

Towards the verbal-visual object: looking for progress in inscriptional lettering

Charles Gurrey

Why is inscriptional lettering as a distinct medium now at a crossroads in Britain? Fifty years ago Nicolette Gray levelled the charge that 'inscriptional work . . . has been over-awed by penmanship and typography'.¹ Elsewhere she was to claim that 'All the real thinking and experimenting, all

the living contact between lettering and the contemporary world . . . [has] been in the field of printing. No wonder that the revival of carving has withered. Architectural lettering has then been dominated either by an imitative chisel or by typographical ideas, which are quite inapplicable.'²

More recently Tom Perkins has argued that 'when we look at the shift in perception of what sculpture could be over the past one hundred years – as Barbara Hepworth said, in 1900 sculpture had been thought of in terms of so many figures in

public squares – there is a similar need today for a wholesale shift of perception regarding inscriptional work.³ Some examples of contemporary practice in lettering do begin to address this need for change. They will be considered later, along with some formal questions that seek to highlight the distinct identity of this medium. Now, however, we must give some account of the failure of inscriptional practice to come into its own for so much of the past hundred years. We might begin with that formative time at the outset, that ‘revival of carving’, to which both Gray and Perkins allude.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Edward Johnston’s work showed that creative calligraphic practice, the revival of formal writing, could be a form of authentic, direct making. From the pen and the cut of the nib came an understanding of calligraphic letter structure: an internal connection of process and result. This was comparable in principle to that creative sense of their own medium which sculptors sought to develop at this time, in terms of the direct carving of stone, which was to become the significant point of growth for modernism in sculpture. Here was the sense of an internal working relationship with a specific material, through which sculptural form could develop as something directly achieved, directly won. Significantly, letter-carving in stone failed to catch this moment of change.

Eric Gill’s contribution to Johnston’s book on lettering in 1906 drew a disingenuous parallel between Johnston’s discipline, of which Gill was in awe, and that of lettering in stone.⁴ Gill’s claim that ‘Beauty of Form may be safely left to the right use of the chisel’ served to draw a simplistic and misplaced analogy with penmanship. The carving chisel is a tool that can be made to make almost *any* shape. Simply of itself it cannot determine some genetic and material understanding of letterform in stone. Gill’s later observation in his auto-biography that ‘[l]etters are things, not pictures of things’ is more resonant.⁵ There is an acknowledgment here of the difference between an embodiment of meaning and its mere representation, a difference in principle which served to underpin much of the invigoration of form achieved in early modernist sculpture.

This failure of carved lettering to come into its own for so much of the past century can be highlighted by looking at those few honourable exceptions which serve in their turn to prove three rules. First, that the Roman letter, used other than as a tool for learning, is an aesthetic irrelevance in the contemporary world. Second, that modernism in architecture has to a large extent compromised any significant development of monumental lettering in an architectural context. Thirdly, we have a rule as it were by association: that inscriptional lettering, in being perceived as ‘bound at the hip’ to the making of memorials, has been coloured by overly conservative assumptions allowed to dictate for too long in the making of headstones.

First, then, what exceptions prove the rule of the irrelevance of the Roman letter in the modern world?⁶ Despite the recurrent historical pursuit of intimations of ideal geometric form in the classical letter, its importance both for Carolingians and Renaissance Humanists had undoubtedly lain in a nostalgia for an idea of the classical past; ‘the idea of Rome was to both of them a complex emotional idea of which the letter was the symbol’.⁷ Such a loaded recollection of past things is seen to inform both the painted inscriptions of David Jones and the literary-practical work of Ian Hamilton Finlay.

