

The Effacement of Myth: A Study of the Work of Roland Barthes, Isidore Isou, François Dufrêne and Daniel Buren

Jennifer Farrell

In 1953, Roland Barthes published his celebrated text *Writing Degree Zero* in which he described the crisis facing contemporary literature.¹ Barthes's basic premise was that literature had moved from the Classical to the modern or bourgeois form. As a result, language had ceased to function as a transparent means of communication, becoming instead an object, and in this capacity, was something the modern writer was forced to confront. It was this confrontation that structured modern writing. The work of the *décollage* artist and *lettriste* poet François Dufrêne reflected a similar conception of language as object in his search for a neutral or "colorless" form of language. Dufrêne, however, did not approach his investigation solely as a theoretician, but rather as an artist and a poet who utilized the very forms he deconstructed to structure his art. Central to his visual work was the removal, or the literal effacing of "language," namely, the texts of the found posters that were the basis for his visual work. The removal and separation of text from meaning in his visual work was paralleled by the aural investigations of his poetry, which explored the liberation of language through the reinterpretation of literary devices, such as alliteration, *crirhythmes*, and other such methods, to ultimately lead to the construction of "a purely phonetic language that would eliminate all semiotic and semantic conventions."² Through the process of extinguishing language, Dufrêne had sought to reinvigorate and reinvent it and to expand the role of the artist beyond art and language to society itself. Dufrêne's work not only addressed the political, social and cultural climate of post-war France, but the paradox of what it meant—politically, artistically, theoretically—to be an artist whose work was structured by language at the very moment of its crisis, the moment when it was exposed as myth. Yet Dufrêne's work engaged language as one form of myth while using its very systems and manifestations—literature, language and writing (or what Barthes more specifically referred to as *écriture*)—to create new myths, the most extreme being the possibility of erasing language in its current, bourgeois form to create an alternative linguistic structure.

Dufrêne originally became interested in *lettrisme* through the writings of Isidore Isou, a poet, critic, and philosopher of language and art who claimed credit for the invention and development of *lettrisme*. Also known as *hypergraphie*, and *super-écriture*, *lettrisme* was a movement based on the plastic use of the letter or sign which was not to signify anything other than itself, thus transcending traditional conventions of meaning by emphasizing the figure or form of the sign of the letter over representation.

In addition to revising language, Isou proposed a radically revised history of modernism that was to be almost exclusively French, beginning with Impressionism and culminating in *lettrisme*. Aside from taking the time to settle scores with almost everyone in contemporary French arts and letters,³ Isou explained how *lettrisme* was to be fundamentally different from movements that preceded it as it represented the complete shift from figuration and abstraction to the plastic use of the symbol of letters or signs. While Isou acknowledged that some artists associated with the Bauhaus and Cubism and artists like Marcel Duchamp approached qualities of *lettrisme*, Isou declared that these artists ultimately faltered by subjecting letters to function and burdening them with meaning, rather than granting them independence and allowing them to become pure form.

According to Isou, *lettrisme* allowed a reexamination of Cubist works by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso and the witnessing of the origins, albeit the failed origins, of *lettrisme*, as Cubism did not, in his view, liberate the sign from meaning. As Isou wrote "...the important thing was not to introduce letters into painting, but to reduce the whole picture to letters, or rather, to the order of letters."⁴ Isou's complaint becomes more concrete when one compares a *lettriste* work by Dufrêne, such as *Decoration of the Reverse Side* of 1960 (Figure 1), with Picasso's *Still Life with Chair Caning* of 1912 (Figure 2). While both works possess some obvious similarities, such as a high/low dichotomy through references to quotidian existence and both possess a fractured pictorial surface

¹ Barthes published *Le Degré Zéro de l'Écriture* in 1953 although several sections were printed in the journal *Combat* in 1947, contemporary with Jean-Paul Sartre's *What is Literature?*

² Benjamin Buchloh "From Detail to Fragment: *Décollage Affichiste*" *October*, 56 (Spring 1991): 108.

³ Incurring Isou's wrath were the critics Pierre Restany and Michel Tapié

and the Informel artist Georges Mathieu, and in a footnote, Jean-Paul Sartre and Dufrêne. Although originally close to Isou, in the grand tradition of many 20th century French artistic groups, Dufrêne had recently fallen out of favor and found himself duly excommunicated and reprimanded in print.

