

A+D

AND THEN  
SHE'S LIKE

CURATED BY CHRIS CAMPE

AUGUST 9 – SEPTEMBER 15, 2012

AND  
HE GOES

Columbia  
COLLEGE CHICAGO

# Someone is telling us that she said something and he answered—

what we don't know. What we do know: there are at least three people involved here: she, he, and the person telling us about their conversation. And actually, we are involved, too. It is up to us, the audience, to speculate what she said and he replied, or what she inquired and how he responded, or what she threw at him and what he retorted. Even though the content of the dialog is left out its colloquial language evokes distinct voices in our head and entices us to imagine what is going on.

The exhibition *And Then She's Like/And He Goes* combines text-based visual art with language-based sound art to highlight the works' multi-sensory appeal as a mode of storytelling. Seeing and reading text in an artwork involves hearing, even if only inside the viewers head, and listening to spoken words and sound involuntarily brings images to the mind's eye, even when the language is not straightforwardly descriptive. The artists examine these audible qualities of image-text and the visual potential of language and sound. Intertwining documentation and fabulation they give us audio/visual bits and pieces and use non-linear narrative to draw us into their stories. Rather than over the course of the traditional beginning, middle, and end the narrative comes alive in the overlap between word, image and sound. Although there is no way of knowing for sure what she said and he replied, the works in the show invite us to be involved in the story.

