Tracing What Remains:

Writing After Language

Jiarui He 24040061

Introduction

This project started with a simple question: why do meaningless things often seem meaningful when presented in a clear structure? In Fake Order 1.0, I used letterpress to arrange fragments of text that carried no meaning. The pages looked precise. Grids aligned. Spacing was balanced. But the language itself remained silent. The tension between visible structure and semantic emptiness became my starting point.

Before I developed Fake Order 2.0, I encountered Futurism. At first, I was attracted to its visual power. Its broken layouts, kinetic typography, and bold rhythm captured my attention. Later, I started to explore what it represented. Futurism viewed chaos as a form of energy.

As Filippo Tommaso Marinetti declared in Futurist Manifestos (1973), typography should become a “dynamic expression of our modern sensibility,” rejecting grammatical order in favor of visual explosion. His call for parole in libertà—“words in freedom”—transformed language into material energy. While Marinetti aimed to celebrate rupture and acceleration, my own practice turns this energy inward, converting noise into rhythm and stillness. By slowing the Futurist impulse, I wanted to see how order could quietly erode from within rather than shatter from outside. This inversion of Futurism helped me recognize that destruction is not always loud; sometimes it occurs through silence, through the hesitation between one mark and the next.

That realization helped me reframe my direction. I stopped focusing on order as a goal and started to think of disorder as a method. I was not trying to replicate Futurism, but I learned from how it performed disruption and turned that insight into my own quiet system of collapse.

Fake Order 2.0 was a system I designed to unravel itself. It followed a structure, but its semantics slowly faded. I was interested in that tension, where the surface remained ordered while meaning collapsed underneath. Yet, the system still retained its structure.

Later, I encountered the writings of Jacques Derrida. In his 1968 lecture “Différance,” he proposed that meaning is never fixed, but always deferred. It emerges not through presence, but through delay and difference. Différance offered a shift in perspective. It moved me beyond the

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logic of structural collapse, toward a space where meaning could remain unfixed and suspended. This became the conceptual base for Différictionary.

Différictionary adopts the structure of a dictionary but rejects its usual function. Inspired by Stéphane Mallarmé's A Roll of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance (2004), I see the page as a space where layout becomes syntax. Mallarmé showed that silence and spacing are not just absences but active zones of meaning. This project develops that idea—blank spaces between entries act as visible pauses, showing where meaning is delayed rather than fixed. Each gap becomes a concrete display of delay. Through these spaces, I aim to shape time itself: a rhythm that makes language hesitate before moving forward, echoing Derrida's idea of différance as both spacing and postponement (Derrida, 1967). Instead of defining, each entry hesitates, repeats, or drifts. Each page delays closure. Meaning never fully stabilizes. This work is both a continuation of my previous explorations and a direct response to the core question—once again asking what makes language seem ordered, even as meaning slips away.

While working on this project, I noticed another kind of instability—one that originates within me. As a bilingual designer, I constantly switch between English and Chinese. When I write in English, I pause, translate, and adjust. When I write in Chinese, I move differently. I write more quickly, more intuitively, and more physically. The way my body moves is shaped by language.

This difference became part of my material. I interviewed translators and observed how rhythm and repetition shape writing. I tested sound and gesture. Through these actions, I began to see language not just as a code, but as something physical. It is created by timing, breath, and control.

Each experiment followed the same thread further. From printed order to structural tension. From repetition to sound. From system to gesture. Gesture was not where I started, but where I arrived. I tracked its motion, and it led me into spaces where meaning starts to break. This gesture-based inquiry will continue to guide my next phases of work.

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From Structure to Slip: Rethinking the Dictionary

1.1 Rethinking Definition: The Dictionary as a Structure of Power

I have always been drawn to structured formats. These are systems that promise order, clarity, and control. Among them, the dictionary stands out as the most rigid and regulated. Its format appears neutral. Its tone implies authority. Its structure claims to stabilize meaning. This promise, however, began to reveal deeper contradictions.

