

Kay Rosen: THE CENTER IS A CONCEPT

The center is a concept that has been in everyone's consciousness this political year as the two political parties vie over the middle undecided few. Independent of party politics though, a recent study of linguistic structures has been found to show that certain words and phrases are capable of depicting through their form multiple relationships between a generic center and the forces surrounding it. Complex scenarios pertaining to the dynamics of the center and its perimeters are succinctly mirrored by words containing no more than eight letters in any one case. Although the nailbiting election will be over by the time this column comes out, perhaps an analysis of these works might suggest some simple analogies to politics as well as a to a range of other issues.

The language in these examples consists of common words which would not raise an eyebrow at first glance. Like any found objects, their value can be easily overlooked until they are given a second chance. These words and phrases are selected for their potential to represent things in an alternate way so that reading is an active, visual, deciphering process rather than a passive, cognitive, scanning process. With agility and efficiency words can enlist their own body parts, or lack of them, to convey meaning. It becomes evident that language can act out meaning and actually be a verbal surrogate for the thing it represents, turning the word into the thing itself. With the help of visual and grammatical strategies language can exceed its function as signifier to artfully role-play the signified.

The adjustments required to remodel language in this way are modest, as the language is selected because of its readymade properties. But in the microcosmic context of one or two words, a small gesture can produce a large shift, with consequences. Half full becomes HALFULL when a letter and a space are removed, putting a letter at the center of a subjective debate. Referencing the proverbial glass, HALFULL offers a verbal shortcut for viewing the world in two ways, positively or negatively, through a simple linguistic choice involving the letter F. In HALFULL, the choice lies between aligning the F with either HAL (HALF) or ULL (FULL). Trapped in the middle, F has to negotiate the philosophical quandary alone without the linguistic sharing of its double. The excision of the other F creates a dilemma for the remaining F because it cannot be in two places at once, with both HAL and ULL. The difficulty of its decision is exacerbated by color which personalizes the positions in this triangular little drama. Orange, yellow, and green, are assigned to the three word parts, reinforcing both their mutual interest and their divisiveness. Yellow is part of both orange and green and would therefore be physically able to blend back in comfortably with either the orange HAL or the green ULL. But even as yellow F sides with one, it maintains a genetic footprint in the other camp as it is indelibly related to both. As a parent of both orange and green, yellow owes loyalty to both.



In addition to validating a viewpoint, F's choice is crucial to HAL'S and ULL'S very existence. Without F, neither can be a word at all. The words are either fully or partially deployed, depending on F's position. As complete four-letter words HALF and FULL are fully articulated whereas the three-letter words, HAL and ULL are not. So F's decision is about more than attitude. It is a matter of linguistic life and death. Its allegiance to either word is necessary for one or the other half to be functionally operative and autonomous. And for F to make sense on behalf of either side, it cannot be halved.

There are some cases when a word comes out whole with a fully formed message, and little intervention is required to deliver it other than to watch and listen closely as it spells itself out. Blurred is such a self-fulfilling and self-directing word whose body

parts contain both the message and the plan for its execution. Like HALFULL, its internal components express opposite positions coalescing around a center, and like HALFULL all the parts are sharply distinguished even as they remain integrated in the word. The emphasis is not so much on resolving their differences (although BLURRED does so), as on highlighting them through color and letter sequence and exposing their relationships to each other and to the original word. The letters that make up the beginning and end of



BLURRED are BLU and RED, so they are identified that way, by their color. Segregated by threes, BLU and RED leave R alone in the middle, like Yellow F between HAL and FUL. As the nexus of BLU and RED, R becomes their mutual point of contact and the natural heir of their combined and blended colors: purple. Unlike F in HALFULL, which was an ambivalent letter at the center of a tug of war, R is the point of accommodation as it blurs two positions together into one. Its resolution is the logical result of its structure. If BLURRED were a mathematical formula it would read $A+B=AB$. As a visual one it reads $BLU + RED = Purple$. The message of BLURRED is physically reinforced when it is painted on two perpendicular walls meeting in a corner. The V-or L-shaped generic architecture literally and conceptually supports the parallel verbal and visual message of difference and compromise, two positions meeting in the middle to form a third position.