Jones’s painted inscriptions are of relevance here for formal reasons as much as for their influence upon the work of some letter-carvers. A romantic attachment to classical tradition was intrinsic to the expressive sense of the texts, which he began in 1943. Jones felt that using given letterforms, rather than seeking to develop some invented form of his own, would serve better to evoke an historic but continuously valid meaning, whether this be in the form of poetry, liturgy or some other cultural memory. He set this down visually, not propositionally. These inscriptions are significant in that they provoke a sense of the text as object, something concrete. ‘These are formal arrangements, visual expression, physical things’.⁸ They achieve this by way of an intensity of expression to which a number of things contribute. Of course the chosen text is critically important and embodies that crucial sense for Jones of formative things recollected. The lettering is made to move gently; highlight

1. Annet Stirling and Brenda Berman, dialling code tablet for central library well, 1991, Purbeck Pon Freestone, approx. 60 × 40 cm. Landesbibliothek, Karlsruhe
(photo: Incisive Letterwork)

colour is used; letters vary in form, size and spacing and may be set perpendicularly or inverted as a border. The text itself is frequently obscure, being set in Welsh, Latin, Greek or Anglo-Saxon. All of this only serves the better to make us see the text as much as to read it. A tentative letterform evokes Hector's defeat; the use of purple colour recalls something regal; magisterial letters quote the Nicene Creed. In these works, meaning is both seen and felt. As effective visual and physical things, these painted inscriptions offer valuable formal insights for carved work.

Ian Hamilton Finlay's output is of course extensive and the use of inscrip-tional text forms but one part of it. A recol-lection of Western classical antiquity is at the centre of Finlay's polemical stance against the secular materialism of contem-porary liberal culture. The past becomes a means to dramatize and interpret the limi-tations of the present: to recover a sense of a sacred tradition, of things and places revered. More specifically, Finlay's work makes frequent recourse to a neo-classical idiom: this recalls the use which the Jacobins had made of that style, when they sought to foster an integration of aesthetic and moral purpose, within a severe and chastened aesthetic, in order to give form to newly claimed values and aspirations following the Revolution. Finlay's work at times makes effective use of such a classi-cal idiom for his own purposes, often through text works and even on occasion within a contemporary architectural context.

The new Landesbibliothek in Karlsruhe, the Baden State Library, is homage to the neo-classical heritage of that city. The building is a cube with an interior hall bounded by unornamented piers, which carry lettered stone frag-ments. These inscriptional tablets represent a collaboration between the neo-rationalist architect Oswald Ungers and Finlay, working in turn in collaboration with Annet Stirling and Brenda Berman as artist-craftspeople (fig. 1). The neo-classical severity of this library well accords with Finlay's use of a classical letter for these fragments. Which is not to say that a mod-ern inscription would not have worked: but that as things stand the classical letter does find a place here within an integral network of supportive allusions and ambi-



tions. In the absence of such implicit cul-tural, religious, or political purpose, as is intrinsic to Jones' and Finlay's use of a clas-sical letter, the use of this exemplar today will be gratuitous and inauthentic.

What of our second generalization: that modernist architecture has served to impede the development of monumental lettering over much of the past century? For its part, the modern movement in architecture did aim to demonstrate a faith in a realizable future, to be idealistic, purist yet demotic. It was culturally expansionist, international, with declared aspirations towards an achievable sense of the humane, healthy and sane. But the func-tional ideals it promoted became introvert-ed. Buildings came to express the built or constructed functionality of architecture's own elements, as opposed to the human ends pursued. Modular form, cantilevered structure, unadorned concrete; these became the object of expression rather than the theatre, library or hospital which they formed. The distinctiveness of these institutions one from another found no expression in the form of the buildings which came to house them.

Here was a growing self-confidence in an exclusively architectural purpose: the belief that what gets 'said' in a building should be something wholly implicit in the building's form and disposition of mass.⁹ In this, the idea of the predominant view-point, the focused assertion of identity implicit in the notion of a façade, comes to be discounted. Out too goes salient titling for a building, any monumental declara-tion of its function – now considered as something too rhetorical, too explicit. At best carving is brought in to recall an event – a plaque for the opening of a

building – rather than to fix the building's identity in a more integral way. The titling – 'hospital', 'school' – then finds its form in some derivation from the building's overall signage system.¹⁰ Architectural lettering as such is played down and has become a mere label devoid of expression.

