

## THE ART OF DRAWING ASEMIC WRITING

**Karna Mustaqim, Ph.D**

Universitas Esa Unggul, karna.mustaqim@esaunggul.ac.id

**Nurfitrihanah Octavianingrum Raharjo Putri, M.Sn.**

Institut Kesenian Jakarta, nurfitrihanah@pascasarjanaikj.ac.id

### A. Intromission

Writing has never been more exciting than before, although the asemic writing that emerges has to be understood as the amorphous form of any common alphabetical writings. The excitement is even greater when we pretend to be challenged by the ability to read asemic writing as if it were mere ordinary writings. It looks like written in an alien languages, seems like meaningless doodling, a bunch of scribble kind of handwriting yet scrawled without concrete representational meaning or might be composed by any random and various abstract lines with no intentional meaning attached on it. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that it was being written in a language we are not yet familiar with.

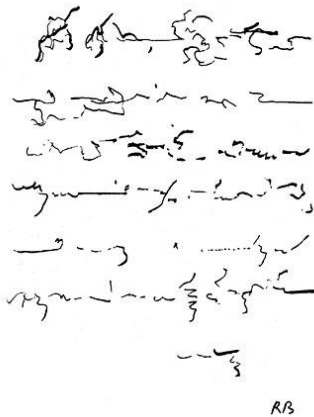


Figure 1. Roland Barthes asemic writing in *Drawing on Writing* (2000). <http://www.drawingsonwriting.org/page25.htm>

Akane Kawakami (2011) asserts the purpose of making illegible writing that cannot be read, conforming to Barthes by refusing to transmit meaning, 'it draws the reader's attention to its material nature, rather than its instrumental one' (p.387). Reading an asemic writing gives a sense of pleasant albeit in the ignorance of the meaning of the words depicted. Although it does not have a distinctive language, it continues to attract the attention of lay readers. Without the apparent meaning being attached to the form, there comes a vacuum of meaning which give freedom for the reader to interpret them without any restriction.

According to Barry Schwabsky in Artforum May 1999, it was a writer the person who push the boundary of writing into painting, named Henri Michaux whom in 1927 notably exhibit 'Narration and Alphabets' which put efforts on handwritten that disclosed "an urge to depict the strangeness of writing". Schwabsky further believed Michaux early fascination, experimenting drawing and writing, plays around the ambiguity of abstract mark-making and its suggestive figuration were the consequences of his attractiveness of Asian cultures—in which painting, drawing, and calligraphy have fairly distinctive visual features from those found in the Western cultures.

One of Michaux's wandering lines "suggests a written text by its form, although its language is clearly undecipherable", said Laurie Edson (1983), she later explained that Michaux, "turned to painting because of the relative lack of freedom experienced in the universe of words(48)". Edson in 'Henri Michaux: Artist and Writer Movement' sees the twentieth century has witnessed the enthusiasm of poets and artist to discover the powerful affinities of those two artforms, seeking within the form of writing to liberate language from its conventional appearance and attach meaning. By heightened the awareness of the

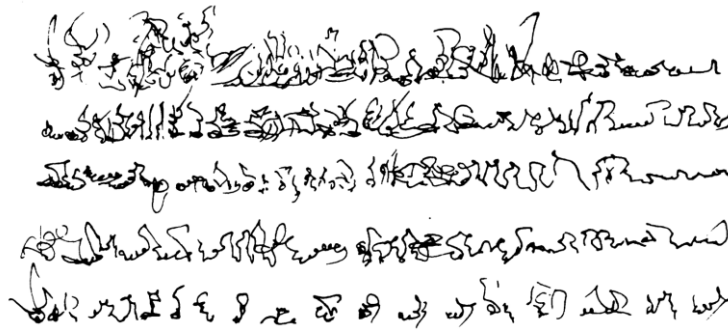


Figure 2. "Narration" (excerpt) 1927, Henri Michaux (1899-1984).

continually-evolving his-self exploration, Michaux experimenting with the possibilities of interactions between poem (writing) and visual art (drawing and painting) whilst revealing his own artistic expression.

