

CHAPTER FOUR

Infinite code: clocks, calendars, numbers, music, scripts

In his novel, *The Unnamable*, Samuel Beckett creates a first person voice floundering with questions of identity, voice, and knowledge. Perplexity empties this character of all but “the voices and thoughts of the devils who beset me” (Beckett, 1994[1951], p. 350). Beckett’s readers cannot escape pervasive perplexity.

Is there a single word of mine in all I say? No, I have no voice, in this matter I have none. That’s one of the reasons I confused myself with Worm. But I have no reasons, either no reason, I’m like Worm, without voice or reason, I’m Worm, no, if I were Worm I wouldn’t know it, I wouldn’t say it, I wouldn’t say anything, I’d be Worm. But I don’t say anything, I don’t know anything, these voices are not mine, nor these thoughts, but the voices and thoughts of the devils who beset me. (p. 350)

Hallucination, for Lacan, is not a perception without an object; rather, the object has an effect on the subject who experiences it as external, yet intimate and deeply puzzling. What invades the mind as a voice or presence is strange and foreign, inescapable, a part of oneself and yet not oneself, ejected from meaning. The effect is perplexity. Here is a message; what is the code needed to grasp it?

Language changes in psychosis. Words become the floating signifiers of a mad Other who takes up a place in speech. Speech elements connect to nothing, have no meaning whatsoever, and disrupt the meaning that was unfolding. These elements, whether heard or spoken, drawn or written, are foreign to the speaker, and create a profound sense of disorder with respect to speaking.

She cannot find her place in language. He questions if his thoughts are actually his, and concludes they are not. How is it possible then to orientate oneself in language? Language becomes a puzzling body of signs, bewildering signs without a code or key. Artists in psychosis make clocks, calendars, numbers, music, and scripts, the infinite unfolding of code, emerging incandescent alphabets.

August Natterer, the artist of *The Miraculous Shepherd* in Chapter Three, envisioned “the clock of the world running backward”, and said of it, “since the clock of the world is running down and going backward, its hands are always running forward in order to delude the people of the disorder of the works inside” (Prinzhorn, 1972[1922], p. 161). While the clock of the world is running backwards (revealed knowledge), the clock hands run forward to “delude the people about disorder of the works inside” (and only the subject knows this). Time, like language, does not work. Something Other creates disorder in time (Image 19).

And what to do with time then? Order it.

Prinzhorn (1972[1922]) comments, “Neter [Natterer] claimed that the whole picture [*World Axis and Rabbit*] has predicted the World War—he had known everything in advance, including the end of the war” (p. 168). Prinzhorn adds, “Everything he says and does betrays a certain discipline, an almost objective logic, in practical matters as well as the delusional system” (p. 162).

A delusional system creates an order, but delusion itself is subjected to destabilising *new* foreign speech elements in psychosis. In this sense, delusion is always a work in progress.

Lacan argued that delusion is not a false belief, because it is not a belief at all. Delusion is built under a new order of linguistic elements. Some speech elements are foreign to the speaker yet perceived as *significant*; they are not evaluated as personal beliefs at all. These elements float, without reference to other meanings, as *autonyms* (Vanheule, 2011). Since they are *revealed* to the subject and come as elements outside her own beliefs, she cannot question whether *or not* to believe them.

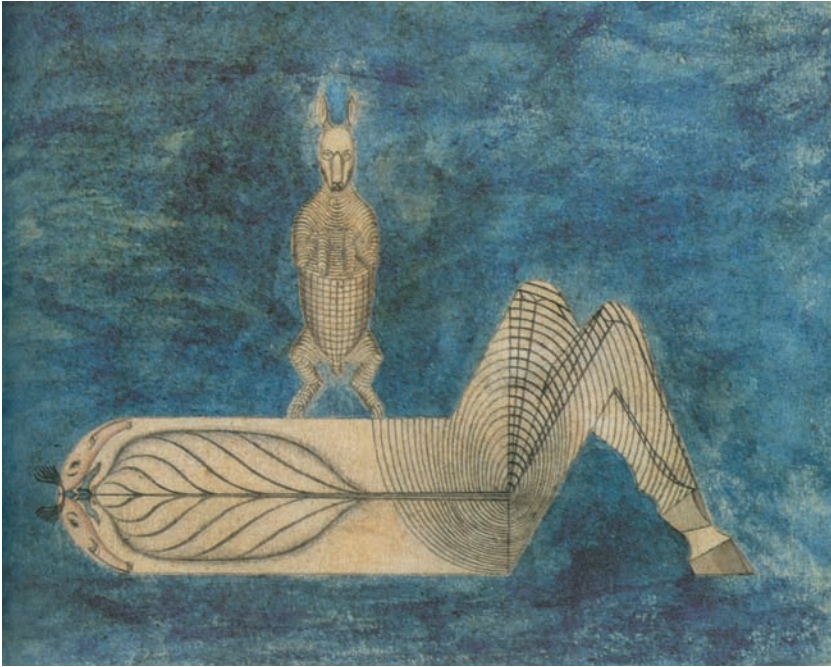


Image 19. August Natterer (pseudonym Neter), *World Axis and Rabbit*, 1911, Inv. No.157. © Prinzhorn Collection, University Hospital Heidelberg.

In the face of such a pervasive change in language, the psychotic subject, confounded by non-sense, begins to create a proto-order with connotations of a linguistic order. The proto-order, however, does not signify the position of the subject, what she thinks or feels or wants or knows.

Lacan observes that the psychotic experiences a negative form of the imposed speech elements; suddenly there is no thought, no word, as if one's very thoughts have been stolen. When God withdraws from Schreber, he is at a complete loss, and turns to counting. To count is to restore a working metonymy, a form of signification that orders time, sequences, or elements.

Does this order not signify the position of the subject with respect to what is happening to him, if we could only render it readable?

Yet, as I look at these works that depict ordering systems, they read as private codes (Image 20).



Image 20. Joseph Heinrich Grebing, *Untitled*, before 1920, Inv. No. 624/12.
© Prinzhorn Collection, University Hospital Heidelberg.

