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## Inscriptive studies: Toward a Field Articulation

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# INSCRIPTIVE STUDIES: TOWARD A FIELD ARTICULATION

- ❖ *1 the Road*: machine-generated novel written by, in, and with a “WordCar” during a four-day journey from Brooklyn to New Orleans. Cadillac, GPS, clock, camera, Convolutional Neural Network (CNN), Recurrent Neural Network (RNN), and custom training corpus. Curated output published by Jean Boîte Éditions, 2018 (165 × 236 mm; 146 pp). Ross Goodwin, with the assistance of a friend, family and Google’s Artists and Machine Intelligence Group, 2017.
- ❖ *ANNEX*: invented and freely downloadable font based on activist graffiti in Istanbul, used for common political slogans rendered illegible by countermarks, geometric shapes, and jumbled arrangements. North Adams, Massachusetts; 30 cm (letters). Neon, Turkish alphabet, English alphabet. Ashl Çavuşoğlu, with font design by Özer Yalçınkaya, 2020.
- ❖ *Because You Know Ultimately We Will Band A Militia*: desert billboards along the Gene Autry Trail documenting the haunted history of settler colonialism and white supremacy. Cahuilla Territory, Palm Springs, California; 33.852444, -116.506083. Billboards, archival images. Xaveria Simmons, 2021.
- ❖ *decomp*: multiple copies of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* left to decompose in different biogeoclimatic zones. British Columbia, Canada. Codex, photographs, poems, ecosystems. *decomp*, Coach House Books, 2013 (9 × 6 in.; 144 pp). Stephen Collis and Jordan Scott, 2013–ongoing.
- ❖ *Future Library*: repository of individually authored literary works that waits unpublished for a century. Nordmarka and Oslo, Norway; 59.986689, 10.696737 and 59.912965, 10.75099169. Cultivated forest, print manuscripts (one added each year), library reading room. Katie Paterson, 2014–2114.
- ❖ *Grobari [Gravediggers]*: a stack of 3,500 sheets of paper, printed on its sides with images of smoke from fires set by Serbian nationalist football fans and marking the imminent disappearance of the .yu domain. Paper, toner, PDF file, printer set to “borderless printing.” Aleksandra Domanović, 2009.

- ❖ *Ice Texts*: words from Gretel Ehrlich's *The Future of Ice* (2005) projected onto the base of glaciers during multiple Cape Farewell expeditions. Svalbard, Norwegian archipelago. Ice, digital projection, inkjet prints. Dave Buckland, 2005–2009.
- ❖ *Print In Process* [印刷中]: abandoned pieces of Chinese lead typeset in a geometric, pixelated pattern that is mirrored in paint. Hong Kong; 70 × 50 cm (painting), 31 × 22 cm (type box). Movable type, wood, watercolor and pencil on paper. Carmen Ng and Victor Wong, 2022.
- ❖ *Truth Be Told*: a three-word figure of speech covering the face of a building, so large as to be deemed hazardous. Kinderhook, New York; 25 × 160 ft. Vinyl building wrap, public building. Nick Cave, 2020.
- ❖ *Untitled (2016)*: A sheet of paper, nearly four feet by five feet, covered almost entirely with three layers of marks, dense to the point of inscrutability: black on black on yellow. New York, New York; 42½ × 58 in. Acrylic and ink on paper. Dan Miller, 2016.
- ❖ *Watering the distant, deserting the near IX*: sand sifted through a fine stencil to form the words of poem, laid on the gallery floor amid memories and documents of public infrastructure and disappearing water stores. North Adams, Massachusetts. Sand, sodium silicate, carbon dioxide, memories, collected recordings, works on paper. Nasser Alzayani, 2020.
- ❖ *WORKBOOK*: single-channel video installation poetically defamiliarizing the spoken English language and thematizing the politics of language. British and American ESL workbooks, Text-to-Speech applications, Google Translate. New York; 7:24. Associated digital project, Triple Canopy, 2019. Jesse Chun, 2018.

