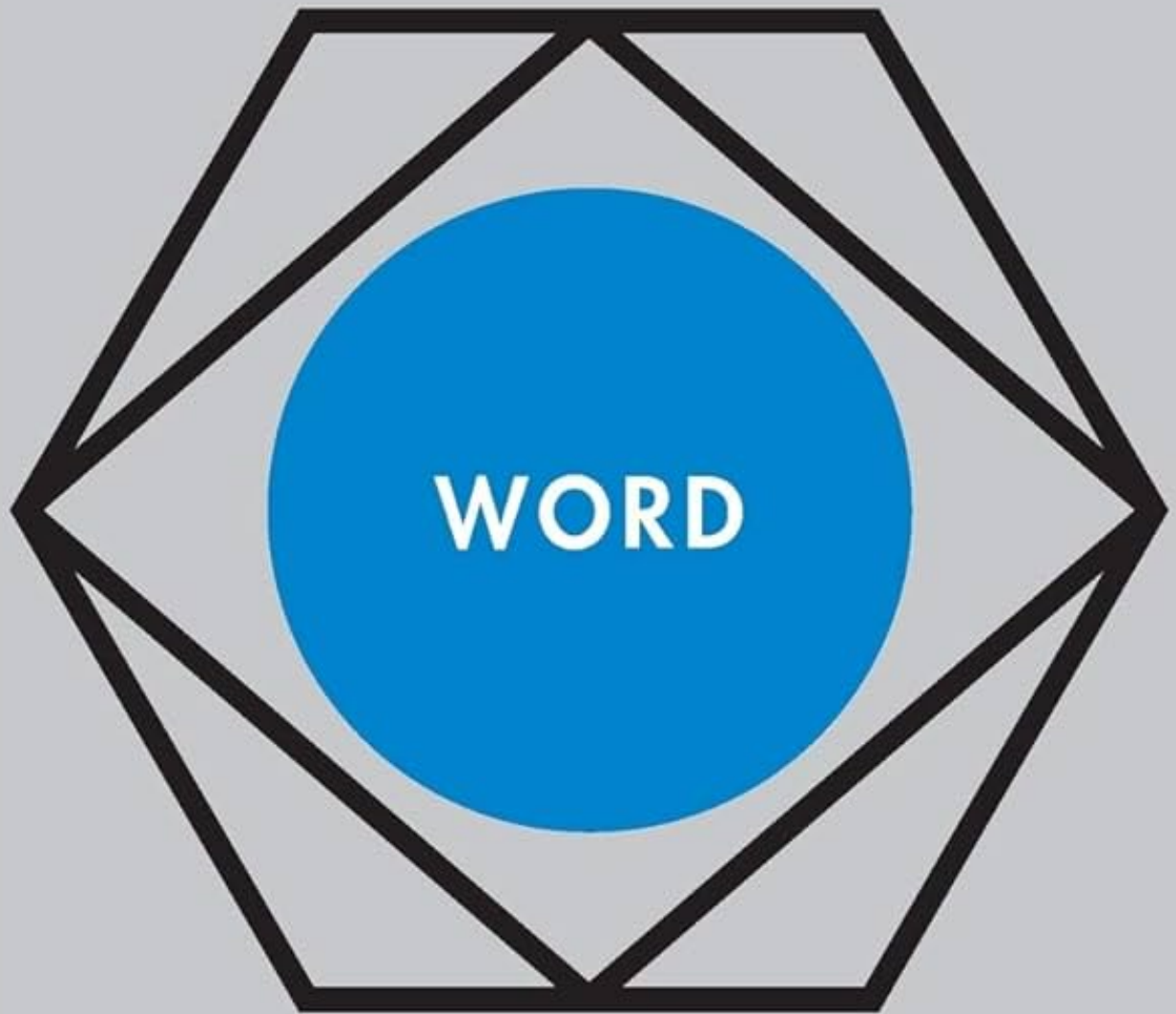


BEYOND LANGUAGE,  
BEYOND IMAGE



MARIAM MOTAMEDI FRASER

connection, or bind it to an isolated referent, or are pierced by a word, in its fullness, solely through the sensory relation by which we most directly perceive it.<sup>16</sup>