Joseph Grebing was a Catholic shopkeeper, committed in 1906 to the Heidelberg Psychiatric Clinic, his diagnosis *dementia praecox*.

He made colour charts, chronologies, and a calendar of executioners and murderers. All around him was danger. He tried to grasp it with an all-embracing cosmological system.

Ironically, Grebing *was* in danger; he was taken and killed by the Nazis in 1940, as were many others living in asylums at that time.

Grebing made sheets of numbers and letters in different coloured inks, crossed out some tiny part at the bottom, and began again.

I picture him, making and remaking these sheets, making and destroying, chasing a code (Image 21).

“The ultimate abstract expression in every art remains the number” (Kandinsky, quoted in Morgenthaler, 1992[1921] p. 105).

You don’t have to be a mathematician to have a feel for numbers. The relation to numbers is not necessarily scientific, and even when I was mentally disturbed, I had a lot of interest in numbers.

I got the idea that I would receive a message somehow. Later on I felt that I might get a divine revelation by seeing a certain number

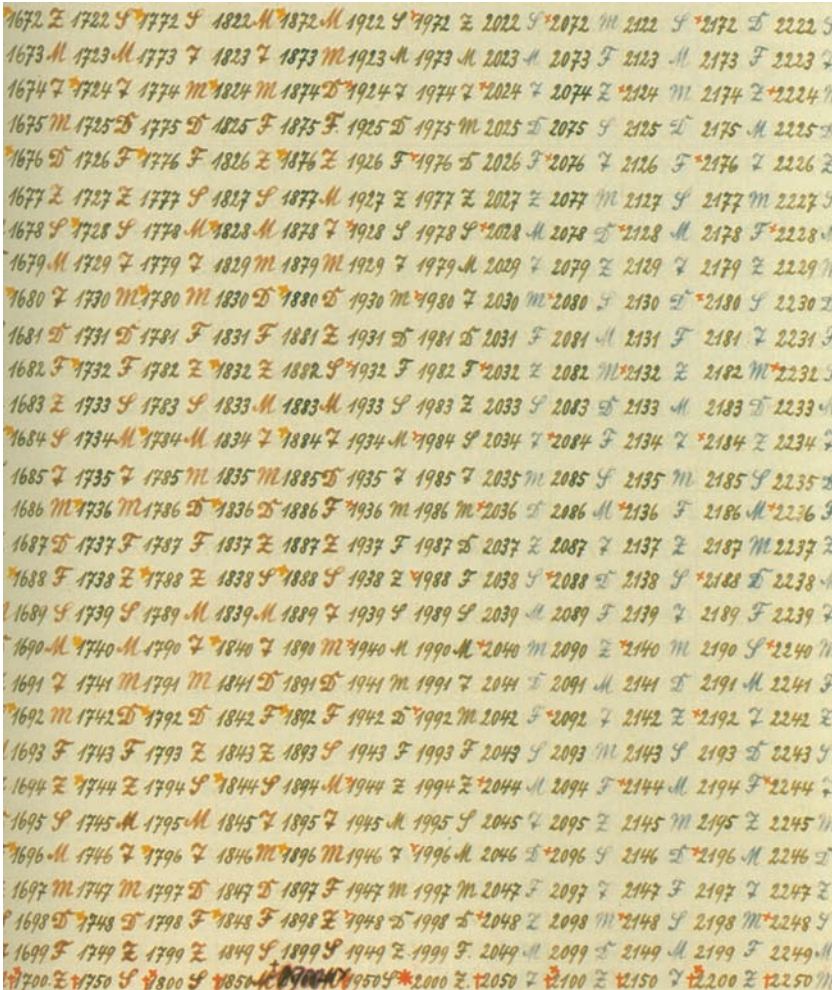


Image 21. Joseph Heinrich Grebing, *Untitled*, undated, Inv. No. 624/6 recto.
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that would appear. (John Nash, www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/nash/sfeature/sf_nash.html)

Image 22 shows pages from Grebing's *Notebook*.

As I look at Grebing's notebook, I think of a code unfolding without a key; it speaks of order, a scheme made of numbers, letters, and little drawings. Joseph Grebing created handmade notebooks, filled

The dislocation of the translation, the imperfect art of making a distorted mark . . . Nur manchmal schiebt der / Vorhang der Pupille / sich laulos auf—On the sheet below you try, “Just now the pupil’s noiseless shutter is lifted;” “only sometimes when the pupil’s film is soundlessly lifted;” or you try, “yet at times, all noiseless, the pupil seems unveiled . . . At times the effort of translation seems to come too much to the front. (Kentrledge, 2014, p. 153)

I worked to translate what streamed through me—voices speaking messages I could not decipher. Yet, I was obligated to record them and use them. The marks on the page spoke back to me differently, depending on whether they were arranged on a horizontal or vertical axis. On a vertical, they spoke omens of the future. On the horizontal, they read backwards, working as time machines to transport humanity into the past. I was trying to make “celestial language”: a code all humans could speak, all nations and peoples, for all time. I had no idea that a translation is a version, a betrayal of its original. I thought I was making a facsimile of what I was hearing, which, after all, made no sense. This translation was never finished. If anyone had asked how it worked as language, I could not have said. I worked on this language, if it can be called a language, from age sixteen until I was twenty-nine (Images 23a,b).

Writing involved “translation” of what I heard, but the translation was *given* to me, not invented by me. What I have shown here is a reconstruction; I no longer have access to what I wrote. The characters in my notebooks once spoke to me, an auditory experience of hearing and responding to language in ordered pieces, because I could not sustain a continuous flow of ideas.

In psychosis, perception of speech changes how one actually hears, as is evident in the following speech of a schizophrenic patient:

When people talk to me now it’s like a different kind of language. It’s too much to hold at once. My head is overloaded and I can’t understand what they say. It makes you forget what you’ve heard because you can’t get hearing it long enough. It’s all in different bits which you have to put together again in your head – just words in the air. (Lawson et al., 1964, p. 375).