Shelley Jackson, writer: this appellation holds throughout the arc of her career, from her pioneering work of hypertext fiction, *Patchwork Girl* (1995), to her most recent novel, *Riddance: Or, The Sybil Joines Vocational School for Ghost Speakers and Hearing-Mouth Children* (2018). It even holds for her ongoing project, *Skin* (2003–), a story tattooed, word by word, on the skin of 2,095 people who have agreed to have their bodies incorporated into this “mortal work of art.”<sup>1</sup> But is “writer” a sufficient or even adequate appellation for the Jackson who originated the project *Snow* (2014), which consists of words of a story cut in book type into snow in locations around Brooklyn, photographed before they melt, and circulated on Instagram? “Artist” and “author” also have their limitations—the

former so broad as to be almost meaningless on its own and the latter suggesting an intellectual property regime at odds with the Meta conglomerate that controls access to the work. Better, then, to seek out a descriptor for *Snow* itself, a category, rubric, or domain that not only articulates the logic of the work and facilitates inquiry into the same but also allows for the identification of cognates and shared properties and investments. Our proposal is that “inscriptive” functions in precisely this manner: as a descriptor that encompasses not just the material form and content of *Snow*, and not just Jackson’s practice and audience response, but the entire expanded field out of which it emerges and on which it self-reflexively comments—a field that is at once environmental, technological, discursive, aesthetic, and political.

*Snow*, then, along with the paradigmatic works we catalog at the outset—as well as Kameelah Janan Rasheed’s *No New Theories* (2019), Lillian-Yvonne Bertram’s *Travesty Generator* (2019), and the range of artifacts featured in the forum contributions and articles of this special issue—evinces a multi-layered concern with text as substance. Within the inscriptive, form and content collapse; across medium and genre, inscriptive works both hinge on and reflexively attend to inscription itself, broadly construed, as both means and end in varying proportions. To at once redouble and unfold the classic McLuhanite formulation, in these works the medium and the message are inextricable: inscriptive works self-consciously and intentionally reflect on the materiality, historicity, apparatus, and politics of text—as image, object, record, material, and process.

In this respect, artists and authors working in the inscriptive are informed, whether directly or indirectly, by a range of cultural precursors across multiple media and formats—antecedents in recent history include the Language poets, xerographic zine culture, the graffiti writers and text-based artists who came to prominence in the 1980s, bookwork artists and deformers of the codex object, and the foundational figures of the first and second waves of electronic literature. Yet their work operates along fundamentally different lines in response to a fundamentally different historical moment. The range of projects and practices with which we began hints at an epistemic articulation that is perhaps more practical than philosophical, rooted in our recognition of a set of common concerns with the contemporary poetics and politics of text, substrate, and environment.<sup>2</sup> The inscriptive thus takes shape within the context of a

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heightened awareness of the intensified generation and circulation of language across media environments by human and nonhuman agents alike; of the proliferation of screens; and more broadly of a complex technological situation in which all media are mixed, reshaped, and realigned as a consequence of an exponential explosion in the quantity of information as well as in forms of communicative practices.

These practical changes in the technocultural landscape have philosophical reverberations; in theorizing inscription as a practice that both emerges from and responds to them, we draw in part on Rosalind Krauss's foundational formulation of sculpture's shift to an expanded field. Writing in 1979 of the move beyond the white box of the gallery by artists such as Mary Miss, Richard Serra, and Robert Smithson, Krauss describes the new sculpture as “the category that result[s] from the addition of the *not-landscape* to the *not-architecture*. . . . a kind of ontological absence, the combination of exclusions, the sum of the neither/nor.”<sup>3</sup> The emergent category we define as inscription functions similarly: whereas textual work in prior moments was often largely discrete, containable, and legible within a singular fixed site—the codex, the canvas, the screen—inscriptive projects tend to operate across an expanded field of the sort Krauss delineates, in which such conceptual and phenomenological circumscription is neither critically productive nor practically feasible. Thus, both the field as a whole and many individual works within it cohere as neither literature, nor art, nor graphic design, nor media practice, but rather somewhere simultaneously across these categories, between them, and altogether outside them. For such a practice, even the notion of “text” would be too discrete and static, too evocative of a prior theoretical and media-historical regime. To call these works “inscriptive,” on the other hand, marks them as characterized by process, evanescence, and an approach to platform and environment that is at once both eclectic and invested.

