and its dogma of pure visuality: it could already seem repulsive there, made to prevent the spectator from entering into an illusory world.[9]

In this reading of it, kitsch does not go with the grain of the culture industry: making us see Monet's *Waterlilies* as so many "Multiple Originals," for example, undermines modernism's certainty by detecting in it the poison that had always been there.

(See "Base Materialism," "No to ... the *Informel*," and "X Marks the Spot.")

L

Liquid Words

Yve-Alain Bois

The essence of language is to be articulated. Such articulations can be as smooth as one wishes; they are no less divisive for all that. In order for language to function, signs must be isolable one from the other (otherwise they would not be repeatable). At every level (phonetic, semantic, syntactic, and so on) language has its own laws of combination and continuity, but its primary material is constructed of irreducible atoms (phonemes for spoken language, and for written, signs whose nature varies according to the system in question: in alphabetical writing, for example, the distinctive unit is the letter). Whoever says "articulation" always says, in the final instance, "divisibility into minimal units": the *articulus* is the particle. Language is a hierarchical combination of bits.

Liquid, on the contrary (except on the molecular level), is indivisible (of course one can divide up a certain quantity of liquid into different containers, but it remains identical to itself in each of its parts).

Thus, properly speaking, there cannot be liquid words (we only speak of a flow of language and of liquid consonants metaphorically), except in terms of the brief moment at which they have just been penned and the ink is not yet dry. It is just such a moment that Edward Ruscha's series of paintings titled *Liquid Words* (figure 41) makes us think of, except that, in trompe-l'oeil, these paintings represent an imaginary inverse process: not the drying out of

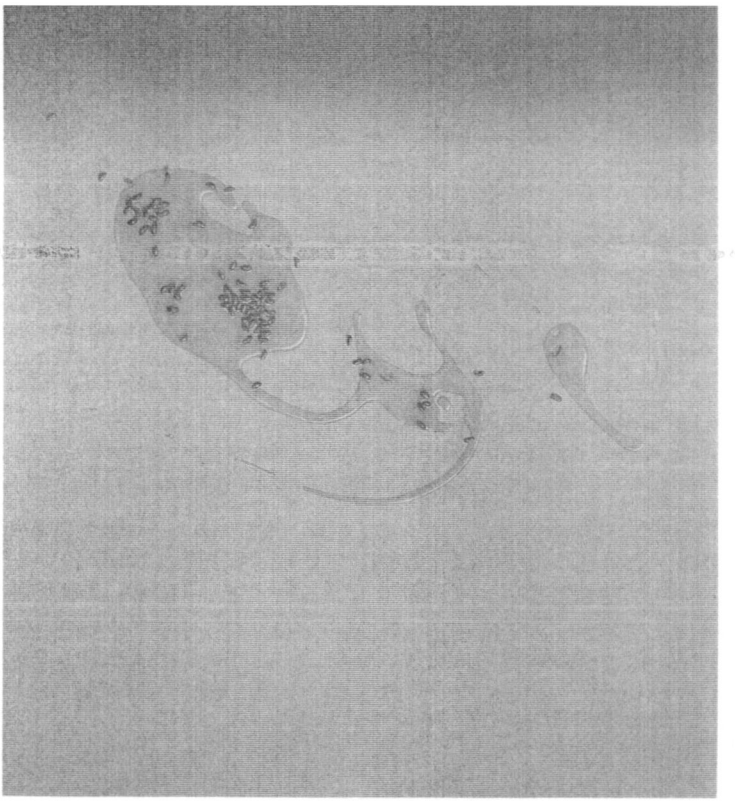

Figure 41.
Edward Ruscha,
Eye, 1969.
Oil on canvas,
60 x 54 inches.
The Oakland Museum of
California, Art Guild
and NEA.

words that have just been written, but the melting of the letters, their more or less slow fusion toward a state of indifferentiation.