The attention of listeners is not drawn to the sounds of speech in themselves but rather to the meanings conveyed by them and which they



Image 23a. Annie Rogers, *Celestial Alphabet*, watercolour, stamped letters and pen on paper.

serve, in a sense, to deliver. It seems that, in listening to speech, our awareness penetrates through the sound to reach a world of verbal meaning beyond. And by the same token, that world is absolutely silent—as silent, indeed, as are the pages of a book. In short, whereas sound is the essence of music, language is mute. How do we come to have this peculiar view of the silence of language, or, for that matter, of the non-verbal nature of musical sound? (Ingold, 2007, p. 6)

In psychosis, it seems that language and music change places. In the place of silently scanning words and sentences to find the



Image 23b. Annie Rogers, *Celestial Alphabet*, watercolour, stamped letters and pen on paper.

meanings others also may hear and converse about, one is lost in language and sometimes cannot follow what is said. It is not possible to keep track of plausible meanings unfolding in a sentence. What then? Rather than listening to language as mute, language becomes musical, a series of sounds addressed to the listener and filled with significance. One searches in vain for a lost code that will scan, deliver meaning to language as enigma. To find such a code, one must create language, or notations, of another order. Here is Walter Morgenthaler, a psychiatrist, writing about his patient, Adolph Wölfli:

Our patient makes music by blowing into horns, which he makes out of thick paper bags . . . His musical notation takes two different forms: either he traces the lines of the staff (most often six) and fills them with the correct notes and bar lines, sharps, rests, clefs, and so on, or he writes out the notes with letters of the alphabet and indicates the meter by doubling the letters, underlining once or twice, crossing things out, and adding sharps and exclamation marks. Whether this alphabetical notation could be realized, I do not know. No one but the patient can read it correctly. (Morgenthaler, 1992[1921], pp. 54–55)

Wölfli, a patient at the Waldau Clinic in Bern, Switzerland from 1885 to 1930, believed he was immortal, despite dying many times. Walter Morganthaler learnt that when Wölfli “died” he was always revived. He created a cosmology to depict where and how he would live after his death:

In my own All-Powerful-Giant-Grand-Hall-of-St.-Adolf, all the gigantic crowds of gods, goddesses, and inhabitants of the most diverse and varied congregations, as soon as the festivities for my reception are completed, on numerous Transparent-Giant-Lightening-Butterflies, Birds and ditto, Snakes, to the other stars . . . (Morganthaler, 1992[1921], p. 48)

Images 24 and 25 are by Wölfli.

Wölfli creates a cosmology comprising spirals and musical notes in *Comet St. Adolph*, a wonderful juxtaposition of the endless time of circles and the specific time of music. In *The Poor Sinners' Stairway in St. Adolph-Summit*, Wölfli's numbers, writing, and repeating forms around the seven figures, which look uncannily alike, dominate the image. Wölfli's drawings fill the page, perhaps an aversion to empty spaces in his work. Morganthaler comments, “This *horror vacui* was already present in the first drawings we know” (Morganthaler, 1992[1921], p. 65).

Perhaps it is necessity to keep going, to fill the page, as a solution to words/thoughts/elements of speech that vanish suddenly, as if stolen or swept away by an outside force. Such moments erase all subjectivity, as if one is dead, a ghost, unable to think, speak, act, or breach a void in meaning in any way. Whatever code Wölfli is working out, it is full, repetitious, and commands his days for decades. His art encompasses letters and words, musical notation and numbers. It has no gaps, no blanks, and yet he cannot explain how it works, and neither does he claim this art as a subject of his own experience. Morganthaler remarks that it is not uncommon to hear him assert that it is not he himself who invents all his pictures. Instead, he has drawn by divine order during his trips through the universe. Wölfli exclaims, “Do you really think I could just make this all up in my head?” (Morganthaler, 1992[1921], pp. 23–24).

The psychotic subject, however, might succeed in establishing a new subjective position by adopting speech elements or autonoms that have been imposed, using them to identify a meaningful task, mission, or purpose. In this way, building delusion not only works to



Image 24. Adolf Wölfli, *Komet St. Adolph/Comet St. Adolph*, 1916, pencil and coloured pencil on paper, 53.0 x 42.7 cm.
© Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts Bern, Switzerland.

stabilise the experience of psychosis, but also to create a new position for the subject.

This subjective position could include making new language, what I call *incandescent alphabets*, but the language will be idiosyncratic, and



Image 25. Adolf Wölfli (1864–1930). *Die Armsünder=Treppe in Skt. Adolf=Höhn/ The Poor Sinners' Stairway in St. Adolf-Summit*, 1914. Geographic and Algebraic Books, Book 12, p. 217. Pencil and coloured pencil on paper, 99.6/100.1 x 71.8/72.2 cm.
© Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Museum of Fine Arts Bern, Switzerland.

the code to understand it, or to make it work, will not function as a system of language (with multiple meanings, nuances, and possible interpretations shared by others) so much as a code. As a combinatory new system, the elements must always mean *one thing*, if combined or calculated correctly. The elements and their combinations are not open to question or to interpretation *outside of the code itself*. The code reinstates the logic of the autonoms—it is complete, even as it emerges, and cannot be questioned.

August Klett created such an alphabet and language. He had been a wine and champagne merchant, but became increasingly eccentric, withdrew to his bed, and lacerated his abdomen with a knife. Inside the Heidelberg Asylum, he was lost to his hallucinations. Then he began to draw and write. He created a “colour alphabet” of letters and numbers in 1905 that he sent to his uncle for use in his dyeing business. Here is a tiny part of the alphabet: “1A = England = red, red beets; 4d = sunlight yellow = road dust coloured; 14 o = white as day, Austria-Hungary; 20 u = Green = frog = Russia . . .” (Prinzhorn, 1972[1922], p. 133) (Image 26).

