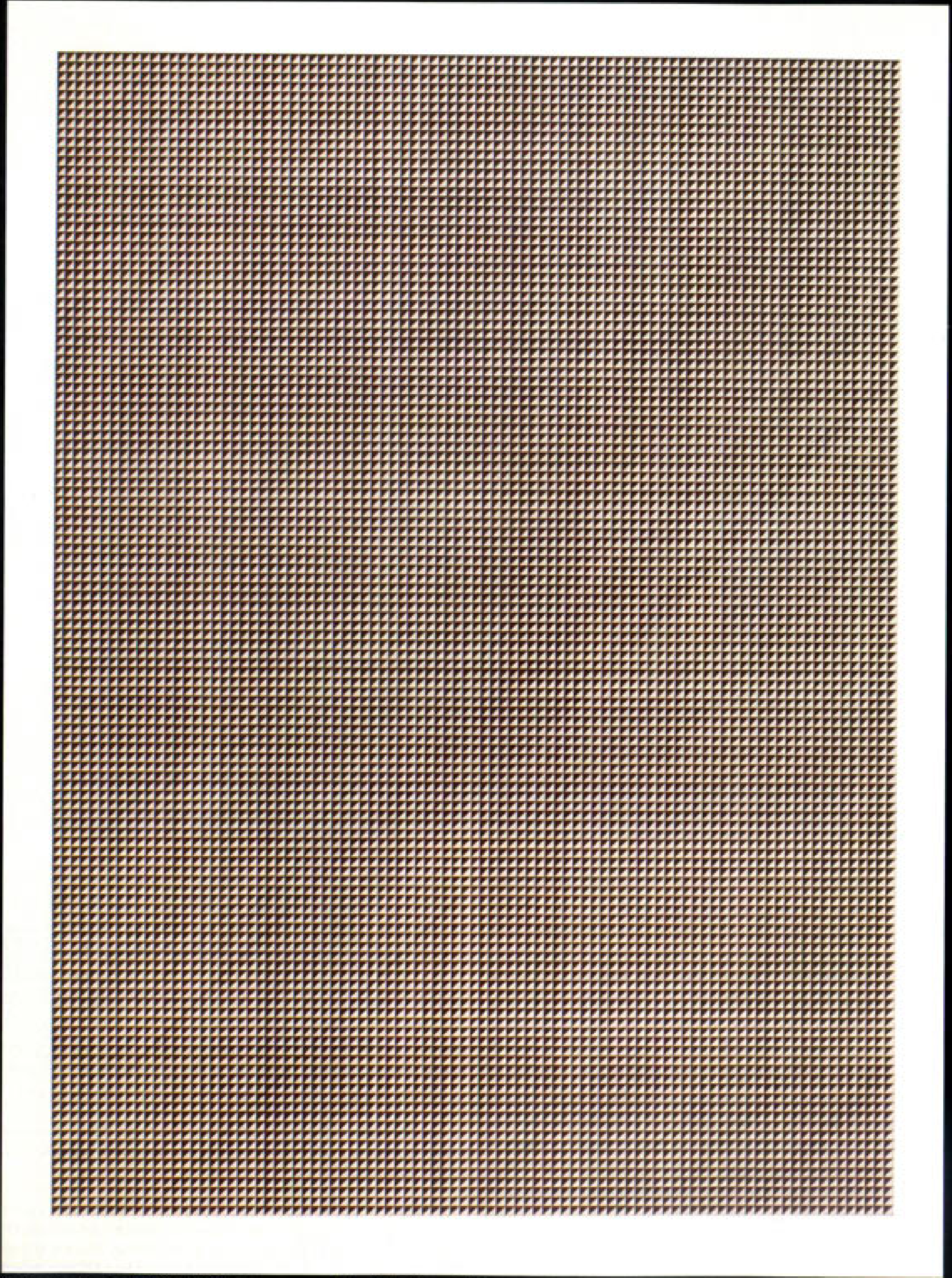
Alpha and Omega



Tauba Auerbach: 50/50 4, 2006, ink on paper, 50 by 38 inches. All photos this article, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Deitch Projects, New York.

