

**How to Do Things with Thoreau's Words:
Ian Whittlesea's *Economy***



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It is easy, perhaps too easy, to forget that language occurs in time. Whether reading, speaking, or writing, for most of us words feel as if they come in a rush or at least as interconnected blocks of phrases and ideas. In reality, meaning accrues, word by word, although we rarely are deliberate enough in our reading or listening practices to be attentive at such a specific level to perceive the incremental process. How can we be, given the increasing demands on our attention, demands that come from all directions and at all times of day? In *Walden*, the 1854 source text for Ian Whittlesea's *Economy*, Henry David Thoreau writes, "There is an incessant influx of novelty in the world, and yet we tolerate incredible dullness." In 2009, such a claim seems a fortiori true. The existence of the internet, for instance, means we are inundated by information and communication as never before, and given such a surfeit, we have less and less time and fewer resources to do anything but process what comes our way. In this way, we become receivers. The imagination—as a combined faculty of perception and understanding—is what, arguably, fashions the links and contexts that group words and produce meaning. But to imagine takes time and patience as one needs opportunity enough to discern anything other than the most immediate patterns. Language is, above all else, patterning, and as such is itself an engagement and negotiation of form, the way that all art deals with form itself. Is all language, thus, artful? Certainly it requires attention and interpretation. In the case of Whittlesea's body of work, language has been recontextualized within art (and not just as literature), thereby posing questions about art and meaning that have ramifications for how we understand the things we use to understand the world we live in. With Whittlesea's work, we ask what these words do rather than ask (merely) what they say.

In Whittlesea's *Economy*, the artist proposes an alternative condition to a consumerist way of being. In point of fact, the work is not easily consumed because it happens over quite a long period of time and so it establishes a range of values that run contrary to those determined by desire, instant gratification, and commodification. *Economy* is, at first glance, relatively direct. The artist has typed each word of the first chapter of Thoreau's *Walden*—entitled "Economy"—into a computer. The words are projected, one at a time over the course of thirty-seven hours and fifty-three minutes with each being displayed for something close to three seconds before fading into the next. The act of all that typing means that we cannot properly think of Whittlesea's piece as minimalist, despite its visual austerity. While we would call it conceptual, such a term seems rather anemic in light of the fact that Thoreau's language is so substantive and full of hard, intractable nouns. I do not think it too far to go in saying that the work is visually economical. This style also

remains consonant with much of Whittlesea's larger body of work, which has continually dealt with text and image, including *Studio Paintings*, his stunning series featuring the precisely rendered addresses of the studios used by such famous writers and artists as Gertrude Stein, Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, and Thoreau. Although with *Economy* the words are rendered by computer rather than painted by hand, the white lettering against a nearly black background inevitably calls to mind On Kawara's *Today* series in which each piece consists of the artist's painting the date each work was created. Yet, generally speaking, Whittlesea's text images refer to places rather than time. In *Economy*, however, Whittlesea goes well beyond any debt to Kawara and merges the specific citation of text, the particularity of space (both in terms of Walden Pond in Concord and the site of the installation), and the experience of time as duration.

The demanding duration of *Economy* raises some questions: does the artist imagine that the viewer would, ideally, watch or read the entire work? Or does he imagine that viewers will pass by casually, pausing to take in some of the words and then move on? If it be the latter case, the words then are almost completely estranged from their semantic meaning or their place within an overall structure. The casual viewer will not know that the source of these words are Thoreau's *Walden* and so cannot know the specific referents and references. Some might argue that the words approach pure form since their meaningfulness is partially inactive without the context of the overarching structure. Andrew Renton has suggested that words in Whittlesea's work become pure signs. But they can never become only form—simply white lines and curves—because we recognize these shapes and forms as words. To put it another way, we know that the words mean when we see them. In this case, such recognition indicates that the words Thoreau writes are not solely his; they cannot be privately owned since they are language that we all share. It is granted that the arrangement is specific to Thoreau, but their meaningfulness comes from and forms the idea of community, or what Wittgenstein might call a “form of life.” From the attention *Economy* requires, what we gain is localized familiarity and sustained acknowledgment of the individual parts. An economy, however, as a system always involves the relationship of parts to a whole structure in which they are found. In the case of Whittlesea's installation, to understand that connection the viewer needs to stay and participate in the economy of the installation. Thus, to walk away is to become responsible for one's own aversion. It is to become accountable for one's own giving up of responsibility. “We belong to the community,” Thoreau writes in a sentence that appears as part of *Economy*. In taking on Thoreau's text, Whittlesea takes on Thoreau's insistence that everyone is at all times caught in a

