

# “No, says the signified” The “Logical Status” of Words in Painting

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**ABSTRACT.** Following the lead of his mentor Duchamp, Arakawa carries on the deconstructive play of non-art (readymades) and the non-visual (enigmatic texts) on his canvasses and posters, operating in the humorous vein of affirmative irony that Duchamp had mined in the Dada generation. Going beyond the reiteration of the disruptive effect of words in painting, his book, *The Mechanism of Meaning*, combines pictorial and textual elements in a complex investigation of meaning where the apparent simplicity of the literal is undone by the spectator's interactions with the contradictions of words and images. An examination of some of its pages attempts to show how Arakawa's work glosses Duchamp's concept of the *regardeur*, the indeterminable reader/spectator, by performing a critique of the speech-acts theory of meaning. The performative in meaning is shown to be a rhetorical, not a discursive, movement where intention and convention are inoperable.

Soon after his arrival in New York from Japan in 1960, Shosaku Arakawa began painting large-scale canvasses done in a subdued palette with meticulous mechanical drawing. His usual method was to overlay a background of grays or pastels with abstract geometrical designs and neatly aligned words which spell out laws, poems, quotations, maxims of genre: sayings we could call epistemological puzzles. The paintings contain a touch of humor — an awkward dribble of color, a dangling line, a hand-written *graffito* — which breaks up the compositional severity and philosophical seriousness that a perfect or complete rendering would entail. The words across the canvasses and prints resemble one another in their stenciled, typewritten, or cursive form as if the whole corpus were to be read as an ensemble, and identical texts or fragments recur in various colors and places. Displacing visual and textual experience into a single space, Arakawa questions the traditional ways by which we try to know the world by looking for its reflections iconographically in pictures and conceptually in texts.

Linguistic elements in pictures disturb the pictorial code, words themselves being considered arbitrary signs which have no visual worth: reading is generally a visual experience only physiologically. The Dadaists first radicalized the status of pictured writing. Until then pictured words were managed into readable contexts in books or on banners, as inscriptions on buildings or tombs by picture viewers who had learned to integrate them

FORGET ANY GRAY

WE ARE TOLD TO FORGET ABOUT GRAY. ALL RIGHT.  
 THEN IT IS NON GRAY WE MUST FORGET ABOUT  
 WHEN VIEWING THIS PAINTING. THIS MAKES ME  
 ANGRY. OF COURSE NEITHER IS POSSIBLE AT LEAST.  
 NOT ABSOLUTELY. AND EACH SUGGESTION (COMMA  
 ND?) MAKES THE OTHER LESS POSSIBLE. WHAT  
 KIND OF NONSENSE IS THIS? I'M SO CONFUSED I'D  
 LIKE TO FORGET THE WHOLE THING

WHEN 'ALWAYS AND NOT' SIGNIFIES SOMETHING. 'THE SIGNIFIED OR IF'  
 BELONGS TO THE ZERO SET. HAVE WE MET BEFORE?

FORGET ANY NON-GRAY

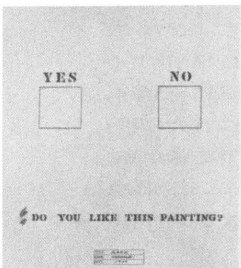
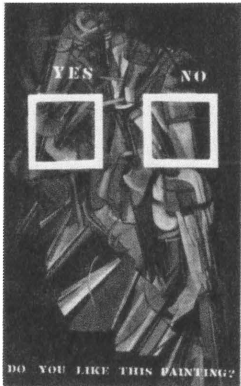
A condition of suspended confusion through which  
 "I" may shift under observation. Or a means for  
 viewing thoughts which might pass between "I" and  
 "me". So, from irregular or parallel intentions,  
 something slowly is forming....

unproblematically into the iconography and interpretation of the visual elements.<sup>1</sup> This practice of reading a work of art as a whole persists today even as the ironies of modernist art and the post-ironic serialism and decorativism of postmodern art refuse to guarantee the integrity and authenticity of contexts in general. What function can Arakawa's words have beyond a performance of Dadaist nonsense or the metalinguistic anarchy of his oft-repeated solecism, "the signified of if"? Our attempt to work out this question will involve the examination of several earlier works and his more recent collection of posters, *The Mechanism of Meaning*.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout his work Arakawa has engaged a playful hermeneutic of time and gaps, exploiting the problematics of memory, error, and the distance between thought and language. The deliberate inexactitude of his geometric drawing, the science fiction flavor of titles like *Reflexis of the Model/The Artificial Given* or *Air: The Diagram of Meeting*, and the verbal visual non-sequiturs created between text and image furnish a sophisticated questioning process directed against accepted conventions of the purposes and intentions of language. An example of the latter can be found in a print, *A Forgettance (Exhaustion Exhumed)*, whose humors title combines a neologism of mock conceptual importance and a pun on Hume whose text is quoted twice on the print. The quote from *A Treatise of Human Nature* uses metaphors, "the memory . . . paints its objects in more distinct colors than [the imagination]" and a memory "flows in upon a mind . . . whereas in the imagination the perception is faint and languid," to explain "a sensible difference between one species of ideas and another." In his rendering of the text in color on paper Arakawa can literalize these metaphors, but his materialization creates a semantic contradiction between text and picture when the phrase "memory . . . distinct colors" is pale and nearly invisible. The ontological imbalance of figurative language is humorously exposed.

To further illustrate Arakawa's capacity for setting up verbal-visual mind bogglers, consider two nearly identical canvasses which "quote" Courbet. One is *Courbet's Canvas* and the other is reproduced without title in *The Mechanism of Meaning* (Figure 1). The imperative "Forget about gray" is grammatically (but conceptually?) contradicted with "Forget about non-gray" in the opposite corner. These imperatives are colored mostly gray, as is the smaller-lettered text near the bottom. The multi-colored main text, read as a commentary on the commands, pictures the impossible forgetting of non-gray. The diagonal line suggests a cancellation but the visual object, *raturé*, remains and joins the joke, "I'm

Figure 1. S. Arakawa, *The Mechanism of Meaning*, p. 90  
"16. Review and Self-Criticism" (also called *Courbet's Canvas*)



**3. PRESENTATION OF AMBIGUOUS ZONES**

EVERYTHING IS AMBIGUOUS AS WELL AS THE JUDGEMENT THAT SOMETHING IS AMBIGUOUS. AS SOON AS ANY FACT IS PRESENTED, AMBIGUITY APPEARS AS THE ZONE OF ALTERNATE POSSIBILITIES. ATTEMPTS TO SELECT (JUXTAPOSE) AMBIGUOUS ZONES WHICH MIGHT EXPLAIN ONE ANOTHER OR THE (AMBIGUOUS) NATURE OF AMBIGUITY.

