



# The ear, the eye, the tongue and the print:

Olga Sankey and the visuality of language

Olga Sankey *Glossolalia 2009*, inkjet print, 48 x 100 cm

*'I discovered that in China the art of writing and that of painting are closely interlocked by history and aesthetic values and I knew that I could not begin to understand one without the other.'* IAN FAIRWEATHER

**by Pamela Zeplin**  
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In Judaeo-Christian culture, unlike Chinese or Islamic traditions, visual and written languages have rarely been an intimate terms. This applies at least since 1440 when Gutenberg's press began deluging the world with printed text. As with so many other binaries and boundaries of enlightenment rationalism, language and image know their places; these are in specialised disciplines from where they rarely converge. And despite our screen-saturated society, the 'politics of seeing' determines that sense-making rather than sensation is invested with value and authority. Consequently, language tends to denote universally fixed meanings that are sternly policed through systems of grammar. Fortunately, humans are untidy and unpredictable creatures and these most fortified borders will invariably leak or spurt if not properly patrolled. Over thirty years Adelaide-based artist Olga Sankey has exploited this potentially porous terrain, deploying various printmaking techniques to resist and subvert the received authority of language and other social institutions, not least, religion. Unique among art forms, the print's history, grounded as it is in both visual imagery and written text, as well as its capacity for replication, provides an ideal platform for these incursions. Additionally, print titles and images share pictorial space, allowing both to be 'read' at the same time. This immediacy, Sankey explains, 'provides the artist with a wonderful opportunity to set up a dialogue between word and image'; her titles regularly determine form and content.

Sankey enjoys a prominent national exhibition and education profile, having graduated from the South Australian School of Art in 1980. This was followed by studies in Italy, where although lithography became her 'medium of choice' for the next decade and a half, often in combination with intaglio processes. From 2001 she focused on digital prints and relief etchings, large format works or large composite images. The artist explains: 'hauling rocks takes its toll eventually... Working digitally allows Sankey to 'physically dissect text and pre-present it in layers', a feature of much recent work. Among her numerous qualifications, an English literature degree introduced her to 'Theatre of the Absurd' where she was drawn to modernist writers such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Roland Barthes, Italo Calvino, and poet, Ted Hughes, all of whom who extended language beyond functionality and description.

The authority of language is targeted by Sankey's armoury of deconstructive tactics as she prizes apart apparently normalised operations of powerful social institutions. While these structures are taken for granted in daily monolingual life, the artist's childhood as a multilingual immigrant was steeped in Czech, English and Latin — 'the language of conquests' and Roman Catholic oppression. In their totality, Sankey's linguistic experiences revealed the inherent arbitrariness that occurs in slips and seepages between language and its myriad interpretations. She also discovered these disparities give rise to confusion, chance, irony and humour, possibilities that resonate — darkly and/or absurdly — throughout her oeuvre. A visual interpretation of 'p-on-er' in the Czech Marek's household, for instance, saw that great Aussie icon held up to the organ of hearing, always accompanied by great mirth.

Within Sankey's practice, language may exist as familiar words or as illegible, language-like inscriptions — pretend text. She explains this approach makes manifest the philosophical weight of text that normally escapes everyday notation, 'as soon as text or words are present in an artwork, the issue of their materiality must be considered in relation to the overall meaning of the work'.

Recurring images of language and social authority surface across Sankey's practice in various intertextual and ambiguous permutations. In *Irregular Verbs #1* (1996, etching), for example, fake Latin graffiti inscriptions and recurring shield forms reference metal weaponry and conquest. Thirteen years later the inscriptions return as quasi alchemical texts, embellishing a suite of disembodied tongues in *Glossolalia* (2009, inkjet print). The shield shapes also allude to inscribed Aboriginal breastplates that were 'awarded' during colonial regimes as ludicrous badges of office or contractual agreements; these were as unintelligible to — and exploitative of — their wearers as official language can be today.

