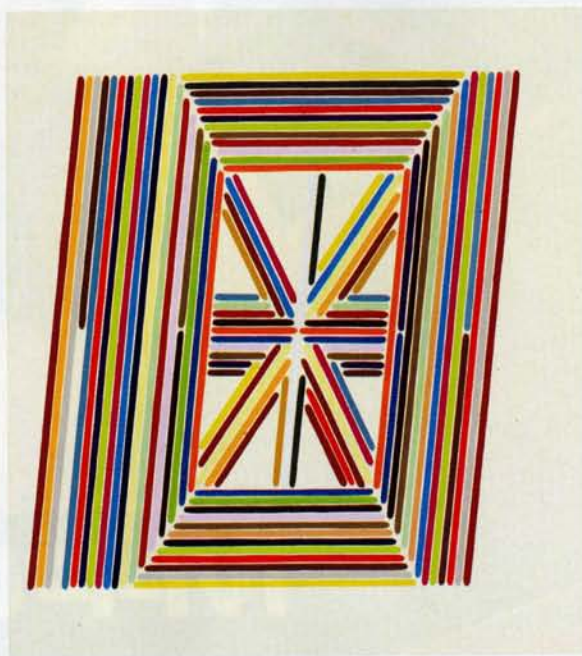


VIS-ED: TAUBA AUERBACH

A former sign painter taps into the magical powers of language.

WORDS: VIVIAN HOST IMAGES: TAUBA AUERBACH



ABOVE:

0-9, *From the Center Out, Digital*
(gouache on paper, 22"x30")

The Whole Alphabet, From the Center Out, Digital (gouache on paper, 22"x30")

RIGHT:

IS-NT, Exclusive for XLR8R Vis-Ed

For many people, language is an afterthought—to Tauba Auerbach, it's everything. Her work centers on the power of words and alphabets, bestowing a rather mystic quality on the tools of everyday communication. Using elaborate calligraphy, reconfigured typewriters, and painstakingly rendered ink drawings that often resemble rebus puzzles, Auerbach's pieces are at first achingly simple, then ponderously complex as they force one to muse on the shortcomings of language.

I reach Bay Area-based Auerbach just as mysteriously, via email through Laurie Lazer, co-owner of San Francisco's Luggage Store Gallery (where Auerbach has shown, in addition to L.A.'s New Image Art). Her emails appear carefully thought out, suggesting a depth beyond her age (24) and the aftereffects of having studied art at Stanford (under the tutelage of friend and Mission School artist Margaret Kilgallen). In between doodling imperfect circles and listening to The Slits and Chilean prog-folk act Congregación Viene, Auerbach typed to us about signifiers, secret codes, and special letters.

By day you are a sign painter. I imagine that to be very meditative.

I actually quit my job at the sign shop about a year ago, but you're right that painting signs has a meditative quality. I felt like I was constantly on a quest for the perfect balance between painting fast and gracefully and not going so fast that I would mess up, because fixing mistakes was painstaking and always made the letters end up looking stiff and labored, which was what I was trying to avoid in the first place. The example is kind of specific, but the idea applies