*If this zone is ambiguous*

*Then one is twice as ambiguous*

**THEN THE ENTIRE AREA IS AT LEAST  
TEN TIMES AS AMBIGUOUS**

USE ALL OF THE ABOVE TO SAY *yes* OR *no*

ARE THESE ZONES FLAWLESS ?

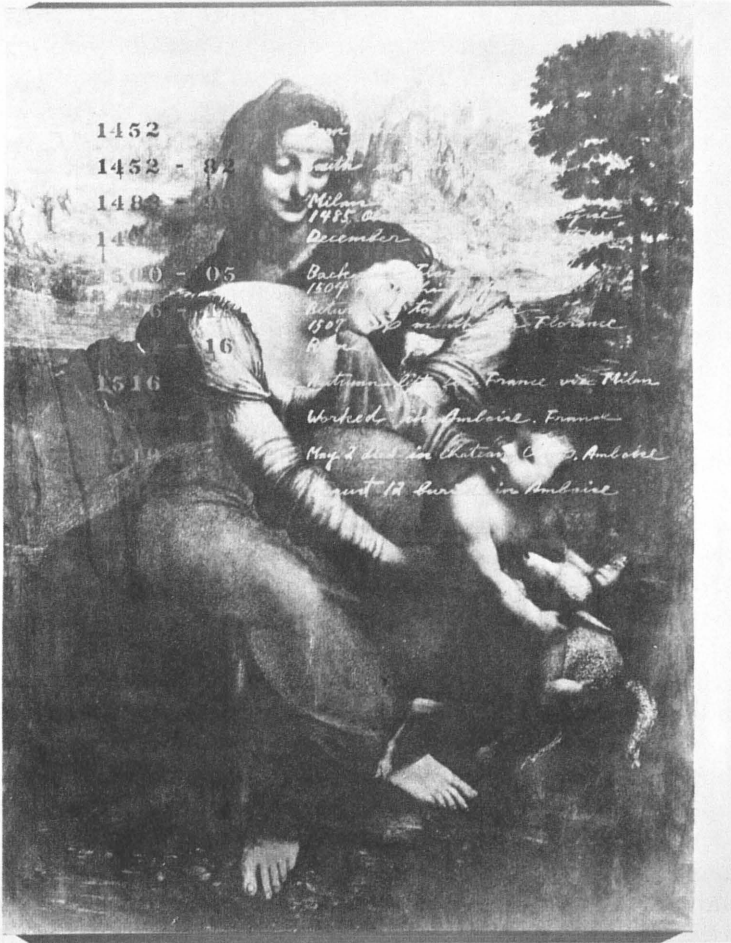
**IN THE NON-SENSE** WHAT IS THE RATIO OF  
ZONES PRESENTED TO AMBIGUITIES EMPLOYED ?

Figure 2. *The Mechanism of Meaning*, p. 15  
 “3. Presentation of Ambiguous Zones”

Figure 3. *The Mechanism of Meaning*, p. 37  
 “7. Splitting of Meaning”

7 SPLITTING OF MEANING

EXERCISES TO DEMONSTRATE THE SEPARATION, DISJUNCTION, DISASSOCIATION, ABSTRACTION, BRANCHING AND RAMIFICATIONS PERTAINING TO SIGNIFICATION. ADDITIONAL EXERCISES MAY ATTEMPT TO INDUCE FURTHER "UNNATURAL" SPLITTING.



PORTRAIT OF MONA LISA (SEE ABOVE)  
BY *La Gioconda*

so confused I'd like to forget the whole thing." Even where writing is reduced to self-contradiction from a logical point of view, readability can be translated to a different level by concrete rendering such that, here, both the necessity and impossibility of forgetting are asserted. The "zero sense set" referred to can include all illogical sentences, such as "When 'always and not' ..." (the sentence it occurs in), or unreadable, undecidable, propositions like "Forget about gray," "Forget about non-gray" whose form plays against their meaning. The tag "Have we met before?" lacks contextual reference, except as a serially recurring fragment on Arakawa's work, an index of self-reference. The caption under the painting might be taken as the program for *The Mechanism of Meaning* in which "a means for viewing thoughts" is presented as a shift between visual and mental planes, between subjective and objective interpretation, to show that meaning does not emerge to leave confusion behind but remains an exchange of contradictions and blurs.

Arakawa's endless self-references assume an ironic tone, a Duchampian irony of affirmation. As if introducing "I" and "me" ("Have we met before?"), he mocks both his own confusion and the view of art as willful self-realization. Having regularly played chess with Duchamp, Arakawa could be called a legitimate heir to New York dada. Direct allusions and glosses turn up everywhere. Just two examples from *Mechanism*: a reproduction of *Nu descendant un escalier* to which he has added large boxes labeled "yes" and "no" and the question "Do you like this painting?"; and Leonardo's *Virgin and Child with St. Anne* labeled as "Portrait of Mona Lisa by la Giaconda" reminding us of Duchamp's Mona Lisa "misnamed" as *L.H.O.O.Q.* (Figures 2 & 3). In a letter to "Dear Rose Selavy, Dear Marcel," dated four years after Duchamp's death, Arakawa concluded as he does on *Courbet's Canvas*, "When 'always and not' ... *Have we met before??*"<sup>3</sup> The same ironic stance and jokey disrespect that set Duchamp apart in 1920 gives Arakawa today an approach so different from the neo-realism and serious postmodernisms of his contemporaries. His verbosity has tenacious roots in Duchamp's punning and his abstract geometrics go about merrily illustrating Duchamp's pataphysical notes on perspective and higher dimensions. Even as Arakawa might seem to fashion himself as a Duchamp readymade, he is not a shadow of Duchamp and his use of language in particular sets him apart from Modernism; his words may be said to set up a "rules of the road" for mapping post-Duchampian art. He is less concerned than the Modernists with art's own means and status and more broadly engages understanding and knowledge, meaning as it functions in all aspects of life. His is far less art about art than Duchamp's and far more "art about discourse": playing on the conventions of current academic and pop discourses — art-historical, psychoanalytic,

structuralist, phenomenological — he uses visual language as “aids” to question the categories of language acts we use in our attempts to deal with the world. Where Duchamp’s was a critique of categories of thought involved in aesthetics (consciousness, truth, self, creation), Arakawa’s is a critique of how language is used to enact any such critique, including his own. Some further comparisons between the two may help to elucidate these differences.