⁴ Isidore Isou, *Le Lettrisme et l'Hypergraphie dans la Peinture et la Sculpture Contemporaines, Poésie Nouvelle*, Numéro Spécial 3 (Juillet-Août-Septembre 1961): 41.

that contains lettered forms, the fundamental critical differences become obvious when examining how language and letters function in the two works.

In a work such as *Still Life with Chair Caning*, Picasso utilized letters in the context of language; the letters carry meaning and are intended to communicate. Language, as Barthes noted, is a system common to a society, a social structure designed to communicate, structured by History, or to take it one step further, a social structure designed to communicate its very structure as representing History. It is through the use of the letters as Language that Picasso created a specific frame of reference—a Cubist illustration of contemporary Parisian café life—that could be “read” by the viewer.

In contrast, Dufrière’s works began as ready-made assemblages literally ripped from the streets of Paris. Rather than coherence, the viewer encountered fragmentation in the bits of text and letters that were reversed and isolated as plastic forms. Dufrière utilized letters and text to deny their meaning, or rather, to illustrate multiple layers of meaning, which served to negate both their individual signification and the possibility of a single text or meaning existing. His work can be read as being defined by multitudes—a multitude of meanings, texts, histories and surfaces. The posters Dufrière utilized were found objects, like Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades—banal, anonymous objects taken from the outside world, which in Dufrière’s case, meant literally from the exterior, the outside of the streets—that were recontextualized through placement in a fine art context. Yet unlike Duchamp’s “neutral,” hermetic presentation of pristine mass-produced objects, Dufrière’s posters reflected a history—their own—through their ripped and torn surfaces.

To return to the comparison with *Still Life with Chair Caning*, Picasso’s work is a collage, taken from the word *coller* referring to the act of pasting, gluing or sticking, while Dufrière’s work was part of the *décollage* movement, literally meaning to unstick, to unglue, to dissolve the bond.⁵ However, it is in the less common definitions that the meanings of the two words may become clearer, as *coller* also means to adhere closely to, while *décoller* means to loosen, disengage or release. These second definitions can be read not only as referring to the literal processes, but to the principles that structured the two movements. Collage refers to the construction, the piecing together of disparate elements to reference a whole, albeit a fragmented whole, and can be read as an attempt to create a new form of realism. The letters “JOU” written across the canvas adhered to the approved definitions, usage and requirements of language, such as possessing visibility, clarity, and providing a connection between a sign and its meaning. However, *décollage* works involved not only the physical disengagement of the posters from their support and their rever-

sal and subsequent release from a functional context, but also the liberation of language from its primary functions—communication and the conveyance of information.

As Robert Rosenblum has noted, the letters “JOU” play a critical role in *Still Life with Chair Caning*.⁶ With these letters, Picasso not only references “le Journal,” but also evokes “jour” or day, referring to the eternal present, both the present of the daily newspaper and of the work. The fact that elements can be read as references to quotidian café life illustrates the fact that the canvas is organized in order to be read, to convey a meaning. The work then, is one that engages, one that appears waiting to be deciphered, like an envelope ready to be opened, or a riddle awaiting an answer. The “jou” could also be read as referencing “jouer,” to play, referring to the act of decoding, the ultimate game of the collage. Indeed, “jouer à quelque chose” means to play at something, “faire jouer quelque chose” means to bring something into motion, in this case, the act of deciphering, whereas “jouer quelqu’un” means to simulate or to deceive, as does “tromper,” as in “trompe l’oeil,” which the collage clearly is. To further elaborate and stress the connection, “jouer sur les mots” means specifically to play with words, the game that drives the collage. The fact that there are endless word associations invoked by “jou” is itself the point, as the work is always, in a sense, in the present and able to be read on many levels, able to enter into a dialogue, or rather a game, with the viewer. The latter point is a critical distinction for it stresses the fundamental importance of interaction with the viewer, since it is ultimately the viewer who structures the work.

By the 1950s, collage was no longer a revolutionary form. As Benjamin Buchloh noted, collage never reached the utopian potential Léo Malet had anticipated. Instead, it had become a recycled avant-garde strategy that had long since ceased to be oppositional. However, there was still radical potential in using something from the street, something found in daily life such as the debased fragments of commercial culture that the *décollagists* used. In addition, the *décollage* artists did not merely incorporate quotidian debris into their work, rather, as Buchloh has noted, they relocated their site of production from the studio to the street.

