



INTERVIEW BY AARON ROSE / PORTRAIT BY ISABEL ASHA PENZLIEN  
SPECIAL THANKS TO JACK HANLEY GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO, DEITCH  
PROJECTS, NEW YORK, STANDARD (OLSO) AND BROWN GALLERY, LONDON.

One night a few years back I was wandering around San Francisco after dark. I was South of Market, maybe meeting someone at a club, when I ran into an artist friend of mine, Keegan McHargue. We were talking on the corner for a second, when he suddenly blurted out, "Have you met Tauba?" I replied that I hadn't. He went on to tell me about a small sign shop down the street that still hand painted signs in the classic technique and that a young artist, Tauba Auerbach was working there. "They're still open!" he exclaimed. "Do you want to check it out?" My curiosity got the best of me and I followed him down the street and into a small storefront. When I got inside I looked around and saw numerous signs in creation, executed in many different styles. Tauba was inside working on a large panel, which she explained was a work-in-progress for the Dreamland Artists Project, a community beautification project that artist Stephen Powers was coordinating in Coney Island (which has since been stolen directly off the wall). We exchanged formalities, hung out for a bit, and I was on my way. Not long after that I was lucky enough to see a solo show of her work in Los Angeles...and at that point I realized that Tauba Auerbach was no ordinary sign painter. Her work was most definitely based in letterforms, but her technique and approach to composition revealed a highly conceptual mind. I had been waiting for someone to take the lettering medium into hyperspace, and Tauba had done it. Not only were her hand skills second to none, but she also took the whole notion of language, and what language and communication mean to us as a culture, and turned it on its head. Since then I've followed her career closely, and have continually admired the way she pushes herself (and her audience) to re-think the connotations of symbols. Not only through her masterful sense of graphic composition, but also in terms of how these forms permeate our daily lives, not only in the external media, but in the digital realm as well. I recently had the pleasure of conducting this interview with Tauba while she was in the process of preparing for, and just after her recent group exhibition at Deitch Projects in New York.

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# TAUBA AUER BACH

**Aaron Rose: When we first met you were working at a sign shop in San Francisco. How did you become interested in sign painting?**

Tauba Auerbach: It was just a perfect job for me because I could just get paid to paint all day. And at the time I was around a lot of people writing graffiti, but I was never good at it myself, so I was thinking about letters all the time and didn't have anywhere for my ideas to go. And there was also a part of me that just fancied being a Luddite, and learning a hand craft fit into the romantic notion I had about that. I've since changed my mind about the Luddite part, but I'll always revere craft.

**AR: I heard that you apprenticed for a while under Margaret Kilgallen? Is that true?**

TA: No that's not true. I don't know how that rumor got started. She and I went to Stanford at the same time, and she was a grad student while I was an undergrad so she was a T.A., but I knew her before that and we were

already becoming friends. I looked up to her a great deal at the time. She was one of those magical people who really left mark on everyone who knew her.

**AR: Does living in San Francisco influence your work?**

TA: Hmmm. That's hard to say, because I've lived there all my life, and it's hard to be objective about that sort of thing. Maybe I'll have a better answer to this question after I move away, which will probably be pretty soon, but for right now I can say that though I feel like part of a great community there, I don't feel like my art is much of a factor in that. It's more about people and an attitude.

**AR: When did you first become interested in typography and letterforms?**

TA: Maybe it was when my dad hand painted my name on his old army trunk for me so I could take it to camp when I was a kid. It was perfect, and I thought he had done it with a stencil but he freehanded it. I was always really obsessed with my handwriting when I was growing up. I changed

it all the time and had different fonts that I would use. I remember writing in a journal about it in third grade.

**AR: Are you a writer as well?**

TA: No.

**AR: One of the things I've always found interesting about your work is how you've taken what is essentially a craft based on the hand, and hand-made forms, and given an almost mathematical approach to it. It's almost like both sides of your brain working together, which is rare. Were you good at math?**

TA: I love math. I'm actually in London right now, and tomorrow I'm going to Cambridge to do to sort of a week-long math residency. I'm designing new math symbols for a logician there named Byron Cook. He is working on something called "the halting problem," and there are new functions in the proofs he's publishing in his book about it that don't have symbols yet. A few people in the same field are working with the same new concepts and they all are representing them

differently right now, so I am going to attempt to come up with symbols that are both logical and intuitive enough to become convention.