Arakawa’s painting title *Tomb of Chance* echoes Duchamp’s *Tu m’* (Figure 4), his last canvas, where meticulously laid-out images momentarily banned his usual aleatory procedures. A kind of summary of methods of perspective projection, *Tu m’* compresses shadows and stencils of readymades, geometric designs (that more resemble Arakawa than Duchamp), trompe-l’oeil elements (“torn canvas” background), and anti-trompe l’oeil readymades (pins in the tear, a bottle brush, a hand painted by a sign painter) into an anamorphic painting that must be viewed from various angles. Arakawa’s title *Insertion Within a Temperature / We* (Figure 5) likewise includes a verbless subject, one that might be a *we/oui* with/for Duchamp’s *You ... me (Tu m’)*. Also a broad horizontal, *Insertion* is divided into four panels with geometric forms — cones and cylinders — rendered in classical perspective. “Behind” these forms, color blocks varying from bright to pale hues in the left section and pale solid blue and gray in the other panels remind us again to forget about gray or non-gray. What appears to be symmetrical is not, and lines trail off like the loose falling threads Duchamp called his “Standard Stoppages” or units of measure. “Over” the two left panels a thirty-three line text with the Godardesque beginning “Two or three points of departure” and multi-color ending “The call of continuity” is replete with geometric metaphors and ignores temperature except as a pun on “volumes of degrees.” The pale pink and blue letters are so faint as to be nearly unreadable. Both *Tu m’* and *Insertion* are cryptic commentaries, Arakawa’s verbal and pictorial, Duchamp’s wordless except for A. Klang (the sign painter’s signature), on the artists’ spatial and anti-representational preoccupations.

To emphasize the visual and mental difficulties of reading *Insertion*, Arakawa placed a regulation black and white eye chart at the far left. It is an oculist witness like Duchamp’s “Témoins oculistes” (Figure 7), optician’s charts he used in the glass paintings *A Regarder d’un oeil près pendant plus d’une heure* and *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*. Arakawa used two oculist charts in another work, *Test Mirror*, but generally his works before *Mechanism* were, apart from the “messages,” abstract. The posters of *Mechanism*, however, are so full of readymades — shoes, cutlery, wood boxes, maps, other artists’ work, and so forth — that it seems at first one is dealing with objects and their captions in a conventional way.

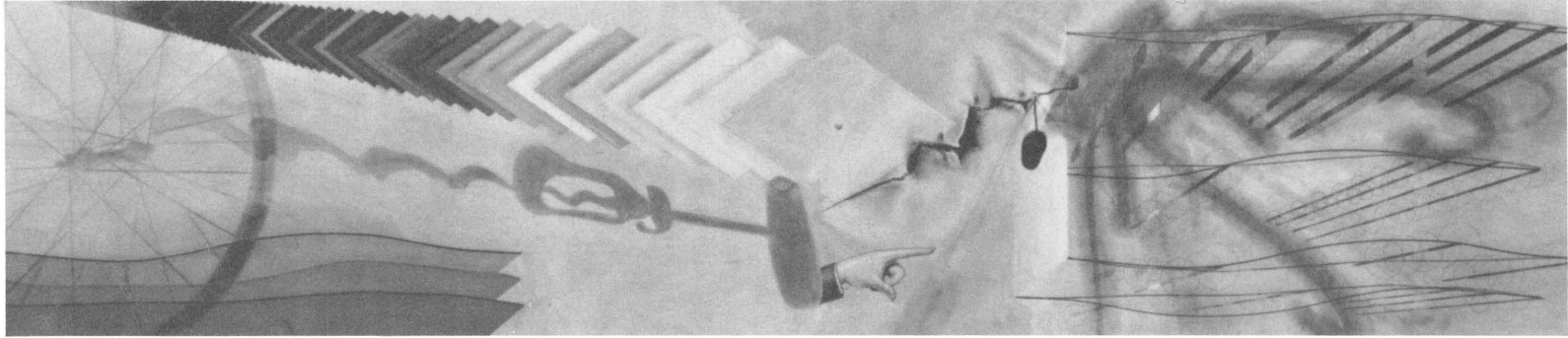


Figure 4. Marcel Duchamp, *Tu m'*. 1918. Oil and pencil on canvas, with bottle brush, 3 safety pins, and, a bolt, 27 1/2 x 122 3/4 in. Yale University Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier.

Figure 5. S. Arakawa, *Insertion Within a Temperature/We*, 1979-80



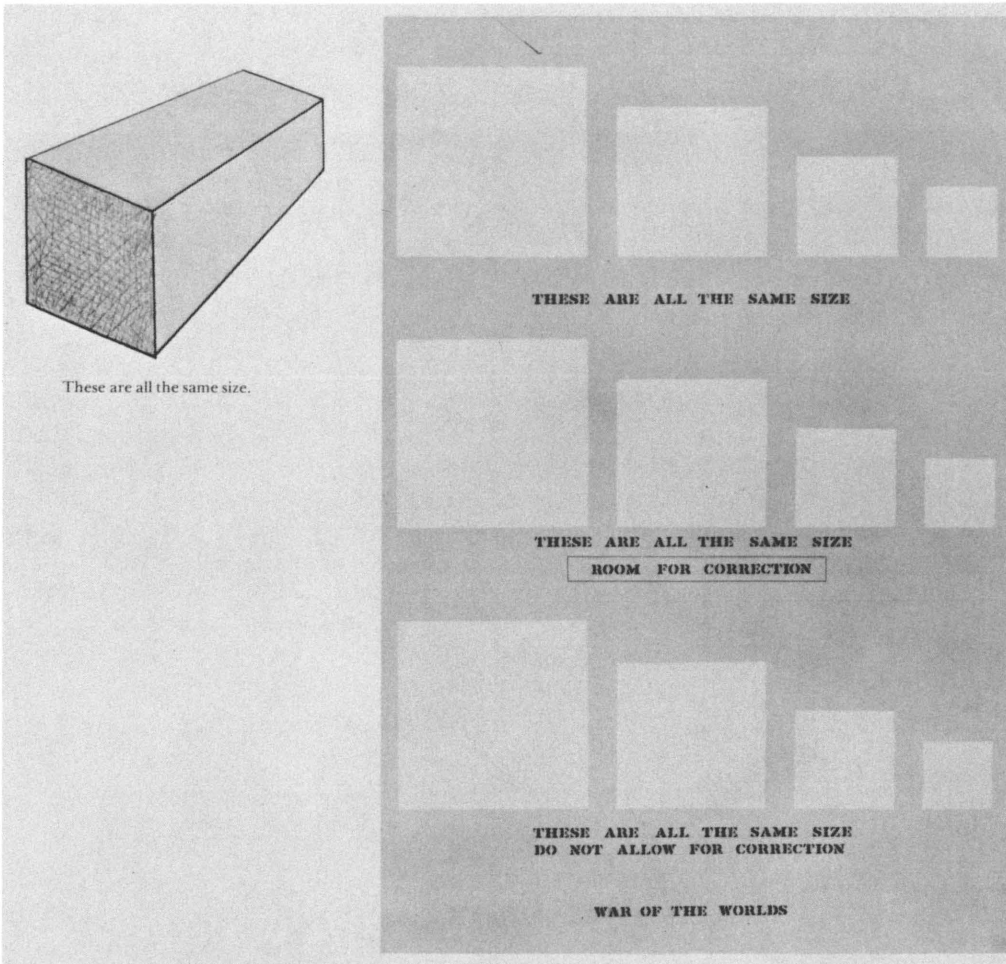


Figure 6. *The Mechanism of Meaning*, p. 27  
 “5. Degrees of Meaning”