### FROM VISUAL TEXT TO TEXTURALIZATION

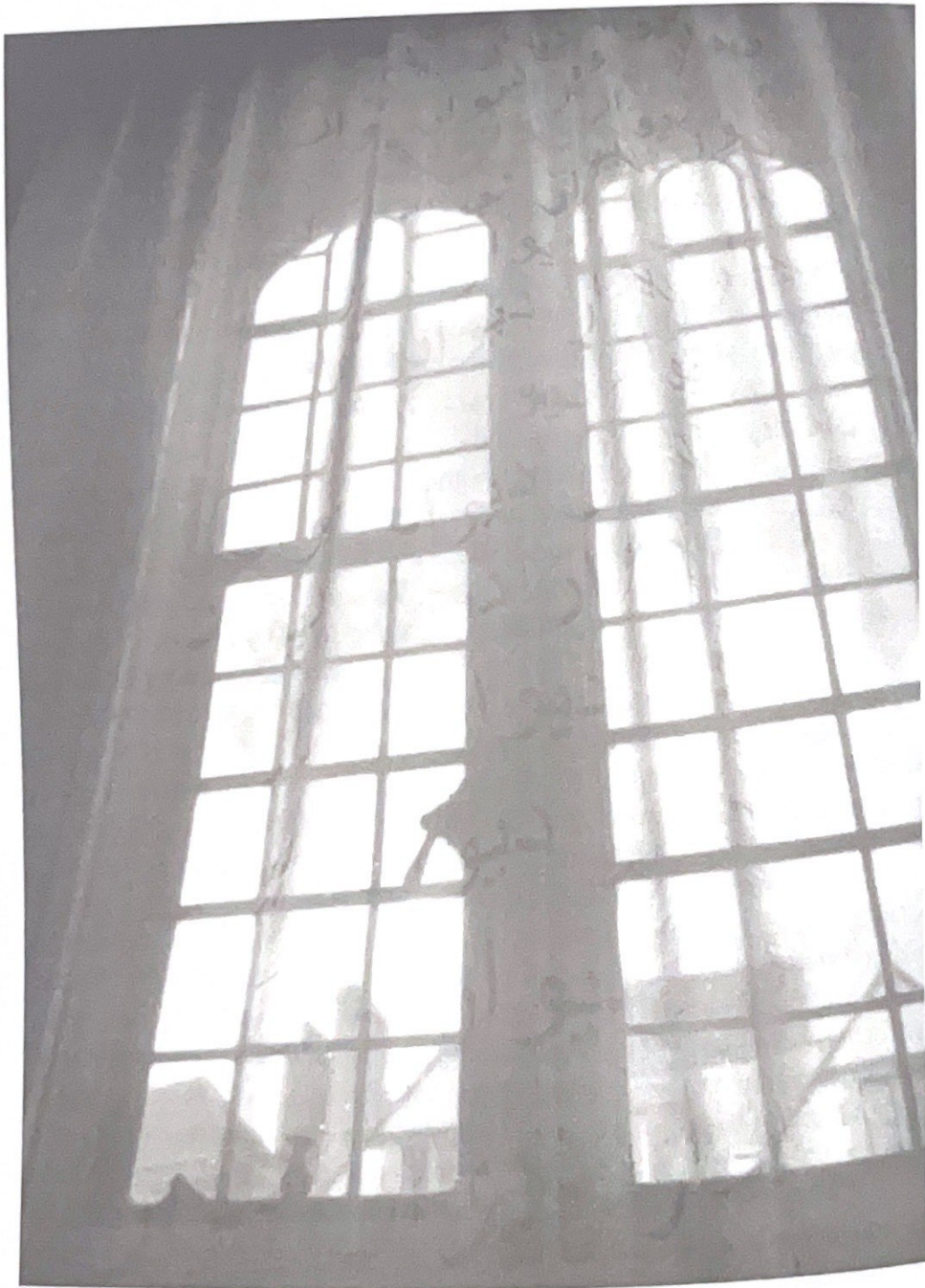
Where Keller leads her reader to understand that words are capable of blasting away the walls of her 'prison-house' (Keller [1903] 1974, 13), for the visual artist Farniyaz Zaker the relations between words and walls are very much more ambivalent. In Zaker's work, words can be participants in the physical destruction *and* construction of walls, and it is rarely clear to what extent walls are, for her, necessarily problematic. In this final section of the chapter I want to explore how, over the course of three pieces—*Pardeh* (2011), *Ge[Wand] II* (2013) and *a red dress, a black dress* (2013)—Zaker weaves words into different kinds of word-assemblages and, specifically, into word-assemblages that are differently material. I will be using Zaker's work both to exemplify some of the themes I have been discussing in this chapter, and as an opportunity to develop them further.

