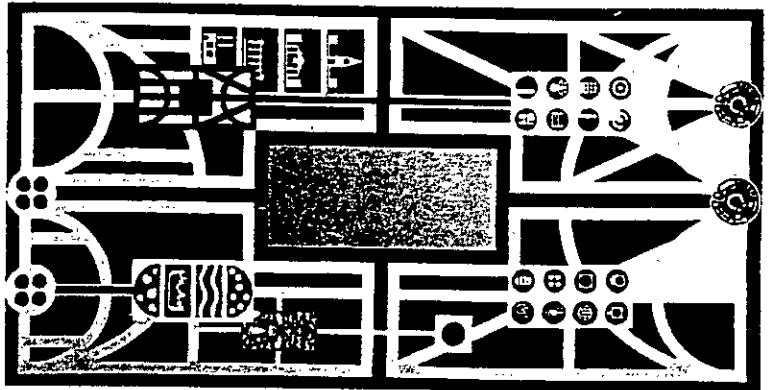
What is happening is that our concepts have advanced beyond the scope of verbal language and we are inventing ever more refined codes to articulate them. In the Mandelbrot monster, these codes are pictorial, and they challenge us to develop a fresh kind of conceptual imagination, as different from verbal thought as mathematical thinking is. Such an imagination would enable us to conceive of a world (and our position therein) that we are incapable of conceiving through speech. This is a formidable challenge, demanding not only that we replace philosophy (a "logical," verbal discourse) with another pictorial method of reflection but also that we sever the link between word and concept that has dominated our thinking ever since the invention of alphabetic writing.

The alphabet's visual encoding of spoken language (letters are visual signs for phonemes) has proved a powerful tool: over history, much of our disciplined conceptual thinking has been encoded in writing. Despite our various visual traditions, I would argue that ours is a logocentric culture (for Heidegger, the word is "the dwelling of Being"), which cherishes the belief that if an idea cannot be expressed verbally it must necessarily be muddled, if indeed, it merits being called an idea at all. And we have amplified the competence of language in poetry and philosophy, also powerful tools. It is due to these that our languages have expanded like gases into the void, and that they have become such refined, exact, beautiful instruments not only for thinking but also for feeling.

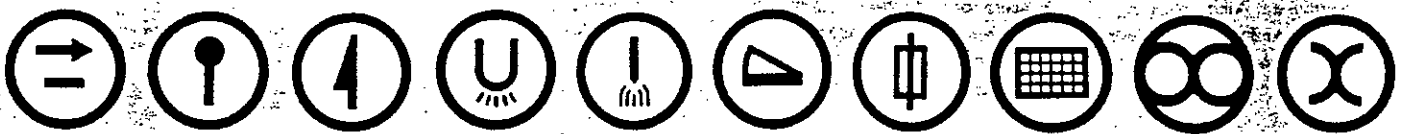
But let us be honest about this: verbal languages have never had total hold upon our thinking. We have always felt that their competence is limited, their universe of meanings finite. The inadequacy of speech is an old theme in Western philosophy and literature, and has been sensed by many visual artists. Mathematicians too have for centuries found equations more articulate in their field than

words. (Try finding words to express $\sqrt{-2}$.) We know that some of our concepts are expressed better in numbers than verbally, and that the objective world demands to be counted as much as to be discussed. This is why our code of writing is called "alphanumeric," containing both letters and numerals.

It's true that numbers have often seemed somehow coincidental with letters, not so much ideograms (images for concepts) as a convenient shorthand—103 instead of a hundred and three. In fact we used to believe that mathematics, the rules of logic, the rules of letters. It has been shown, however, that this is not so (*Principia mathematica*, by Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead)—that thinking in numbers is quite different from thinking in speech. What is happening now is that numbers are leaving the alphanumeric code to branch off into new codes (for example, the digital code), and that an increasing amount of our thinking is being articulated in those new codes and in the images they produce. In an important sense, we are beginning to emancipate ourselves from word languages, and are beginning to exercise a



Matt Mulican, *Untitled*, 1989, wool rug, 11 x 22". Bottom: Tomàs Maldonado, system of symbols for electromedical apparatus, 1962. From Giovanni Anselmi, *Monogrammi e figure*, Florence: La casa Usher, 1981.



new imagination.