But the improbable short-circuit between language and liquidity that Ruscha proposes also concerns another opposition, carrying with it a considerable historical sedimentation, that of writing and painting. For centuries, at least since the invention of the printing press, these have been phenomenologically perpendicular to one another (we read a book on a table but look at a picture on a wall). Picasso's cubist collages first shook up this order of things deliberately (for him it was a matter of turning his painting into a form of writing). On closer inspection, however, we see that the cubist transformation of the picture into a table covered over the collapse – increasingly visible since Cézanne – of the airtight division between the visual field (vertical and transversal) and the space of the body (horizontal and "low," even, animal); Picasso made the picture the tablet on which one writes in order not to make it into the table on which one eats (see above, "Introduction: The Use Value of *Formless*"). After several attempts were made to level art's verticality, none producing any immediate progeny (Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages*, for example, or certain sculptures from Giacometti's surrealist period), Jackson Pollock, refusing cubism's semiological solution to the danger of a carnal corruption of "pure visuality," reopened the break that Picasso had plugged: he began to paint on the ground, to walk on his pictures, to make gravity itself an agent of his process of inscription. The role played by this horizontalization in the rupture Pollock introduced in the history of painting was immediately repressed by Clement Greenberg's modernist interpretation (according to which Pollock's pictures contributed to an "optical mirage"). But in the 1960s certain artists – for example, Robert Morris and Andy Warhol – recognized it and refused to believe that the true destiny of Pollock's "drip paintings" was in the misty stained canvases of Morris Louis and his followers (see "Horizontality," above). Edward Ruscha was among these disbelievers; interestingly, his *Liquid Words* appeared just following the 1967 Pollock retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art.[1] Not only does he take up Pollock's tactile horizontality (and the pouring gesture that produced it) on his own terms, but he maps this onto writing, producing a movement that is precisely the reverse of cubism's. Picasso had thought it possible to escape the body by means of a semiological horizontalization, but Ruscha pronounces this escape route impassable and he submits words to gravity.

Or rather, he *shows* them as if there were made of nameless, more or less viscous and oily spreading liquids. The puddle that results from the yielding to gravity is, to be sure, a depicted motif

here (it is, in fact, falsely simulated: the trompe l'oeil is both very effective – there is no perceptible texture – and negated by the total impermeability between the fake, floating landscape of the background and the sticky letters crushed against it). One might say that, in comparison to Warhol or Morris, who were contemporaneously engaging in processes that involved an actual yielding to gravity (this is above all what they took from Pollock), Ruscha's *Liquid Words* are more conservative. But this would overlook the linguistic issue at stake. They are signaling the repressed materiality of an idealized code, and even if it means pulling out the old apparatus of mimesis, the act of reembodying the word, of staging this linguistic body at the point of vanishing, it is not necessarily the worst way to take the chatter of language down a peg or two.

Moreover, the substance of letters is not always "represented" in Ruscha's work: those paintings that engage with words accentuate what, in language, exceeds speech's communicative function – that is, everything that makes it into matter, everything that escapes idealization. With Ruscha, the "palpable aspect of signs," which Roman Jakobson made the object of the poetic function, becomes a negative force, a low blow: Ruscha gives voice to stuttering (several works carry the single inscription "lisp"); paints inaudible alliterations (such as the redoubled letters of *Hollywood Dream Bubble Popped* [1976]); shows the unbridgeable gap between the sound of words and the silence of writing (a gap whose very repression, as Jacques Derrida demonstrated in *Of Grammatology* – which was published in 1967, precisely when Ruscha was taking the meltdown of language as his motif – is the underpinning of the logocentrism of Western metaphysics). The material of inscription, ink or pigment, which is, in principle, perfectly indifferent to the communicative function, irrupts in a grotesque and tempestuous manner in his works on paper (he uses everything from axle grease and caviar to those liquids whose permutation Bataille discussed in his *Story of the Eye*: egg yolk, milk, sperm, urine, and so on). And even when Ruscha only pictures the materiality of words, a certain baseness arrives to disturb the distancing achieved by the means of representation. His *Liquid Words*, as the little pieces of food that settle in the puddles indicate, are vomitted words – reminding us that, like so many other parts of the human body, the mouth has a double function (in *Documents* Michel Leiris noted that this organ of eloquence, "the visible sign of intelligence," also serves to spit;[2] the same "base materialism" animates Ruscha's work).