Through its graceful connection of two single words ('a text') and a curtain (a textile), *Pardeh* (2011) creates rich and complex meanings out of a very small number of elements. *Pardeh* (2011), which means curtain in Farsi, is composed of an almost transparent curtain on which the word *divār*, which means 'wall,' is printed (figure 4.1).

In a public discussion between Zaker and myself in 2013,<sup>17</sup> Zaker explained that *Pardeh* was inspired by the architectural transformations that many traditional courtyard houses in Iran had undergone during the twentieth century. No longer based on the design of sacred buildings, which preserve privacy (and in the context of domestic houses, had concealed family life), 'Western-style' houses reconstituted the relations between public and private through their different uses of structures (walls, for instance, were lowered or eradicated) and materials (such as glass). In an implicit

16. Through, that is, what is sometimes called 'the proper sensible.' As the philosopher and theologian Jean-Louis Chrétien explains, according to this ancient Aristotelian notion, 'the eye exclusively sees and the ear exclusively hears, each sense yielding access to only a single aspect of being' (Chrétien 2004, 33).

17. This discussion was held in conjunction with the launch, in March 2013, of Zaker's exhibition *a black dress, a red dress* at Goldsmiths, University of London. It was subsequently published as 'Words and Walls, Texts and Textiles: A Conversation' (Motamedi Fraser and Zaker 2014).



**Figure 4.1. *Pardeh*, 2011**

Old Masters Room, The Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Arts, Oxford, UK.  
Farniyaz Zaker

reference to the lace curtain, which was used extensively in interior design at the turn of the century in Europe and North America, the curtain in *Pardeh*, Zaker says, 'is purposely thin and transparent in order to evoke the fading away of the word *divār* [wall] and, with it, the walled space it represents. In this respect the piece emulates the decline in traditional Iranian domestic architecture and, up until the Iranian revolution in 1979, in traditional Iranian dress code' (Zaker in Motamedi Fraser and Zaker 2014, 4).

The word *divār* (wall) is not, of course, the correct signifier for the material object (the curtain) on which it is printed, but it is arguably precisely by way of this 'error' that the piece slows itself down and opens itself up to architectural storying—to 'another way of telling' (Berger and Mohr [1982] 1995). It is the 'shock' of discontinuity, as Berger would surely anticipate (Berger 2013, 62–63), between the word and the signifying work that it is supposed to do that prompts the spectator to pause and to think again about what they are seeing. The fact that the word *divār*, although severed from linguistic efficacy, is not also drained of meaning, and that the 'correct' referent is somewhere present in the piece (in the title), suggests that the aim of *Pardeh* is not to meditate on the betrayals of language (its arbitrariness and its absences), or on the failure of words to designate, but rather to give words an opportunity to *participate* in meaning making in ways other than simply by pointing. *Pardeh* is an invitation to investigate further connections and associations, some of which belong to language, others of which do not.

In my earlier discussion of Berger's work on photography, I drew on Mary Carruthers' analysis of medieval mnemonic techniques, noting in particular that, like the meaning of a photograph (as Berger understands it), *memoria*, or the art of memory, is made through associations (Carruthers 2009, 23). Importantly then, for Carruthers, this art does not turn on the incorporation of static texts into memory but rather refers to a *process* of textualization. No text, Carruthers argues, can be said to properly exist without textualization, without its extension, that is, beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of a printed or spoken event and its author. By this, Carruthers does not mean that '[t]here is nothing outside of the text' (Derrida [1967] 1997, 158, emphasis omitted), but rather that text, first, is an activity—*praxis* rather than *doxis*—and, second, that this activity is the weaving of meaning in and out of social life. (Social life is in this sense, rather literally, *con*, with, *text*). She writes:

The Latin word *textus* comes from the verb meaning 'to weave' and it is in the institutionalizing of a story through *memoria* that textualizing occurs. . . . In the process of textualizing, the original work acquires commentary and gloss;

this activity is not regarded as something other than the text, but is the mark of textualization itself. *Textus* also means ‘texture,’ the layers of meaning that attach as a text is woven into and through the historical and institutional fabric of a society. (Carruthers 2009, 14)

