

WORD
EACH

TO
CLING

I

ROLL PLAYING

erica baum

All images courtesy of the artist, digital C-prints excerpted from a larger series. Published upon the exhibition *Word Each to Cling I* at the Kelly Writers House, the University of Pennsylvania, September 11, 2008 through October 25, 2008.



Catalogue cosponsored by
the Center for Programs in
Contemporary Writing.

OF?

ING

THINK-

I
WAS

WHAT

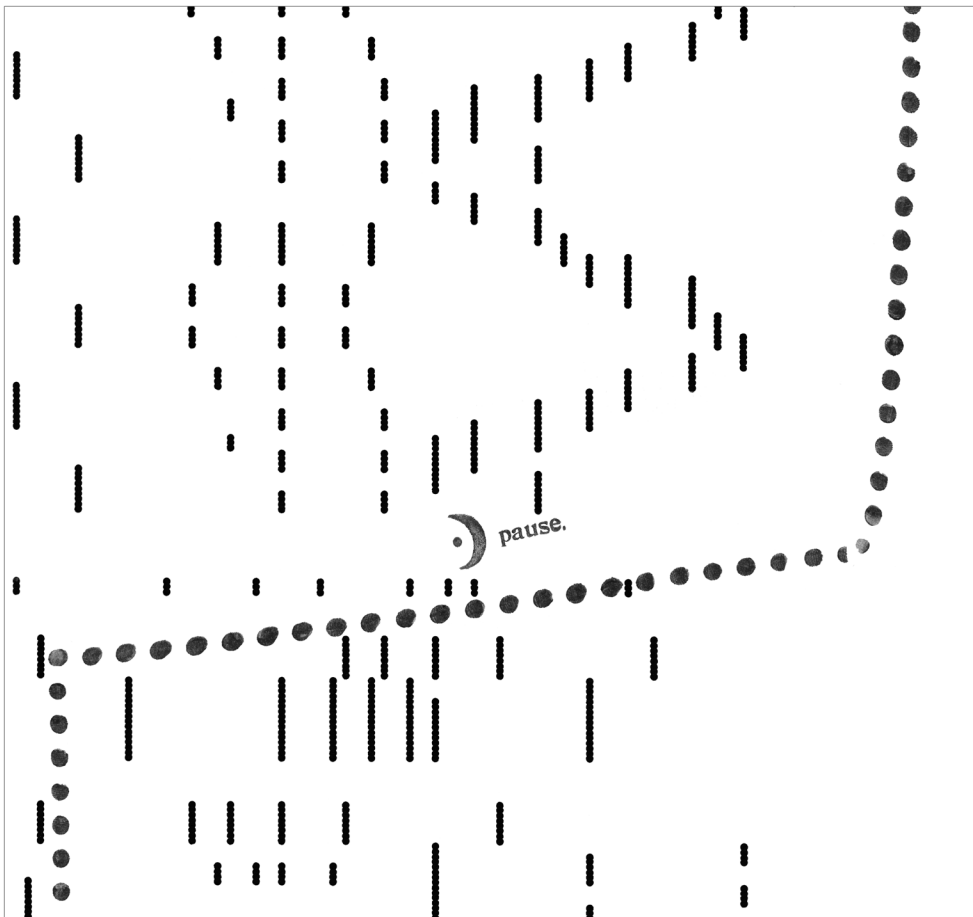
curator's introduction

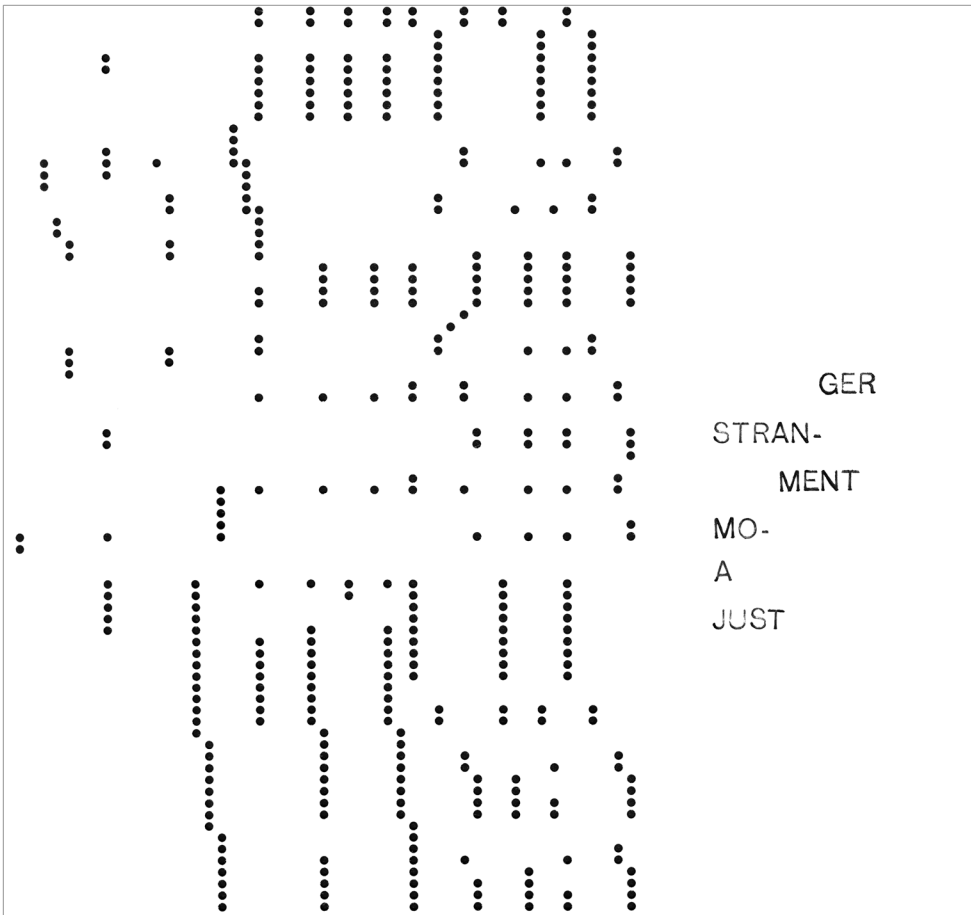
The inverse title of Erica Baum's newest body of work splices its subliminal content and material source: rolls of music made for a player piano, or pianola. Piano rolls, akin to early digital punch card technology, are paper rolls with perforations arranged along axes of time and pitch. Like a monstrous music box, a mechanism on the front of the instrument translates these punctures to keyed notes, freeing the "player" to manipulate other variables (tempo, dynamics, bass/treble ratio) and thus reducing music-making to pure nuance. By extracting segments of such rolls, Baum's *Roll Playing* series translates the punctures again, this time through more contemporary photographic technology, to dark traces where there were voids in the paper, filling their small absences subtly with her own mark. Capitalizing on flukes of visual interest, she alludes to the machine, and, through their accompanying song lyrics, the human operator.

