**Material Poetics and the ‘Communication Event’:**

**A theory and critical framework for artworks at a crossover between poetry and text-based art**

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This article offers a theory of material poetics alongside the development of a subjective critical framework through which to consider artworks at a crossover between poetry and text-based art practice.[{note}]1Crucial for understanding the complex meaning of artworks that employ a verbal message will be Roman Jakobson’s scheme of the ‘speech event’ (1960: 353).Deceptively simple in appearance, Jakobson’s scheme is able to account for how artworks that employ a verbal message generate meaning through language as well as through their physical material properties in relation to their wider context. I call this a material poetics. Arriving at an understanding of material poetics through Jakobson’s speech event links an appreciation of artworks that employ a verbal message to Jakobson’s seminal argument concerning the nature and function of poetry. It also subtends my thinking around signand subject. This thinking is intrinsic to a material poetic practice and important for my extension, ultimately, of Jakobson’s scheme into the ‘communication event’: a discursive, embodied and politically situated critical framework through which to consider artworks at the crossover between poetry and text-based art practice.

**The speech event**

CONTEXT

ADDRESSER MESSAGE ADDRESSEE

…………………………………………………………..

 C O N T A C T

CODE

As outlined in ‘Closing statement: Linguistics and poetics’, the defining characteristic of Jakobson’s speech event is the relationship between an ‘addresser’ and an ‘addressee’, predicated on the sending of a ‘message’ (1960: 353). The message itself is inert and becomes activated through the reciprocal acts of speaking and listening. Importantly, Jakobson also uses the speech event to account for written works whose messages are activated through writing and reading; arguably, we can extend this to messages sent and received in theatre, film, dance and so forth.

Within the speech act, the message becomes operative—that is, understandable to the addressee—through recourse to the other constituent factors of the event, including the ‘code’, ‘context’ and ‘contact’. The code here refers to the symbolic code, language; however, we can, again, extend this to include other semiotic codes. The context is ‘a context referred to (“referent” in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature), seizable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized’ (1960: 353). Phrased differently, the context is the world of objects and things as this is referred to by language. Finally, the contact is ‘a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication’ (1960: 353). For Jakobson, a verbal message’s orientation toward any of these six factors determines a different linguistic function, including the ‘emotive’, ‘referential’, ‘poetic’, ‘phatic’, ‘metalingual’ and ‘conative’ functions. And while any verbal message fulfils a combination of any of these six functions, he argues, the verbal structure of a message depends upon the predominant function (1960: 353).

Isolating the poetic function, Jakobson answers what he considers to be the primary question of poetics, ‘What makes a verbal message a work of art?’ (1960: 350). What makes a verbal message a work of art (that is, poetry or literature) is, Jakobson argues, when the message is characterized primarily by the poetic function, which he defines as an orientation toward the message itself. We can unpack this definition by looking at an earlier essay, ‘Two aspects of language and two types of aphasic disturbances’ (1956). Here, Jakobson argues that the poetic function manifests through the figurative tropes of metaphor and metonymy, which he associates with poetry and realistic prose, respectively. In poetry, Jakobson argues, an orientation toward the message itself entails a predominant concentration on the code or the selection of linguistic signs along an axis of selection. Through this concentration, the logic of similarity characteristic of this axis is introduced into the axis of contiguity or syntax of a verbal statement, as manifest in patterns of rhyme, rhythm, metre and so forth. Jakobson compares this to realistic prose, where an orientation toward the message itself entails focusing predominantly on the combination of linguistic signs in the context of a verbal statement, with the aim of digressing metonymically into the referential context: ‘Following the path of contiguous relationships, the realist author metonymically digresses from the plot to the atmosphere and from the characters to the setting in space and time. He is fond of synecdochic details,’ Jakobson writes (1956: 256). All of which suggests that what makes a verbal message a work of art is when the verbal message is characterized by an orientation toward the message itself through a concentration on code and context (that is, the selection and combination of linguistic signs) as realized through metaphor and metonymy.