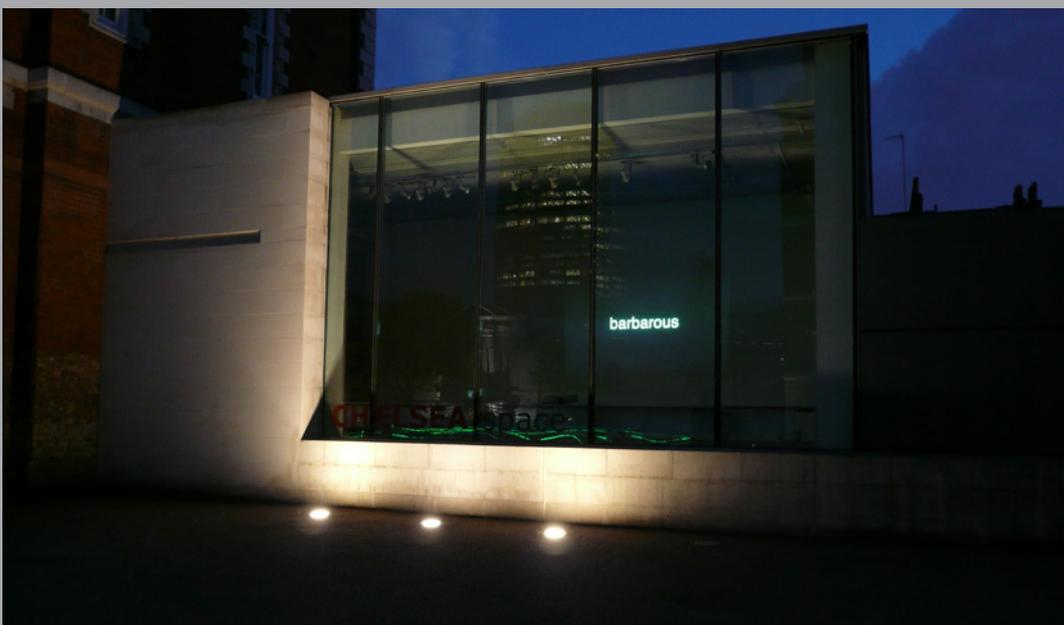
larger ethical economy. The abjuring of one's role in that condition is the forbearance of that which we might call the human.

Yet, even to watch the installation start to finish would cause a sense of disorientation or alienation as it would be impossible to hold in all the meanings of all the words as they appear one at a time, each new word displacing the previous one while still extending the sentential thought. Moreover, the work of gathering the language by the viewer is commensurate or even complementary to Whittlesea's actions of disseminating the words—or, to use an agrarian term that Thoreau would employ and which has now an aptly double significance, broadcasting them. *Economy* makes it clear how first Whittlesea and then the viewer are replicating Thoreau's labor by engaging each word. The words become shared acts of interpretation, negotiation, and response. Whittlesea's entering Thoreau's text into his computer makes literally true the old adage that all reading is rewriting. The next step left is for the viewer to gather the words across time, in a sense rewriting them in discerning their larger pattern, even as the words as discrete units continually decay and give way to what follows.

It might be tempting to see Whittlesea as undertaking some form of translation. Given that the artist has recently translated Yves Klein's *Les Fondements du Judo* into English in an edition published by Everyday Press, such a conception might be plausible. Certainly, Thoreau's text is translated into visual art, which is a different experience altogether. Yet, of course, the words remain the words. We are left then to consider context and what it entails in terms of how we negotiate those words. "Homeliness," *Thoreau writes in A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, "is almost as great a merit in a book as in a house, if the reader would abide there." Whittlesea is able to transfigure Thoreau's trope of abiding from primarily a spatial trope to one of time as well, as if the issue is to abide or dwell in the space of the text as well as in its time.

"The cost of a thing is the amount of what I call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run," Thoreau writes in "Economy." With Whittlesea's installation, one knows exactly what amount of time—and thus what part of our lives—needs to be given to the piece, both in its making and in its experiencing, and this itself serves as some comment on the market forces that shape the art world. Art asks of us everything we are willing to give it, and now with *Economy* we have an exact sense of what that cost is for this specific encounter. We can decide not to pay it or offer anything in exchange—either way, the choice we make is our own. The exchange, however, is the realization that interpretation, the ongoing act of reading, working, and participating in larger social, ethical, and existential patterns are, first and last, a

shared endeavor. This shared labor, this literal collaboration in the hope of meaning, Whittlesea's installation reminds us, is a human economy.



Ian Whittlesea
Economy
2009
Computer, data-projector

Venue: Chelsea space,
May 2009

The first chapter of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau projected, one word at a time, each word fading into the next. A 12 hour excerpt from a total running time of 37 hours 53 minutes.