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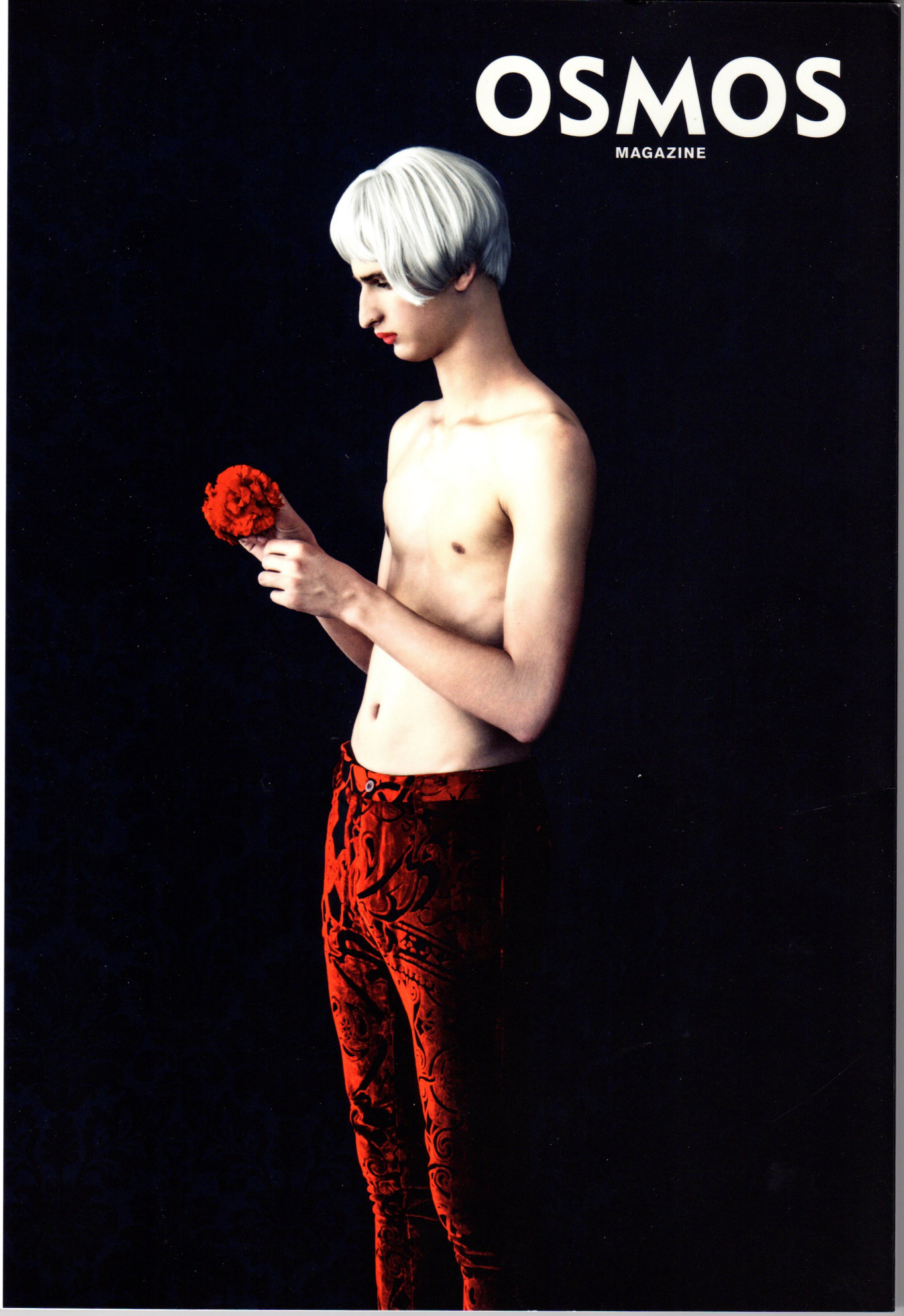