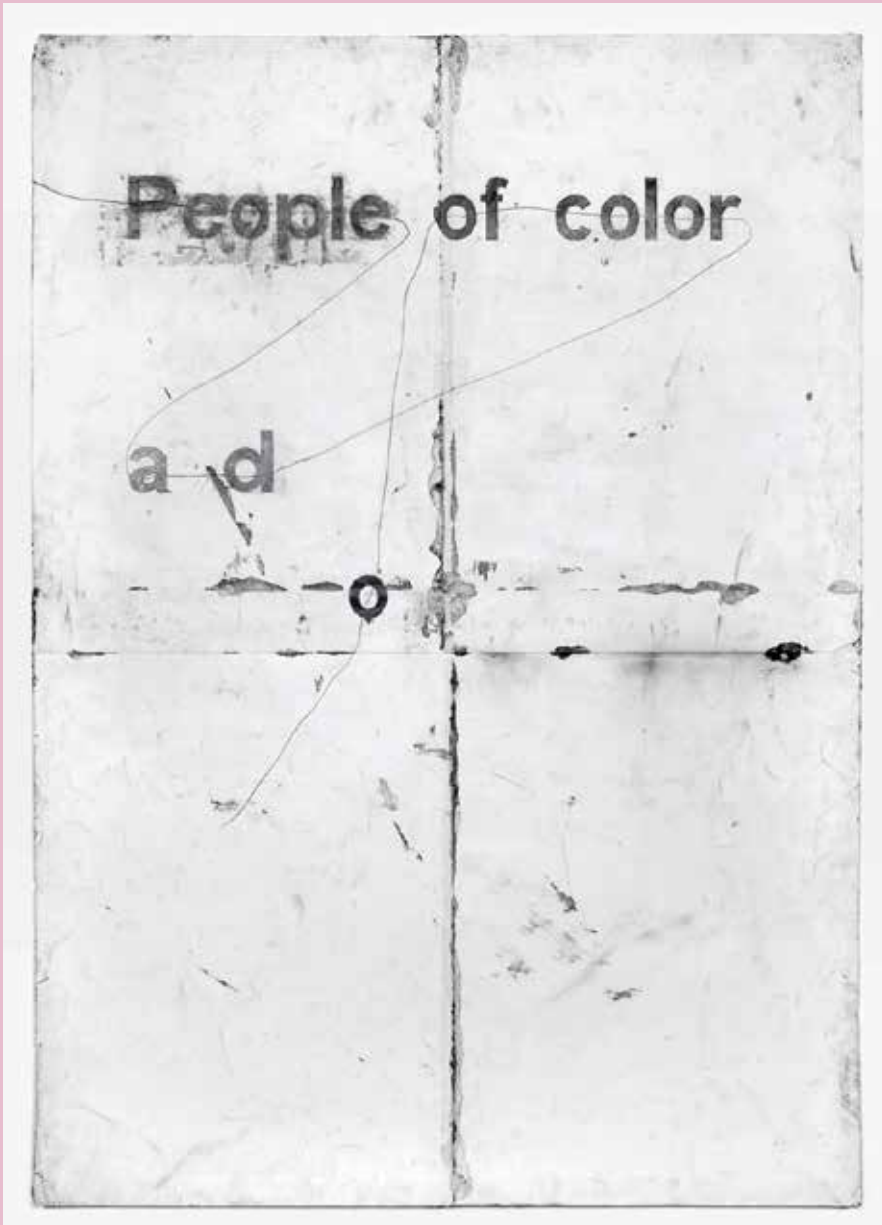
Chris Campe, Curator

she committed  
suicide  
*and he*  
*remarried*

# THOUGHTS ON STRUCTURING ABSENCE IN TEXT-SOUND-IMAGE

BY JOHN CORBETT

Close your eyes and imagine the sound of someone sketching. Pencil drags across paper, stopping and starting, high frequency noise establishing a scratchy rhythm in areas of shading or cross-hatching, perhaps swooping more loudly through a contour line. Now imagine another activity: writing. Same material – pencil and paper, high frequency noise of variegated density – but the impression is different. The rhythm is less pulsed, figity but fluid, more so if the writing is cursive. One more variation: imagine watching someone writing out letters, spelling words one by one, nothing manifestly audible, and as you see the words appear you hear them in your head, the imaginary sound of them perhaps shaped by the way they're written.



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1. MARK ADDISON SMITH  
*AUGUST 20*, 2011  
INDIA INK ON BRISTOL BOARD  
USING OVERHEARD DIALOGUE  
7 X 11 INCHES

2. TONY LEWIS  
*PEOPLE AD ROLOC FOO*, 2012  
PENCIL AND GRAPHITE  
POWDER ON PAPER  
60 X 84 INCHES

3. CHRIS CAMPE  
*OH SURE (DETAIL)*, 2012  
HANDCUT PAINTED PAPER,  
COLLAGE  
76 X 94 X 20 INCHES

4. DEB SOKOLOW  
*CHAPTER 12. THE DAIRY QUEEN  
EMPLOYEE FOLLOWING YOU*,  
2011  
GRAPHITE AND ACRYLIC ON  
PAPER MOUNTED TO PANEL  
30 X 22 X 1 INCHES

5. ANNE VAGT  
*WORLDS*, 2012  
MARKER ON PAPER  
8.3 X 11.7 INCHES

6. MARK BOOTH  
*MOON*, 2012  
PHOTOGRAPH

7. JANA SOTZKO &  
ELEN FLÜGGE  
*SHELL ONE*, 2012  
WIRE, PLASTER, SPEAKER,  
PAINT, LINEN, FISHLINE  
20 X 23 X 10 CENTIMETERS