Olga Sankey *Irregular Verbs #1* 1996, etching, 29.5 x 63 cm

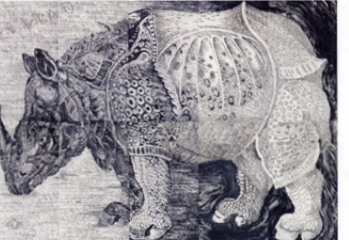


Olga Sankey *TENET 1999*, etching/etched metal plates, 130 x 380 cm

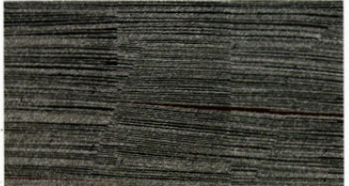
Reinforcing this message is the central red 'shield' of *Irregular Verbs #1*, which also invites interpretation as a mask, a bloodied flint-axe or a [sharp] scarlet tongue. Flanked on one side by an enigmatic tribal-like 'weapon', the shield also features scrawled Latin conjugations denoting power (to be able to) — 'potēs', 'possim' etc.; first person 'possim', however, is scratched out, 'under erasure'. Sankey revisits the metal/military theme with *TENET* [etching/etched metal plates], an audacious 1999 rendition of Dürer's 1515 woodcut of an armour-plated rhinoceros. For Sankey, this work represents a 'watershed' of realisation about 'the power of words and images to shape our perception of reality'. An absurdly inaccurate image created from second-hand information rather than observation, it nevertheless defined the animal for centuries and was blindly accepted as an article of faith, a tenet. Now exhibited so as to suggest an open book, Sankey places the paper print head to head with its metal etching plates. The front end of this mirrored beast gradually metamorphoses into highly detailed and 'tonally substantial' veracity, as the eye moves leftwards from the rhino's rump. This rear section is inscribed with 'graphic marks resembling writing and brings to mind the enduring institutional mythologies that upheld Dürer's so-called 'truth'.

As well as biting social critique, an aching beauty also resides in the cracks and crevices formed by Sankey's painstaking exploration of language and meaning. In a deliberate attempt to play with negative space between words, sentences and lines, a series of works including the digital print *Indulgence* (2001) presents extraordinary, undulating, and even epic landscapes of language. These result from a grueling and poignant repetition of hand-written puns or graphic marks resembling arbitrary DNA codes. Recalling primitive chalk 'lines' on classroom blackboards or the endless reciting of rosaries, their very compulsiveness invokes a hypnotically meditative effect. Within this pervasive quietude what's not said therefore becomes important. Negative spaces between the elements of language are now energised as rivulets and patterns, to be read as fascinating and indeterminate drawings.

In 1998 Sankey noted that 'text and image bounce off each other' in the 'luxury of experimentation that the digital process offers' the contemporary printmaker'. The prints discussed here represent only a small selection of Sankey's comprehensive research into the visually and vulnerability of language. From degraded text fragments (he said/she said, 2004, inkjet print) to deconstructed personal column advertisements (I wish you were here, 1998, a set of eight digital 'postcards'), her works are typically configured as triptychs and diptychs. This strategy literally creates different perspectives and double/triple dialogues within each print, as well as multiple conversations between print and audience. As with the complex operations of language, many voices and positions participate in constructing meaning. This is ironically underscored by Sankey's word puzzles on glass, such as the *Doubletake* series (2006), which may only be read from a fixed position.



Olga Sankey *Indulgence Detail 2001*, inkjet print, 24 x 216 cm

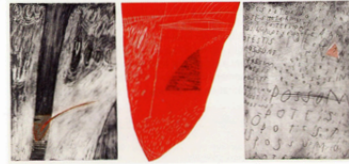


Olga Sankey *Forked tongue 2007*, inkjet print, 24 x 216 cm

The tongue is very much at the heart of Sankey's linguistic odyssey in *Forked tongue* (2007) and *Glossolalia* (2009). The latter encapsulates the tricky business attending inflated language and its mis-readings. Thirteen ghostly 'tongues' are dramatised by insistent waves of Latin-like text, free-ranging across the black velvety fields of a triptych. To a monolingual viewer the incantation 'koronik-kakiriki-kukeleku-cocoric' might suggest the speaking-in-tongues of Pentecostal ecstasy or alchemical mysticism. For the multi-lingual viewer, however, the message holds less reverence; these words translate as 'cock-a-doodle-doo' in various languages. As Sankey reminds us in so many ways, language and social institutions can be as amusing as they are elusive; finally, we are left with mumbo jumbo and a babble of chook noises. Ironically, it often takes the visual arts to reveal these threat — and small — unspoken untruths.

**References**

1. B. Hooks, 'Art is for everybody', cited in T. Foster & K. Prevallet (eds), 'Apple of the mind', *Third mind: Creative writing through visual art*, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, New York, 2002, p. 3. Online: Accessed July 21 2009. [Material World: A Journal of Text and Image Studies](http://www.material-world.com/Writing/Foster.htm).
2. All following quotations are by Olga Sankey, in conversation with the author, July 2009 unless otherwise indicated.
3. Marek was Sankey's birth name.
4. G. Sankey, 'Visible language: An investigation of the potential of printed and written text to function as a visual element in the construction of an artwork', unpublished Master of Creative Arts Exhibition, Curtin University of Technology, 2002, p. 38.
5. G. Sankey, 1998. *Cited in C. Speck*, 'Three South Australian digital printmakers', *MPRINT*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Autumn 1998, p. 27.



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