

Shapes

By Caroline Nevejan

Clutter

In the summer of my 26th year I lost the capacity to read completely. I had hit my head real badly and a severe concussion made me instantly illiterate. Slowly walking the streets of the heart of Amsterdam with a large hat, I was so surprised. Streets appeared to be full of text and I had never realized this before. They were full of cluttered signs randomly organized preventing the buildings to be seen. Why do people need so much text? Why do we put it anywhere, as if nothing can be left without a mark?

Blur

After a few days the illiteracy did not disappear and I realized I had to learn myself reading again. But I could not see the shape of signs, I did not recognize any letter. So I started to do Tangram, the game in which you make different shapes with the same 7 pieces. On and off I would try to make shapes and make the same shape again. Slowly I improved. After about a week I opened a Donald Duck magazine. First the exclamations opened up and bit by bit more letters and even words. It was a strange experience that after another week I could read the Donald Duck, but at the same time the newspaper still remained a blur. I remembered this experience from when I was a child. Learning to read, but not being able to read 'grown up' things. Apparently when you cannot handle a more complex level of the same thing, it goes back to the state of blur.

Looking through

So after Donald Duck I went into the women's magazines and by the time I could read those (especially advertising was fun in the beginning) slowly the newspaper opened up. By now I was training several hours a day and faster and faster I could read. I was immersed in trying to make sense of more blur and more blur, puzzled by how my brain was adapting in this exponential manner. After 4 weeks I even read complex French and German texts that I could hardly read before. My focus and training on 'looking through shapes' had deep impact on my understanding.

Opening up

The experience of letters 'opening up' is strange. One has to be able to recognize the shape to be able to read the words. But once reading one does not see the shape anymore, only words and meaning surface. Learning to read appeared to be learning to look through shapes and not at shapes. Peripheral attention registers the shapes, but behind and through the shapes words, sounds and meaning emerge. Letters are like the 'mis en scene' of language, setting the stage for the theatre of mediated communication. Only when you grab the 'mis en scene', words acquire meaning and communication flows.

Center Stage

Letter's opening up requires me to move my attention into the place where letters are located. On the many devices connecting to the Internet however, letters pass by in instantaneous configurations of a never ending 'mis-en scene'. I am put center stage, where mobile letter carriers embrace my body with their bliebs and sounds and color my personal sphere. No looking through is required here; opening up one's self is the only way in or out. All is here. What is it that we do not look at now?