The dictionary does not simply collect words. It organizes them. As Michel Foucault notes in The Order of Things (1966), classification is never a neutral act. To name is already to arrange, and to arrange is to construct a system of visibility. The dictionary performs this same gesture: it divides, orders, and sets the limits of what can be known. In this sense, it is less a mirror of language than a mechanism that governs it. Each alphabetical order becomes a form of power, one that assigns categories and turns fluid speech into a frozen archive. It imposes definitions that appear final. This act of defining often presents itself as descriptive. In fact, it is prescriptive.

Derrida similarly questions the neutrality of structural systems in his lecture "Différance" (1968), where he argues that meaning is never present in its entirety, but always deferred. The dictionary's claim to stability thus masks the instability of language itself. While Foucault exposes how classification shapes regimes of knowledge, Derrida reveals how such regimes suppress difference in favor of fixed identity. Together, they show that to order is not to clarify, but to conceal — to give the illusion of coherence by erasing contradiction.

The more I engaged with the dictionary, the more I sensed that it was shaping language, not just recording it. I began to see it as a mechanism of control — not through

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censorship, but through structure.

Jacques Derrida, in his 1968 lecture Différance, directly challenged the idea that meaning can ever be fully present. He argued that meaning is always deferred. It exists only through a chain of differences, not through fixed definitions. This theory led me to reconsider what a dictionary really does.

In this framework, the dictionary becomes more than just a reference tool; it transforms into a system of containment. It halts the movement of signs and replaces open relationships with a closed structure. This led me to question the very nature of structure itself. I no longer saw it as neutral. Benjamin Bratton makes a similar point in his TEDx talk "What's the Point of TED?" (2013), where he critiques how popular systems reduce complexity into simplified clarity. The very idea of definition, he argues, belongs to this logic of simplification — it promises understanding but hides its own exclusions.

I see the same paradox in the dictionary: a structure that appears to clarify but limits. Its transparency is misleading because every act of ordering determines what remains unseen. I began to see it as a mechanism of control.

This perspective led me to reconsider the role of structure. A structure does not need to end things. It can exist without closure. It can support language while allowing it to flow. That idea became the starting point for my scroll experiment. In that work, I eliminated formal structure completely. But without a frame, something else was lost. The text drifted. It lacked tension.

This made me reconsider whether some kind of structure was still necessary. I started looking for a format that could hold tension without closing off meaning.

1.2 After Removal: Rebuilding Tension Through Form

The scroll experiment did not begin as a rejection of structure. It was based on the dictionary, but only in terms of its language arrangement. I borrowed the way entries stack and repeat, but I removed its formal structure. There were no frames, no index, no fixed layout.

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Without these visible constraints, the content no longer felt like a dictionary. It became soft and unstable. Its rhythm dissolved. I thought I was freeing the text, but I ended up losing its internal flow. That was when I began to realize: the form itself matters.

What I had removed was not just hierarchy or alignment. I had removed the potential for tension. Without tension, meaning collapsed. The work lacked resistance. It could not hold anything. This failure did not lead me back to the traditional order. However, it prompted me to ask a new question. What kind of structure could carry tension without claiming finality?

This question led me to reconsider what kind of structure I was resisting. I was not against all forms. I was against closure. I needed something that could shape without locking. Something that could guide without deciding. I turned back to the dictionary.

But this time, I looked at it not as a fixed archive, but as a form. A form that could be reimagined. It offered a grid. A way to hold fragments. A logic of containment. Yet I knew I had to resist its totality. I did not want to restore its authority. I only wanted to borrow its tension.

To better understand the structure of the dictionary, I went back to the beginning. I turned to A Dictionary of the English Language by Samuel Johnson, published in 1755. It is widely considered the first modern English dictionary. Though not the earliest attempt to collect English words, it was the first to do so with such scope, internal consistency, and literary ambition. It included over 40,000 entries, many of which were explained through quotations from literary texts.