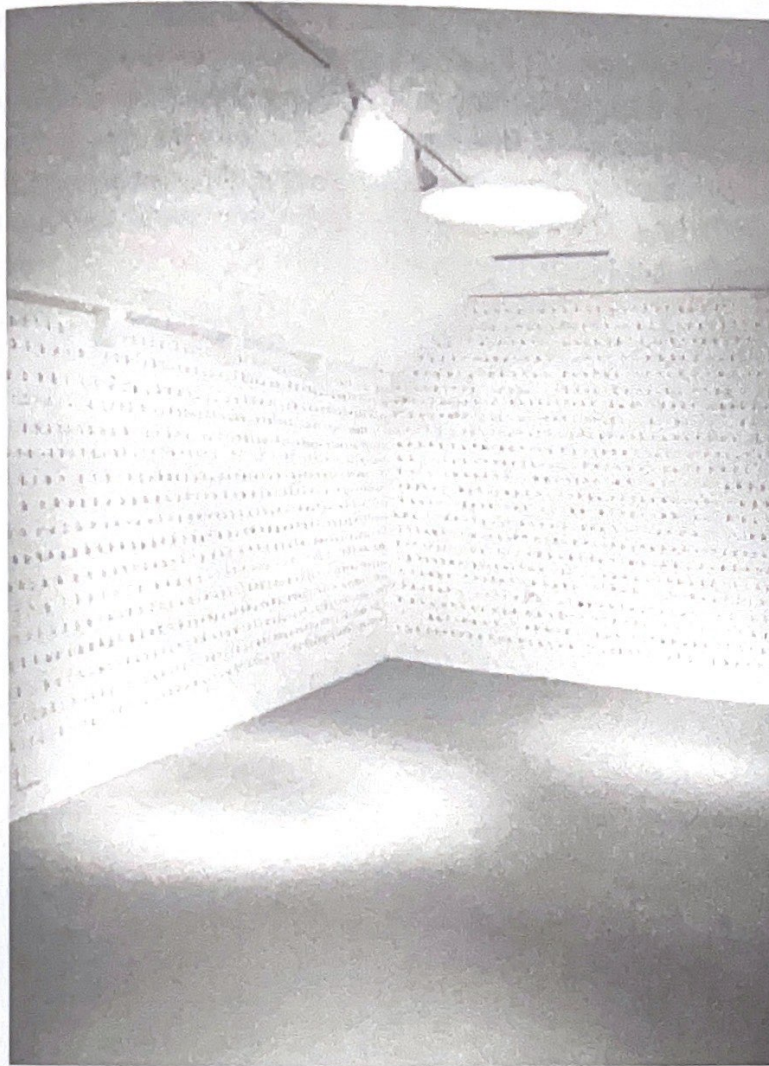
One might say that it is through textualization that a text becomes textured. And by way of example, that Zaker’s *Pardeh* is a textualization of a story of architecture, a story which is now remembered, very simply, through a set of connections between two words and a gossamer curtain.

Carruthers’ notion of textualization as weaving is especially apt in the context of Zaker’s work, for it seeks to bring together, as I noted earlier in passing, the themes of dress and dwelling. While this is achieved with great subtlety in *Pardeh* (which recalls women’s seclusion in both Farsi and English),<sup>18</sup> it is conveyed with almost brutal forthrightness in *Ge[Wand] II* (figure 4.2).

*Gewand* is the German word for ‘garment’ or ‘clothing,’ and it derives from the root word *wand*, meaning ‘wall’ and ‘screen’ (Bruno 2007, 32). In this piece, the first syllable of the title [*Ge*]wand—*Ge*—is recognizable as letters (that is, as marks) printed on the gallery wall. There are no marks for the second syllable, *wand*. Instead, there is the wall. *Ge* thus appears to be attached to the wall not only in a physical sense (the black ink is inscribed on it, and seeps into it) but also in a linguistic sense: the wall itself completes the word. The word is materialized by the wall. Or conversely: the word *gewand*, which means ‘clothing,’ ‘wears the wall’ (Bruno 2007, 32). As Zaker puts it, ‘although there are no textiles involved in this work, in [*Ge*]wand II, the syllable *Ge* runs along all the walls of the gallery, almost like a mantra, weaving them into a single, static *Gewand* (dress)’ (Zaker 2013, personal correspondence). The word, it seems, does not so much occupy the space, as it does become it (Bruno 2007, 32).

