

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Weaving the Book of Revelations from the Koran

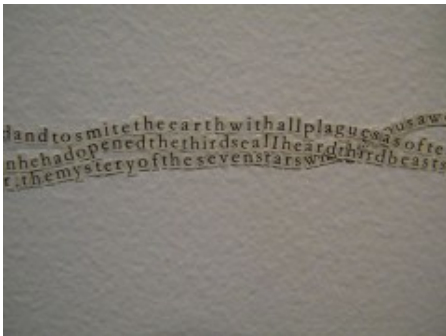
Daniel Larkin February 22, 2011



Author Daniel Larkin reading Hitchcock's text on the floor of Famous Accountants (all images, unless otherwise noted, by Ellen Letcher/Famous Accountants)

[Meg Hitchcock](#) spent 135 hours gluing letters on the wall, floor, and ceiling of the Famous Accountants gallery in Bushwick. She adhered them one-by one and side-by-side. These letters form a long string that circles around the gallery numerous times. As this cord twists around and eventually intertwines, it weaves itself into a thick rope of words. This rope lassos viewers, tugs at them to read

along, and tests their endurance like a good game of tug of war — seeing just how long they can endure this seemingly endless string of letters.



Detail of Hitchcock's installation (click to enlarge)

This rope spells out the entire [Book of Revelation](#), the last book of the Christian New Testament, but with letters cut out from an English translation of the Koran, the Islamic holy book. However, one also encounters a few insertions like a Hindu chant to Shiva, excerpts from the Koran, and other verbal flares. This rich and evocative pastiche draws attention to what all religions have in common — using words as portals into a mystical and uplifting subjective experience.

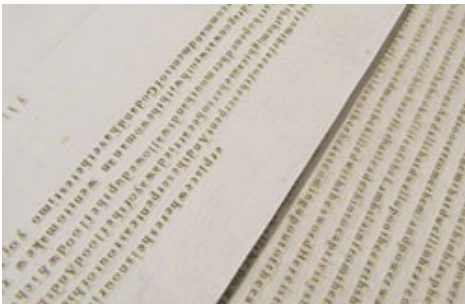
It's a wonderfully unpredictable work. Reading along, one passes certain sections that feel undecipherable, and then suddenly stumbles upon a rich phrase and a vivid image.

Since the threads are so tightly intertwined and constantly crossing over each other, the text gets cut up into small bite-size pieces, encouraging viewers to dwell on particular phrases rather than racing straight through. It's amazing how five different glances at the same area can reveal five different phrases. It can be hard to re-find a favorite fragment, but, eventually, it emerges again.

One can also marvel at the images in the text. A slide show of dragons, fire, angels and smoke flickers in the mind's eye and offers an opportunity to transcend with vivid visions. Some of the images that jumped out to me:

- “ ... and the temple was filled with smoke ... ”
- “ ... and they worshiped the dragon ... ”
- “ ... cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone ... ”
- “ ... and I beheld and heard an angel flying through the midst of heaven ... ”
- “ ... and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit ... ”

These phrases shine because of the vibrant imagery contained in the Book of Revelation. In popular culture, this text is defined by the overzealous radicals that preach apocalypse on the streets. All this talk of damnation and salvation has shifted the emphasis away from the visual power that once inspired artists, like Albrecht Dürer, to illustrate it.



A detail of the sheets of letters the artist prepared before the installation at Famous Accountants. (click to enlarge)

The artist's original plan was to arrange the letters rigidly and straight like a newspaper column. But that dream died after nine inches of testing. For the rest of the project, she curved the line. This piece revels in the coils and tangles of the meandering cord it creates. One can't get too far along without a kink interrupting the flow. As the work coils around itself, submerging underneath another thread, or

crossing over other strands, it creates a sensuous surface pattern. It's a sensibility that recalls illuminated manuscripts and Islamic calligraphy's delight in the dense intermingling of lines.

Rope is not a perfect metaphor for these strands of words. Sometimes, it frays and unravels into something else. The final few chapters are a pattern of words on the back wall. And there are a few other flourishes here and there where the rope pattern is broken and the threads go rogue. But these disruptions add visual interest, pleasantly befuddle expectations, and eliminate the risk of monotony. These well-designed breaks are echoes of Hitchcock's other art works, which she creates on a much smaller scale by weaving strands of text to produce a tightly packed design or emblem. A few of these smaller pieces are included near the door, which provide some excellent context for this artist's process, mind-numbing attention to detail, and formidable visual density.

The words on the floor are worth the strain of squatting or kneeling to read them. Rather than give everything away, let's just say that something whimsical beckons. The variances in the height of the rope on the wall encourage the viewer to vacillate between standing up and huddling down. When the rope travels up to the ceiling to cross over the back door, the neck pain of looking up for a long time can become intense. Interacting with the work becomes an incredibly physical experience.

Switching from the physical to spiritual aspect, the word reaching jumped out in conversation with the artist. Whatever religious or spiritual practice an individual viewer might follow, nearly everyone can relate to the desire to reach out and touch the mystical — peppering your subjectivity with moment of awe and transcendence. By encouraging viewers to contemplate the rich imagery of the Book of Revelation, this piece invites us to step into the mindset of a mystic and relish private visions on our mind's eye that no one else can see. Organized religion does not own an exclusive patent on the visionary experience, and the work deftly avoids religious and dogmatic baggage, so that the focus can instead fall on the mystic hunger that all creeds share.

The ability to enjoy this work — like reading poetry — rests heavily on how the viewer curates his or her experience of the words. By presenting just text, it allows your mind to generate the picture, or perhaps just contemplate the idea more abstractly. As a viewer, you have choices. You get to decide whether to just read “dragon” and think nothing, envision a simple caricature, or see in that word boundless potential and imagine the dragon's slimy scales shimmering in the light created by its breathe of fire. The work is open to interpretation, so don't sell yourself short with a bland imagination when exploring these phrases from a book rich with images.

Obsession: The Book of Revelation from the Koran, an installation by Meg Hitchcock will be on view at Famous Accountants until March 20, 2011.

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