

Gahlberg Gallery

**Mark Booth**

*The stinging tentacles of anxiety that constrict the heart are dissolved by the healing light of an inner sun*

Thursday, March 12, to Saturday, April 11, 2009

*Mark Booth is an interdisciplinary artist who works in writing, visual art, sound art, performance and music, often in overlapping combinations. His work is rooted in an exploration of thought, language, perception and place.*

The Gahlberg Gallery/McAninch Arts Center would like to thank the artist, Mark Booth, and the writers, Christian Sheppard and Matthew Goulish, for their generous contributions and creativity in developing this publication.

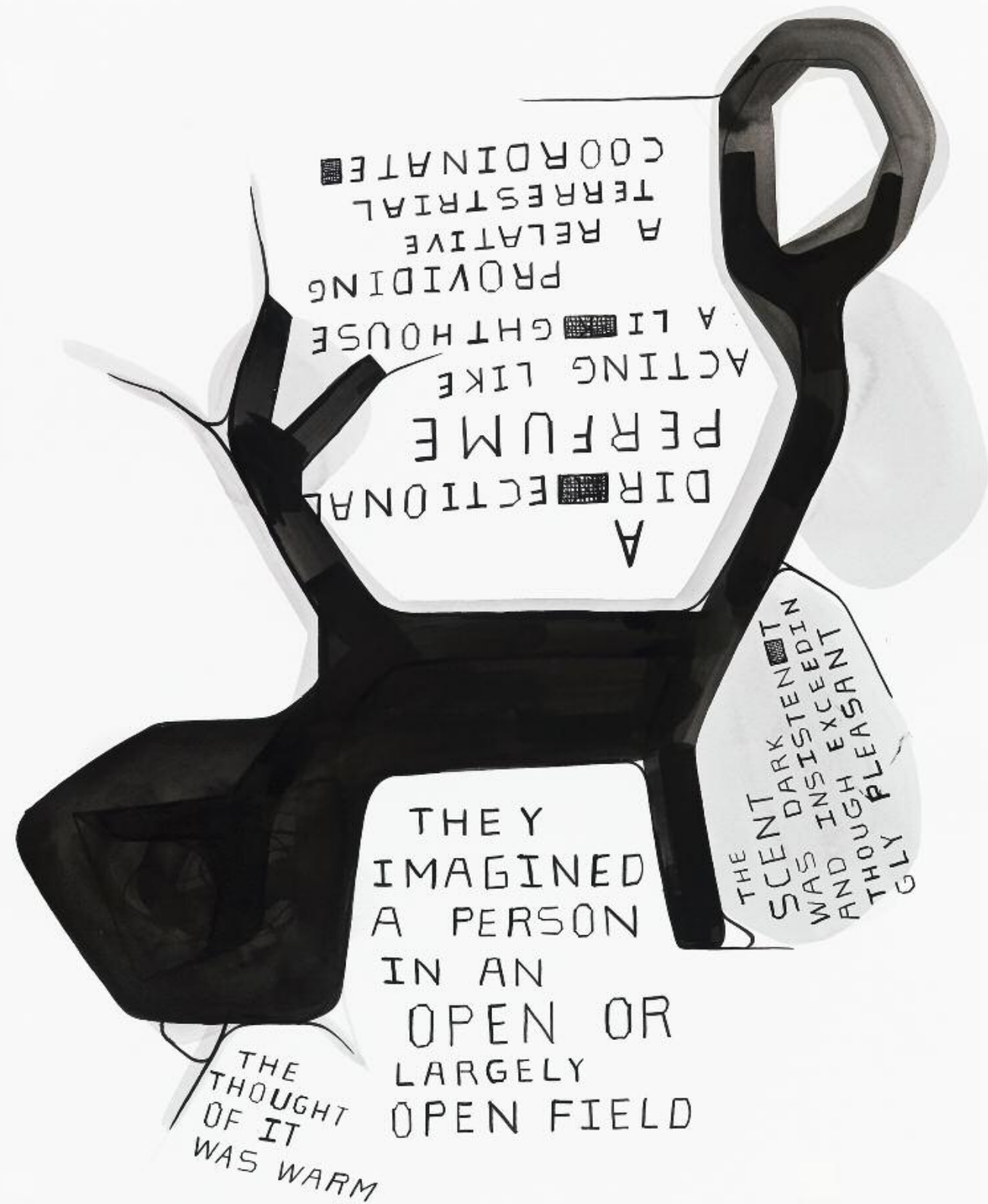
Barbara Wiesen  
Director and Curator  
Gahlberg Gallery



This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and by The National Endowment for the Arts.

