

X is for Sign(ature)

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image from Michelle Fornabai

U and V rent a small boat and go fishing. After a while, U says to V, "This is a great spot for fishing." V says, "Yes, but how will we know to come back to this spot?" U takes a brush and draws an X in the bottom of the boat. "That's how!" V says, "That's silly; how do you know that they'll rent us the same boat tomorrow?"

So, "X" marks the spot. In Roman languages, "X" was the quintessential sign of here-ness. It was also the mark of I-ness in lieu of the more ideographic mark that an analphabetic person could make as a legal signature. (Perhaps for Chinese it should be rather the rectangle 口 "kou" signifying mouth, which filled with the cross signifies 田 "tian"/paddyfield, or which filled with glyphs of the structures of cities signifies 國 "guo"/nation.)

In any case, what is a signature, and what does it do?

Derrida said in his celebrated essay, "Signature, événement, contexte" (1971) that writing, or any grapheme, breaks with every context. A grapheme's very persistence, its "iterability," detaches it from both reader and writer, from even the intentionality of the one who makes the mark. So, in deep senses, writing works by absence. That's not all. Not only is the boat unmoored, its subsequent inhabitants may make quite different uses of the "X." Vive la différence!

Imagine that U's boat had marked that "X" by chance, instead. U and V's conversation about it could still have happened. Or another conversation, equally sensible. Concerning writing in general, Derrida says, it is a "spacing as a disruption of presence in a mark"ⁱ; it works as a grapheme, even without referent fish, water, U or V.

Now suppose, nevertheless, that U and V wanted to affirm their good fishing here and now to an imagined fellow fisherman who may someday sit in this boat? Derrida says, "In order for the tethering to the source to occur, what must be retained is the absolute singularity of a signature-event and a signature-form: the pure reproducibility of a pure event."ⁱⁱ But what is this pureness of the event of making that mark? Derrida makes no logical argument but slips into the waters of empiricism: "Effects of signature are the most common thing in the world."

Why not follow Derrida into the life world and into deeper waters? What if we slip from the problematic warrant of identity suggested by nuance, tone of voice, accent (whose conventional effect Derrida does not deny), to the processes themselves of nuancing, intoning, and accenting? What if we pass from predicating the signature that detachedly warrants "good fishing happened here" to the inking of the signature?

A more symmetrical, Simondonian account of this action would draw attention to the unbounded massing of material processes in the water, the ink, the wood, the fisherman's

schooled hand dragged by the wood as it forms the mark, and the thousand years of concretization in that pen inextricably entwined with the evolution of associated technical crafts of ink, writing instruments, and orthography.

Supplementing J.D.'s "very dry discussion,"ⁱⁱⁱ let me ink my brush and stroke this tissue paper in a crisscrossing motion, watching the paper's fibers swell darkly for a moment as the ink suffuses them, then coalesce into pools of black. I pour water after the ink, watching the water chase and diffuse the ink further into the paper's fibers. As the wet pools grow, the water stratifies what used to be a uniform black, separating out the hues. I smell the ink now as enough of the paper's surface has wetted to perfume the air. The spotting absorbs the X.

ⁱ Derrida, Jacques. "Signature, Event, Context," translated by Alan Bass. *Margins of Philosophy*. 1971, p. 19.

ⁱⁱ Derrida, 1971, p. 20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Derrida, 1971, p. 21.