

## The Death of Semiology After Conceptual Art

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### Abstract

“The Death of Semiology after Conceptual Art” offers an in-depth analysis of Saussure's semiology and its validity in art history. Theorists like Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson advocate that semiology is an effective interpretative methodology in every circumstance. However, a further analysis shows that their thesis is flawed, and while semiology has some prominence, the validity of semiology should be questioned after the passing of Conceptual art. Rene Magritte (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*) acts as an important precursor to the art of Joseph Kosuth and the Conceptual Artists. Magritte's textual ideas, as seen in the *Treachery of Images*, can be understood through semiology. Before Magritte, semiology is not an effective tool, such as in the Renaissance, like Bal & Bryson argue. Semiology takes prevalence through the work of the Conceptual artists, mainly Joseph Kosuth, as an applicable method of interpretation. After the Conceptual artists, semiology should be formally questioned as a methodology. As a case study, examples of the prominence of semiology include Rene Magritte and Joseph Kosuth. After Magritte and Kosuth, Tauba Auerbach, Liam Gillick with Lawrence Weiner, Glenn Ligon, Christopher Wool, and Shirin Neshat are considered as artists who utilize common visual themes in Postmodern art as case studies for the death of semiology. Each artist and the interpretation that is being developed starts with a different facet of semiology – one with the sign, one with the signifier, and one with the signified. Looking at the equation of semiology from all angles suggests that semiology is a faltering methodology. This thesis is meant to be a critical analysis of the methods of critical theory, and reevaluating their purpose in Postmodern art. “The Death of Semiology after Conceptual Art” will be submitted in partial requirement to graduate with honors from the University of Iowa.

### Keywords: Semiology, Conceptual Art, Postmodernism

“Theorization comes easily; it requires nothing more than imagination, fantasy. Myths are theories that have stiffened. To debunk a myth is to flex a countertheory.”

- Richard Shiff, “Every Shiny Object Wants an Infant Who Will Love It”

### 1. The Validity of Semiology

Is a picture worth a thousand words, or are there enough words to discuss a picture? In art history, a thousand words to describe a picture can be too few. With the advent of critical theory, various fields of study such as philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, and history, unite to inform art through theory and develop new methods of understanding. Semiology, not to be confused with semiotics, is a branch of critical theory rooted in linguistic anthropology and the studies of Ferdinand de Saussure.<sup>1</sup> Semiology is the study of signs used to study meaning. While many theoreticians may argue that semiology is a useful tool in interpreting any composition, it is mostly useful in textual art, as seen in movements like Conceptual art. However, after Conceptual art, is semiology still a valid theory? Postmodern artists often create their ideas through texts in ways that are illegible or indistinct, thus questioning the validity of semiology in understanding complex ideas that are expressed largely in text.

The existing scholarship on semiology reflects a generally positive outlook for semiology. In 2006, Roland Barthes

offered a series of detailed analyses on the effectiveness of semiology.<sup>2</sup> In 1991, Bal and Bryson argue for the utility of semiology in post-Renaissance art.<sup>3</sup> In 1976, semiology and its problems are discussed by Umberto Eco in *A Theory of Semiotics*.<sup>4</sup> This study considers various writings and examines a number of art works deeply rooted in text to see whether or not semiology is effective.

Textual works are the primary focus of this analysis. They are chosen to align with the linguistic roots of semiology spanning approximately fifty years to encompass both the birth and the death of semiology. Particular attention is paid to the semiology of abstract and gestural images in order to consider the role the sign plays in interpretation. The final conclusion of this brief study is that semiology passes away with Conceptual Art. This theory is supported by a series of semiological analyses that start with each side of the semiological triangle, or the sign, signifier, and signified. How does semiology succeed or fall short in explaining non-Western art? If semiology regains prominence in Post-Conceptual art, in what ways does it do so?

Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, proposed the theory of semiology. Saussure began his linguistic studies due to his dismay with previous linguists who never attempted to understand the nature of objects being studied.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Saussure set out to propose a new treatment of language that considered facets never before analyzed. Saussure's new theory of semiology considered the structure of language, as well as the way in which the relationship between language and the human mind translate into performing and analyzing language. Semiology, as told by Saussure, unifies the sign, signifier, and the signified. The sign is the arbitrary representation referring to another word, object, or idea.<sup>6</sup> The signifier is the defining feature or description of the sign under scrutiny. The signified unites the sign and the signifier in a physical manifestation.<sup>7</sup> The sign, signifier, and signified form the base structure toward an analysis of the larger systems of meaning in language.

Saussure's study of semiology with the science of signs and their respective systems translate into the larger study of language as a part of the development of structuralism.<sup>8</sup> In structuralism, the individual characteristics are secondary to what promotes the rigid construction of ideas, as well as its role in the larger schema. Poststructuralists consider the ideas of the structuralism and inquire about if there even is a way to discuss art in context, questioning the entire organization of structuralism. David Carrier discusses the differences by using the analogy of chess: a structuralist sees art history as a game of chess, but a poststructuralist sees art history as stuck in outdated conventions, like chess.<sup>9</sup> Both semiology and structuralism are similar in their consideration of the parts that contribute to the whole. Semiology is important to structuralism in understanding how parts relate to the whole.

Before suggesting the death of semiology, it is important to highlight when semiology was prominent and the role it played. One of semiology's important tasks is considering the connection between ideas, their interpretation, and their manifestation. A case study of interpreting ideas through text can be seen in the work of Rene Magritte as a precursor to Conceptual art.