Like *Pardeh*, [*Ge*]wand II speaks to the ambivalences that can be generated by exclusion and seclusion. ‘Clearly,’ Zaker explains, ‘the repetition and piercing effect of the black ink on the white wall has a distinctly claustrophobic feel to it. But it also suggests something monotonous, something soothing and ordered, which contrasts with the chaos “outside”’ (Zaker 2013, personal correspondence). It is this benumbing sense of claustrophobia and monotony however, that arguably excludes/secludes not only the spectator from ‘the chaos “outside,”’ but also the word *gewand*. Inside this white box, as the word itself constructs it, *gewand* not only *is* the wall,

18. In Farsi, *pardeh* refers not only to curtain, but also ‘to the “curtain of virginity” or, to be more precise, it means “hymen”’ (Zaker in Motamedi Fraser and Zaker 2014, 4–5). In English, it is associated with the word *purdah*.



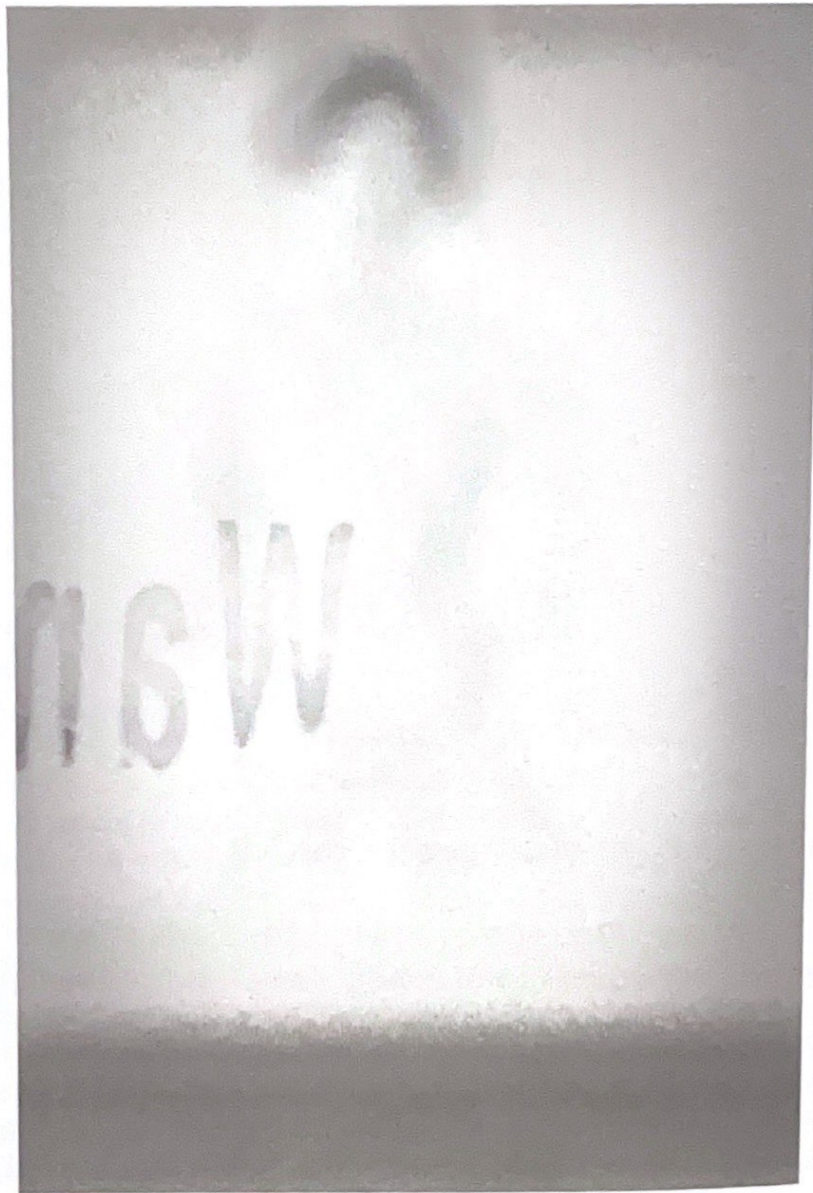
**Figure 4.2.** *[Ge]wand II*, 2013

'Repeated Return' Exhibition, The Dolphin Gallery, St John's College, Oxford. Site Specific Installation. Farniyaz Zaker

physically, but also, more metaphorically, hits it. Indeed one might liken *[Ge]wand II* to a *camera obscura* for words, a chamber that forecloses a more diverse array of sensory relations with and in the world. As I noted in chapter 2, the *camera obscura* was John Locke's metaphor for (misty?) consciousness, a metaphor that served to privilege sight in the acquisition of knowledge. It was his wish, of course, that the mind's eyes' images be finally quietened. Perhaps *[Ge]wand II* is an attempt to fulfil it.

