



THE MIND MADE MATERIAL

by Anne Cross

an essay for *Into the Valley*
a solo exhibition by Marianne Dages

The subject of Marianne Dages's latest work is words and the spaces between them. With an artistic practice that manifests itself variously as image, text, sculpture, and sound, Dages engages language as both form and content, pressing upon and pulling apart the symbolic nature of this familiar system until it buckles and cracks. As a result, she is able to reveal the inherent materiality of written language, suffusing its silent structures with the possibility of new meaning. Bridging the gap between conceptual practice and haptic experience, her work allows us to contemplate the nature of words as both material signs and ephemeral signifiers.

*Objects have such strong feelings // like soreness in the neck **



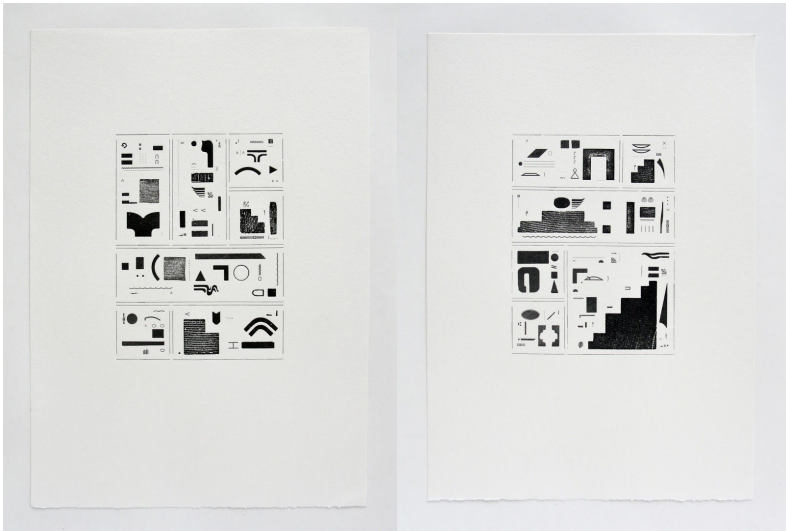
Objects of Unknown Use, letterpress and risograph artist's book, 2017

The primary object of the exhibition is Dages's recent artist's book, *Objects of Unknown Use*, which she published in the spring of 2017. Inspired by her simultaneous readings of three texts – a blog on UFO encounters, a catalogue of the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities, and a translation of the Egyptian Book of the Dead – the artist selected evocative words and phrases from these sources and transformed them through cut-ups and translation. Through these material and conceptual processes, two voices emerge, that of an unfamiliar traveler and its companion *ka*, which serves as both its spiritual twin and life force. As they move through a landscape that is alien to them, the voice of the traveler is both commanding and petitional, narrating their past and future experiences while also seeking some thing that would open their path to a seemingly unbound future.

“Examine all surrounding spirits” // “Tell me, what do you see?”

The words of this unfamiliar traveler seem at once known and unknown to us, describing a subject that is both within and outside our realms of individual and collective consciousness. This connects to Dages's interest in the work of writer William Burroughs and artist Brion Gysin, who proposed that their collaborative experiments with appropriated texts and cut-ups resulted in the creation of an invisible, intangible force that could be likened to a third mind. The poetic third mind that is brought forth by Dages's own aesthetic explorations demonstrates the profundity of the intersections that occur within such chance operations. The direct, almost psychic communications that emerge from the seemingly random order of her process sound like electricity and taste like a hum.

A case of light has fallen on the ground. // Surely someone opened it



Hieroglyphic Silence I & II, letterpress on paper, 2017

Dages's texts are written in English, an alphabetic language based on the general principle not only that the letters represent basic significant sounds of the spoken language, but also that the spaces between the words are where complex meaning resides. Narrative and understanding is constructed through the performance of reading the text from left to right, from the lines above to the ones below, across these bridges that guide the path between one word and another. To make a cut-up text is to disrupt these conditions of grammar, to approach words and the spaces between them as material images with a weight that can be untethered from syntax. To separate a line in a text from its original context is to alter its position in space and time, and therefore our location of its meaning. This sense of dislocation is illustrated in the prints entitled *Hieroglyphic Silence*, in which icons of the Egyptian revival have been integrated into a new, yet indecipherable language. Though these forms are grounded within linear structures that should grant them legibility, they frustrate our impulses at understanding.

The ka came to my house // to interfere with my sequence

Call in.
Call and wake my shadow.
Safe, colorful, dreamer.
Slowly lift the receiver,
I'm going home. [[sinc 400]]
I'm going to last forever. [[sinc 1400]]
When we saw the gray,
we fled to the mountains.
A single thought, filled our minds.
a thought about a window, and a pulley. [[sinc 300]]
Filled our hearts like wind. [[sinc 400]]
What, did it mean? [[sinc 1200]]
There have been several unsuccessful attempts
to scan me.
Silent hovers.
Janitors with binocular brooms. [[sinc 400]]
I watch back.
The cow watches too. [[sinc 300]]
Thick with empty dreams. [[sinc 600]]
I remove a small bone from my foot.
I'll plow this under later, in the arrow fields.