The Surrealist painter René Magritte and his methodology can be seen as anticipating Conceptual Art. Magritte's methodology considers how to find objective representations of objects that are a part of a universal pictorial language. Thus, his work suggests an inquiry about the formal properties of objects through Nietzschean skepticism.<sup>10</sup> Magritte's series of works entitled *The Treachery of Images* from 1928-9 reveals a small facet of his larger exploration about the interpretation and comprehension of objects.<sup>11</sup> In *This Is Not a Pipe*, or *The Treachery of Images (This is not a Pipe) (La trahison des images [Ceci n'est pas une pipe])*, fig. 1, specifically toys with the idea of the truth of objects and images.<sup>12</sup> Using semiology, Magritte questions the existence of objects versus ideas, just as Joseph Kosuth will do in Conceptual Art.

Magritte suggests the debate of illusion versus reality in *This Is not a Pipe* by juxtaposing the image of a pipe with "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." Semiology can interpret *This Is Not a Pipe* through the sign, signifier, and the signified, and comprehend Magritte's search for truth in ideas. The sign is the image of the pipe as the representation of an idea. The signifier is the text noting "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," describing the idea or the object. The negative of the text complicates the situation by subtly revealing Magritte's thesis that it is not an actual pipe, but a representation of a pipe. The signified manifests how representations and descriptions of an idea translate into a physical entity. What Magritte offers is not a pipe, but the image or the idea of a pipe. The image and the idea in painting exemplifies Magritte's thesis in *The Treachery of Images* – art represents ideas of objects existing in reality, but it is not the entity itself. The query rests in whether or not the viewer recognizes the image of a pipe as a representation rather than the actual entity itself. In this, Magritte can be seen as questioning the fundamental existence of painting itself.<sup>13</sup> Semiology supports Magritte's thesis about illusion versus reality as exemplified in art, as images are primarily illusions or depictions of reality. Magritte is important because he uses examples of semiology to discuss the treacheries of interpretation by exploiting the facets of semiology and revealing the heterotopias of language.

Magritte's thesis concerning the relationship between image, object, and language acts as an important precursor to the ways that Conceptual Art presents ideas. However, there is a considerable theoretical framework that aligns with Magritte. One considerable supporter of Magritte's thesis is Ludwig Wittgenstein who analyzed the logical disorders

of language. Wittgenstein was an analytical philosopher who focused on the inexpressible, the boundaries of language, and language games. To him, language is a system of meaning, and thoughts exist in language. In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, his picture theory proposes that the essential function of language is to represent reality, meaning sentences (also called propositions) are pictures of states of affairs in the world.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, language describes reality, but there are boundaries and things language cannot express. Wittgenstein's logic runs analogous to Magritte as his boundaries of language are the same treacherous ones that Magritte considers in his work. This important theoretical connection prefaces how the Conceptual artists consider and further this argument.

Conceptual Art is a movement attentive to ideas and meanings over forms and materials.<sup>15</sup> Conceptual Art developed in the late 1960s after Pop art, a movement rooted in revealing the effects of consumerism. Though not a part of the Conceptual art movement, the ready-made, made famous by Marcel Duchamp, prefaces Conceptual art by questioning the function of art by taking an everyday object and pronouncing it as art.<sup>16</sup> "Modernism's nervous breakdown," as exemplified by Duchamp, challenged everything thought to be known about art, such as what art is and its medium, and suggesting that the idea is more important than the form.<sup>17</sup> The every day image became art in the same way that the ready-made converted objects to art. Additionally, Pop and Conceptual artists are connected through interrogation of language.

Four stylistic axioms loosely delineate the style of Conceptual Art: the readymade; the intervention, in which a text or a thing is presented in an unexpected context; documentation, where work can only be presented in terms of evidence; and words, where the concept is presented in language.<sup>18</sup> Conceptual Art could be presented in many other forms as well, given idea dominates over form. Documentation and words are the two forms of Conceptual Art that involve the principles of semiology by considering how a work of art is interpreted through language. Thus, the idea is emphasized and understood through semiology, as exemplified through the work of Joseph Kosuth.

Within Conceptual art, semiology can be used to understand the ideas presented in language and its implied references. Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*, fig. 2, considers the ideas and subsequent representations resulting from a semiological analysis.<sup>19</sup> Kosuth's interpretation follows the same vane as Magritte via the sign, signifier, and signified. *One and Three Chairs* is an instillation comprised of a chair, a photograph of a chair, and the dictionary definition of a chair. The dictionary definition sets up a relationship for the viewer to recreate with the chair and the photograph of the chair, connecting language and form via semiology. Semiology's "triangle" is comprised of the sign, the signifier, and signified. In the case of *One and Three Chairs*, the sign is the photograph of the chair, acting as a representation of the idea. The signifier is the description of a chair and its function, which Kosuth interpreted as the dictionary definition. The signified is the actual chair, joining the representation of the sign and the dictionary definition of the signifier. By including the dictionary definition, the photograph, and the object in three dimensions, the idea is the most important aspect, as well its versatility and polysemous interpretations.

Kosuth's work suggests that the tenets of semiology inhibit the ability of Conceptual artists to present concepts with polysemous interpretations. Kosuth adapted Wittgenstein's contextual theory of meaning, positing that words in a language make no sense unless they appear in context, and the word itself has no meaning, only usages.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the dictionary definition (the signifier) is only understood by seeing the chair in three dimensions. The signifier reveals that language possesses inadequacies in capturing the physical characteristics of a tangible object, or the photographic representation of the object (the sign).<sup>21</sup> The description and features of the three-dimensional chair that Kosuth uses in *One and Three Chairs* cannot be found in or inferred from the dictionary definition of a chair. A dictionary definition discusses function rather than appearance, ignoring a defining characteristic of the object and its identification.

