Images as Poetry in Caroline Bergvall's *Drift*

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When a reader picks up a book that includes images, chances are they are expecting the visual component of the book to inform the written one. In doing so, they instinctively characterize the images as diagrams or illustrations. This interpretation suggests that the visuals function almost as crutches that the author has included to help the reader understand the text better, whether through visualization or simply visual organization. Caroline Bergvall's *Drift* works against this conventional perception of images and their function. Her collection includes four sections — "Lines", "Sighting", "Maps", and "Block 16A6" — that, at first glance, appear to be "merely images"; that is, the reader acknowledges their presence and perceives them visually but does not place any greater consideration into *what* they are seeing. Yet Bergvall deliberately invokes this instinctive response to purposefully misguide the reader, inviting them to contemplate these four sections further. By making the reader consider the scattered placement of these four sections throughout *Drift*, as well as the multiple styles and "means of production", Bergvall moves away from the polarizing idea that images work either with or against the text. Instead, the images in *Drift* enhance. They act as translations of ideas that the reader is then meant to translate further by returning to the text and trying to establish a relationship between what they see and what they read. In doing so, Bergvall challenges the idea that images in a novel or poetry collection are literal translations across different media that should be "accurate" and therefore static in terms of what the reader is meant to "get out of it." Bergvall demonstrates that it is the fluid notion of what exactly constitutes an image, as well as the fact that they appear in a book where one might not have anticipated to find them, that allows the reader to better appreciate the text, providing them with the opportunity to step away from it and consider the role of the images in the context of the book.

Before looking closer at these four sections it is important to first consider the two "typical" functions of images: as works of art and as a means of visualizing information. One can think of this as the difference between a painting that is presented as a standalone work of art and a drawing that is presented as a faithful depiction of a scene described in a novel. Johanna Drucker refers to this as the distinction between "visualizations that are *representations* of information already known and those that are *knowledge generators* capable of creating new information through their use," where the former "are static in relation to what they show and reference" while the latter "have a dynamic, open-ended relation to what they can provoke" (65). Similarly, the use of the word "image" over "illustration" or even "graphic representation" is also worth mentioning for, in the words of W.J.T. Mitchell, "[w]ith a picture or specimen, we ask, Is this a good example of X? With an image, we ask, Does X go anywhere? Does it flourish, reproduce itself, thrive and circulate?" (87). The pieces in *Drift* lack the features of a work of art —labels that include a title, medium, etc. under each image— yet although they appear to act like visualizations they also lack one of the key features: evidence of a clear narrative or at least some kind of action that would ground them in the "real". In this regard, Bergvall leaves the images open-ended without making them feel like they are out of place in the collection. This is done by grounding them in the thematic concerns of the poems—migration, language—without making it seem like the reader is meant to strictly move back and forth between text and image through close reading.

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Their proximity to the text, as well as the fact that they are presented in a book format rather than as independent pieces, is another reason why the images in *Drift* are more likely to come across more as visualizations than as works of art. However, the way in which Bergvall not only made but also presented these images to the viewer works against written language's "monolingual" status as the primary way for conveying and receiving information. The term monolingualism has been most famously theorized by Jacques Derrida in the eponymous *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*. Derrida's concern with monolingualism refers to the question of identity and language's connection when it comes to determining who "belongs" and who does not. Specifically, Derrida questions what it means to have a "native language" and whether linguistic belonging automatically leads to social, cultural, and political belonging. Although Derrida does not speak about art in this text, his interest in the referentiality and interconnectivity of language can also be applied to the level of language itself in its textual and visual form. Another way to think of this is by framing it as a matter of translation, in a conceptual rather than simply a literal way. In her theorization of translation, Linda Hutcheon emphasized that translations are "re-mediations, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images)" (16). This shift from one system to another always includes a trace of the previous form, such that there is never such a thing as a "pure" translation, stripped of the traces of any prior form, or "original", as we tend to think of the relationship between the two forms. If images are a form of translation—though not necessarily a literal one, as I shall discuss shortly—that are porous to meaning, then they are sensitive to the shifts in language in the way that Derrida discusses it in regard to language blurring, melding, and reforming on the macro level of individuals, cultures, even countries.

