The philosophy from which current cultural theory has emerged is rooted in chains of assumptions arising from theories with no grounding whatsoever in what we now know to be true about the mechanisms of human experience. The most basic assumption is that all signs are arbitrary and the human mind is a blank slate, a tabula rasa, with no inherent structural dynamics. The assumption is based on the idea that all forms of meaning are comprised of arbitrary relational networks arising between arbitrary signs. Networks of meaning are said to emerge simply as a result of the focus of our attention. Some networks are then reinforced by a cultural context of existing relationships which, although initially assembled arbitrarily, are now treated as authentic phenomena.

The contemporary art world is a clear manifestation of this philosophical idea. Museums of contemporary art now treat drawn, painted, and photographed images; written and spoken words; original or appropriated objects; and any other physical phenomena as equivalent signs suitable for presentation in what was historically a context primarily limited to the exhibition of visual works. We're asked to accept the argument that the meaning of the work currently in vogue emerges, not from anything inherent in the construction of the signs, but from the network of cultural associations which can be gleaned from the context of the presentation.

It's my contention that our present and future society are being seriously harmed by this philosophical theory. It underlies the choices of exhibition programs and influences the collecting philosophies of major cultural institutions; and as a result, adversely impacts the allocation of the limited resources available to encourage, maintain, and preserve other cultural activity which is now being neglected.

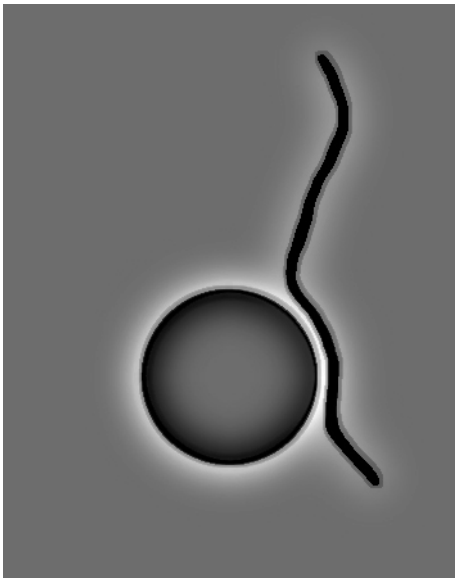
According to some psychologists, the theory of the mind as a blank slate has been entirely disproved by recent research. Psychologists such as Gary Marcus have argued that the human mind arises from the genetic structure of the brain (Central Nervous System) but develops by responding to signals from the sensory environment. The mind is comprised of an interaction of Nature and nurture. A detailed explanation can be found in “The Birth of the Mind,” Gary Markus (Basic Books 2004). But researchers such as Marcus and his mentor, Steven Pinker, “Words & Rules” (Harper Perennial 1999) do not extend the manifest interaction of Nature and nurture into the signs of language. They too believe the signs for words are arbitrary. They justify their belief by noting that different languages have different signs for the same thing. However, this justification is without merit. Anyone who has ever been involved in the translation of a literary work from one language to another is well aware there is no exact correlation between the meaning of words in different languages (for example, the French word for 'water' (eau) and the English word for 'water' emerged from different environmentally and culturally mediated conceptions associated with the same physical substance). Furthermore, as products of the mind, the signs for words would most likely mirror the mind's interaction of Nature and nurture. At most, we would expect to

find only partial similarity in the structure of the signs even if the signified concepts were nearly identical. As it happens, some similarity has been found. A large number of different languages are so similarly structured that linguistics researchers have theorized they are all descended from the same earlier language, Indo European. No evidence has been found that an Indo European culture ever existed. But since linguistics researchers believe the signs for words are arbitrary, they are left with no other possible explanation.

The real reason the idea of arbitrariness has become so ingrained in linguistics, philosophy, and psychology is that it has a historical basis of acceptance extending back to an original assumption made about a century ago by Ferdinand de Saussure, a founder of linguistics and 'semiotics' (the study of signs). Except for a few instances of onomatopoeia, such as bees buzz, Saussure couldn't find any correlation between the sound of a word and its meaning. Consequently, he assumed the sign for a word must be fundamentally arbitrary. His assumption of arbitrariness is now treated as fact, and it has become a foundation of modern linguistics. Unfortunately, Saussure was entirely mistaken about what constitutes the sign for a word. We've recently learned that it is the recognition of the sequencing of the vocalic gestures which conveys the spoken word, not recognition of the characteristics of the sound. The same is true for written language. We don't read the overall shape or outline of a written word as had been thought (Bouma Theory). We read the individual letters (Parallel Letter Recognition). Our letter characters do not embody our words--there are only 26 letters in the alphabet and they can be transmitted using any kind of character: uppercase or lowercase type, script, Braille,... (some current letter-characters were used to convey different letters in the past). The identity of each letter resides in its specific relationship to the other 25 letters within the alphabetic system. It is the sequencing of the 26 letters (the pattern of spelling) which is actually the sign for a written word (the same letters placed in a different order create signs for different words). This tells us that language does not have a material form of its own, its manifestation is fundamentally rooted in the recognition of the patterning of the sequential relationships within a finite system of possibilities. However, the number of possibilities is immense. The sequential patterning of only 26 letters is conveying over 750,000 English words, not to mention the words in all the other languages written using the Roman Alphabet. Saussure never examined the code of spelling for any structural connection to the concept of the word. He thought the sign was residing in the physical sound rather than in the recognition of a pattern conveyed by the underlying sequencing. The question of whether the codified pattern which constitutes the sign for a word is arbitrary has, as far as I know, never been thoroughly researched. It's clear Saussure never examined it; consequently, his assumption has no logical basis whatsoever.

I've been exploiting the meaningful structure of the code of spelling in my art for 35 years, but my 'spelled-

forms' are not the subject of this article. It's goal is to argue for the development of a new cultural theory. The starting point should be the signs themselves. One of the most intriguing groups of signs are the letter-characters. Although they do not comprise the signs for words, it's possible they are the evolutionary products of a proto-language comprised of elemental meanings. Letter-characters often resemble the earliest artifacts of the symbolic mind. Furthermore, the patterns from which they are constructed are identical to Entoptic Forms (dots, lines, circles, grids, spirals, meanders, zigzags, etc) spontaneously generated at the optic nerve by the human Central Nervous System as a result of extreme stress, altered states of consciousness, or head injuries. Moreover, letter-characters are universally applicable signifiers (attach Part A to Part B). We even write the genetic code using them. And it is not inconceivable that letter-characters are a reflection of the basic forms which allow us to discern objects and beings within the din of particles and waves presented to our senses by the physical environment (letter-characters have evolved into visual forms which can be accurately identified in rapid succession). In other words, modern letter-characters could be an evolutionary manifestation of the original significations of awareness.



*The image above, which looks like '**d**,' is actually an artist's rendering of the Bhimbetka Glyphs (India)—a marking which is believed to be 270,000 years old (the image originally appearded in the article, “Ancient Art & Modern Language” published in the Newsletter of the Pleistocene Coalition in 2010).