## B. Writing the Unknown

A handful of terms occurs when people begin responding to words and images then seek to get out of the existing convention of language, namely a written language that has been learned since childhood and blends into our adulthood. Asemic writing intends to explore the field that has not yet been distinguished, when the practice has not yet separated by definition between *anulis* (writing) and *anglukis* (painting). Those terms were used by Sanento Yuliman (1941-1992), an Indonesian prominent art critics, words taken from ancient Sundanese and Javanese. Quite similar to the etymology of writing and drawing which is root back to the greek word, such as '*graphein*' that refer to the act of scratching on surfaces, to write, to draw, to etch, to engrave. People are attracted to the form without the sound of a certain meaning, and free the line of writing as a picture as writing, without having to think about the meaning, neither the artistic nor the aesthetics play of the asemic itself.

Plausibly, Ari J. Adipurwawidjana (2016) writes down an asemic writing in his essay purposively as an attempts to respond Afrizal Malna's invitation to take a break from the nebula of words and characters. It seems arguably that the Asemic gives him a chance to

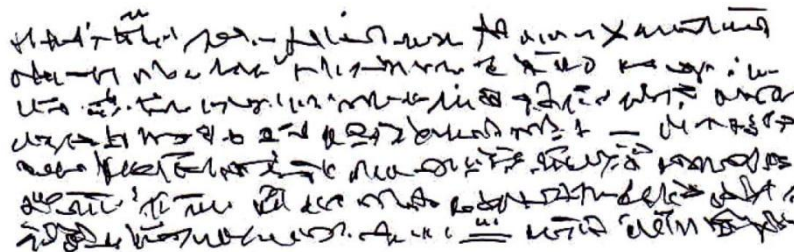


Figure 3. Ari J. Adipurwawidjana, 14 April 2016, p. 13.

write the unwritten writings, to depict thoughts that have not yet known thinkable, writing down things that is not yet known through writing in itself. In this case, one must first postpone all the preconceptions which have been presented a-priori which enframing our historical thoughts. Thoughts that have been passed generation by generation forming lives of our parents, our grandparents, our great-grandparents, and to the wider society around us.

As grows up we let down the fun of marks making on surfaces, an activity once which is not necessarily has to have any actual meaning, reasons, rationale and whatsoever aims in doing it. People becomes adults who willingly abandon the pleasure gained from writing and drawing as we experienced in childhood, as toddler, as an imaginative kids. Nowadays, in the lives of many modern urban livings, our adulthood faces many restrain situations that hold us back and hinder us in expressing our true feelings.

On the current urban situation in the city, the practice of art therapy or the use of art as part of the therapeutic process, is still in the early stage, the psychotherapy usually looks towards the effectiveness of using music and painting, rarely by using expressive writing. Yet, expressive writing was said 'might not be beneficial for people who have reservation or difficulties in expressing emotions' (Niles, A.N., et.al, cited in Dinastuti, 2018). One of an intriguing topic study in psychological field namely Alexithymia or lacking words of emotion (Haviland, M.G., 2016), a term coined by psychotherapist Peter Emanuel Sifneos in 1973 which related to a personal trait characterized inability to identify and describe emotions experienced by one's self or others. It has generated voluminous research so many years. Based on Siti, and Machsunah (2019) there is an association between alexithymia and aggressive behavior in male adolescents. The study by Lestari,

M. Y., Dewi, S.Y., dan Chairani, A. (2020) pointed out that teenagers with alexithymia tend to become addicted to social media. Yet, it also indicating limited imagination caused by a lack of fantasy.