While the images in *Drift* work with the text thematically, they also work against it in the way Bergvall organizes them into self-contained sections, encouraging the reader to "read" them on the same level as one would the individual poetry sequences. In doing so, Bergvall reinforces Derrida's suspicions that one can inhabit a language naturally, since "one never inhabits what one is in the habit of calling inhabiting [...and] [t]here is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia" (Derrida 58). The images make the reader reconsider their relationship with language by asking whether it is truly necessary, as shall be discussed later. At the same time, Bergvall arguably goes against Derrida's belief that "[o]ne cannot speak of a language except in that language[,] [e]ven if to place it outside itself" (22), in part because the sole overt inclusion of language—the Þ —was done in an abstract way, as an expression of the maker's hand rather than as a letter meant to convey meaning in a word. Bergvall goes further by equating the images to language and showing that both "only ever speak one language [...yet] never speak only one language" (Derrida 7). By not following the picture book format, in which images and text exist side by side, or relegating the images to the end of the book like an appendix, Bergvall allows them to exist somewhere between artwork and illustration, stressing that they are not an afterthought yet that they are also not direct visual translations of the text.

Similarly, one might be tempted to think that the images are indebted to the text and responsible for clarifying it, just as a mimetic approach believes there is something in the work that the reader must decode, something I will be discussing later. This kind of mentality sees images as copies that must thematically correspond to the written information, either by giving it a visual form through illustration, or by representing it through graphic arrangement. What one forgets, however, is that the image-as-copy or, as Mitchell refers to it, "[t]he clone[,] signifies the potential for the creation of new images in our time — new images that fulfill the ancient dream of creating a 'living image' [...] an organic, biologically viable simulacrum of a living organism" (12-13). The difference between adaptation and interpretation, therefore, arguably hinges on "the elusive notion of the 'spirit' of a work or an artist that has to be captured and conveyed in the adaptation for it to be a success" (Hutcheon 10), as an interpretation, by its very definition, suggests a distancing between the image

and the text that only widens further when the reader picks it up. Returning to Hutcheon's concept of "re-mediation"—that is, an adaptation that is in a different medium than the original, making it a "transmutation or transcoding [...] a recoding into a new set of conventions as well as signs" (16)—Bergvall's illustrations invite the reader to consider to what extent the images create information rather than merely carry it over. In the case of *Drift*, the familiar use of the words "translation" and "adaptation", or even "visualization", is not done with the goal of having a finished product that is a reconfiguration of the poetry in visual form. Rather, Bergvall plays with the idea that "[t]here are no pictures without language [. . .] without real things to represent, and a real object in which to make them appear" (Mitchell 73) by making the reader not so much the recipient as an active participant, the one who brings this "real thing" into being in their mind. Therefore, while language certainly plays a vital role in how one perceives the four visual sections in *Drift*, there is no single language that they are responding to. Bergvall invites the voice of the text—her own voice and that of the reader—to intertwine with the visual language of the images, creating one new entity that one should listen to as a new whole.

Fig. 1: Untitled drawing from "Lines." Drift, by Caroline Bergvall, Nightboat Books, 2014, p. 9.

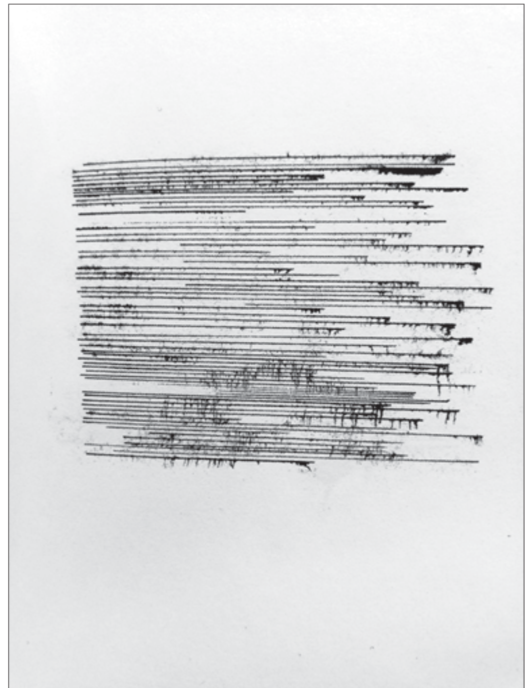

Fig. 2: Untitled drawing from "Lines." *Drift*, by Caroline Bergvall, Nightboat Books, 2014, p. 17.