I have been using Zaker's work as a way to dramatize some of the various ways that words can be understood to participate in meaning-making assemblages, drawing on themes that have been raised throughout this

chapter. I want to push some of these ‘participations’ further now, with reference to a final piece of Zaker’s, entitled *a black dress, a red dress* (2013). This piece stands in especially striking contrast to *[Ge]wand II* for it takes the static word—in fact it takes the same word, *gewand*—and puts it into sensory motion. Thus while Zaker uses the word *gewand* in both *[Ge]Wand II* and *a black dress, a red dress*, one could say that they are very differently texturalized.



**Figure 4.3.** *a black dress, a red dress*, 2013  
‘Re-enveloped’ Exhibition, Kingsway Corridor, Goldsmiths, London.  
Site Specific Installation. Farniyaz Zaker

Zaker's *a black dress, a red dress* (figure 4.3) was shown at Goldsmiths as part of the Re-Enveloped exhibition (2013). This was a site-specific piece, made for the Kingsway Corridor. At the time, the Kingsway Corridor was a large space, almost a hall, in which two glass cabinets were built into/set level with the walls. Zaker covered the interior of the cabinets in a floral Victorian-style wallpaper and hung, in each cabinet, two similar photographs of herself wearing a Victorian-style dress. The photograph/'the woman' is thus twice enclosed/secluded/excluded: once by the glass which frames the pictures, and then again by the glass of the cabinets. Zaker stencilled the word *wand*, which, as I noted earlier, is the German word for wall, on the glass of the cabinets. She also placed two speakers inside the cabinets through which the sound *ge* could, just about, be heard. The low volume of the recorded *ge ge ge* induces the spectator to physically engage with the piece by pressing up against the glass cabinet in order to hear what is being said. (In this way, the spectator abandons a private or cerebral relation to the word, as 'listening' becomes self-consciously bodily). As in *[Ge]Wand II*, the sound *ge* and the stencilled *wand* 'add up' (or potentially add up) to *gewand*, the German word for clothing or garment.

Nevertheless, there are differences between the pieces. For example: although it is possible to absorb *[Ge]wand II* as a 'unitary tableau' (as Condillac's young Prince of Parma absorbs the view from the window), it is difficult, ultimately, for the reader/spectator to resist the linearity of the relation between the word and the wall into which the piece dissolves, or to see its parts as anything other than additive. Thus *ge* + wall = *gewand*. In *a black dress, a red dress* the word *gewand* is also split between two materials: *ge* is repeatedly spoken/heard through the glass, while *wand* is repeatedly stencilled on the glass. But while there are certainly linear elements in *a black dress, a red dress*, it remains a challenge for the spectator/listener/reader to grasp the piece *either* in its linearity *or* instantaneously. Indeed my hesitation as to how to describe the audience for this piece—for she is one moment a spectator, another a listener, or then again a reader—is symptomatic of the restless movement that defines *a black dress, a red dress*. It is this restlessness which recalls Gottfried Semper's theory of matter 'as being in transit, as neither being raw substance any longer nor having yet entered the field of finalized forms' (Spuybroek 2011, 95, emphasis in the original).

Zaker's work (Zaker 2014) is indebted to Semper, and particularly to his *Four Elements of Architecture* which was published in 1860. In this book, as Tim Ingold summarizes it, Semper argues that 'the threading, twisting and knotting of fibres were among the most ancient of human arts, from which all else was derived including both buildings and textiles' (Ingold



2007, 42): ‘*Decke* [which means ceiling and, in some contexts, blanket], *Bekleidung* [clothing], *Schranke* [barrier], *Zaun* [fence] (similar to *Saum* [which means hem, and can also mean the border of a field]),<sup>19</sup> Semper writes, ‘and many other technical expressions are not linguistic symbols applied to the building at a later stage but clear indications of the textile origin of these building elements’ (Semper in Spuybroek 2011, 91). If Semper expresses the point etymologically, Zaker, in her *[Ge]Wand II* (2013), expresses it materially.