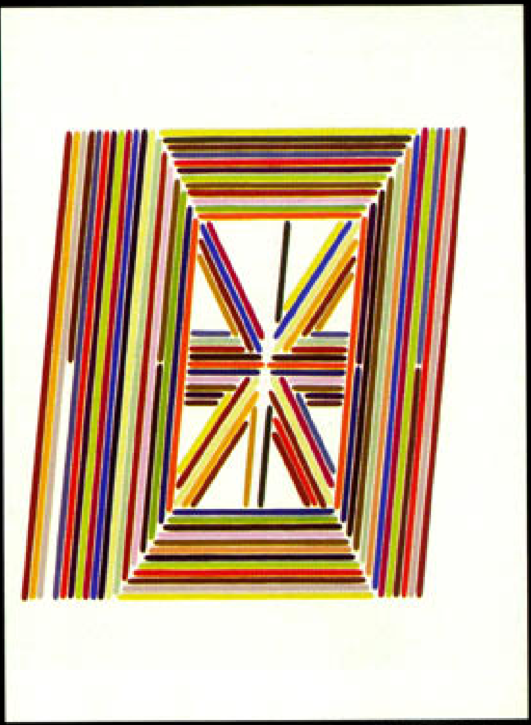
In contemplating how letters accrete into words and words into meanings, painter Tauba Auerbach depicts a variety of alphabets and semantic systems—from cuneiform to digital code—while leaving the essential mystery intact.

BY LEAH OLLMAN

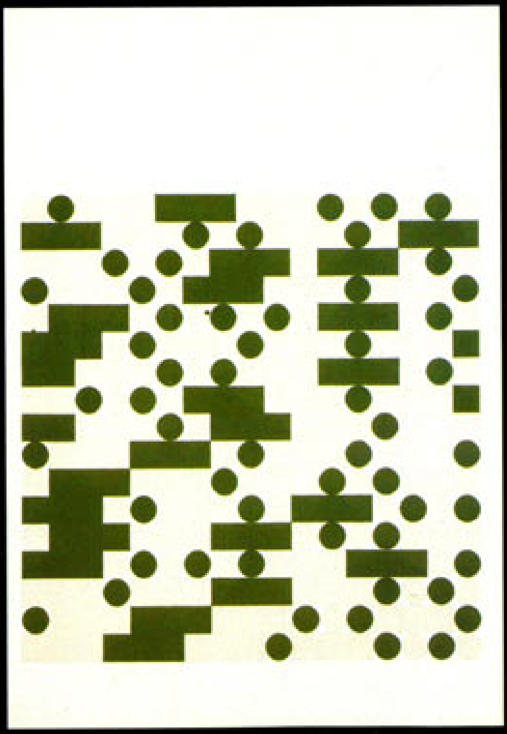
The letters that spell the words in this sentence, throughout this magazine and in all the text that streams through daily life are ordinarily as invisible as molecules to those who make use of them. Only when clustered together to form something recognizable do they claim attention, and even then, they are primarily vehicles of meaning, not meaningful in themselves. Tauba Auerbach has embraced letters as the raw material of her work, a hybrid of typography, calligraphy, visual poetry and conceptual inquiry into semantic systems and their applications.

In the paintings and works on paper in her fall show at Deitch Projects, New York, Auerbach focused on alphabets: familiar, obsolete and specialized. Presented with the crisp neutrality of eye charts (a form the artist has also made sport of), the letters oscillate between abstract and referential, flaunting their dual status as independent shapes and associative symbols. The intellectual rigor of Auerbach's investigation into the written word wraps around a basic core of wonder at how letters look and how those random alphabetic shapes come to have meaning.

Much of the work in the show could pass as geometric, hard-edged abstraction. A series of densely tessellated, black-and-white paintings represents ambiguity, binary-style. Each surface is compartmentalized into modules that are half white, half black; half on, half off; equal parts "Yes and Not Yes" (the show's collective title). Aiming for gray through the unyielding extremes of black and white, Auerbach sequentially shrank the 50/50 units in the paintings until those units were less than a half-inch square, in the most densely checkered versions, and emitted an aggressive, optically repellent, oscillating buzz.