In terms of artworks that employ a verbal message, Jakobson’s argument is helpful for considering the poetics of their verbal message. His isolation of the poetic function suggests how an artwork’s verbal message is capable of extending into the linguistic code along an axis of similarity, and into its referential context along an axis of contiguity. Critically, the latter is particularly important as it suggests how the verbal message of these artworks relates to the world. This metaphysical question of the relation between the word and the world, the question of linguistic reference, was sidestepped by earlier developments in structuralist linguistics. However, recognizing that this relation is intrinsic for understanding not only works of verbal art, but actually all kinds of discourse, Jakobson accounts for it in his scheme of the speech event by including the context as one of its constitutive factors. But why was this question first excluded from linguistics, and why is it so important to consider in relation to discourse, generally, and artworks, specifically? To answer this, I turn to the work of the linguist Emile Benveniste.

In an essay entitled ‘The nature of the linguistic sign’ (1971a [1939]), written well before Jakobson’s ‘Closing statement’, Benveniste reintroduces the question of the referent that was excluded by Ferdinand de Saussure from his study of structuralist linguistics. Saussure’s structuralism concentrates solely on language as a system of signs—signs that are, themselves, comprised of an arbitrary relationship between a signifier and signified. Contrary to Saussure’s claim, Benveniste argues that the relationship between the signifier and the signified of the linguistic sign is not arbitrary; rather, it is necessary. The linguistic sign would not be a linguistic sign without this relationship. What is arbitrary, Benveniste argues, is the linguistic sign’s relation to the reality or ‘thing’ to which it refers. This still affirms the linguistic sign’s arbitrary nature, but only by introducing a ‘third term’ into Saussure’s linguistic theory: the referent or, in Benveniste’s terms, ‘the thing itself, the reality’ (1971a [1939]: 44). Through this, Benveniste (re)introduces the relationship between the word and the world into a study of linguistics. Importantly, Benveniste’s continuing argument suggests that even if the relationship between the word and its material referent, or the word and the world, is arbitrary, the linguistic sign nevertheless ‘overlies and commands reality; even better, it isthat reality’ for the speaker (1971a [1939]: 46). He extrapolates this idea in a later essay, ‘A look at the development of the linguistic sign’ (1962) that, written four years after Jakobson’s ‘Closing statement’, defines what Benveniste calls the ‘symbolic faculty’ as ‘the faculty of representingthe real by a “sign” and of understanding the “sign” as representing the real—the faculty, then, of establishing a relation of “signification” between one thing and another’ (1971f [1962]: 21). Through this symbolic faculty, Benveniste argues, language, which is a system of symbolic signs, transforms elements of reality into concepts. These concepts are then used to categorize and organize reality. As a result, language is not a reflection of the world. When it is realized through the recriprocal acts of speaking and listening, language actually produces reality as an effect of discourse: ‘Thus the situation inherent in the practice of language, namely that of exchange and dialogue, confers a double function on the act of discourse; for the speaker it represents reality, for the hearer it recreates that reality’ (1971f [1962]): 22). In terms of Jakobson’s scheme, this implies that any exchange of a verbal message is capable of producing reality as an effect. In terms of the artworks that I am looking at, this implies that their employment of verbal message—more specifically, our reception of this message—is capable of producing reality as an effect.

Considering the relationship between the word and the world through Jakobson’s scheme paves the way for appreciating how artworks that employ a verbal message are capable of working work with critical strategies to question given realities, or to produce alternative ones. Which is to say, it suggests the potential link between poetics, its resulting aesthetics and politics. Having said this, I am not only interested in how an artwork employing text generates meaning through its verbal message, but also how such an artwork generates meaning through its material properties or, as I am calling it, through a material poetics. I suggest that, through a material poetics, an artwork is able to relate to its context not only through an arbitrary linguistic relation, but also through the physical and existential relation that the artwork’s material properties have with the world of objects and things. Ultimately, I am interested in how such an artwork employs critical strategies of material poetics, and to what effect.[{note}]3