But Duchamp’s passage through the art world disallows that and demands a different relationship between image and inscription. Readymades, according to the commonly quoted definition given them by André Breton, are “un certain nombre d’objets tout faits (ready made) dignifiés *a priori* par la seule vertu de son choix”<sup>4</sup>, and Duchamp later said the choice was based on “une réaction d’indifférence *visuelle*, assortie au même moment à une absence totale de bon ou mauvais goût.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, a readymade is not a surrealist found object and is often neither found nor an object in the usual sense. Early readymades *were* common objects, usually with a punny or

enigmatic inscription, of which the urinal called *Fontaine* and signed “R. Mutt” is perhaps the best known. Soon readymades were commissioned or completely designed and hand-made by Duchamp. The readymade came to be a category, a name, a concept, rather than a process.

This new and problematic status of non-art has a corollary in Duchamp’s idea of the *regardeur*, the viewer/reader who creates: “Ce sont les regardeurs qui font les tableaux.”<sup>6</sup> The artist’s choices and intentions are abandoned with the finished object and the receiver must become active in the creation of the work’s meaning. Along with his “alter-ego” Rose Sélavy, the *regardeur* is one of Duchamp’s radical moves to de-name and name new categories that challenge the selfhood of the artist, and even all manifestations of the Cartesian ego. In *The Mechanism of Meaning*, Arakawa combines the discursive with readymades and visual tricks in a immensely complicated system to demonstrate how the *regardeur* operates, how on many levels meaning intertextualizes between the visual and the verbal. In the book, photographs of spectators dealing with the five and one-half by seven and one-half-foot panels show what cannot be ascertained from the panel reproductions on the page, in effect demonstrating the inadequacy of a single point of view. The *regardeur*, a critique of the classical perspective based on the idealized spatial relationship between a flat work and a monocular view, is neither an ideal or a “typical” viewer, nor is it an empirical aggregate of all viewers or their opinions. In *Tu m’* Duchamp’s anamorphic projections are one method used to cause shifts in the subject-object positions — “you” becomes “me.” Arakawa tends more to use words like those in the caption under *Courbet’s Canvas* to destabilize the writer/reader balance, but he also plays text off images to challenge the givens of perception and understanding. To have an example of a deconstruction of perspective, consider a panel where the written statements, “These are all one size,” are invalidated by the shapes so labeled (Figure 6). The beam drawn to the left of the panel is rendered by conventional perspective drawing, reminding us that objects of differing sizes are understood to be of equal size if they are correctly depicted in a given space: there is an accepted relativity of size and distance that Western spectators have learned to read which tells them the small squares are not smaller, just farther away. The program of “Degrees of Meaning” is given a very literal demonstration. The important thing here is that the mind operates spatial manoeuvres as easily as semantic manoeuvres and the *regardeur* operates in both modes at once. Duchamp’s readymades undermined the exalted status of the artist and his object of creation. By picturing discourse Arakawa challenges the concepts that guide our understanding of art (and all visual processes) and any will to communicate via a transparent writing system.

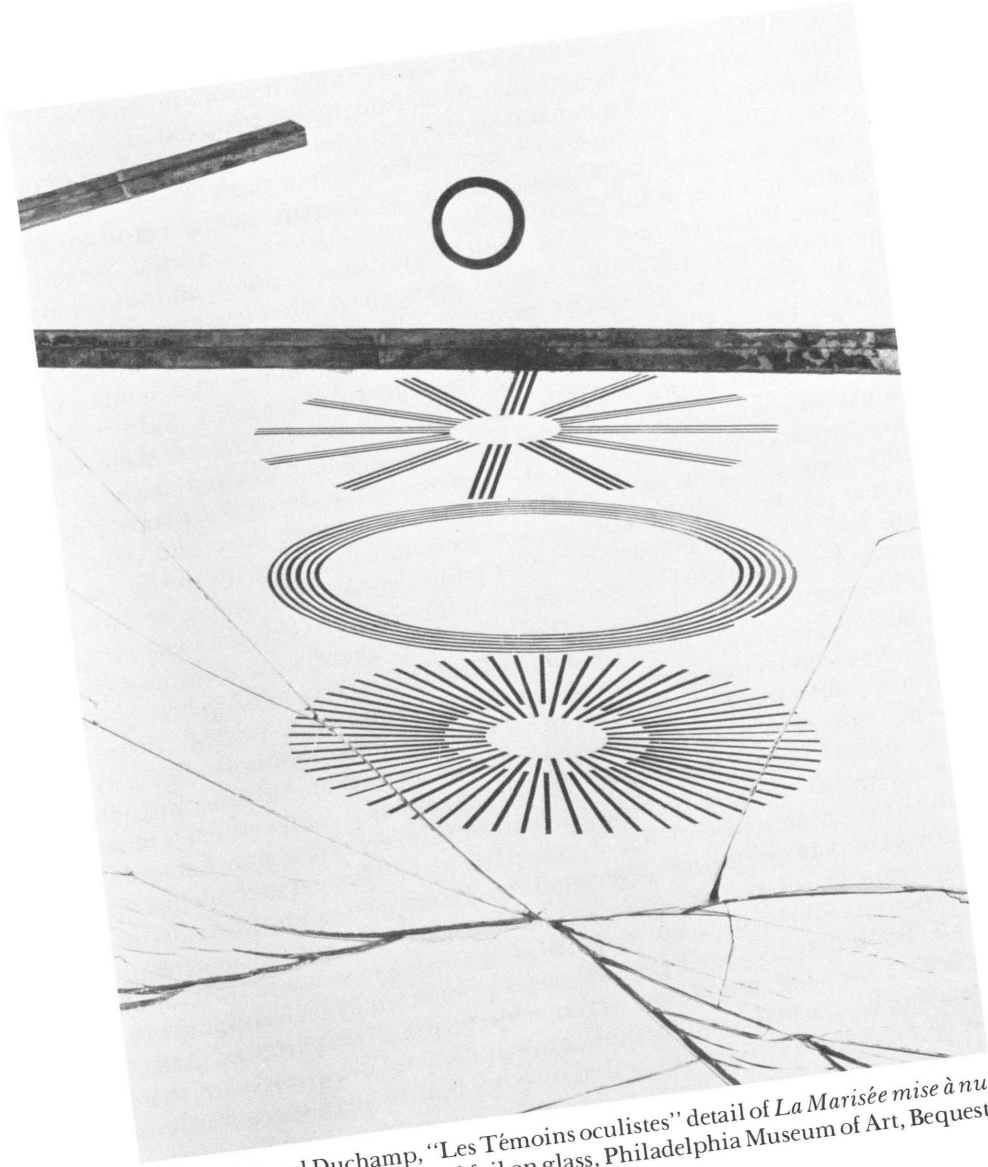


Figure 7. Marcel Duchamp, "Les Témoins oculistes" detail of *La Marisée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*, lead foil on glass, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Bequest of Katherine S. Dreier

