

VERSO / RECTO

A TWO-SIDED MEDITATION ON LANGUAGE AND IMAGE.

“GINNY COOK: SHORTHAND”

By Kim Schoen

My mother took shorthand. I remember seeing its cryptic symbols in light pencil on notes around the house. My mother was a secretary. Taking shorthand has, in the last century, typically been the province of stenographers and secretaries—in short: the province of women.

Shorthand was created to capture the speed of speech. Evidence of its practice has been found in the remains of Ancient Egypt and Greece; several centuries later Marcus Tullius Tiro invented “Tironian notes” so as to capture the speeches of Cicero. “Because letters are signs for spoken sounds, an alphabetic text is a score for an audible performance: it makes sounds visible.” Shorthand, also called phonography (sound writing), is a kind of condensed version of this score—for example, eliminating vowels when consonants do fine on their own, or employing geometric symbols and modified strokes to allow the hand and mind to move faster. But when a person not versed in shorthand looks at shorthand, the signs unravel into that which they are—lines. These lines remind us of the essentially abstract qualities of letters when untethered from sound.

The shock of looking at writing that we do not understand is returned to us via the dead letter. When signs become mute, we are thrown back into a state of imagistic perception—letters become lines become images. This process of abstraction is what is returned to us via the drawings of Ginny Cook.

Above all, shorthand was created to be “swift.” (from Timothie Bright’s 1588 *Characterie: An Arte of Shorte, Swifte and Secrete Writing by Character*). Shorthand aims for speed. It is a kind of note-taking, or notation. Vilem Flusser, in his chapter “Notation” from the book *Does Writing Have A Future?*, positions notational writing in contrast to inscription in order to describe differences in modes of thought in relation to temporality:

“Inscriptions are laborious, slow, and therefore considered writings. They are monuments (monere: “to consider”). Notes are writings thrown in passing onto surfaces with the intention of instructing a reader by means of a message. They are documents (docere: “to teach”). Inscriptions are monumental, notations are documentary.” Flusser’s message is that technologies affect consciousness—and vice versa. To notate one uses a different technology than to inscribe. A quill operates differently than a chisel. Quills enable speed. Shorthand privileges speed. Speed privileges forward motion, with its conceptual ties to progress. And this speed operates on our consciousness.

[...] As long as people wrote inscriptions, slowly, with effort and consideration, the madness of historically structured thought remained hidden....But with notation, progress began to accelerate. Now it is racing. Historical consciousness only really got going with notation...”. Cook takes the notational and returns it to the monumental. In her act of drawing the act of note-taking, the process of writing slows down, becomes something other than writing. The hand (holding the pencil lead) has to cease its forward progress, and go back and forth, back and forth, with the effort—not to notate, or denote—but to fill in a line. As she enlarges these shorthand notations, her drawings become tenderly comic—the inscription growing slightly estranged through this scale-shift, and

awkward through the enforced temporal shift. Cook reverses the intention of shorthand. She intends slowness. There is a labored quality to the drawings, the pencil markings calling to mind the ruts of a chisel in stone.

“Progress carries us along with it, but we continually bob up above it so as not to completely lose contact with reality; so as not to become completely progressive, mad.” There is a reason that writing is often breathless, as we chase our thoughts forward. The madness of the rush of linearity has led us many places—some of which we now inhabit with dread and unease. Cook returns us to the state of imagistic perception, through the detour of language. To take the time with these translations means to inhabit a time of looking that—perhaps—works against the continuous and accelerating linearity we are swept up in.

* All quotes from Vilem Flusser, *Does Writing Have A Future?* (Translated by Nancy Ann Roth), Minnesota Press, 2011