

WORDS MEAN EVERYTHING: THE POETRY OF EDWIN SCHLOSSBERG

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Theoretical Introduction: the Poet's Main Themes and his Ways with Words

Edwin Schlossberg's poetry is a large, intricate body of work which the poet has enriched by the inclusion of gestures and colors, and by the treatment of words and letters as visually significant, as images as well as symbolic cyphers. The art historian and critic John Russell pointed out that Schlossberg is not content with the stillness and passivity of the printed word ("Deep See Poems by Edwin Schlossberg").¹ Schlossberg himself has said that "[...] one of the reasons I do my work is because I want to bring attention to the fact that words are not an invisible medium through which an author talks directly to the reader" (Baker, "An Artist on Art"). Accordingly, Schlossberg first of all chooses his supports for their qualities of activity and visibility; many of the poems are on surfaces other than paper: the supports include aluminum, acetate, plexiglass, vinyl, copper and Scotch Brite. These supports transform both meaning and the experience of reading, making unique signifying artifacts in which content is inseparable from form. Reflectivity for example, is a property of many of the supports, resulting in the viewer's image literally being in the surface of the poems thus dramatizing (because it makes an image of) the viewer's presence in the generation of the poems' contents. As Russell observed: "The experience of reading the poems is inseparable from the experience of the individual medium which was chosen for each of them" ("Words" 31).² Schlossberg has exhibited his

¹ The most significant article on Schlossberg is Russell's "Words," *Art International*, Vol. XIV/5, 20 May, 1970, 31, which discusses Schlossberg's *WordsWordsWords*, published in 1968 by Universal Art Editions Limited. This important artist's book, consisting of seventeen poems with a preface by Robert Rauschenberg, was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum shortly after its publication. No less an intellect than a poet, Schlossberg received Masters (1969) and Ph.D. (1971) degrees from an interdisciplinary program at Columbia in the history of science and the history of literature. His dissertation, "Einstein and Beckett: An Imaginary Dialogue" was written under the supervision of John Unterecker and was published as a book of the same title by Links Books (1973) with a good preface by Unterecker. In 1970 Schlossberg exhibited at the Leo Castelli Gallery and in 1978 he was given the first of thirteen solo exhibitions by Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, the most recent being in October 2014. In addition, Schlossberg has exhibited at the Toledo Museum of Art (2003), Grey Art Gallery, New York University (1981), the Corcoran Gallery of Art (1978), the Cincinnati Art Museum (1978), the Museum of Modern Art (1974), the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University (1971) and The Jewish Museum, New York (1968).

² Schlossberg's work has similarities to the concrete poetry movement in terms of its use of unorthodox support materials and typographies that themselves carry meaning. On the history of concrete poetry see especially Jackson, Voss and Drucker (1996).

poems regularly since 1978 at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Often large in scale (sometimes several feet in length and width) and displayed on the walls of the gallery bathed in light, the poems have the appearance and impact of large drawings.

Perhaps partly because Schlossberg's work is hybrid poetry and visual art it has not received adequate critical attention from either the literary community or the art world. Also, throughout his career the materials and formats of Schlossberg's poems have changed almost with every exhibition, thus making it challenging to keep pace with the evolution of his means and purposes.³ In this essay on Schlossberg's use of synesthesia it is necessary first to provide a context for its understanding in the poet's major and recurring ideas, idioms and attitudes toward words. Only then will the uniqueness of Schlossberg's employment of cross-sensory imagery and his discursive elaborations of synesthesia's significance be fully intelligible because they will then be visible in relation to his poetic vision and purposes seen comprehensively and as part of his abiding intentions.

In one of his poems Schlossberg uses the phrase "poetry of insight", a pun that refers both to the conceptual content of his work and to the imminence of reaching its meanings (Schlossberg, "W" *Conscious Alphabet*). Throughout his work, thought itself is a recurring subject; and also recurring is the poet's abiding concern for expressing his caring for his readers, specifically for their understanding of his thoughts and their own. In this connection one of the key themes in Schlossberg's poems centers on the idea of the inevitability of subjectivity in the creation of meaning. As he puts it: "Probably the single most important thing in learning by verbal means is to pay attention to the fact that one is both the observer to and the creator of the experience in the words." (Baker, "An Artist on Art").⁴ Because meaning is necessarily intersubjective (between reader and writer, or viewer and artist), whether in the experience of literature or art, (and also, Schlossberg believes, more generally), the paradigm of the individual's search for and attainment of objective truth is cast into radical doubt. What matters is what WE know, or more precisely, what we experience intersubjectively as knowledge.⁵

Furthermore, what we know is transient, as transient as the moments of connection between those doing the knowing, and as transient as thoughts themselves, which appear only for a time at the

³ I am grateful for this insight to Ronald Feldman, (conversation of 18 Oct, 2014).

⁴ John Unterecker, in his introduction to *Einstein and Beckett*, has a good discussion of Schlossberg's ideas about subjectivity.

⁵ To the inevitability of the impermanence of ideas and their subjective basis must be added, as among Schlossberg's main concerns, his commitment to celebrating values and significances larger than self and his belief in the immanence of the possibility of achieving profundity.

surface of consciousness, or in the public realm of ideas, only to sooner or later evaporate from the mind of the individual, or be superseded intellectually, socially or culturally. This is why, for Schlossberg, it is the act and process of knowing, not the attainment of the known, that matters most. The concept of the known, like Julia Kristeva's concept of archivism or archivistic language (7, 15), Schlossberg holds to be misleading because it suggests that language and the attainments of epistemology reflect permanent truths.

To reach the meanings in Schlossberg's poetry and the full significance of all his means and devices including synesthesia it is necessary to become acquainted not only with his key themes but also with his unique approaches to words themselves. Schlossberg's ways reveal an unexpected relationship between the self of the poet and his choice of words. It is more often a process of Schlossberg finding meanings in words (and parts of words) as one discovers truths about the natural world than it is his choosing words to match up with and express pre-thought but as-yet-to-be- verbalized meaning-intentions of his self (as an ego). In this sense, words are "out there" in the world as natural objects, rather than being non-entity (or empty) cyphers whose significances lie totally and merely in their intended and controlled referents.⁶

But paradoxically something like an opposite of seeing words "with the disinterested curiosity of an astro-physicist" is also part of his ways with words. Language is a discovered reality in the world outside the ego of the poet, yet also language constructs, i.e. gives pattern and form to the world from within the poet's mind and spirit.⁷ Only thirdly does language stand between the poet and the world imitating or reflecting that world as it is customarily or commonly understood to do.