But this issue of wrought, individual solutions to lettering and titling is only a particular case in point of a more general excision of craftsmanship from the building process. The spread of a 'component' mentality among architects has served to reduce the procedure of building to one of applying and manipulating so many pre-formed elements. Hitherto it had been in the nature of stone, as the supremely versatile building material it is, to be specifically worked and adapted in order to realize any given outcome, whether as masonry, monumental lettering or architectural sculpture. The reluctance by architects to pursue lettering in stone for buildings is of a piece then with a more general failure to sustain habits of cooperation with artists and craftspeople.¹¹

Within this broad development of modern architecture and its failure to offer a context for inscriptional work, one notable exception serving to prove the rule would be that of Ralph Beyer's monumental lettering for the 'Tablets of the Word' and other work at Coventry Cathedral (1956–62). These carved texts were the outcome of Henry Moore's initial advice to the architect, Basil Spence, that he should abandon a proposal for eight large carved sculptural reliefs along the nave, each con-

ceived to be its own 'hallowing place'. Beyer came to the alternative proposal for large text works, full of the tension between the progressive influences in his own background, and the conservatism of his training in the workshops of Eric Gill and David Kindersley.¹² He persuaded Spence not to use Roman letterforms, and from one-twelfth scale drawings squared-up, he carved, with the assistance of Michael Watson, eight key New Testament texts, *in situ*, in compound tablets of Hollington stone, each measuring four-and-a-half by two metres overall (fig. 2).

The work recalls early Christian catacomb inscriptions in the combined use made of text with simple incised symbols: but more so still in the fact that Beyer's work, despite its high profile, does not seek to demonstrate its own ability to achieve a result. This is large anti-virtuoso lettering that, like its historic exemplars, makes effective expression of spiritual meaning precisely on account of its directness and want of sophistication. Gray qualified her praise for this work by asking what 'creative imagination [and] intensity of religious feeling David Jones [might] have brought to the work' by comparison.¹³ But these inscriptions are perhaps very much of their time in being plain-spoken, low-key, and unrhetoical. With their roughness of finish and limpid feel, these carved texts have an evident simple materiality wholly sufficient for the spiritual sense that can be had in encountering them.

What constraining principle is seen to attach to memorial work that has



2. Ralph Beyer, inscriptional panel 'The Son of Man is come . . .', 1962, Hollington stone, eight panels each 4.6 × 2.1 m. Coventry Cathedral (photo: © Birmingham Pose Studios)

3. George Pace and Geoffrey Kaye, Memorial to George McLane, 1965, sandstone, 127 × 66 × 12 cm. Goathland, North Yorks (photo: Charles Gurrey)

4. Headstone, Putney Cemetery, 1969, Portland stone. Central Lettering Record, Central St Martins College, University of the Arts, London (photo: N. Gray)

proved so limiting in turn to a broader appreciation of what inscriptional lettering can be? In *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, a book otherwise characterized by a balance of approach and ready embrace of change, Tanya Harrod asserts that '[one] area where a species of neo-conservatism made important sense was in the carving of headstones'.¹⁴ No argument is offered for this assumption. Just what specific dissociation of feeling for contemporary design are memorials held to license? Significant memorials had after all been part of the development of sculptural modernism in the early years of the century, such as Jacob Epstein's tomb for Oscar Wilde in Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris (1910–12); Eric Kennington's memorial for the 24th Infantry Division, Battersea Park (1924); and his Memorial to the Missing (of the battles of the Marne and the Aisne 1912), Soissons (1925–28). In a contribution to *The Art of Remembering*, the catalogue to the exhibition *Memorials by Artists* (Blickling Hall, Norfolk, 1998), Alan Powers alludes more broadly to the degree of accommodation and acceptance of clients' wishes and preferences, which could be seen to displace the possibilities of 'personal expression and originality' that might entitle memorial work to be considered as 'art' at all.¹⁵ But these are generalizations of a kind which for too long have been taken to uphold some unexamined conservative presumption as a rule of memorial work. Harriet Frazer founded 'Memorials by Artists' in 1988, and, as distinct from the earlier more impersonal memorial agency, 'Sculpted Memorials and Headstones', established by Gilbert Ledward (with Gill, Lutyens, Durst, Garbe and others) in 1934, she has sought to facilitate the bringing together of client with maker as central to realizing appropriate headstones. Through this connection the possibility of more contemporary work can arise.

