

Asemic — between drawing and writing

Project report, April, 2024



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Introduction

Asemic writing comprises a vast variety of artistic practices in the fields of visual poetry, fine arts and calligraphy. The term itself was coined by Tim Gaze and Jim Leftwich, themselves avid asemic poets, in 1997.

Asemic writing is defined as a form of graphic expression deploying letter-like structures without conventionally fixed semantic meaning. It can be found in many different variations ranging from the expressive gestural to the systematic typographical. The artistic potential of asemic writing lies in its opposition to conventional forms of writing. As such, it acts as a poetic subversion questioning essential aspects both of writing and reading.

In its chirographic manifestations, asemic writing can be seen as an abstracted form of calligraphy, even though it often deliberately disregards the notion of *beauty* that defines calligraphy (from the Greek words *kallos*, “beauty” and *graphein*, “to write”). Many asemic artists have been influenced by Chinese and Japanese calligraphic practice, since in these cultures, handwriting and the aesthetic aspects of it enjoy a higher status than in our Western situation. Furthermore, due to historical and material development, the distinction between writing and painting, between content and form is less strictly defined, and as such, more akin to the transition from conventional to non-conventional forms that constitutes asemic practice.

In recent years asemic writing has gained popularity as a medium of artistic expression. This may be largely due to the anti-elitist and democratic nature of asemic writing, both in its production and its perception.

Research subjects

In his seminal text “Asemic. The Art of Writing”, Peter Schwenger is mainly concerned with fine arts and visual poetry. On the contrary, in the current discourses in graphic design practice and education, asemic writing is very much absent. This project aims to (re-)introduce asemic writing as a relevant opposition to the making of conventional letterforms, unifying the often conceptually distinct disciplines of drawing and writing.

This investigation is conducted within the context of my own practice as a type designer, researcher and educator. In relation to the first, asemic writing provides the antidote to the rational, systematic and often commercially driven activity of designing typefaces. In relation to the latter, the mentioned practices widen the educational possibilities by introducing unrestrained, direct and gestural expression to students of graphic design. As such, it adds both to the field of knowledge within the professional as well as to the pedagogical field.

Knowledge of the fundamentals of handwriting is considered crucial in graphic design education. This is reflected in the curricula employed at many educational institutions in the field of graphic design, type design and typography. At the Oslo National Academy of the Arts this is exemplified by exposing BA students to handwriting and calligraphy in the first year of training.

Introducing asemic writing as an accessible, unrestrained form of mark-making proved to be of great benefit in teaching fundamental aspects of visual design. Historically this can be observed in André Gürtler’s book “Experiments with Letterforms and Calligraphy” and Martin Andersch “Symbols, Signs and Letters”. Both these publications show that asemic practices (even though not termed as such) were integral part in graphic design education in the second half of the 20th century. Both Gürtler and Andersch place asemic techniques before introducing students to conventional (and eventually calligraphic) letterforms. This is done in order to explore the expressive potential of written shapes, yet also to develop a graphic sensibility for flow and rhythm, consistency and variation, accentuation and emphasis. By teaching the fundamentals of gestural mark-making and the formal aspects of tool handling, students gain greater awareness of the foundations needed in the production of graphic signs.

In this project the relevance and potential of asemic writing is explored regarding physical aspects of graphic production often

lost in a commercially driven design practice. This is done by employing expressive, improvisational and performative elements of mark-making beyond the constraints of conventional letterforms.

Beyond that, this project also investigates the subversive potential of asemic practices in opposition to the persisting ideology of legibility, transparency and comprehensibility deeply embedded into modernist design thinking.

Research methods

The topic of asemic writing was been investigated regarding its historical and conceptual context as well as its relevance for practice-based artistic research and education in graphic design.

Historical investigations

Historically asemic writing has been practiced by many poets, artists and calligraphers. A distinction should be made between work that has been done after the introduction of the term “asemic writing” and work that has been coined “asemic” after the fact. Peter Schwenger emphasizes “three asemic ancestors”. Taking the asemic works of Henri Michaux, Roland Barthes and Cy Twombly as examples for asemic work produced *avant-la-lettre*, he consecutively examines asemic writing as a well established art form present in 20th and early 21st century fine arts and visual poetry.

An important influence in this project was the consideration of Chinese and Japanese calligraphy within the context of asemic writing. Especially the reflections and works of the *Bokujinkai* (“The People of the Ink”), a group of Japanese avantgarde calligraphers were formative not only conceptually but also in the practice-based investigations.

Beyond that, the historical survey of asemic writing has been extended to more unconventional areas. Amongst those, the connection of asemic writing with prehistoric mark-making and the formal affinity with graffiti and tagging culture proved to be fertile areas of exploration.

Conceptual investigations

The conceptual contextualisation of this project happened in parallel to the practice-based investigations described below.

A literature and practice review was conducted in order to gain knowledge of the existing theoretical, practical and historical

(see above) discourse on asemic writing. As part of this, research trips to London and Metz helped to get an insight into current issues present in artistic practices as well as in the dissemination of historical material. Amongst these museum and gallery visits the exhibition on William Kentridge's work at the Royal Academy London and the exhibition «Writing is Drawing» at the Centre Pompidou-Metz stand out as especially relevant.