8. JEFF KOLAR  
*THE WILHELM SCREAM*, 2012  
CDR  
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE

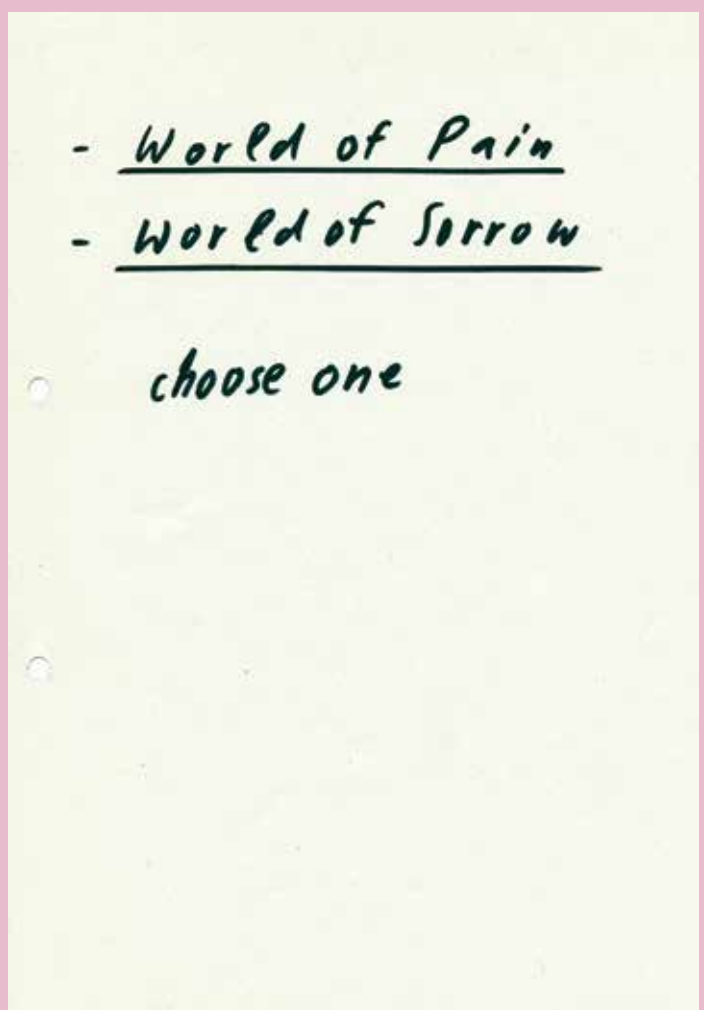
In this thought exercise, an idea already emerges that there is an intimate relationship between drawing and language. If the sound of sketching and the sound of writing are distinct, they are also related – handwriting, in this understanding, is a subset of drawing, a version of the drawn arts that has a highly pragmatic, informational skew, but one that also expresses more than mere words. It's a fading practice now, handwriting, largely superseded by the keyboard, but the craft remains an iconic part of humanity, at least in the lingering power of the signature, which remains as the personal “voice” of writing.

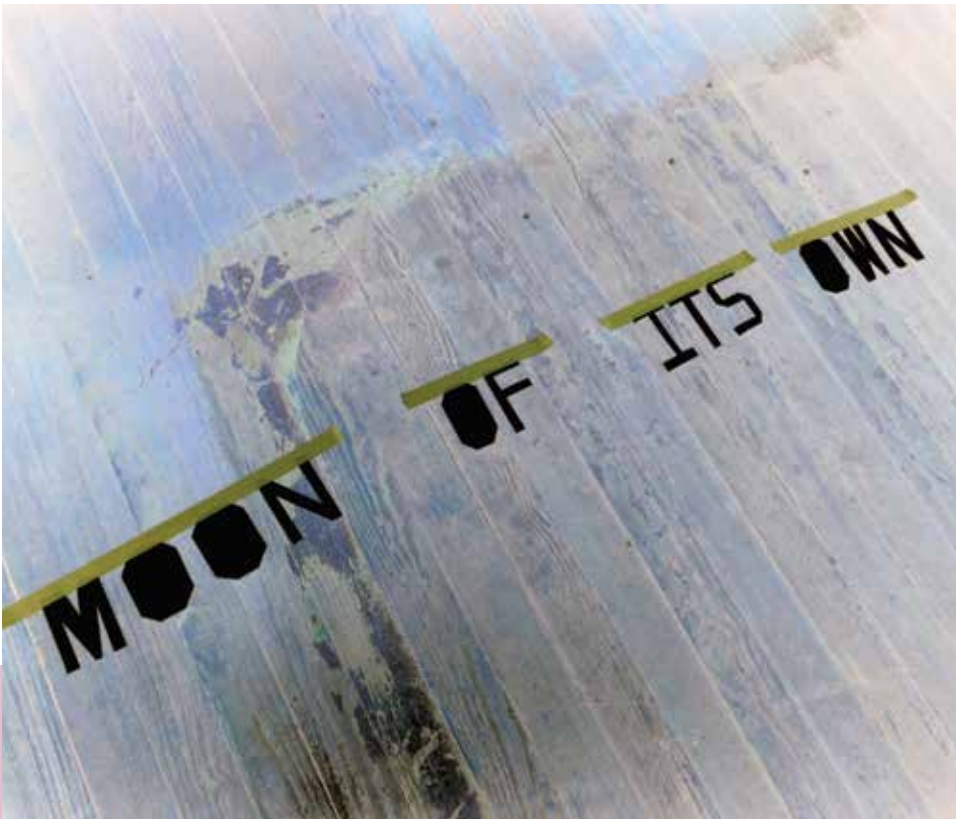
The central conceit of *And Then She's Like/And He Goes* has to do with this juncture between writing, drawing, and audition. Artist **Chris Campe** has convened a group of visual and sound artists, mostly friends whose work she has admired, among whom she recognized shared interests. Some of them have been involved in what she tentatively titles “typographic storytelling,” noting the synaesthetic semiotics of this aggregated activity. Identifying narration as a common thread, the exhibition suggests a terrain in which the mode of interpretation incessantly shifts from reading to viewing to hearing and back again. Drawing letters in the context of narrative, the artists engage in the same subtle work as font designers, retooling meaning though nimble formal maneuvers, often more felt than acknowledged. Font gives specific shape to the basic letter; drawing gives personal style and expressivity to the font. As Campe elaborates: “One key interest in the visual pieces is how the letterforms give clues as to how the text might sound when read and influences how the text resonates in the viewer’s head.” Wondering how this could work conversely, the exhibition engages sound artists whose investigations lie in this exploration of implication and imagination, insisting that the relationship between text and sound is a two-way street.