Some study shown the possibility and potential relationship of art therapy to contribute significantly of multidisciplinary milieu (Heiman, M., Et.al., 1994). Heiman categorizes the art production that applied to their therapeutic method were concrete, abstract and symbolic (p.144). Winston (2016) found that expressive therapies which have roots in creative arts. One phenomenon to stand in some relation with seemingly nonsensical here is the asemic writing. Asemic writing is particularly promising for alexithymic individuals but, the improvement was still temporary (Winston, C., Et.al., 2016). Here we does not mean to go in depth with psychotherapy, but slightly mentioned on alexithymia phenomenon, since it make sense that in certain degree writing some nonsensical or meaningless scribble can bring a relaxed state of mind. In conclusion, Winston suggests that “seemingly nonsensical and inconsequential behaviors can indeed confer benefits on one’s well-being” (p. 153).

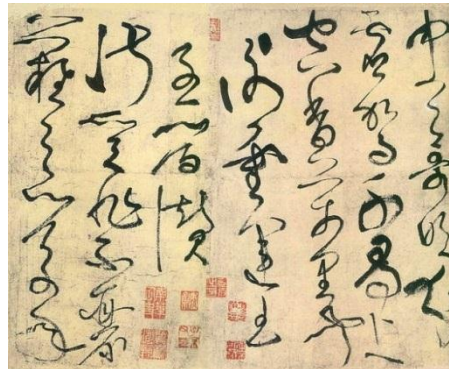


Figure 4. , Zhang Xu, Cursive calligraphy around 710-750 AD.  
<https://www.graphs.com.br/zhang-xu>

Michael Jacobson (2013), artist and poet founder of the gallery Asemic Writing: New Post-Literate, explicate that asemic writing as a “shadow, impression, and abstraction of conventional writing”. Jacobson witnesses a long history of people creating unreadable works. He introduced by his partner Tim Gaze about an excellent Tang Dynasty cursive calligrapher, Zhang Xu, who already creating wild illegible calligraphy almost 1200 years ago. According to



Figure 5. "Collaborative Calligraphy" was performed by English artist Roland Buckingham-Hsiao and Taiwanese artist Chou, Cheng-Yu (周政宇) at Hei Bai Qie Art Space (黑白切藝文空間) in Taichung City, Taiwan, on Saturday 23rd and Sunday 24th April 2016.

Todd Burst (2019), Jacobson believed that this asemic 'bridges inexplicable emotions from an opaque and inaccessible subjectivity to the visual sphere without imposing meaning'. Figure 5 above, we see an example from Roland Buckingham-Hsiao (2017) whom experiments on collaborative writing through deliberating the chinese calligraphy, inviting the areas of signification available to non-readers of Chinese language.

Unaware of those asemic movement, two of Indonesian prominent artist has been practicing the mode of mark making verisimilitude asemic writings. Made Wianta (1949-2020), Balinese Indonesian master of painting, poet and calligrapher, turned his painting into realm of calligraphy and vice versa. Calligraphy in Song (2005), a catalog booked his journey on colliding the writings and the visual, can be seen as a distinctive visual poetry differed from other poet or painter such as Sutardji Calzoum Bachri, Remy Silado, and Danarto.



Figure 6. Made Wianta, The Song of Calligraphy #2

Not even the resemblance of Chinese calligraphy made by Ezra Pound (1915) can be compared to what Made Wianta reached by pulled out the visual form of his calligraphical strokes that mimicry of somewhat the Chinese characters. Meanwhile, another prominent Chinese Calligrapher in 2020, Tjutu Widaja 79 year old from Bandung, get her doctoral degree from local public university by releasing the strokes of Chinese characters from its origin meaning into experimenting layers in surfaces calligraphic painting. Eventhough she still performs to impose meaning onto her strokes. The act of writing might be perform as more usual starting point, the asemic intertwined themselves between pure literature and visual art. More than insisting traditionally textual works, it becomes blending the visual and textual.