Like much of her previous work, *Roll Playing* converts coincidental intersections of patterns in text and form into concrete poetry. Baum fuses the cut-up poem and alternative typography with the readymade; her own interference is limited to simply capturing and re-presenting the construction she finds. This is nothing to disregard, however, for through the act of repartitioning each piece not only becomes distinct from the original roll but inescapably relative to the rest of the series. Fragmented, the photographed text is suddenly dislodged from its lyric transparency, enabling it to become a module in multiple new contexts (or, as Eugen Gomringer would have it, a component in a constellation). It is this equivocality in the work that diffracts its language into a slew of voices, so that even curating it becomes intricate as composing a poem.

Kaegan Sparks
August 27, 2008

**TIMES
AT
REAL
SO
SEEMS
IT
AND**





assembly lines: a discussion with erica baum

Kaegan Sparks: Since much of your work in recent years, including maybe your most famous series using library card catalogs, relies on aleatory compounds of words and phrases, I wonder a little about the origins of your interest in language. Do you consider yourself a poet?

Erica Baum: I do consider this work poetry—a combination of concrete poetry, found poetry and photography. The origins of my interest in language stem from many sources. I've studied linguistics and Japanese language and poetry and taught English as a Second Language—all of which bring a distanced view of language, reencountering the familiar to the point where it appears strange and becomes more objectlike. I'm an obsessive reader and have a love of words in general.

Many influential contemporary artists like Ed Ruscha, Lawrence Weiner and Joseph Kosuth work with language with differing sensibilities, but the starting point for my approach has its origins in the tradition of straight street photography, looking at the work of Walker Evans, Atget, Brassai, and other artists who punctuated their landscapes with strands of found text. The whole concept of the aleatory is intrinsic to this type of photography. You work with what you find.

KS: The idea of distancing yourself from language—'our' language, even—to the point that it becomes alien to you intrigues me: "reencountering the familiar to the point where it appears strange." It's almost the same phenomenon as hearing a voice on a loop, or repeating some essential word like 'the' until it's nonsensical—an ironic emptying of meaning. How do you feel about the vagueness, specifically the use of nonspecific pronouns, in your work?

EB: The vagueness and the use of nonspecific pronouns contribute to an overall state of abstraction. There is a slippage in ground—where does the reader stand—who is the writer and who is the reader?

KS: Phaidon's *Vitamin Ph* describes your penchant for “oblique references, odd coincidences and startling reductions that occur when ideas and objects are translated into text.” How do you feel about the idea of reduction, since excerpting is such a central part of your praxis?

EB: I prefer the word ‘minimal’ in place of ‘reduction’. Selected lyrics translate into layers of compressed meaning.

KS: So, there is an interesting paradox in the ‘compression’ of meaning by paring away words of particular charge. And, as I see it, the combination and orientation of more ‘grey’ words make them intensely poignant: “Just a moment stranger” and “No one but you” —these are either store-bought valentine messages or existential tremors.

EB: Or both.

KS: Indeed. There is a trend in your practice of reframing systems of reference, or extracting different sorts of language from the specific matrix for which it was crafted (stage directions from play scripts, category headings from archives). While the abstract patterns on piano rolls are paramount for their primary function of producing sound, with the accompanying song lyrics (literally) marginal, in your work the text comes to the forefront as the only one explicitly ‘meaningful’ to the eye. In your selection process, did you find yourself prioritizing words over form for this reason?

EB: By selecting work from specific contexts and re-presenting them, new references can co-exist with earlier ones. In the piano rolls I prioritized the

verbal over the visual but searched long enough and hard enough to find pieces that satisfied both. In this project the image is ultimately in the service of the words but they are co-dependent.

KS: A box of player piano rolls notes: “The hand played music roll for player piano is a musical photograph of the hand playing of the musician who made it.” This brings up the conflict between subjective and neutral content in your work. Unlike other musical scores, many player piano rolls describe a particular performance, recording the idiosyncratic rendition of the player rather than prescribing a general one. By contrast, much of the language in the *Roll Playing* series is ambiguous and obscures a specific speaker. Is this an intentional dissonance?

EB: There is an intentional dissonance between the specificity of the piano roll musical notation and the lyric language selected. Again there is a disorientation involved. I was especially drawn to phrases that circled back on themselves, with a self-reference and sentimentality in sharp contrast to the coolness of this industrially produced graphic notational field.