I have taken the liberty of turning this image on its side so that we can see what dominates the face is the order inscribed into the profile,



Image 26. August Klett (Pseudonym Klotz), *Worm Holes*, 1919, Inv. No. 568. © Prinzhorn Collection, University Hospital Heidelberg.

repeating worms with human heads, and human heads inside the rounded shapes of worm holes. As though the drawing were not enough, Klett created a language in which words were combined to make new words, elements devoid of meaning except, perhaps, that they spoke to Klett himself. The words form a code: an order constructed through dashes, parentheses, word combinations, a few numbers, and equal signs: "Worm holes (bath faces) worm paths (piano-musicstickteeth) worm strong (spitbathlife of the archlyregallery-tintimlier-reflections: ad mothersugarmoon in the sevensaltnosewater . . ." (Prinzhorn, 1972[1922], p. 142).

Klett's art and writing might well serve as an elaborate code for an experience that continued to be imposed on him. Is this work, as Prinzhorn suggests, "an endless, aimless, somehow enjoyable game" (p. 143), or is it a serious effort to reinstate order and a subjective position within that order? I do not know, but I think it is possible that Klett was making a code as a life work; and perhaps that code gave him a place and a purpose after hallucinations had taken from him his place in the world, and his purpose among others.

What of the illegible writing of psychotics? Is this work a language that can be read, an open, uncodified script, or it does it mean something very particular to the writer that others cannot read or discern? Whatever it is, whether illegible, or barely legible, or privately legible, writing scribbles and scripts around and within drawings seems to be one of the signatures of psychotic art. I wonder if these artists were actively experimenting with the unknown, that edge of the unreadable in language? Currently, writers and artists use the term "asemic writing" to refer to experimental writing that has no semantic content (Jacobson & Gaze, 2013). Josiah McElheny (2013) summarises the forms adopted by Emily Dickinson (using pieces of envelopes to shape her poetry) and by Robert Walser (who wrote in tiny script in pencil on found scraps):

Ephemeral works on paper that are gorgeous and mysterious, they are hybrid forms that speak about the situational specificity of language and the tension between word as representation and word as specific object . . . they also contain drafts of texts that are fantastic in any format. (McElheny, 2013, p. 51)

I cannot think of a better way to describe the work of the next three artists-writers.

Writing: scripts and scribbles

I know very little of these three artists–writers. The first is Barbara Suckfüll (Image 27), who was a farmer’s wife living at the Werneck Asylum following her diagnosis of dementia praecox (schizophrenia).

The next, Emma Bachmayer, lived in the Regensburg Asylum with the same diagnosis. I only know that she was Catholic and single (Image 28).

Then there is Heinrich Mebes, who was a Protestant watchmaker, again diagnosed with dementia praecox (schizophrenia) (Image 29). I chose these three examples among many forms of writing in the Prinzhorn Collection to capture a range of forms: scribbles, as well as art comprising scripts and art created alongside scripts.

Barbara Suckfüll wrote printed words in addition to works that combined drawing and writing:

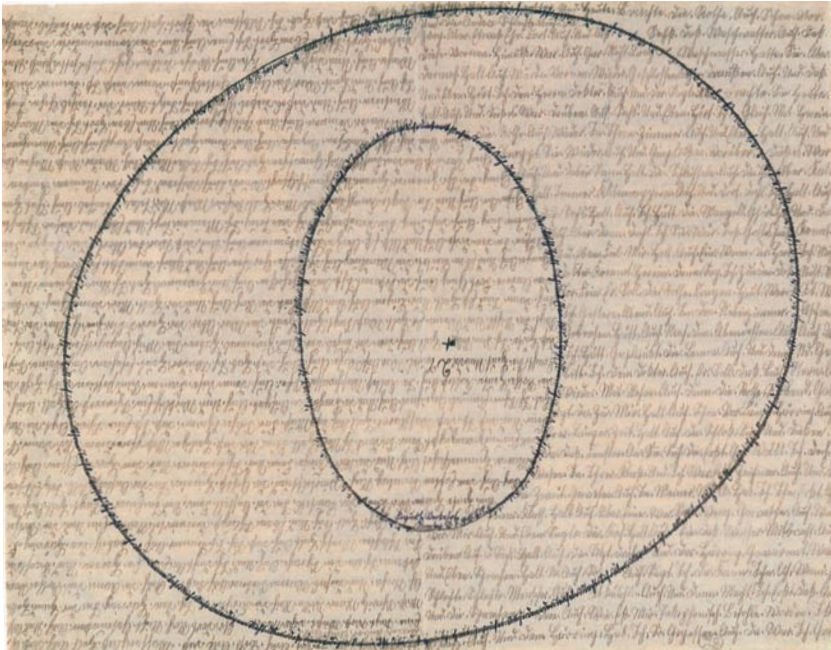


Image 27. Barbara Suckfüll, Untitled, 1910, Inv. No. 1956 verso.
© Prinzhorn Collection, University Hospital Heidelberg.



Image 28. Emma Bachmeyer, *Untitled*, 1912, Inv. 4730.
© Prinzhorn Collection, University Hospital Heidelberg.

And. Today. Is. Sunday. Too. The. First. Sunday. After. The.
Assumption. Too. And. So. It. Will. Be. The. Twenty-first. This. Is. Fine.
I. Think. And. That. Is. The. Washbasin. You. See. I. Have. Drawn.
That. Too. One. Time. Too. And. Then. Today. The. Redhead. Brought.
Cold. Washing. Water. It. Was. Too. Cold. What. She. Brought. Today.
And. The. Second. Devil. Was. On. The. Lookout. I. Heard. That.
Myself. Too. (Clausen et al., 1996, p. 175)

This passage is wonderfully lucid, down to the day of the week and the cold washing water. Even the devil seems quite ordinary here. While Suckfüll's art looks like an ornate "O" over tiny, almost illegible, lighter script that is not easy to decipher, her printed text is legible and readable, every word punctuated, made to stand still for a moment.

Heinrich Mebes writes a script within his egg-shape, and though I cannot read it, it reads as writing.



Image 29. Heinrich Hermann Mebes, *Follow God Abandon Gods*, undated, Inv. 413 recto.
 © Prinzhorn Collection, University Hospital Heidelberg.

Emma Backmayer's pen on paper appears as scribbles, but who is to say that it is, or is not, writing?

What is writing? What, of this writing, is imagined by the artist as written and, therefore, composed? Is there some requirement that it be something legible *to us*, reading it a century or more later, in another language?