René Magritte's *Ceci n'est pas une pipe* anticipated Kosuth, and Kosuth's work suggests both the potentiality and the limits of semiology as an interpretive device. While Joseph Kosuth was one of the first artists to make text the focus of his works as a part of Conceptual Art, he consequently could be considered the first to highlight the flaws of semiology. Perhaps the issue with semiology, as revealed by Magritte and Kosuth, is that the world to which language refers existed before the descriptive language used today, meaning the interpretation of language must conform to preexisting forms and concepts.<sup>22</sup> The inconsistencies and inadequacies of language reveal the necessity in considering that semiology could have similar flaws and inadequacies. However, what are all of the theoretical issues with semiology and language? What should the solution be? Should semiology simply be considered dead, or could it be modified and revived? Should language adapt to semiology, or should semiology adapt to language? Can semiology break free from the confines of language to interpret intricate art historical concepts presented via complex visual forms, or will it simply fade away?

## 2. Postmodernism & The Death of Semiology

Whether or not semiology is still useful today, semiology is still a science with great ambitions. As Claude Levi-Strauss noted, the ambition of semiotics is to be a science of signs, which can account for polysemous meanings of signification, or phenomena, as found through the sign expressing one by the means of the other.<sup>23</sup> In essence, semiology desires to be a universal postulate encompassing all signs and their meanings. One issue with Saussure's semiology, published between 1906 and 1911, could be considered to be the lack of intrinsic connection between the signifier and the signified, even if they are united under the sign. Therefore, the connections inferred from uniting the signifier and the signified under the sign are arbitrary and could lead to a greater chance of error. The sign itself is also arbitrary, as the sign is a word suggesting an object existing in reality, yet the system of nomenclature that is assigned to things is entirely arbitrary.<sup>24</sup> The connection between the word and the form of the object being described also deserves to be questioned. As Ronald Schleifer argues, often the arbitrary essence of the sign proves its own meaninglessness.<sup>25</sup> The arbitrariness of semiology in conjunction with the lack of semiological rooting presents a potential hindrance to concrete interpretation.

In addition, the sense of arbitrariness in semiology could be connected to the idiolect, as suggested by Saussure. The idiolect is language spoken by an individual, or an individual's related set of linguistic habits. Roman Jakobson responded to Saussure suggesting that idiolect is an illusion, since language is largely a social activity (as suggested by Saussure's *parole*), and each speaker tries to communicate at the level understood by the receiver.<sup>26</sup> While Jakobson is likely correct, there is still the problem of mutual comprehension between the sender and receiver. The various levels of miscommunication suggest that the entire semiological process can be arbitrary, creating a troublesome process of interpretation.

Beyond the arbitrary, A. J. Greimas noted in 1989 that semiology can only be considered and used to the extent that a description is postulated, or assumed to be true.<sup>27</sup> In other words, there should be a kind of universal understanding about words and descriptions before using semiology. If words are combined to create descriptive syntax, and if words are arbitrary and culturally defined, then the description is limited to the little meaning derived from those words, leaving ideas extending beyond the boundaries of words that are only a general description that strive to define concepts. Therefore, words and their implied ideas can be inadequate.

Umberto Eco noted in 1976 that the only way to accept Saussure's idea of a correspondence between the sign and the signified is to accept the sign as an expression correlated to a myriad of elements on the content plane. Eco even corrected Saussure by noting that there are no signs, only sign-functions, because the functions of expression and content enter into a mutually exclusive relationship. Additionally, the signifier reveals the possibility of falsehood, as there may not be conceptual correspondence with the signifier.<sup>28</sup> Eco notes the most important fallacy pointing toward the death of semiology – that there can be no interpretation described by language based on a concept not existing in reality, making the referent and the sign exist in a state of dissonance, and rendering semiology invalid. The final question about the death of semiology after Conceptual Art is rooted in its arbitrariness. Thus, semiology may not be applicable in Postmodern situations in which the text and the ideas are not explicitly presented.<sup>29</sup>

After Conceptual Art, semiology should be placed under consideration as a viable art historical methodology in compositions where text remains an integral part of the inspiration for the subject matter and the composition. The difference between the uses of text in Modernism versus Postmodernism is a part of the definition of truth and its presentation. When text written in Postmodern art is presented in an abstract manner, semiology is at its highest point of contention. Sometimes, the text is presented in a manner that is illegible to the viewer. Rosemary Hawker suggests that Postmodern artists follow the ideas of Gerhard Richter's photo-paintings, revealing that the new image or image condition (the new truth) is not bound to any one medium.<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida notes that truth is found in Paul Cezanne's letter to Emilie Bernard, saying that "I owe you the truth in painting and I will tell it to you." In this, Cezanne reveals larger truths – the truth of the medium, the truth to the world through painting, and the truth as told by language.<sup>31</sup> Indirectly, what Cezanne says in 1905 prefaces what Martin Heidegger says about the truth in art in 1935, that art is not a "thing", but rather "art is truth setting itself to work."<sup>32</sup> The various definitions of truth as well as their verbal manifestations reveal the issues of polysemous meanings and truth in language, as manifested in the visual arts.

The development of Post-structuralism can be seen as relevant to understanding the problematic nature of semiology and its various transformations. Emerging out of Structuralism is Post-structuralism, which critiqued and modified the foundations of structuralism. Structuralism aimed to create a sense of order in the humanities in contrast to their previously liberal nature. For example, structuralism is compared with the analogy of playing chess, in which each piece has a set of possibilities fixed by rules and conventions. Thinkers like Herman Northrop Frye and Louis Hjelmslev make implicit that where semiotics, and hence structuralism, become insufficient is in the belief that the

humanities can undergo a process of conversion in order to exist on the same platform as the scientific model of study.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, can semiology really be transferred from a theory for linguistic anthropologists to a method of interpretation for art historians?

In all of the changes of the form of art and the discourse of what art is, the ability of art to exist is dependent on art not performing some a service found in kitsch culture, nor by assuming a philosophical stance, but as art existing only for its own sake, making art the definition of art.<sup>34</sup> After Conceptual art, new practices move from Conceptual art's anti-emotional critique of aesthetics. The difference between precursors like Magritte, Conceptual artists like Kosuth, and Postmodern artists who focus on text is that Postmodern artists have texts and subjects that are allegorical with polysemous meanings and interpretations, questioning semiology because of the restriction to one meaning from the sign, signifier, and signified.