What fascinated me was not just the literary tone. I was drawn to its format. Each word sat in a bounded space. Entries were numbered, structured, and held in place. The layout embodied a specific authority. But it did not feel mechanical. Johnson's subjectivity leaked through the frame. His definitions moved between poetic, ironic, and deeply personal voices. This tension between rigid form and expressive content reminded me that structure does not eliminate instability. It only masks it. Johnson's dictionary made me realize that even a controlled system

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can host hesitation, irony, and voice.

This gave me a new direction. A dictionary could hold structure and still slip. It could create tension through its format, but also interrupt it through its content. It gave me a method, or at least a possibility—a way to let tension hold the form together, while allowing the content to push back. There may be a structure that carries tension, but never fully closes it.

1.3 Rewriting from Within: Transforming the Structure Instead of Abandoning It

The scroll experiment made something clear. Without a structural backbone, the fragments I gathered began to fall apart. They moved too quickly. They held no tension. At first, I thought this speed was what I wanted. But eventually, I found myself returning to structure. Not because I trusted it, but because I needed it as a surface to work against. The dictionary format reappeared. I did not follow it, but I leaned on it carefully.

Différictionary kept the external look of a dictionary. Each entry began with a word. But what followed was not a definition. It was a line, or a voice, or an interruption—something I borrowed from cinema. These fragments were not there to clarify meaning. They opened it. They shifted tone. They marked hesitation. Some felt like memories, others like questions that had lost their subject. I was not writing meanings. I was letting them scatter.

The structure helped me slow things down. I placed blank pages between entries. The space did not explain anything. But it allowed something to happen. A word could echo. Another could fade. Meaning slipped between them, not inside them. This flow became the core of the configuration. It was not linear. It did not build. It moved. From word to word. From sense to silence. From language to delay. This was how I responded to Derrida. Not by quoting him, but by spacing.

I did not destroy the structure. I stayed with it but changed how it worked. I no longer trusted it to deliver clarity. But I also began to see it differently.

Michael Rock, in his essay Designer as Author (1996),

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argues that authorship in design is not about inserting meaning, but about shaping the conditions under which meaning appears. This idea changed how I approached the dictionary form. Rather than rejecting it, I began to see the format itself as an authored space—a stage where gaps, pauses, and rhythms could take on a voice. The designer becomes a quiet orchestrator, guiding perception rather than declaring truth.

It became a frame that could hold uncertainty. The surface looked stable, but what happened inside kept slipping. My system was not aiming for order. It allowed order to loosen. This looseness, this breathing, became part of the method.

When Language Collapses: Seeking Meaning through Gesture

2.1 The Freezing of Language: Pain Dictionary and Structural Violence

“What pain, whose pain, wherefrom the pain, as if pain had to be explained, analyzed. There’s nothing to be explained: the pain is there.”

— Mladen Stilinović, Pain Dictionary

Stilinović’s Pain Dictionary (1990–2003) is a dictionary composed entirely of a single word. Every entry is defined as pain, without exception. In form, it preserves the familiar order of a conventional dictionary: alphabetical sequence,

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clear grids, and formatted layout. But in content, it becomes an evacuation of language, a suspension of linguistic action. The work is not a reconstruction of meaning, but a shutdown of the mechanism by which language occurs.

The dictionary still “functions” as expected. It appears even cleaner and more controlled. Yet the action of language has been fully suspended. It no longer generates, and it no longer flows. Each entry is like a stone, sealed within the repetition of pain. This freezing of language is not disorder or deconstruction. It is a removal carried out in the name of structure. Language can no longer move, nor can it shift.

This condition reminds me of a kind of language that is being stared at. It no longer participates in the generation of meaning. It can only be watched, categorised, and fixed. Like a body turned to stone under the gaze of Medusa, language begins to petrify. It is supposed to unfold across time, but here it is suspended on the surface of the dictionary. This loss of motion and difference creates a structural silence.