Unlike Picasso’s *Still life with Chair Caning*, Dufrière’s posters already existed in the world in a specific location—that of the street—where they had a particular context and audience. In the art gallery, the posters were decontextualized and would encounter a different audience. A critical difference would divide the art audience from the original audience, who had encountered the posters on the street, before they became art, when they were merely text, or rather, a series of texts. This audience—vast, formless, and essentially anonymous (although socio-economic levels were always

⁵ As Benjamin Buchloh notes, the term *décollage* was invented in the 1930s by the second-generation Surrealist, Léo Malet, considered a predecessor to many *décollagists*. Paradoxically, Malet wrote a utopian account of collage as the new art form occurring in public spaces throughout the city. Buchloh 105.

⁶ For a detailed and early account on Picasso’s use of text in collage and *papier collé*, see Robert Rosenblum “Picasso and the Typography of Cubism,” eds. John Golding and Robert Penrose, *Picasso in Retrospect, 1881-1973* (New York: Praeger, 1973).

present, determining the production and the placements of such texts)—encountered the work as part of their daily routine, and it was for this audience that the posters were originally created. In such a context, the piece need not say “jouer” to invoke the quotidian since the work was not merely composed of the everyday, but literally was the everyday. The second audience was an elite who encountered the work not on the street but in the rarefied environment of the art institution where the posters were decontextualized, reversed, effaced, framed and presented not as “texts” (which had been literally erased) but as “works,” specifically works of art.

While the original text of *Decoration of the Reverse Side* was essentially rubbed out and negated by tears, rips, glue stains, layering and scratching, some letters are discernable in the bottom corner. In contrast to the faint outlines of the ghostlike forms of the colored letters, are letters written in fine script spelling “fdufrêne” as in François Dufrêne, the artist of the work.⁷ Although Picasso’s hand may be visible in the overlapping planes, the arrangement of forms, the shimmering brushstrokes, and the stenciled lettering, he did not add those letters that would claim the piece as his own, thus he conferred an anonymity on his clearly manufactured work. By signing the work, Dufrêne claimed it and essentially negated the anonymous collaborative process that located the work in opposition both to the commodified spectacle and to the precious studio creation.

Dufrêne’s posters reflect an alternate history—the history of exposure—in their archeological appearance which reveal the physical passage of time through faded colors, torn paper, rough edges, staining from changing weather conditions, abrasions and the stains of graffiti from anonymous passerbys—which Dufrêne peeled away, layer by layer, like an onion. As Buchloh noted, the posters also represented a form of nostalgia as the location and mode of advertising represented in the work (literally, as the work) had already changed, with advertisers abandoning the city for the private realm of television, radio and magazines. Therefore, the process of placement, of encounter, and of vandalism within the city had already changed, making the posters more of an artifact than a contemporary production. A connection can thus be seen between an outmoded form of advertising and an archaic concept of language. The literal ripping, removing, reversing and subsequent display of the posters can be viewed as an embalming of a corpse, paralleling what Barthes called “the crowning achievement of this creation of Literature as Object, and this by the ultimate of all objectifying acts: murder. For we all know that the whole effort of Mallarmé was exerted towards the destruction of language, with Literature reduced, so to speak, to being its carcass.”⁸ In contrast to

Picasso’s collage, the posters reflect the past and simultaneously allude to the perpetual future promised by advertising, while references to the present are absent. It is in this schism, between the history of the object, the promise for the future, and the present encounter that a tension exists which can be said to structure the work.

In *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes wrote of the crisis of literature that began around 1850 when the writer encountered the “problematics” of language and “when Literature (the word having come into being shortly before) was finally established as an object.”⁹ Barthes established the categories of *Language*, referring to the common, social usage that was structured by History, or style (which Barthes noted “is never anything but metaphor”), and *écriture*, which could encompass art and writing. *Écriture* would play a critical role in the establishment of a new form as it offered a solution, a way to transgress the confining history of Language and the personal nature of style. In *écriture* the writer found freedom and a reprieve from style and from the public form of Language. For Dufrêne, the liberation of *écriture* was found not in writing but in the act of erasing, the literal rubbing out and negating, which served to ultimately fold meaning back in on itself to reveal Language as being merely empty forms.