Notwithstanding his paradigmatic shifts in the consideration and use of language, Schlossberg also frequently chooses to communicate in more familiar poetic forms and idioms. For example, such passages as the following from the *Knowing Not Known* series (exhibited at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, in 1997) exemplify what the poet himself referred to as "weightless lyricism":

⁶ How different this stance is from what we see across the social/cultural panorama when it comes to the use of words, where it is usual, even nearly ubiquitous, to control words on behalf of the self for the sake of supposed mastery of the world and "fulfillment".

⁷ For a beautifully articulated line of thought on this matter see Ernst Cassirer's criticism of the mimetic theory of language in "Language and the Construction of the World of Objects", (*Cassirer: The Warburg Years* 335).

Your map of the stars /
 The field with the trees /
 Your child's hand (From "Lenses", 28-30).

I wrote about moonlight settling on the sea like a wish (From "Perception", 29).

Struggles are outside the boundaries /
 But they are there, inventions for tomorrow /
 Flowers for another wind (From "Stillness", 29-32).

In summary, Schlossberg's poetry is a "poetry of insight" in which both radically new and traditional means serve to connect the poet and his readers together in the celebration of the many dimensions of subjectivity, the closeness of the present and its promise, the collective capacity of all of us beyond individualism and the stunning immanence of nature. To the poet's various means can be added his use of synesthetic devices, which, however, Schlossberg conceives of and employs in ways consistent with his own unique poetic purposes and at variance with most uses of synesthesia by other poets of note. Consistent with his emphasis on insight, conceptually significant references to synesthesia outweigh particular instances of cross-sensory imagery.

Synesthesia in Schlossberg's Poetry: General Overview

Multi-sensory poetic constructions are different than cross-sensory ones; they are not necessarily synesthetic; and by some definitions, including the one preferred by this author, they are not authentically synesthetic at all. Even as there are many multi-sensory combinations in Schlossberg's work, for example, the printing of words in colors, and the interspersing of words with representational drawings or abstract gestures (as in the *Conscious Alphabet* series) I will not consider them in this essay. Schlossberg does however employ a variety of genuinely synesthetic devices as strategies to bring his meanings to the reader. Similes and metaphors, conceptual articulations of the poetic/philosophical significances of synesthetic capacity and experience, and even the use of a medium in the creation of the works themselves that provokes a synesthetic experience for the viewer all occur in the poems, where they are testimony to the poet's interest in the cross-sensory.

Visual-auditory crossovers like the following from Schlossberg's "To See Into The Intricacy" (from *Knowing Not Known*) are familiar territory to anyone familiar with synesthesia:

Even casual glances over the horizon /
grey and white mixed whispers of red (25-26).

Even more compelling visual-auditory crossovers can be found in “With hands without thought” (from: *Maps Songs Lenses*, exhibited at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, in 1987):

a thought [...] and twice we heard it /
It became starlight (9, 11-12).

and in “Intention” (from *Knowing Not Known*):

and we [...] stare back at the void /
in earnest, in whispers (12-13).

Also to be found in Schlossberg’s poems are tactile-olfactory crossovers:

A fire is started [...] we sit one after the other /
And stare as the flames splash into the air without other light we toss stones pieces of
wood smell the heat (from: “Clarity,” 30-31, *Knowing Not Known*).

Schlossberg’s interest in synesthesia can be found in discursive passages in the poems about synesthesia as well as in instances of its use. In one remarkable passage from *Knowing Not Known* Schlossberg expresses his convictions and feelings about the relationship between synesthetic experience and the creative insight of genius:

IMAGINE just being born...every signal crosses light sound smell but stays as a single impulse /
not knowing not being joined every small thing feels like the ocean / to separate one
thing, one impulse from another only happens after a while /
soon, sooner than you can differentiate, parts emerge and you reintegrate them /
learning is not adding but differentiating and singing /
genius returns to the ocean but with a timeless vibration everyone can share /
the effort to realize the range of the universe /
is the effort to listen with everyone’s ear and as your own (From “Imagine”, 7-14).

In the above passage Schlossberg suggests that genius needs to recapture the absolute and synesthetic freshness of perception/apprehension that prevails in infants’ experience; that is, genius needs total freedom from the routine differentiations and conceptualizations that ostensibly mark and partially

constitute the development of self but which actually undercut it.⁸ Furthermore, as is expressed in lines 7 and 14 above, if a particular product of genius is genuine then everyone can share it because everyone has in common first, synesthetic experiences with their intensities and pre-conceptual freedoms when “every signal crosses.” It is as though the insight was apprehended not by one person for himself but by everyone and for all. In this latter respect, the poetic concept is very similar to one in the poem “Intelligence,” also from the *Knowing Not Known* series:

the lense of intelligence associates processes and holds them in pattern only to then
disassociate by changing /
the evolution is measured in the degree of complexity of the pattern /
complexity is measured in the extent and range of implication of the metaphor employed /
and in the number of people who can share in the pattern depicted (4-7).

For Schlossberg it is in the very nature of intelligence and genius to be sharable and here we learn that their level or magnitude seems directly proportional to the number of people doing the sharing; that is, in a sense intelligence and genius are communal rather than individual, and the larger the community the better.

In “Intelligence” Schlossberg refers to how a given stage in the evolution of intelligence can be measured: “the evolution is measured in the degree of complexity of the pattern”. The term “evolution” is important here. Several times in his poems Schlossberg refers to Ludwig Boltzmann, a late 19th-early 20th Century theoretical physicist and philosopher of science who was a significant influence on the formation of Einstein’s thought. In Boltzmann’s lectures, some of which were delivered at the Vienna Philosophical Society in the first years of the 20th Century, he decried what he regarded as the dismaying tendency in metaphysics and epistemology to search for, and make claims that there are unchanging, “once and for all” truths, such as the hypotheses about the necessary and eternally present categories of the mind propounded by Kant in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Blackmore passim).⁹ For Boltzmann, mankind’s thinking about reality must and will necessarily evolve as his interactions with his environment become more effective (Feyerabend 334-35). This idea is very similar to Schlossberg’s many articulations of the idea that the products of thought are best regarded as changing, i.e. dynamic,

⁸ On some of the various ideas of genius prominent in the history of the concept see Penelope Murray, ed., *Genius: The History of an Idea*, 1989, especially the essays on Shakespeare and Goethe.