Taubman Auerbach is a Postmodern artist whose prominent series featured in "Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language" focuses on interpretations of the alphabet.<sup>35</sup> Auerbach's compositions are a deconstruction of language into its essential components.<sup>36</sup> In *How to Spell the Alphabet*, fig. 3, Auerbach spells out the sounds of the alphabet. Auerbach does not use the phonetic alphabet, but uses the written alphabet and spells out the sound each letter makes when articulated.<sup>37</sup> Further more, in *Components, in Order*, fig. 4, and *Lowercase Components*, fig. 5, Auerbach breaks down the geometry of each letter.<sup>38</sup> The composition is arranged on a grid with each square containing a geometric mark that is a facet of the letter. Reading the composition line by line from left to right, the viewer can imagine the relationship between the squares and understanding the construction of letters. Finally, in *All the Punctuation*, fig. 6, Auerbach displays a singular comma.<sup>39</sup> The comma references the idea that there is no end to language, but that it is a continuous discourse with infinite room for meaning and interpretation.<sup>40</sup>

Auerbach's linguistic series is important because of the implied discourse about the structure of language. Letters are juxtaposed into the morphemes that create words. Morphemes are the smallest grammatical units of language.<sup>41</sup> Letters, morphemes, and words unite to create the syntax that can describe the signifier, which in semiology, is used to derive meaning. In theory, the signifier is the most important facet of semiology as the concrete definition explaining the viewer's understanding. The concrete definition implies a universal understanding rooted in familiarity with language. From this deconstruction of the alphabet, it can be inferred that parts could be rearranged, metaphorically implying that new meaning can always be created, just like Postmodernism engenders a variety of polysemous meanings. Supporting the panoply of interpretations is Auerbach's representation of a comma, suggesting that the discourse surrounding language has no end.

Auerbach does not prove specifically whether or not semiology is valid or relevant. Rather, she is important because her work leads to the larger idea about the ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning in the visual arts. Auerbach's work suggests that elements can be rearranged to create something new, just as multiple meanings can derive from ambiguous visual forms. Discourse regarding meaning from language, or language in the visual arts, both with its structural elements and its performative aspects, do not have one singular end, as suggested by Auerbach's comma, prefacing the discourse about the open ended and polysemous interpretations of Postmodernism.

Liam Gillick is a Postmodern artist who creates paintings, sculptures, and installations with textual components. Gillick takes ideas or objects associated with intellectual context and translates them into visual forms. Presented in an abstract manner, Gillick's meaning is allegorical, ubiquitous, and ambiguous. Gillick's texts may be clearly visible and legible (despite the lack of spaces he puts between words), but his meaning is anything but clear.

In *Installation View of Consiens Lobby*, fig. 7, from 2001, Gillick created an aluminum cube with brightly colored text.<sup>42</sup> The text reads "wittes learning and studie" repeated around the cube. Written in lower case text, each of the four words is presented in an alternating pattern of black, brown, yellow, and orange. There are no spaces between the words; they are differentiated by different colors. The words unify the origin and stages of the English language – *wittes* comes from Old English, *learning* comes from Modern English, and *studie* is the German spelling of the Modern English word meaning "to study." The phrase is adapted from the book, *Literally No Place*, from 2002.<sup>43</sup> There is also text reflected on the ceiling reading "THE DISCHARGE OF MY CONSIENS ENFORCETH ME TO SPEAK SO MUCHE," from the trial of Thomas More, as reflected in the book *Literally No Place*, discussing how conscience and ethics are revealed in the world.<sup>44</sup>

There are two different levels of text that can be considered in relation to semiology – the ceiling and the cube. The quote on the ceiling acts as the signifier; however, the related sign and signified are unclear. While research explains that the installation is about the trial of Thomas More, the signifier does not reveal this, nor does it reveal the relationship to the sign or the signified. The text of the cube focuses on a collective meaning of education and learning. The idea of education and learning as a signifier leave the sign and the signified unclear. While the viewer could take the text to envision learning and the physical manifestations associated with spaces of learning, the possibilities are ubiquitous. The Old English and the German makes the process even more arbitrary. Whether it is one language or three languages in the text on the cube or on the ceiling, there is no clear relationship leading to the sign or signified.

In this work by Liam Gillick, semiology does not seem to be an effective method of interpretation because there is no clear indicator of the signifier and the signified.

Gillick also worked with Lawrence Weiner to create “Syntax of Dependency:” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp, fig. 8.<sup>45</sup> Note that the colon at the end of the title is not an “orthographic anomaly,” but an expression of the open-ended and ambiguous nature of all human dialogue.<sup>46</sup> Gillick brings a modernist portrayal to exhibit Weiner’s command of language. The work reads “Outside of Any Given Context.” The signifier is now the artist’s intention, but it the sign and signified are still ambiguous. While the artists offer a detailed description, there is still ambiguity about the related sign or signifier. Therefore, while Gillick’s detailed signifier should aid in a semiological analysis, his ambiguous texts, consistent with themes in Postmodernism, reveal that by starting with the signifier, semiology remains problematic as a method of interpretation.