**AR: You obviously spend a great deal of time considering language, not only its sociological implications, but its visual influence as well. What are you trying to say about it? Is there a higher objective rather than calling out differences and subtleties?**

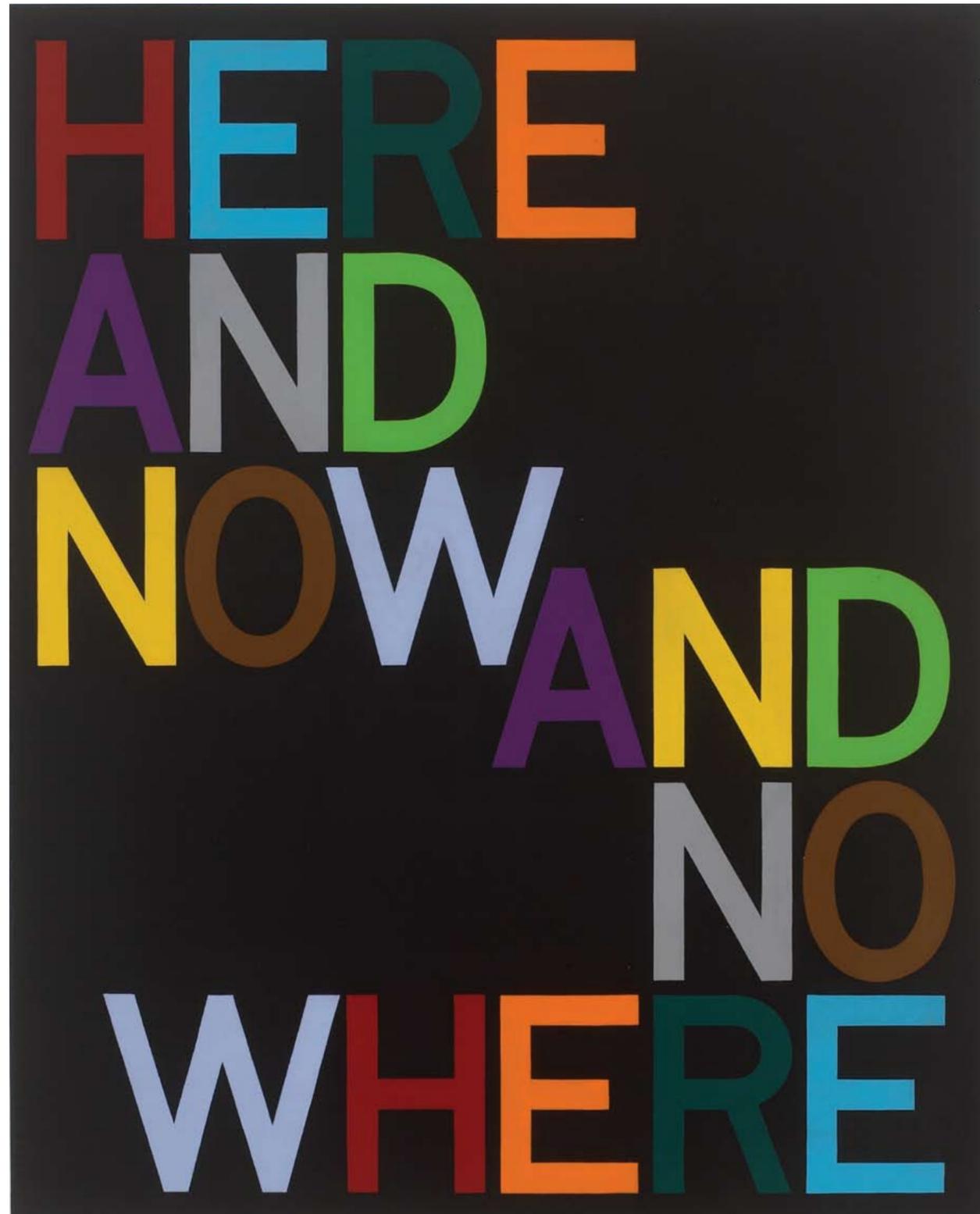
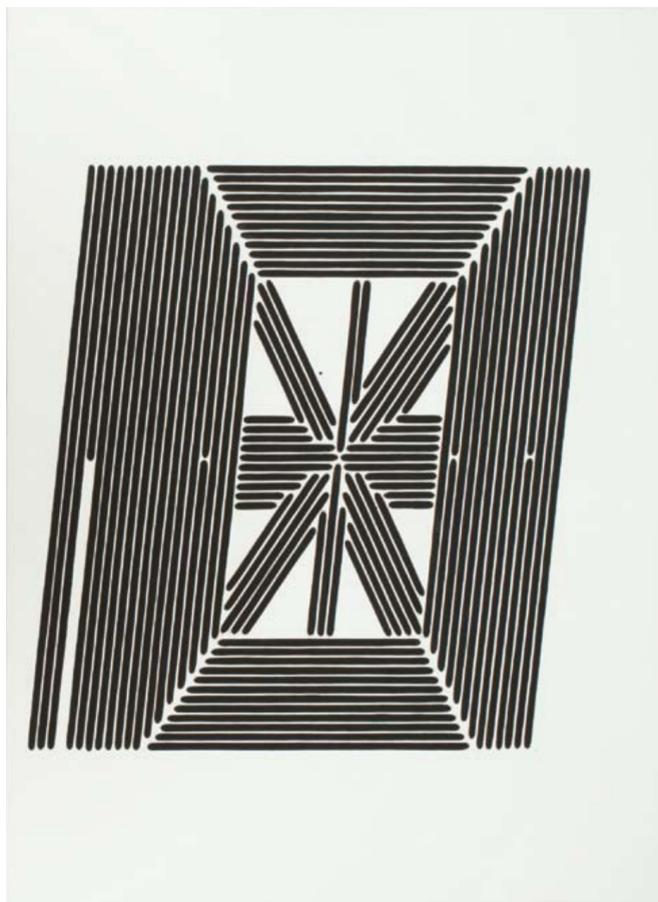
TA: All of this work about language is in a larger sense about logic, and often how there are flaws and loopholes in those systems, but also how they are inextricably linked to one another. And I like to implement those systems against themselves or each other, and in that way it is sort of an act of defiance, or a statement about how certainty and absolutes are things that we should be suspicious of. A lot of times I use linguistic polarities to discuss this, like using transitivity to prove that yes equals no, but more recently I've been more focused on