Although Duchamp's title *La Mariée mise à nu . . .* has been the subject of reams of commentary, the actual picture on glass contains no written words except the title and signature on the back. The narrative fragments must be read among the notes of the Green Box of the same name.<sup>7</sup> The critical function of one of the components of the *Bride*, the *Oculist Witnesses* (Figure 7), can be compared to Arakawa's works that use eye charts or mirrors. Duchamp's Witnesses are silvered disks of the type used to test camera focus or astigmatism. Within the perspectively-drawn lower half of the glass, or "Bachelor Apparatus," they are tilted to reflect upward to the Bride half, across the center "Horizon" line or "Bride's Garment." The witnesses are *auculistes*, voyeur-agents of the Bachelors, and fragmented reflections of the viewer and as such avatars of the *regardeur*, a figure whose place is indeterminable. Again, the Witnesses serve to undermine certain visual traditions and their punning name is the stab of truth about the fetishizing of images.

Arakawa plays with the *regardeur* when he puts commands on a panel of *Mechanism*, "Open this to have a déjà vu," where mirrors inside two boxes send back the spectator's own face (p. 28). As Duchamp did with his work, *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy?*, Arakawa subverts an involuntary experience by changing its syntax. In the "Feeling of Meaning" series he gives another command, "Pull," to apply to a tangled mass of string that is drawn on the board (Figure 8). A mirror above reflects the puller's hand so that one might ask whether the pulling is meaningful because it is reproduced, whether the feeling of pulling is meaningful or merely pretend, whether the command should not rather have been placed below the hanks of hair, and so forth. The visual position of the commands (one can immediately gauge the futility of pulling the "string" or of rearranging the cutlery below) alters their logical status of meaningfulness: something changes, as in Arakawa's caption on the lower right, "in . . . out from what is perceived." Arakawa's eye chart (Figure 5) is the optician's *letter* chart, the one that tests reading; Duchamp chose the test that measures visual distortion. The Oculist Witnesses comment on the distance between art and viewer, pointing out faults in artists' and critics' perception. Arakawa changes focus, so to speak, placing the easy-to-read but meaningless text next to a barely legible but "literate" text. Duchamp's texts generally retain an iconoclastic force whereas Arakawa's tend to work the other way, throwing into doubt writing as a medium for any intention to signify in a clear, direct manner.

The caption above the "Portrait of Mona Lisa" (Figure 3) introduces the section on "Splitting of Meaning": "Exercises to demonstrate the separation, disjunction, disassociation, abstraction, branching and ramifications pertaining to signification. Additional exercises may attempt to induce

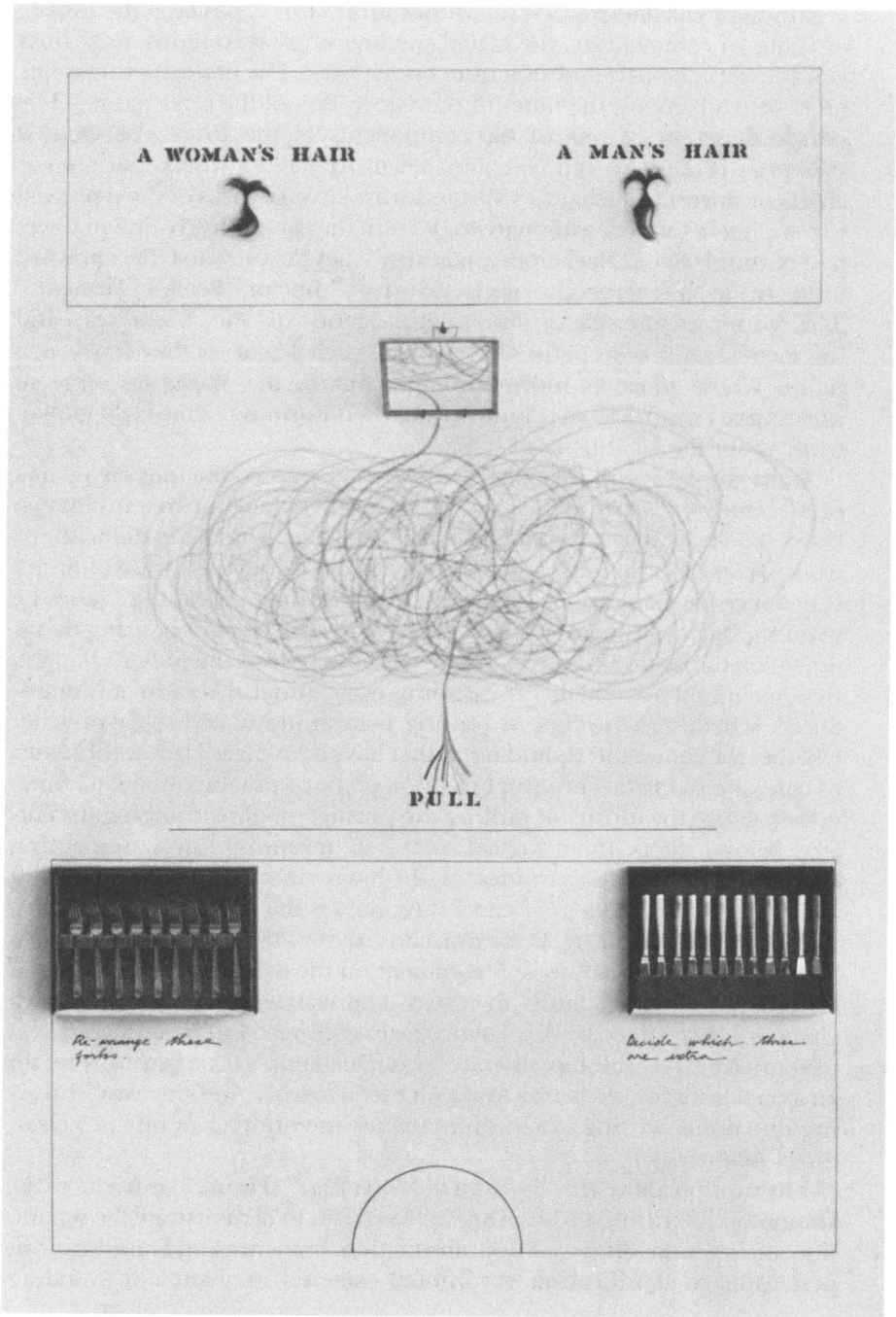
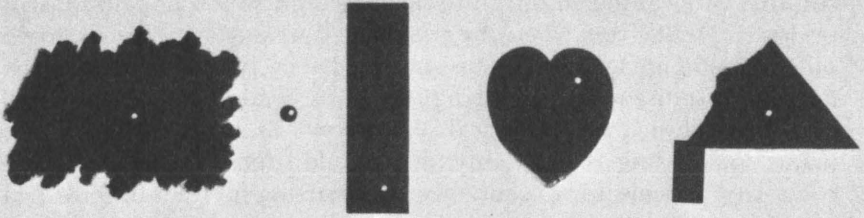