What makes Semper’s work especially interesting is that his ‘origin myth’ (regarding threading, twisting and knotting) (Spuybroek 2011, 327) obliges him to conceive of the relations between buildings and textiles, matter and pattern, in ways that do not reduce the former to a ‘passive mass awaiting a negative form to be molded in, as if the “made of” can be separated from the “it”’ (Spuybroek 2011, 97). Conversely, and particularly because he confers great significance on the techniques of weaving and braiding, Semper objects to any conception of weaving as either ‘metaphorical or “applied”’ (Spuybroek 2011, 95). Drawing on the notion of *Stoffwechsel* (which means metabolism, as it pertains to living organisms), Semper argues that the emergence of pattern is the outcome of transition itself, of the dynamic and symbiotic relations between matter/materials, ‘activities, techniques and technologies’ (Spuybroek 2011, 93). As Spuybroek explains it (by way of example): water freezes, lava hardens, faces age (Spuybroek 2011, 96).<sup>20</sup>

Semper’s understanding of matter and pattern is relevant to words because it can serve as a counterweight to the notion of symbolic forms. For while symbolic forms, being perceived in their essence to be immaterial, may or *may not* be manifested materially (see also my discussion of Saussure in chapter 2), pattern, by contrast, for Semper, ‘can never be idealized, never be fully subtracted from matter’ (Spuybroek 2011, 97). This distinction helpfully illuminates, I think, the difference between words as they appear in relations with language, and words in nonlinguistic relations. For language-words require, at least to some degree, a symbolic dimension. Without it, their material differences would potentially make a prohibitive difference (that is, they would matter) to their practical, everyday usage. It

19. My thanks to Michael Guggenheim for helping me with these translations and their etymologies.

20. There are parallels to be identified here with Carruthers’ theory of textualization in which ‘commentary and gloss’ is not so much a surface, or a ‘crust of ornamentation’ added to the original text, but is, as I cited her arguing earlier, ‘the mark of textualization itself’ (Carruthers 2009, 14).

is important, in order for the letter 'a' to be transferred from one context to another, that 'all inscriptions of "a," regardless of how they are written, count as the same letter' (Mitchell 1986, 68). It is important, in other words, that it is *not* important that the letter 'a' that you read in this font on this page does not look identical to the 'a' that you would write. With respect to words in other kinds of relations however, words as I am understanding them in *Word*, material specificity—or material embodiment, as N. Katherine Hayles (1999) puts it (see my discussion in chapter 2)—*does* make a difference to what they mean or, more accurately, to how they are able to contribute to meaning-making. It matters that *divār* is printed on a curtain and not on a wall. To detach it from this particular texturalization would be to transform the connections it is able to generate and, most likely, to shrink its 'hermeneutic circle.' It might also alter *how* it contributes to meaning, which is by participating and not by pointing.

This brings me to one of the reasons why I have been resistant in this book to the claim, when it is made without investigation, that words are, or act, like images. The problem with this proposal, for me, is that it implies both that words are a generic, general category—and so are images—and also that it is already decided what words and images are. In keeping with Semper's theory of matter, I would prefer to think of a (material) word not as a 'petrified image' (as a fixed and static 'thing'), but rather 'as an embellishment that has become structurally stable' (Spuybroek 2011, 94). As required by the term *Stoffwechsel*, or metabolism, this alternative conception draws attention to process: to the process by which *this* specific word acquires *this* specific material stability (and what sustains it).

To return to *a black dress, a red dress*. 'Drawing attention to process' is a characteristic, I would argue, of this piece. Unlike the frozen and finished display of both word and matter in *[G]ewand II, a black dress, a red dress* can, I think, be conceived of as a field—or perhaps, more accurately, a technique—that gives direction to the word *gewand*'s 'potential to become many forms, depending on the actual forces at work during the transition' (Spuybroek 2011, 97). Rather than being resolved and completed, as it arguably is in *[Ge]wand II*, the word *gewand* in *a black dress, a red dress* seems to *roam* around its possible forms of materialization, at once written (seen and/or felt on the glass), aural (heard), oral (spoken) and re-presented (as a photographic image of a dress). Also it is woven. '[I]n *a black dress, a red dress*,' Zaker writes, 'the word *Wand* (wall) is spread over the glass cabinets in a specific pattern which is similar to a particular and uniform knotting technique. The glass window is transformed into a woven textile. The recording of the continuous sound 'Ge, Ge Ge, Ge' also relates to the theme of regular knots, of rhythm' (Zaker in Motamedi Fraser and Zaker

2014, 14). But how is it to be decided that the word *gewand* is spoken or written or woven? That it is heard or seen or felt? I want to suggest that the word *gewand* in *a black dress*, *a red dress* cannot be disaggregated from the spectator/reader/listener who ‘observes’ it; that the observer is a part of the ‘actual forces,’ as Spuybroek puts it, through which the word *gewand* is stabilized, at least temporarily, in its material specificity. Importantly, however, this process is completed not *by* the spectator, but *with* them.