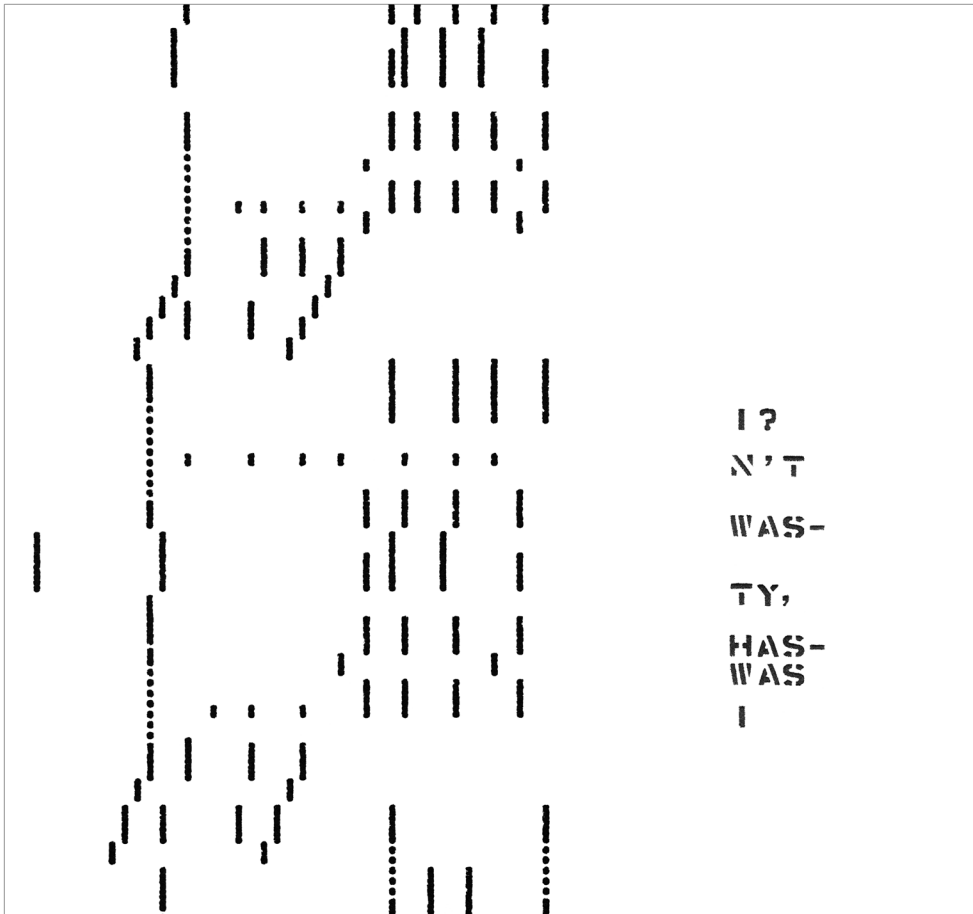
KS: And to me, this reflects the same double-edge many of us deal with as individuals, emotionally: opaque coolness on the surface from an outright fear of sentimentality. So the lyrics of your pieces visually and figuratively ricochet between their meaning as phrases and their new identity in the graphic field. The text, by the way, really holds little effect outside of the frame; the orientation literally transforms it—a clear success on your part.

EB: I like the claim in that quote from the box, that a piano roll represents a particular performance, because of its indexical relationship to the facts—so similar to photography—but I’m not sure I completely accept it. There is something both mechanical and ghostly about this notion of the performance and I think my lyrics hint at my skepticism.

KS: Your works do seem like vestiges of some sort. The technology is antiquated, but even the sterility of the stenciled font adds to the distance we were talking about earlier, the stiffness and inaccessibility. Maybe the language seems foreign because its fragmentation across the page demands fresh attention to familiar expressions we might normally skim, inverting and opening them up.

EB: I want to present a voice that reminds us of the individual in the midst of the machine. So this creaky lyricism blurts along the assembly line. And the use of many pronouns keeps it abstract—it's many voices at the same time that it's one voice—so I'm trying to have it both ways. Ultimately it's my voice making the choices, but the viewer/reader experiences a factory generated chorus.

Erica Baum holds a B.A. in Anthropology from Barnard College, Columbia University and an M.F.A. in Photography from the Yale School of Art. She has exhibited in New York, Baltimore, San Francisco, Kansas City, Germany, Italy, and France, and her work has been reviewed in ArtForum and Art in America. She lives and works in New York City.