⁹ In the above sense Boltzmann can be seen as a pioneer of the movement in theory of knowledge called evolutionary epistemology, a philosophical elaboration similar to Schlossberg’s position. See especially Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach* 66-67.

rather than permanent, i.e. static and thus an unfortunate ballast on the evolution of thinking.¹⁰ For Schlossberg this evolution is connected to synesthesia because the evolving insights contain more and more fresh awareness brought back from the ocean and fewer and fewer constricting, archivistic thought forms. In this connection, his poetic expansion of the number of senses from five to six makes sense (pun intended) in relation to adaptation:

Seeing hearing smelling tasting touching orienting /
 six senses orienting is a sense pattern detecting strategy /
 that I think is as helpful as a description as the rest /
 moving around these are the categories my cellular self /
 uses to translate the world (From: "Perception," 3-5, *Knowing Not Known*).

It takes imagination, specifically scientific imagination, to create such a sixth sense:

dreaming of a different sense /
 beyond those familiar /
 gathered by logic /
 placed within our understanding (From: "Of what use a sign" 10-13, *Deep See Poems*).

For Schlossberg, the cross-sensory analogies of synesthesia are far from being ends in themselves; they do not merely provide the reader with intensified sensuous experience for its own sake, as in the writings of Baudelaire, Hausmann or E.T.A. Hoffmann, but rather are means to ends above the sensuous realm. To bring into greater focus the intellectuality of Schlossberg's synesthesia, a contrast with the Romantic poet Shelley, who employs synesthesia "to betoken spiritual elevation and order" made possible by "a fusion of sensuous and spiritual experience, is useful (O'Malley 176).¹¹ For Shelley, "harmony of the

¹⁰ Unterecker discusses Schlossberg's awareness of the impermanence of all views of reality: "what we call reality has throughout man's history been involved in an almost constant redefinition. Each time man has learned more about the nature of the earth, the solar system and the galaxies, he has found himself forced to reexamine his ideas about the structure of being itself" (VII).

¹¹ In his introduction, O'Malley surveys early discussions of Shelley's use of "intersense analogy" from his contemporary critics in the early 19th Century through the Victorian period and into the first half of the 20th Century. Almost all very negative, these criticisms and commentaries, seeing the poet's use of synesthesia as "stylistic anarchy" and "symptomatic of psychological and spiritual disorder", offer an interesting glimpse at the early marginalization of synesthesia in part seemingly motivated by Victorian strictures. For an example of the imposition of such strictures see Babbitt passim.

senses” provides access by analogy to “world harmony both human and natural” (Ibid 175, 32). In passages from Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound”:

As the bare green hill /
 When some soft cloud vanishes into rain, /
 Laughs with a thousand drops of sunny water/
 To the unpavilioned sky! (181-184)

Realms where the air we breathe is love, /
 Which in the winds and on the waves doth move, /
 Harmonizing this earth with what we feel above. (95-97)

Shelley “lets intersensory perception symbolize the rare spiritual elevation needed to hear [the] mystical harmony” (Ibid 59). In contrast, often Schlossberg’s conception is not in the end like Shelley’s, a vision of an absolute, symphonic order of nature existing independently of the human mind, even less a blissful state of mind resulting from such a vision¹², but rather is a path to original insight and discovery:

Amidst the hardest struggle to assemble /
 a picture reflective of the passion /
 and wonder to discover, my hands ache /
 my legs are exhausted, and pushing outward /
 my senses must close, cross and reassemble
 (From “Discover” 33-37, *Knowing Not Known*).

For Shelley, the inanimate (the bare green hill) becomes animate (it laughs) and the most cherished human emotion (love) becomes the very air we breathe and is therefore just as essential to life. The auditory-visual synesthetic crossover (laughing is metaphorically compared to the sparkle of the sun in droplets of water) and the crossover from a kinesthetic sensation (breathing) to an emotional one (love) serve to melt away sensory distinctions and build toward the experience of mystically apprehended unity (“harmonizing the earth with what we feel above”). But Schlossberg longs to struggle to make

¹² An overview of the writing on synesthesia as a literary strategy suggests that the goals of the strategy are most often explained as mystical in nature. An interesting example of this tendency can be found in a detailed study by Viola Gananian: *The Ultimate Meaning of Synesthesia: E.T.A. Hoffmann (1776-1822) and Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867)*. Gananian claims that “the metaphysical drive for harmony of being [...] is the ultimate offspring of the psychological state of synesthesia” (32). For a more sophisticated treatment of this idea see Erhardt-Siebold (1932 and 1931-32). By contrast, Schlossberg’s texts would seem to show that Kuspit (68) is wrong to refer to the poet as a mystic.

a picture of the world (not to receive one that is mystically given) which is achieved as a result of maintaining contact with his “passion and wonder to discover”; that is, with uncompromised curiosity and uncontrolled by preconceptions about reality. This accomplishment entails synesthetic crossovers (“my senses must close, cross”) but for Schlossberg these make possible a different kind of contact with the world than Shelley’s, a contact more like that attained by scientific imagination.

There is another respect in which Schlossberg’s apprehension of synesthesia could not be further from the mysticism of Shelley or the cross-sensory personal phantasmagorias of Baudelaire and E.T.A.Hoffmann. For Schlossberg it is a question not only of the radical reframing of the nature of thought but also of his desire to open roads of connection between peoples’ awarenesses to create collectivities of understanding. A remarkable synesthetic transfer from sight to sound in his work can serve to epitomize his social purpose; in a poem from the recent *From Here* series the following simile occurs:

[...] the light on the buildings and lakes /
 were lit like the last act of a stubborn opera that /
 sounded like how we all sing when we long for /
 change (From “I Saw The Beginning Of Something” 16-19).

Even though the simile crosses over to the auditory to enrich the description of something seen, it is far from an indulgence for its own sake in sensuous extravagance. Rather, it reveals that the poet hears the possibility of social change in light (for him a constant source of, and frequent metaphor for, insight or insight possibility). This cross-sensory reach makes the possibility of change seem more imminent: the vision of its possibility, like a suffusing light, emerges everywhere. This is hardly similar to Baudelaire’s famous line from “Correspondences”: “like the sweetness of oboes,” — a simile that seeks to access a new quality of sensory experience by opening up sensory boundaries.