As with the transition Krauss outlines, the turn toward the inscriptive constitutes an unfolding from prior moments rather than a wholesale break, a reverberation and echoing of past artistic practices that nonetheless registers as distinct. As such, it invites, even necessitates, a corresponding shift in critical practice. It is here, then, that we summon the vast discourse on the once and future conditions of writing as cognate, complement, and context for our approach. With which tools and on which surfaces; governed by which procedures, protocols, and institutions; encoded, transmitted, and decoded by which means; and to whom and to what purpose was the message communicated: these are the questions that have historically informed academic inquiry into *writing* writ large. From bibliographic to textual studies, these scholarly communities, which we discuss below, are well established and made both more necessary and more lively by technological transformations seen and unseen. However, while the critical vocabularies and toolkits that researchers have developed for works based in codex or on the screen are portable to new domains, they are no longer by themselves sufficient to the ways in which the inscriptive now spans across a dizzying range of sites, platforms, substrates, and environments. Here again, Krauss's formulation offers a way to unfold our heuristic toward a wider critical purchase: our suggestion is that we need to understand this field of practice as not literary studies, not book history, not art criticism, not digital studies, not media archeology, although each of these might help to illuminate different projects in different moments. Viewing these works through the syncretic framework of the inscriptive, in contrast, helps us to come to terms not only with the form and content of the works themselves but also with the emergent logics of production, circulation, and reception that they make visible. Toward this end, we will suggest that self-reflexivity is a central characteristic: to think these works through the inscriptive is not only to consider them in the contexts of these logics but also to center that consideration in the ways in which these works themselves consciously and self-consciously reflect on the same.

Julia Weist's *Reach* (2015) serves as a useful exemplar of how the inscriptive operates in an expanded field. As its title suggests, the piece deploys inscriptive technology across space, in the sense of both geographic distance and network communication. For the project, Weist installed a billboard in Queens, New York, emblazoned with a single archaic word, "parbunkells," a term with its last recorded use in the seventeenth century, meaning "coming together through the binding of two ropes."<sup>4</sup> When passersby Googled the word, it originally led



**Figure 1.**  
*Julia Weist, Reach (2015), billboard in Queens, NY. 48' × 14'. Courtesy of the artist.*

to a single search result, a page established by Weist with the text “This is where I come to be alone. We’re here together now.”<sup>5</sup> Every hit on the page would turn on a light bulb in Weist’s upstate New York home—the illumination, the idea, the circuit completed.

Weist’s use of a billboard as the point of departure and even putative center from and toward which its vectors could be said to “reach” evokes the text-based art, public and otherwise, of the 1980s: Barbara Kruger, REVS and COST, even the obliqueness of Jenny Holzer’s *Truisms*. But the billboard here is only a point of departure, no longer merely a surface for linguistic or semiotic articulation but rather one node in the project’s larger constellation of search, storage, and circulation. Indeed, *Reach* hinges on the quintessentially contemporary phenomenon of network effects, but not only, or not primarily, by way of the accumulative logic of big data such as one can find in the artistic practices of Paolo Cirio, Hasan Elahi, and Laurie Frick. On the contrary, the particular circuits that *Reach* spans—from billboard to lightbulb, antiquated word to always-updating database—throw into relief the status of contemporary networked inscription as taking place between and across substrates, site-specific precisely in its distributed multi-sitedness. Thus, in the spirit of Krauss’s earlier conception of

sculpture, Weist's work is neither installation, nor public art, nor electronic literature. In this sense, her selection of "parbunkells" as the piece's pivotal word is a moment of charged self-reflexivity: the work comes together through the binding of not just two ropes but many, the archaism of the word and its meaning unfolding from early modernity into the space of the contemporary.

The shape of this distribution and unfolding changes, of course, with access and consumption. As news of Weist's installation spread over 2015, the search results for "parbunkells" evolved, Google's algorithms re-forming the work and reconfiguring the shape of the circuit in real time. As with comparable artistic practices of working with and against Google's search algorithms, the found or retrieved content of *Reach* inevitably changed with each request, in this instance proceeding from the whimsy of scarcity to the common.<sup>6</sup> As the word "parbunkells" transformed from an obscurity to an artworld sensation and became the subject of memes and readymade merchandise, it enacted the public sphere of the internet as a space to be alone, "here together now," and at the same time gave particular weight to the "now"—whatever coming together it was able to achieve necessarily momentary, fleeting, and in a practical sense irrecoverable. In its malleability, *Reach* bears a family resemblance to participationist artworks that invite an audience interaction that changes their shape: the diminishing paper stacks and candy piles of Félix González-Torres, for example, or Francis Alÿs's *When Faith Moves Mountains*. But the reshaping that *Reach* undergoes is at once both discursive and material; indeed, the two are inextricable within the work, even and especially as it shifts and moves across multiple sites (the public billboard, the mobile phone of the curious viewer, the secluded data center, the upstate home), substrates (vinyl, silicon, screen, tungsten wire), and formats (type, search query, incandescent illumination).