I ?
N'T
WAS-
TY,
HAS-
WAS
I

A

DE-

I-

NO

HAVE

YOU

OH

DONE

AND

SAID

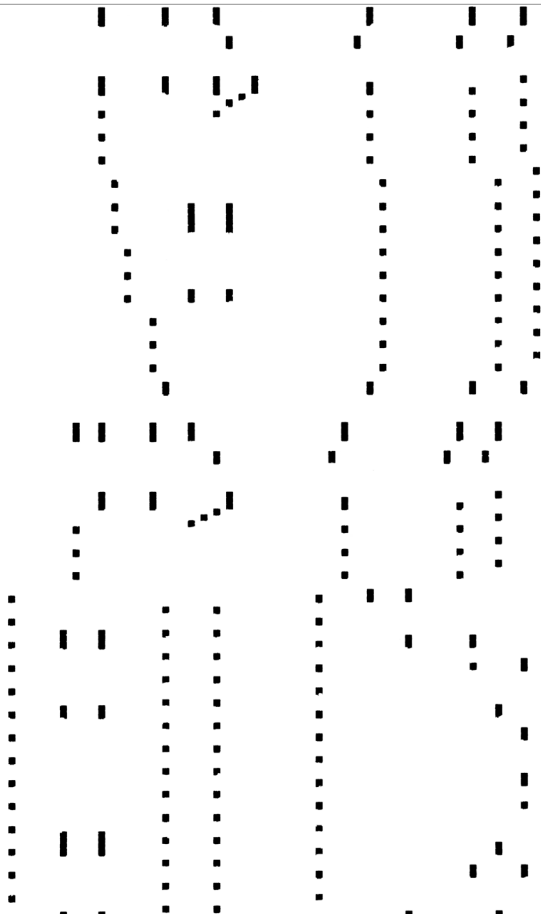
ALL'S

TER

AF-

AND

I



NEAR
ING
DRAW-
IS

NIGHT



WALLS
BARE
FOUR
THE
AT
ING
LOOK-
OF
TIRED
I'M

the ghosts

in erica baum's machines

kenneth goldsmith

In the twentieth century, any avantist who made a point of killing art did it with impeccable taste, hence its ultimate absorption into the canon of art. Take Duchamp. Every *objet trouvé* of his reeked of his taste. What if, for example, Duchamp had chosen a light bulb (as Johns did later with impeccable taste) instead of a urinal? a shoe (as Warhol did later with impeccable taste) instead of a bicycle wheel? What made these anti-art objects essentially Duchampian was his great taste. In writing, Jackson Mac Low, too, had amazing taste: he made all the right choices to free himself of choice-making.

Contrary to my own claims, I'm always banging my head against the realization that no matter how hard you try, you can never remove the individual from art. I have made arguments for ego-less art, found art, art driven by chance operations and many other strains, but in fact there's always someone behind the curtain, manning the machines. I have yet to encounter tasteless art. We try too hard, which is why I'm always in favor of doing less. If there's one thing that the avant-garde has shown us, it's that regardless of form, non-expression is impossible.

But this is something that photographers knew from the get-go. Early on, the greatest photographers showed exquisite taste in terms of what to point their camera at. Atget's taste created iconic images of Paris and Man Ray's vision of what is elegant, sophisticated, and tasteful became our vision of what is elegant, sophisticated, and tasteful. Toward the end of the century when the new German photographers emerged to make purposely dull pictures, they did it exquisitely. They knew just how to reframe the banal to make it tasteful. Even the appropriationist photog-

raphers of the 1980s chose just the right things to appropriate: think of Sherrie Levine's rephotographing of Walker Evans' classics or of Richard Prince's Marlboro Men (or conversely, in a show of great taste for the bad, his pictures of biker chicks).

The whole act of photography is a tightrope walk of taste. You can't misstep anywhere along the way: from the time you pick up the camera to the way the piece is printed and framed, intention rules. Over the past decade, I have yet to see Erica Baum misstep in any of the nine major bodies of photographic work that she's created. Whether she's photographing notes on the back of catalog cards at the Frick Museum or creating visual poems from Lucille Ball-endorsed charade game cards, she always seems to choose the right thing, the most resonant thing. With these choices, her oeuvre creates a lost 20th century world unto itself, a world filled with longing and nostalgia; a world inhabited by the ghosts of electronic voice phenomena, Sigmund Freud, shock therapy, Madame Blavatsky, Walter Benjamin, reefer madness, and player pianos. Baum is an auteur: anything she touches becomes instantly Baumian. In this way, she is the heir to the tradition of Duchamp, Hitchcock and Bellmer; she's a cousin to David Lynch, a sister to filmmaker Guy Maddin.

If there ever was an instrument haunted by a ghost in the machine, it is the player piano. Somehow it wasn't enough for the piano to play itself, the keys also had to move as if invisible hands were playing them. To see one in operation is really eerie. It's no coincidence this automaton emerged concurrently with the Victorian's obsession with the occult. Like its mechanical magnetic doppelganger, the Ouija board, the player piano is a sublime apparition, able to self-sustain marathon runs of old favorites, summoning memories in musical form, creating an eternal ever-present past.

With the rise of industrial culture in the 19th century, a hunger for industrially-produced music arose. By the mid-1800s, a piano using a roll read by fingers attached to springs was invented. A smooth roll of paper moved along these fingers (which, in turn were attached to the keys) and when they hit a hole, a note was sounded. As time went on, amplifiers and mechanical devices were added to finally arrive at the modern 88-keyed player piano around the turn of the century. From then until the Wall Street crash of 1929, the player piano was the predominant way of hearing music, soon to be doomed to obscurity by the advent of radio and 78 rpm records, technologies that were *transparently* mechanical, where once again, you could feel the “touch” and “warmth” of the maestro, something that was impossible with the monotonous, mechanical drone of the player piano.

As often happens when technology falls out of favor with the general public, it is embraced by artists and visionaries, many of whom find a way to wring new uses out of worn technology. In the case of the player piano, 20th century experimentalists such as Conlon Nancarrow, George Antheil, Igor Stravinsky, Percy Grainger, and György Ligeti exploited the instrument’s mechanical qualities to make it perform super-human feats.

Nancarrow, for one, made it explicit that he wished to write piano works so complex that no human hands could possibly play them. By using overlapping polyrhythms, crazy-clockwork multitempos and insanely complex contrapuntal devices, Nancarrow pushed the 14th century idea of the canon to its limit; his mechanistic complexities make even Bach appear simple. Nancarrow emerged as a modern composer in the early 1940s, a period that lay between the demise of the player piano and the rise of electronic music. For a composer wanting to create such hyper-human compositions, the player piano was the only means available. Nancarrow grew so fond of the instrument that he worked with it for the rest of his life, hand-punching scrolls in his Mexico City workshop. For his efforts, he was awarded a MacArthur genius grant at the end of his life.

It's not surprising that Baum chose player piano rolls as the subject for her 2008 series *Piano Rolls–Roll Playing*. The instrument and its metaphorical intonations echo many ideas running throughout Baum's oeuvre: the poetics of the obsolete, the absence of color, deep whiffs of memory and nostalgia, long-lost tokens of popular culture and a fascination with the play between the hand-made and the mechanical. Most important, these works merge text and image.