At this point it is worth examining the relationship between the images and the text of *Drift* on a section-by-section case, for while "Lines" and "Sighting" exist as separate and self-contained fragments, "Maps" and "Block 16A6" are nestled within larger sections, existing next to the text. "Lines" has the most unusual relationship with the text because it appears in the beginning of the collection and before any of the writing. This means that "Lines" contextualizes the whole work, rather than functioning as a means for the reader to "step away" from the text, as is the case with "Sight", a shorter section that is easy to overlook if one is unsure what they are looking at. It is the visual similarity between "Lines" and the following section, "Seafarer", that gives some clues as to the possible relationship between the two, as their arrangement into verse-like form already makes it tempting to think of them as parallels or even as literal responses to each other. There are, in fact, some connec-

tions that can be drawn between the text and the visuals, for instance between the third image in "Lines" (Figure 1) and "Song 3" in "Seafarer." There is an immediate sense of discomfort visually from the entangled lines that begins from the top left corner, the logical starting point for examining the image. Similarly, "Song 3" also begins right away with a chaotic atmosphere, "Stormed by winter land fell away This one / doesn't know fact noman knows" (Bergvall 27). If one attempts to follow this pattern, however, they will quickly find that it is the pairing of 'Line 11' (Figure 2) with "Halfville 3" that disrupts this seemingly straightforward and linear correlation due to the way the text of "Halfville 3" linguistically interrupts the reader's understanding, including only a handful of legible words that are interspersed among a sea of floating consonants. Due to its location, as well as the absence of any kind of identifying information that could help orient the reader within the set of images, Bergvall seems to expect the reader to flip through "Lines" when they first pick up the book because of the way the section decentralizes the reader's expectations of what they will first encounter in a poetry collection. It is only after the reader is eased into the tandem of the equally unconventional poem sequences to follow that a natural return to the section becomes possible.

Because they form subsections of a section, one cannot help but examine "Maps" and "Block 16A6" in relation to the poems that come before them. However, even within this apparently simple classification, there is an additional pairing that exists between "Sighting" and "Maps", which arguably have a stronger relationship with the explanatory notes at the end than they do with the poems themselves. In the case of "Sighting", the reader will most likely not understand what they are looking at, only that the images are most likely close-ups or at least blurred versions of something that was once visually clear, and it is only upon reading the notes at the end that a firm relationship between image and text is established.

A similar case can be made with "Maps", which offers the reader a clue in the title and the constellation-like appearance of white dots against a back background. Here, however, the images are even more indebted to the notes, for unlike in "Sighting", where the reader's first impression can either be supported or dispelled through the explanatory text, the notes for "Maps" act as a sort of key that deciphers the image and makes it accessible to the viewer. Furthermore, the notes also form a textual and thematic among the images in addition to the already evident visual one, connecting voyages with cities with the zodiac to form a commentary on identity that approaches the topic from multiple angles. "Maps" is conditioned not so much by the poetry in *Drift* as by the explanation of what it is, so although the reader may be convinced that the constellation-like images have a direct and linear relationship with the preceding text, the image itself denies them the opportunity to easily confirm this. "Maps" is a literal translation of the information in the back of the book that, nonetheless, does not sacrifice its primary function as a *poetic transformation* of this very same information. The reader can only appreciate this approach if they also consider why Bergvall to use this visual format instead of something more straightforward, like a chart.

This leaves "Block 16A6", which forms half of the "Shake" section yet does not have any text to identify it as a separate part, as is the case with the way "Maps" is identifies as part of "Report." The poems that precede "Block 16A6" have a flowing quality to them, even during the moments when the language changes. They seem to address the reader directly, telling them "Here is ok/ mind home embodies ok/ walk inside your own walk/ sit inside your own seat/ talk within your own voice/ spread within your own shape" (Bergvall 107). By comparison, "Block 16A6" has a staccato-like quality due to its persistent repetition of a single letter which, it should be noted, appears only once within the poems themselves. The blocks of Þs form an impenetrable wall on the level of comprehension that the reader cannot entirely overcome, yet they also are constantly within the reader's grasp due to visual simplicity of these images. In some ways, "Block 16A6" has the most complex relationship with the text due to the way it condenses Bergvall's linguistic concerns—especially those in the following section, "Log"—into one visual signifier: the Þ. It gives the reader access beyond the text and into Bergvall's own personal state of being, especially into moments like when, "[a]t night in