In another visual-auditory crossover, the concluding verse paragraph in “Like Light” from the *Deep See* series, Schlossberg leads his reader through an experience of synesthetic intensity to insight (metaphorically), the lights in peoples’ eyes (literally), and the necessity of the unbroken pursuit of both:

You are listening to a symphony /
 being in a room /
 flowing with constellations /
 shining and flickering /
 count on the lights in your eyes /
 there is no intermission. (15-20)

Touching Changes: Synesthesia in the Fort Meyers Mural

In 1981 Schlossberg created *Touching Changes*, (Figs. 1 and 2), a mural for the Art Wall at the Barbara B. Mann Performing Art Center in South Fort Myers, Florida. Curated by Robert Rauschenberg, the installation was painted directly onto a wall with materials that included liquid crystal. Spectators were encouraged to touch the mural, which changed colors in response to the warmth of their touch and recorded the shapes made by the pressure of their contact. The mural's response to the interaction with the spectators was synesthetic in that it automatically translated from the tactile to the visual. The spectators' response to their interaction with the mural gave them an experience beyond sensory compartmentalization suggesting perhaps to the youngest among them that such cross-sensory occurrences are a matter of course. To be sure, *Touching Changes*, with its sponged-on surfaces of liquid crystal, as Schlossberg said: "enabled peoples' presence to change the work" (Savko 1D, 3D). The spectators were even encouraged to press their bodies on the mural. Schlossberg's strategy here was to employ synesthetic experience to dramatize the spectators' creation of the content of the work itself in interaction with it. And what is "touching" is the change in the viewers as they become aware of their contribution to the meaning of the work. Once again for this poet it is a question of the celebration of subjectivity and the inevitability of its presence in experience.

Schlossberg also used liquid crystal as a material in *Warm Memories*, a series of twelve poems created in 1981 and exhibited that year at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. This series of works, created with conte crayon, pencil and liquid crystal, was drawn on dark paper, which makes the words and gestures stand forward as "lights" (i.e., insights) against their background. As was the case with *Touching Changes*, the viewers of the exhibition were encouraged to "please touch the works of art". In the poems of this series many of the words themselves refer to the process of being read by the viewer and literally transformed by the viewer's touch. In "Touching Relation" (Fig. 3) occurs the phrase "For You I Am Invisible." Here Schlossberg means that the self of the poet is invisible because it is the viewer who has created the very meaning of the words through touching them. The words could not mean what they mean (or even exist as they are) without the viewer, and this is why the poem concludes with the phrase "As I Am," that is, the poet is invisible as he is, like an unknowable Kantian noumena behind the creation of the work, unreachable because of the viewer's overriding contribution to its meaning.

In "Beneath Around" (Fig. 4), also from the *Touching Changes* series, the phrases "Reveal No Edges" and "Spreading Present" describe the transformations of the words when touched into soft, almost organic and growing clouds of color (nonetheless still legible as words) created by the viewer's physical warmth. Edges for Schlossberg are arbitrary, both perceptually and conceptually;



Fig. 1: Edwin Schlossberg. *Touching Changes—Fort Myers Mural*. 1981. (Full View). Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

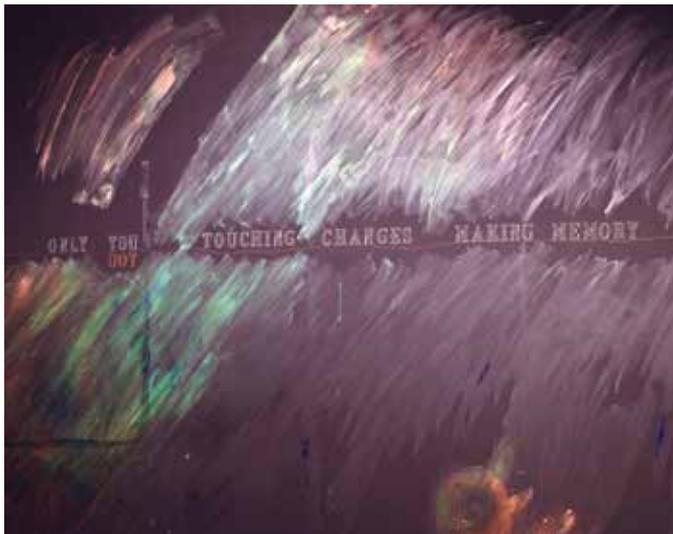


Fig. 2: Edwin Schlossberg. *Touching Changes-Fort Myers Mural*. 1981. (Detail of left side). Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

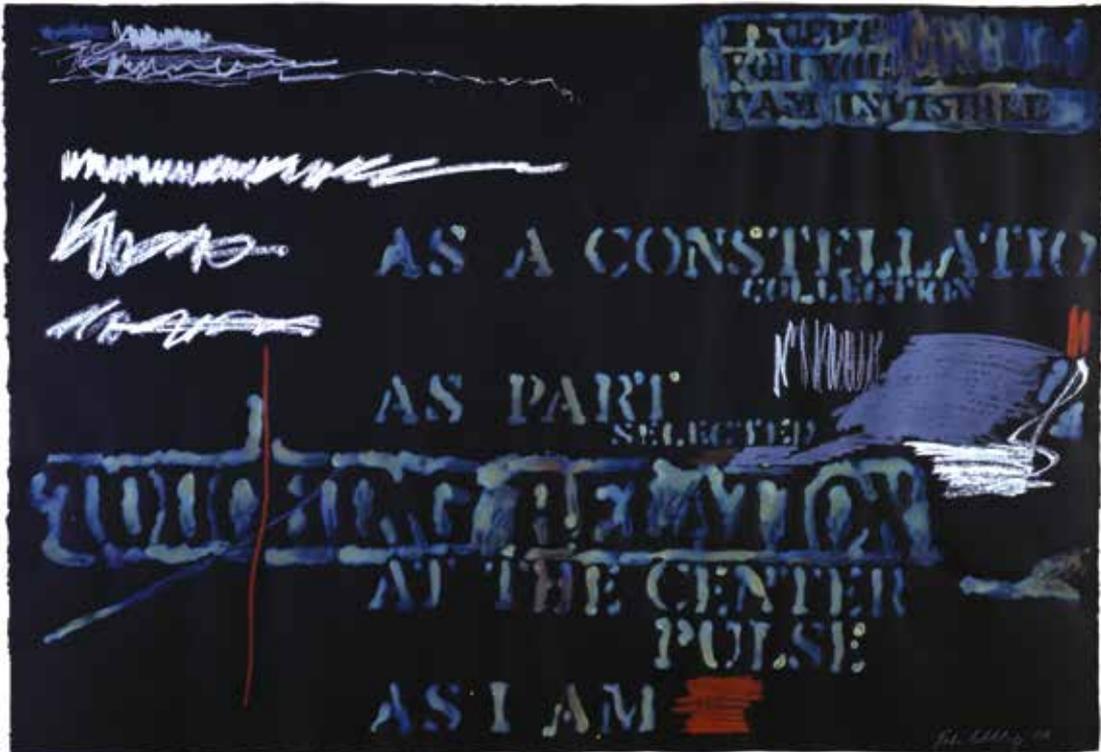


Fig. 3: Edwin Schlossberg. “Touching Relation” (from the *Touching Changes* series). 1981. Conte crayon, pencil and liquid crystal on paper, 30" x 43 ¾". Photo: Zindman/Fremont. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

things no more than people need not be seen as separate from one another, and the viewer’s touch in softening edges underscores this point kinesthetically, synesthetically and visually. The phrase “vanishing limits stories” (which typographically reads as a syntactical branch: “vanishing limits” and/or “vanishing stories,” depending on which “fork in the road” one takes) refers to the liberating consequences of overcoming edges and boundaries in every sense. And the present is spreading in additional senses: the possibility of living in the present is enhanced by the realization of the arbitrariness of edges, and this possibility is a gift (i.e., a present).