The Whole Alphabet, From The Center Out, Digital V, ***2006, gouache on paper mounted on panel, 30 by 22 inches.***



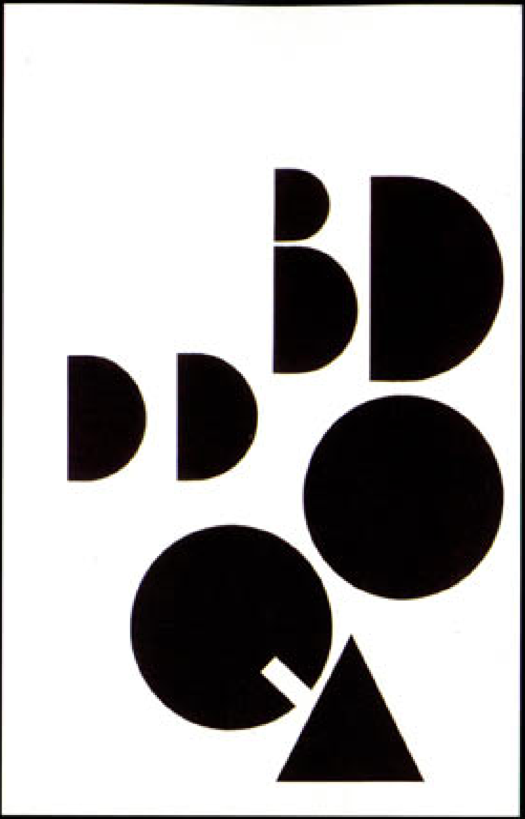
Morse Alphabet with Spaces—Mint, Red, ***2006, ink and gouache on paper, 44 by 30½ inches.***

Paintings charting the Morse code's alphabet of short and long signals as well as the silences between them (all in neatly aligned, solid-colored dots and dashes) brought to mind boldly geometric wallpaper and textile patterns from the '60s and '70s, or an insistently atonal musical score. Auerbach also painted her version of a semaphore alphabet and the cuneiform symbols of Ugaritic, an early Babylonian alphabet comprising permutations of a single mark, a triangular wedge with a straight tail.

When pictographs (representing objects) gave way to ideograms (representing ideas and metaphors), written language became discontinuous with its referents in the visible world. As phonetic and alphabetic systems of communication evolved, writing aligned itself anew with sound, with speech. Most alphabets offer no obvious connection between the symbols and their corresponding sounds, except perhaps for the Latinate letter O, which mimics the shape of the mouth that sounds it. Visible speech, a little-known alphabet that reinforced the relationship between letterform and sound, was the subject of two of Auerbach's paintings, one representing consonants and the other vowels.

Conceived in 1849 by Alexander Melville Bell (father of inventor Alexander Graham Bell), visible speech was a controversial, doomed effort to establish a universal mode of notation, and to aid the elocution of the deaf and hard-of-hearing. The 122 symbols of the "Physiological Alphabet" (as it was also called) correspond to particular positions of the glottis, tongue and lips. Vowels, painted in red, look like squirming variants of the letters J, F and I. Consonants, in black, mostly resemble the letters C, E and W—wide, peculiarly flourished horseshoes, rotated to open in every direction.

Auerbach's work brings about a shift in our perception of written letters, a reversal of reflexes: seeing comes to prevail over meaning.

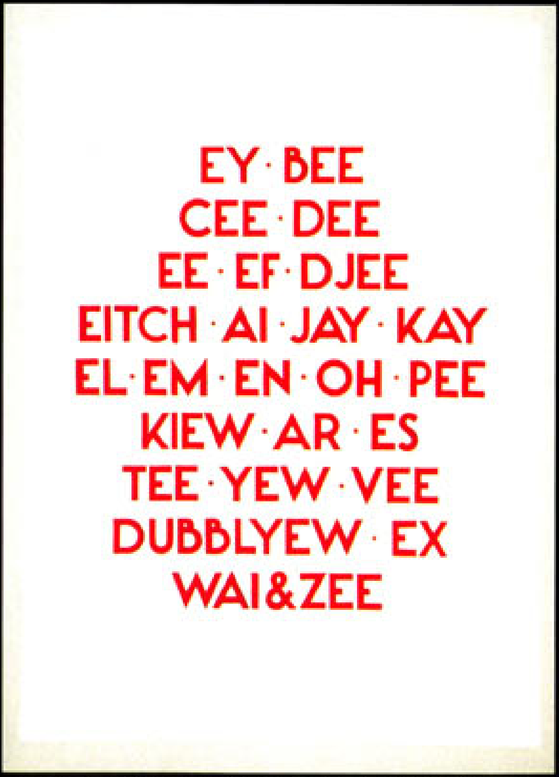


Uppercase Insides, *2006, acrylic on wood panel, 40 by 28 inches.*

Bell's forms verge on familiarity, but remain elusive, cryptic. The same is true of the alphabet painted in digital read-out style, all of the letters superimposed onto a compressed network of horizontal, vertical and diagonal bars. Individual letters can be puzzled out, but the whole resembles a tidy game of pickup sticks more than readable text. The alphabet systems in Auerbach's paintings are identified in their titles, but legibility is still willfully, playfully compromised. Function recedes into latency; form predominates. The work orchestrates a shift in our perception of written letters, a reversal of reflexes: seeing comes to prevail over reading.