Another example of Postmodern artists is Glenn Ligon, who inspired by the Abstract Expressionists who used texts in their works while experimenting with media, such as de Kooning and the action painters. Ligon’s most prominent works came after his 1985 Whitney Museum Independent Studies program where he focused on issues of illegibility, history, the use of language, and issues of race.<sup>47</sup> As an abstract painter, Ligon found the possibilities of using text in art intriguing. Ligon begins by adopting the texts of others, and shifts to writing his own text. These texts are not metaphors: they are the texts themselves that deal with translation and understanding.<sup>48</sup> He had a crisis when he realized the immensity of the gap between what he wanted to say and the means available to him to say it.<sup>49</sup> The iterations of Ligon’s thoughts come through portrayals of these issues through stencils transferred to paper with an oil crayon. Ligon uses a stencil of the alphabet and traces each letter to rewrite the text. As he moves down the sheet, he never washes the stencil, causing the buildup of ink to move the text toward absolute illegibility since the oil crayon has no sharp boundaries.<sup>50</sup> Like many Postmodern artists, Ligon’s illegible texts complicate the signifier as a starting point to a semiological analysis.

Glenn Ligon created *Four Untitled Etchings* in 1992, fig. 9 and fig. 10.<sup>51</sup> Ligon uses these panels to write letters regarding his thoughts on race: two are black text on a white panel, and two are a lighter black text on a darker black panel. The black panels, arranged next to each other like a diptych, are entirely illegible. The text is slightly distinguishable by a value shift, but it is not clear enough to read. The white panels are also arranged like a diptych. They are legible until the bottom third of the panel. The text of the white panels implies that an African American is the narrator explaining his feelings about being colored. In the left panel, the text becomes misaligned and the words eventually fall to different lines. Whether or not it is the same sentence throughout the entire panel is unclear, as the bottom of the panel is illegible. The right panel is an entirely different discourse that seems to describe when the narrator feels colored as opposed to what it feels like to be colored. Ligon’s continued description becomes blurred toward the bottom where the text reaches illegibility. In a fast paced society that never stops to read, *Four Untitled Etchings* is meant to slow the viewer down.<sup>52</sup> After reading, one could infer that the narrative of the left panel is related to the feelings of an African American, or maybe a Caucasian, describing the feelings of an African American man. While it seems that the possibilities of the sign and the signified are narrowed down, there is no clear final answer because of the kind of unfinished discourse Ligon presents.

Starting with the signifier in a semiological analysis becomes more complicated as the text reaches illegibility. Illegible text simply makes the signifier more difficult to understand, but not impossible to represent. The conclusion is that semiology has distinct difficulties interpreting the works of Ligon. Whether or not the text is legible, the signifier does not reveal the sign and the signified. While the signifier may limit the possibilities, the text is often too ambiguous and abstract, especially in Postmodern art, to ever come to a clear consensus or interpretation via semiology.

Defying a single style or description, the Postmodern artist Christopher Wool creates abstract compositions.<sup>53</sup> Wool was likely inspired by Dieter Roth and Daido Moriyama’s over-enlarged, scratchy images that are corroding and deteriorating, questioning the process of image making, as seen in the book *Bye Bye Photography Dear*.<sup>54</sup> Wool’s works may have a similar form, but they are not meant as a series, nor are Roth and Moriyama’s. Wool occupies two distinctive modes in his compositions – one an abstract wash of color on a silkscreen (such as in *Untitled* from 2000), fig. 11, and the other a series of detailed patterns.<sup>55</sup>

While the washes of color and the preconceived patterns could both be considered a semiological sign, the washes of color will be used here to avoid iconographical confusion and to remain in line with Postmodernism’s key formal appearances. Wool’s form is a large amoeba like concept that dominates the composition, but leaves its ultimate identity unclear. The canvas itself is larger than life with an ambiguous center that could be seen as a Rorschach stain, a skewed figure ground relationship, a shape, a reference to the city or technology, or even a metaphor for consciousness and memory.<sup>56</sup> If any of these are understood as a signifier, there is still likely to be an ambiguous and further descriptive gap, leading to a further break in understanding the relationship to the sign or signified.

Each viewer is likely to envision something different from each Wool image because of its visual abstraction and

the necessity of the viewer's consideration and personal thoughts for comprehension. Therefore, each viewer could see a different image, or a different sign, leading to a different signifier and signified. Differentiation among viewers defies Saussure's idea of universality in semiology. In Wool's *Untitled* from 2000, there is an extensive list of possibilities of what the sign could be. As Umberto Eco noted, the issue with the referent is that it may refer to something that does not exist in reality, making it difficult to articulate and understand.<sup>57</sup> For example, a Rorschach stain could be described as one's thoughts, conscious or subconscious. How can thoughts be manifested into a universal signifier or a tangible signified? A figure ground relationship could be both described and seen, but what proportions, figures, and locations would make it equivalent to Wool's sign? How could it be a reference to the city or technology when those things vary based on locations and perceptions? How can memory and consciousness be tangibly manifested?

Wool's formal aesthetics could be considered to be a return to the ideology of Ad Reinhardt who advocated for art solely as an aesthetic experience. While Wool's canvases are more aesthetically intricate than Reinhardt's, both artists seem to move toward a place without exterior reference. In Wool's texts, there is no direct mention of whether or not he meant anything to be without reference. Upon first glance, it is about the aesthetic experience. Through aesthetics, the possibility of a sign's utility is reduced. Possible interpretations do exist, but it would be wise to advocate for an aesthetic experience. Moving away from referentiality and toward art as an aesthetic experience is detrimental to semiology, because it could lead the viewer through the signifier and the signified, to a lie.

To bring a more comprehensive conclusion to the utility of semiology, it is important to consider non-Western case studies of semiology, as exemplified by the still images of Shirin Neshat.<sup>58</sup> Neshat is a painter, photographer, and video artist (not to be confused with cinema) whose subject matter focuses on her viewpoints of the issues in the Middle East.<sup>59</sup> Inspired by her life as an Iranian exile, Neshat now creates photographs with Farsi texts expressing opinions on Iranian politics since 1979.<sup>60</sup> Emblematic of this is Neshat's photographic series entitled "Women of Allah." The key visual elements following through "Women in Allah" are the veil, gun, and text, all penetrated by the subject's gaze through the veil and at the viewer. The Farsi decorating the subjects is poetry by female Iranian writers encompassing the spectrum of viewpoints about the political situation in Iran.<sup>61</sup> However, even though the text has political connotations, it is not specific enough to fulfill the sign, signifier, and the signified in the semiological triangle.