Kay Rosen

The Gravity of Language

BY **STEPHANIE CRISTELLO**

Prelude

You are standing at the foot of a steep mountain, situated within a deep valley, surrounded on both sides by immense tree-lined cliffs. To your left runs a waterfall, a glass-clear stream whose blue-green veil undulates upon a tableau of rocks of varying scales, framed by species of mosses and ferns. The sound of water breaking, as it falls from one precipice onto another, is suspended within the air, like a static symphony. Beside you stands your *guide*, who has wordlessly driven you to this place—he does not speak French, nor you Arabic. He points his hand toward the top of a mountain, tracing his finger slowly upward, denoting a soft crescendo as if to be played by an orchestra. The path is a narrow and unstable channel that leads to a bridge called the Pont de Dieu—a natural rock formation of extraordinary height—that extends across the two mountain faces. As he lowers his hand, placing one foot in front of the other, you begin to ascend along the mountain's edge.

A rhythm is established. The passage possesses a severe incline; its unexpected and sharp curvatures are not unlike those of the roads you drove upon to arrive here. With your gaze lowered, you continue to methodically ascend. Every now and then, the terrain transforms from moist compact ground into expanses of tightly arranged stones, polished over centuries. At times, the path is punctuated by large rocks, which perform as multifaceted footholds, or by vines that compose a series of *escaliers* that you move over with ease—*façon, contre-façon* (a term that without the hyphen translates to "forgery")—by positioning your weight in a lithe series of equations. The textures are transformed by your eyes into an index, a primeval alphabet; the ground becomes a language of images that plays across your downcast eyes. It is imbued with its own type of animation.

As the air thins, so does your notion of time. Having walked an immeasurable distance, you lift your gaze and realize that you can no longer see the *conducteur*. Your image is that of a solitary figure scaling a mountain. The burning in your legs increases with each step, followed by a swell that rushes through each of your internal capillaries outward to your extremities—at once, like the flush of a fever. You look down toward your feet and notice that your shoes have suddenly transformed into sandals made of braided leather. In the light of the sun, which now bathes the face of the mountain you are scaling, you see that the shadow cast by your body is unusually elongated, as if you have grown considerably taller. You can no longer hear the waterfalls below. Now nearing the precipice, you realize that language escapes you; you no longer possess a single word. You wish to know your name. The wind plays upon your skin in patterns—you can hear it running through the trees as if it were pronouncing a series of s, f, and soft y or i sounds, but you cannot translate what they mean. In place of words, there are only images; syntactic and grammatical structures, not to be uttered, but to be viewed. Your figure stands at the top of the mountain, an image of Sisyphus. You realize that gravity is the language of all things. Gravity caused primordial plates to crash and settle and articulate this mountain landscape. Gravity, whose force triggers the earth to revolve in and out of view of the sun; whose stars' brilliance are amassed by gathering matter across galaxies; whose tides rise and collapse upon a sea pulled by the moon. The architect of earth's image—an indexical sphere—is not a linguist, but gravity itself.

It is not the boulder that must repetitively fall: it is you.

Falling for Sisyphus

As a prelude to this essay, the above text attempts to enact a form, developed by German literary critic and scholar Walter Benjamin, known as *Denkbild* ("thought-image") writings; pieces of short prose devoid of the formal features of narrative and meant to reveal what's hidden.[1] The purpose of this text foreshadows Benjamin's use of emblematic structures to reveal the latent meaning of visual-textual structures. My veiled subject is the artist Kay Rosen, whose work exists between the use of language and its image. Yet this passage also acts as the preface to a larger theme embedded within the artist's work, and the focus of this essay: gravity. Its dual register—as both a physical force and a term for significance—has appeared in Rosen's practice since the 1970s.