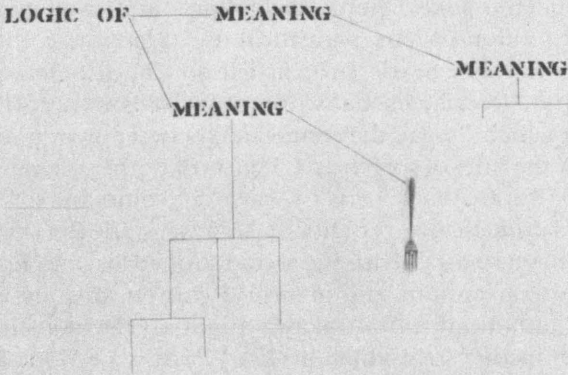
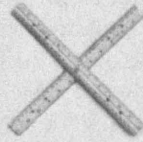
Figure 8. *The Mechanism of Meaning*, p. 72  
"12. Feeling of Meaning"

### 13. LOGIC OF MEANING

VIEWING LOGIC AS THE ORDER AND/OR CONTEXT IN WHICH ANY MEANING OCCURS, TO STUDY ITS FUNCTION AS A STRUCTURING ELEMENT (POINTS OF APPLICATION TO SOMETHING) AND SUGGEST ALTERNATIVES



————— *Make this line more abstract*



KEEP THE END IN SIGHT

WHAT'S THE POINT ?

Figure 9. *The Mechanism of Meaning*, p. 73  
"13. Logic of Meaning"

further 'unnatural' splitting." To change the title affixed to a picture would be such an "unnatural" split, and altering or misassociating the names of things or functions is one of Arakawa's frequent language games. The "Splitting" section includes two posters with dictionary page readymades and a caption, "Name Impasse" (p. 39). In the phrase, "No, says the signified," the signified, not the signifier, is given a voice. But the splitting of meaning into signifieds and signifiers is a hopeless task for readers of *Mechanism*, where the grammar of art and language, the logical ordering of language function, is subverted at every turn. If *Mechanism's* expository or discursive use of language as a critical tool to illustrate splitting seems clear, the ontological status of words as art remains problematic: does writing as a decorative display add a dimension to meaning or, contrarily, does meaning occur only when writing succeeds in showing its mark?

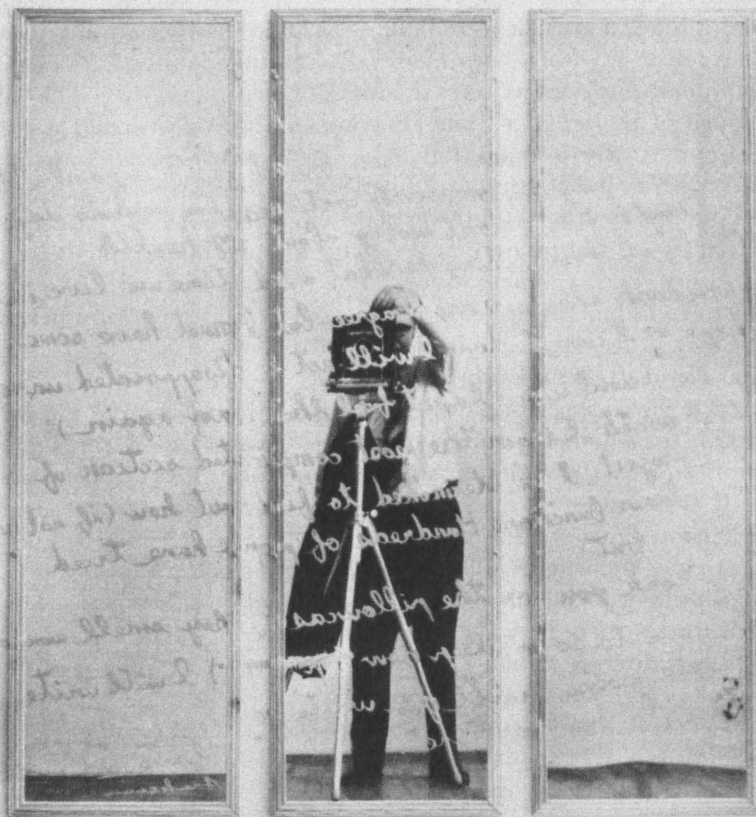
An investigation of the performative status of language, how and when language acts rather than represents, will be useful in putting aside the question why the artist would display his words rather than deliver his theories in essays or speeches. Language acts theory, as sketched out by J. L. Austin in the seminal *How to Do Things with Words*, bypasses all notions of the sign and syntax to propose that ordinary utterances have meaning through the results incurred, results which Austin referred to not as meaningful but as "felicitous." Following Austin's death, John R. Searle attempted to elaborate and systematize Austin's theory in *Speech Acts* and numerous other studies.<sup>8</sup> A serious drawback in applying their sort of speech act theory to our case here is their exclusion from consideration as an "act" of anything but "ordinary" language. For Austin and Searle, Arakawa's language would be outside the purview of speech acts because, like poetry, jokes, puns, metaphors, and even possibly writing, it constitutes a non-serious, parasitical use of language. In order to explain how fiction works, Searle, in an article on "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," concludes that works of fiction are comprised of pretend speech acts which "break the connection between words and the world established by the rules of speech acts"<sup>9</sup> but evoke other conventions. It would of course be impossible to classify Arakawa's command to "Pull" according to Searle's mimetic theory of fiction because, while the word and the strings may be in/on a work of art, the action solicited is both real and pretend. Real-world conventions and art-world conventions are not so easily separable: an unnatural split, Arakawa might say. Demonstrations like "Pull," and "erroneous" reproductions like "Portrait of Mona Lisa," show that any sort of original vs. replica dichotomy is inconsistent with a theory of language such as speech act theory that would throw out the transcendental sign and deny the referent outside language. If language performs it must do so everywhere, even if presented as a picture.