*The Whole Alphabet, From The Center Out, Digital V, 2006, gouache and pencil on paper on panel, 30X22"*

*The Whole Alphabet, From The Center Out, Digital VI, 2006, gouache and pencil on paper on panel, 30X22"*

(opposite)

*Here And Now/And Nowhere: The Uncertainty Principle (Anagram VIII), 2008, acrylic on wood panel, 40X32"*





abstract binaries, like two colors, or something ordered versus something chaotic.

**AR: Many artists throughout history have dealt with the question of balancing order and chaos, or exposing those polarities. How would you say your approach is unique?**

TA: My approach is to show that we can't be sure that there is really a difference between order and chaos. I spent months taking pictures of my television on static—a supposedly truly random phenomenon—and patterns arose. I've made several drawings recently with my eyes closed and filled other drawings in based

on the roll of a die, but patterns always came about. And every time I try to do something perfect and ordered I always make a mistake, and that breaks the rigidity of the order, and think that's the best part. All these experiments me reevaluate what is "perfect" and I think that's a good thing, and that is what I hope my art would ask people to do. To me all of this is playful about bringing about optimism by proposing that anything possible or that things might be different than you thought they were.

**AR: What about the works titled *The Whole Alphabet From The Center Out, Digital*,**

**what inspired those works? There seems to be a puzzle in them. Am I correct?**

TA: It's not really a puzzle, but it might take a minute to see what is going on there. I like that delay. The piece is structured like the matrix on your digital alarm clock, with all the characters constructed out of some combination of the same set of segments. At first the piece looks like a colorful cluster of lines, but then if you just look at each color separately, you see that each one is a letter, with A at the center and Z on the outside. I repeated this piece few times with slight variations, and finished by doing one that where the lines are

all black, so you couldn't possibly separate the individual letters, but you get this abstract shape that sort of sums to the whole alphabet.