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While not every work we might deem inscriptive touches the same multiplicity of sites and modalities as *Reach* does, these multiplicities nonetheless illustrate a crucial part of what characterizes the field of the inscriptive more broadly: inscriptive works focus on the stakes of writing, data, and the material record as both a means of production and a subject of

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inquiry. Indeed, as *Reach* suggests, the inscriptive inheres not only in new media or digital art, nor only in firmly analog or predigital practices of writing—nor even in a fusion or juxtaposition of the two—but rather in an engagement with technologies of writing and information that is deeply invested in the historicity and materiality of platform at the same time that it is broadly agnostic toward it. We thus find the inscriptive on paper, on canvas, on screens, on walls, in and on the land, and in milieux such as air and water that defy the conventional logic of the surface, slipping through fingers and our writing instruments alike.<sup>7</sup> Authors and artists deploy it by way of a range of tools, the horizon of possibilities extending well beyond common devices to include new technologies across the spectrum of technological complexity, ranging from large-format projectors and the electrical impulses that record flash memory to sticks carving in snow and the black paper of the silhouette cutout. We can point here as well to the continuous and seemingly pervasive practices of nonlinguistic technological inscriptions, among them logs of keystrokes, cursor movements, GPS coordinates, and packet transmissions.<sup>8</sup> So too does the horizon of inscriptive possibilities extend beyond the hands and their prostheses to gesture, sight, and the voice (Graffiti Research Lab's EyeWriter and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's speech-to-text machine learning work, *Cloud Display*, are two of many such examples). Attendant on, and resulting from, the expansion of technological possibility is the expansion of imagination about who or what can function as an inscribing agent, not only in terms of the incorporation of nonhuman entities but also in terms of open calls for contribution to nominal projects that unfold into multiple, interlocking series or threads, iterations on themes no longer tethered to, or necessarily organized by, the category of "author."<sup>9</sup>

In this sense, indeterminacy characterizes the inscriptive at multiple levels: these open-ended projects, thought alongside EyeWriting or, again, *Reach*'s updating in accordance with search queries, point us toward ephemerality, vulnerability, and contingency as constitutive properties of the inscriptive. Here, then, we might contrast the inscriptive as we conceive it with Vilém Flusser's poetic but nonetheless historically grounded and media-specific exploration of inscription as a carving into a durable surface that lays claims to monumentality.<sup>10</sup> Dan Miller's *Untitled* (2016), for example, with its opaque ink layers of words upon words, offers a powerful reminder that the inscriptive actualizes the prescriptive and performative potential of symbolicity and at the same time serves as a reminder of the multiple ways in which it might fail, its messages unrealized,

obscured, or even destroyed. So too the slogans of *Annex* are presented under erasure; the words of *Snow* can and do melt; the glaciers upon which *Ice Texts* were projected certainly are melting as well; *decomp*'s print copies of *On the Origin of Species* are in varying states of decomposition; sand tables will disintegrate and internet domains can be removed; billboards and installations are taken down, sometimes even censored; and *Future Library* is haunted by the possibility that its books will never be printed, much less read, in the twenty-second century.

If the physical parameters, and indeed perimeters, of the inscriptive might not easily be secured, what then of its temporal parameters? A looming question, perhaps especially so for readers of a journal dedicated to the arts of the present, would be *when* the inscriptive as we are conceiving it might be situated. What, in other words, distinguishes the inscriptive from earlier predecessors: from Jenny Holzer's movie theater marquees and scrolling LED signs, for example, or Cy Twombly's scribbblings, or Park Seo-Bo's *Écriture* series? What allows for an articulation of the inscriptive as a distinctly contemporary practice? And what distinguishes the methodology we imagine as "inscriptive studies" from earlier critical approaches to language art, textuality, and writing machines and technologies? In short, our proposal is that the inscriptive, while "always already new" in the sense that there are clear continuities between past and present, emerges from, and is emblematic of, the very sociotechnical condition that it thematizes and arguably helps to perpetuate. It is not determined by computational media, but computational media in many instances make it possible. It is not a direct consequence of social media, but social media platforms certainly host and condition it. The inscriptive is not necessarily occasioned by the many narratives of the ends of print, the book, writing, or even language, but these narratives often inform, animate, and indeed haunt an art practice that appears to be resolutely committed to the idea that things disappear. And while it has not simply been thinkable in a moment of accelerated Anthropocentric climate change (indeed many of its representative works are symptomatic in this regard), it does explicitly prompt recognition of myriad environmental transformations, as well as of our conscious and unconscious anxieties about the same.