Barthes began *Writing Degree Zero* by dividing writing into specific stages: “the object of a gaze, then of creative action, finally of murder, and...a last metamorphosis, absence” ideally resulting in “neutral modes of writing ... ‘the zero degree of writing.’”¹⁰ The question then becomes what happens after the last stage, after language has been removed and History denied, when the letters and words carry no meaning other than their own. The “neutral, colorless writing,” called *l’écriture blanc* by Jean-Paul Sartre, or the “the zero degree of writing” by Barthes represented a utopian state, a myth Barthes created to replace the myth of Literature, where “it is now writing which absorbs the whole identity of a literary work.”¹¹

Dufrêne searched for a similar state, one in which poetry would be reduced to pure phonetics and visual art reduced to erased bits of found text turned inside out and where meaning itself would be erased and language simply reduced to empty plastic forms. Yet although the forms were emptied, their very invocation was essential to the work as they provided proof of denied meaning. Like Mallarmé, Dufrêne was still held to the conventions of Literature, even if it was, as Barthes declared, in order “to produce a carcass.”

In contrast, Daniel Buren’s work appears to be more closely aligned with Barthes’s conception of a zero degree art. Buren attempted to create a new form of art, one in which the conventions of Art, such as aesthetics, would be erased and the work allowed to achieve a state of neutrality or “pure form.”

⁷ It is interesting to note that Dufrene’s name itself can be read as having two meanings. The signature then, has the potential to be another example of word play, similar to the numerous Duchampian puns involving either his own or fictitious names.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968) 5.

⁹ Barthes 3.

¹⁰ Barthes 5.

¹¹ Barthes 85.

In Buren's work, the stripes—his “visual tool” employed since 1965—act as a code, providing a flow of information, such as the name of the artist if one recognizes Buren's “signature” or “visual tool,” but not meaning. As the works are *in situ*, specific to particular places and contexts, their setting acts as a “frame” to increase awareness of the conditions under which culture is presented and processed. Rather than imparting a particular meaning or message, the stripes act as conveyors of information, allowing multiple simultaneous meanings. Essentially, the works are “open,” a description based on Umberto Eco's 1962 text *The Open Work*, in which he wrote that “Certain forms of communication demand meaning, order, obviousness....Others, instead, seek to convey to their readers sheer information, an unchecked abundance of possible meanings.”¹²

As the works provide information as opposed to a message, viewers are able to construct meaning based on information perceived. Experiencing one of Buren's *affichages sauvages* (Figure 3) from a distance, one may not be able to distinguish them from advertisements until one notices a lack of text, a lack of photographs, a lack of product. After acknowledging what they are not (perhaps still wondering what they “are”), one is able to examine how the works interact with the posters and messages beneath them, the wall or kiosk on which they are placed, the location and conditions in which they are being viewed. Being an open work, the work is a field of possibilities and, ultimately, the more information provided, the more ambiguous the message.

Yet although Buren's works are read as neutral, the visual equivalent of *l'écriture blanc*, Buren's “tool” is instantly recognizable, having kept the same basic format (vertical stripes 8.7 cm in width) since 1965. Simultaneously anonymous and a signature, his works evoke the death of the author although the author is very much present, particularly when the visual works are viewed in relation to his writings. As Jean-François Lyotard has noted, Buren's writings act as the frame for his work, and it is through the writings that the works can be viewed.¹³

The work of Buren and Dufrêne thus expose the impossibility of achieving a state of pure form and ultimately the myth of creating “a colourless writing, freed from all bondage to a pre-ordained state of language.”¹⁴ Buren and Dufrêne, in fact, can be read as showing the ultimate fallacy of a “degree zero,” a state which Barthes himself acknowledged as myth. Yet as Susan Sontag has noted “myth doesn't mean that a concept (or argument or narrative) is false. Myths are not descriptions but rather models for description (or thinking).”¹⁵ The failure to attain a pure state of literature and the subsequent lapse into myth should not be read as a failure per se, for myths serve a powerful function. Therefore, while “degree zero” can never be attained, it is in the struggle, the tension between the search for an emerging form and a mourning of the older, outdated forms that perhaps new forms, new constructions and ultimately new myths may be created.

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¹² Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989) 93-4.

¹³ See Jean-François Lyotard “The Works and Writings of Daniel Buren, an Introduction to the Philosophy of Contemporary Art,” *Artforum*, 19 (February 1981).

¹⁴ Barthes 76.