Apart from current work, what exceptions might we cite to prove this rule? Consider two from the 1960s: one by George Pace (1915–75), an architect and designer of memorials, who, while not himself a carver, designed work that was at times effective as lettering in stone. The McLane memorial made in 1965 develops a ribbon pattern of raised and overlapping letters in three planes as a carpet across the



face of a tooled and irregular sandstone slab (fig. 3). Letters are sometimes reversed, have a degree of movement, and in their form make a connection between the eighth and mid-twentieth centuries. The back of the stone carries robust carved elements in relief and freer letters ranged about a cross of St Chad. In the Central Lettering Record, held at the University of the Arts in London, two related but unattributed illustrations stand out (fig. 4). In one, a memorial to Alison Le Plat, the name is set in generous monoline raised letters with overlaps and varying forms, at the top

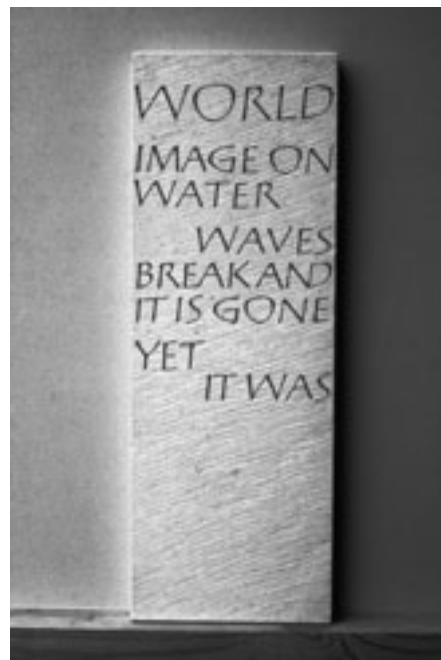
5. Tom Perkins, *World*, 1994, incised and painted Portland stone, 69 × 23 cm. Short poem by Kathleen Raine. Collection of the artist
(photo: Tom Perkins)

of the stone, to form a tripartite block of lettering. This is echoed at the base by repeated 'alleluias' carved in up to four superimposed planes of raised letters varying in form and layout to give an energy and 'voice' to the words.

There are of course other examples of work seeking a fresh approach, or a truth to the medium. It may be significant for example both for Eric Kennington's lettering in the thirties, and later for John Skelton's letterforms, with their characteristic sense of being tensed and stretched, as it were from within, that the physical vigour and absence of preciousness in their respective lettering owed something to a broader carving interest, which found expression for both men in the making of notable sculptural work.

Let us look at some contemporary work that brings a renewed sense of the distinctness of this medium. Tom Perkins has sought to effect a fusion of calligraphy and stone lettering. He feels it is difficult to avoid the association with calligraphy in italic forms: but with capitals he has deliberately sought a more dynamic structure. 'Parabolic' shapes have come to register the influence of Hepworth's sculpture, particularly of the fifties. Perkins has drawn too upon the work of John Skelton and Jack Trowbridge in the 1980s, to try to distil something new, and is definitely one of the first people since Beyer to develop a distinct visual identity for his inscriptional work. For him, Edward Johnston's Quaker background is taken to be a critical ingredient in the directness and feel of that calligrapher's work. In Perkins' own work there is a quality of understatement; other things are permitted to come through – a sense of space, a feel for texture, abstract balance, and so on. Restrained, ascetic and sinewy letters carry resonances of modesty and grace. Directional movement together with lifted horizontal strokes further encourage a feeling that there are physical intimations here of things beyond the lettering itself. At times the taut and spare letters suggest scratch-like marks, things registered and left behind, as a result of some encounter with the material, rather than any declared intention to manipulate or dominate it.