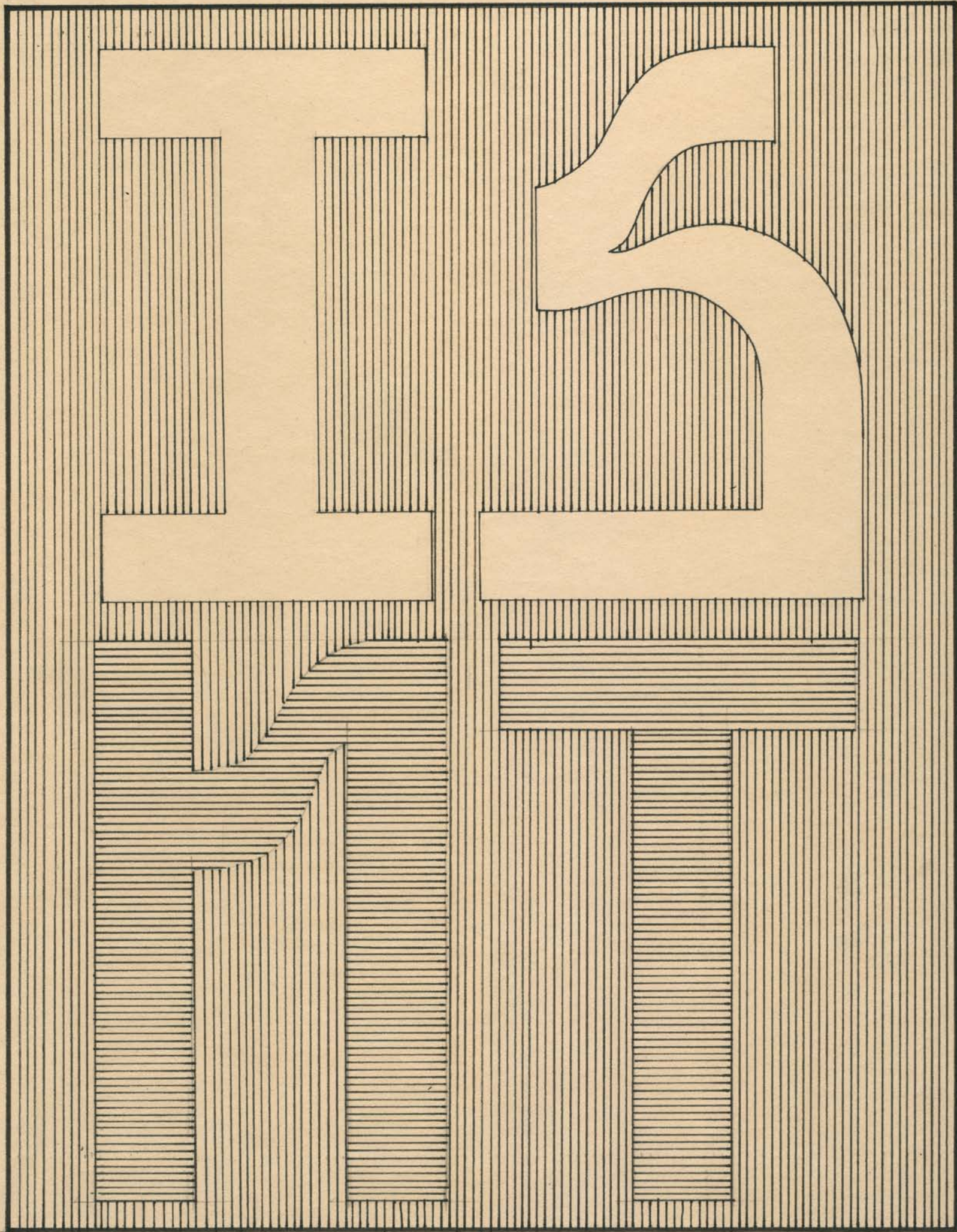
to a lot of situations. Balance is so hard. It takes constant self-observation and millions of tiny adjustments.

What are your favorite letters to paint? Are there any letters that you don't get along with?

My favorite letters to paint are not necessarily my favorite letters to look at. Rs and Ss are challenging to paint, but some of my favorites aesthetically. E, A, and Q are also at the top of the favorites list. There used to be some letters that I hated, but not anymore. We all get along pretty well now.

What is your favorite way to communicate?

It's interesting that you should ask that, because in the last year or so I have become a huge mail sender. I have a few really good regular penpals. My friend Will always sends me these beautiful typewritten letters where he rotates the orientation of the paper in the typewriter to make different designs and patterns. We send letters back and forth every few weeks. My last one to him was in a code that he had to decipher. I was reading about old spy communications, and the different kinds of codes they'd write in. One of my favorite ones is where the two parties would agree to always refer to a certain book, and correspondences were made up of a series of pairs of numbers like "33,157," which would mean that the reader should look up the 157th word on the 33rd page. The whole letter was number pairs [that were] substituted for words.



THIS PAGE (top row):

Morse Alphabet, No Spaces, Yellow (ink on paper, 22"x30")

How To Spell The Alphabet (ink on paper, 22"x30")

THIS PAGE (bottom row):