We begin with the prelude as an allegory for one of the artist's rare films, *Sisyphus* (1991), which was remastered in 2017 and most recently included in the exhibition In *Light of...*, which I curated at Chicago Manual Style in September 2018. Featuring black Times New Roman text set against a stark white background, the video is presented as a PowerPoint whose slides cycle through nearly every possible phonetic spelling of Sisyphus—who, as punishment for defying the Gods, was condemned to eternally push the weight of a boulder to the top of a mountain, only to watch it fall—while circumventing the correct articulation. Set to the recording of a repetitive drumroll, whose crescendo announces the arrival of each changing variation, the film's infinite loop mimics the form of the myth. The format of the work introduces an element of levity—which is to say humor, but also the counteraction of gravity that balances between the grimness of the subject's condemnation and an allusion to the absurdist use of Sisyphus within French existentialism. Rosen's *Sisyphus* is both a portrait of the condemned figure and an empathetic treatise on his conviction, forcing viewers to undergo a similar senseless repetition without reward. The ontological use of language—a concrete presentation of text that echoes the

conceptual meaning of the text itself—is a constant in Rosen's practice. This facet of her work is often complemented by structures that hinge upon double registers of meaning. As such, in Sisyphus, each misspelling is a "sentence": a term that refers to a textual unit in linguistics as well as to a command of imprisonment. The fall of Sisyphus is not recounted, but enacted—as the phonetic variations cycle through and move further away from the correct spelling, the viewer is left without satisfaction. In place of gratification, the work makes use of language to trace the origins of an image that is built through text. The image of a solitary figure scaling a mountain; an image of burden.

The conceptual scope of *Sisyphus* extends beyond Rosen's presentation of words on a screen to evoke the rise and fall of a figure, an imagined motion that exists outside of the work itself, within the viewer's mind—a type of "internal representation." In his 2001 publication *The Anthropology of Images*, art historian Hans Belting dispenses with the preconception that images have the ability to circulate in disembodied form, a type of transmission "not even true of images in imagination or memory, for they, after all, colonize our memory."[2] In this sense, while the specificity of the image of Rosen's work that manifests within the viewer's mind is ultimately fugitive, it is not inherently beyond reach—or, as Belting states, "our internal images are not necessarily personal in nature, but even when they are collective in origin, we internalize them in such a way that we come to consider them as our own."[3] For Rosen, images can mature into language, just as language can bring form to images. It is the mutability of the image of the figure itself that most closely mirrors the plight and existential salvation of Sisyphus—the idea that despite the rigidity of the work's structural containment, creativity can exist.

This approach is emblematic of the artist's wry and physical work with text: incisive, dexterous, and romantic. In Rosen's portrayal of Sisyphus, we fall for him and with him. Which is to say, we fall as the figure; this is how the preface concludes—the ending to the thought-image makes use of the reader becoming the subject. This act of becoming harkens to Rosen's attitude toward appropriation, not only in her choice of mythological source material, but also in her practice as a whole. In his 1973 publication *The Anxiety of Influence*, literary critic Harold Bloom proposed that the purposeful misreading of modern poets as a tactic of appropriation—a term he developed as "poetic misprision"—could be used to gain access to generative methods of creation that were at once dependent on source material but also deviated from it in a substantive fashion. The fall of Sisyphus, which Camus likened to the role of the artist, could just as easily translate to the fall of Milton's Satan, to the role of the poet, or, as Bloom writes, "Poetry begins with our awareness, not of a Fall, but that we *are falling*. The poet is our chosen man, and his consciousness of election comes as a curse; again, not 'I am a fallen man,' but 'I am Man, and I am falling'—or rather 'I *was* God, I *was* Man (for to a poet they were the same), and I *am* falling, from myself."[4] The fall implicit in Rosen's *Sisyphus* exists as an image of a figure falling off the face of a mountain and lures the viewer to fall for the promise that the correct spelling may appear. The satisfaction of the viewer engaging with the work remains beyond reach; as the viewer fulfills the role of the Sisyphean figure, the myth is assumed. With each cycle, we fall again.