With *World* (1994) transience is evoked in a medium more often associated with its opposite (fig. 5). The inscription taken to



the very edge of the stone adds intensity, and heightens the sense of these words finding themselves *in* a material, as opposed to being set upon a page. They do not aspire to be sufficient in themselves, but suggest that they lead off to other things. This ascetic, meditative quality is seen again in *The World* (1993); the vanities and self-importance of much inscriptional work are exposed here. In this working out of contemporary letterform, tensed sculptural forms make an intentional fusion of the calligraphic with the carved, where the resulting letters have an openness of feeling which does connect with the spirit of Johnston's work. There is, however, little exploitation of the third dimension, and the lettering remains tied to a logic of the letterform itself, rather than developing more directly in terms of the specific physical object whose identity it will come to determine.

Charles Smith's approach is quite different. Above all for this carver there is a concern for movement, and a sense of freedom that this implies. The dynamic sense of the carving will come out of what the words say, and from the particular space that the work is intended to fit.¹⁶ With this freeing-up of the lettering, lines and serifs and the centring of inscriptions are discarded. Once letters are in mid-air, serifs become irrelevant. Letter shapes follow

6. Charles Smith, Memorial to Kathi Craven. A Quaker memorial. Park Spring sandstone, 90 × 50 cm. Scotton churchyard, N. Yorks
(photo: Charles Smith, 1999)

which are conducive to some sense of the movement that can be developed through carving a given inscription. This work frequently has a taut, compressed, ascetic quality; there is an intensity, and a focusing of expressive effect here. Tightly wrought compositions frequently result, in which letter strokes tie into one another and complex links and rhythms are set up. At times these can have the same effect as a piece of music: if the composition of the lettering works and the meaning is sympathetic, Smith says one can *feel* the words. At times pictorial imagery may be mirrored in the text. In *Like a Swan*, the composition echoes the swan landing upon water. Dramatic zig-zags, arcs and diagonals of interrelated and connected strokes lead airborne letters on one side to more composed letters on the other, a resolution being achieved in the last two letters of the text.

The visual, felt and seen dynamic of an inscription may be valued almost to the point of disregarding legibility. The logic of the letterform is revoked: form now derives as much from the dynamics of the particular composition. Letter consistency is not necessary. Letters can be upside-down if wished, as long as the meaning of the piece is grasped. The Craven memorial counterpoints English and Welsh text, using different degrees of stress to produce a composition which moves within itself, but which overall has an almost weightless feel, with an effect like falling leaves (fig. 6). In Smith's work, the authority of the particular carved object is affirmed by way of the specific dynamic of a composition, which any given text can be brought to form.

Since forming 'Incisive Letterwork' in the late 1980s, Annet Stirling and Brenda Berman have sought to pursue the combination of letters and stone, feeling that too much inscriptional work tended to have a two-dimensional, graphic quality. Being around and working in St Aldhelm's Quarry, Isle of Purbeck, initially to work the block for a large inscriptional piece for Ian Hamilton Finlay (one of the 'Present Order' series), brought a revelation of the material as it is, at source. Lettering in stone then came to be expressive for them of the very experience of working with and responding to the medium: the sense of origin and timescale; the character of a quarry face,



the very processes of working the material itself, including the marks that tools make in the process of carving. These carvers pursue an interest in the more abstract qualities attaching to letters. The spaces inside and between letters become as important as the letters themselves. They seek to extend the gap between looking and reading. They have an interest in visual ambiguity; dual-text works set two lots of text running together as alternating lines or in alternating cases. Diverse influences inform the work. Investigated sources get remade for a different medium: the symbolic forms of Kandinsky, the jewellery of Wendy Ramshaw, and the sculpture of Chillida for example. Other letterers are charged with frequently failing to 'see the rough' – with being too ready to reject anything that does not conspicuously reveal skill.