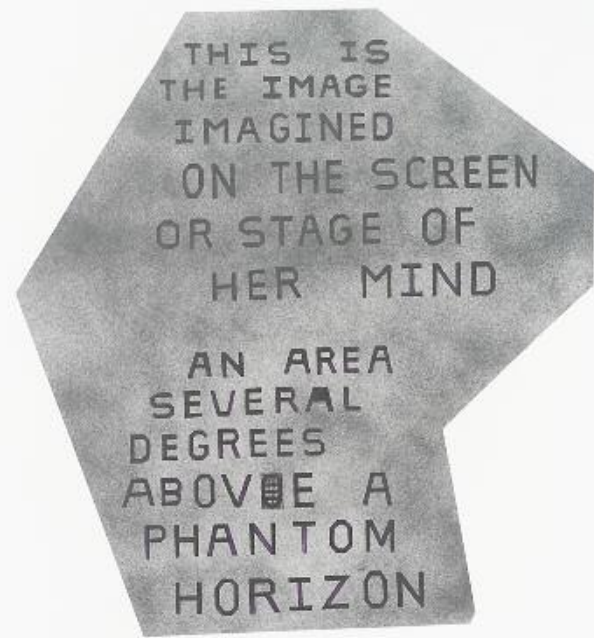
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## **Mark Booth**

*The stinging tentacles of anxiety  
that constrict the heart are dissolved  
by the healing light of an inner sun*



*This is the image imagined on the screen or stage of her mind – an area several degrees above a phantom horizon, 2008, enamel, spray paint and canvas over panel, 35" x 45"*

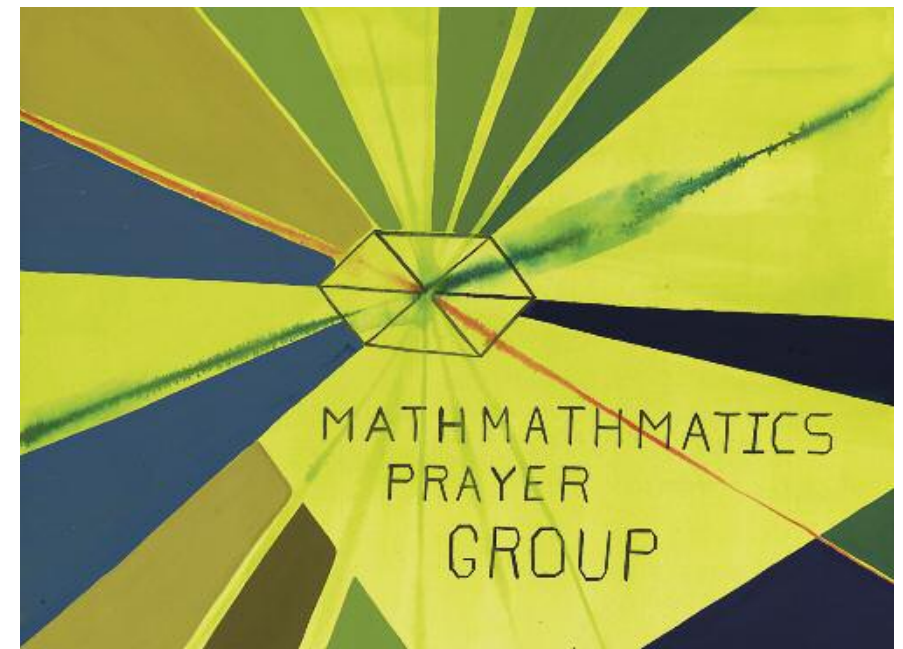
**On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Practice of Art, or Mark Booth**

Mark Booth has not read *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music* (1863) by Hermann von Helmholtz. His 2008 Weimar installation *I have not yet read* confesses as much. Titles of various books are listed on the windows of a small newspaper kiosk in the middle of the city. The kiosk, an open shelter suited for one person, is a neat, clean space of polished panes and serene green lettering. The titles listed are not those the artist has read in the past. Neither are they books he knows he will never read in the future. The kiosk

merely offers a public announcement of present inclination and happy anticipation. These are all books the artist would like to read.

