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SPELLING GRATITUDE: AN AESTHETIC EXPLORATION

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

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Confidently, Courageously, Hopefully: An Introduction

As students are invited into the nestled campus of Scripps College, they pass through an archway marked by the words of the college's founder, Ellen Browning Scripps. She asks for students to go forth "Confidently. Courageously. Hopefully." As I pass through this gateway on nearly a daily basis, it is rare that I take the time to reread this quote, as I am sure is the case for many, and yet these three words are known by all who attend the college. The phrase is surely inspiring as one meditates on these foundational words, yet the meaning developed for me even further when I left the comfort of the campus to study abroad in Denmark in the Spring of 2011. Enrolled in the course at the Danish Institute for Study Abroad, entitled "Positive Psychology," I was confident, courageous, and hopeful as I took on the challenges and opportunities of the experience abroad.

Positive Psychology began to resonate and shape my understanding of the world. This young and developing field suddenly substantiated understandings of happiness and positivity in a realm too often dominated by the abnormality and deficits of human functioning. This shift in the discipline, in many ways headed by the President of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman, demonstrated precisely what the material suggests: positivity and the development of optimal functioning is accessible through perspective and awareness. With class lectures on the science of hope and the pillars of positivity, I was reminded of the insights of my college's founder. Positivity was encouraged for all students as a component of the mission of the school: "Confidently. Courageously. Hopefully."

As my explorations developed I was soon versed in the many modes of positivity put forth by the psychological research and development. Gratitude, the sense of thankfulness, remained potent in my understandings. As I returned Stateside with a renewed sense of investment in positivity as a valid mode of moving through our current context, my explorations into the field itself continued. As a double major in Art and Psychology, I have come to realize the fusion of the two

disciplines is inextricable. I constantly develop ideas and projects in relation to my own psyche and the communal psychology in which I function. For this project, the fusion once again is apparent as I work to borrow concepts from the field of positive psychology to inform the development of my own aesthetic investigation of gratitude and positivity with the aim of emphasizing the subtle shift in awareness that is a necessary component in the transition towards the upward spiral of positivity. In the current sociopolitical context marked by unequal opportunity, deficits in human rights, war zones, the stress of the dollar, and innumerable other aspects of our local and global society which point towards a negative perspective, the subtle activism of engaging with positivity has an, often untapped, currency.

In the domain of contemporary art, the opportunities are endless as an artist navigates what their own talents and interpretations of context are in developing what they articulate in their work. It is my prerogative to use the tools I have developed in my study of studio art as a mode to communicate and make salient the experience of gratitude as I explore my own personal understanding through the work itself. The mode in which I choose to explore gratitude aesthetically is through language. While textual language has been present in the visual arts for centuries, it is contemporary art practices that identify and enable the use of language as subject, working to investigate both the form and the content as constructed by the word. Centering language as subject removes the rigidity from the text, yielding fluidity in expression and communication. Contemporary art's use of language illuminates the experience of gratitude as highlighted in the implicit meaning of the subject. It is my intent to explore the use of language as a valid means of crafting a personal and communal exploration of gratitude through the visual and experiential qualities of art. Just as instructed as I first entered Scripps College, I aim to do so "confidently, courageously, and hopefully."

Gratitude in Theory: The Positive Psychological Framework

Recently, the field of positive psychology has begun to blossom. Positive psychology is the study of optimal human functioning and works towards

understanding, defining, measuring and fostering happiness instead of identifying deficits, as is the tradition in psychology. It works to foster flourishing in people, groups, and institutions. While the seminal ideas that construct the field are not new, the current resurgence of positive psychology is in reaction to the overwhelming imbalance in psychology, which favors disorder and deficits over ability.¹ This imbalance has been prevalent for a reason. Negative emotions and events tend to be more salient to the human psyche, therefore the number of good events must outnumber that of the bad in order to ensue a positive affect. Specifically, according to Marcial Losada's nonlinear dynamics model that charts positivity and its affect on flourishing, for every negative event, there should be 2.9 positive events to produce optimal functioning.² Positive psychology aims to operationalize concepts like this one in order to promote flourishing. As Barbra Fredrickson explores the power of positivity, she states "'feeling good' does far more than signal the absence of threats. It can transform people for the better, making them more optimistic, resilient and socially connected."³ Positivity is both personal and relational, making it a valuable pursuit for both individuals and communities.

In another vein of Fredrickson's work, she defines the *broaden-and-build theory*, which showcases how, while a negative affect narrows an individual's cognitive experience to a mode of fight or flight, positivity broadens their mental scope, fostering flexibility and investigation while simultaneously building their psychological resources.⁴ This theory points to the ability to cultivate positivity as one begins to engage in such a perspective. However, this growth, as indicated by the saliency of negative thoughts and experiences, often times must be learned. In contrast to his own theory of *learned helplessness*, which suggests that depressive behavior is related to the perceived loss of control and efficacy in daily situations,

¹ Shelly L. Gable and Jonathan Haidt, "What (and Why) Is Positive Psychology?" Review of General Psychology 2005: 103-110.

