

Zero Against One: Reworlding the Word in the Art of Nicky Broekhuysen

When the world dissolves into its component parts, it will become clear that it all has always been made of ones and zeros: the interplay between presence and absence; proof of *creatio ex nihilo* through the divination of Chinese numbers; a Schroedenger's cat who may or may not meow. Whether under the divine composed of the unity of the all being, or in the virtual reality of the computer destined to survive every apocalypse, it will all be one puddle between meaning and meaninglessness.

The space between the zero and the one was never distant from the search for the divine. When, in 1703, the father of calculus Gottfried Leibnitz published the essay that would someday allow for computing, and through computing for the infinity of information flows that waver between infinite complexity and the white noise of excess, he was actually searching for God. And he did this by way of China, inspired by the method of divination called the *I Ching*.¹ Between the method of prophecy which sought information where we might believe there to be none; and the birth of infinite possibility between presence and absence set up in the gap between the one and the zero, he sought proof for God's creation (the one) out of nothing (the zero). On the path of an Other logic, the thought of the Sufi sage Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240) recognizes the multiplicity of being as united in the divine. Everything in the world united in its simplicity: what we see is infinite and manifold, but if we were able to see it in its truth, the one truth would be the divine. Between the infinite and the nothing, that is the place of man.

The one and the zero: containing and erasing everything in one fell swoop. It is just as well. Consider the decaying archive of the Iraqi Embassy in East Berlin: a city no longer divided, a city in which the two becomes one and everything unnecessarily doubled as in two sides of a mirror. In the archive, spiders swinging between the books, the registers, the records – a bureaucratic tightrope suspended in the mundane facts hanging between birth and death – will be abandoned without the trouble of memory. The registers of the Iraqi Embassy will have become like that first of so many heartbreaks written into your diary when you were fourteen: so intensely true at the time, so void now. In the end, only the one and the zero, pregnant with all the possibility of the world, and the poignancy of its dissolution, will remain.

Like the archive, a pencil case in this museum: a magic box nested with little boxes. On the box, writing. In the box, pens. From the box, ink. Dipping pen into ink, the artist made art, erasing his own presence into the plenitude of the work(s), which marched on in their artistic labor in each place where the diversity of paper painted by the pen and the ink took wing. The pen case is the vehicle of pen and ink, and the pen the vehicle of the ink, and the artist the vehicle of the pen, as much a vessel as the Virgin Mary in the enabling of the divine. Martin Heidegger explains, “the artist remains inconsequential as compared with the work, almost like a passageway that destroys itself in the creative process for the work to emerge.”²

Once a space of habitation, the pen case contained the pen that contained the possibility of every line that can be drawn with the pen – every word in every language, every image that might be born of ink, folded into a single tool of the possible. The Qur'an says, ‘If the whole ocean were ink for writing the words of my Lord, it would run dry before those words were exhausted’ – even if We were to add another ocean to it.” (Q. 18:109).³ A world now, uninhabited, void of pen, void of ink, void of words. When the inkwell is dry and the pen writes no more, what has become of the world that it wrote into being?

¹ "Explanation of the Binary Arithmetic, which uses only the characters 1 and 0, with some remarks on its usefulness, and on the light it throws on the ancient Chinese figures of Fu Xi."

² Martin Heidegger, Albert Hofstadter, trans. "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 39.

³ Haleem, M. A. S. Abdel. (2004) *The Qur'an*, (London: Oxford University Press), p. 190.

Since the birth of the pen case as equipment, its world has withdrawn, leaving us with what we can know only as art. What is this thing we call “art” in the midst of the infinity of things inhabiting the earth and making it into a world? The year was 1937, and the stable world was quickly dissolving. Everybody would soon have to take sides. Given the circumstances, the origin of the work of art might not have seemed a pressing question, but it was Martin Heidegger’s way of asking the question of the chicken and the egg: is it the artist who makes the artwork, or the artwork that makes the artist, or the thing called art that must reside in between and in both – an absence and a presence, a zero and a one – that makes art different from any mundane thing? And, in parenthesis, not even written in the text, what if it should come to pass that the world as we know it and trust it should come to end, then is it possible for the truth of the artwork to survive?