In *Alphabet for our Heroes* (1991), a frieze counterpoints an alphabet with text. There is a creative revisiting of historic letterforms together with constructions which derive from processes for working in low relief (GQX). Allusions to generic types such as cuneiform, or broad decorative systems like art nouveau and art deco, are framed by borders of letters-in-relief with a sunk background listing lettering 'heroes'. *New Blue Moon* (2002), which grew out of a sketch of a rock face at Winspit in Dorset, is

7. Annet Stirling and Brenda Berman, *New Blue Moon*, 2002, Burlington grey slate, 62.5 × 59.5 × 20 cm. Private collection (photo: the artists)



a relief-carved inscription which forms a tapestry of linear bands formed from incised marks and shallow facets (fig. 7). Light is crucial to the reading of this oblique message in stone: and light is the central poetic image of the text used. One's engagement in reading the puzzle of forms offsets the melancholy mood disclosed in the meaning of the piece.

Stirling and Berman have been enterprising in preparing bodies of work for their own themed exhibitions: *The Ground Beneath Our Feet* in 2000, and in 2006, *Heavens Above*.¹⁷ Ideas are explored here, and work made which shows what is possible. These are valuable portfolio exercises, but opportunities must be found for work whose potential is only indicated in such exhibition pieces; it cannot be an end in itself. Without denying the significant commissioned work for which Incisive Letterwork has been responsible, such as at the National Portrait Gallery, Ondaatje Wing (1999), and Norwich Castle Museum's *Stones* (2000), the inherent connection which the medium of stone has with built form and with structure leaves even the most imaginative inscriptional work conceived and executed for exhibition feeling like a surrogate for the real thing. One feels the detachment from context or site. The feeling echoes Herbert Read's charge upon sculpture, made at a time when carving in stone was central to that medium, that it is 'not a cabinet art, suitable for drawing-rooms or boudoirs; it is a monumental art'.¹⁸

For Peter Coates, lettering, as this can be made to work as abstract pattern or as some configuration of positive and nega-

tive shape, is seen to be as important in being a creative vehicle for other work beyond lettering, as it may be for inscriptional work itself. This is a reverse direction of influence to that we saw in Perkins' work. Although Coates is keen to explore possibilities for taking various formal and structural principles which interest him in lettering, and putting them to work in more overtly constructional, architectural contexts, in his more specifically inscriptional commissions, certain qualities are salient. For Coates there is pleasure to be had in *not* being able to read, for example, Latin inscriptions. In *Stele* any express propositional meaning is concealed, and this serves to highlight the particular object-quality and material sense of the piece. Here too there is a paring-down of inscriptional elements in pursuit of a minimalism of form. For this carver lettering is something to be 'taken to the nth degree'. Square-sunk letters are used, which can have a less graphic and more sculptural quality than v-cut inscriptions. These appear again in *Iffley Knot* (fig. 8). Again to a large extent the explicit sense is withheld and text comes to form a pattern that fringes the plinth, making the visual bridge between the worked sculptural form and the sheer surfaces of the base. The handling of this text only serves to accentuate the particular object-forms and materials

8. Peter Coates, *Iffley Knot*, 2004, Portland Blue and Portland Basebed limestone, 120 × 70 × 50 cm. Iffley churchyard, Oxford (photo: Adrian Ray)



that make up this singular churchyard memorial.

The present writer, himself a sculptor and letterer, is interested in letters as three-dimensional, physical things; how they occupy a specific material and physical space. Work often seeks to provoke a degree of effort, some deliberate response in the act of reading, opening up the gap between reading and looking so that the grasp of meaning comes in part as a sense of realization or achievement. Meaning may be grasped not through syntax but through seeing words, as these have become objects, or parts of an object: letters as solid things. In the VC Memorial at Dunorlan Park, Kent (fig. 9), individual lines from separate stanzas of a commissioned poem by Andrew Motion, (the then Poet Laureate) set up echoes of their sense in the object-quality of this minimal standing form, and in their deployment as lines of raised text running down its whole length. The letterforms as much as the con-structural forms develop out of the specific character of the material used. In *Pedestal* the letters have become abstracted modular forms (fig. 10), thus setting up a distance between the public and the private meaning of the inscription. Words of particular poignant significance to the client are screened from over-exposure, from any too-ready legibility.