As our opening catalog suggests, language politics are also at the center of numerous inscriptive projects. *WORKBOOK*, and indeed Chun's broader

artistic practice, brings to the fore the thematics of monolingualism and Global English as central concerns, while Çavuşoğlu's *Annex* and Alzayani's *Watering the distant, deserting the near* attend to the respective materiality of Turkish and Arabic scripts, aestheticizing letters as sculptural objects while engaging with the political question of their transmission in the term's full sense of broadcasting, sending across, and transference. (In Alzayani's work, the content of information to be transmitted concerns an historical memory of a family trip to a now-dried-up water spring—here again the Anthropocene and the inscriptive converge.) Beyond this catalog, Christine Sun Kim's work with American Sign Language and sound notation opens a discussion of the full range of inscriptive works based on nonalphabetic languages. Part of the power of the inscriptive and of inscriptive studies, then, is their capacity to reach across different languages and symbolic systems and their corresponding potential to unsettle alphabetic writing as the privileged medium of global art and global communication.

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These and other examples suggest that the so-termed crisis of language—particularly its seeming absorption and dissolution by the forces of linguistic capitalism and semio-capital—is a point of departure for inscriptive practice.<sup>11</sup> Precisely when the symbolic order of language has been made machinic by ever-more-powerful language models; when gifs and emojis have made the leap from ordinary communication to literary and professional genres; when so-termed minority languages are exponentially dying; when we are told, repeatedly, that no one reads, that text is just one form of streaming media among many, and an insignificant one at that—it is at this point that the inscriptive emerges as if to say, writing is dead, long live writing. Not as an elegy, not as an evocation of nostalgia or romance, or utopian desire for written culture as the sine qua non of stable and functional societies, but rather as the formulation of a contingent, immanent inquiry into the conditions of possibility that inform

textual production in the contemporary moment. Indeed, what distinguishes many inscriptive projects most saliently is their synthesis of these historical, discursive, technological, and ecological forces at speed and scale and in real time. While it is of course the case that artistic engagement with these forces is not new, the inscriptive explores the newly urgent circumstance of their dynamic, co-constitutive relationality as both its prerequisite and its subject. And it is neither incidental nor coincidental that this condition should be in line with the contemporary theoretical doxa of entanglement as well as the structural logics of surplus data, algorithmic governmentality, and deep learning: the inscriptive, we might say, simultaneously indexes and enacts our entanglement with information across multiple sites and platforms.<sup>12</sup>

But the caveat we have thus far implied can and should be made more explicit: while we stand by the articulation of the inscriptive as a category, a concept, and a practice, we recognize the impossibility, even the absurdity, of attempting to station ourselves before works that are themselves not stationary. More precisely, to insist on a totalization of what we imagine as the inscriptive would be to falsely fix and demarcate a field defined in every respect by process, mutability, and diffusion. Too much qualification of the sort that we offer here of course risks undermining the project of articulation itself, but iteratively self-reflexive works demand comparable self-reflexivity of their critics. What we propose with this special issue, then, can be thought in terms of a heuristic, one that came into view as we read, watched, searched, collected, talked, and read some more. After all, the inscriptive's fundamental instability and openness to external forces inspires such circumspection: not a certain and unwavering gaze on a fixed target, a discrete cultural artifact, but circumspection in its etymological sense of continuously looking around.

It would follow that inscriptive studies is methodologically circumspect as well, drawing on and synthesizing approaches from across multiple disciplines. Just as the works themselves can in part be understood topologically—as comprising a system, assemblage, or network made up of interrelated parts—so too does a critical approach to the inscriptive appropriate (and incorporate) concepts, questions, and axioms from neighboring scholarly communities, chief among them media archeology, critical infrastructure studies, affect studies, the environmental humanities, thing theory, and science and technology studies. Thus, inscriptive studies both diverges from and builds on the forensic study of technological