With this in mind, I turn again to Jakobson’s scheme in order to define my understanding of material poetics. Specifically, I refer to Jakobson’s definition of the contact in ‘Closing statement’ as ‘a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication’ (1960 [1958]: 353). As we have seen, each constitutive factor of Jakobson’s speech event is associated with a particular function and, for Jakobson, a verbal message with an orientation toward the contact is characterized by the phatic function. Primarily serving to establish or prolong communication (for example, talking about the weather) or to check if the ‘channel’ works (for example, ‘Hello? Hello? Are you still there?’), these messages are used to attract the attention of the interlocutor and to confirm that continued attention (Jakobson, ‘Closing 355’). Jakobson likens this kind of communication to talking birds, indicating that it is the one kind of communication shared between humans and animals. He also argues that it is ‘the first verbal function acquired by infants; they are prone to communicate before being able to send or receive informative communication’ (1960 [1958]: 353). From this description, I appreciate ‘phatic communication’, oriented toward the contact, as anterior to language, but coextensive with speech. And this, I suggest, is none other than the material aspect of language.

As with the relationship between the word and the world, this material aspect of language is excluded from formalist linguistic theory wherein language is conceived solely in terms of an immaterial order of signs. However, within the situation of speech, this material aspect of language can be recognized, as it is realized, through the reciprocal acts of speaking and listening that establish contact between the speaker and the listener. This is clear enough from Jakobson’s inclusion of the contact within his scheme of the speech event. This appreciation of the material aspect of language is also found, again, in Benveniste’s ‘A look at the development of the linguistic sign’ where, after having claimed that the symbolic faculty finds its ‘supreme realization in language’, Benveniste argues that, in fact, language is a special symbolic system organized on two planes. The first is the material plane of language: language as a physical fact that ‘makes use of the vocal apparatus for arising and the auditory apparatus for being perceived’ (1971f [1962]: 25). The second is an immaterial plane: ‘a communication of things signified, which replaces events or experiences by their “evocation”’ (1971f [1962]: 25). If we read Benveniste’s argument here in terms of Jakobson’s speech event, language organized as an ‘immaterial structure’ relates to the code of a verbal message, whereas the ‘material aspect’ of language, acted out through speaking and listening, engenders the contact. It is this appreciation of language as a double-sided entity, both code and contact, that is of interest to me, and that informs my definition of material poetics.

I posit that artworks employing a verbal message are, like works of verbal art, oriented toward the message and, thus, characterized by the poetic function. They can reveal this orientation through a concentration on code and context, realized through metaphor and metonymy. However, it is through an additional concentration, or even a sole focus, on the contact that they reveal an orientation toward their message: this is material poetics. Further, an orientation toward the contact characterizes artworks whose messages are realized through a meaningful manipulation of the artworks’ material aspects.[{note}]3

Importantly, if in order to account for the material aspect of language one must take into consideration the reciprocal embodied acts that perform a verbal message, this suggests that a material poetics is inexplicably linked to the performance of the verbal message: its embodied enactment through the reciprocal acts of ‘speaking’ and ‘listening’. (And I place these words in quotations to denote an extended appreciation of these terms to include any embodied performance of language, for example, speaking and listening, writing and reading, gesturing and viewing.) This emphasis on the reciprocal performance of a verbal message underpins the concepts of sign and subject that follow and, ultimately, my extension of Jakobson’s speech event into the ‘communication event’ as a subjective critical framework through which to consider artworks at a crossover between poetry and text-based art practice.

**The indexical symbol**

Accounting for the meaningful aspects of a verbal message requires a reconceptualization of the linguistic sign. For this, I propose to consider the sign in terms of the indexical symbol, understood in a material sense. I base this understanding on a revision of the semiotics of the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce by Arthur Burks.