² Barbra L. Fredrickson and Marcial F. Losada, "Positive Affect and the Complex Dynamics of Human Flourishing," American Psychologist October 2005: 678-686.

³ Barbara L. Fredrickson, "The Value of Positive Emotions: The emerging science of positive psychology is coming to understand why it's good to feel good," American Scientist 2003: 330-335. Pg. 334

⁴ Barbara L. Fredrickson and Marcial F. Losada, p. 679.

Martin Seligman developed the positive psychological model of *learned optimism*. This theory examines how our perception and communication of events leads us to derive a related affect. Explanatory styles are the informants as to how an individual experiences the event. The distinction is made between optimistic and pessimistic explanatory styles and their relative affect on the perception of the future and on the lived state.⁵ Learned optimism is possible through the refining of an optimistic explanatory style. Language becomes central to this self-understanding as well as the communication of events. The mode of communicating felt experience is refined even further in the specific exploration of gratitude, yet another form of a positive psychological intervention.

Gratitude is a familiar word. To most, and according to Merriam-Websters.com, it is a noun that means “the state of being grateful; thankfulness”.⁶ However, in psychology this definition becomes slightly more complex. Clinically, it is “the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself; it is a general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation.”⁷ But gratitude can be defined in a multitude of ways. For instance, if it is an emotional state it could be defined as “an attribution-dependent state that results from two stages of information processing: (a) recognizing that one has obtained a positive outcome; and (b) recognizing that there is an external source for this positive outcome.”⁸ It has also been contextualized as a trait, an internal feature that can be nurtured and fostered, producing the temporal emotional state. The goal within the framework of positive psychology is to identify the characteristics of that trait and foster them. Through positive psychological interventions, these aspects can be developed.

Evidence shows the positive psychological interventions increase physical and psychological well-being⁹, as well as improves ability to build and maintain meaningful

⁵ Karen Reivich and Jane Gillham, “Learned optimism: The Measurement of Explanatory Style,” Positive Psychology Assessment 2003:57-74.

⁶ Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2011. 5 October, 2011. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gratitude>.

⁷ Randy A. Sansone and Lori A. Sansone, “Gratitude and Well-Being: The Benefits of Appretiation,” Psychiatry 11 November 2010: 18-22. p.18

⁸ Jeffery J. Froh, William J. Sefick, Robert A. Emmons, “Counting blessings in early adolescents: An experimental study of gratitude and subject well-being,” Journal of School Psychology 2008: 213-233. p. 215.

⁹R.A. Emmons and M.E. McCullough, The psychology of gratitude: An Introduction, New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press, 2004. pp. 3-16.

relationships.¹⁰ Specifically though, gratitude interventions are found to increase overall life satisfaction, optimism, vitality, agreeableness, extraversion, openness, and positive emotions while decreasing symptoms of depression, envy, neuroticism, and the frequency of negative emotions.¹¹ These benefits are found to be additive to the human experience as well as working to prevent and subdue felt deficits in the human experience. Even as the specificity seems individualized, the impact ripples beyond the singular person. It is beneficial for both individuals and society since the expression and experience of gratitude has a positive effect on personal and relational well-being. Gratitude empowers the self and reinforces the community in which the individual finds him or herself, yielding the potential to improve the positive affect of many more than just the individual experiencing the feeling of thankfulness.¹²

In comparison to other positive psychological interventions, gratitude enhancement yields the highest retention rate of the intervention over long periods of time, making it a valuable mode of fostering flourishing.¹³ There are many forms of improving gratitude in applied positive psychology. Interventions range from gratitude journaling, in which the individual writes about things that he or she is grateful for, writing a letter to a person the individual is thankful for, prayer (if religious), saying “thank you” with sincerity, and meditating on present moments with thankfulness.¹⁴ It is evident that more often than not these interventions are founded in language as a mode of expressing the abstraction of the felt experience of gratitude. Much of the process is in the active and overt articulation of the under-expressed emotion. While language unifies the modes of promoting gratitude there are distinctions between the applied concepts. The specificity of using an intervention that requires post hoc processing of gratitude and positive events is found to

¹⁰ Barbara L. Fredrickson, “Gratitude, like other positive emotions, broadens and builds,” in R. A. Emmons & M. E. McCullough (Eds.), The psychology of gratitude New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press, 2004. pp. 145-161.

¹¹ M.E. McCullough, R.A. Emmons, and J. Tsang, “The grateful disposition: A conceptual and empirical topography,” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 2002: 112–127; P.C. Watkins, K. Woodward, T. Stone, and R.D. Kolts, “Gratitude and happiness: The development of a measure of gratitude and its relationship with subjective well-being,” Social Behavior and Personality, 2003: 431–452.

¹² E.J. Harpman, “Gratitude in the history of ideas,” in R.A. Emmons & M.E. McCullough (Eds.), The psychology of gratitude New York: Oxford University Press, 2004: 19–36.

¹³ Martin E.P. Seligman, T.A. Steen, N. Park, and C. Peterson, “Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions,” American Psychologist, 2005: 410–421.