Running along the right edge of the piano rolls are enigmatic texts. At first glance, they make no sense, appearing to be some sort of koan:

LETS
O-
VI-
ING
RAIN-
IT'S

They are reminiscent of mid-century E.E. Cummings poems:

n
Umb a
stree
t's winrt

y ugli
nes
s C
omprises

6
twirls of do
gsh
it m

much f
ilt
h
Y slus

h & h
ideou
s 3 m
aybe

o
nce V
o
ices

(E.E. Cummings from *95 Poems*, 1958)

It's only when you realize that, like words painted on the street to alert you to the fact that you're in the LANE FIRE, do you understand that these phrases are printed backwards. When viewed through a window in the piano you can see the words flow by, making it able to sing along with the music, a sort of analog karaoke. The connection between word and image bears a resemblance to Apollinaire's *Calligrammes*, the visual poems he wrote between 1912 and 1918, in particular "Il Pleut," his portrait of words raining down the page (written during the period in which the popularity of the player piano was at its height). Even the words above (lyrics from Al Jolson's 1921 song, "April Showers") "LETS / O- / VI- / ING / RAIN- / IT'S" echo Apollinaire's opening lines: "It's raining women's voices..." Accompanied by streaky vertical lines—the word rain of Apollinaire and the punch holes of the rolls—the resemblance between the two is uncanny.

When the rolls are unrolled and laid out flat to be photographed, they assume a strange topography, divorcing form from function and

opening up the possibilities of interpretation. We feel lost: the images of vertical lines which, in fact are holes, are now rendered as two-dimensional graphical marks. They could be mistaken for Morse code, another contemporaneous set of images that translates into sound. Instead of the rolls' role as sound producers, they are now transformed into semiotic enigmas: as traces and referents without signifiers, they're the perfect accompaniment to the upside-down words.

The marks themselves appear to be variants of minimalist painting. They could be landscapes, like the grids of illuminated windows in Alex Katz's New York City night scenes. They also recall the works of the Swiss painter Niele Toroni, who in the mid-60s made a vow to only make marks the width of a n° 50 paintbrush, spread apart at exactly 30 cm intervals on the top, bottom and sides often arranged in grids. It's in the grid that Baum's works find their perfect armature, both literally and metaphorically. Rosalind Krauss claims that "... the grid is an emblem of modernity... the form that is ubiquitous in the art of *our* century..."¹ The piano scrolls needed to be aligned on a grid in order for function, bridging industry and aesthetics, the Victorians and the Moderns, the mechanical and the human, and the physical and the metaphysical.

Like Cummings' fractured language, Baum manages to capture the process of linguistic, technological, and imagistic deconstruction in mid-air. As the century moved on, all of this would change. And yet what might be most present is curiously absent: sound. By negating sound, Baum points to Cage's concept of silence, arguably the aesthetic hinge that binds the first half of the century to the second. These are some of the most silent pictures you will ever see, a strange condition for a body of work predicated on music. But like the best works of Christian Marclay, Baum takes one sensation—sound—and translates it into another—concept, a scheme that follows the trajectory of the last century: from horse to horseless, from wire to wireless, from sound to silence.

1 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, p 10.

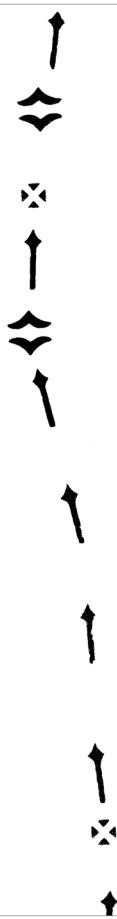


BOAT

DREAM

MY
LOT

PI-
YOU



S I D E

I N -
I N G,

B L O W -

I S

W I N D

T H E

THEIR
FEAR-
A
WITH
VIER
O-
ME
KNOCKED
VIE
(COULD-
YOU)