Although he has not yet read *On the Sensations of Tone*, Booth's work addresses some of the same questions as the seminal scientific text. Helmholtz experimented with sound and hearing, seeking in physics and physiology an empirical foundation for what Immanuel Kant deduced as the transcendental conditions, the *a priori* givens, of all human experiencing and understanding: space, time and logical causality. (Indeed Helmholtz's groundbreaking work later inspired a young Albert Einstein's theorizing.) Booth playfully experiments with sounds, images and words, contriving audio-visual inventions that test how the given limits of space, time and logic may be taken by the imagination and made into artistic constraints. Necessity, Plato said, is the mother of invention. But for Booth's ludic imagination, natural limitations may be consciously, if comically, adopted as rules to inspire creative play. (Booth works in the tradition of the Parisian mathematico-literary group Oulipo, *Ouvrier de littérature potentielle*.) He seeks to open himself and his audience to new possibilities of aesthetic experience, especially to discover nature's beauty and our human capacity for amusement and wonder.

On logic: Since 2003, Booth has ventured into nature to make "field-recordings." He has returned with the sounds of grass, the center of the earth, odd-shaped clouds ... He also has made notes, spontaneous poems inspired by his fieldwork. The project is called *This is the sound of the Milky Way*. (Imagine a microphone proffered to the starry night sky.) His title, of course (like the project itself, methodically pursued now for years), is absurd yet, like the galaxy it points to, sublime. The formulation — "This is ..." — is a performative. As a deadpan statement referring to empty



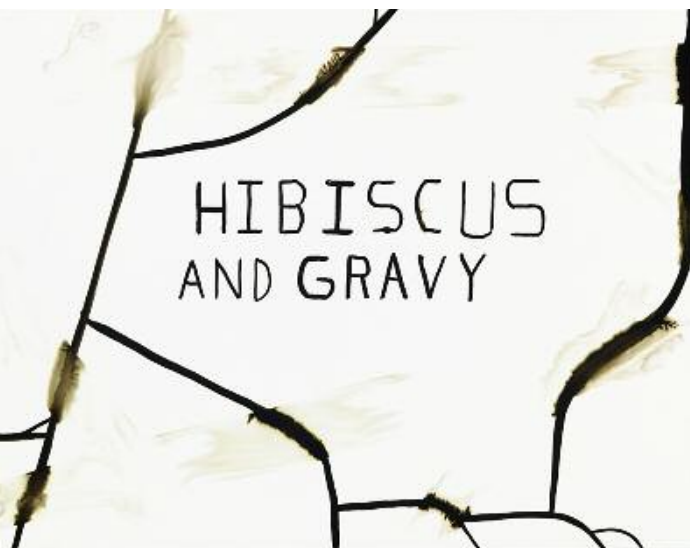
*Mathmathmatics prayer group, 2008, gouache, ink and pencil on paper, 12.25" x 16"*

ambient sound, it functions in the same way as the classic ontological interrogative "What is ...?" But rather than asking (like Plato) for a rational definition of an eternal essence or (like Kant) for a reasoned description of a transcendental condition, Booth's simple statement indicates the limits of definition, description — of denomination as such. Recording the world's reticence reveals the limits of technology as well as logic's limits. Methodically doing so uncannily reveals the illimitable powers of imagination.