¹⁴ Randy A. Sansone and Lori A. Sansone, “Gratitude and Well-Being: The Benefits of Appretiation,” Psychiatry 11 November 2010: 18-22.

provide additional psychological benefit, suggesting that reflection and savoring of these moments are just as essential in the process.¹⁵ One specific incidence of a reflective gratitude measure is the “Three good things,” or “Counting Blessings” interventions. Ranging from daily to weekly recordings, participants in this intervention are asked to record three events or things that have occurred since the last reflection for which they are thankful. Reflection is often prompted in questions, which derive meaning and significance attached to each moment for the individual, aiding her or him in identifying how to create and be aware of more moments of thanks.¹⁶

The benefits of positive psychology are proven time and time again in the scientific context of research. Even further, gratitude has substantiated its importance in the field in an empirical manner. The proof of the benefit to the self and others is apparent both from a scientific and experiential perspective and yet there has been little effort in exploring and promoting this way of seeing and being in alternate fields. The transition between an abstract state or feeling into a rigid mode of articulation is a place ripe for exploration. Further, the inherent promotion and exploration of gratitude acts as subtle activism for positivity and its resultant benefits for the larger community. Art is one such avenue that can explore, express and engage with the resonant concepts of positive psychology.

Text and Tradition: An Examination of Language and Contemporary Artists

Visual art has consistently been inscribed with the written word. Ancient relics of religion and popular images from the mid century demonstrate the omnipresence of language in the visual sphere. Textual language continually works to expand the expressed meaning presented in the symbols and colors in the piece as a whole. According to John Dixon’s introduction to *Art, Word, And Image: 2,000 Years of Visual/Textual Interaction*, these early examples are demonstrative of “explicit” use of textual language in art. “Explicitly” used language is “when words, decipherable

¹⁵ J.J. Froh, W.J. Sefick, R.A. Emmons, “Counting blessings in early adolescents: An experimental study of gratitude and subjective well-being,” *Journal of School Psychology* 2007: 213–233.

¹⁶ Martin E.P., Seligman, *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*, New York, NY: FreePress, 2011: 5-97.

and meaningful by their own account outside the graphic medium, are included in or on the visual art work.”¹⁷ This explicit mode is not the only measure and utility of the word. Implicit language, or the lack of literal text but the implication of, is apparent in well-known narratives, which suggest familiar names or stories.¹⁸ Language infiltrates even further into the visual dimension as “additive or supplementary” as is the case of the title.¹⁹ The omnipresence of text as it interacts with image is apparent as the modes of its use are teased out into such categories. But these categories become obscured in the contemporary context.

While the use of language in art is nothing new, the development of its concept has been cultivated and has become a crucial component to its contemporary usage. John Baldessari (b. 1931) is a conceptual artist whose work has spanned the decades beginning in the 1960’s. By the end of the decade his paintings transitioned into text based compositions.²⁰ His textual works transcend the media, working both explicitly and additively, as text becomes integral in many of his works. One such example is *Tips for Artists who want to Sell*, 1966-68 (Image I). Relating to Belgian surrealist Rene Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images (Ceci n’est pas une pipe)*, 1928-29 (Image II), Baldessari threatens the media of paint, thrusting art into the structure of mainstream concepts of signage.²¹ In both cases, the art object is referential to the modern era of commodity, employing a sense of humor to satirize the culture of consumption and advertising. However, unlike its predecessor, Baldessari strips away the illustrative quality, rendering only the essential: the text. Baldessari plays with not only cultural standards of art and consumption, but further asserts that word, just like the image, is symbolic for larger concepts, able to sustain the canvas as a piece in and of itself. In accordance to Hunt’s definition, the work of Balderssari would be identified as explicit. Yet as

¹⁷ John Dixon Hunt, David Lomas, and Michael Corris, *Art, Word and Image: 2,000 years of Visual/Textual Interaction* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2010), 17.

¹⁸ Hunt, Lomas, Corris 18.

¹⁹ Hunt, Lomas, Corris 18.

²⁰ Artstory.orgFINISH!

²¹ Deven Golden, “On the Road: John Baldessari’s Pure Beauty” *Artcritical* 4 March, 201125 Oct. 2011 <<http://artcritical.com/2011/03/04/baldessari/>>.

the language becomes the subject, the text becomes an explicit vehicle for the implicit meaning, intertwining the two concepts.

While the three bullet points of advice are understandable terms, the collection and composition of the phrase in simple black and off-white substantiates the decipherable text as indication of a larger dialogue. The explicit nature of the word that is used in this piece simultaneously functions as implicit language as it pushes the viewer to delve into the intellectual and cultural basis for which both the form and the content craft an immediate art piece as well as the intangible, supplementary forum. Baldessari demonstrates a more contemporary access point into language. No longer is it necessary for a narrative to be implied or present. Nor is it necessary for the word to aid or contort an image, as is the case in Magritte's surrealist work of the 1920s. Instead the text works to simultaneously "illuminate, confound, and challenge meaning,"²² for which the rigidity of text boasts. Language becomes the image, an image, which is symbolic for the implicit suggested in any work.