I draw a distinction between ‘by’ and ‘with’ here in order to forfend the idea that the material form of the word *gewand* will be decided by the physical capacities of the spectator. (Such that the aural materialization of the word will be precluded *by* a deaf spectator, or that the word will be materialized visually *by* a sighted person, and so forth). To presume as much would be to bring a different kind of linearity to the piece: not the linearity of relation or equation (as in *[Ge]Wand II*), but the linear equivalence of sense and sensed object (where sighted person, for instance, = seen word). This anaemic conception of the sensory worlds of words is not, as I have already noted, uncommon. It underlies numerous accounts of words, as illustrated (in this book) by their tendency to examine at length the implications that follow from the visuality and/or orality of words, while neglecting to address other possible sensory and cross-sensory ways of feeling and experiencing them. But I have also explored, in this and the previous chapter, how word-senses can weave and be woven through and across and into each other in complicated patterns and textures that make it difficult to extract exactly the sense or senses or sensations by which a word comes alive in the mind, or is scraped with a finger, or is sharply grasped or tasted, or passed over with indifference . . . and this, I would argue, is what it means to be ‘with’ *a black dress*, *a red dress*: it is to have one’s senses patterned, through movement, *with* the word *gewand*. Indeed, one might go so far as to say that *a black dress*, *a red dress* operates as a living, abstract station for movement (Spuybroek 2011, 95)—which is why the kind of word that is *gewand*, the sense of it, cannot be decided *without* the spectator, even though it is not determined *by* her. When Althea Greenan, from the Women’s Art Library at Goldsmiths, was documenting *a black dress*, *a red dress* for the library archive, she proposed that the combination of its materials ‘disorients perspective and troubles the space as the words start to play, or move and merge with the patterns of the wallpaper’ (Greenan 2013, personal correspondence). Greenan likened this hallucinatory aspect of the piece to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* which is very powerfully about the experience of domestic space. But it might equally evoke the tremble of anticipation before transition begins.

## CONCLUSION

As I have suggested throughout this book, words are often associated with absence. In part, my intentions in this chapter have been to try to explore the *presence* of words through a focus on words in connections, textures and patterns. These are just some of the ways, I have argued, that nonlinguistic word-world relations acquire significance. Significance is an important aspect of wonder—to return to my discussion of Caroline Walker Bynum's medievalist understanding of this concept (see the introduction to this book)—because it serves as a lure to investigate the wondrous object further. 'All [medieval] theories of wonder,' Walker Bynum writes, 'saw it as a significance-reaction: a flooding with awe, pleasure, or dread owing to something deeper, lurking in the phenomenon' (Walker Bynum 1997, 3). Such a reaction could explain the broad appeal of Helen Keller's water-pump scene, and of the other sensual and sensory experiences of words that I have described in this chapter: that feeling of being *flooded* (literally, in Keller's case) with wonder at a word.

But wonder, as Walker Bynum indicates, also marks out difference. It was precisely his wonder at Keller's grasp of words, Georgina Kleege proposes, that led Michael Anagnos, the Director of the Perkins Institute, to put her on trial for plagiarism and fraud (Kleege 2006, 28–29). Kleege suggests that Anagnos was 'unsettled' by Keller's ability with words because he had the 'impression that the words appearing one by one on the page are somehow connected to thoughts as they form inside your [Keller's] head, when he really knows it is a matter of rote memorization and retrieval' (Kleege 2006, 29). Unlike the 'fanatical words' that I discussed in chapter 3, it is *thought* rather than *rote* that is the cause here for wondrous fear and dread. But either way, in both examples, it is the relation of a subject to words, and how that relation is mediated by conscious or nonconscious cognition, that is a matter for policing. And it is the more complex relations with words—relations that do not neatly pluck a word out of a position in a system (and then return it), or which do not bind it to the most immediate of the physical senses—that are of course viewed with suspicion. I say 'of course,' for these are the micro-political prohibitions through which the sign machine, which I discussed in the introduction to this book, exercises its power.