**AR: Even though you are known primarily as a painter, some of my favorite pieces you've done are actually the customized typewriters. What was the inspiration for those?**

TA: The fact that I mostly make paintings or drawings is pretty incidental. I'll use whatever medium makes the most sense for the idea....so the idea takes precedence. And I'll learn something entirely new if necessary. For instance, my last show was mostly photography,



*Reflector I*, 2005, altered typewriter, sign enamel dimensions variable

*Reflector II*, 2005, altered typewriter, sign enamel dimensions variable

*+1*, 2005, altered typewriter, sign enamel dimensions variable

(opposite)  
*Letters As Numbers II*, 2008, gouache and pencil on paper on panel, 20X16"





Installation View Of "Construction" Show  
*Crumple I, Crumple II, 50/50 Floor, 2008*

*50/50 XI, 2007, ink on paper, 50X38"*

*50/50 XII, 2007, ink on paper, 50X38"*

(opposite)

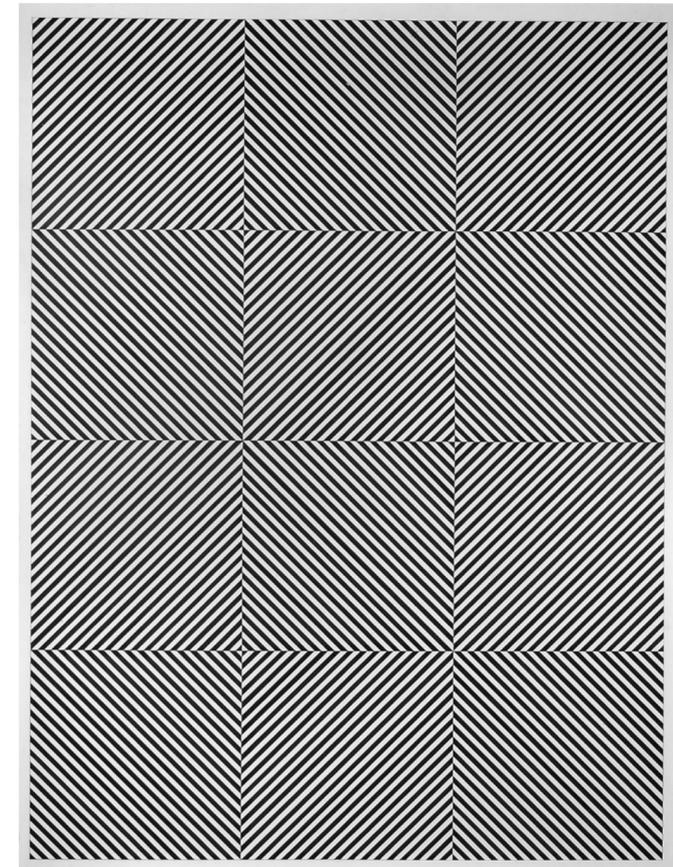
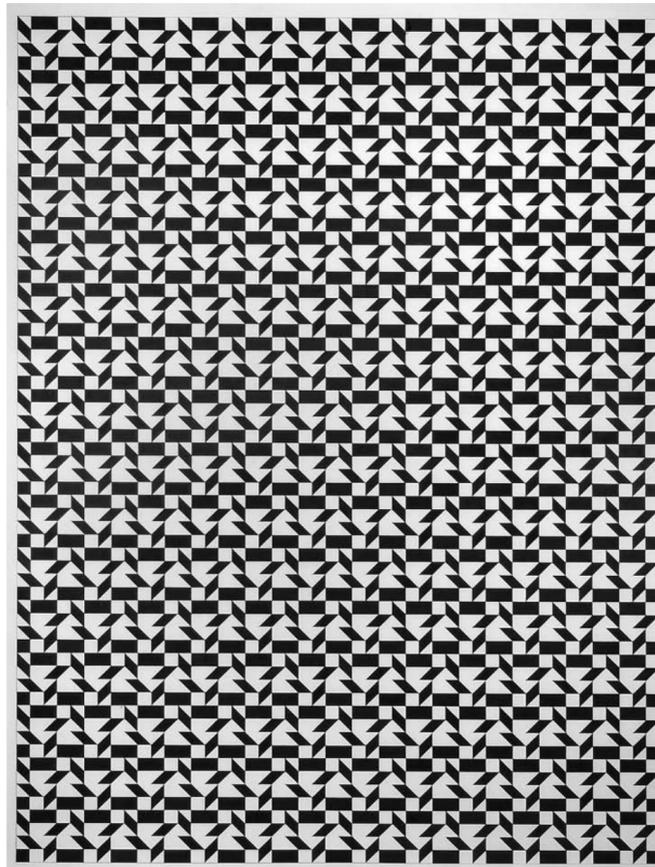
*Static I, 2008, c-type print, 60X42"*