At my little round table in my office, I use a magnifying glass to look closely at the intricate lines of this writing. I do not know if it is meant to speak or not; it is singularly marvellous and inventive.

As I look at the art, writing, scripts, scribbles, all made by psychotics of the last century, I wonder what, if anything, is metaphoric about it? A metaphor, when it works, forms a bridge to other meanings, after all. Poetry works by extending new horizons of meaning in relation to a metaphor. Yet, this art of calendars, clocks, numbers, repeating forms, combined words, writing of scripts and scribbles, does not seem to connect with *any* collective meaning.

I wonder if these systems of order, however, connect particular floating autonyms in the psychotic's experience in a way that nothing else will serve, and this art creates new meanings she or he might then grasp.

In his book, *The Subject of Psychosis: A Lacanian Perspective* (2011) Stijn Vanheule considers the possibility that the psychotic constructs an "axiom" (p. 116) of delusion, a key idea that explains his experience. This explanation places him utterly at the disposal of a perverse Other. In the face of this terrible predicament, the subject introduces an *opposing* signifier, a protestation against the "signifier of the Other's madness" (p. 117). Finally, the subject takes up a work, mission, or project that is a compromise between what the mad Other demands and his own protest. The new work is *itself* a new subjective position. Vanheule describes how this happens:

As a delusion is elaborated, a change in the condition of autonomous speech elements can be observed. Whereas at first they are experienced as "intimate exteriorities," as communications from without that touch on the intimacy of a person's being, their status changes to that of what I call "exterior intimacies," in that they gradually start to be the intimate poles around which discourse is organized. (p. 110)

Such a position implies an active construction that transforms the psychotic's language in order to oppose the signifiers of a mad Other, and to reconfigure them in a new way.

Hyacinth Freiherr von Wieser (pseudonym Heinrich Welz), another artist of the Prinzhorn Collection, drew many geometric forms (Image 30). Prinzhorn (1972[1922]), looking at the development of this art over time, asks, "What element in the drawing gives us the feeling of regularity, while we think of arbitrariness without arriving at a balance?" (p. 199). He concludes that, despite the fact that von Wieser persists with impossible ideas, in his art "regularity and arbitrariness are finally combined and developed, if you will, into a valid, formal language" (p. 199).

Commenting on this drawing, Prinzhorn explains, "Welz [von Wieser] assumes various centers from which lines of force radiate, in keeping with projections of thoughts and the polarization of the human body in relation to the earth and other bodies" (Prinzhorn, 1972[1922], pp. 198–199). Von Wieser developed a new relation to the

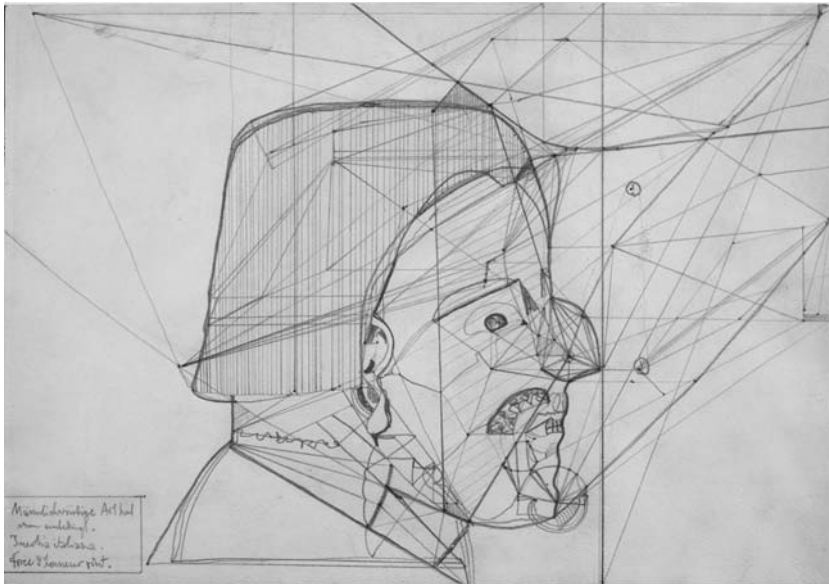


Image 30. Hyacinth Freiherr von Wieser (pseudonym Welz), *Geometrical portrait "Männlichwürdige Art hat man unbedingt"*, undated, Inv. No. 2458 recto.
© Prinzhorn Collection, University Hospital Heidelberg.

polarities that controlled him; he could spin around rapidly and overcome the attraction of the earth, and believed he could actually ascend (Image 31). Perhaps this was a gesture that signified his opposition to the lines of force imposed on him.