Some more general points can now be usefully made. As Charles Smith sees it, the letter-cutter should be viewed today like the scribe at the point of the invention of printed text: if the carver is not moving forward in his own medium, there is no justification for the practice at all.¹⁹ The technical possibilities of machine-cut letters now – whereby the execution of a War Graves Commission headstone, cross inscription and regimental badge can all be completed in twenty-five minutes – leave no room for hand-carved work which is less than a particular achievement, a thing of risk and invention.

It could also be argued that given the ubiquitous presence and largely instrumental use of words and text within contemporary society, there is a responsibility upon inscriptional lettering, as upon calligraphy, to open up a point of disengagement here: that both media should strive to reinstate looking and seeing as particular conditions of reading. As such, a material

object can be made the occasion for attending to letters and text, and provoke a sense of the physical reality of the word. What can we say more specifically about the formal virtues of the particular medium of carved lettering in stone?

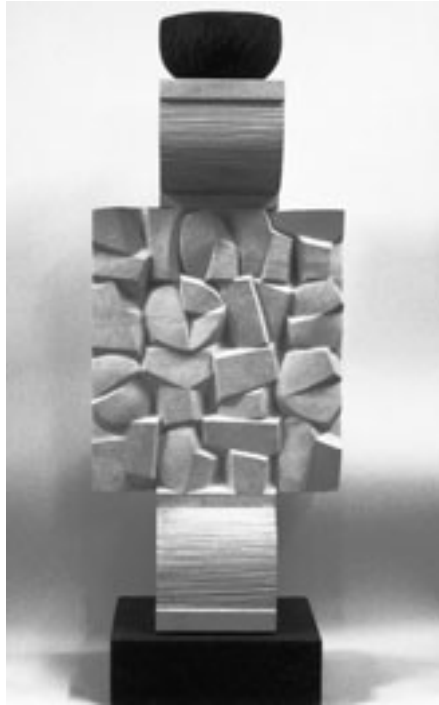
Communication should not automatically be taken to be a virtue in this medium. It should not stand in the way of formal invention. Significant abstraction and patterned elaboration of text can at times serve to rescue some bureaucratic and formal wording, and make of it a singular artwork.²⁰ One's appreciation of some text may well turn upon something other than its explicit sense. The satisfaction derived from *seeing* text in a language one does not know is not illicit, and, as with Jones' painted works, can be part of grasping an allusive or nostalgic second-order meaning. Gray argued that lettering for architecture should specifically be conceived as pattern, and that the readability of architectural lettering should be a strictly secondary requirement.²¹ To the extent that architectural letters get *recognized* rather than read, this is quite consistent with the purposes of commercial or civic signage. This is to reverse the criterion for typography, seeing design rather than legibility as the priority for monumental lettering. An undue concern for communication and explicit sense can lead to a negative limit of expressionism in lettering. At this point the gap between looking and reading gets eliminated. The looking is not then consciously registered at all – unless it is provoked by mere virtuosic execution, which is a dead end. The grasp of meaning in a carved inscription should be mediated by the specific material realization of it. We should perceive *an object* as a part of our grasp of a text.