Writing in the essay ‘Icon, index, and symbol’ (1949), Burks emphasizes the potential for semiotic complexity in Peirce’s original formulation of a typology of signs. In this typology, ‘icon’, index’ and ‘symbol’ each refer to the different means whereby a sign relates to an object in the mind of an interpreter. The icon bears a mimetic relation, a relation of similitude or likeness, to the world or object, for example, photographic images, diagrams and mimicry (as an auditory icon) (Peirce 1992a [c. 1895]). The index has a real connection to an object: it ‘bears a physical or existential relation to the world or object’, says Peirce (1992b [c. 1894]: 9). Examples of the index include a pointing finger, the North Star and demonstrative pronouns, such as ‘this’ or ‘that’ (Peirce 1992a [c. 1895]: 15). And the symbol bears no direct relation to the world or object but, rather, becomes related to the world or object by means of a learned association or law (Peirce 1992b [c. 1894]: 9). In this sense, the linguistic sign is a type of Peircian symbol. Important for Burks, however, is Peirce’s understanding that these signs can be of mixed nature, not simply icons, indices or symbols, respectively. It is this potential for semiotic complexity that subtends Burks’ revision of Peirce, whereby he arrives at a definition of the indexical symbol in the grammatical sense.

Burks argues that Peirce’s major contribution to knowledge is his recognition of indexicality as a ‘genuine mode of meaning’; however, he argues that Peirce’s definition of the index necessitates a revision (Burks 1949: 685). According to Burks, the fundamental kind of indexical sign is actually the indexical symbol and not, as he calls it, the ‘pure index’ ( 680). He proceeds to define the indexical symbol specifically in terms of grammatical indexicality, including words such as ‘now’ and ‘then’ as well as personal pronouns such as ‘I’ and ‘you’: words that are, in linguistic terminology, called ‘shifters’. According to Burks, what must be understood or known by the interpreter in order to grasp the symbolic-meaning of an indexical symbol understood in the grammatical sense is the language of the code wherein this meaning resides. However, in order to grasp its indexical-meaning, the interpreter must also possess a knowledge or understanding of the particular spatiotemporal location in which the indexical symbol is interpreted. This, for me, is key. And while Burks’ discussion relates solely to the indexical symbol understood in a grammatical sense, I use his argument to subtend a further theorization of the indexical symbol, understood in a material sense, for the purposes of a material poetics.

I propose to consider the spatiotemporal location in which one interprets the indexical symbol in the grammatical sense in terms of Jakobson’s speech event. Significantly, Jakobson himself actually situates the indexical symbol understood in the grammatical sense within his scheme of the speech event in the essay ‘Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb’ (1971). Here Jakobson argues that linguistic shifters (words such as ‘I’ and ‘you’, ‘now’ and ‘then’) are ‘a complex category where code and message overlap’, whereupon he refers specifically to Burks’s revision of Peirce in order to classify the shifter as a type of indexical symbol (Jakobson 1971: 132). Critically, both ‘code’ and ‘message’ are constitutive aspects of Jakobson’s speech event. This means that in order to understand the meaning of the indexical symbol in a grammatical sense, when this is situated in Jakobson’s speech event, one must have knowledge of both the code and the message. Stemming from this, I ask: how do we understand the meaning of the indexical symbol understood in the material sense when this is situated within Jakobson’s scheme of the speech event?

To answer this, I recall that other factor of Jakobson’s speech event: the contact, which Jakobson defines as ‘a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication’ (1960 [1958]: 353). As I discussed above, it is in the contact of Jakobson’s speech event that I specifically locate the material quality of a sign as this is enacted through the reciprocal acts of ‘speaking’ and ‘listening’. It follows that I would locate the indexical-meaning of an indexical symbol, understood in the material sense, in the contact. Furthermore, if the indexical symbol in a grammatical sense (that is, the linguistic shifter) is an overlap of message and code, I now posit that the indexical symbol in a material sense is an overlap of message, code and contact. With this understanding, the indexical symbol understood in a material sense serves as the basis for the sign in a material poetics and, as explore in the next section, it also informs how I understand the subject within a material poetic practice.