In another poem in the series, “On Into,” the concluding phrase “gather expanding lines” refers both to the transformation of the words and letters as their edges dissolve in response to the reader’s touch and to the conceptual expansion of their meaning, while “lines” refers to both the words’ and letters’ physical boundaries and edges and to the lines of the poem. And “gather” implores the reader to reap the harvest of the realization of expanded possibilities. Thus in the *Touching Changes* series Schlossberg created a kind of synesthetic ultimate in viewer participation which he then explores thematically.

Kinesthesia and Synesthesia in Schlossberg’s Poetry; Kinesthesia as a Sixth Sense

Schlossberg has said “it is important to me to consider reading as both a metaphysical and kinesthetic experience” (Baker, “An Artist on Art”). As we have seen, he regards metaphysical ideas as impermanent at best. However, his poetry is filled

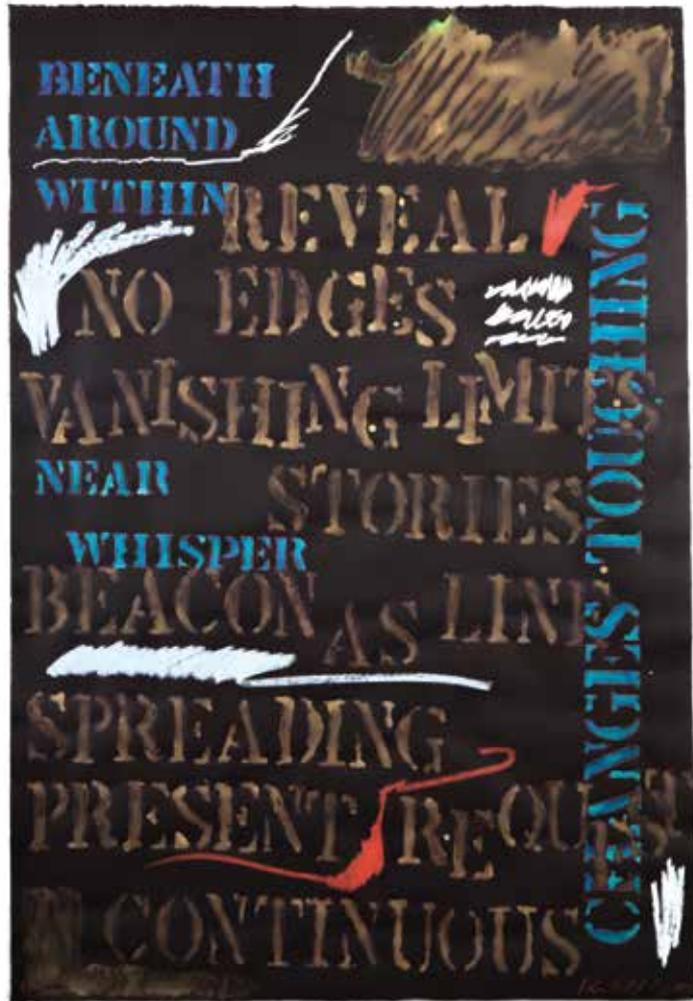


Fig. 4: Edwin Schlossberg. “Beneath Around” (from the *Touching Changes* series). 1981. Conte crayon, pencil and liquid crystal on paper, 43 ¾" x 30". Photo: Casey Dorobek. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

with opportunities for the reader to experience the texts kinesthetically. In this respect the *Tidal Gestures* series (exhibited at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, in 1990) is an epitome. In the works of this series Schlossberg has applied fragments of vinyl letters to panels or sheets of transparent plexiglass suspended behind one another, the effect resembling in a general way the appearance of hanging Asian scroll paintings were they transparent (Baker, "Edwin Schlossberg at Feldman" 53). Parts of each letter have been placed on each transparent plane so that the words cohere and can be read only when the viewer faces the poems straight on. When viewed from oblique angles the alignment of letter parts changes and the words transform entropically into insistently abstract patterns of suspended shapes. Schlossberg has long employed this format. For example, in 1978 he created a predecessor to the *Tidal Gestures* series, "Where Light Revises," made of lettrasign on three vertically positioned vinyl sheets suspended one behind the other (Figs. 5 and 6). In considering all the works of this format the reader is asked to re-assemble letters and words from the abstract patterns of fragments. In this way Schlossberg makes his point about the subjective construction of meaning by his use of the concrete force of words and their components: the reader's synthesizing the letters and words stands for his or her contributing conceptually to the very sense of the words. For example, in "Where Light Revises" the last two lines of the first verse paragraph can be made out as "Today Tomorrow Is Between," a celebration of the "is" as what **is**: a full experience of the moment (Fig. 5). But from oblique angles these lines cannot be made out as letters and words (Fig. 6). If the reader were to approach this poem in a gallery the experience would be one of coming upon something that at first made no sense but gradually did make sense when approached "straight on" in both the physical and conceptual senses; so the reader and Schlossberg together make the very words as well as their meanings.

In the *Tidal Gestures* series and its predecessors Schlossberg arrived at what could be considered a third general stage in the evolution of words, the first stage being the pictographic, in which the forms of the words resemble or image the things in the world they stand for, and the second being the symbolic, in which the words are arbitrary cyphers standing for, by conceptual agreement, their referents. In Schlossberg's third stage the fragmentation of the words and letters creates a kinesthetic experience in which the reader's efforts to reassemble the fragments into legibility is analogous to the effortful conceptual process of deciphering or making their meaning out and also the very process of making or creating meaning as a reader. This experience dramatizes the conceptual process through its analogies to perception: the poems are kinesthetic dramatizations of the gradual and often difficult