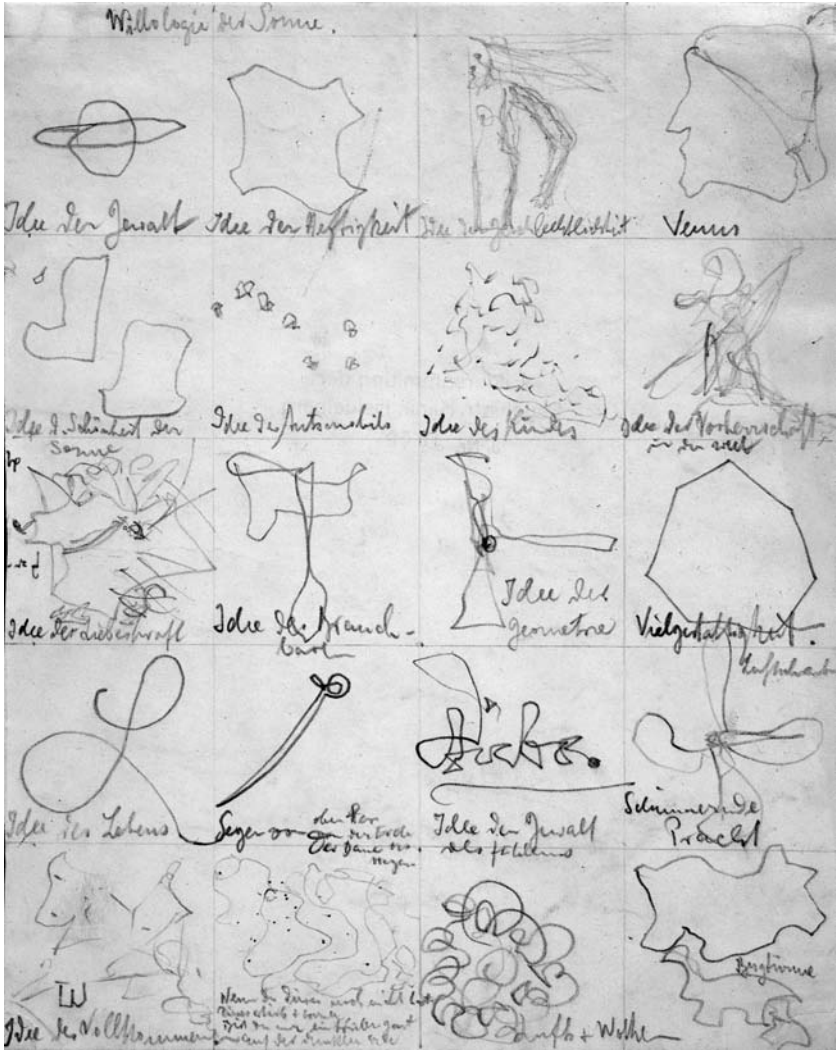


Image 31. Hyacinth Freiherr von Wieser (pseudonym Welz), *Willology of the Sun*, Inv. No. 2440. © Prinzhorn Collection, University Hospital Heidelberg.

Following Vanheule, I wonder if von Wieser created, in opposition to a delusional axiom concerning a universe of controlling polarities, a language of curves and gestures. If this is the case, his work solved an enigma that language cannot really solve; the drawn curve could make another's (Napoleon's) thought fully accessible across time and space. The magic of drawing applied to thoughts. Von Wieser reduced his wonderful geometries to the idea that *thinking of drawing* would create a finished drawing. There was no need to draw in time and space any longer. Has he wrestled back his agency, his subjectivity, with this coded language of drawing curves and lines propelled by his own magical thoughts? He believed that he could (and we can) relive history in a curve.

Again, I come to the problem of Time. What is Time, and to what extent can we play with it?

In the studio I film my eight-year-old son. He takes a jar of paint and a handful of pencils, some books and papers. He throws the jar of paint across the studio walls, scatters the pencils, tears the papers and scatters the shards. We run the film in reverse. There is a utopian perfection. The papers reconstruct themselves every time. He gathers them all. He catches twelve pencils, all arriving from different corners of the room in the same moment. In the jar he catches all the paint—not a drop is spilled. The wall is pristine. His joy at his own skill is overflowing. "Can I do it again?" (Kentrige, 2014, p. 106)

William Kentridge with his son in the studio; we can see them, making a film in reverse. First, we can imagine the boy and his elation. Time can be rearranged. Sequence can be reversed, and, as it is reversed, relived. More accurately, reversed, it is lived for *the first time* in this strange way. As humans, we are fascinated with time, how it can be arranged, rearranged, written, rewritten. To play with time is not psychotic. But the sheer necessity to find a new way to represent time might be.

It is difficult to convey the extent to which the psychotic subject can be left outside of time. Just as he cannot make language work as it once did, he cannot comprehend what has happened to time.

As I turn to look at contemporary versions of an infinite code (calendars, ratios, drawing with repeating forms) made by psychotic artists, again it is not easy to find or identify this art. I am filled with joy when I see it in *Raw Vision* (Winter 2012–2013), a journal dedicated to artists

named as outsider, brut, folk, naïve, intuitive, and visionary. In an article by Tony Thorne, “Heavenly city—John Devlin’s utopian visions” (pp. 42–45), I discover art that arrests me, takes my breath away, because it is so like the art of his historical predecessors. Devlin, I learn, had an experience of epiphany and a mental breakdown when he was a Divinity student at Edmund’s College, Cambridge University in 1979. He returned to Nova Scotia in Canada, resided in a hospital for a time, and then lived at home. He volunteers with the Nova Scotia Art Gallery, struggles with the side effects of his medication, and creates art.

Devlin has created a utopian world called Nova Cantabrigiensis, an imaginary city, an artificial island on the North Atlantic coast of Canada. His art includes drawings, annotations, dates, formulae, diagrams, symbols, and repeating forms. These works are made of layers of paper, glued together. On the verso are numerical sequences developed according to mystical principles. He explains to Tony Thorne (2012–2013):

My theory is that for ideal design, there is an Ideal Ratio. I have been hunting for such a constant. I was on a Faustian Quest for arcane knowledge that would explain the magical ambience of Cambridge. I thought that if I could capture that ambience as a mathematical formula, then I wouldn’t have to go to England. I thought I could think my way out of mental illness, back to the happy times in Cambridge before things began to fall apart on me. (pp. 43–44)

Images 33 and 34 are examples of Devlin’s work.

It is possibly of minor interest that the dimensions of the Canadian dollar bill match the ratio of the major architectural elements of two Cambridge University collegiate monuments. The crisis of the euro would be over if they adopted 11:24 as the ratio for their paper currency . . . no wonder there is a euro banking crisis: and the solution is so simple. (Thorne, 2012, p. 45)

Image 35 is also by John Devlin.

Again, I encounter marvellous geometries and magical thinking, this time in opposition to mental illness, with the promise of a restoration of another time, and a solution to world problems.

Utopia: time stops, before disorder. The time created is a new time, a new alphabet for how to measure, consider, and live in that time.