PENDULUM, unlike BLURRED, is not a self-made object. In order to model itself after its real life counterpart, its letters have to be completely reordered. The new order, PNUUMLDE, reflects the successive stations of a pendulum's arc as it swings back and forth across an imaginary center between the first and last letters, the second and



seventh, the third and sixth, and the fourth and fifth, punctuating each one with a change of direction. The sequence of letters is deliberately out of order linguistically but in order conceptually. While the word does not actively move, it serves as a kind of score for reading which the viewer activates each time they read it. As they attempt to spell it correctly by visually reordering the letters, their repeated eye movements back and forth between P and E, N and D, U and L, and U and M mimic the pendulum's motion. It is an unintelligible jumble of letters until the viewers set it in motion.

The reader generates the pendulum, whose alternating rhythm is reinforced by its black and white palette, just as HALFULL and BLURRED together are cast in the entire color spectrum.

Color, sequence, and incidence of letters are important to the way words play out their message, but in issues of polarity numbers are important too, as in any situation involving two sides. HALFULL and BLURRED are symmetrical constructions of uneven-lettered words, bilateral units of three letters each astride a central pivotal letter. The power struggle over F's or B's alignment with one or the other side could result in a three-four or a four-three split. But HALFULL is stabilized by F's indecision, and BLURRED, by R's diplomacy. PENDULUM is stabilized by balance. Its even-numbered letters, four on each side of the center, methodically record each stroke to the right and left by the virtual pendulum.

When the it swings one way, it can be assured by gravity and momentum that it will swing back by that much the other way. The center here is not the subject of colonization as it is in BLURRED and HALFULL, but the fixed point against which the equal distance to each side is measured. Within a word, that distance is measured by

the number of letters. If *pendulum* did not have even-numbered letters, it would not have worked. When a verbal object is so mysterious that it lacks enough vital information to make its case, the viewer must supplement what they see with their own associations and knowledge in conjunction with clues from the words themselves, just as they do with any art work. They are already engaged to the degree that they read it. Any further exchange back and forth between them, signals from the language and interpretation by the viewer, hopefully builds a consensus of meaning between them. Although there is an argument to be made for a particular reading, there is no right or wrong answer.

WISH DISH ostensibly describes a yellow and red receptacle of desire, but it is really a verbal remnant descended from the past, the legacy of the original roots Yellow and Red before they were compromised into Yellowish and Reddish and then shortened to wish dish. They have not only gone through a name change, but they have also changed speech parts, from adjective to noun. Their transformation from



color to object within the small range of half a dozen letters is dramatic. It empowers the phrase with entirely new status. As former modifiers, Yellow and Red served in a dependent and accessory capacity to help define nouns. Now they are nouns. Although there is little outward resemblance to their antecedents, a close examination of WISH DISH reveals some genetic baggage. Seventy-five percent of each word is comprised of a suffix, ISH, passed down from Reddish and Yellowish. Twenty-five percent is borrowed from the previous syllables: W from Yellow which, like jello and hello, does not need it for pronunciation, and the extra D from Reddish.

The most visual holdover from the past is color, which Wish and Dish have inherited through their chromatic genes Yellow and Red.

The viewer comes in on the third act of an evolutionary sequence whose species are words. The stage where the viewer meets WISH DISH represents a transitional point on a path of change. Its amnesic past is silent and invisible, as it does not exist except for the residual features subtly embedded in the new structure, color and word parts disguised as complete words. Whatever its future might be can only be extrapolated from the present WISH DISH. Like HALFULL, BLURRED, and PENDULUM whose structures and colors set up a dynamic situation of opposing forces around a center, WISH DISH is the center, between past and future. At this arrested point in its passage from one to the other, it is uncertain if it is wishing for the past or future (with longing and desire), or both, or if its concern is for the present. Perhaps WISH DISH is a vessel which, like language, is for the benefit of the user, to be filled up with meaning.

-Kay Rosen, 2004

This text appeared as a handout to accompany the exhibition *Kay Rosen: Ha/full* at The University Art Museum, UC Santa Barbara, 2004, and a version appeared in *artUS* #516 (Jan-Feb 05).