artifacts by opening a space for inquiry into the technological particulars of textuality broadly understood, across platforms, sites, networks, and the digital/analog divide.<sup>13</sup> So too inscriptive studies not only asks the templated questions that have been developed for “writing” as such but also more directly expands that inquiry to the whole of the discursive and material constellation that informs and animates it and, in doing so, upends entirely the notion that there was ever a single object, much less a single text, at its center. If textual studies has, in spite of its commitments to a radical expansion of “text,” upheld to some degree the distinction between a text’s primary message and secondary marks (e.g., marginalia, manuscript annotations), inscriptive studies in contrast often offers the appearance of a central object that it is then immediately displaced and withdrawn, giving way to a larger structure. In other words, the billboard in *Reach* is not the work, even if it does momentarily serve to direct the eye of the viewer and thus presents as such, just as the physical copies of Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* are not at the center of *decomp*, because *decomp* itself is all and only orbit.

A contrast might be drawn as well between inscriptive studies and “comparative textual media,” the critical framework proposed by N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman.<sup>14</sup> In their formulation, dislodging “print” as the foundation of humanities scholarship in favor of “media” as a cultural technique has as its productive consequence the unsettling of generic categories and national literary traditions. We might say the same of the inscriptive—another shovel to help move the mountain—but then go further to reiterate that digital media is not singularly or even primarily the occasion and motivation for our heuristic. Indeed, as we suggest below, inscriptive studies responds to changes in technological and cultural conditions that ramify well beyond the question of format. Further, unlike the mode of comparative analysis, inscriptive studies does not stabilize and align two critical objects for side-by-side examination but rather needs to think systemically, in terms of temporary arrangements of constituent parts and the constitutive flows among them. Inscriptive studies also grants more theoretical weight to the full range of exogenous forces—technological, to be sure, but also sociological, ecological, infrastructural, and political—that condition the lifecycle of its objects, even as it would not in the end adhere to, or even allow for, an inside-outside distinction.

This then introduces the practical question that might hinder the realization of inscriptive studies as an academic-analytical practice: what are its objects

exactly and how might they be transmitted and shared with students and colleagues? What should be included on a syllabus or exam list? Some of the projects we have identified as representative circulate as temporary installations (*Watering the distant, deserting the near*), or as social media pages (*Snow*) or downloadable files (*Annex*) that, as with the case of Çavuşoğlu's font, may at some point no longer be accessible to the public. Sometimes the installation begets petitions, hearings, and regulatory orders that extend the field of the work (*Truth Be Told*); and sometimes the installation begets or is paired with a separate publication (*WORKBOOK*). Many of the works then are available only through documentation, through photographs and video, artist statements, journalistic coverage, critical appraisals, and viewers' experiential accounts (*Because You Know Ultimately We Will Band A Militia, Future Library, Ice Texts*); and associated codex publications are often the occasion for the folding of these materials within the ever-expanding field of the work (*decomp, 1 the Road*). Even more striking in its apparatus is Ng and Wong's *Print In Process*, with lead type characters referring, variously, to non-mainland Chinese and Communism—words that, from the perspective of a censor, may bear the promise of subversion—striking because that latent potential is held in reserve, subversive messages that can only ever be in process, or in progress, until actualized through print.<sup>15</sup>

But herein lies a dilemma: should documentation or first-hand experience be granted analytic priority, and how can one delineate, so as to manage, the parameters of an inscriptive work? Such questions are by no means new, as indeed every scholar of theater, performance, social practice, and conceptual art can attest. They are, however, now suddenly and surprisingly fundamental for disciplines premised in part on the idea that there are discrete textual objects to be analyzed. Thus, we find in much of the inscriptive a paradox or aporia regarding what to interpret and how: is the published text within an inscriptive work the proper object of study, or only the documentation of the process of a work? Conversely, is that process the work itself, or is it only in service of the production of the text? Shelley Jackson's work on Instagram exemplifies this tension, and the complex circuit of *Print In Process* perhaps even more so, in that Ng and Wong gesture toward the act of printing in the setting of type but then offer the viewer only the simulacral output of an inkjet printer, supplanting both printed document and digital file with gesture, the work itself functioning as a record of an inscriptive act that can never take place. Here, as in many cases, the

tangible objecthood promised by the inscriptive dissipates, its supposed thingness absorbed by a larger, dynamic system composed of other things, actants, and sites, as well as the myriad vectors that connect and animate them.