This new imagination may even now be observed in the form of a new type of image. Some of these images are produced by people we might call "artists," but most are made by people we would be more likely to call "scientists," or "computer programmers." We need to put such categories aside to understand the newly emerging imagination. We should instead distinguish between two types of

images: those traditional images that imagine situations—loosely speaking, "images of the world"—and those computer visions that imagine thoughts, or "images of thinking." These categories may overlap: pictures from the past will reveal some of the thinking of those who produced them (religious ideas, for instance, in Byzantine mosaics), and in some fractal images we may decipher, say, formations like the Alps. But

this overlap should not confuse us, for the intentions behind these two types of pictures are in fact quite different. The first intention is to publish a personal vision; the second is to express a thought that cannot be expressed in the words of a language. The first type of image wants to be spoken about in order to conceive its meaning. The other type cannot be spoken about because its meaning is beyond words.

If we put aside our traditional ideas of pictures, we may begin to grasp what it is that is happening at present. Art, in a new sense of that term, is beginning, in a new way, to absorb scientific and philosophical discourse, and thus to articulate our most abstract and refined concepts of the world and of our position within it. It is too early to try to define what art may mean in the future, and were we to try, this itself might prove

to be a concept that defied verbal definition. But it may well be that to grasp the new concept of art we will have to look at those new pictures. And one thing may certainly be said at this early stage: those new pictures, and the new imagination they express, is opening up an unspeakable future for us. □

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Border Art Workshop, Columbus Day Performance Intervention, 12 October 1989, Soccer Field, San Diego/Tijuana.
Photo: Bertha Jettur.

Exits and Entrances

Jeff Kelley on Border Art

The Soccer Field is the barren expanse of ground behind Tijuana's oldest neighborhood, Colonia Libertad, where would-be migrants wait in small groups to catch the economic tides that drift back and forth across the Americas. Each day, about an hour before sunset, these *indocumentados* filter down through the neighborhood to gather in the Soccer Field, where they eat, drink, trade information, and await the call to move out beyond the farthest plateau and into the deepest canyon, into a surreal gamescape of fading sunlight and brilliant searchlights, of hovering aircraft, waiting authorities, and workers become fugitives in a zone overrun by an almost desperate legality. The United States Border Patrol has plowed furrows to the north of the Soccer Field deep enough to stop cars if they try to cross, but the combined weight of countless feet has rounded these ditches into ruins, softening the whole of Canyon Emiliano Zapata—an arid complex of gullies, plateaus, and hills for which the Soccer Field is a staging area—into a kind of dusty geopolitical pass. Here, the erosion of borders is less metaphor than fact.

Though the Soccer Field has been appropriated over the years as a kind of neighborhood square by the residents of Colonia Libertad, it is actually a patch of U.S. territory. To enter this place is already to have left Mexico, though one may be prevented from moving any

farther north. As the embarkation site for a migration across the border, the Soccer Field has been described by some North American journalists as a no-man's-land, a DMZ, even as "one square mile of hell." Colonia Libertad has likewise been called a "teeming, reeking slum." Given the range of humanity that passes through it, the Soccer Field is indeed a risky place to be, but one feels more threatened by partying white males in San Diego than by the residents and migrants of Colonia Libertad—which feels more abundant than "teeming," and usually smells like food. It is the poetics of the mass media that involve the substitution of metaphors for the place itself, often from great and lofty distances.

Metaphors hang over the continent like a semiotic haze. They rise from our computer keyboards and never settle, contributing to a media mythology about place from the viewpoint of U.S. self-interest. A dream state, a state dream. But a place comes into art loaded with content, already meaningful, and can embody more than one dream state: it can be a state of menace to the border agent, a state of waiting and hunger to the immigrant, a state of war to the conservative columnist, a state of enterprise to the local taco vendor, a state of irony to the social critic, a state of art to the border artist. A border state of art.

Michael Schnorr, a founding member of the Border Arts Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronteriza, or BAWTAF, has described the Soccer Field as a place where many try to be but no one wants