As seen in *Offered Eyes*, fig. 12, art is the method for Neshat to portray, resolve, and engage the viewer with her thoughts following her first trip back to Iran after the 1979 Iranian Revolution.<sup>62</sup> *Offered Eyes* is a photograph featuring the eye and eyebrow of a female subject with text in Farsi written on the subject's sclera (the white of the eye).<sup>63</sup> When considering the semiology of the photograph, one can start from the sign or the signifier. The sign is the image of the woman. From this, the signifier would be the description of the woman and her thoughts, and the signified is the woman herself. However, there is not enough of the woman portrayed to give way for a semiological analysis. The small portion of the woman's face does not lend enough information to reveal her true identity because her physical features are hidden, and the text is too ambiguous to aid in understanding her identity.

When beginning with the signifier, the text acts as a legible description and a clear signifier. Rebecca Hart says that Neshat's Farsi text is "a poem about a garden on a photograph of her eye," which is "I Feel Sorry for the Garden" by Forugh Farrokhzad.<sup>64</sup> The poem is clearly not describing the female subject, eliminating that option as a sign or signified. Taking the poem more literally, the metaphorical language describing the garden does not lend to any kind of specific imagery or manifestation of the garden that is spoken of. Though the text is visible and legible, it does not lead to a distinguished sign or signified. More importantly, even the possible interpretation that connects the woman viewing her new Iranian home while thinking about the home she left behind is void of a clear connection of an image or woman with a garden. Thus, whether or not the signifier is in English or Farsi, and whether or not the sign accompanies it, there are still holes in the semiological interpretation of Neshat's *Offered Eyes*.

After Conceptual Art, semiology is no longer as useful of a theory because Postmodern artists recreate their ideas through texts in ways that are illegible or indistinct, questioning the applicability of semiology in understanding complex ideas that are represented through text. It would be false to say that semiology has never been useful. As discussed, there are times when semiology is an incredibly useful methodology. Prior to Conceptual Art, René Magritte provided an important precursor with his series, *Treachery of Images*. Magritte reveals the problems with absolute trust in images because of the lies images can portray. Semiology works effectively to unpack Magritte's thesis about the falsity of images. The work of Joseph Kosuth as a part of Conceptual Art most effectively utilizes semiology. Since Conceptual Art focuses on ideas, it is important that Kosuth reinterprets the same idea. Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* states the idea of a chair through the sign, signifier, and signified, making his work clearly understood through semiology. Semiology loses some of its efficacy when Postmodern artists use abstract ideas and texts that are not clearly comprehended by semiology.

When using semiology, it becomes clear that there are many problems with the theory, such as the arbitrariness of

the sign. Beyond the sign, there are other problems that lead to the logical conclusion that the problem lies in the arbitrariness of semiology as a whole. When this arbitrary method is applied to the abstract ideas of Postmodernism, semiology is hard-pressed to interpret Postmodern ideas. Tauba Auerbach offers a distinct breakdown of each letter of the alphabet, revealing how the components of letters can be rearranged to create new meaning. Auerbach reveals that meaning is more ambiguous than previously realized because of its ability to be deconstructed and reconstructed. When textual components are portrayed in the work of Liam Gillick, problems also arise. While Gillick's text is clearly legible and shows some signification, it does not lead to an understanding of the sign or the signified. Because his text and his ideas are abstract, they confound comprehension and interpretation.

When the text and the signifier become unclear, as with the work of Glenn Ligon, the situation becomes even more complicated. While some of Ligon's text is legible, it gradually reaches a point of complete illegibility. Even when Ligon's text is legible, it does not point to a sign or a signified. Reading further, the illegible text does not clarify the signifier. Rather, it makes it difficult to decode the sign or the signified. Ligon is one of many Postmodern artists who create illegible texts, and semiology does not make postmodern texts more comprehensible. In the work of Christopher Wool, semiology is confronted with abstract or gestural images. Wool's abstract images dominate his canvases with his washes of color and amoeba like forms that should act as the sign. But his representations are abstract, and the underlying concepts are unclear. Wool is one of many Postmodern artists whose ideas deal with abstractions. By the standards of semiology, because the idea is abstract and unclear, there is no sign to be understood.

To bring the argument around full circle, one must consider semiology in relationship non-Western art via the example of Shirin Neshat. Neshat's *Offered Eyes* purveys a portrait of a female with text in Farsi. Semiology has the sign and the signifier. Although the sign is clear and the text is legible (disregarding language barriers), the sign does not lead to its own signifier or signified, or connect with the signifier given. When beginning with the legible signifier, it also does not connect to the sign, nor does it connect to a different sign or signified. Although one can apply a two fold semiological analysis in one non-Western image, including the challenge of reading in Farsi, semiology falls short in the face of a necessary interpretation. This is the final case suggesting that the use of semiology can be problematic because it is lacking a clear idea to be described by the signifier and translated into the signified.

After reviewing some of the main themes in Postmodernism, such as illegible texts and abstract ideas, it can be argued that semiology loses some of its efficacy after Conceptual Art. Semiology is an arbitrary science that functions best when all three aspects of the sign, signifier, and the signified, are made relatively clear, as in Magritte and Kosuth. Sometimes, semiology can function when two out of three are clear, but the approach fails when the ideas are unclear or abstract. Postmodernism often involves a shift toward abstraction in which text and ideas became quite unclear. Meanwhile, semiology loses its relevance. Critics and theoreticians say that semiology is always prominent, yet substantial evidence, as suggested here, says otherwise. To ask whether there will be a rebirth of semiology means several facets should be considered, such as current art trends, global interaction, textual components to art, just to name a few. However, the safest hypothesis, though highly unsatisfactory, is that anything is possible. A reemergence of Conceptual art could exist, as well as art that emphasizes text, either legible or illegible, not to mention in numerous languages depending on the continued prominence of global artistic interaction. Though there is no straight foreword or guaranteed answer, it is still probable that even if a textual art in need of a semiological like analysis emerges, a new method should emerge to interpret and understand it. While art historians can appreciate semiology for its interpretation of ideas, it is now safe to let semiology pass, and to search for a new method to understand the abstracted ideas of Postmodernism.