Stretching and circulating across such systems, the inscriptive hinges on the current moment as a point of departure from which to make a larger argument about the medium specificity theorized by Hayles and other scholars of the digital.<sup>16</sup> If Hayles's attention to the rise of the digital makes clear that critical inquiry has always been medium-specific, inscriptive studies suggests two subsequent conditions of textual materiality, namely that medium specificity has always been political and that, conversely, politics is medium-specific. Indeed, the self-reflexivity of the inscriptive is central to its purchase on the social and political. At first, this would seem to point toward a short circuit, a textual mise-en-abyme that rehearses the surfaces and language games associated with high postmodernism. Roy Lichtenstein's comic book reproductions might serve as one antecedent of this sort of zero-sum circumscription, but we might also suggest as corollary examples artistic projects that transform codices into houses, labyrinths, and sculptural objects to be seen rather than read—*interesting*, to invoke Sianne Ngai, but there it often ends.<sup>17</sup> And indeed, instances of this sort of attenuated textual work abound across the landscape of what Michel de Certeau describes as the “scriptural economy”: the banal platitudes that populate social typography, for example, or the evacuated textual forms and formats that pervade social media, from letterboards to instagraphic carousel slideshows.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, just as not all textual work is politically engaged, it should go without saying that not all artistic work is textually engaged; indeed, the examples discussed here and in the contributions that follow constitute only one specific subset of contemporary cultural production. A glance through contemporary biennale exhibition catalogs may suggest, *prima facie*, that the inscriptive is not axiomatic for artists and researchers engaging questions of borders, urban space, social justice, colonialism, or identity, broadly construed as such. Yet the inscriptive has a great deal to tell us about the place of writing, textuality, substrate, platform, data, medium, and the archive within those larger questions—in our present moment, across history, and into the future. Thus, what might look on the surface like a focus on language and writing for their own sakes, seemingly outside or even devoid of politics, actually provides a backdoor point of

entry into how the political is staged, represented, and remembered in what the inscriptive registers as a profoundly textual and informational moment.

In other words, for the works we categorize as inscriptive and the critical methods that pertain to them, this reflexive preoccupation with the text, the codex, and the mark serves as an unfolding onto larger political horizons rather than a withdrawal from them, a feature in relation to critique and the social rather than a bug. This unfolding is, to be sure, carefully situated: the inscriptive invests not in the broader question of politics as such but rather in the specific politics and potentiality of symbolicity and materiality. In attending to text through text, inscriptive works diagnose that text aesthetically, structurally, and politically across different sites and contexts. To this end, their logics of changeability and malleability—of addition, subtraction, accumulation—speak not just to the nature of contemporary textuality but also, through textuality, to larger questions of the social and political: energy consumption, habitat loss, resource depletion, supply chain failures, the contested terrain of the public sphere, national crises and conflicts, and the forced removal and resettlement of populations. The politics of the inscriptive, then, is at once both resolutely local and situated in its sweep and at the same time a politics and a practice of deep political engagement across history and across geopolitical domains.<sup>19</sup>

While the scope of the inscriptive is localized—indeed, precisely because of this localization rather than in spite of it—it is at the same time also flexible, extensible, and portable. The works and approaches we bring together in this essay, the list that opens it, and the writings that follow are meant not as a prescriptive canon but rather a preliminary catalog, one that might be expanded on and further unfolded along any number of vectors. The “toward” of our title, then, imagines inscriptive studies as an emergent field studying an emergent corpus of cultural production: our intent in this introduction and this special issue is to begin to map the shifting territory of the inscriptive in order to invite future engagements with this field, future constellations of its forms and formats, and future deployments and revisions of inscriptive studies as a critical methodology.

—————/ **Notes** /—————

<sup>1</sup> Shelley Jackson, “Skin,” *Shelley Jackson’s Ineradicable Stain*, 2003, <https://ineradicablestain.com/skindex.html>.

<sup>2</sup> It perhaps goes without saying, but given space enough and time, our opening list might have stretched to many pages. In its most ambitious guise, “inscriptive studies” is a rubric not only for future scholarship but for curricula as well.

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” *October* 8 (Spring 1979): 36.

<sup>4</sup> John Smith, “parbunkell,” *A Sea Grammar: With the Plaine Exposition of Smiths Accidence for Young Sea-men*, ed. Kermit Goell (1627; London: Joseph, 1970), 26.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Weist, “Reach—Julia Weist,” *Julia Weist*, 2015, <http://work.deaccession.org/reach>.