One of the most salient attacks on speech act theory has come from Jacques Derrida, who nevertheless has some sympathy with it and acknowledges its philosophical importance.<sup>10</sup> He points out the logocentrism of Austin's argument wherein only the spoken word is used as a model; and writing, as the trace of mark of the visual, concrete foundation of meaning, is ignored. Derrida's commentary on Searle, which quotes Searle's reply to Derrida's piece on Austin in its entirety, addresses the question of parasitism and discusses Searle's simplistic understanding of intention. Derrida's grammatological approach to understanding meaning considers the gap between emitter and message to be inevitable and necessary, a condition impossible in Searle's system where the speaker's intention structures both the speech act and the response. Derrida: "My communion must be repeatable — iterable — in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers. Such iterability . . . structures the mark of writing itself."<sup>11</sup> The "absolute absence of the receiver" and its concomitant absence of a conscious subject is exactly the condition of the *regardeur* who remains an imaginary space with an indeterminate point of view. The possibility of the *regardeur* becomes the enabling condition of the work and not vice-versa. The "mark of writing" is not necessarily language but any mark lying between subject/origin and *regardeur*. Works like those of Duchamp and Arakawa, which combine writing with other visual elements, perform iterability in that they prove writing to be no more (or less) parasitic or arbitrary than other forms of signification.

Searle views speech acts as having a vertical relation to the world (he actually uses directional arrows to symbolize the "fit" of words to world<sup>12</sup>) determined by the speaking subject's intention (illocution) to direct the result (perlocution) of the act. The performative is thus tied to a rhetoric of persuasion based on language-as-representation: either the speaker wants to convince the listener that the world is as he says (he makes, say, a statement) or he wants the listener to change the world (he gives a command). But in cases such as Arakawa's "statements" or "commands," reference and illocution are at odds: one is asked to read both literally and figuratively, to "pull" and see the illogicality of it at the same time. Everything pulls at everything else in a state of what Paul de Man called "referential aberration," "When it is impossible to decide which of the two meanings (that can be entirely contradictory) prevails. Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration."<sup>13</sup> If rhetoric is understood to extend beyond the persuasive to include that over which a speaker has no control — figural conventions, the unconscious, the *regardeur* or indeterminate receiver — the notion of performance is broadened from simple action upon others to a more adequate theory of meaning. De Man explained:

14 CONSTRUCTION OF THE MEMORY OF MEANING

A STUDY OF MEMORY: ITS OPERATIONS, ITS SCOPE, ITS ROLE  
IN THE REALIZATION OF MEANING. TOWARD THE CONSTRUCTION  
OF A TOTAL SITUATION IN WHICH MEMORY CAN REMEMBER  
ITSELF (ITS OWN OPERATIONS)



NIGHT

Considered as persuasion, rhetoric is performative but when considered as a system of tropes, it deconstructs its own performance. Rhetoric is a *text* in that it allows for two incompatible, mutually self-destructive points of view, and therefore puts an insurmountable obstacle in the way of any reading or understanding. The aporia between performative and constative language is merely a version of the aporia between trope and persuasion that both generates and paralyzes rhetoric and thus gives it the appearance of a history.<sup>14</sup>

The theory of meaning Arakawa is working toward is one that accepts the fallibility of intentionality and readability and understands that rhetoric is not simply the vehicle of intent but the whole difference between what Searle calls “sentence meaning” and “utterance meaning.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the performative is rhetoric, that which suspends grammar and cognition, plays with reference, and defines meaning in terms of effect.

Arakawa’s words and images in *The Mechanism of Meaning* interact rhetorically to demonstrate how “sentence meaning,” or literal meaning, really has no meaning in and of itself. In saying that “sentence meaning” is what the sentence “actually means” because “sentences and words have only the meanings that they have,”<sup>16</sup> Searle is, quite contrary to speech act theory, giving words meaning outside usage and, again, establishing an idealistic normative status for statements as “everyday language.” Arakawa, however, constantly problematizes language’s relation to reality, in particular by clashing the most prosaic of literal words against the visual. A command like “Laugh only along your left side” (p. 42, “Splitting of Meaning”), a catachresis, or a label “Empty texture” (p. 64), an oxymoron, mock literality with conventional rhetorical figures, but their shape and position on the posters further the disparity between word and world. The first panel of the series “Construction of Memory of Meaning” is a photograph of a glass panel in front of three mirrors (Figure 10). Words written on the glass in white face the mirror and are unreadable unless held up to a *real* mirror. The message is a letter to Arakawa’s mother, incredulously dated 1915, as if the mirror of memory were turned backwards to the time Duchamp was beginning to think of glass. That the “proper” reading of a text is destroyed by a mirror image reminds us, as did the Oculist Witnesses, that mirrors trick the eye and there is no adequate form of reproduction or memory. Reading the pages of *Mechanism* we understand again and again that, as De Man recognized, “it is not

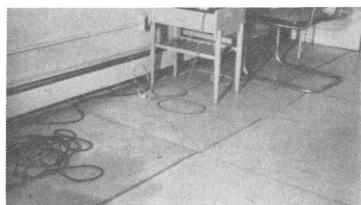
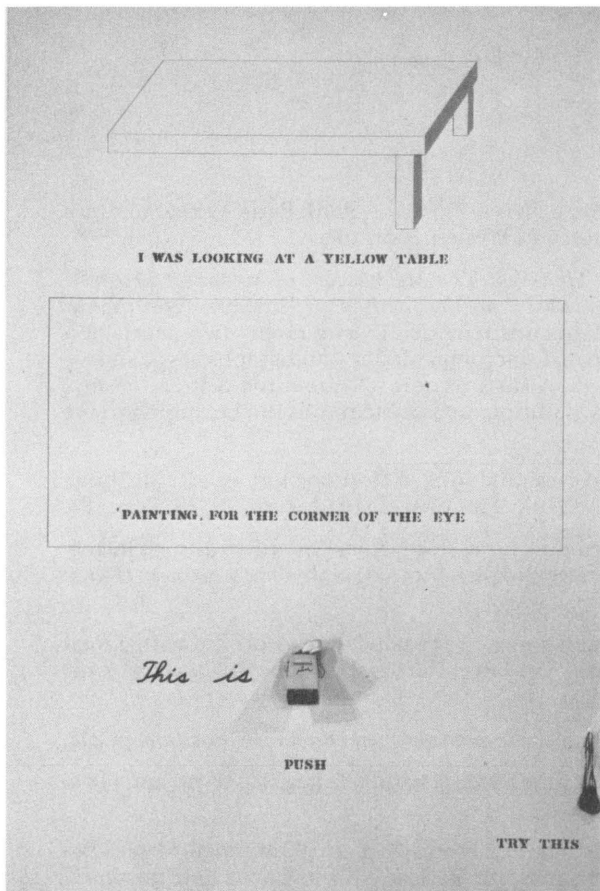
Figure 10. *The Mechanism of Meaning*, p. 77  
“14. Construction of the Memory of Meaning”