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  30. Schleifer, Ronald. *Analogical Thinking: Post-Enlightenment Understanding in Language, Collaboration, and Interpretation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003.
  31. Shiff, Richard. "Every Shiny Object Wants an Infant Who Will Love It." *Art Journal* 70, no. 1 (2011): 6-33.

#### 4. Endnotes

1 Semiology is the study of signs by Ferdinand de Saussure. See: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986). Semiotics is a similar theory, but by Charles Sanders Peirce. See: Charles Sanders Peirce, *Semiotic and Significs: The Correspondence between Charles S. Peirce and Victoria Lady Welby*, ed. Charles S. Hardwick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977). However, Peircean studies are neglected in the art historical adaptation of semiology. An important nuisance and distinction is that semiotics and semiology are not interchangeable. Peircean semiotics uses the sign, object, and interpretant.

2 See: Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion* (New York: Berg, 2006); Roland Barthes, *The Semiotic Challenge* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1988); Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (London: J. Cape, 1985); Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs* (London: Cape, 1983); Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977); Roland Barthes, *Pleasure of the Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975).

3 Although there is an implied debate within this case study about the validity of Bal and Bryson's thesis, it will not be considered here. The timeline of Bal and Bryson (the Renaissance) falls too far out of the spectrum of this essay that argues for the primacy of semiology in Joseph Kosuth with René Magritte acting as an important precursor. See: Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 73 (June 1991): 174-208.

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4 The obvious issue with Eco is that he is analyzing Peircian semiotics, and not Saussurean semiology. Many of the problems he points out are still applicable, but he does not specifically speak to Saussure. See: Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976).

5 Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, rev. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 27.

6 Sign should not be confused with metaphor, the part of speech in which two unrelated things become related by comparison. It should also not be confused with metonym, the association of one thing as a part for the whole.

7 Paul Bouissac, *Encyclopedia of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 573.

8 Ibid., 15-16. Saussure's great contemporaries are Emile Durkheim in sociology and Sigmund Freud in psychology. The three great thinkers revolutionized the idea that human behavior is not a system that is similar to the series of events in the physical world, nor can behavior be understood by historical causes of events.

9 David Carrier, "Art History," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 179-80.

10 Richard Calvocoressi, *Magritte* (London: Phaidon, 1979), 3.

11 Calvocoressi also called the series *The Betrayal of Images* in his book on Magritte.

12 Figure 1. <http://collections.lacma.org/node/239578>

13 Ibid., 9-10.

14 Duncan Richter, *Historical Dictionary of Wittgenstein's Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 1, 103-106, 145. Jean Francois Lyotard notes in his book, *The Postmodern Explained*, that Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* changed the face of modern philosophy. See: Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

15 Liam Gillick, a Postmodern artist discussed later in this essay, also described Conceptual Art in his *Poster for Buro Friedrich* from Berlin in 1999. See: *Liam Gillick*, exh. cat., ed. Susanne Gaensheimer and Nicolaus Schafhausen, trans. Brigitte Kalthoff (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2000), 154.

16 Joseph Kosuth, *Bedeutung von Bedeutung (The Making of Meaning)* (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1981), 152-154.

17 Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, *Who's Afraid of Conceptual Art?* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 10, 22. I would tend to suggest the breakdown also occurs in the viewer, as they get lost in the discourse of whether or not it is art.

18 Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*, 7.

19 A more traditional interpretation of the meaning of *One and Three Chairs*, as well as a comparison to traditional art history can be found in Carolyn Wilde's essay "Matter and Meaning in the Work of Art: Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs*," in *Philosophy and Conceptual Art*, ed. Peter Goldie and Elisabeth Schellekens, 119-37. Figure 2. [http://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/joseph-kosuth-one-and-three-chairs-1965](http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/joseph-kosuth-one-and-three-chairs-1965).

20 Joseph Kosuth, *Joseph Kosuth: El arte como idea como idea (Joseph Kosuth: Art as idea as idea)* (Buenos Aires: CAYC, 1971), 1-2. The above description was adapted from a description made by Jorge Glusberg that prefaced an exhibition by Joseph Kosuth. Additionally, Wittgenstein's contextual theory is related to Barthes' theory of intertextuality. Finally, language and usage relates to Saussure's idea of langue versus parole, which is the structure of language versus the performance of language.

21 Curley, "Fuzzy Language," 125.

22 Ronald Schleifer, *Analogical Thinking: Post-Enlightenment Understanding in Language, Collaboration, and Interpretation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 108.

23 Schleifer, *Analogical Thinking*, 35. When reading about about the science of signs that semiology is Saussure's theory, and semiotics is Peirce's theory. Art historians broadly use semiotics as a term, but they more closely align themselves with the principles of Saussurean thought. Levi-Strauss is likely discussing the general principle, though his terminology would suggest Peirce.

24 Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, 30-31. Culler also notes on page 46 that the sign is arbitrary because it is subject to history. The matter is additionally complicated because of coding issues between multiple languages.

25 Schleifer, *Analogical Thinking*, 50.

26 Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, 21. Barthes is referencing Jakobsen's 'Deux aspects du langage et deux types d'aphasies.' See: Roman Jakobsen, "Deux aspects du langage et deux types d'aphasies," in *Essais de Linguistique generale* (Éditions de Minuit, 1963). Also see: Roman Jakobsen and M. Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague, 1956).