A screenshot of the text used to generate the voice of Project KA

Cut-ups force us to consider words and the spaces between them as fragile aesthetic gestures. The pages and folds and threads and glue that bind the book together are now tensile structures, capable of being drawn out until they collapse in multiple locations and timelines that exist at once. Suddenly the reader's experience and ability to supply the appropriate meaning that completes the word or phrase is contingent on an essential arbitrariness. As a result, we are forced to question the systemic organization of our epistemologies, the very governance of our understanding. In *Project KA*, a sound piece and reading of *Objects of Unknown Use*, we listen to the recorded sound of the traveler's voice and feel a certain melancholy not only for this being who remains lost, but also for our own loss of security in words. And yet we still read and listen to the narrative of the unfamiliar traveler and its ka and try desperately to locate ourselves beside and within this third mind, unable to fully reconcile our sense of instability.

Today I am known // I become the landscape's familiar



Left: Language of the Birds, book pages on board, 2018
Right: Grey Theatres, photograph on aluminum, 2004-2018

In Dages's work the letters of our alphabetic language are akin to hieroglyphs, which can simultaneously exist as word and image. Her images of Hieroglyphic Silence and glimpses of birds out of the corner of the eye in *Language of the Birds* are yet further visual equivalents for the mind's experience of trying to construct meaning within these collections of lines and spaces. Though these partial views are lacking, if we close our eyes, we can feel the shift in the air within our periphery and more fully understand the volume of nothingness, silence, and spaces.

Did you feel the tremblings and emittances // the waves of Great Breath?



Earthly Vehicle, Treasures of Tutankhamun the height of the artist, 2018

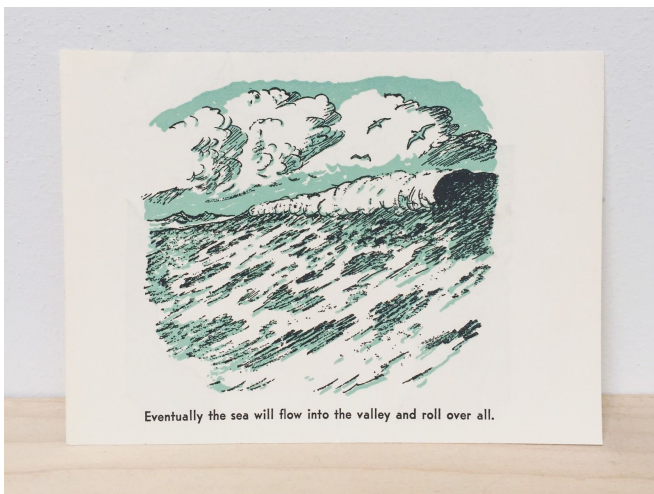
Into the Valley importantly extends this sense of a third mind existing in the space between words, in the folds between pages, between image as sign and as signifier, by bringing it into the gallery space and giving material form to the conceit of Dages's book. In *Eventually the Sea...*, a mylar layering of prophetic words is imposed over an image of a cresting wave, igniting the understanding that transparent structures, and the superimposition of language over images through culture, is a central concern. *Grey Theatres*, a photograph of an empty storefront window containing only an empty plastic box and the artist's reflection, articulates the corporeality of the void. Meanwhile, *Earthly Vehicle*, a stack of *Treasures of Tutankhamun* exhibition catalogs that measure the height of the artist, is nothing less than a body of words whose sinuous, serpentine form we must transverse around, as their pages buckle under their own weight. These are words that enter our space and interrupt our proprioception, as the language of ancient mysticism and the divine body of a young boy are made into populist American culture – kitsch.

*Tell me of my figures // covered in earth //
their feet and eyes missing // like composite sphinxes*



Eventually the sea...detail, letterpress on plasticized paper and mylar, 2018

The title of the exhibition derives from a found object, a children's book illustration that the artist cut out, divorcing it from its material origins and intended context. Depicting a wave as it draws back before breaking over the sea, its caption reads "Eventually the sea will flow into the valley and roll over all." This source of inspiration highlights the artist's interest in the valleys and folds and cuts of our material world, and the submersion of these meaningful spaces. These are the places where kings are buried. What exists in these folds, these silences, these spaces between words, then, is nothing less than a place where words are merely objects of unknown use.



Found page cut from a children's book

* Excerpts from *Objects of Unknown Use*, found throughout the essay.

About the Author: Anne Cross is a Philadelphia-based art historian, writer, and curator. She is a third year PhD student in Art History at the University of Delaware, where her research focuses primarily on photography and print culture of the long nineteenth century. Her dissertation, currently in progress, explores the publication of remediating images of atrocity in the nineteenth-century American illustrated mass press. In 2017 Anne received a CASVA Predoctoral Fellowship to support her research on the transnational histories of racism and its impact on contemporary artistic practice in South Africa. Anne received her BA from NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study in 2009, and her Master's degree in 2013 from the Institute of Fine Arts at NYU. Prior to attending the University of Delaware, she served as the Luce Fellow in American Prints at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In addition to her academic work, Anne curates and writes about contemporary art in the Philadelphia area.



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