[her] hotel room[,] [she tries] to write but [is] too exhausted from the physical impact of spending hours inside these sounding and spoken vibrations [...how] [t]here's a constant electric buzz running through [her] limbs" (129). Since the text in *Drift* is always, first and foremost, a vehicle through which Bergvall expresses her own thoughts and concerns, then in some ways "Block 16A6" serves Bergvall directly by allowing her to directly express these ideas in the movement of her hand, as shall be discussed shortly.

"Sighting" and "Maps" in particular touch upon Edouard Glissant's belief that "the poetics of Relation remain forever conjectural and presupposes no ideological stability" (32), for even though one supposedly knows what they are looking at, the very ambiguity that surrounds these sections suggests that one does not necessarily need to know in order to appreciate the image or even "understand" the image on an emotional level. Moreover, this kind approach also, as mentioned earlier, suggests that the ideas the reader extracts from the image based on their personal impressions of it are as valid, if not more important, even, than those the artist imbued them with. It is helpful that, in the case of *Drift*, the poet and the artist are the same individual, simplifying an additional issue that is beyond the scope of this paper to examine. While "[t]he root is unique" (Glissant 11) in that *Drift* relies on repetition and overlapping ideas to ensure the reader is able to follow along without getting completely lost, it is the kind of root that grounds rather than strangles, as Bergvall encourages difference not just in the kinds of images she includes but also in how the reader will, inevitably, respond to them. She simplifies Glissant's argument that "[t]ransparency no longer seems like the bottom of the mirror [...as] [t]here is opacity now at the bottom of [it]" (111) by encouraging the reader to seek out the assumed transparent connections throughout the book in order to demonstrate that images can be like written text in the way they "oppose[ ] anything that might lead a reader to formulate the author's intention differently [though] [a]t the same time [one] can only guess at the shape of this intention" (115).

It is now worth considering some smaller, perhaps less apparent though no less important, differences between these four sections, as this further determines what kind of effect the images will have on the reader, which lie in the role of the artist's hand and the question of how a mechanically-produced image compares to a hand-drawn image. This opposition is most clearly reflected if one juxtaposes "Sighting" and "Block 16A6", since the former was produced through the mechanical and reproducible medium of photography, whereas the latter displays variation in shape, size, and arrangement while leaving unmistakable evidence of the maker's presence, most notably by smudging and deliberate overlapping. Once again, if the reader considers their placement in *Drift*, then "Sighting" and "Block 16A6" enhance one's understanding of the text by, in the case of "Sighting", portraying a visual and documentary side to the account of the zodiac vessel or by, in the case of "Block 16A6", pictorially introducing the subject of the section "Þ" and serving as a foreshadowing to Bergvall's statement on how she "went looking for [her] Nordic roots in the English language and found this sign" (177).

Once again, however, the matter is not as simple, as the sections "Lines" and "Block 16A6" portray mechanical qualities despite being hand-drawn. Both rely on the repetition of one key element, whether a line or a letter, to engage the reader's attention, and may therefore initially come across as abstract and wholly divergent from the text. In some ways this crossing over is akin to the way one "speak[s] [a language] by presenting it, in that very language, as the language of the other" (Derrida 21), especially if one considers the formal difference between the two sections according to Wilhem Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*, in which he argued that "hard-edged, geometric forms emerge in cultures whose relation to the natural world is fraught and difficult, while sinewy curves are found among those in more harmonious circumstances" (Drucker 40). Such a perspective would be too far-reaching in the search for Bergvall's presence and emotional state within her writing, yet it comes close to embodying what she describes when she says: "the lines are starting to think of their own accord. They refuse the ruler, refuse their line state, thicken and deepen and engage in short

dances that release other spatial rhythms" (Bergvall 146). Since "the marks that make up an image are neither semantically consistent [...] nor are they graphically consistent, unless they are produced by mechanical means" (Drucker 24), then the very nature of the hand-drawn elements makes them act as a more interpretive compared to the more strictly factual nature of the photographs or plot points in "Sighting" and "Maps" respectively, which are meant to depict or at least convey something. This kind of hybridity therefore caters to both the more theoretical and factual aspect of *Drift* while also emphasizing the collection's role as an exploration of language in the form of a "modern poetic epic."