Contemporary practice of text and image, as demonstrated in Baldessari's work, suggests the flexibility innate to the assumed rigid form of language. Just like the image, the word is a symbol, inviting the audience to engage in the text both as it is immediately decipherable and as it implies deeper meaning. Ghada Amer's (b.1963) *Encyclopedia of Pleasures*, 2001 (Image III) moves beyond the flat surface of the canvas onto the three-dimensional cubes covered in selected versus from the 11th century text of the same name. Written by a Muslim man as a catalogue of scientific recognition of the sexual pleasures for both men and women, Amer literally stitches together the phrases into an overwhelming log exploring the religiosity and feminist potential of the original work.²³ Like Baldessari, the textual language works alongside the form, as it's own language. Stitching recalls

²² "John Baldessari: Biography" *Art:21*, 2010-2011, Art 21, Inc., 22 Oct. 2011, <<http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/john-baldessari/>>.

²³ Hilarie M. Sheets, "Stich by Stich, a Daughter of Islam Takes on Taboos," *Women Voices in the Franco-Arabic World*, 2011, 24 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.unc.edu/depts/europe/conferences/islam/article.htm>>.

femininity²⁴, while the boxes suggest the transit from home to home, between Arab and western worlds and ideals.²⁵

With the wealth of letters and words, often times obscured or incomplete in the embroidery covering the cubes, Amer's *Encyclopedia of Pleasures*, invites the viewer to be consumed by the context, aggregating the words from their autonomous state into an overwhelming environment in which the viewer may be enveloped. Of the piece Amer asserts, "It's not meant to be read. You just get a sense. I think for Islamic people, the text and the image are the same. When I think about using a text, I don't think about translating it into drawings. To copy it means I have illustrated it."²⁶ The word transcends traditional context of written language, becoming both necessary to the piece yet the individual importance of the word is overwhelmed by the feeling it is meant to cast on the viewer. The textual language, once again, is the image as informed by the mode of rendering, just as was the case in Baldessari's *Tips for Artist who Want to Sell*, 1966-68. These pieces invoke cultural and intellectual concepts as represented by the words as image.

The conceptual is not limited to external context. Words also yield identity. Glenn Ligon (b. 1960) is well known for his series of textual based paintings from the late 1980s.²⁷ Drawing on the written or verbal quotes of figures ranging from Zora Neale Hurston to Richard Pryor, the paintings work as a mode to explore his own identity, specifically, as it is raced black. In an interview with fellow artist, Byron Kim, Ligon explains race as a function of identity expressed in his work, "Toni Morrison argues that blackness has been used by other groups to define Americanness, blackness being placed at the limit of what it means to be American. So, obviously, exploring blackness as a subject matter tells you about what it means to be anything else in this country."²⁸ Identity, the personal exploration, becomes a

²⁴ Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop, "Ghada Amer: Defusing the power of erotic images," *The New York Times*, 12 Mar. 2007, 25 Oct. 2011, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/12/arts/12iht-jessop.4882064.html>>.

²⁵ Sheets 2011

²⁶ Sheets 2011

²⁷ "Glenn Ligon: America." *Whitney*. Whitney Museum of American Art. <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/GlennLigon>. 25 Nov. 2011.

²⁸ Ligon, Glenn. "Interview with Byron Kim." *Yourself in the World: Selected Writings and Interviews*, Glenn Ligon. Scott Rothkopf, ed. Byron Kim. Whitney Museum of American Art and Yale University Press, 2011. pp. 93-99. Print. p.99

valid lens through which to investigate both the personal and the larger context. Ligon suggests that exploration of identity acts as a lens through which we interpret and experience the world, and similarly can inform those excluded from the particular identity, yet are members a larger context for which we all belong. Ligon elects to explore his racial identity as a mode of delving into the larger context not just of race, but also of our society. He does so by using words to illustrate both the explicit quotes of black figures as well as to investigate and probe at that which the text implies.

Ligon's *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against a Sharp White Background)*, 1990 (Image IV), is a prime example of utilizing language to communicate both explicitly and implicitly. Citing Zora Neale Hurston, the painting moves from text to abstraction as it moves down the door on which it is painted. As the piece begins, the text is legible and decipherable for its meaning as a phrase. Yet the progression of the vertical composition begins to become hazy, obscuring words with overlay of the same text and the white noise of ink blurring together letters. The repetition of the phrase allows the textual content to be understood, even in the obscuration. However it is the obscuration and the handling of the presentation of the text that becomes the active subject in the painting, expanding from the explicit meaning and illustrating that which lies beyond. It is through the conjunction of text and underlying meaning that the piece gains a new and important perspective on both identity and communication. According to Ligon, the text is the subject that he paints as a mode of entering a particular visual dialogue,

Words *are* pictures the way I paint them. I'd agree that there is a tension between the meaning of the words and the form of the paintings. That's what's interesting to me. The paintings are about a desire to communicate and a certain pessimism about the possibility of doing that.²⁹

Words are the tool that Ligon uses to probe and explore. However, it is their presence specifically in the aesthetic context of painting that renders them a valid medium to develop communication in a particular area. Ligon states of the

²⁹ Ligon p.96

materials he employs: "I hope that the beauty of the surfaces facilitates an engagement with the ideas in the text, or the ideas behind the positioning of the texts."³⁰ Language's utility in the aesthetic realm is reliant on the development and awareness of the media as it functions to interrogate and support the words themselves. The word becomes the image as it balances between its meaning within a lexicon of textual and verbal language as well as a meaning devised from its handling and presentation in a visual language.