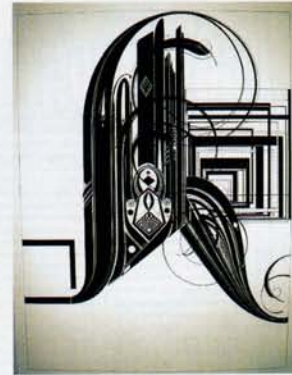
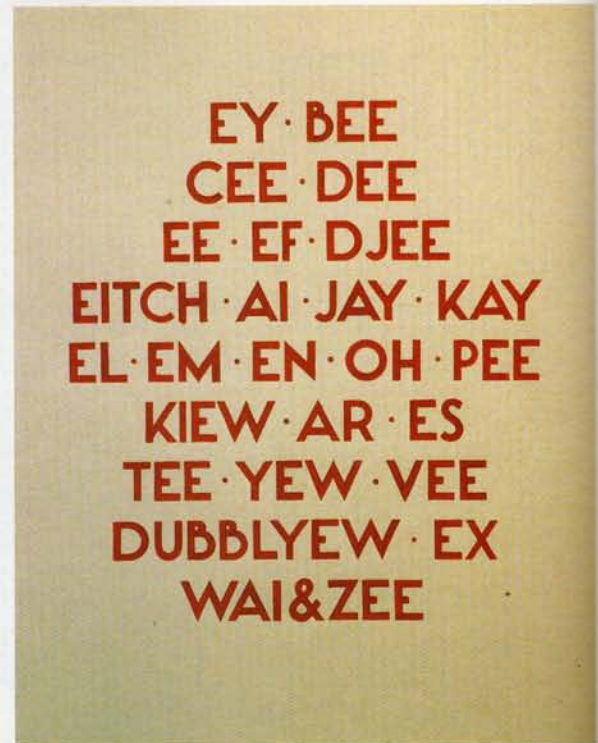
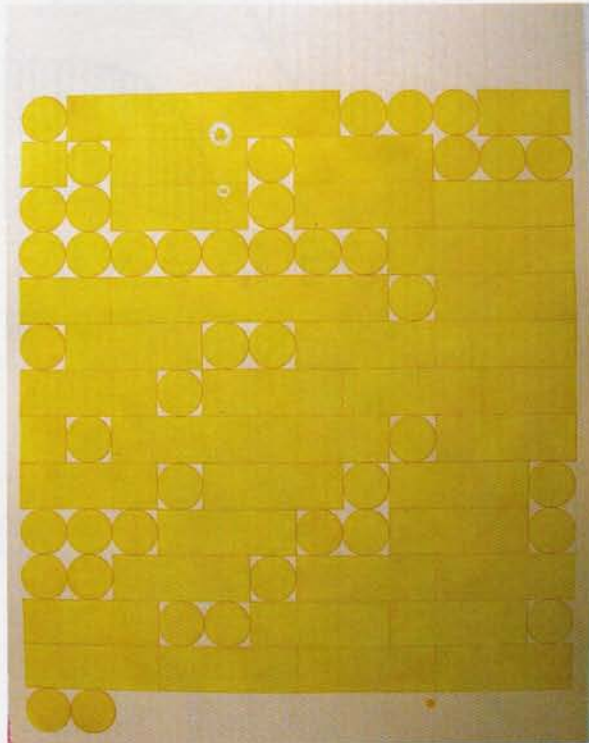
A, E, G, R, V (all ink on paper, 38"x50")

OPPOSITE PAGE (clockwise from left):

Edland 1892 Indexing, JVCRAK and ergonomic QWERTY

Ugaritic Alphabet

And Per Se And (ink on paper)



One of your shows at New Image was titled "Signs of the Real and Infinite." What does that title mean to you?

My friend Nico [Dios] and I did that show together. We came up with the name because we were both making art about symbols—his work is mostly about numbers and math and mythology. We had this connection about signifier systems, and how they represent everything from very tangible, real things in the world to totally abstract ideas like God, truth, ambivalence, or infinity.

What's the most interesting thing to you about the Morse alphabet?

The Morse alphabet is what got me thinking about how abstract all alphabets are. Morse is made up of flashes of light, or tones of different length, just on and off, a lot like digital encoding...And it's amazing to me that all of our meanings and thoughts, every word you've ever said or written

in your whole life, could be reduced to a series of flashes or pulses. I also think it's interesting that the spaces in between the signals mean as much as the signals themselves.

Your work seems very meticulous. Are you a perfectionist in your personal life?

By nature, yes. But I am trying to have more balance about that in my work and in my personal life. Sometimes I'll be sort of compulsive about getting things precise and perfect, but I'm starting to like and even revere the imperfect things that happen along the way.