Song and Dance, 1978

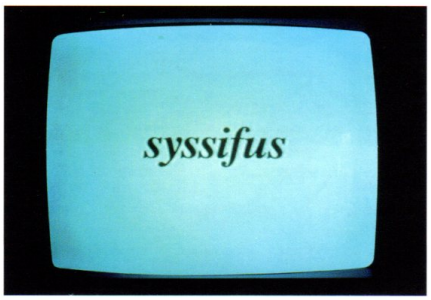
Descending Rosen's Staircases

As it happens, staircases figure prominently in Rosen's work. Throughout her practice, the subject of steps has existed as an architectural object to be scaled, performed upon, diagrammed, replicated, and abstracted. The artist's use of staircases comprises a basis for a vocabulary that is not unlike the function of letters in an alphabet. Yet it is the movement that a staircase facilitates, up and down, that traces a more general thread through Rosen's work. The implicit "gravity" of Rosen's pieces refers to not only the many allusions to force throughout her practice, but also conveys the many definitions of the word itself, i.e. the importance, significance, and severity of language that is imposed upon our way of looking at and experiencing the world around us.

Double Staircase, 1978

An early example is *Brides and Slinkies Descending the Staircase* (1977), a site-specific installation that was commissioned as part of *All Over the Place*, curated by Eileen Shukovsky at The MoMing Dance and Arts Center in Chicago, which featured a series of tripartite image structures mounted at eye level above each of the fifteen steps of the building's staircase, so that the final assemblage created a diagonal cascade just above where one would find a banister. The work makes use of the conceptual structure behind Marcel Duchamp's iconic painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912), yet in place of tracking motion the work figures a formulaic representation of three images within a vertical composition. The first is an image of the building's staircase, taken from above; second, found photographs of brides whose gaze is facing downward, taken from the *Gary Post Tribune* archives; and third, a Slinky stretched between two concrete steps—each sequence manifesting a similar motion of descent. The ultimate action of the work is completed through the combination of the three images within the viewer's mind, as if each image represents a variable within an equation. Filmic in nature, the work operates as an animation—its cinematic dimension established through a dependence on the movement of the viewer. Yet, contained within the reference to a specific work by Duchamp, a graver consequence is drawn: in place of a bride stripped bare, we may imagine a suite of brides flung down the stairs, tumbling at high velocity.

The movement expected of their bodies is no less supple than the beloved mid-century American toy, bending and flipping like the spine of an accordion as it expands and contracts. The humor of *Brides and Slinkies* shares Rosen's rigorous methodology of representing the faults and exactness of language. In another photographic work, *Song and Dance* (1978), originally presented at N.A.M.E. gallery in the exhibition *Daley's Tomb,* occasioned by the mayor's death and curated by Jerry Saltz, a more severely vertical composition features forty-five images of the artist's legs adorned in pink ballet tights. Performing various positions upon a staircase—at times appearing classically trained, at others imbued with a jesting and amusing air—each suite of images is accompanied by a caption set in cursive text. The instructive aesthetic of the movement almost mirrors the approach found in Warhol's *Dance Diagrams* from the early 1960s—though its elongated form more closely adopts the appearance of a scroll or other official document of decree and signals a more political purpose than how to perform a series of poses. The impetus of the work is clear within the first caption, which features the extraction of a quotation by Mayor Richard J. Daley, "Together we must rise to ever higher and higher platitudes,"[5] a malaprop that Rosen isolates and uses as a catalyst



Sisyphus, 1991

to spark variations on the misuse of cliché in each of the subsequent texts. The captions unfold as a series of plays on language that elicit an often historical or mythic image; " Together we must rise ... from the mouths of Bach choristers / like Icarian fliers of the Audubon order / from the port of Pandora."