¹⁵ Sontag, Preface, *Writing Degree Zero*, xx.



Figure 1. François Dufrêne, *Decoration of the Reverse Side*, 1960, poster on canvas, 185 x 155 cm. © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

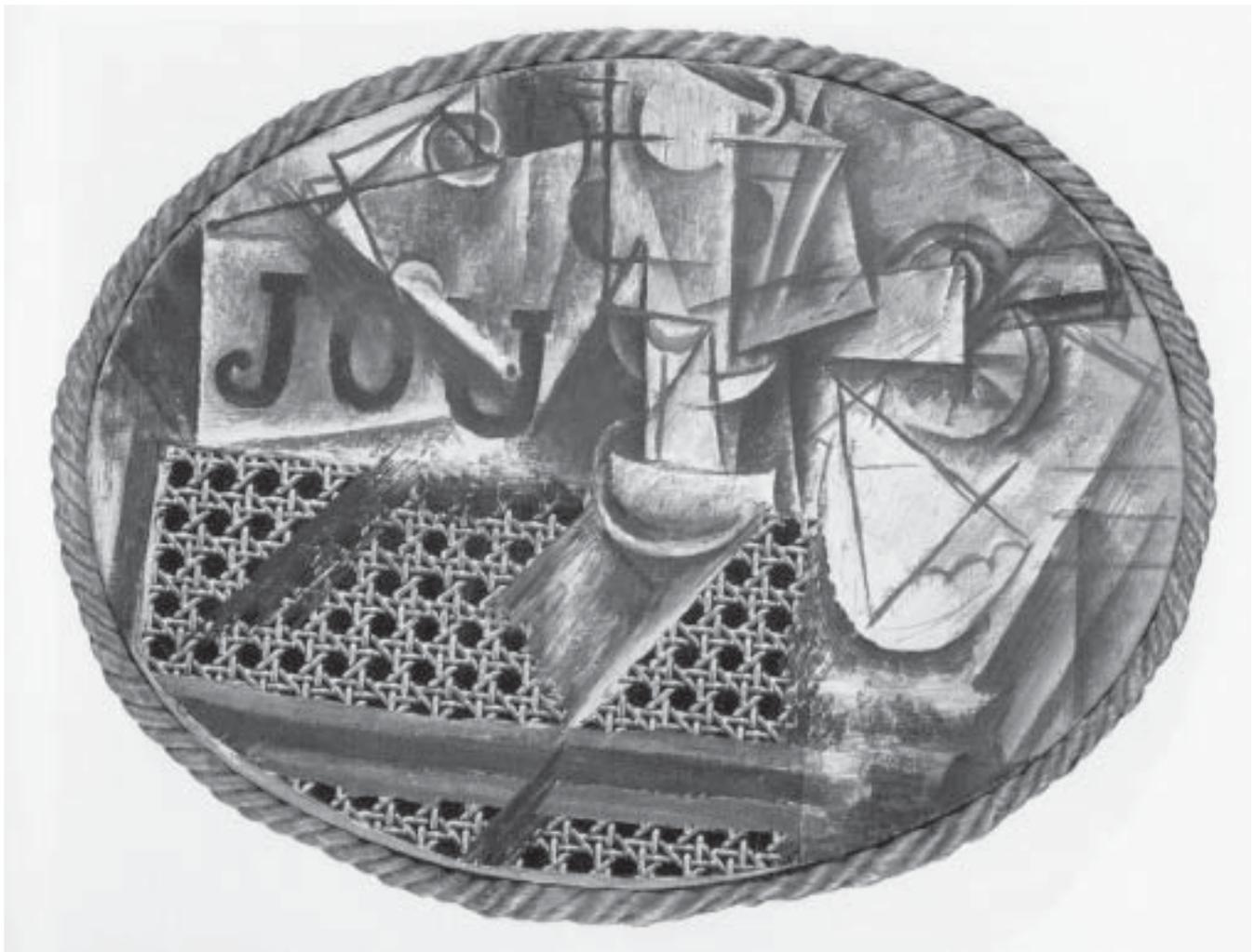


Figure 2. Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair Caning*, May, 1912, collage of oil, oilcloth, and pasted paper on canvas surrounded by rope. © 2003 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Figure 3. Daniel Buren, *Affichage Sauvage*, work in situ, Paris, April 1968. © 2003 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.