On time: Booth has rendered his "fieldwork" as a sound installation, a room with three speakers, a single low-hanging light bulb illuminating a ring on the floor and, in absence of an astronomy textbook, copies of an appropriated image of the galaxy. One speaker announces "This is the sound of ..." along with what's been recorded (the functional equivalent of the sound

of one hand clapping). Another speaker plays studio recordings of Booth's spontaneously written texts. From the third speaker, a voice lists those aspects of the world Booth has yet but would still like to hear (e.g., "This is the sound of a narwhal's horn"). As at his German kiosk, Booth transforms logically proscribed limits into ludic guidelines for imagination's free play. Technology and logic are revealed as prostheses for an imagination inclined to curiosity and wonder. This hauntingly lit room of evocative voices and baffling silences invites contemplation of impossibilities and spontaneities from both the future and the past. The aim is not to transcend time, but rather to reveal the present's ever immanent potential for illumination and spontaneous creation. Staring at the white ring of light reflecting on the floor, we might suddenly, playfully repeat the refrain: "This is ... the Milky Way."

On space: See the usual white cube of a contemporary exhibition space filled with a seemingly random clutter of ink drawings on paper. They are just posted up with thumbtacks, like sketches in an artist's studio, notes in a writer's garret, data in a laboratory or announcements



*Hibiscus and gravy*, 2008, gouache, ink and pencil on synthetic paper, 9" x 12"

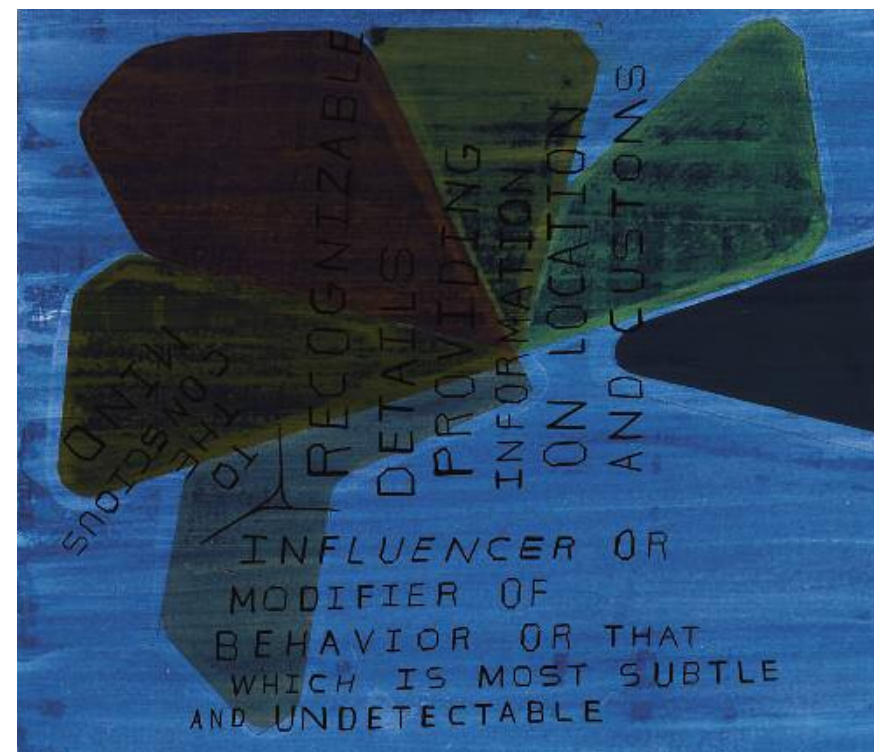
at a city kiosk. Whether for reminiscence, research or inspiration, all seems fleeting, off-hand, temporary, as if an order for it all is still being sought. On entry, black and white pictures play against designs in bold color, drawing our eyes along the wall, throwing off our sense of scale. The same antinomian, ludic, luddite spirit that contrived those other places here proves space (like time, logic, technology) relative.