During the research trip to London I also had the opportunity to meet and converse with British poet and expert on visual poetry Steven J Fowler, who shared his views, knowledge and perspectives on asemic writing as a poetic and artistic practice. This exchange set the basis for further collaboration in the form of a lecture and a workshop, as described below.

A number of concepts arose from these initial surveys, readings and discussions.

Breaking the formal activity of writing down to its fundamental aspects, the term mark-making proved appropriate to convey the primordial aspect of graphic communication. Closely related to this notion is the mental activity of meaning-making, both in the production of signs and in their reading.

The establishing of formal conventions lie at the core of writing and form the base for its communal function. In asemic writing it is the questioning of traditional modes of sign production that is emphasised. It bares written communication of its conventional baggage and reveals the fundamental mechanisms (both physically and mentally) at work. In this process of unlearning how to write (and, conversely on the side of the audience, read) in accord with established conventions, asemic writing gains its powerful potential as a medium of artistic expression.

Another core concept growing from the mentioned surveys was the affordance of tools and materials. In this context, affordance indicates not only the possibilities of usage, but also the inherent formal qualities materials and tools produce and hence the expressions that arise.

The above mentioned reflections culminated in a series of models and diagrams (described in further detail below). These models also informed the practical investigations executed within this project.

Practice-based investigations

Practical investigations have been conducted in a multitude of formats.

Individual research in the form of informal sketching and visual ideation lead to works referring various historical manifestations of asemic writing. The scope of these ranged from long form visual poems to larger scale artworks, as can be found in the fine arts and calligraphic tradition of both Eastern and Western emanation. In contrast to these gestural, expressive works, another body of works utilised a more systematic, typographic approach. These graphic explorations were done not only to develop the somatic skills necessary but also to understand the historical context of and the artistic intentions behind asemic writing.

Practical investigations were also done in collaboration and exchange with fellow researcher Maziar Raein. As part of the Artistic Research Week 2023 a series of assignment-based writing exercises (in reference to Brian Eno's and Peter Schmidt's "Oblique Strategies") was employed. A set of instructions would dictate the formal aspects and artistic intentions of the asemic work produced. Staged as a writing performance in the *Resepsjonsgalleriet* at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, this event lead to interesting interaction with the audience. The reoccurring question of "What is this?" eventually lead to the presentation title "Asemic what?" used on later occasions. Part of the performance was the simultaneous installation of the exhibition showcasing the in-situ produced artworks.

This hybrid mode of performance and exhibition was reused at a later stage at the Artistic Research week 2024. Here a slideshow with a variety of asemic works produced during the project period formed the third element. In addition, the staged writing performance culminated in an exhibition of the produced asemic works. These works made an illustrative attempt at translating the sound, meaning, word shape or association of a (random) word from Merriam Webster's online dictionary into asemic writing.

Pedagogical investigations

An extension of the practical investigation was the implementation of asemic techniques as a method of teaching the fundamentals of writing and letterforms within the Graphic Design and Illustration curriculum at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts.

As mentioned above, the understanding of handwriting — and calligraphy as an extension of it — formed (and still form) the basis of education in typographic design. By theoretically and practically introducing the essential interconnection of tools, gestures (ductus) and letterforms, students are engaging with historical letter models and their evolutionary lineage. As such, fundamental principles of rhythm, consistency, composition, tension and emphasis are experienced through practical application rather than presented as imposed concepts.

Paradoxically — considering its counter-conventional intention — the practice of asemic writing has proven to be enormously beneficial in developing an awareness of the above mentioned fundamentals. By removing the pressure of reproducing conventional letterforms often heavily laden with historical earnestness, students gain a formal freedom that enables unrestrained exploration of the interplay of tools and gestures.

This is further enhanced by techniques of alienation and defamiliarisation by introducing unconventional tools, both industrially pre-made as well as self-made and found. Combined with rule- and assignment-based writing activities, students are encouraged to rethink and question preconceived notions of writing and letterforms. By treating writing as an evolutionary extension of drawing the unnecessary awe — that often is blocking progress in conventional calligraphic exercises — is diminished.

Insights, reflections and perspectives

This section briefly outlines some of the insights and reflections that emerged during the theoretical and practical research. Furthermore, these issues are assessed regarding future research which will help to gain a deeper knowledge of some of the key aspects of asemic writing.

Within this project a conceptual model was employed that served as an analytical tool not only in examining asemic writing, but also to position other forms of graphic expressions. All mark-making — from prehistoric scratches to digital typography — exists in a triangulation of tools, gestures and conventions. The term *tools* describes the implements and materials involved in the production of visual marks; *gestures* designate the manual activity and (psycho-)somatic intention necessary in the mark-making process; *conventions* are the communally defined and culturally dictated formal norms that render some marks legible and others illegible. The interplay of these three aspects organises the conceptual and

formal scope of possibilities of mark-making within a specific cultural and historical context.