Pain Dictionary is not an isolated experiment. Stilinović extends his critique of linguistic power in other works as well. In An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist, he embeds a critique of linguistic hegemony directly into the title. In Artist at Work, he uses the act of “sleeping” to reject the mechanisms of artistic production. He is not trying to “express” an opinion, but to expose the absurdity and violence of systemic structures through radical simplicity.

Art critic Bojana Pejić has described Stilinović’s approach as a “politics of negation,” one that resists both Western norms and Eastern dogma by reducing expression to its barest form. Miško Šuvaković writes that his work exemplifies the refusal to be productive, to be legible, or to serve meaning. It is not about the absence of content, but the sabotage of a system that demands coherence.

Derrida’s reading of Freud’s Mystic Writing-Pad (1972) helps clarify this condition of repetition and suspension. In Pain Dictionary, every entry performs the paradox Derrida calls différance, a process in which meaning is both produced and postponed through the act of writing. Each repetition of the word “pain” leaves a trace that confirms the presence of language while erasing its difference. The

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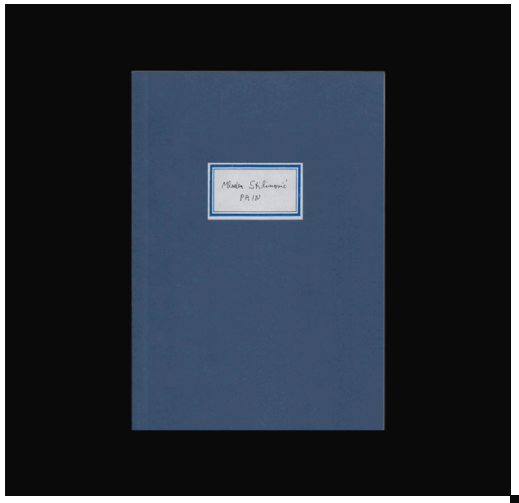

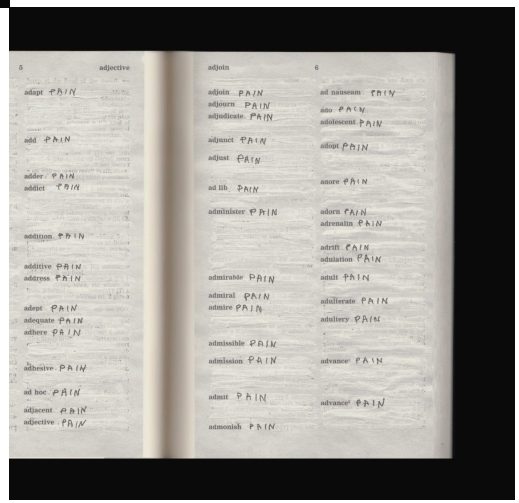

word remains as a mark, but its vitality fades. The more perfectly the system repeats itself, the less language can live within it. This situation reflects what Derrida describes as “writing as spacing,” where absence becomes the very mechanism that produces meaning. Stilinović’s gesture is therefore not a failure of language but a form of excessive precision that eliminates movement. The work reveals the violence hidden within the pursuit of clarity, a violence that also exists in modern systems of definition.

I began to ask: if language cannot extend or drag, does it still function as language? Here, structure is not only a container for language. It is a form of lockdown and stillness. Pain Dictionary does not break the structure. It makes the structure so “correct” that language can no longer occur. I realised that the generation of language requires a kind of movement, not just systematic logic.

I do not write in English as my first language. My writing and design constantly shift between Chinese and English. This duality is not an advantage—it is often a form of struggle. Sentences falter in translation. Concepts get delayed. This hesitation made me realise that the structure of language

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itself is a kind of alienation.