Auerbach has been exploring the visual possibilities of individual letters in an ongoing series of large, totemic ink drawings. In each, she elaborates on the basic shape of a letter using ornate filigree and lavish gestural scaffolding. The grace and integrity of handcrafting is fundamental to nearly all of her work, even when she is visualizing systems that seldom have occasion to be hand-drawn, such as Braille, Morse code or the digitally rendered alphabet. After graduating from Stanford in 2003, Auerbach worked for three years at a sign-painting shop in San Francisco, practicing the waning art of hand-lettering. Her interest in obsolete and vernacular modes of visual communication is something she shared with the late Margaret Kilgallen, a friend she planned to collaborate with on a stop-action animated film before Kilgallen's death in 2001.

Auerbach also presents the printed word in her work, exerting a different strategy of disorientation when the alphabetic letters are immediately legible. In two recent pieces, she disassembled printed religious texts, rearranging the letters in alphabetical order. A small collage of the Lord's Prayer has the scrappy intimacy of a work by Kurt Schwitters, though the process of its making—excising each tiny letter and setting it into a grid—more closely resembles a meditative performance by Ann Hamilton. That exercise led Auerbach to alphabetize the King James version of the bible. Bound in sober gray linen with gold embossing, the book registers instantly as a bible in spite of the title, which reads, "Bbe ehHi lloTy," the letters scrambled yet utterly in order. Auerbach's reconfiguration renders the familiar odd, but still somehow recognizable.