Despite the formal, structuralist qualities of Rosen's work, the images it invokes within the viewer are often more ornamental in nature, carrying an undercurrent of Baroque romanticism. Her use of a tripartite structure in works such as *Brides and Slinkies* or *Song and Dance* mirror the foundations of Benjamin's *Denkbild*, a form that emerged from his study of the Baroque, and the evolution of emblems; profoundly influenced by the allegorical material, the "thought- images" similarly consisted of a title, a narrated image, and its related thought. In a 1994 essay, Karoline Kirst explains Benjamin's thought-image writings through a comparison to the emblem; a form composed of a "pictura," meaning the icon or image device; a "motto," which can either describe or enshroud the image; and a "subscriptio," or epigram—an explanatory poem or text.[6] In both the Baroque emblems and Benjamin's *Denkbild*, one searches in vain for a central subject, evidence of standard plot development, or a clear narrative voice. A reader will not find immediate meaning. Instead, they will discover their own reflective process. While emblems from the Baroque era were constructed as a means to reveal divine hidden messages, a *Pont de Dieu*, Benjamin's use of the form was introduced to expose "information about the hidden signatures of reality," originating from a humanistic attempt to provide a modern form of ideological writing.[7]

The attraction of the emblem is its enigmatic claim, its riddle character. In this sense, Rosen's practice is emblematic: prudent observation is rewarded. The emblem unfolds in two parts: the first, a representation; the second, an interpretation. In place of clarifying a thought by an image, or an image by a thought, the *Denkbild*, as with Rosen's work, presents each component as an integral (albeit not immediately recognizable) part of the other. Neither is complete without its complement. Insight into Rosen's works is reached through critically engaging the incongruence between representation and interpretation and the artist's intervention into, or attention toward, structures that already exist. How else to explain *Sheep in Wolf's Clothing* (1994), an elegant wall painting typographically styled as VIRGIN*ia* WOOL*f,* or the brilliant exactitude of *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* (2012), installed at the Art Institute of Chicago, which exposes the word KANDAHAR, the second largest city in Afghanistan, latent within the center of one of the most common aphorisms used to describe conflict. The clandestine

Stairwalking: Directions/Patterns, 1980

nature of Rosen's early works, such as *Brides and Slinkies* and *Song and Dance*, are foundational to understanding her approach to linguistics throughout her career, in which turns of phrase become morals, aphoristic interventions, hidden messages.

The site-specificity of *Brides and Slinkies* and *Song and Dance* acts as a precursor to Rosen's use of staircases over subsequent years. If we were to revert to the Baroque era, a symbolic signifier contained within the image of Rosen's emblem would undoubtedly picture a flight of stairs. The value of Rosen's emblematic nature remains her emphasis on the importance of conveying complex, interrelated messages within her visual-textual practice. It is within this context that we can approach *Double Staircase* (1978–81), a series of collaged photographic compositions that exist somewhere between performance documentation and land art, and *Stair Walking* (1981), which traces a more diagrammatic turn in the artist's practice. *Double Staircase* exists as a diamond-shaped composition of identically sized black-and-white photographs. Placed in rows, like a pair of inverted pyramids, two performers are positioned centrally within the frame in each of the tiled images (the artist herself and a woman named Tony Lane) and enact strict choreographic instructions devised by the artist. Their hair is dark and shoulder length with bangs; each wears a black turtleneck, simplistic flared trousers, and bare feet.

At times the women look at the camera, and at others face away. Their movements oscillate between exaggerated bends from the waist down, as if conducting *pliés* in first position, and resolute straightness, folding back through their knees toward a standing pose, with accompanying arm movements. Within this prescriptive and limited repertoire of motions, the women move up and down the staircase. A diagram of the dictated positions is included as a type of legend in the lower-left corner of the collage.

The similarity of the photographs, as they progress from one frame to the next, imbues the work with a test-like quality, like a Muybridge study or an early motion picture. Yet the balletic movements also lend a lyricism to the progression that quite fluidly translates to the aesthetics of notes in a musical score. One can imagine this work as the visualization of a linguistic or grammatical study of the term scale within the context of Rosen's practice—to scale architecture to one's body, to scale the stairs, to practice scales on the piano. In this way, scale becomes a cipher within the work, one that perhaps holds as much meaning as the performer.