necessarily the literal reading which is simpler than the figurative one” nor is the literal reading the origin or abstracted “sentence meaning” of the figurative.<sup>17</sup> Arakawa problematizes the literal in language by using simple, logical-seeming commands and labels alongside visual elements that are equally obvious in the interpretation but have no logical match to the words. The pictures both literally depict a fork, a list, a blob, or whatever, and the readymades “represent” themselves all in order to deconstruct what we take to be figurative uses and show the literal to be the unreadable.

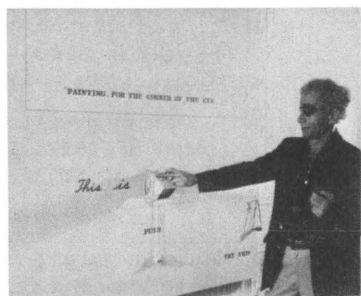
When the qualities of pictures and words are compared, a hierarchy develops: pictures are primary, present, clear; words are secondary, abstract, mediated. Arakawa undermines the “specific difference” of writing, its “absence” (absence of the emitter, of the referent)<sup>18</sup> turning words into visual elements and forcing a reading of pictorial elements as part of a written context. He shows how his visual forms which may be without reference, perform as writing: they take meaning from the dissemination of all the elements, visual and textual, across each other, generalizing the traits of writing, and give writing its materiality, its marks.

*The Mechanism of Meaning* is anything but a Cartesian discourse on “The Method of Arakawa.” The thirteenth section, “Logic of Meaning,” begins with a panel opposite the “Pull” the fake string (Figure 9). Following its heading, “Viewing logic as the order and/or context in which any meaning occurs,” we might place Arakawa’s texts, which perform rhetorically, not cognitively, in a logical status of a “zero set.” Where intention or “illocutionary point” (Searle) is set adrift, the sideways command “Keep the end in sight” mocks the supposed linearity of language acts. The branching schema of logic forks off into a fork, humorously illustrating a supposed distinction between a literal and a figurative representation. When Searle proposes that “[t]he central problem of the philosophy of language is to explain how the physical can become intentional, how the mind can impose intentionality on objects that are not intentional to start with, how, in short, mere things can *represent*,” he assumes that the *point* of representation is to embody intentionality and that “mere things” like “our utterances, writings, and pictures”<sup>19</sup> have a pre-intentional or meaningless state. Is the pre-representational status of the fork that of the eating instrument? Surely not, for its precarious position over the word “point” reminds us of its stabbing, consuming function. Is it that of a piece of metal in a certain shape, as seen by some primitive who has no idea of a fork? But one could imagine it as an art object without guessing its “proper” meaning. These paradoxes and anomalies Arakawa methodically (if not logically) puts before us show the inadequacies of representational systems, be they pictorial or linguistic, and the impossible “fit” of

Figure 11. *The Mechanism of Meaning*, p. 40  
"7. Splitting of Meaning"



Peripheral photo.



phenomenon and intention. Meaning never works as a one-way street with an end or point. A theory of performative language must be able to account for what seem to be nonsense, abnormalities, and illogicalities; parasitical, substandard, and figurative usage is, as we have seen, quite as originary to meaning as “speech.” Arakawa clearly distinguishes meaning as a mechanism or movement or action, an unstable performance that leaves us perplexed, laughing, and even vaguely more knowledgeable than before. *The Mechanism of Meaning* is not a book or an exhibition but an ongoing performance of meaning between the artist, his posters, his spectators, and his readers. Every page is a “Painting, for the corner or the eye” (a phrase borrowed from Duchamp<sup>20</sup>) like *Tum’* or page 40 (Figure 11) where the eye patch in the corner (*le coin*) and the slide viewer invite a *clin d’oeil*, a wink, from the *regardeur* who manipulates for herself the elements of meaning.

1. Michel Butor’s study, *Les Mots dans la Peinture* (Seuil: Paris, 1969), examines the various uses of such words in Western painting.
2. S. Arakawa and Madeline H. Gins, *The Mechanism of Meaning: Work in Progress (1963-1971, 1978). Based on the method of Arakawa* (New York: Abrams, 1979). The book contains reproductions of eighty-two panels of a series begun in 1963. Each panel is accompanied by photographs, texts, and/or drawings on the same page. A final section, “Review and Self-Criticism,” reproduces eight drawings, paintings and photographs not belonging to the series.
3. The letter is reproduced in facsimile in A. d’Harnoncourt and K. McShine, eds., *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1973), p. 181.
4. “. . . a certain number of manufactured (readymade) qualified as such merely by virtue of choice,” in André Breton, *Anthologie de l’humour noir* (Paris: Pauvert, 1966), p. 356.
5. “. . . a reaction of visual indifference, at the same time associated with a total absence of good or bad taste,” in Marcel Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe: écrits* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), p. 191.
6. “It is the *regardeurs* who make the pictures,” in *Duchamp du signe*, p. 247.
7. The principal texts relating to the *Large Glass* are on pages 54 to 101 and 118 to 120 of *Duchamp du signe*.
8. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), and John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

9. *New Literary History*, 6 (1975), p. 326.
10. "Signature Événement Contexte" in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 367-393, on Austin. The English translation, "Signature Event Context," is in *Glyph 1* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), 142-197. "Limited Inc abc . . ." in *Glyph 2* (1977), 161-254, was published in the original French as a *Supplement to Glyph 2*. The latter piece was written in response to Searle's "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," in *Glyph 1*, pp. 198-208.
11. "Signature Event Context," pp. 179-180.
12. "A Taxonomy of Illocutionary Acts," in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. III: *Language, Mind, and Knowledge*, ed. Keith Gunderson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), pp. 354-361.
13. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 10.
14. *Allegories of Reading*, p. 131.
15. "Metaphor," *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the theory of speech acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 76-116, passim. See also the following chapter, "Literal Meaning."
16. "Metaphor," p. 77.
17. *Allegories of Reading*, p. 11.
18. See Derrida, "Signature Event Context," pp. 179ff.
19. J. R. Searle, "Las Meninas and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation," *Critical Inquiry*, 6 (1980), p. 480-481.
20. *Duchamp du signe*, p. 119.