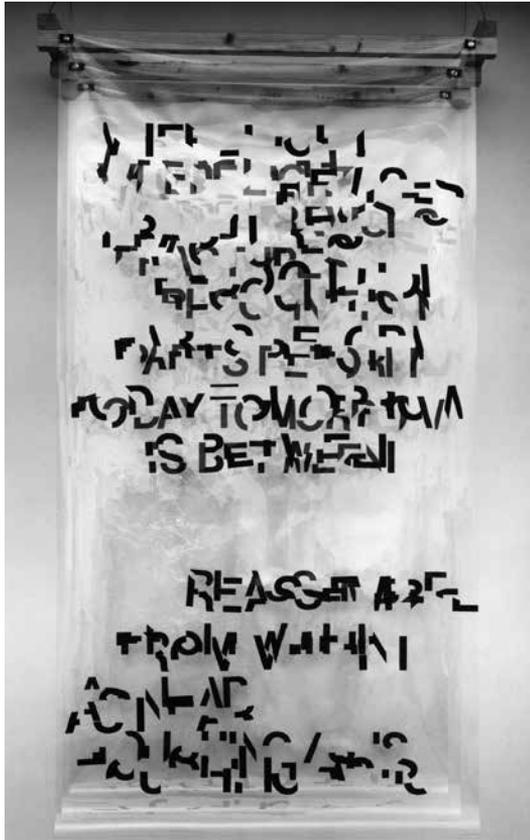


Fig. 5: Edwin Schlossberg. "Where Light Revises". 1978. (Straight on view). Lettrasign on three vinyl pieces. Photo: Eeva-Inkeri. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

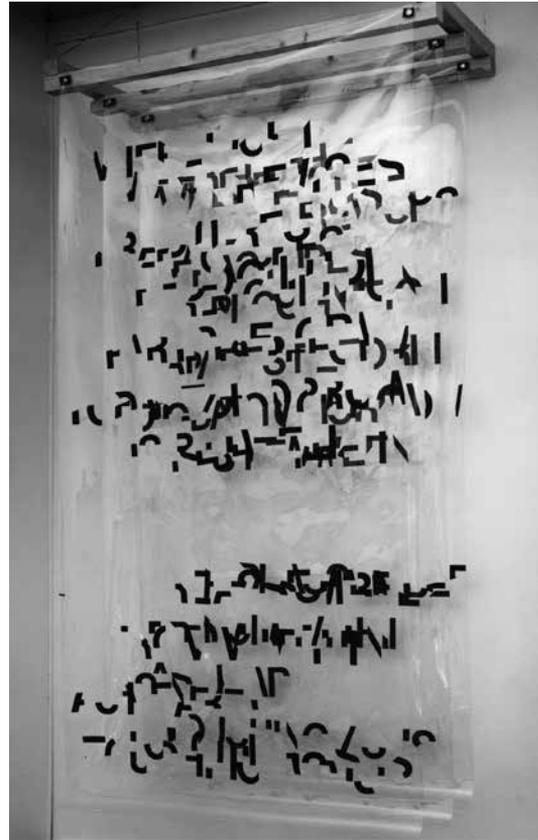


Fig. 6: Edwin Schlossberg. "Where Light Revises". 1978. (Oblique view). Lettrasign on three vinyl pieces. Photo: Eeva-Inkeri. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

process of attaining understanding conceptually.¹³ The poems are the very process of the experience of the readers reading them. “Fragments” (Fig. 7) is a good example:

Fragments
 form parts
 become words
 that catch
 in distance
 resolve
 thoughts
 into thinking

Because the fragmentation is insistent, in that once assembled by the reader the letters and words inevitably tend to break apart again, the kinesthetic experience also dramatizes the impermanence of thought (in general) and individual thoughts (in particular). This meaning is explicit in the iconic “These Words” (Fig. 8):

These words
 will fall
 apart
 to be sure
 in light of
 because of
 what is
 to become

Also, the kaleidoscopic shifts as the viewer’s perspective changes from “straight on” to oblique yield glimpses of compositions of arcs and gestures that are reminiscent of the geometrical intricacy of Analytic Cubism and of its multiple and shifting points of view (Baker Ibid). The poems in the *Tidal Gestures* series create meaning by a process similar to Analytic Cubism: breakup leads to breakthrough, as in “Fragments” (Fig. 7), where the complex and shifting composition is inseparable from the meaning it yields.

¹³ Charles Bernstein, co-editor of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, said in his book of essays *Contents Dream* (1986), that “language” writing, “rather than making the language as transparent as possible” moves toward denseness and opacity in order to “actually map the fullness of thought and its movement.” (Qtd. in Messerli 4).

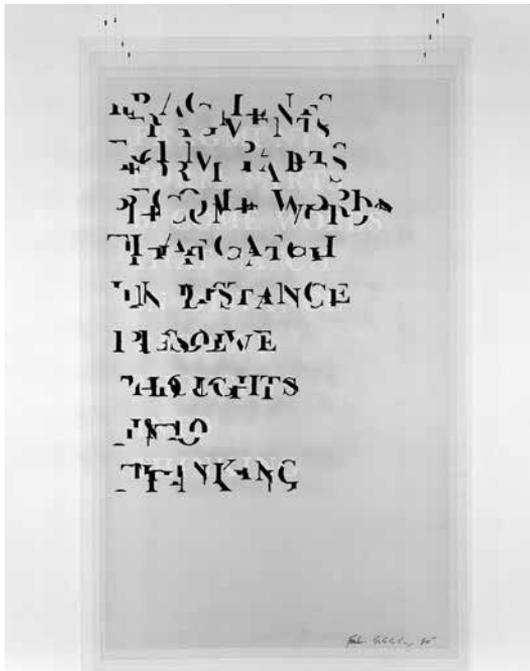


Fig. 7: Edwin Schlossberg. “Fragments” (from the *Tidal Gestures* series). 1990. Vinyl lettering on plexiglass, four panels, 60" x 36". Photo: Dennis Cowley. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

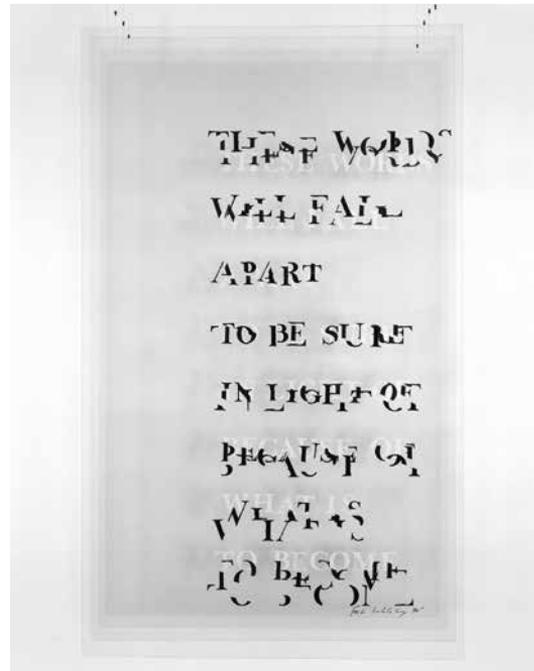


Fig. 8: Edwin Schlossberg. “These Words” (from the *Tidal Gestures* series). 1990. Vinyl lettering on plexiglass, four panels, 60" x 36". Photo: Dennis Cowley. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