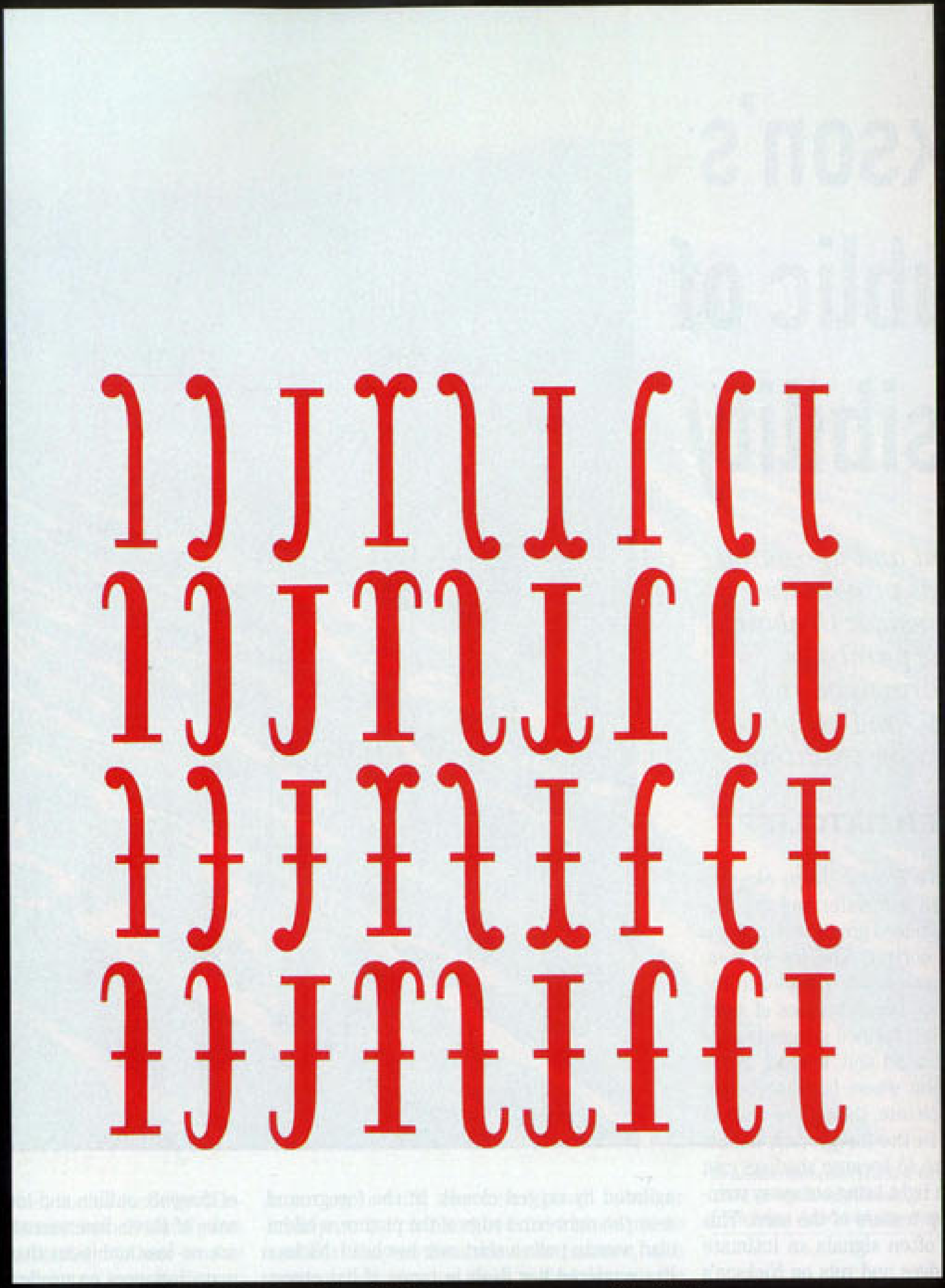


How to Spell the Alphabet, *2005, ink on paper, 30 by 22 inches. Courtesy New Image Art, West Hollywood.*

Inside the covers, letters stream across the pages in tight rows without interruption, capitals and italics occurring in order of their appearance in the text. The book entails a dispassionate application of a system to a given set of data, an encryption of sorts. Yet the rhythmic litany of letters, a sustained, ritualized thrum, also hints at prayer. Meaning and context have been stripped away; what's left is a primal verbal/visual chant.

Auerbach's interest in text as image has its roots in Mallarmé and Apollinaire, revolutions in typographic design in the first half of the 20th century, and Bauhaus lessons about the substantiality of space around and inside letters. Her iconic extrapolations of individual letters call to mind Schwitters's recitation of a poem consisting of a single printed W.

Auerbach has altered several manual typewriters to interrupt the one-to-one correspondence between keys and their imprinted letters, substituting Cyrillic characters or exchanging keys on the left for those on the right. The results relate distantly to conceptual typewriter exercises from the '60s. Among Auerbach's contemporaries, Joe Amrhein (likewise a former sign painter) and Jack Pierson also mine the evocative potential of typefaces, but what their letters spell is integral to how they look. In Auerbach's alphabet paintings, letters are proffered but not employed. She restores visibility and primacy to the alphabetic system, but through that work of reclamation runs a thread of subver-



Alexander Melville Bell's Visible Speech (vowels), ***2006, gouache on paper, 46 by 34 inches.***

sion. She celebrates the ingenuity of those systems but also exposes their limitations—the inability, within the binary system, for instance, to ever reach gray from black and white, to set the toggle switch to *maybe.* She also revels in the malleability of language built from such standardized ingredients. In a strikingly simple, self-reflexive chart, she uses the letters of the alphabet to spell their phonetic equivalents: Ey, Bee, Cee and so on. In *Blah Blah Blah*, she undermines the declamatory presence of words to repeat, in spirited variations, the verbal surrogate for nothingness. And in a brilliantly witty and stunningly logical accordion-fold book, she sequences pairs of synonyms to turn *yes*, the first word, into the final entry, *no*.

When Bell devised his universal alphabet, he envisioned it as the foundation for a "Linguistic Temple of Human Unity." His symbols, though, remain just one code among many. They may not be familiar any longer, but neither, necessarily, are our own building blocks of meaning, at least when pulled from use and put on view as supple shapes—ciphers with a full, formal life of their own. ☐

"Yes and Not Yes" was on view at Deitch Projects, New York [Oct. 5-Nov. 4, 2006]. Tauba Auerbach's work will be shown at Jack Hanley in San Francisco in May.

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