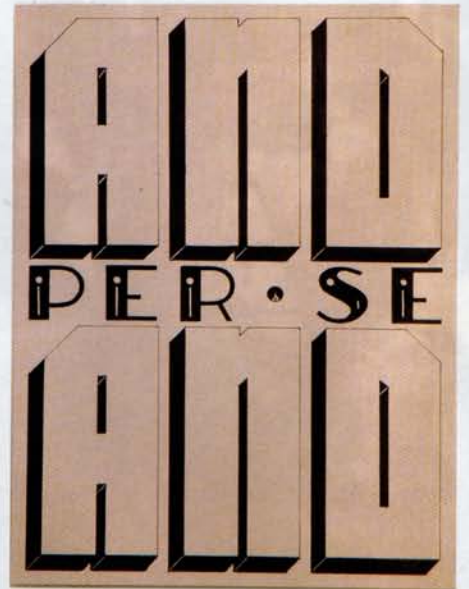
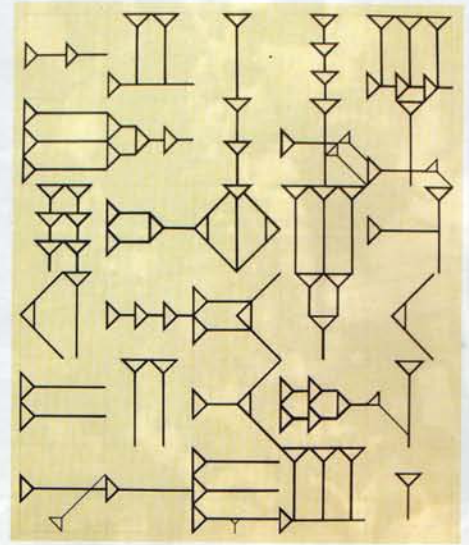
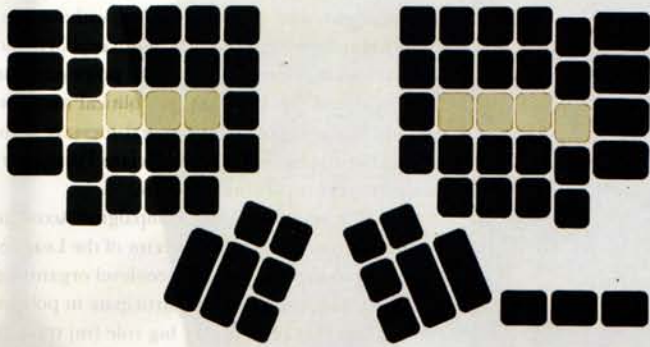
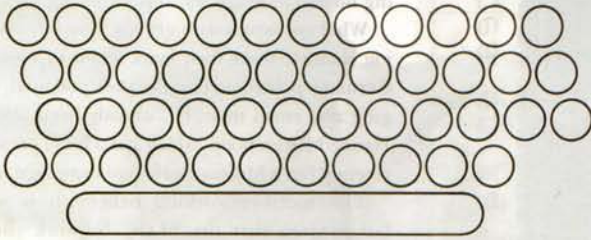
How do you feel about computers and how they are changing language?

That is a big question. Computers are changing everything, and language kind of coats everything we do, so they are inextricably linked. What's most interesting to me is how the language that

computers use is changing our world. Everything is getting digitally encoded—old analog recordings and films, photographs, people's voices. Film grain changes when it's turned into pixels. And it's not just that real things are being made into digital information, it goes the other direction too—digital information is actually creating real things. And the way the digital language works is, like any other language, not unbiased. Because it is a binary system, it precludes any real ambiguity, and can only simulate it. It's all 0s and 1s. There is actually no 0.5 in the language.

What do you think is the ugliest word in the English language, based on either meaning or looks or both?

There is a little tiny street in San Francisco called Larch. I always walk past it and think, "That is a disgusting word." I believe it's the name of a tree.



What do you do when you're lacking inspiration?

I go to the library. It never fails, because if I go there without a direct purpose, it feels acceptable to indulge a tangent or just sort of let my mind wander. Every time I feel stuck, I get out of it because I am somehow reminded of how much stuff and information there is in the world. I usually have the problem of being excited by too many things, and wanting to learn about and do more things than there is time for.

How did you get your start?

I sort of don't know how to answer that because I don't know where the "start" is. I have always been making art. I drew and built things as a kid and both my parents are very artistic, crafty people who would always help me carry out any project I wanted to do, no matter how stupid. My dad is one of those people who can build anything...and he has a lot of tools. One time when

I was little we made this ridiculous house for my pet rabbit at the time, Momo. My dad called it Chateau Momo, because it had separate rooms, including a little private room for the rabbit to go and hide if he didn't feel like being social. We did a lot of projects together and sometimes we still do. My mom went to CCA(C) and knows a lot about ceramics and plaster. Her art is up all over their house. My parents are very supportive and interested in art. So for me, the "start" is really my childhood.

What did you study at Stanford?

I studied Studio Art, but I chose to go there because it wasn't strictly an art school and I could take classes in any area I wanted. For me it was really the right decision because I was kind of a nerd, so I took classes in physics and engineering even though they weren't connected to my official major. The biggest lesson I learned in

college though is that academia is not the end-all it thinks it is.

What daily rituals do you have?

I don't really have any. I am not a person who needs structure or routine to function. I think I am very self-disciplined, so I just do things when I want or feel like I should, and everything kind of just gets done. I feel very, very lucky that I can set my own schedule and be so in control of my daily life.

Have you always been interested in letters?

Pretty much always. I was really into changing and perfecting my handwriting when I was growing up and we had to handwrite everything in school. I put a lot of thought into how I wrote letters; I even remember writing in my diary about it—how I was inventing a new "A," and was going to use the new one from that point forward.