AIR

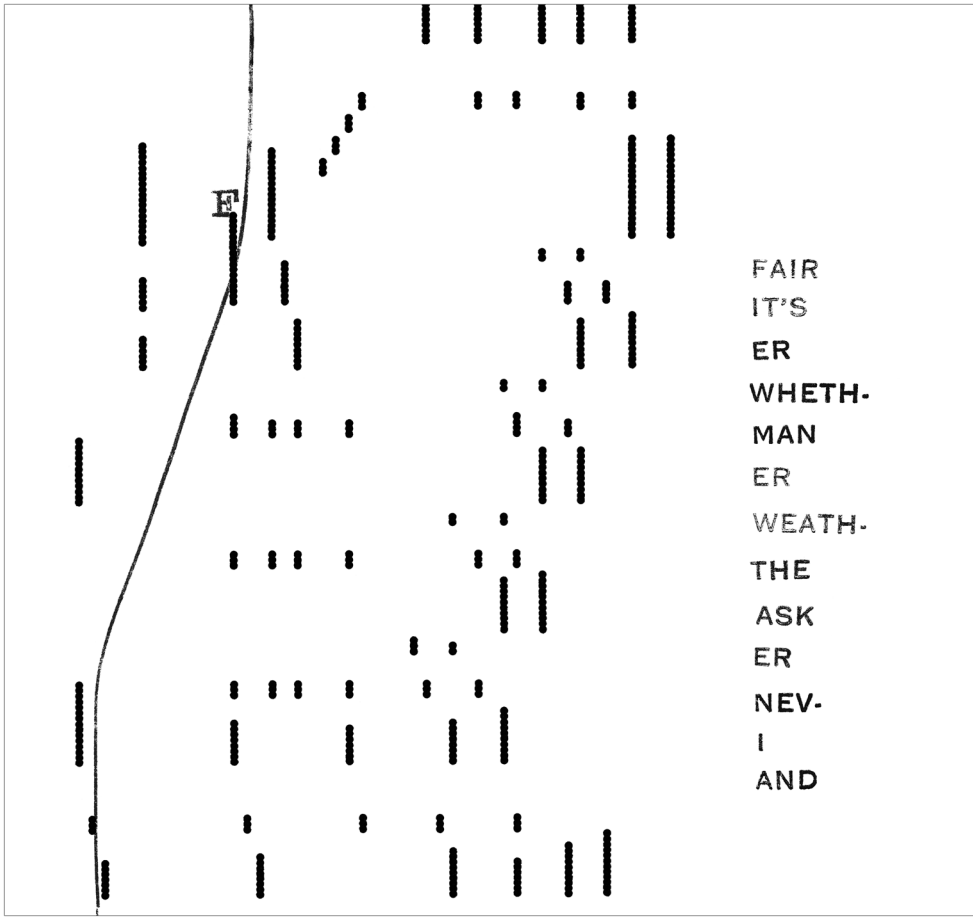
THE

IN

UP

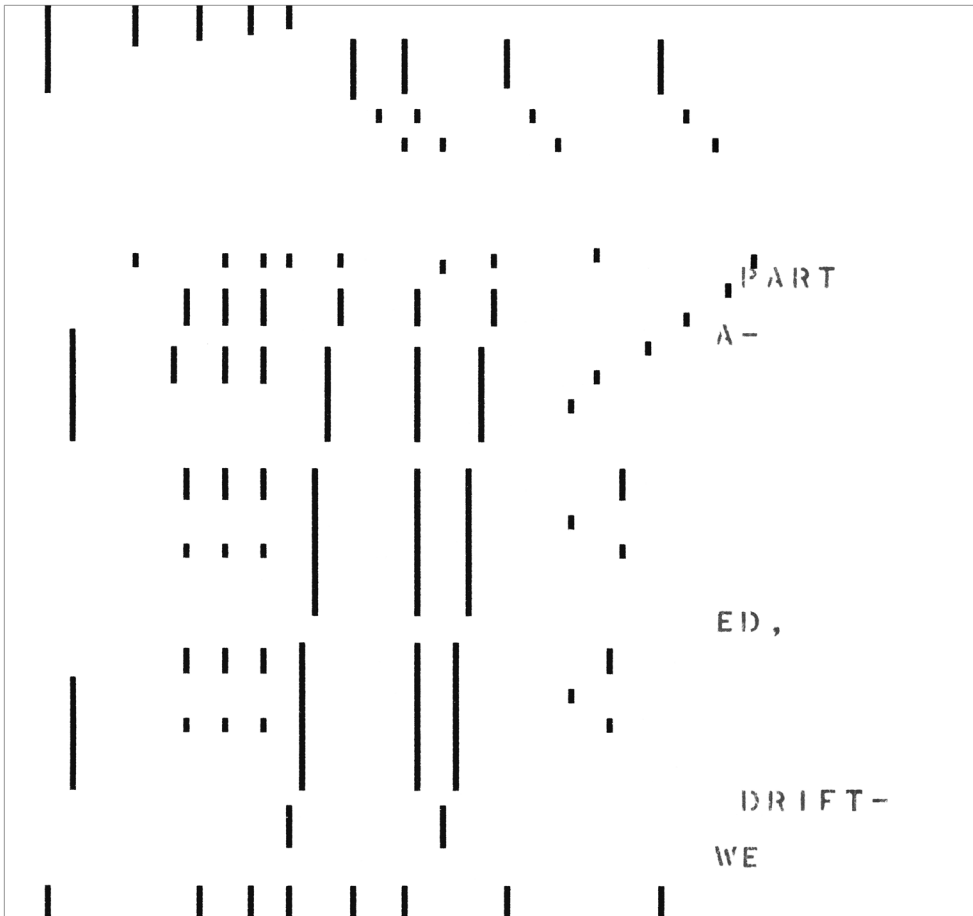
I'M





E

FAIR
IT'S
ER
WHETH-
MAN
ER
WEATH-
THE
ASK
ER
NEV-
I
AND



you, but one, no kaegan sparks

HE I'm not really talking to myself?

SHE I'm not talking to you. We're obviously—I'm not sitting here simply talking to you simply talking—to *me*?

Robert Creeley, *Listen*

This is an exhibition as abridged script, a silent transmission, an anonymous conversation of indeterminate sequence. Tangling mechanical, unreadable sound vocabulary with verbal gestures (which read normally in plain typeface, are often the most nauseating sort of lyric), Erica Baum's photographs of found pianola rolls repackage a continuous strand of functional data into delicately parsed frames of mind. Disembodied from their predictable sing-song and then inverted and splintered vertically across the page, Baum's lines intimate a collapse of communication. The phrases float like æther—in our heads, in our mouths. Any order or causality between them is entirely the viewer's own; attempts to thread the exhibition into a congruous exchange inevitably result in an imbroglia of skew lines, traversing each other without intersecting.¹

Confined by the formal constraint of a square window and devoid of any subjective intervention, Baum's *Roll Playing* series harnesses a disorienting friction between sterile visuals and sentimental messages. The

1 As Kyle Schlesinger says of Creeley's radio play *Listen*, "like a submarine passing below the Mayflower; two vessels vacillating between irreconcilable pasts" ("Meaning: I Hear You," *Golden Handcuffs Review*, Summer/Fall 2005).

interaction of mechanics and the love lyric, of text and musical notation, and even within the language, of cliché and disruption (in the dry stenciled letters, broken and backwards), all reinforce the same æsthetic discord. Read in reverse, many of Baum's 'captions' become more provocative than in their conventional order, and moreover charge the language with variable meanings. Even the process of reading the pieces on the wall bewilders the viewer, and this sense of confusion in the incoherency couldn't be more apt. In exposing such a compelling readymade orientation Baum demonstrates keen skill as framer.

Installed together, the physical proximity—and non-linearity—of the pieces evoke a patchy dialogue between the vaguest of dramatic personae: I and you. Debris of some deconstructed love affair projects a thousand different exchanges between the walls of the gallery. Besides the ambiguous identity of the speaker(s), we are left uncertain of much else. Are these words spoken, or thought? And, perhaps the real gut of the matter—to whom?