Rosen's *Double Staircase* remains one of the artist's closest pursuits of formalism. Yet Rosen fully realizes her diagrammatic impetus in a series entitled *Stair Walking*, completed in 1981. Hypothetically conducted in a clocktower building in New York, the artist staged a series of rigid and reduced performances by three actors set within three geometrically significant architectures: a spiral staircase, based on the one at the Clocktower Gallery in New York; a triangular staircase, inspired by the staircase at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; and a rectangular staircase, modeled after one at the original Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago location on Ontario Street. The resulting series of drawings, which began in the wake of the artist amassing more photographic material than she could properly archive within her studio or contain on the four-by-six-foot boards used in the final compositions, depict instead the markings of movement measured by the artist (partial curves; horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines) in place of the photographic image.

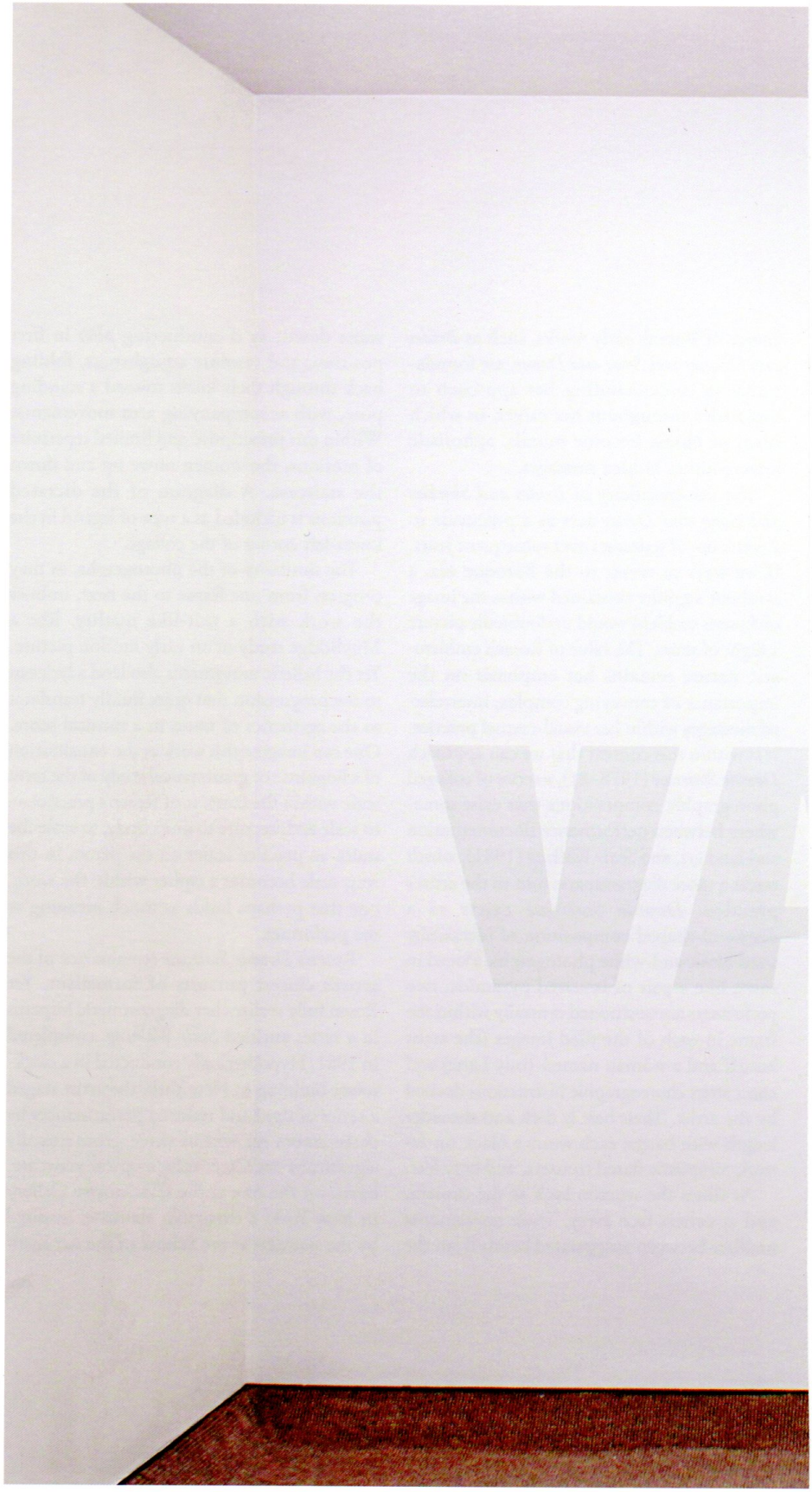
While the drawings that occupy the work's large grid appear deliberate—neatly filled with hand-drawn lines meant to indicate motion and position—the resulting compositions are essentially inaccessible. Whereas in *Double Staircase* a viewer could rely on the image of the performer to denote up and down, here the actions disintegrate into an unreadable chart or map: the ornamentation of grammar without the structure of words. Devoid of orientation or context, the progression of the processes utilized within *Brides and Slinkies to Stair Walking* quite literally marks Rosen's descent into minimalism—an attitude toward her patterns of representation that was perhaps born from a staircase but grew into something much larger and all-encompassing: topographies of the hidden green pastures that extend behind a museum's walls, the motion of the pendulum that keeps the time of clocks, valleys covered in a blanket of snow....