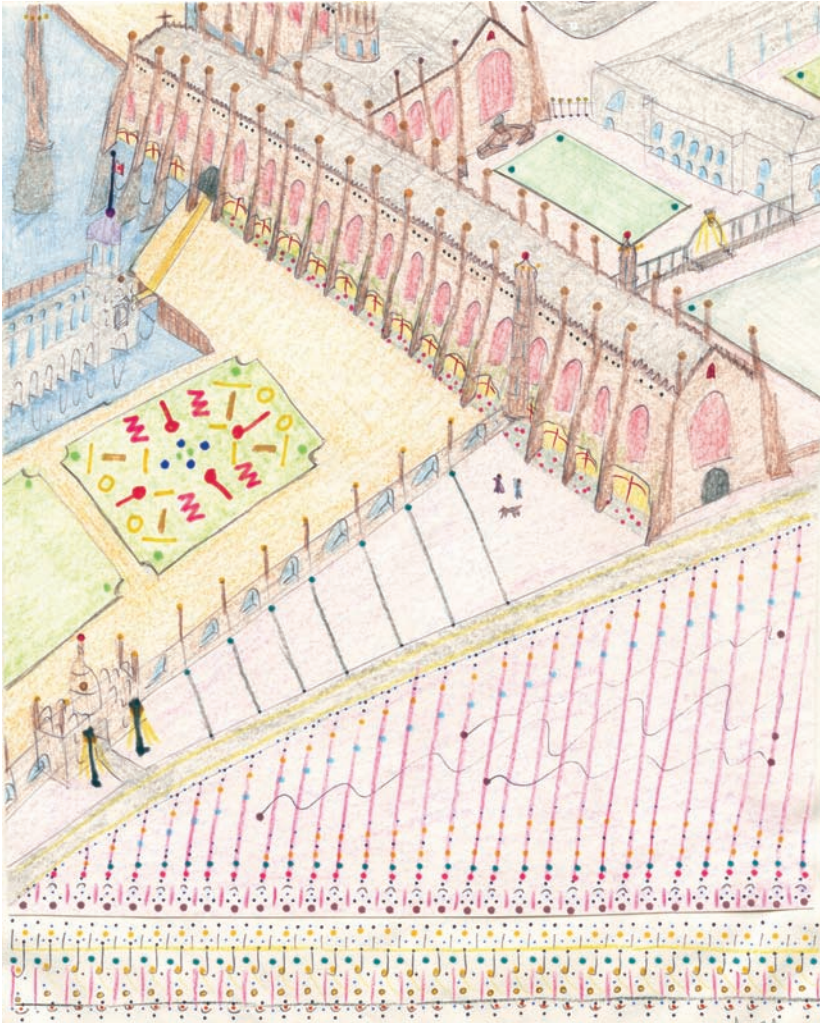


Image 34. John Devlin, *Untitled no. 120*, 11 January 1989, mixed media on paper, 27.94 x 21.59 cm.
Courtesy of Henry Boxer Gallery, London.

I look at his art and revel in its beauty, the magic of its incandescent alphabets and numbers, created as if to signify a new subjective position, a new time, and a corrective ratio. His art speaks to me in ways I cannot begin to convey with words.

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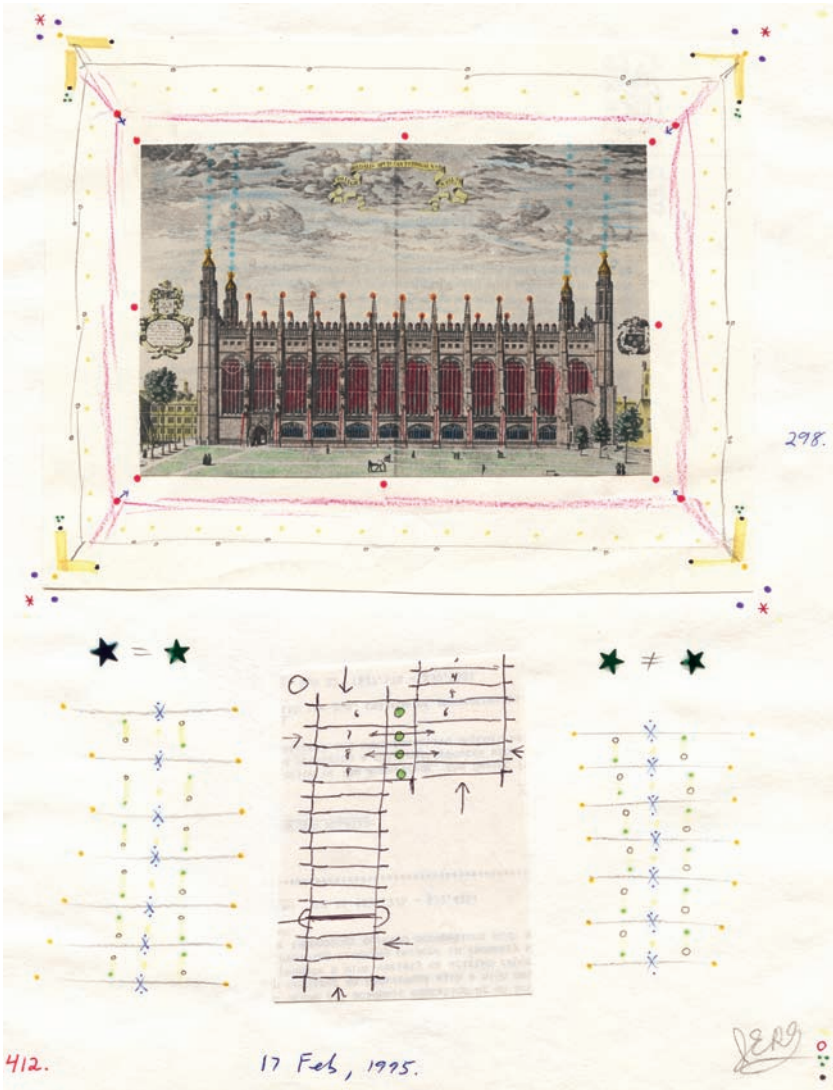


Image 35. John Devlin, *Untitled no. 298*, 17 February 1995, mixed media on paper, 27.94 x 21.59 cm. Courtesy of Henry Boxer Gallery, London.

I return to the Lavender Door, walking though a dusting of fresh snow from my office at Austen Riggs. There, I find Mark Mulherrin waiting for me inside the painting studio. It is cold and I shed layers: coat, scarf, hat. I sit on a high stool and we talk. I show him the images of

this chapter, especially the scripts, because I am curious about how he will read them.