If there is validity to the assertion that kinesthesia is a sixth sense, then Schlossberg’s *Tidal Gestures* series can be considered explicitly synesthetic in its crossing of the visual with body awareness or sentience¹⁴ Richard Cytowic asserts that “the sensory percepts are closer to the essence of what it

¹⁴ Dani Cavallaro, in *Synesthesia and the Arts*, writes of synesthesia in ways that expand the definition from the cross-sensory to the multi-sensory. For a discussion of the kinesthetic sense as a genuine sixth sense, as “a perception of motion and position,” see Fitt, *Dance Kinesiology*, 276-277. For a detailed, although somewhat turgid, narration of the development of the idea of kinesthesia as a sixth sense among 19th Century physiologists and the physicist and physician Hermann von Helmholtz, see Zeynep Celik, “Kinesthesia,” in Jones, ed., *Sensorium* 159-162.

is to perceive meaning than are semantic abstractions” (10). If this is so then the experience of the poems in Schlossberg’s *Tidal Gestures* series in the end offers more than kinesthetic dramatizations of the process of attaining understanding conceptually. They provide, through the nature of the reading processes they require, a richer, fuller experience of the very nature of attaining meaning.

Another high point of the supercharging of conceptual abstraction by means of perceptual, and even kinesthetic, contents in the words themselves and in the process of reading them is Schlossberg’s *Figure: Ground* series (exhibited at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, in 2000). In order to situate the poems of this series in the conceptual landscapes in which they belong, a comparison with the sculpture of David Smith is helpful. For Smith, placing his sculptures outdoors in a field at his Bolton Landing studio on Lake George was a way of putting his three-dimensional “drawing,” his gestures and forms, back with and into the nature of which he believed they were a part. Through the sculptures and around them, the natural prospects change with the spectator’s point of view, and these changes enrich infinitely the references and relationships of Smith’s creations to what lies outside and beyond them, in a sense bringing the environment inside the work of art.

What Smith accomplished with steel lines and forms is part of what Schlossberg accomplished with words in his *Figure: Ground* series. In these poems the words are stenciled onto and through the surfaces of large brass sheets; that is, the words are like open windows in a brass wall through which one can see to the outside, to the referents of the words! (Fig. 9). The linguistic symbols (i.e., the words) acquire their referents not by a process of conventional agreement but actually, physically, phenomenologically by being put out in the world (just as the world is put into them!).¹⁵ This format sets up a word/image dynamic (because what is visible through the words is seen both optically and conceptually) rich in possibilities for meaning. In fact, any word, in the format of these poems, can mean anything, an enriching liberation to be sure. Words mean everything!

The things one sees through the stenciled words are seen to be their referents but these referents change with the physical position of each poem and with the point of view of the reader. For example, in the poem “We Are The Reason” (visible on the left in Fig. 9) as it is shown displayed in the gallery the vistas through the stenciled words are blank. But this need not be the case; the poem could be placed before a window, with the result that the view through the words would give referents to each of them, referents that would change once again were the poem facing the interior of a room with its contents. And for that matter, even the view through to blankness in the installation photo (Fig. 9) gives meaning to the words. Each word, by virtue of its stenciled inscription and shifting position,

¹⁵ The format of the poems in the *Figure: Ground* series is similar to what the “language” poet Bruce Andrews called for in his essay “Text and Context” (1984): a poetry in which the “subject” disappears “behind the words only to emerge in front, or inside them.” (qtd. in Messerli 4.)



Fig. 9: Edwin Schlossberg. *Figure: Ground* series. (Installation view at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York). Photo: Zindman/Fremont. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

has an infinitely large number of meanings that are experienced as two-way streets where both the words and their referents condition each other, create each other's meanings. And these meanings are in a significant sense free of the poet's intentions; the reader finds them/creates them in each present moment of exploring the poem: "Walks in the woods /strong currents" as Schlossberg himself puns about living in the present, where he urges everyone to dwell and not just as readers.

Such a device as the stenciling in *Figure: Ground* is only one in a career-long series of strategies for enriching meaning and making its subjective and changing foundations phenomenologically inescapable. For Schlossberg unambiguous, linear meaning has always been an arbitrary construct and an illusion. As he said in the poem "Purpose" in *Knowing Not Known*: "Mystery a yearning for the loss of sequence" ("Purpose" 28, *Knowing Not Known*). Since the 1970s he has written poems in visual compositions which maximize the reader's opportunities to develop multiple meanings by following out and creating syntactical sequences as they branch away from linearity, and regroup through identity of typeface, size, and inclination (i.e., angles, sometimes away from the horizontal) on the "page."¹⁶ These are labyrinths of meanings but with each winding passage, each twist and turn, being a right way!¹⁷ For example, the words "Reckoning Through Wonder" in the poem of the same title read together (and express the poet's belief in the value of thinking unencumbered by preconceptions) even though the words are somewhat distant from one another because they are identical in typeface size and angle of inclination on the brass support. But also these three words can be read as parts of other possible syntactical sequences in the poem, all of whose words can be combined and recombined with one another by the reader to create other possibilities for reading meaning, for example the phrases "reckoning to alert," "reckoning-finding yours" and "reckoning losing the way" can also be constructed. So although Schlossberg's arranging of his words, i.e., word patterns, may at first look like Suprematist or Dada energies (or the poems of Marinetti), their purpose is not to energize the compositions but to energize the reader!

In another example, "Outside Eyes All Ways Through To True" (reproduced here in a drawn version — Fig. 10), the different sizes of the typefaces lead the reader to structure the syntax sequences both vertically and horizontally, with consequent enrichments of the themes of superseding

¹⁶ For more on Schlossberg's syntaxes see Sheets, 124-26.

¹⁷ To follow out the relationships between Schlossberg's early interest in E.E. Cummings and the development of his own work one could start with R.P. Draper's *Introduction to 20th Century Poetry in English*, 1999, 219-222, where a source of the concrete poetry movement in the work of Cummings is discussed. See also, Michael William O'Brien, *Between Language and Voice* (126, 128-166).