Egyptian sinologist Ahmed Sayed described this in our interview as a loss of “linguistic energy” during translation, especially when moving between non-Western languages. He noted that Chinese often requires an English detour to be rendered into Arabic, highlighting the systemic dependency on a linguistic centre. This reflection resonated with my own hesitation and positional discomfort. The delay has gradually become a rhythm in my practice.

I started to realise that I was not working outside of structure. I was reorganising it from within. This suspension of language led me to imagine another possibility: if language can no longer be generated through systems, can it be reactivated through bodily action? Outside of structure, what else can trigger the event of meaning?

2.2 Gesture as Language: Movement Before Meaning

“Every line is a record of a movement. It is not simply a mark on a surface but a trace of life.”

—— Tim Ingold, Lines: A Brief History (2007)

The freezing of language is not an end. It is a pause. In that pause, I began to notice small bodily movements. I began to sense that gesture is not just a form of expression. It is a rhythm that exists before language. I started to question whether language truly begins with words and structure. Maybe it starts with motion.

In Lines: A Brief History, Tim Ingold argues that writing is not an act of coding but of making lines. A line, he explains, is not a static symbol but the continuation of movement.

This understanding of gesture also resonates with Mallarmé’s poetic conception of motion as an unfinished sentence. In Un Coup de Dés (1897), the gesture of writing becomes an act of spacing and hesitation, allowing meaning to emerge through rhythm rather than completion. For Mallarmé, to write is to move between intention and silence.

A similar condition appears in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, where the body is not an instrument of expression but the very site where meaning occurs. Gesture, in this sense, does not follow thought but

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produces it. Every movement becomes a form of thinking that unfolds through space. Seen from this perspective, writing is not a trace left by language but a continuation of the body's attempt to speak. Gesture becomes the first form of inscription, a visible rhythm that exists before any word takes shape.

The essence of writing, therefore, is not to deliver meaning but to leave a trace of life on the surface. This idea made me realise that gesture may not be a supplement to language but its very beginning, that language itself may not start with words but emerge from motion.

Once language dissolves, it can no longer appear on the surface. But it does not disappear entirely. Its path remains in the trajectory of motion. I began to realise that gesture is not a mimicry of language. It is proof that language once existed. It translates language into the body when it can no longer be written. Motion, in this sense, is not an expression. It is another state of language.

I was not building a language system based on gesture. Nor was I translating motion into structured meaning. I was simply trying to trace: when language collapses, can movement pick up its fragments? In this process, gesture became more than a bodily action. It became a new form of writing. It did not restore order. It continued the presence of language. Language disappeared, and gesture left its shadow.

2.3 From Experiment to Gesture: Making Language Visible Again

When language disappears, what remains? This question pushed me back to my earlier materials, especially my first-year letterpress prints. In them, I discovered a semantic breakdown. The words, after repeated printing, remained visible but were no longer legible. Language had not vanished entirely. It had become unreadable.

This moment became the starting point of my experiment. I began by returning to letterpress, printing the word "repeat" again and again on the same sheet of paper. With each layer slightly shifting and overlapping, the legibility of the word gradually dissolved. But something stayed.

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At first, I treated repetition as an act of erasure. I wanted to observe how language, when precisely executed and endlessly repeated, begins to collapse. The word was still visible as a form, but it no longer held meaning. It was in this collapse that I began to hear something. The mechanical rhythm of the machine. The repeated motion of my hand. Language had dissolved, but rhythm remained.

In the second phase, I turned from printing to observation. I extracted the mechanical sounds from the letterpress and layered them with a synthetic voice, repeatedly reading “repeat.” As the layers accumulated, the voice lost clarity. Meaning dissolved into rhythm. I then recorded the printing process from a fixed side view, tracking the movement of my hand. I converted each action into lines. These lines accumulated into a visual rhythm. I didn’t exclude the mistakes. I kept the failed strokes, the hesitations, the noise of deviation.