Mark asks me if I have ever seen the film *Crumb*, directed by Terry Zwigoff. At my blank look he asks if I know of Robert Crumb. “Famous cartoonist?” Mark prompts. No. Mark tells me the film is primarily about Robert, but his family, including his brother Charles, make an appearance. Charles was mentally ill and lived as a recluse at home with his mother. Mark sees a parallel between the art of psychotics that we both find compelling and the work of Charles Crumb. Mark explains, “Charles also made cartoons, and he moved from cartooning to distorted figures to speech bubbles, the text taking over, to just writing, to scribbles—tiny gestures that look like writing but can’t be read.” Is this the evolution of change in language for him, we wonder, or is it a trace of getting more and more lost? We do not know. After the film was made, in February, 1993, Charles committed suicide.

Mark sits and “writes” scripts—letter-like forms that are not letters. He made them as a child, and muttered to himself as he wrote, as if speaking the writing. What is this? It is so familiar to me, and yet distinctive, *his* way of writing. What is writing, after all, if not first and foremost, a form of thinking, thinking the unthinkable for ourselves?

I find and repeat the list four or five times in different notebooks . . . Each time I expect the list to be different; each time to my surprise, it is the same, or almost the same. But in the reordering, the slight shift, the word that is illegible, we make some new crack, a new element enters the list, makes a space for itself—and this is the guest we have been waiting for. (Kentrige, 2014, p. 117)

Donald Mitchell, an African-American artist diagnosed as schizophrenic with mild mental retardation (Rivers, 2004), makes art that seems to me a visual representation of what Kentridge describes: figures repeat, almost the same, but not the same, as if each one is a new crack, a new element, “the guest we have been waiting for”. Mitchell’s figures are uncannily alike with their big heads and smaller squared torsos.

On the page, his figures repeat and become superimposed; they emerge from, and recede into, his wonderful cross-hatched spaces,

proliferate and dissolve, repeating in the signature of true outsider art: a new visual alphabet (Image 36).

The art of this chapter, made by those who have entered madness, those who have exited, and those who have not, carries a signature of their constructed, lived experience: figures repeat, merge with writing; writing turns into scripts and scribbles, writing with and without letters, writing that dissolves. I read them all as incandescent alphabets, speaking a code that is missing from language, making a form for experiences that are otherwise unrepresentable. Whatever it means or once meant to the makers, they are artists–writers making something utterly original with words and images (Image 37).

I imagine Grebing making this object for his writing with the materials he could assemble in an asylum. It contains folded spaces for inserts; layered, cut, and assembled, it is an object any writer might envy. It is, *itself*, a work of marvellous visual complexity and yearning.

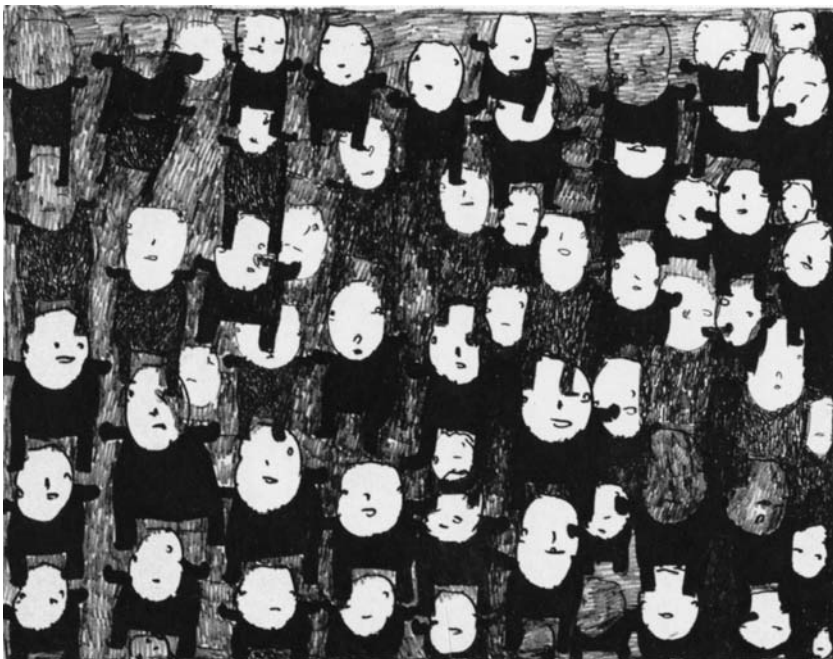


Image 36. Donald Mitchell, *Untitled* (superimposed figures), 1996, ink on paper, 18 x 24.5 in. Image courtesy of Creative Growth Art Center.

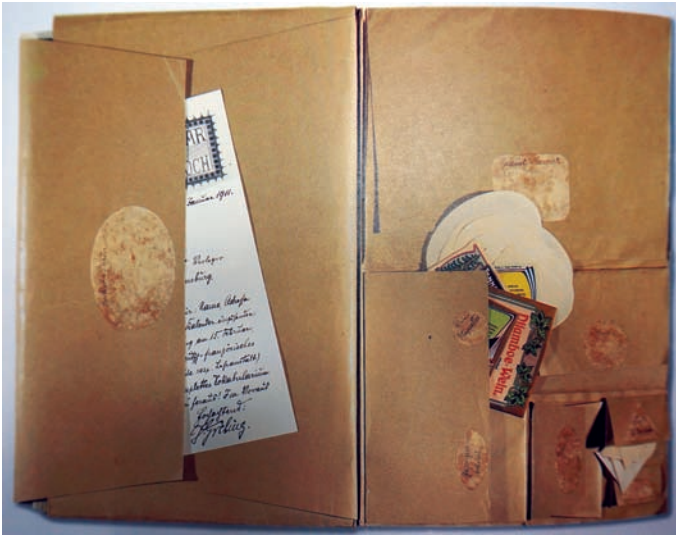


Image 37. Joseph Heinrich Grebing, *Writing Materials*, undated, Inv. No. 612.
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