27 A. J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics*, trans. H. S. Gill (New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1989), 114

28 Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 48-49, 58.

29 Modernism here is considered in the same time frame of Modern art that begins in the late nineteenth century and continues through the middle of the twentieth century. 1965 is considered here as the emergence of

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Postmodernism, but Modernism and Postmodernism exist along side each other to the present day, even though Postmodernism still exists and is more prominent.

30 Rosemary Hawker, "Idiom Post-medium: Richter Painting Photography," *Oxford Art Journal* 32 (June 2009): 268.

31 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 2. Cezanne's letter was to Emile Bernard, 23 October 1905. See: Hawker, "Idiom Post-Medium: Richter Painting Photography:" 275.

32 Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 294-295.

33 Northrop Frye, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York: Longman, 1994), 44; Schleifer, *Analogical Thinking*, 38; and Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, trans. Francis J. Whitfield (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 8-9.

34 Kosuth, *Bedeutung von Bedeutung (The Making of Meaning)*, 163-165.

35 The full catalogue can be found at [http://www.moma.org/wp/ecstatic\\_alphabets/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ecstatic-alphabets\\_checklist\\_final\\_may-1-2012.pdf](http://www.moma.org/wp/ecstatic_alphabets/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/ecstatic-alphabets_checklist_final_may-1-2012.pdf).

36 Note that deconstruction here signifies literally taking things apart and not in reference to Jacques Derrida's theories of deconstruction.

37 Figure 3. <http://taubauerbach.com/view.php?id=31>

38 Figure 4. <http://taubauerbach.com/view.php?id=81>. Figure 5. <http://www.taubauerbach.com/view.php?id=80>.

39 Figure 6. <http://www.taubauerbach.com/view.php?id=19>.

40 Glenn Ligon also wrote about what each letter of the alphabet stands for in the context of his African American heritage. It is an interesting perspective away from Auerbach's technicality and linguistics. Ligon's alphabet can be found in Glenn Ligon, *Yourself in the World* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2011), 25-32.

41 P. H. Matthews, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39, 87, 127, 163, 210.

42 Figure 7. <http://www.liamgillick.info/home/work/projects-and-work-4>.

43 Lillian Haberer, *Factories in the snow*, exh. cat. (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2007), 99.

44 Ibid., 99. Interestingly enough, the Museum of Modern Art in New York did an exhibition of Liam Gillick's work, but they spelled it "Consciens," instead of Gillick's spelling, "Consien's."

45 Figure 8. <http://moussemagazine.it/liam-gillick-and-lawrence-weiner-a-syntax-of-dependency-at-m-hka-antwerp/>.

46 "A Syntax of Dependency – Liam Gillick," <http://www.liamgillick.info/home/work/a-syntax-of-dependency>. More information about the installation can be found through the E-flux advertisement at <http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/liam-gillick-and-lawrence-weiners-syntax-of-dependency/>.

47 Glenn Ligon, "Interview with Andrea Miller-Keller," in *Yourself in the World*, ed. Scott Rothkopf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 69-70.

48 Glenn Ligon, "Get the Picture: An Interview with Marie de Brugerolle," in *Yourself in the World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 78-80.

49 Scott Rothkopf, "I Lost my Voice I Found my Voice," in *Yourself in the World*, ed. Scott Rothkopf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), ix.

50 Glenn Ligon, "History," PBS video, April 26, 2012, <http://video.pbs.org/video/2227718406/>. One of his favorite texts that discussed race was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Kara Walker also was greatly inspired by this text, as seen by her work *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* from 1995. Many of Walker's other works discussing slavery also relate back to this key text.

51 Figures 9 and 10. <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/490241?=&imgno=0&tabname=label>.

52 Ligon, "History," <http://video.pbs.org/video/2227718406/>

53 Wool's pervasive forms and styles can be seen in greater detail at his exhibition at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York (<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/on-view/christopher-wool>), with photos at <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/on-view/christopher-wool/installation-photos>. Also noteworthy is: Josh Smith and Christopher Wool, *Can Your Monkey Do the Dog* (Brussels, Belgium: Michèle Didier, 2007).

54 Jeffrey Deitch, *The Painting Factory: Abstraction After Warhol* (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 55-8

55 Figure 11. <http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/exhibitions/past/exhibit/4917>.

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56 Ibid., 55-8.

57 Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 58. Interestingly enough, Eco is using terminology from Peircian Semiotics. However, his idea is still applicable because Peirce's referent equates to Saussure's signifier.

58 Although Shirin Neshat has a myriad of complex aspects to her work, such as Middle Eastern socio-political issues and feminist viewpoints, it is important to just focus on her use of text and how it relates to Semiology.

59 Shoja Azari, "Perceptual Dislocation," in *Shirin Neshat: Women Without Men*, ed. Shirin Neshat (New York: Charta Books, 2011), 9. In this, Neshat specifically argues that video art varies from cinema. While video art is "informed and realized, cinema concerns itself primarily with the art of storytelling."

60 Arthur Danto, *Shirin Neshat* (New York: Rizzoli, 2010), 9. To invoke a frame of reference, the Iranian Revolution began in 1979, and was immediately followed by the Iran-Iraq war in 1980

61 Ibid., 19.

62 Figure 12. <http://www.dia.org/about/images-album.aspx?gid=0&aid=17>.

63 Danto's book includes several Farsi poems with English translations that are portrayed in the "Women of Allah" series, including: "Allegiance with Wakefulness" by Tahereh Saffarzadeh, "I Will Greet the Sun Again" by Forough Farokhzad, and "I Feel Sorry for the Garden" by an unknown author.

64 Susan Babaie, *Shirin Neshat* (Detroit, MI: Detroit Institute of Arts, 2013), 9.