Constructed Landscapes

Another thought-image. This time, of Rosen's *Constructed Landscape (Winter)* (2013), which depicts a series of intersecting words painted in hues of gray—River, Hill, Valley—the letters within each word interlaced with one another so that each either completes or complements the next. The form of each word-based element within the composition is embodied to create the image—the letters that comprise "River" appear to flow down the construction; "Hill" is stacked on top of itself, existing within its own sense of verticality; "Valley" runs like a cradle below. Yet the title of the work is derived from a bilingual secret contained within its structure: "Hill" and "River" combine to spell *hiver*, the French term for winter. The lexicon of experiences and phenomena that define "winter" are also hidden within the associative nature of the work's title—evoking the sensation of snow, its lightness, visions of suspension, the quietude established by the white blanket that stretches across every visible surface. The chamber of winter: where everything seems open and closed to life at the same moment. A deadening of a landscape but an increase of the senses.

As with the mythic references embedded within *Sisyphus or Don't Look Back*, the experience of winter exists elsewhere. Of course, it is experienced here—within the gallery, the museum—yet "here" is also someplace else. For Rosen, the dialectic of image and language is equivocal, never resting statically in one category over the other. The works exist instead within a liminal space that constantly fluctuates between these two classifications, a type of limbo that unfolds fugitively: images if they should be words, words if they should be images.

As Belting suggests, the use of semiotics to remove the sensuality (the body) from the use of words in favor of cognition (the conceptual) remains one of modernity's greatest achievements in abstraction. In contrast, Rosen's semiotic approach insists on returning the image into language (the two are inextricably tied) in a manner that is firmly oppositional to how modernism attempted to separate "the world of signs from the world of bodies."[8] In other words, Rosen refuses the impulse to sever language from the sensory realm. It is perhaps for this reason that her



Constructed Landscape (Winter), 2012/2013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practice has been described as "sculpture"—in the sense that the work carries the potential to formulate object-based mirages within the viewer's consciousness beyond the formal flatness of the work—or as "architecture"—not that it uses space, but *creates* space, like a blueprint in relationship to buildings.[9]