As initially stated, asemic writing exists only in its opposition to conventional forms of writing. By removing both the formal and semantic requirements, asemic writing gives access to an experience of pure interaction of gestures and tools. As such, it offers an opportunity to gain insight into the nature of mark-making beyond the constraints of conventions.

This removal also takes away the burden of skills that is often attached to calligraphy as a creative discipline. This is especially present in the teaching of letterforms, where the threshold of entry is kept intact by arbiters of judgment of so-called “standards” and the notion of “correct” forms. In contrast to this attitude, asemic writing acts as a democratic and anti-elitist art form actively fighting these residual ideology from days past. Everybody can produce, read and appreciate asemic art. Here, a social agenda emerges similar to the programmatic introduction of abstract art at the beginning of the 20th century.

Also in its perception a parallel can be made with abstract art, both in its pre- and post-war manifestations. In asemic writing it is the form that we read. In the absence of semantic meaning we fall back on the bare experience of the material and formal qualities of the graphic marks and their compositional relationships. Within these marks, the signified and the signifier collapse into one experiential singularity.

In the perception of asemic writing the *reader* is confronted with the arbitrariness of communicatory processes. The acts of comprehension and deciphering are revealed as constructed (learned) intellectual abilities. Furthermore, it uncovers the mechanism of in- and exclusion that are at work in any human communication.

This process of unlearning conventions, of defamiliarisation (as applied to poetic language by Viktor Shklovsky) as an artistic intention — both in making, analysing and reading — is what in consecutive research will be coined «Asemic Strategies».

What started out as assignment-based writing exercises in order «to trick oneself» into asemic production mode by circumnavigation our internal priming of conventional signs, will be extended into a more extensive exploration of the coding, decoding,

un-coding and re-coding of visual mark-making. As such, future research will be conducted in order to uncover the mechanics of visual cognition and re-cognition and to confront the ideology of legibility that is the modernist idiom with a world that is quintessentially asemic.

Documentation and dissemination

Research conducted within this projects was documented and publicly disseminated in various ways and media, both formal and informal.

References in literature and online media have been gathered. These resources formed the basis for the theoretical reflections around asemic writing, its history, practice and relevance in the context of contemporary art, design and education. In addition, an image collection has been assembled to further contextualise both the theoretical research as well as the practical output of the project.

Sketch books played an essential part in exploring the visual language of asemic writing. These spontaneous scribbles have in a later stage been selected, retouched and presented as a video work showcasing a vast variety of expressions within the realm of asemic writing.

After an initial phase of contextual research (see above), a first performance showcasing asemic writing as an artistic practice has been given at the Artistic Research Week at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts in January 2023 (Img. 1-2).

In October 2023 the project was presented as part of the Design Talks series at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts. For this occasion British poet Steven J Fowler was invited, who further contextualised the practice of asemic writing. This was followed by a one-day workshop held by Steven J Fowler for a group of BA and MA students from the department of Graphic Design and Illustration. Both the lecture and workshop have been documented extensively in the form of image and video material (Img. 3-6).

In November 2023 a condensed version of the above mentioned lecture was held at the Encontro de Tipografia, an annual gathering of practitioners and educators in the field of typography in Lisbon. The presentation files for these lectures also act as documentation of the assessed material.

The Artistic Research Week 2024 at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts gave another opportunity to showcase the ongoing research. The event taking place at the reception area consisted of three elements; a video showcasing results of asemic work accumulated in sketch books throughout the project period; a five hour live writing performance done on-site resulting in; an exhibition of the works produced (Img. 7-9)

Finally, asemic writing was employed in a lecture and workshop held for a group of students from the Kunsthøgskolen i Østfold, who visited the Oslo National Academy of the Arts in February 2024 (Img. 10).

The research outcomes have been registered in the database of CRISTIN (Current Research Information System in Norway) and KHIODA (Oslo National Academy of the Arts' Digital Archive).

As an extension of the conducted research, theoretical reflections and practical outcomes will be gathered in a forthcoming publication entitled "Asemic Strategies".

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Image documentation



Img. 1



Img. 2



Img. 4



Img. 3



Img. 5



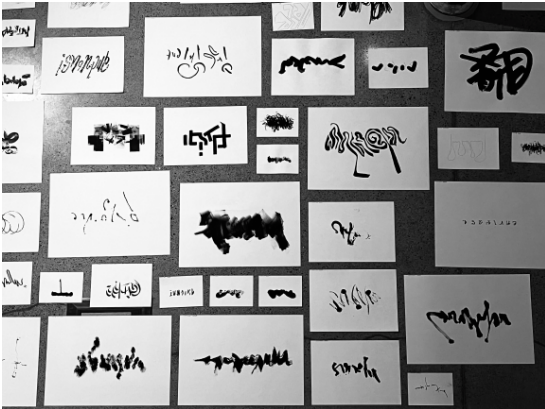
Img. 6



Img. 7



Img. 8



Img. 9



Img. 10