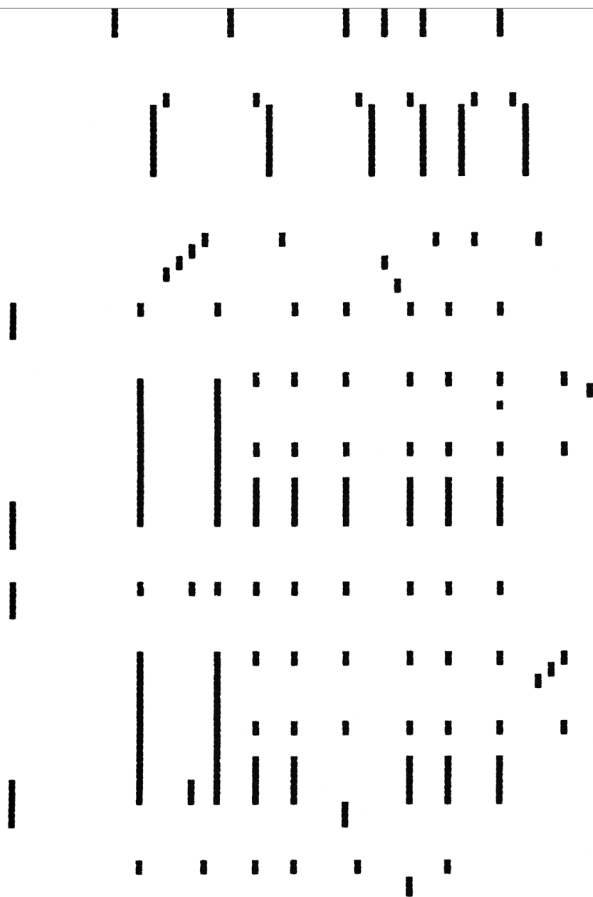
We can presume a chorus, but another reading of the works in tandem reveals a violently vacillating interior dialogue. Some pieces occupy their own bare wall. These are the real faltering, timid gestures ("What Was I Thinking of?"), confessed infatuations ("You Pilot My Dream Boat"), and tremors of misunderstanding ("Oh, You Have No Idea"). As a one-sided conversation of disillusionment, unrequited affection, self-doubt ("I was hasty, wasn't I?", "And it seems so real at times") the works arrest us with a backhanded pathos.

Read as interlocution between a couple, or two sides of the self, particular lines generate a poignant volta between them ("The wind is blowing, inside" / "We drifted apart"). Disjointed by dashes to accommodate the tempo of the music, in a silent gallery these words effect their own hesitations, foibles and fortes of spoken delivery. Across two or more pieces the text alone evinces a dynamic totally estranged from the crescendos and climaxes encoded in its silent bedfellow—Baum's works, in remarkably banal

language, literally speak to one another in impassioned pulses and plumb droids of despair.

In the mentally disturbed, 'poverty of speech' is a symptom characterized by language that "tends to be vague, often over-abstract or over-concrete, repetitive and stereotyped."² The glitch is in the transfer; the punch of meaning is short-circuited by tired or sparse articulation. Patients with this difficulty often exhibit a serious attempt to communicate, but their intent is lost in the rendering. In Baum's work it is precisely this disconnect between the impression and the utterance that holds us suspended, as the dashed notes run off the page, bereft of an end-rhymed resolution; dropped in a semiquaver to interpolate a response.

² Peter J. McKenna and Tomasina Oh, *Schizophrenic Speech: Making Sense of Bathrooms and Ponds that Fall in Doorways*, Cambridge UP, 2005: 21.