There's also a fascinating structuralist underpinning to *And Then She's Like/And He Goes*. In particular, some of the work relates to Saussure's notion of the paradigmatic in language, especially what has been called “structuring absence,” the power not only of what is there (a specific word, icon, image; the “syntagm” structured into a sentence), but what is not there, in certain texts. Even the diptych title of the exhibition contains, by implication, just such a play, inviting the audience to fill in the blank, like the Mad Libs of yore. The viewer, or listener, is invited to feel the undertow of possibility left in the absence of words. Or, to put it a slightly different way, in the absence of a concrete utterance, to feel a question welling up: what might a particular font sound like?

Font has been a focus of contemporary art for decades. In the divergent work of **Tauba Auerbach, Mel Bochner, Glenn Ligon, Kay Rosen, and Christopher Wool**, for instance, the wide spread of strategies for using fonts is clear. In Wool's case, the multi-directionality of literal meaning and formal abstraction is central to the painterly activity. In Wool's text paintings, the assertive, even aggressive meaning of the words is a foil for the painting, which, almost surreptitiously, is in fact the focal point. The hard edge of his stencils produces an edge around and out of which the paint expresses its own irregularity, moves, as it were, outside the lines.

Campe also uses stencils. Like Wool's, they are hand drawn, then, in the case of the current body of work, used to create posters that recall vintage block-printed circus or boxing posters. She, too, deals with familiar vernacular phrases, emptied of their literal meaning, painted in high key colors and intensely seductive type fonts. It is not the perfect, machine-like finish that interests her, but a sort of face-off between the rigid feel of stencil and the manually crafted manner in which they're drawn, the imperfections, the wonk and waft of a beautiful freehand creation. And the implied sound, the hail of the ringmaster under the big top. **Jana Sotzko and Elen Flügge** explore the line between the actual and the imagined, creating sound works that examine anticipated sound, what they refer to as “the voice in your head.” This offers sound as the starting point, rather than end point, of the process, so that where Campe's visual work may “evoke” a sound, Sotzko and Flügge's sounds do the same with an image. **Jeff Kolar's** wonderfully strange entry engages with the notion of the Wilhelm Scream, a longstanding staple of cinema used in hundreds of films dating back to the early 1950s. Kolar excerpts the scream from its narrative context, liberating it from the story, rendering it back to a simple sound effect, rather than part of the semiotic complex in situ. Here, again, the structuring absence is deeply felt. Each shriek (the death-knell of language) is coupled with an image associated with the exact moment it occurs in the film, but the sound's intimate relationship with image is deconstructed, disinterred, unclothed to reveal





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all its constructedness. Mark Booth has long been exploring the bi-directionality of text-sound and sound-image by means of drawings, paintings, performances, recordings, and installations, and in his work he has established a remarkably fluid sense of interchangeability between the methods of image making and the material life of the audible. For the exhibition, he has contributed a piece centered on a series of delightfully evocative text lines featuring the word “chords.” As in most of his work, Booth slyly insists on the signifying energy of absurd juxtaposition and the arbitrary relationship between language and meaning.