What, then, is in a knowing withdrawn from its world? A series of cyphers, a lamp housing a silent genie, symbols without a world to world them? The equipment, far from used up in the making of the work, proliferates in the realm of our senses. “...the piece of equipment is half thing, because characterized by thingliness, and yet it is something more; at the same time it is half art work and yet something less, because lacking the self-sufficiency of the artwork.”⁴

For when the meaning of the pen case as equipment is erased; when the signs of its letters become symbols not of words but of a world now distant; and when the name deciphered refers only to the idea of a man who made the case, and not to a man of flesh and blood who built it and was paid; nor to a man who pricked his finger with the nib of the pen and then wrote with his own blood; for when this comes to pass, the equipment becomes a mere thing on the earth. It withdraws from what it has been. “World-withdrawal and world-decay can never be undone. The works are no longer the same as they once were. It is they themselves, to be sure, that we encounter there, but they themselves are gone by. As bygone works they stand over against us in the realm of tradition and conservation.”⁵ Withdrawn, the equipment waits, a something that was nothing; a nothing that could be something. A zero, a one. A zero and a one both, in potentiality, suspended. The pen case in the museum is the object that it always was, and yet its truth has become invisible because, transformed from equipment into art, it has lost the purpose of its being.

The pen case voided of its pens and its ink, also voided of its voice, laments no less than the flute poet and Sufi guide Jelaleddin Rumi uses to characterize the sorrow the lost beloved of man torn from God. “Listen to this reed flute as it tells it tales,/ Complaining of separations as it wails.”⁶ The pen case laments the loss of its reed, the pen. It lives in the void of its visibility, a mere thing bought and sold, hidden and shown, shielded from hands and then handled. The pen case laments the distance of its living past, its separation from the time when if the oceans were full of ink, it would never cease to write all. Heidegger reminds us that what makes the temple into a temple is the presence of the god within. “The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves. This view remains open as long as the work is a work, as long as the god has not fled from it.”⁷ The pen case without its pens is hardly still a pen case at all, just as the pen, no longer guided by a hand, cannot write.

The zeros and the ones stamp over pages: an ant colony on the march, termites devouring the volumes, snail trails through an untended garden; waves washing the paper from the meaning of the letters already dissolved on their pages. They devour the substrate

⁴ Heidegger, p. 28.

⁵ Heidegger, p. 40.

⁶ Victoria Holbrook, trans. From "Listen: Commentary on the Spiritual Couplets of Mevlana Rumi by Kenan Rifai," (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2011).

⁷ Heidegger, p. 42

that persists through time, and in devouring it, allow it to live again. Against the pen case withdrawn from the world of its work, zeros and ones redraw the possibility of having written in the infinite plenitude of meaning, a sea that circulates in its own exhaustion. Against the work of the stampede of meaning released against the fixed forms of history, the artwork releases its other from its being as equipment into becoming art in a new world, a new space of meaning. The pen case can become art as long as it is rewritten in a new language for a new world, and this rewriting is also art: from zero to one, and back again. This is the purpose of art: “The [artwork] is the disclosure of what the equipment... *is* in truth. This entity emerges into the unconcealedness of its being... Towering up within itself, the work opens up a *world* and keeps it abidingly in force... The *world worlds*, and is more fully in being than the tangible and perceptible realm in which we believe ourselves to be at home.”⁸

Between the zeros and ones, the invisible writing of the new that creeps over and recycles the writing of the old, rewriting the deceased into new vines, we see art not explicating a historical relationship with the past, but bringing an impossibility into presence. The objects of writing sit in a museum in their object plenitude, yet their truth is the liberty to write, a liberty that depends on the pen and the ink and the writer of a language that is no more. Answering Martin in his study of 1937, sitting there late at night under a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling, pondering if truth can persist even after the gods have fled the temple, the zeros and the ones march in, a colony of ants crawling under the door, over the stone floor, each digit at once each an independent creature and together an organism, and in the intercourse of digit against digit against digit the possibility for every meaning. Between the zero and the one, the world.

⁸ Heidegger, p. 43.