LET'S

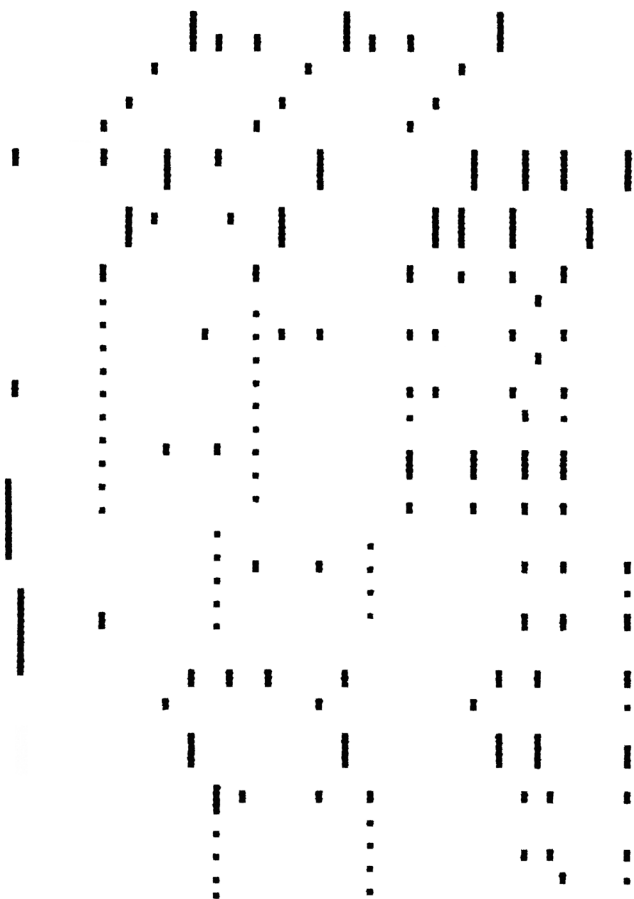
O-

VI-

ING

RAIN-

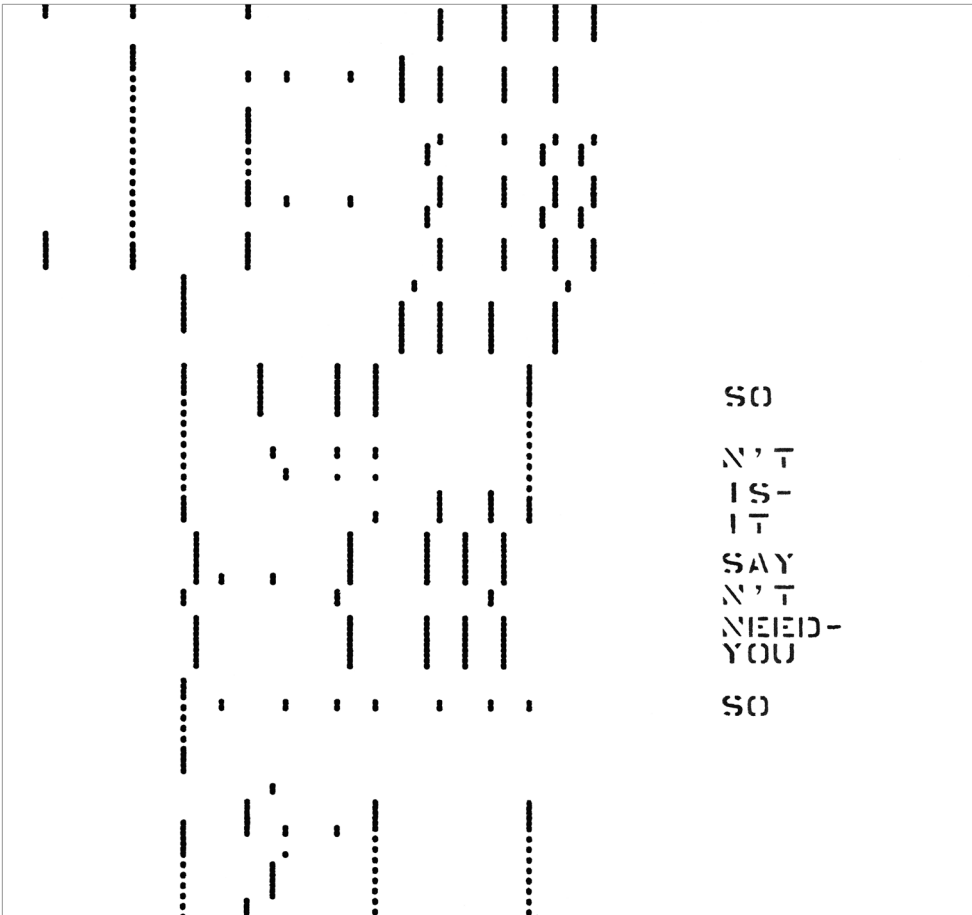
IT'S



ON,
NOW
FROM

SKIES

BLUE
BUT
ING
NOTH-



SO

N'T

IS-

IT

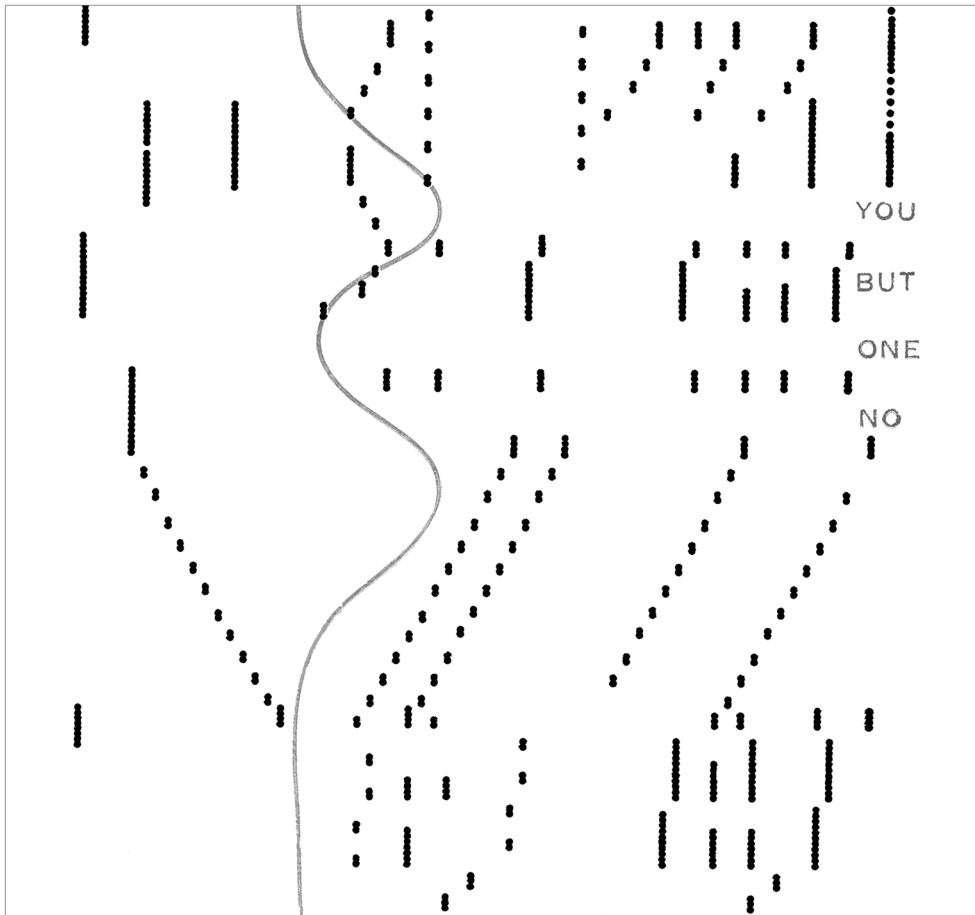
SAY

N'T

NEED-

YOU

SO



YOU

BUT

ONE

NO