**The discursive subjects ‘I’ and ‘you’ as indexical symbols in both the grammatical and material senses**

In his essay ‘Subjectivity in language’ (1971e [1958]), Benveniste defines subjectivity specifically in terms of the discursive act. ‘Now we hold that “subjectivity”, whether it is placed in phenomenology or psychology, as one may wish, is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. “Ego” is he who says“ego”,’ he writes (Benveniste 1971e [1958]: 224). Benveniste further argues that this definition of subjectivity is inherently relational: any utterance of ‘I’ always implies a ‘you’.

I use ‘I’ only when I am speaking to someone who will be a ‘you’ in my address … ‘I’ posits another person, the one who, being, as he is, completely exterior to ‘me’, becomes my echo to whom I say ‘you’ and who says ‘you’ to me.

(Benveniste 1971e [1958]: 224)

For Benveniste, subjectivity thus emerges in and through speaking—where ‘I’ posits another, as the ‘you’ of address—while falling into abeyance during the interludes between discursive exchange.

Writing in The Subject of Semiotics(1983)*,* film theorist Kaja Silverman notes the radical potential of this inherent contingency in Benveniste’s theory of the subject. Silverman looks at how Benveniste’s discursive relational subject is, like the Lacanian subject in language, constituted symbolically (that is, is dependent upon the production of the signified and operations of identification). And yet, Benveniste’s discursive subject is transitive and contingent upon all of the contextual factors that bear on a given discursive instance. As such, subjectivity is never fixed, but fluctuates and multiplies with any given instance of discourse depending upon the range of discursive positions available at a given time, as understood with recourse to the context of the discursive exchange. In allowing for the possibility of change, ‘the generation of new discursive positions implies a new subjectivity as well’, and, for Silverman, herein lies the radical potential of Benveniste’s theory of the subject (1983:199).

Suggestive of the political potential of Benveniste’s theory of the subject, Silverman’s reading is compelling for my own consideration of the subject in a material poetics and, thus, artworks that employ a verbal message. That said, Silverman’s reading is based on an understanding of the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ as linguistic signifiers. What happens when we consider the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ as indexical symbols in the grammatical sense, as per Burks and Jakobson?

As we have seen, in order to grasp the meaning of the indexical symbol in a grammatical sense, one must have knowledge and understanding of its particular spatiotemporal location. I suggested above that we can understand this spatiotemporal location in terms of Jakobson’s speech event, whereby each of the constitutive factors of the event have a bearing on one’s interpretation of the indexical symbol. Now, if we understand the ‘I’ in terms of an indexical symbol in a grammatical sense, then the symbolic-meaning of the ‘I’signifies the speaker of the utterance containing ‘I’ and all instances of ‘I’ have this symbolic-meaning. To grasp this meaning, one needs knowledge of the linguistic code in which it is uttered. This, however, is only part of the ‘I’s full meaning since each discursive instance or token of the word ‘I’has a different indexical-meaning that is specific to its spatiotemporal location, distinguishing it from all other tokens or instances. As we looked at above, this means that the interpreter must have a knowledge of both code and message in order to grasp the full meaning of the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ as indexical symbols in the grammatical sense. However, Silverman has argued that the speaking subject ‘I’ is constituted ‘in terms of a range of discursive positions available at a given time, which reflect all sorts of economic, political, sexual, artistic, and other determinants’ (1983:199). In keeping, when we understand the ‘I’ in terms of an indexical symbol in a grammatical sense, then it is through this range of discursive positions that the ‘I’—and the ‘you’—become recognizable, both to themselves and/through one another in the instance of discourse. This recognition is intrinsic to the indexical-meaning of the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ because it is specific to the contextual determinants of the spatiotemporal location in which they are uttered. So, in the instance of discourse, the symbolic-meaning of the ‘I’, the subject in language, is coupled with an indexical-meaning that is specific to the spatiotemporal location within the instance of discourse. This constitutes, at one and the same time, the ‘I’ as a grammatical subject in language and a culturally and historically specific (that is, contextually specific) discursive subject ‘I’ in relation to ‘you’, recognizable through a range of discursive positions available in any given instance of discourse. One’s constitution as a discursive subject, specific to the spatiotemporal location of the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ in an instance of discourse, therefore fills the ‘I’ with indexical-meaning. This means that in order to understand the full meaning of the grammatical indexical symbols ‘I’ and ‘you’ within the situation of discourse, one must have an understanding of code, message andcontext.