This brought me to the third phase of the experiment. At first, I attempted to write using a pen I used in daily life. I wanted to keep the process informal, unburdened by aesthetic traditions. But as I continued, I realized that tools also carry position. Letterpress, with its mechanical structure and industrial rhythm, already imposed a certain system. Similarly, the pen I used and the way I held it reflected my assumptions about writing. I began to question what it meant to write from my own cultural and bodily standpoint.

In the third phase of the experiment, I turned to Chinese calligraphy. I consulted a calligrapher, who explained that different scripts activate different parts of the body. I chose zhuanshu (seal script), a style that emphasises circular motion and continuity, and began writing the English word “language” repeatedly with a brush. Each attempt was filmed from a fixed top-down perspective. I traced the lines of movement, preserving failed attempts, hesitation, rhythm, and error.

During this process, I began to notice formal and kinetic similarities between English letters and the brushstrokes of seal script. For instance, the letter “U” can be written in two continuous strokes, echoing the curved and enclosed structure typical of zhuanshu. The vertical and diagonal motion of letters like “L” or “A” also share the directional

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rhythm found in many Chinese characters. What began as an experiment in translation gradually became an encounter between two systems of writing that, despite their cultural distance, share a physical logic rooted in movement.

This observation challenged my previous assumptions about writing as a cultural divide. While Western alphabetic writing is often perceived as linear, segmented, and linguistic, seal script operates through rounded continuity, rhythm, and gesture. Yet, when I wrote English letters with a brush, these boundaries started to blur. The alphabet adopted a tactile rhythm; each letter became a gesture of duration rather than a fixed symbol. Writing turned into an embodied act where control, pressure, and hesitation revealed more than linguistic meaning—they exposed time.

Through this process, I realised that the essence of writing lies not in representation but in gesture. Each stroke, whether alphabetic or logographic, records a trace of bodily rhythm. The repetition of writing “language” in a seal-script-like motion allowed the page to become a space of coexistence. It was not about imitation or translation but about the recognition of shared movement—the point where language regains visibility through the act of writing itself.

The gestures of the two writing systems began to overlap. Both depend on the movement of the body, and their rhythms sometimes echoed one another. This resonance made me realise that writing is not an act of replacement, but of continuation. The page became a field where movement and time could stay visible.

It allowed me to continue when language had collapsed. It offered a different kind of visibility. A word could be seen, not as a symbol, but as a movement. I was no longer repeating “repeat.” I was moving through the remnants of repetition, through the gaps between voice and body, through the difference between structure and breath.

When I looked back at what I had done, I started to notice a shift. These weren’t just three separate tests. They formed a path. The letterpress made me listen to repetition as something hollow but rhythmic. The sound recordings showed me how meaning starts to fade when

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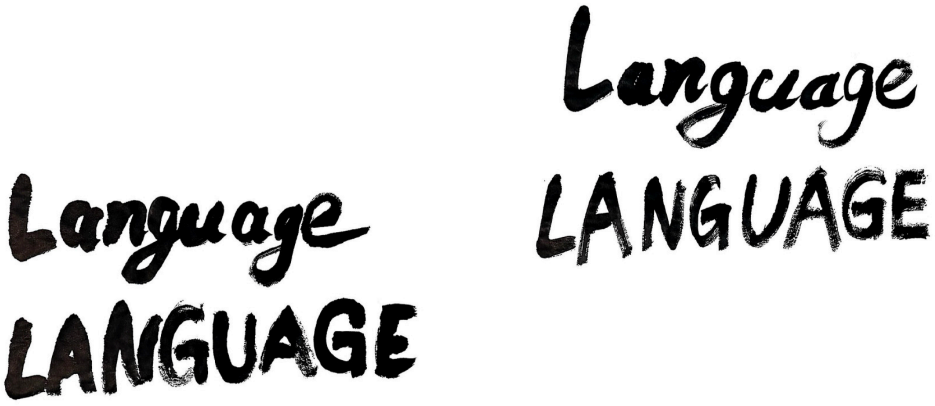
voices overlap. And the brush pushed me to think through the hand, not through words. I wasn't trying to restore language to clarity. I was observing how it continues to move even when it breaks down. Through this process, I've come to understand that writing does not depend on stable meaning. It can begin with motion, rhythm, and the traces of hesitation. This is not a final answer. But it feels like a direction. It is a way of allowing language to stay visible, even when it begins to disappear.