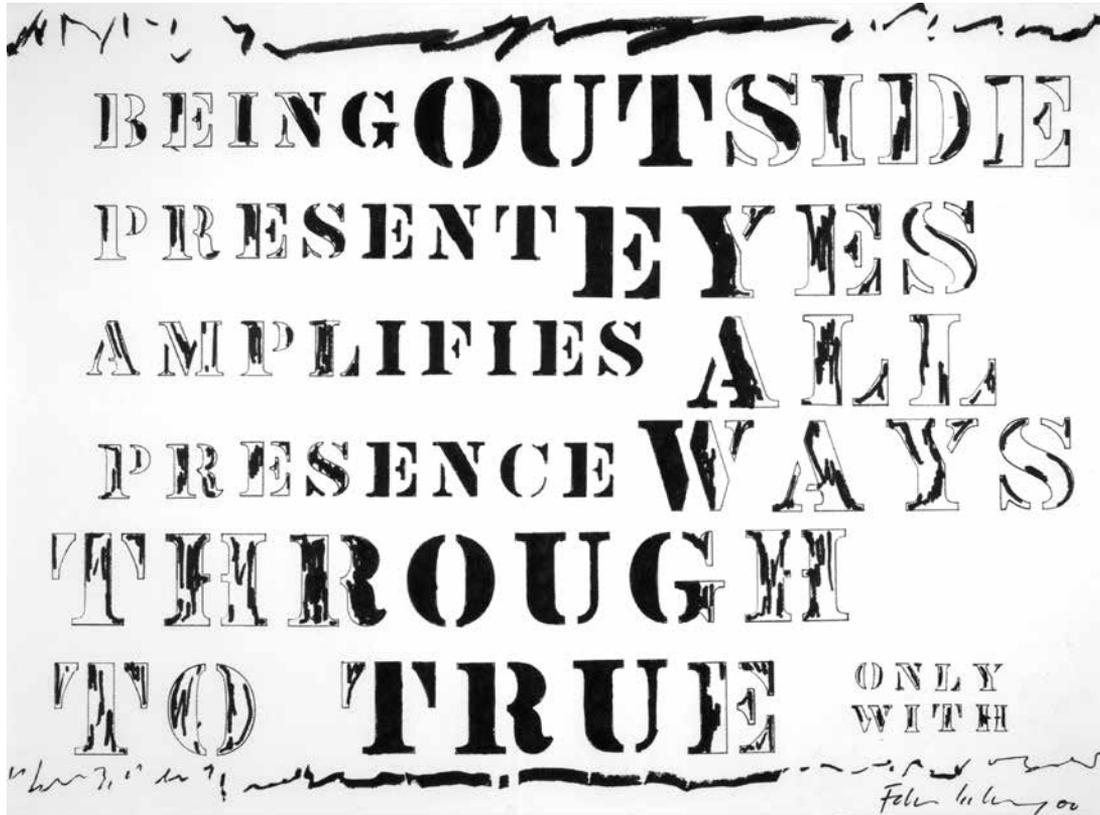


Fig. 10: Edwin Schlossberg. "Outside Eyes All Ways Through To True" (from the *Figure: Ground* series). 2000. Ink, charcoal and crayon on Arches paper, 22 ½" x 29 ½". Photo: Zindman/Fremont. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

the limitations of the self (“All Ways Through To True” in a larger typeface) and reaching the present (“Being Present Amplifies Presence” in a smaller typeface). The concluding line of “Staggering Light Across Eyes” (fig. 11): “To Engage Across Eyes”, accomplishes a similar thematic statement and with the same pun: “across eyes” refers not only to eye contact but also means across “I’s”, that is, reaching across selves from one person to another. Also in this poem meaning branches proliferate: another syntactical possibility is “pity without perception eyes”, in which the poet laments the isolation of selves (“I’s).

Perhaps the most rhapsodic of the meaning branches in the *Figure: Ground* series is the line “Bereft Within Indelible Joy Growing Awake Through Every Wave” (from the poem “Seem”). Here the beautiful concluding pun (wave in the ocean but also the wave of the hand of another human being) expresses Schlossberg’s deeply felt aversion to egoistic isolation and his commitment to both human connection and absorption in natural splendor as redeeming possibilities, if only we can choose them. And for this line in “Seem” there is another syntactical possibility, which includes the word “conscious”: “Indelible joy awake through every **conscious** wave.” In the process of discovering each and every one of Schlossberg’s syntactical ambiguities and possibilities the reader’s kinesthetic sense is awakened. Cytowic’s concept of the “sensory percept” might be applied here to see a synesthetic significance in the very act of realizing these syntactical options physically as well as conceptually.

With regard to his means, that is, his moment by moment and line by line practices and choices, Schlossberg’s accomplishment certainly is similar to what O’Malley says in summary of Shelley’s

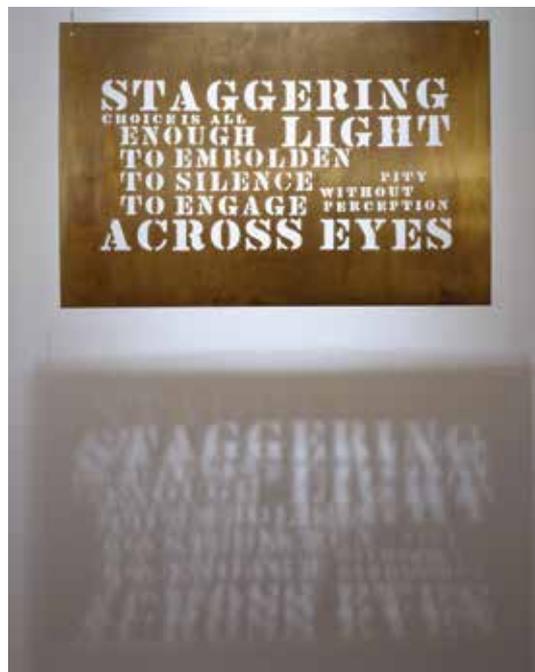


Fig. 11: Edwin Schlossberg. “Staggering Light Across Eyes” (from the *Figure: Ground* series). 2000. Acid etched brass, 24” x 36”. Photo: Zindman/Fremont. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

accomplishment through synesthetic imagery: “that practice [...] reveals a sustained, consistent effort to discover and celebrate values inherent in the coordinate expansion and sharpening of all human faculties” (177). In his poem “Radiate” from the *Deep See* series Schlossberg seems to be referring to just such a coordinate, or synesthetic, expansion:

It is our wish to touch /
when we are close to understanding /
the processes that cause us /
we are within reach of a sense /
so large that even all history /
cannot sustain it [...] (23-28)

But for Schlossberg, beyond Shelley, the focus is most often on what is possible for the human community. For him, in the utter subjectivity of the process of composing reality there is the greatest promise imaginable because the substance of reality can be suffused with our own aspirations. And Schlossberg is never far from reaching to his readers, exhorting them about the prospects and caring about them. As he so eloquently puts his commitment in the concluding lines of “The Distance In Order”, the last poem in the *From Here* series: “the promise extended as long as it takes.”

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