If this is the case, then what happens if we consider the ‘I’ not just in terms of the indexical symbol in the grammatical sense, but also in the material sense, as I have proposed to do in order to arrive at a basis for the subject? If we consider the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ not just in terms of the indexical symbol in a grammatical sense, but also in a material sense, then the contextually specific indexical-meaning is still only part of the full indexical-meaning of the ‘I’. There is, in addition, an indexical-meaning of the ‘I’ that is specific to the contact, that is, to the material quality of the utterance in which the ‘I’ is spoken. Bearing this in mind, I look again at Jakobson’s ‘Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb’ (1971 [1957]) where, significantly, he refers not just to Burks, as I have said, but also to Benveniste’s essay ‘Subjectivity in language’. This reference to Benveniste occurs when Jakobson discusses the ‘I’ specifically in terms of the indexical symbol in a grammatical sense. Citing Benveniste’s definition of the subject in language, Jakobson pronounces: ‘I means the person uttering I’ (Jakobson, ‘Shifters’ 132). With this as a basis, Jakobson goes on to claim, firstly, that the ‘I’is associated with its represented object by a conventional rule: the ‘I’is therefore asymbol. Jakobson then argues that ‘the word Idesignating the utterer is existentially related to his utterance’ (1971 [1957]: 132). The ‘I’therefore functions indexically since the word ‘I’is in existential relation with the object it represents, which in this case is the utterance. I now propose that, when uttered (that is, within the performance of speech or, by extension, writing), the indexical symbol ‘I’ that is indexically related to the utterance, is specific to the material quality of the speaking voice: the voice with what Roland Barthes calls its ‘grain’. In ‘The grain of the voice’ Barthes writes that the ‘grain’ is ‘the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs’ (1977 [1972]): 188). Through Barthes, we can appreciate how the embodied acts of speaking, writing and performing imbue speech, writing and performance with a material quality or ‘grain’ that is specific to one’s unique corporeality. Phrased differently, this ‘grain’ is an index to the body in the act of speaking, writing, performing. It follows that any embodied enactment of language generates a verbal message as a composite of indexical symbols understood in the material sense, and that the body’s ‘grain’ is intrinsic to the indexical-meaning of this message. What is more, as this material quality of voice establishes the contact between the speaker and listener of this speech event, it is likewise part of the indexical-meaning of the indexical symbols ‘I’ and ‘you’ in the instance of discourse. All of which suggests that the indexical symbols ‘I’ and ‘you’ are, in the situation of discourse, an overlap of message and code whose grammatical indexical-meaning inheres in the context and whose material indexical-meaning inheres in the contact.

Having clarified my understanding of the discursive subjects ‘I’ and ‘you’, the next question is: where do I place them? I say this bearing in mind Benveniste’s definition above: ‘Now we hold that ‘subjectivity’, whether it is placed in phenomenology or psychology, as one may wish, is only the emergence in the being of a fundamental property of language. ‘Ego’ is he who *says* ‘ego’,’ (Benveniste, ‘Subjectivity’ 224). It is important for my purposes to place my definition of subjectivity in a phenomenological context. I do so by situating an encounter between discursive subjects ‘I’ and ‘you,’ understood as indexical symbols in both the grammatical and material sense, in the political public sphere of appearance as articulated by the philosopher Hannah Arendt.