In many ways, word and image have fused together in a contemporary exploration of language in the visual arts. Tauba Auerbach (b. 1981) has fused the word and image to the degree of abstraction.³¹ Auerbach's *Yes Or No And/Or Yes And No* (Image V) fuses the letters and obscures their explicit nature in the overlapping, color-coded quality of the finished piece. Hunt's definition of additive or supplementary language is apparent in this piece. The title decodes the abstraction and illuminates the color aquatint etching in the light of language. However, it is not only defined by the title. The abstraction of the language further solidifies the fusion of word into image. The image present on the paper is rendered into small, abstract, individually colored shapes, recalling Charles Demuth's (b. 1883-1935) *The Figure 5 in Gold*, 1928 (Image VI). Demuth's abstracted portraiture allows the rigidity of the numeric figure to become symbolic for that which is not there, a human figure.³² Similar to Auerbach's *Yes Or No And/Or Yes And No*, the lines and arcs seem to be spiraling from a central point of intersection. While Demuth creates this composition with additive elements of line, Auerbach allows the figure of the letter to be the entirety of the image supporting the contemporary fusion of image and word.

Auerbach's composition yields to aesthetics in its color awareness and carefully constructed intersections, verifying its engagement in fine art. Further than the aesthetics of the overlapping figures, the language also speaks to the

³⁰ Ligon p. 95

³¹ Roberta Smith, "Art in Review: Tauba Auerbach," *The New York Times*, 27 Oct. 2006, 25 Oct. 2011, <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9904E7DD153FF934A15753C1A9609C8B63>> .

³² "Charles Demuth: The Figure 5 in Gold (49.59.1)". In *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/49.59.1> (October 2006)

muddling of basic communication in language. “Yes,” an affirmative nod to the inquisitive, while “No,” negates the inquiry, lie atop one another diffusing the power of either response. That which is communicated is no longer “yes,” and “no,” but rather a “cultural, historical, aesthetic, and philosophical significance,” tied to the words themselves as they are convoluted in the composition.³³ Auerbach, like Demuth, utilizes the simplicity of short, yet significant figures to convey and communicate a much larger intellectual body.

While the literal word is small, “yes,” is large in its content. Auerbach fills the paper both literally and implicitly with the presence of the word. Similarly, Yoko Ono (b. 1933), employs the same simplicity of “yes,” in her piece *Ceiling Painting (Yes Painting)*, 1966 (Image VII). Like Ghada Amer’s *The Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, 2001, Ono moves beyond the tradition of two-dimensional painting. Inviting the viewer to climb a ladder in order to use a magnifying glass and enlarge the tiny print of the word “yes,” hung on the ceiling, Ono prompts the word to become larger than the three letters, allowing the viewer to engage with the language as a personal investigation. Enacting the viewer to access the image of the word, as small as it was rendered, allows each viewer to derive an exceptionally personal narrative implied from the experience and the language. However, it is not isolated to the personal. The personal is fused with the contextual. As Ono explains,

My view of life is the fact that there were many incredible negative elements in my life, and in the world, and because of that I had to conjure up a positive attitude within me in balance to the most chaotic ... and I had to balance that by activating the 'Yes' element. 'Yes' is an expression that I always carried and that I'm carrying.³⁴

The positivity evoked by the piece is intentional in combating an otherwise negative historical and cultural context specific to the time. And yet it is through the personal exploration of the artist in which the piece is substantiated. The process of

³³ Sophie Landres, “Tauba Auerbach & Infinity,” *Make*, 2011, MAKE Literary Productions, NFP., 26 Oct. 2011, <<http://makemag.com/tauba-auerbach-infinity/>>.

³⁴ “Narum, Paul (Translator), “Yes Yoko Ono,” *Mito Arts Foundation*, 2003, 25 Oct. 2011, <<http://www.arttowermito.or.jp/art/yokoono.html>>

accessing the word “yes,” which symbolizes the positivity Ono “carries,” recreates the personal experience of Ono for each viewer that climbs each rung in curiosity. As they descend they are prompted to reflect on that which the word symbolizes. The subtlety of the word, emphasized by its minute size, simultaneously grants access to the immense “centerpiece” of the work: positivity.

In contemporary art, the word and the image have found themselves closely related to one another. No longer is it easy enough to categorize the mode of language into explicit, implicit, or additive. Language, just as the visual symbols found in art act as a component of communication. Words tell a primary narrative as they are found in the work, however they also expand the narrative to engage in the implied contextual and environmental realities of the personal and public climate. Contemporary artists who use language within their respective “canvas,” engage not only with the face value of the words and figures, but employ them as a tool of representation to probe and engage the viewer. In the current environmental climate, there is still the challenge in locating the “yes,” within the personal in order to navigate the chaos. Using word as symbol, the exploration of the personal can be transcribed into the larger cultural and social context in which the art emerges in order to promote the subtle radicalism of positivity in our contemporary practices.