Besides horizontality and "base materialism," *Liquid Words* brings a third operation into play, namely entropy, since the liquifaction to which Ruscha submits the words is also a liquidation of their meaning. These works are, at the level of language, equivalent

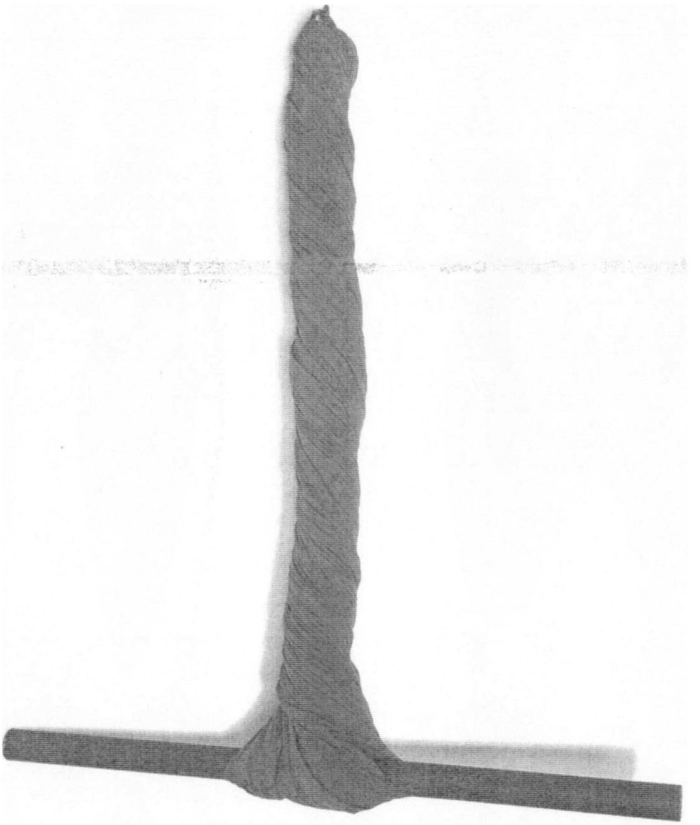

Figure 42.
Giovanni Anselmo,
Torsione, 1967–68.
Metal and cloth.
90½ x 73¼ x 11¾ inches.
Courtesy Sonnabend
Collection.

to the spills that Robert Smithson executed slightly later (*Asphalt Rundown* [1969] [figure 4] and *Glue Pour* [1969] for example), spills that directly related to Pollock's art. (Smithson, for whom entropy was the key concept and who spoke of it in almost every one of his texts, never hid his debt to Ruscha, particularly to his books, which are discussed below, in "Zone."[1]) Ruscha is preoccupied by the becoming inarticulate of words, but also by all forms of erosion to which language is victim (for example, the devitalization words suffer when they turn into clichés), and by the inevitable and irreversible nature of this process. His liquid words have no relation to the "illegible" scribblings of which modern art has supplied so many variations (perhaps the best known are Henri Michaux's calligraphies): for while the latter are like Rorschach tests inducing the viewer to project linguistic meanings onto them and thus to rearticulate them, Ruscha's *Liquid Words* leave no role to our imagination other than to complete the work of decomposition.

Liquid, even when it is sticky or consists of paste, is not elastic. (Jacques Tati treated this idea in one of the most nostalgic scenes in *M. Hulot's Holiday* [1953], in which the hero, fascinated by the slow stretching of the taffy that hangs from a pushcart, watches as it is – repeatedly – just about to fall to the ground. He is subjected to this "torture" up to the moment that the candy seller catches the taffy – over and over – just in time.) Liquid does not rebound, never moves into reverse.

Entropic irreversibility struck Smithson deeply, and of all his works, his "spills" are the ones that show this most clearly. Other artists, at the same moment, were engaged with nonelasticity as well, trying to exploit it in the very universe of solids. Richard Serra, in his first lead works (1968), uses the malleability of that metal: the only possible future for his rolled sheets of lead is not to unroll but to compact. It is true that lead's plasticity makes it a metal close to the liquid state (on a scale of liquidity, it would fall between mercury and a pure solid such as steel). In this period as well, Giovanni Anselmo practiced an even more effective entropic devitalization on the elasticity of bodies. One could say that the twisted cloth of his *Torsione* (1967–68) (figure 42) is held like a spring ready to release itself from the wall against which the slung metal bar pins it, but that is an illusion. No untwisting is to be feared when the work is taken down: the spring is broken, its tension slowly sapped by time.

(See "Base Materialism," "Entropy," "Horizontality," and "Zone.")