On spontaneity: *Suddenly one of the carrots asked, what is crime?* was the title of Booth's 2007 drawing installation at Hudson Franklin gallery and also one of the text paintings in his 2008 installation *Endless* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. *Suddenly one of the carrots asked, what is crime?* Rather than Plato inquiring "What is ...?" suddenly it is a non-thinking vegetable that's asking. Not surprisingly, the carrot is inquiring about defying rules. Is this a real inquiry, or rather a rhetorical question, an exculpatory plea? Look at a single drawing. Carrots are good

for your eyes. These biomorphic cells, explosions of manic squiggles, at times recall zen ink drawings, at other times, a child's idle doodles. Arising from this web of lines are words and phrases, like passing thoughts or overhead bits of conversation. Booth is dyslexic but has used his condition as a fruitful artistic constraint, noting that "mistakes of the mind and the hand lead to other thoughts and possibilities ..." The letters of each word, we note, are also made of so many deliberate lines, as are the walls of each patiently traced organic cell — these now seem like comic strip boxes for talk or bubbles for thought, "What's up, doc?" And now the corners of the room, the room in which we stand here mulling over all this nonsense, is made up of so many deliberately made lines. Some of the phrases in the drawings we have to turn our heads and twist our necks to read. It could be dizzying. As if we have fallen through a microscope into the molecules that compose our own minds, we see little thoughts bubbling up from the nerves into literal letters, words and lists. The spaces we inspect here and the time we take to reflect now are all relative, relative to each of us. So the ubiquitous conditions of everyday human experience, when vivified by a certain perversely contemplative imagination, reveal radical mutability, transformations unforeseen, unplanned, but not — with the aid of Mark Booth — unprepared for. Spontaneity becomes insouciant.

— Christian Sheppard

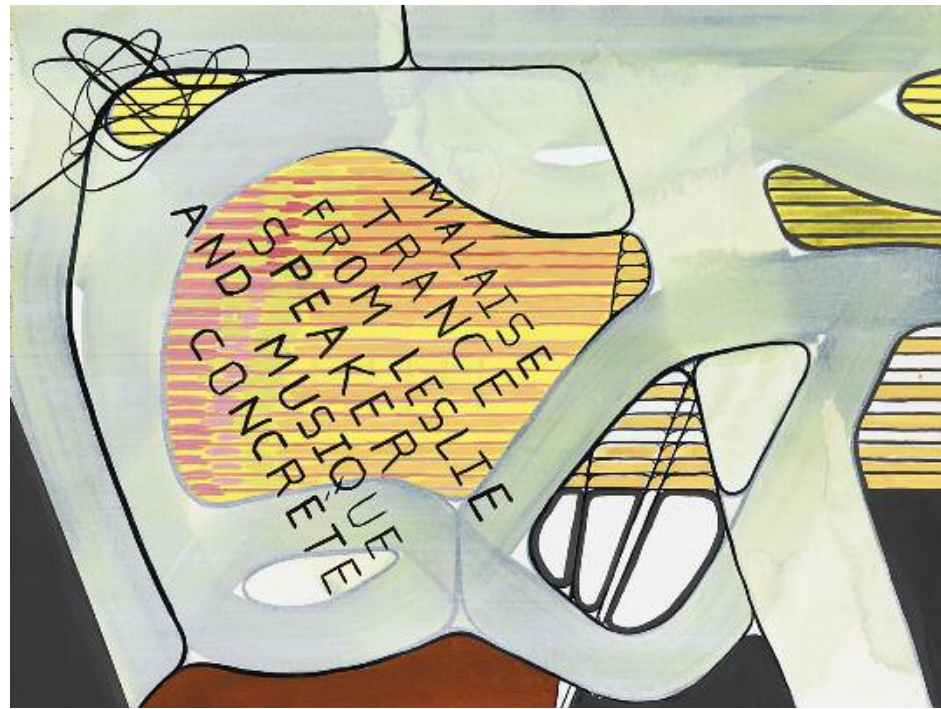
*Christian Sheppard* holds a doctorate in divinity from the University of Chicago. Co-editor of *Mystics: Presence and Aporia* (The University of Chicago Press), he has written cultural criticism for, among other places, The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, The Journal of Religion, The Chicago Review and Chicago Artists' News.