**Positioning ‘I’ and ‘you’ in the political public space of appearance**

In The Human Condition(1998 [1958]), Arendt argues that we appear in the world and to others as unique—that is, we enter into the world and, physically appearing to others, expose ourselves as unique (Arendt 1998 [1958]:178). Throughout our lives, she writes, we continue to appear physically ‘in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice’ (179). We looked above at how each voice has a unique material quality or ‘grain’ that is specific to one’s corporeality and an index of the body of the one who emits. Introducing Arendt’s argument, voice is a means whereby we physically appear in the world and to others as unique beings. Later, in The Life of the Mind (1977 [1971]), Arendt argues that all things—natural, artificial, living, dead—share in common the fact that they appear and, as such, are to be perceived by other sentient creatures. This exposed physicality constitutes the very basis of our being as relational. As Arendt notes, our entry into the world marks the point where ‘Being and Appearing coincide’, upon which she states: ‘nothing that is, insofar as it appears, exists in the singular; everything that is is meant to be perceived by somebody. Not man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the earth’ (Arendt 1977 [1971]:19). This suggests that, paradoxically, the singularity of our uniqueness hinges upon plurality since it can only be grasped in and through one’s reciprocal exposure in the realm of appearance. Following Arendt, the unique being is thus an embodied relational existent.

It is not, however, that we simply exist physically and uniquely in the world as objects; for Arendt, we actively appear to the world and to others through our actions and our speech. This begins with birth, the first human act, whereby we reveal ourselves as unique corporeal identities, and continues throughout our lives when, making our unique appearance in the world and to others, we also reveal who we are through action and speech:

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.

(Arendt1977 [1971]: 179)

Through action as well as speech, we thus disclose our unique personal identity, above and beyond our unique corporeal identity, thereby distinguishing us as human and not merely distinct objects existing in the world. Moreover, by means of our active appearance through speech and action, the subjective space between people is established. As such, Arendt argues, our physical or worldly in-between ‘is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between which consists of deeds and words and owes its origin exclusively to men’s acting and speaking directly toone another’ (Arendt1977 [1971]: 182). Arendt claims that this subjective in-between is not tangible; however, ‘for all its intangibility, this in-between is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common’ (183). Indeed, it constructs our reality insofar as the political realm emerges from this intangible space of the subjective in-between: ‘The political realm rises directly out of acting together, the “sharing of words and deeds”’ (198). As I see it, even while the subjective space of the in-between is, for Arendt, ‘intangible’, because her arguments around speech and action stem from phenomenology, Arendt’s is a politics rooted in material conditions. That is to say, we exist relationally as unique beings in a material context, the world of objects and things, while subjectively acting and interacting with others through words and deeds, thereby constituting the intersubjective realm of the political—that returns me to my understanding of the discursive speaking subjects ‘I’ and ‘you’.

Following Arendt, I now propose to understand the ‘being’ in Benveniste’s definition above, which underlies my nuanced definition of the discursive subjects ‘I’ and ‘you’, as a ‘unique being’: one who appears in the world and to others through the unique shape of body and sound of voice; who, in making this appearance, exists relationally in the world and with others. Subjectivity is the emergence in this unique being, understood as an embodied relational existent, of a fundamental property of language: the capacity to posit herself as a grammatical subject ‘I’ in an instance of discourse. Positing herself as ‘I’, she implies an address to ‘you’, thereby establishing a situation of discourse. I locate this situation of discourse within the realm of appearance—that is, a material context, the world of objects and things. Within this situation of discourse, located in a material context, two unique beings, as ‘I’ and ‘you’, appear uniquely to each other through the shape of their body and sound of their voice. Meanwhile, the ‘I’ and ‘you’, positioned relationally, become constituted as discursive subjects through a range of culturally and historically specific (that is, contextually specific) range of discursive positions available to them in any given instance of discourse. Drawing all of this together, two unique beings, taking up the positions of ‘I’ in relation to ‘you’ in the situation of discourse, are positioned grammatically in language (that is, the linguistic code), discursively through positions that are historically and culturally specific to the instance of discourse (that is, its referential context) and materially in the world and in relation to each other through the specific contact and variable distance between them generated through the material quality of voice.