This brings the paper to the related concern over representation and the question of how much claim, if any, an image has on reality; that is, whether it should be "mandatory" that images in a book be either mimetic in and of themselves or, more significantly, mimetic *in relation to* the text. A strong argument against this kind of mentality can be found in Susan Sontag's seminal essay "Against Interpretation", in which she stresses not only that "the mimetic theory, by its very terms, challenges art to justify itself" (3), but also that, "[b]y reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting that, one tames the work of art" (8). Once again, this returns to the earlier discussion of how one should classify the images in *Drift*. If one chooses to literally apply the mimetic theory to the 'works of art' in *Drift*, however, they will once again encounter the opposition on handmade versus mechanical and images that present valid information in a more "artistic guise"—"Sighting", "Maps"—versus images that do not seem to be interested in pursuing such a straightforward relationship with the text in the first place, like "Lines" and "Block 16A6". Moreover, mimesis implies a tautological perception of reality, since there is an unspoken expectation that all people who see a mimetic work of art should be able to recognize what they are looking at.

The four sections, and even the text, in *Drift*, however, are a hybrid reality, whether this is the author's personal relationship with the texts and languages she is writing about, or if it is her *interpretation* and *artistic arrangement* of actual events, as in "Report", which "register[s] the event by recitation" (Bergvall 134). Thus, what the images *correspond* to, if one wishes to think in these terms, is to Bergvall's already mediated version of these topics, acting as *visual* translations of her *internal* ones. To argue, therefore, that the images work with or against the text would be to neglect the creative process altogether, to simplify, if not overlook, the relationship between *Drift* as a whole and its creator. Bergvall complicates matters for the reader who may be interested in "conceiv[ing] [...] the work of art on the model of a statement [...in which case] content still comes first [before form]" (4) by demonstrating that form *is* content, since none of the images have a one-to-one correlation with the text like in a picture book, at times even forming their own distinct sections.

In fact, if one truly wishes to categorize the images in *Drift* as being of a particular type, then they are more likely to fit the categorization of asemic writing, as the next logical step after being told that the images do not "represent" something is, arguably, to then to think of them—especially the sections "Lines" and "Block 16A6"—as nonsensical scribbles. Michael Jacobson offers an alternative way of thinking about the form, describing asemic writing as "a wordless, open semantic form of writing that is international in its mission" that "offers meaning by way of aesthetic intuition, and not by verbal expression [...allowing it] to relate all words, colors, and even music, irrespective of the author or the reader's original languages" ("On Asemic Writing"). These observations bring the argument away not only from the notion of image-as-translation but also from the desire to create a binary relationship between the two, instead encouraging the reader to consider images on the same level as the text, for "[n]ot only is writing already and immediately a kind of drawing[,] but initiation into one practice presumes the other, insofar as this distinction is itself conceptual" (Scott, "Writing Drawing/Drawing Writing"). Although classifying the four sections in question as asemic writing may come across as a way of disengaging them from the rest of *Drift*, neatly labelling them whereas the poetic text frequently avoids such easy compartmentalization, doing so allows the reader to think of the connection between the two aspects of the collection as one of *discourse* rather than *transliteration*.

The images in Caroline Bergvall's *Drift* escape easy classification and even push the reader's understanding of what constitutes an image. By including more factual visuals alongside more artistic and expressive ones, Bergvall suggests that before embarking upon a discussion of how these images relate to the text one should first understand how they interact with each other. By giving the images this level of attention that they rightly deserve, one acknowledges them as *content* rather than as mere embellishments to the collection. For this very reason, it would also be unproductive to discuss the four sections according to familiar theories of translation or even as translations. Instead, Bergvall demonstrates that it is the formal and even aesthetic qualities of the images that makes them vital in conveying things the reader may not have even considered were an integral part of the collection, such as the author's own emotions and relationship with the content, thereby providing the reader with a level of access that transcends the very notion of what a translation is capable of.

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