Figure 7. Tjutu Widaja, 2020, Abstraction of Modern Chinese Calligraphy. Still video from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-l8eml8myQ&t=340s>

Asemic writing comes to us when we were first learnt to write down a word, such as when we learnt new kind of writing from different types of alphabets from different culture. Intentional scribbling turns out to resemble illegible writing. Besides asemic writing along with many other form of contemplation of the aesthetic qualities of cross mediums in concrete poetry, photo poetry, writing art, calligrams visual poetry, abstract comics, uncreative writings, conceptual writing being collaborate and collide becoming each other in contemporary art practices.

Steven J. Fowler, one of current contemporary English poet and avant-garde artis goes further by producing diverse body of work across poetry, performance art, experimental theatre, asemic writing, calligrams, concrete poetry and sound poetry, as well as sonic art, installation, fiction and visual art. Somehow it lead us to the hybridity works of art, in the practice of performance of artists who have entered into work tangent to the frontier fields of science and technology, manifesting socio-cultural change, and transcend the temporality of the art itself. "Art transcend all human boundaries," once said by Richard MacDonald, a figurative artist sculptor. Indeed, another views form Ramanan's (2018) that seems aligned in favor of asemic work is that 'art can transcend reason and the confines of language'.



Figure 8. Steven J. Fowler, 2017, Reading Text-World-World-Text I .  
Still video from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHZL5hSd7E8>

At some point on the asemic, writing and drawing exchange their visibility. Sometimes it looks like a pictogram whose shape implies a vague meaning. Sometimes invites us to follow an obscure curvilinear form. The visible in exchange with the invisible, if the form of writing fade out, we are entering the world of drawing. Then, if we look on to their form of drawing, somekind of unreadable writing comes alive, inviting us to interpret them. Both writing and drawing are the instinctual of figure and ground, interplay themselves between hidden and come to forth.

This phenomenon of visibility reserved in the temporality work of kinetic typography. Whilst on its transition between legibility and illegibility, as explained by Betancourt (2019), the texts type in a motion graphics work which is illegible at some moment in time can somewhat be legible at the other moment in its played duration, the asemic dimensions apparently visible in between the transition. Thus, it is more like 'reading images' rather than 'seeing words' which defies gravitational adherence to the lexical structure and linguistic interpretation of language. Letterform as a unit in typographic design becomes fluid in motion graphics (Brownie, 2013), wherein the appearance of the letterform becomes a signifier through itself.

Burst (2019) states that 'one of the keys to asemic writing is its openness which derives from the indeterminacy of translation and meaning'. It is not merely indeterminacy come from linguistic, but moreover also an openness to explore possibility of the medium suitable to experimenting with the asemic. The drawing of asemic writing which manifested in diverse medium, opening up the potentiality of returning art as living activity. The art of drawing asemic writing is to let them loose in openness of elastic interpretation. One way or another, this loosely meaning comes out from drawing the asemic writing into various media might have therapeutic values. It can communicates inexpressible thought or feelings through the emergent of multiple interpretations beyond perceptible senses. Ken Johnson (2013) asserts the calligraphic works in exhibition titled: "Drawing Time, Reading Time" by Pavel Büchler, Mirtha Dermisache and Guy de Cointet are like scat singing, pure visual music.

One different type of articulation occurs in such as visual music of 'Optical Poems' filmed by Oskar Fischinger in 1938 whom makes graphical motion wherein the musical turns into animated graphical elements, he showed how vision becomes audible not in the sense of written composition, or playable composition, but much more approachin visual inasmuch as if one listening to the musicality of visible language. Another articulation through making mark like drawing as such MacLagan (2014) calls the act of let loose in scribbling as 'meta-doodles' that did not followed any preconceived plan by the drawing process itself, 'out of which forms that may be more or less recognizable appear, and into which they might then seem about to disappear'(132).