Present Moment Gratitude: The Current Work

With an awareness of the current chaos prescribed to our present, it is my intent to encourage and emphasize the subtle power of positivity in the form of gratitude. As Ono’s work *Ceiling Painting (Yes Painting)*, 1966, demonstrates, the presence of positivity is often obscured and unexpected, demanding an active attempt to locate the power of “yes.” As positive psychological theory shows, positivity is not inaccessible but rather it is a matter of perspective. Ono’s “yes,” suggests the same, as a magnifying glass and a craned neck force a bodily awareness of how we interact with positivity. Awareness is the essential first step to developing an upward spiral of positivity. My own work uses this psychological

framework of positivity in the more specific form of gratitude as means of reorienting my own self towards the “yes” of this present moment.

Through the understanding of language as a mode of communicating explicitly and implicitly, language informs this work as a means of simultaneous exploration, expression, and emphasis of gratitude. Artists like Baldessari and Auerbach, demonstrate the ability of language to be central to composition and to function as subject in the work. Both artists influence the use of language in this present work as they demonstrate the way the explicit acts as a stand in for the implicit meaning. Ligon, also marked by his explicit use of language, demonstrates the manipulation and handling of the text to expose the implicit in his works. Awareness of the presentation of language is imperative as the often additive element of words are pushed into the center of the piece. The current work utilizes the notions of language as being understood in a sense of literacy, but further as it is culturally understood to be impregnated with context, meaning, and the unstated. By revealing and concealing words and language as it is drawn, stitched, and formed in the fiber pieces, I attempt to acknowledge the function of language as a powerful tool used both socially as well as clinically in positive psychological interventions from which I draw inspiration. Baldessari employs the explicit use of language to reference the nuances of his context as the words literally and indirectly express. It is my similar intent to both illuminate this subtle power of language and cultivate that which it represents.

As the present work is developed via personal explorations of gratitude in its multitude of forms, language becomes a crucial component to the process. However, the product is hinged on the presence of language, as it is both understandable and muddled. The space in-between is where the fluidity of language can be emphasized. Artist's like Auerbach abstract language to tap into its ability to break free from the rigidity of form. Ligon uses a similar approach of striking a tension between that which is visible and decipherable and that which is convoluted. The space created amidst this tension is the point of interest for my own work as I employ language to develop and deepen the communication of

gratitude. Just as informed by these contemporary artists, the present work aims to develop the subtle space of language as a rigid form and a fluid meaning.

The fluidity is further emphasized in the materials of the work. Using sheer fabric, the current pieces work to manipulate visibility as it interacts with light and its surroundings. Fiber as a base for the word, image, and expression acts to add the dimension of fluidity as the solidity of the mark of the surface shifts from reinforced and opaque to transparent and divergent. This emphasizes the quality of gratitude itself: fluctuating in and out of awareness. This mutable quality of the work is further investigated with the stitch, as it solidifies the fiber into a more structured and transformed material. Inspired by Amer's use of thread a mode of clarifying and obscuring meaning as text appears and disappears, the stitch is treated not as a perfected embellishment but as a tedious meditation in the implicit context of the work, in this case gratitude, in the case of Amer, femininity.

Developing the tension of the implicit, as it is represented in the explicit, works to move language away from simply being a necessity of communication. Instead, it pushes language towards being a conduit through which the experience of gratitude, as an implicit feeling or state, can be explored. The construction of language becomes both integral and supplementary to the aesthetic presentation of gratitude as the fluidity of the experience is articulated in the handling of the words themselves. Drawing upon the materials and the form, the mutability of the experience is emphasized. The experience, presented in the fabric and text, originates from a personal exploration, however, through the representation of authentic exploration, I "confidently, courageously, and hopefully" convey the possibility of positivity for those who engage with the gratitude inscribed in the fiber-based pieces.

Reflecting on Thank You: An Epilogue

As this semester began I was enthusiastic about rearticulating gratitude in a singular installation. Over the fall semester, my work aided both my exploration into the concept of gratitude as well as into the materiality of representing my process and understanding of the term. Approaching the next phase demanded that

I embrace and fully understand my own relationship to gratitude. Process. It infiltrated the entirety of the project.

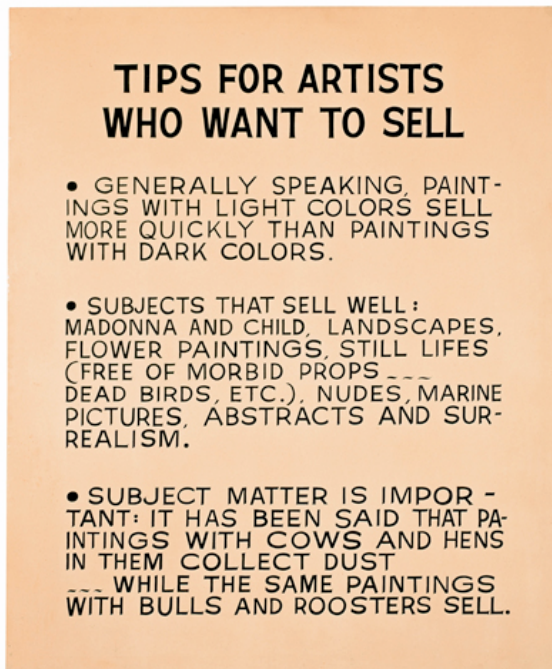
With my personal reflection, journaling, and craft, I developed a new understanding of gratitude. Thankfulness morphed from an awareness and gratefulness for that which positively benefited me, but instead I came to understand it to mean a present moment awareness, acceptance, and balance. Through discussing my project with so many, it became clear that my own definition was not the most widely accessed. However, I did not wish to prescribe my personal understanding to those around me. Instead I was invested in the process and my personal relearning of the concept. This process is what I aimed to expose in the final piece.