*Recognizable details providing information on locations and customs – influencer or modifier of behavior or that which is most subtle and undetectable*, 2008, gouache, ink and pencil on paper, 16" x 20"



*Harmonium solo Berlin*, 2008, gouache, ink and pencil on paper, 12.25" x 15.5"



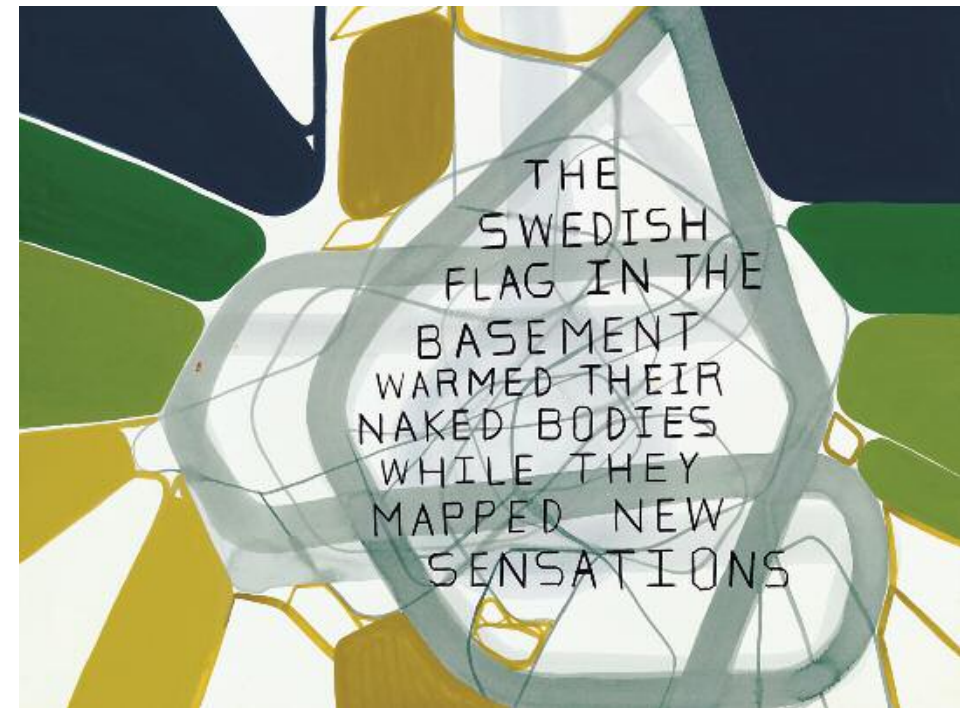
*Malaise trance from Leslie speaker and musique concrète, 2008, gouache, ink and pencil on paper, 12" x 16"*

**Human ice cubes in a disaster film**  
Mark Booth's magic words

*the weatherman practiced expressions  
of uncertainty  
cloud forms  
clod forms  
cloud forms  
clot forms  
between railway and rain there  
is raiment  
the toes cramp  
a feature length x-ray motion picture  
actors fornicating transparently  
x ray newscast  
singing signing  
and  
the rain falls later perhaps  
hoar frost  
semi-transparent  
his skeleton like a dim  
incandescent filament*

Mark Booth's text paintings resemble pages from the notebook of a medieval monastic gardener whose interfloral grafts invited accusations of sorcery. We may think of the white as the page; the black as ink; the text a caption for an impossible picture. The painted words ask us to imagine the unpainted, the unpictured, maybe the unpicturable.

Or we think of these words less as caption, less explanation, than stand-in: language substituted for image, metonymic, on the canvas where the picture could be, or where it was. Its removal left these words. *The head of the corpse was replaced with his bandoneon as per her wishes.* The phrase congeals in the place of the missing picture, with its imperative to the viewer to picture this: a graft not of contrasting plants or even foreign species, but of a merged afterlife of human and accordion. Thus we find ourselves transported to the realm of the magic word, the performative utterance that animates the inanimate and joins the unjoinable.