The shift in interpretation alters the textuality into the visuality of texts, then bring up meaningfulness of neither the textual nor the visual, but the intertwining upon the revealing and the concealing of the truth. In accordance to Heidegger (1971) who simply put that 'art is the becoming and happening of truth'. R. Raj Singh (1990) further explained that the truth in Heidegger was not about to carry out a correct portrayal of particular truth. The truth is about how an artwork in relation with our worldly world, truly true understanding on the whole world itself. Accordingly, an artwork does not need to be pictorial to be revelatory of the world, however abstracted a piece of an artwork, it could be seen embodied in the worldly entities. It transported us out from the familiarity of the world we ordinarily lived in. The drawing of the asemic writing disclosed our contradictory on subjective and objective mindset, then invited us to experience the world unfolded as one.



Figure 9. Karna Mustaqim, 2020. Asemic as Writing as Drawing as Art. Writer's Documentation.

In the realm of artistic research, Mustaqim (2018) uphold that the artist being a researcher is the instrument, those researcher becomes the instrument of practicing research. Whom reveals the truth about the work of art in itself, in which he/she must be true to the used of him/herslef as instrument of the artistic research itself (p.59). Kane X. Faucher (2016) states, that:

“...it is the pre-erasure of stable meaning and fixity to linguistic code, while retaining only the surplus “gestures” of writing...., we are left with is a hybrid, simulacrum experience of the pre-literate.”

### C. Not Quite Concluded

This article here intends to convey a number of concepts that are expected to be related in the effort to cultivate the asemic writing as language as well as images. The interplay between visible and invisible give much more mistery than it may seems. The truthful of meaningful world seem hiding behind the visible, it awaitings in ways that are more drawn out be recognized, yet once it occurs to surface, all of sudden it shades away back to the edge, challenging us to figure out what was it anyway. Asemic is becoming of a system without structure, a meaningful with no grounded semantical meaning. The meaningless asemic writing drawn out its meaningfulness due to the absence of meaning itself. It transports us, tranforms our polarity mindset perception in perceiving things into subjective or objective mannerism, one way or another to be true to ourselves.

At one point, this asemic – its perceptibility either as writing or drawing – transform our enigmatic vision. Yet, it does not mean the asemic provides any given answer, neither it is an objective one nor it is a subjective matter. Its just is, it ocilates from visible to invisible, swinging from what is known to be unknown, moving back and forth continually. Everything within the passage of time, come and gone, appearance and disappearance, growing then falling, nothing is everlasting. The asemic acquires its disposition as pre-linguistic inasmuch as post-literacy simultaneously, and it is all just the beginning of a wonderful journey.

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### Glossary

Alexithymia	Inability to express emotion
Asemic	Non-semantic, wordless open semantic form of writing, without any specific semantic content.
Doodle,	Scribble or draw aimlessly, to play or improvise
Doodling	idly.
Intertwine	to become mutually involved; or to be connected so as to be difficult to separate

## Indeks

### Riwayat Hidup Penulis dan Foto

**Karna Mustaqim** completed his PhD in comics studies at the Faculty of Art and Design, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). He received his Master of Art in Visual Communication and New Media at the same institution. Formerly, taught foundation of graphic design, creative arts methodology, interest in artistic practice-based research typography, traditional freeform drawings and digital illustration. Recently, studying comics, asemics writing-drawing, and learning the phenomenology of aesthetic experience are becoming his predominant interest. Nowadays, attached to Universitas Esa Unggul at Faculty of Design & Creative Industry, and lives in Tangerang, Indonesia, with his beloved wife, and two kids.



Karna Mustaqim, Ph.D.  
Universitas Esa Unggul

**Nurfitrianah Octavianingrum Raharjo Putri**, graduated from Fakultas Seni Rupa dan Desain, Institute Teknologi Bandung (ITB). She engaged in fine arts education as well as cultural activities in the city of Tangerang Selatan (Tangsel), currently pursuing postgraduate study at the Institut Kesenian Jakarta.



Nurfitrianah Octavianingrum Raharjo Putri, S.Sn.  
Institut Kesenian Jakarta.