In her 2001 installation *Sight and Sound of Music*, commissioned for MASS MoCA in North Adams, Massachusetts, Rosen constructed a similar type of landscape. The floor-to-ceiling wall painting adopted the architectural scale of the vast galleries, spanning forty feet tall by one hundred thirty feet wide, which conceals behind their structure the Berkshire Mountains and the Hoosic River. The artwork is presented as a graph; a lettered key, composed of the alphabet, runs along the y-axis, upon which two lines are plotted—a green line, meant to represent a mountain, and a blue line, meant to signify the river. The graph traces the spelling of lyrics from a famous song in the 1965 film the *Sound of Music*—as the viewer's eye traces the erratic line of the "mountain," the text "Climb every mountain, ford every stream, follow every rainbow" is revealed. The river that runs along the bottom ambles along the lettered scale, never ascending above *F* or below *D*, an indication that these are not words, but notes—an image of the melody, a score. A lyrical landscape. The work becomes a picture—a mirror image—of the environment that surrounds the museum. The viewer is at once inside and occupied by an image of the outside.

The Gravity of Language

You will notice, by now, that the works discussed here are united by their allusions to the motions of up and down. Does this seem arbitrary to you? Or strike you as the imposition of a rule-based physics upon an artistic practice whose oeuvre certainly contains variances, divergences, and oddities—cut out for the purpose of being explored through a particular force? Perhaps. Yet it would be impossible to ignore this crystalline pattern in Rosen's practice—one of many intersecting threads, to be sure—which opens into larger concepts that would otherwise be left unturned.

Rosen's work makes use not only of the gravity of language, but also the language of gravity. This constant is bound by the nature of the viewer's experience of things that cannot be said, but shown, in words—the embodiment of language in place of its illustration. We experience this in other examples of the artist's wall paintings, such as *Leak* (1997), installed at the Art Institute of Chicago. Above the viewer, imposing black letters spell the word ROOF, inverted and read backwards, near the ceiling of the soaring architecture, whereas below, hovering just above the floor at eye level, is the word FLOOR. The work's emphatic typographical treatment underscores its animated quality—as if the *L* falls to complete the word. Similarly, in *Pendulum* (2004/2010), the letters of that word are rearranged so that your eye must pass from one end of the text to its opposite, tracking each letter to complete the spelling of the word, your pupils swaying back and forth like the ticks of a clock. The act of reading becomes an act of inertia— the image is only formed once your vision has settled in the middle of the work; you register its full meaning within the stillness of the center of the composition. You read again; within this equation, the movement of your eyes is the constant force. With each reading, you become the keeper of time, your vision no different than the mechanics of a clocktower. In a chapter of his novel T*he Black Flame of Paradise* titled "In Praise of Inertia," artist Zachary Cahill asks: "How do we stop the physics of momentum, that enemy of life, that may carry us away and wipe out every vestige of inertia? Contemplation. Love. Life."[10] Paradoxically, it is Rosen's calculated inertia—her ability to arrest the viewer, to stage revelations—that propels us.

The identification of gravity in Rosen's practice, as it reappears across the decades, points toward the hidden significance of the artist's interest in the forces (conscious or unconscious) that have shaped our sense of space, our methods of communication, our language. She is an author of works that could only be made by one who believes in the secreted meaning of the world. This text is merely magnetic. For Benjamin, his covert thought-image exercises hinged upon a single narrative: the revolt against the tragic, self-inflicted catastrophe of human history. Rosen's mission is decidedly not this. She conjures the experience of being a human in this world. Her works allow viewers to enact what it feels like to detect the astonishing correspondences that already exist in our reality, under the surface of the systems and structures we use to codify meaning, of language and image itself. Benjamin sought to rescue the wreckage of the past through the present. For Rosen, it is present and present that are merged. The work in front of you does not reflect, but instead recreates, the experience inside of us. If the Baroque emblem was divine, and the *Denkbild* humanist, Rosen's practice is resolutely empathetic. It's a theorem for gravity that encompasses forces from outside and within.