Gratitude Intervention (Image VII) utilizes the original materials of sheer fabric and embroidery. It calls upon the innocence of learning in the “learn-to-write” lines as the format on which the embroidery of “Thank You” fortifies the sheer quality of the voile. The grand scale of the piece, reaching 24 feet in its length, provides ample space for learning to occur. Finally, the meditative process of embroidery interrupts the simplicity, though non-obtrusively, identifying gratitude as the relearned. Suspended in the gallery, the fabric peels away from the wall where it is initially secured and creates a scrim of gratitude that is both structural and fluid. Behind it hangs an ordered chaos of writings on the familiar “learn-to-write” lines found on similarly on the fabric. The non-narrative, intimate writings are honest and uncensored expressions of that which I am aware of as contributing to my present moments. Ranging from innocuous observations to revealing insights, the papers, viewed through the curtain of thankfulness, point to my own awareness of gratitude to be holistic and honest in accepting the moment and position that I fill within it.

Using my own words of gratitude forced me to fight censorship of my authentic experience and expression. This honesty was necessary to the piece and yet it was the most difficult component to present. Relinquishing my ability to elect what part of myself my community is privy to, forced the process of acceptance to infiltrate both the piece and the artist. This personal endeavor was chosen in order

to inspire a similar process of relearning for those who view the piece. My explorations into gratitude have not only illuminated new definitions, but has further revealed that through the process of art, personal and communal experience and being can be explored and cultivated to support positive growth and change.

Image I



John Baldessari (American, b. 1931).

Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell, 1966-68. Acrylic on canvas. 68 x 56 1/2 in. (172.7 x 143.5 cm).

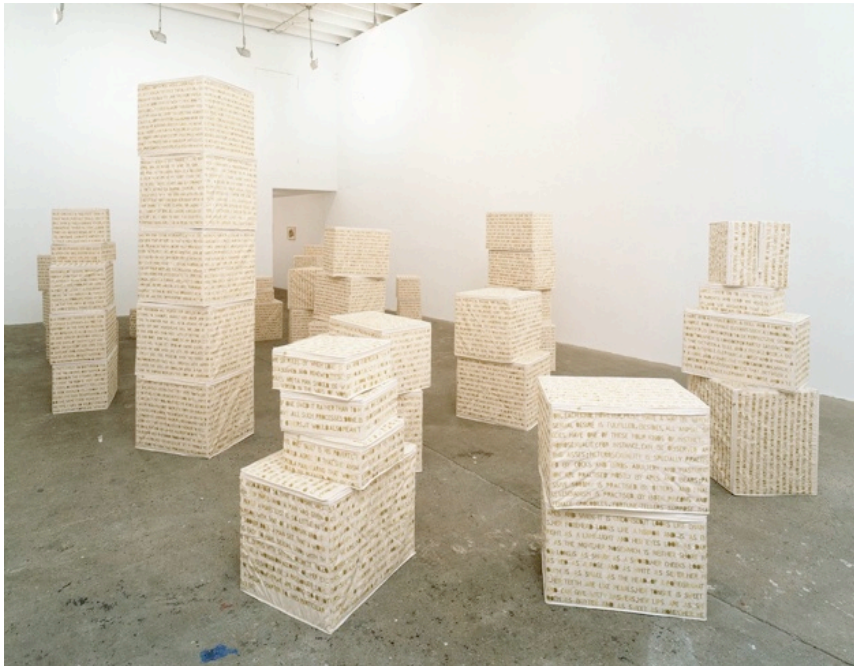
Image II



René Magritte (Belgian, b. 1898).

The Treachery of Images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe), 1928-29. Oil on canvas. 25 x 37 in (63.5 x 93.98 cm).