which was new for me, so I made a lot mistakes and spent a lot of time worrying about if what was in my head could come out on paper. It was a negotiation of sorts. The typewriters required negotiation of a different kind, because I needed a typewriter repair-person to take off all the slugs and resolder them in different places. I went to four or five people who refused to do it before I found someone who would, because they couldn't understand why I would want to "ruin" my typewriter. Even then, it took some convincing. But back to your question...the typewriters were about derailing a habituated experience, so they had to be interactive. The idea was for users to sit down to type and realize that what was happening did not conform to their expectations, like something was "going wrong," and then hopefully realize that there was a method to what seemed like madness coming

out on the other end. There was always a clue about what was happening in the way each machine was painted, so if you took a moment, you could see that maybe "a" typed "b," and "b" typed "c" etc, or that the type was coming out upside down, or that all the keys under your right hand typed the letters that were under the equivalent fingers on your left hand.  
**AR: Your series of works titled 50/50 are intriguing to me. As opposed to some of your other output, they seem to be completely removed from language and focused almost exclusively on geometry.**  
 TA: Actually these are about language too in that they are a representation of a binary code. Every drawing is exactly half black and half white, making the same middle gray over and over through different arrangements of the same components. Actually, I should

really say that I am simulating or approximating grey, because this binary language, which is the most prevalent language of our digitized time, does not contain ambiguity, and only can simulate it by combining imperceptibly small unambiguous parts. So it's interesting to me that the language of our most advance technologies is in certain ways the most limited and basic language in its structure.  
**AR: You recently installed a massive floor piece at Deitch Projects in New York. What was the idea behind that? Is there an inherent logic within the work?**  
 TA: A long time ago this collector who owns a lot of high-end fashion boutiques asked me to design something for one of his stores. It never came about, but the idea was to do a 50/50 tile floor...so when Kathy Grayson was putting together the Construction show for Deitch

she asked me to do the floor there. Originally, it was going to be a specific pattern, but in the last six months I've been totally preoccupied with making work about randomness and accidental pattern, so I decided to do the floor exactly half black and half white, but totally randomly. And then any patterns that would occur would kind of create themselves. It was also an appropriate setting because the floor at Deitch is usually grey, so this is a pixelated, static-y approximation of its normal state.  
**AR: You mentioned that your work has been leaning toward the photographic. Would you say that as you have developed as an artist that your reliance on or appreciation for the hand-craft has waned?**  
 TA: No, no. My appreciation for the hand-craft is still very much intact, but it is no longer as important a part of my concept.





Installation View Of "The Uncertainty Principle", Standard (Oslo), Norway, *Cmy IV, Cmy I, Cmy III, Static II*, 2008

Installation View Of "The Uncertainty Principle", Standard (Oslo), Norway, *50/50 XVI, 50/50 XV*, 2008

(opposite)  
*Crumple II*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 80X60"

As I've continued to think about language, the computer became an inevitable subject. And while in the past I rejected technology on the principle that it was obliterating the tradition of craft and hand-making, I now think that position is stodgy or conservative. Old and new technologies are not mutually exclusive. And the part of me that has always wanted to learn new crafts—sign painting, neon bending, casting, turning, gilding, whatever, also wanted to learn how to use a digital camera and Photoshop. In the end it's kind of nice because my photos are a combination of old and new technology—the TV static is analogue, I captured the images on real film because still love that

specific grain, and then scanned the negatives into a computer and printed them on a lightjet printer, so they are printed with light, but the light is guided by a computer. **AR: The last section of your recent catalog is a to scale reproduction of what looks like a zine you made. What is the story behind this?**  
TA: Yeah, that's a little hand made book I made a few years ago where I prove that "yes" equals "no" by stringing together a series of synonyms found in the dictionary. Basically it's based on the principle of transitivity which says that if  $a = b$  and  $b = c$ , then  $a = c$ . So the point is to use a scientific or logic-based method of reasoning to prove something illogical.

**AR: We've spoken quite a bit about patterns, deciphering systems of language and space/forms into various graphic mutations, recontextualizing things, etc., all of which speak to a very right brain sense of logic and design. I'm curious if your works have a deeper personal meaning...beyond formula?**  
TA: For me there is no separation between right and left-brain activities. And to me, everything is personal. Something like a pattern or formula can be totally personal and emotional, especially if it is made by nature for example...or by a human being. And these things are within us, in our very make up and structure, so I think that things

as basic as pattern and color and waveforms hit on a very visceral deep level. And this is especially true if something harmonious or unexpected happens within that, because you have to reevaluate intuitions and assumptions about the most basic things. Any time I am forced to change my thinking, that is a personal experience. I look for that in everything. I want to have my mind changed.