The literary form of the concrete poem is relevant here. Concrete poetry is distinguished by its relinquishing of conventional syntax, which ordinarily serves to tie one word to another as the reader is taken in a linear or sequential way through a poem. With the concrete poem, by contrast, the way one reads it, 'the connections one makes between its different components, and the conclusions one draws from these connections, are all determined *visually*, not by a discursive movement of linear syntax'.²² The apprehension of the physical space and pattern of the text becomes an

- 1 N. Gray, 'Theory of classical', *Architectural Review*, November, 1953, p. ?.
- 2 N. Gray, *Lettering on Buildings*, Oxford, Architectural Press, 1960, p. ?.
- 3 Interview with Tom Perkins, September 2005.
- 4 E. Johnston, *Writing & Illuminating & Lettering*, ed. W. R. Lethaby, Artistic Crafts Series Technical Handbook, London, 1906.
- 5 E. Gill, *Autobiography*, London, 1940, p. ?.
- 6 For what has proved to be recourse to a restricted range of letterforms as supposed paradigms of Roman practice, see Gray, as at note 2.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 N. Gray, 'David Jones and the art of lettering', *Motif 7*, Summer 1961, p. ?.
- 9 See for example J. Stirling in *This is Tomorrow*, exh. cat., Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1956.
- 10 R. Kindersley and M. Jennings, 'The letterers are willing', *Crafts*, 56, May/June 1982; R. Kindersley and M. Jennings, *Typos*, 5, London College of Printing, 1982.
- 11 Such habits are necessary for the realization of any properly integral detail for a building, however minimal or abstract, so that it might accord well with a modernist approach, as in Carlo Scarpa's tomb for the Brion family at San Vito d'Altivole (1969–78).
- 12 Ralph Beyer (1921–2008). His father, Oscar Beyer, had been a noted writer on modernist art practice. Family friends had included the architect Erich Mendelsohn (1887–1953); and Beyer was aware of the work of the calligrapher and typographer Rudolf Koch (1876–1934). See K. Eustace, 'Sculpture', in L. Campbell, *To Build a Cathedral: Coventry Cathedral 1945–1962*, exh. cat., Mead Gallery, University of Warwick, 1987, pp. 63–64. Beyer was also responsible for the memorial to the theologian Paul Tillich at Paul Tillich Park, New Harmony, Indiana, and later worked with the architect Philip Johnson.
- 13 N. Gray, 'Lettering in Coventry Cathedral', *Typographica*, 6 December 1962, p. ?.
- 14 T. Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1999, p. ?.
- 15 A. Powers, 'Living memorials', in *The Art of Remembering*, Manchester, 1998, p. ?.
- 16 Interview with Charles Smith, 2005.



10. Charles Gurrey, *Pedestal*, 2006, Monks Park with Caithness stone, h: 120 cm. Private collection (photo: Charles Gurrey)



some close, internal relation connecting up the various constituent elements of a carved work: the text; the letterforms; the setting-out or pattern of the words, the material, the object form, and the context or purpose of the work.

A visual and intuitive grasp of the sense of some inscription can then come by way of a response to a physical and particular object form – in which some expressionist distance has been opened up between seeing and reading. The particular resonance of the words comes to seem inseparable from the quite specific physical form of their embodiment. What we have is the creation of a ‘verbal-visual object’.

Notwithstanding the compromises and qualifications which commissioned work can imply, as a counsel of perfection it could be said that inscriptional work will be most true to itself when it has before it, as some regulative idea for its practice, just such a notion of the ‘verbal-visual object’ as is here proposed.

integral part of the poetic experience and helps to determine the particular meaning grasped.

With effective and adventurous inscriptional work, looking at and seeing words can be as important as reading them. The visual sense of design and pattern may come even to displace legibility itself. The sense we can have of the particular physical and material object becomes itself a key ingredient in apprehending the meaning of the work. What has to be developed then is the grasp one can have of there being

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17 *Heavens Above*, Fowey, Cornwall, 2005.

18 H. Read, *Henry Moore*, London, 1934, p. ?.

19 Smith, as at note 16.

20 See for example the plaque by Charles Smith at Lichfield Cathedral recording the award of a European Regional Development Fund Grant in 1989.

21 Gray, as at note 2, p. ?.

22 S. Scobie, ‘Models of order’, in A. Finlay (ed.), *Wood Notes Wild: Essays on the Poetry and Art of Ian Hamilton Finlay*, Edinburgh, 1995, p. ?.