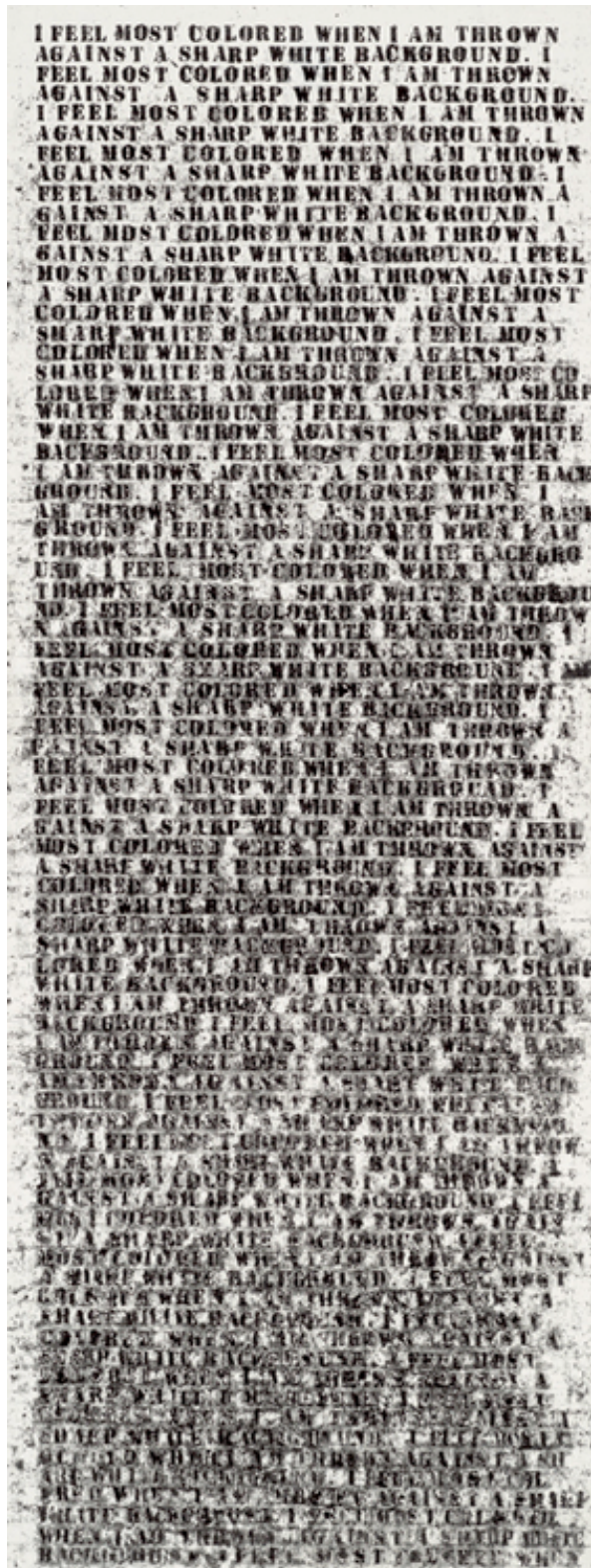
Image III



Ghada Amer (b.1963). Encyclopedia of Pleasure, 2001.

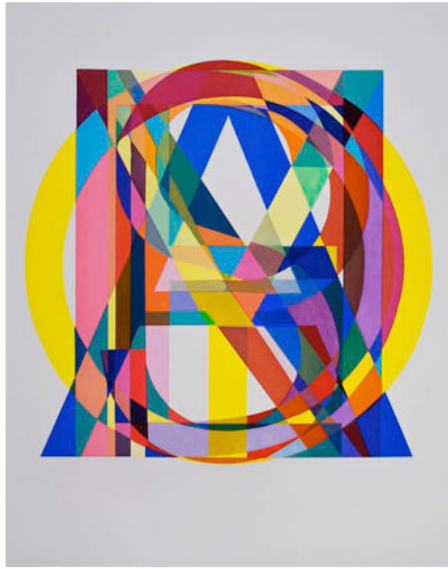
Embroidery on cotton duck, dimensions variable.

Image V



Glen Ligon (b.1960), *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A White Background)*, 1990. Oil stick, gesso, and graphite on wood. 80 × 30 in. (203.2 × 76.2 cm).

Image VI



Tauba Auerbach (b. 1981). Yes Or No And/Or Yes And No. 2008
Color aquatint etching on paper. 39 x 30 ¼ in

Image V



Charles Demuth (American, 1883- 1935).
I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold, 1928. Oil on cardboard.
35 ½ x 30 in.

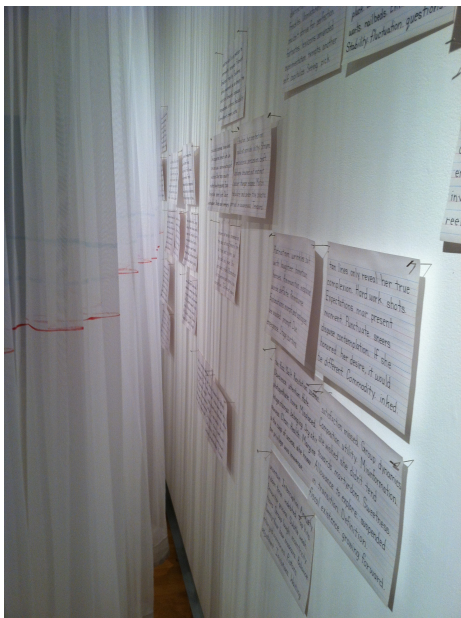
Image VI



Yoko Ono (b. 1933). Ceiling Painting (Yes Painting), 1966.

*Text on canvas, glass, metal frame, metal chain,
magnifying glass, painted ladder.*

Image VII



Lily Burgess (b. 1989). Gratitude Intervention, 2012.

Fabric, embroidery floss, paper, and ink.

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