**Deb Sokolow's** work has moved in recent years from very literal (and very funny) storytelling towards a less one-to-one relationship between text and image. She still uses hand drawn text and accompanying illustrative images, often bifurcating into many possible, even virtual, stories. Here Sokolow contributes a major work based on her investigations into a conspiracy. Specifically, she researched a covert military base purportedly lurking beneath the Denver International Airport, culminating in a daytrip to Denver to check out the grounds first hand. The oblique relationship between story and image in this multi-part work seems to me to suggest a specific kind of structuring absence, what I'd like to call *abstraction by redaction*. The hand drawn interruptions offer a text made more oblique and more intriguing by means of redaction. Sometimes made directly into the text, sometimes hovering in the non-illustrative, non-didactic relationship between text and image, these interruptions create a fertile tension, requiring imagination to fill in the blanks and generate meaning. **Anne Vagt** also merges images and text,

often asserting one for the other. She sometimes draws text, sometimes draws objects, but most often Vagt relates them in an oblique way, distorting an implied captioned or diagrammatic relationship. Her images have a language-like association, like a rebus; different kinds of signifying are deployed in her buoyant colored pencil drawings, confusing the various dividers between literal and figurative, denotative and connotative, serious and playful, heard and seen.

In the large, scuffed, intensely worked graphite drawings of **Tony Lewis**, we find another version of abstraction by redaction. Permuting a single line by means of removing individual letters, Lewis has created a series of variations, perhaps recalling the visual storytelling of Tom Phillips, who interrupted an existing Victorian novel to uncover another narrative contained therein. Lewis's project is as much invested in the materiality of the resulting drawing as in the halting meanings he excavates. But those are there, and they're sometimes startling, suggesting the existence of another layer of language submerged beneath the one we use. “People freed the color red,” for example, is an unexpected permutation from, as Lewis calls it, “down the rabbit hole that becomes deeper and deeper with every step.” Atop this abstraction of language, Lewis also includes a curvilinear line connecting the letters, not always in sequence, thereby articulating yet another, even more abstract possibility. **Mark Addison Smith's** contribution might actually be the converse of redaction by abstraction. Eavesdropping on conversations in daily life, he extracts juicy tidbits, which he then turns into exquisite ink drawings. “Am I still too abstract?,” one of them asks, a circle and a hexagon floating below the text like eyes. The

absent element in these vignettes is the surrounding narrative of quotidian dialogue; by decontextualizing everyday speech and stylizing the font to match the words, Smith concentrates the oral power of the statements, pairing it with a glyph-like sketch, sometimes incorporating the text into the image, fusing draw and drawl. Like Kolar, his work gains signifying power by eliminating context, holding the material of conversation to close scrutiny.

The nine artists in *And Then She's Like/And He Goes* approach the interplay of text, sound, and image with distinct agendas, but they have in common a sensitivity to the play of presence and absence, the way that something missing can become a fertile, rather than bereft thing. I'm reminded of C.D. Wright's haunting poem “Tours,” which she concludes with an image of a piano:

The last black key  
She presses stays down, makes no sound,  
Someone putting their tongue where their  
tooth had been.

The unexpected, the anticipated, the unstated, the intimated – such is the rich world of semiotic ambiguity. A sock in the mouth to certainty, so welcome in a time of resurgent and regressive positivism.

**John Corbett** is a curator and writer based in Chicago. He teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he has chaired the Sound Department and the Exhibition Studies Program. Recent curatorial efforts include an exhibition of ephemera and artwork related to Sun Ra (co-curated with Anthony Elms and Terri Kapsalis) and a retrospective of Ray Yoshida (curated with Jim Dempsey). Corbett is co-owner of Corbett vs. Dempsey Gallery.

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MARK ADDISON SMITH  
TONY LEWIS  
JEFF KOLAR  
CHRIS CAMPE  
MARK BOOTH

create...  
change

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Consulate General  
of the Federal Republic of Germany  
Chicago

ARTWORK: Mark Addison Smith  
August 20, 2011 (detail)  
India ink on Bristol board using overheard dialogue, 7" x 11"

