

Morphemes, Graphemes, and Boustrophedonics: An Introduction to Matt Magee's Language of the Grid

Matt Magee's work is clearly defined by an interest in minimal and conceptual vocabularies that, since the 1980's, has informed a diverse practice encompassing abstract and geometric paintings, sculptures, print making, assemblages, murals and photography. The development of these artistic impulses can be defined as a sustained preoccupation with geometric points, lines, surfaces, and angles more commonly associated with mathematics, physics, and architecture. Despite what appears to be a purely cold and analytic predisposition towards the grid, his practice is also grounded in a curious interest in found materials and a constant desire to alter their perception through the artist's hand. This makes his relationship to the grid a complicated one that takes us far beyond the conventional understanding of its role as a purely visual structure. The grid, it seems, has a far longer and complicated history than we might have initially imagined and while firmly associated with the mathematical side of our brains, it also engages with our unconscious impulse to read and write.

Complicating these seemingly independent systems of communication and spatial organization are an abiding interest in the artist's practice. References to typographic characters, numeric algorithms, and semiotics frequently appear in his work and are underscored by personal history, numerology, and social media. Some of Magee's early works focus on "alphabet making" by taking materials collected from streets in and around his home or studio and arranged into a typological grid. These artistic experiments tap into unconscious formations developed out of his early exposure to non-Western cultures that resonate to this day, manifesting in a micro version of eternal return¹. As we are drawn further into his constellation of signs and signifiers we are invariably pushed further and further away from a purely Western ideological framework. In fact, the logic of his grammatical units puts us into closer connection to broader human impulses central to both ancient and contemporary conventions of writing. We are reminded that language arranged in a left to right (or right to left), top to bottom visual logic can be seen in everything from ancient pictograms and hieroglyphics to dot matrix printing and smartphone screens.

Having yet to be adequately challenged over several millennia, this is an organizational structure that hasn't gone away.

In the last decade, Magee's assimilation of language and structure has resulted in conceptually-sharp and graphically-sophisticated print making and mural projects. *rose of jays* (2011), is a classic example of concrete poetry through its visual verbal pun of the writing grid and the double meaning of the spoken vs. the written word. While his ongoing series of "graphemes," which alludes to the smallest unit in a writing system, replaces the written word with spatial units of color, thereby merging conceptualism with the history of the monochromatic painting. The artists Agnes Martin and Richard Artschwager are important contemporary touchstones for Magee and provide a rich foundation for expanding on well-established idioms while creating trans-generational conversations in the process². Recently, the austerity of these grid structures have given way to more spontaneous and humorous structures; sometimes turning up as assemblages resembling computer tablets but made out of rounded edge plywood panels and plastic elements. While his contemporary glyph/mural *Wall. Text.* (2018), references the current state of communication and the disintegration of traditional social connective tissues through a string of illegible typographic characters arranged into seeming coherence and legibility.

Through these and other recent works, Magee replays the logic of the grid in unique and surprising ways while hinting at our current obsessions and superstitions. As the independent scholar and curator Margarita Tupitsyn has written "...the grid can still be an effective device in radical art practices as long as it is not perceived as an escapist structure that does not address the topics of today."³ In the countless iterations of the grid that underpin the artist's work there continues to be a counterbalance of found materials such as plastic bottles, mica, aluminum, gold compact discs that pushes the work closer to the context of archaeology and recycling. A recent output of three dimensional works from his *Hanger* series combines irregularly shaped elements made from brightly colored Mexican laundry detergent bottles that are suspended from wire to create floating grids of color. Having recently moved to Arizona, Magee's scavenging of materials reveals consumer preferences shaped by a border state economy and cultural specificity which in turn give these pieces a readymade identity. Shocking pinks, deep violets, and lemon

yellows are arranged horizontally, vertically and in some cases bi-directionally to form planes of colors and shapes that in their mute plasticity are able to speak a language of art and culture that looks frontwards and backwards, and side to side.

Gilbert Vicario

¹ Eternal return (also known as eternal recurrence) is a theory that the universe and all existence and energy has been recurring, and will continue to recur, in a self-similar form an infinite number of times across infinite time or space. The theory is found in Indian philosophy and in ancient Egypt and was subsequently taken up by the Pythagoreans and Stoics. With the decline of antiquity and the spread of Christianity, the theory fell into disuse in the Western world, with the exception of Friedrich Nietzsche, who connected the thought to many of his other concepts, including amor fati. Eternal return is based on the philosophy of pre-determinism in that people are predestined to continue repeating the same events over and over again.

² “In 2005, I began using an image of Agnes Martin’s 1973 screenprint edition ‘On a Clear Day’. The Edition is a meditation on the grid in 30 different formats. I painted in Martin’s grid with a language of blips which became suggestive of braille and morse code.” Matt Magee, A Lecture at Phoenix Art Museum, May 23, 2018.

³ Margarita Tupitsyn, “The Grid as a Checkpoint of Modernity,” Tate Papers No. 12. Autumn 2009