<sup>6</sup> For one notable example, see John Cayley and Daniel C. Howe, *How It Is in Common Tongues, The Readers Project*, 2012, <http://thereadersproject.org/hiiict2012.html>.

<sup>7</sup> The inscriptive can similarly be found at all scales, from Christian Bök’s “xenotext” experiments with DNA to Tavares Strachan’s one-hundred-foot mobile neon sign, *You Belong Here*, floating on a barge on the Mississippi around New Orleans. And with Eduardo Kac’s laser-etched space poem, *Adsum*, in view, we can observe that it reaches from the ocean depths to the International Space Station. Related here is Orit Halpern’s suggestion that “[t]he planet has become a medium for recording inscriptions,” which she makes in the context of an ethnographic analysis of the Atacama Large Millimeter/submillimeter Array (ALMA) astronomical observatory. Orit Halpern, “Planetary Intelligence,” in *The Cultural Life of Machine Learning: An Incursion into Critical AI Studies*, ed. Jonathan Roberge and Michael Castelle (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 238.

<sup>8</sup> To this list we might add the chemical inscriptions discussed by Melody Jue and Amy J. Elias, along with the state redactions discussed by Joshua Craze, in their forum contributions to this issue.

<sup>9</sup> *Project Hashtag*, from the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (MMCA) in Korea, and *Messages for the City* (a Times Square public art project) are two of many such examples, particularly appropriate perhaps in that they indicate a different property regime of the inscriptive, whereby works might emerge from a single source that may use initial protocols to govern the processual arc to some degree, after which there is an inevitable ceding of control to myriad exogenous forces. See *Project Hashtag*, 2022, <http://projecthashtag.net>; “Messages for the City,” *Times Square Arts*, 2020, <http://arts.timessquarenyc.org/times-square-arts/projects/at-the-crossroads/messages-for-the-city/index.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> See Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (1987; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 11–21.

<sup>11</sup> See Frederic Kaplan, “Linguistic Capitalism and Algorithmic Mediation,” *Representations* 127, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 57–63; Franco Berardi, *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2012).

<sup>12</sup> For reference, see Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007);

Antoinette Rouvroy, “Algorithmic Governmentality: Radicalisation and Immune Strategy of Capitalism and Neoliberalism?” trans. Benoît Dillet, *La Deleuziana*, no. 3 (2016): 30–36, <http://www.ladeleuziana.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Rouvroy2eng.pdf>; Louise Amoore, *Cloud Ethics: Algorithms and the Attributes of Ourselves and Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> We note Matthew Kirschenbaum’s critique of screen essentialism as an inevitable byproduct of the neglect of inscriptive acts, as well as his suggestion that scholars of electronic textuality “follow the bits all the way down to the metal,” applying the approach of platform studies theorized by Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort to technologies of digital writing. Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 27ff, xiv.

<sup>14</sup> N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman, eds., *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Thanks to Yunte Huang for assistance with translation of this work.

<sup>16</sup> Writing of the shifts in textuality made visible by the emergence of electronic literature, Hayles suggests that “literary analysis should awaken to the importance of media-specific analysis, a mode of critical attention which recognizes that all texts are instantiated and that the nature of the medium in which they are instantiated matters. Central to repositioning critical inquiry, so it can attend to the specificity of the medium, is a more robust notion of materiality.” N. Katherine Hayles, “Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis,” *Poetics Today* 25, no.1 (Spring 2004): 67.

<sup>17</sup> See Garrett Stewart, *Bookwork: Medium to Object to Concept to Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), for a survey of art that frames the book as object; Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>18</sup> See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (1980; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 131, 132.

<sup>19</sup> While many of the projects we reference and that are the focus of the articles in this special issue are manifestly of and about the present—*Reach*, to be sure, but also Hideo Kojima’s *Death Stranding*, which Daniel Snelson engages, and Xu Bing’s *Book from the Ground*, the subject of Lee Konstantinou’s article—inscriptive works that return to earlier, predigital modalities point to a genealogy of textual politics that long precedes our current moment. In this latter category, we highlight the “performative typography” of Douglas Kearney and Eve Ewing discussed by Nikki Skillman; the archival work of Kara Walker discussed by Kinohi Nishikawa; the public, site-specific language art of Cecilia Vicuña and Lotty Rosenfeld discussed by Allie Tepper; and the complex print apparatus of Vivian Abenshushan discussed by Élika Ortega.

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