2.4 A Way of Working

As I moved through the experiments, I began to understand something. These were not separate steps. They were part of how I started to work. Each stage responded to what the last one could not hold. Letterpress made me listen. The recordings made me notice how voices fall apart. The brush brought me back to the body. I was not following a plan. I was adjusting each time. Learning through what failed. Staying with what broke.

I realised I was not applying a method. I was watching something form. Not from rules, but from what remained. Every error left a mark. Every repetition left weight. Each movement carried a trace. These moments did not make a system. But they offered a way to continue. A way to stay with language when it no longer speaks clearly. I still do not know where it leads. But I know how to remain with it. To trace. To repeat. To begin again.

Synthesis

This project did not begin with a fixed method. It started with a question: what remains when language disappears? As I moved through different stages, this question shaped how I approached form, structure, and rhythm. It did not give me an answer, but it opened a way of thinking. It shaped how I approached form, structure, and repetition. It shifted my understanding of what writing could be. Across different stages, from Fake Order to Différictionary and then to gesture-based experiments, I stayed close to disappearance. I did not treat it as a loss. I treated it as a condition. Each step became less about control and more about attention. I began to see what language could no longer express.

I never abandoned the path. My research did not shift directions; instead, it expanded inwards. From analyzing structural violence in Pain Dictionary—where order becomes a form of suppression—to exploring the rhythms of gesture, where movement resists control, I have been circling the same terrain. What changed was not the question, but the tools. The typewriter gave way to the brush. The grid gave way to pause. The surface of writing became less about clarity and more about accumulation, repetition, and trace.

My position is rooted in my bilingual condition. English is not my first language. My relationship with it is shaped by delay, translation, and approximation. This is why I am drawn to fragments, to repetition, to gesture. These are not decorative elements. They are modes of survival. In the gaps of language, I found my space to act. This instability shapes my design decisions—not to resolve it, but to dwell inside it. Design, for me, is not a neutral act. It is a form of pacing.

Design, in this sense, is not a solution. It is a way of staying with the question. It is a method of holding space for what has no name. As John Berger writes in Ways of Seeing, “The act of looking is never neutral.” (Berger,2008) To examine the failure of language closely is already to take a position. And my position is not fixed. It is built through rhythm, hesitation, and refusal. I do not design to define. I design to trace what slips.

Graphic design does not exist to clarify language. It can’t restore what has been lost. But it can offer a frame where

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disappearance becomes visible. In my practice, this means designing around absence rather than presence. It means attending to what resists capture—what flickers, delays, or breaks. These qualities are not deficiencies. They are conditions that enable visual language to emerge. I see graphic design not as a delivery system for stable content, but as a responsive surface for unstable meaning.

In future development, I want to continue expanding the grammar of gesture, seeking how motion, pressure, and rhythm might carry semantic weight. I am interested in the threshold where language breaks, and in what forms of design can hold that break open. This might take the form of interface experiments, responsive typography, or time-based formats. It might take the form of publishing. Not publishing as closure, but as circulation—as unfinished, partial, contingent meaning held momentarily in place. I do not aim to replace words. I aim to design around their disappearance.

APPENDICES

Theoretical & Critical Texts

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APPENDICES

Artworks & Exhibitions

Estorick Collection. (2024) Breaking Lines: Postwar Italian Art and the Informal Movement [Exhibition]. London: Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art. Curated by Roberta Cremoncini.

Estorick Collection. (2025) Ketty La Rocca: You – You [Exhibition]. London: Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, 19 June – 22 September. In collaboration with Museo Novecento, Florence. Curated by Roberta Cremoncini.

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