*The Swedish flag in the basement warmed their naked bodies while they mapped new sensations, 2008, gouache, ink and pencil on paper, 12.25" x 16.25"*

Yet before or beside what the words ask us to picture, there is the picture of the words themselves, the image of the lines that form their letters, lines like webs or fissures on whiteness: each letter a sub-unit of each word, each word a sub-unit of each phrase, each phrase a unit of language. These language clusters form and reform like clouds arrested on their way to becoming something else. Each reformulation arranges itself beside the others, and in the paratactic dyslexia of reading cloud formations, the letters trade places, words before or behind phrases, tilting on disagreeing axes. We will detect no narrative, only thought in constant remix. At this moment the accordion-head body is neighbor to *Death to the Shah*, a phrase that surfaces and submerges like a breath. The cloud in the shape of the word *cloud* becomes the cloud in the shape of the word *clod* when the bubble of *u* evaporates from its middle, before the tail of *d* thins to *t*, making *clot*, and the weatherman-poet records these expressions of uncertainty, wisps on their way to disintegration.

This is not a world of resemblance, but of exactitude. Why these words and not other words? They strike a balance between slogan and image, between extended aphorism and historical moment and distillation of weakness. The magician responsible for these spells has a weakness for legness and tentacality, for trunk of elephant, snout of anteater, prehensile tongue of giraffe – forms that elongate, that insist on a confusion of cloud and body. *A platform with legs that thrust above the sea.* This restrained confusion captures a force of language at its moments of perpetual reformation, a threshold which, were we to take it seriously, would give us vertigo, arising in the gap between endless language territories adrift like ice floes. The resonance between the shapes that the



*This is the sound of the Milky Way, 2003-2008 (installation detail), three-channel audio, loudspeakers, light, absent astronomy text, tape, and an appropriated image of the galaxy from Charles and Ray Eames.*

words imagine and those that the black outlines demarcate – outlines like those of Blake and Duchamp, of vision and delicacy – oscillates between stalactite and anatomical wax model of stomach. Interior and exterior collapse into one another: a conical pillar in a limestone cave gradually builds upward from the floor as a deposit from ground water seeping through and dripping from the cave's roof. In a limestone cavern, one encounters off-key graffiti on the journey to the center of the earth: sex and *scientology*. How may we think of this whiteness now? The spidery lines alert us to the exact white backdrop for a boyhood adventure world, the whiteness of Jules Verne, of glaciers and chalk, as if to redirect a tired world toward

a parallel universe of enchantment, through these signposts revisiting the foundations of discovery and wonder.

The question in this laboratory, where cloud becomes word becomes body, is less one of ethics (How should one live?) and more one of a deployment of imagination (How might one live? How might one enchant the world through observation?). This raises the final question: what about this undeniable humor? We find it between the phrases and within them – a humor that inheres in language, although we could not see it until the words became visible – words always formal in tone: confessional, contractual, proclamatory, annunciatory – public language samples collected and arranged. We find humor in the peculiar sensation of transubstantiation: of these shapes giving birth to these phrases, and these phrases becoming these shapes. We find it in the way *panda bear* evokes both animal and party costume in equal proportion; in the lightness of mis-animation, in the endless comic proliferation that the invocation inadvertently brings to life when two magic words are reversed. Two incompatible genres fold into one another; two gestures graft into a monstrous invention, Hieronymus Bosch stitched to Irwin Allen, a renegade vision of purgatory conjured and captured, and the fantasy of the heretic gardener is released before us, an unadorned incantation: *Human ice cubes in a disaster film*.

— Matthew Goulish

*Matthew Goulish is a performer and founding member of the Chicago performance group Goat Island, a prolific essayist, the author of 39 Microlectures in Proximity of Performance, and co-editor of Small Acts of Repair - performance, ecology and Goat Island. He teaches writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.*

*Cover: A directional perfume acting like a lighthouse providing a relative terrestrial coordinate – they imagined a person in an open or largely open field – the thought of it was warm – the scent was dark and insistent though exceedingly pleasant, 2008, ink and pencil on paper, 22.5" x 30.5"*

Artworks courtesy of the artist, Tony Wight Gallery, Chicago and Hudson Franklin Gallery, New York.

Photos by Tom van Eynde, installation detail of *This is the sound of the Milky Way* by John Sisson.