Not only does all of this discussion of the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ lay the foundation for how a concept of subjectivity emerges from a theory of material poetics, it paves the way for a subjective critical approach to artworks that employ a verbal message. Toward this, I understand my own encounter with such artworks in terms of an encounter between an ‘I’ and ‘you’, where the artwork is situated as ‘I’ and I, receiving them, am situated as their site of reception, ‘you’. Employing strategies drawn from performance-writing, art-writing and site-writing, I respond to the artwork through a critical practice: a practice with its own poetics—a practice in which meaning is generated reciprocally and responsively.[{note}]4With this in mind, I offer an adaptation of Jakobson’s scheme of the speech event diagrammatically rendering an encounter between an artwork and its recipient: an extended framework that I use to situate such a subjective critical engagement with artworks at a crossover between poetry and text-based art practices, that is, artworks that practice a material poetics.

**The communication event**



The event exists, broadly, within the world of objects and things. This is the material context in which the event takes place. Within this context, the specific acts of an artwork’s generation and subsequent reception occur within a respective spatiotemporal location. The artwork is positioned as ‘I’ and the recipient as ‘you’.

The artwork’s message is a composite of symbolic signs. This message is activated by the recipient’s reception of it. I consider the generation and reception of an artwork’s message in terms of the reciprocal acts of ‘speaking’ and ‘listening’, which I place in quotation marks to denote an extended appreciation of these terms to include any embodied performance of language—for example, speaking and listening, writing and reading, gesturing and viewing.

Through these reciprocal acts of ‘speaking’ and ‘listening’ the artwork becomes operative through recourse to each of the constitutive factors of the event. One factor is the code(s), which includes—but is not restricted to—language. Another factor is the referential context, which is the world of objects and things as referred to by language. A third factor is the contact between the artwork and its recipient. The contact cultivates a physical channel, and potentially psychic connection, between the artwork and its recipient. The material qualities of an artwork, which I consider in terms of the material qualities of sign, subject and site, are located in this contact. These qualities can be considered in terms of the artwork’s ‘voice’, which I also place in quotation marks to denote an extended sense of this term. Through these material aspects, an artwork is capable of relating physically and existentially to its material context, thereby relating necessarily to the world of objects and things or, phrased differently, the political space of appearance.

**Notes**

1 This argument is taken from a larger project where I develop this theory and framework for the purposes of looking at Roni Horn’s installation Pair Object III: For two rooms (1988), Emily Dickinson’s later manuscript pages (1868–83, inclusive), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s video installation Passages Paysages(1978), Fiona Templeton’s performance installation Cells of Release(1995) and Jenny Holzer’s artists’ pages Lustmord(1993). With the theory and framework outlined here serving as a basis, I proceed to engage with each of these artworks through a method of creative critical writing based on the tenets of art-writing, site-writing and critical performance. See Kreider (2014).

2 I consider how artworks employing a verbal message are capable of contributing to contemporary ethicopolitical discourse in ‘Performing the line: Fiona Templeton’s Cells of Releaseas political activism’ and ‘The material reach of the word: Jenny Holzer’s Lustmordand the responsibility of art’, the final two chapters of Poetics and Place (Kreider 2014)*.*

3 I consider this meaningful manipulation of an artwork’s material aspects not only in terms of the sign but also in terms of site. Particularly in ‘Object, sign & (punctuating) space: An emergence of the indexical symbol through Roni Horn’s Pair Object III*:* For Two Rooms*’* and ‘The page as site: A creative and critical performance of Emily Dickinson’s later manuscripts’, the first two chapters of Poetics and Place (Kreider 2014)*.*

4 I look specifically at the implications of voice for an understanding of subjectivity in ‘Projecting the voice: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s Passages Paysages’, the fourth chapter of Poetics and Place (Kreider 2014)*.*

5 For further discussion and a full contextualization of this critical practice see the introduction to Poetics and Place (Kreider 2014)*.*

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