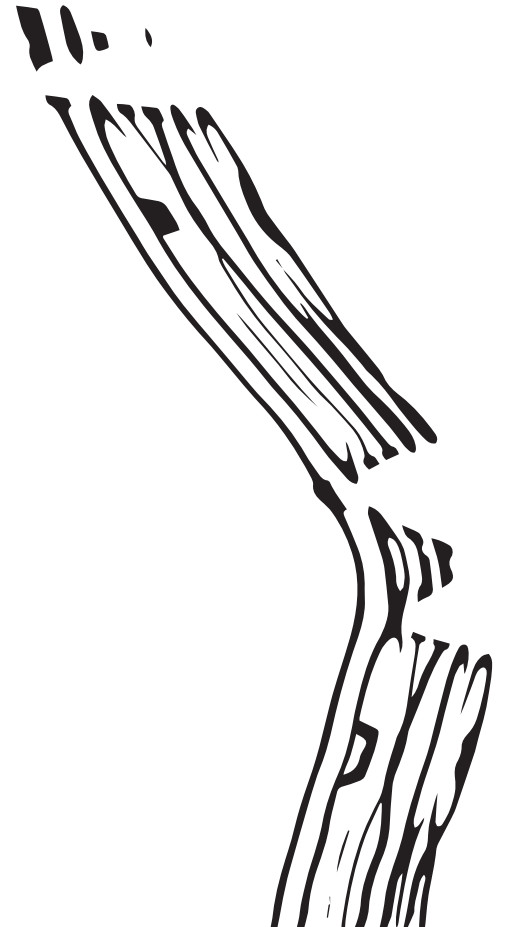


Texts



The Missing ‘E’

Kim Schoen

The genre of nonsense raises philosophical problems from the first. There is a confrontation between meaning and non-meaning in the production of nonsense. The absurd is also born from this conflict. The absurd is of course not the ridiculous and neither is it nonsense. And nonsense is most certainly not *non*-sense.

Nonsense embodies paradox. It’s ridiculous to even call it out as such, since to name it is to relegate to a common realm of ‘the understood.’ But language is slippery. What is understood can also be misunderstood, or not understood in the slightest.

What do we consider nonsense today? To what ends is it used? Under what conditions is it recognizable? To begin, let’s look uncomfortably closely at a single sentence, an example of what I call not nonsense per se, but *almost sense*, and the confrontations between meaning and non-meaning that occur there.

In an absolut world true taste comes naturally.

If we begin by defining absolute as that which negates relativity, is positive and certain, then in an absolute world—i.e. one where all variables are positively what they are, unchallenged in a specific configuration that is the case—this is what we can say absolutely: true taste comes naturally. However, that *true taste comes naturally* follows *in an absolute world* is not by definition absolute; there is a choice being made to finish the sentence with what may happen. There might be other worlds where true taste does *not* come naturally—but here, in an absolute one (or the absolut one, missing an ‘e’) we are told that it does.

How do we define taste? Absolut conflates taste as an aesthetic judgment—and physical taste, i.e. the sense by which the savour of things is perceived when brought into contact with the tongue. Kant’s necessary conditions for a judgment of taste are subjectivity and universality (and we’ll forget for a moment that a ‘tongue taste’ would fall under Kant’s “judgments of agreeableness” and *not* of taste.) In Kantian terms, in an aesthetic judgment one’s taste must be asserted as universally the correct taste, so in this sense, perhaps Absolut is Kantian in its assertion that one’s taste ought to be true as the precondition of having taste in the first place.



Unfortunately, Kant's judgement of taste involves both disinterestedness and "does not presuppose an end or purpose which the object is taken to satisfy"¹—two factors which the brand Absolut would most definitely *not* be interested in.

And whose taste is it? For there to be taste, must there not also be a subject who asserts that taste, and who might allow for it to come naturally? Can taste be autonomous, not linked to a judging subject? *Comes naturally* is an idiom meaning "to be natural and easy for someone," but in this case no someone is named for it to come naturally to. Therefore true taste 'comes naturally to someone' means here the impersonal pronoun 'one'—and 'one' we assume to be *'every one.'* So in this impersonal grammar—reach is assumed and expanded. (I refer here to reach as a marketing term, meaning total number of people exposed to a message.) Therefore *everyone* can have true taste—which is an impossibility.

One may find many definitions of the word true and this statement follows some of them steadfastly: i.e. one definition of true is that to be true means to be steadfast, or loyal, and so for Absolut to suggest loyalty by employing the word true follows on perhaps naturally, as brand loyalty is a concept to which they are steadfastly loyal, and wish you to be as well. *True* also means genuine, or authentic, or the one and only, which we can see Absolut might also have a vested interest in: true as 'proprietary.' True taste means the archetypal taste, positively, the one and only taste. This definition is a repetition of the concept of absolute—so we may now say:

In an *absolut* world *absolute* taste comes naturally.

Let's continue on. What does naturally mean? *Clearly*, or dare I say it: *fluidly*? Comes through nature, inherently, instinctively? "Without artificial assistance, by a natural process?"² Let us think about this—what would a natural process be in terms of being *told* your taste comes naturally through the rhetorical use of language in this phrase? The imperative in this sentence is an order, paradoxically opposed to the concept of the natural, and therefore, we find ourselves in a third repetition:

In an *absolut* world *absolute* taste comes *absolutely*.

It is in these repetitions where nonsense emerges. The sentence is emptied out three times within itself, and as well exponentially as a unit, as it repeats within a landscape ad nauseum. What is constructed to *sound like* abundance is, in effect, a lack. So we may argue that one reason for *almost sense* is repetition, appearing as abundance, but masking lack.

Almost sense also arises from a confusion in who is speaking, who is asserting beliefs, and whom the beliefs are supposed to apply to. *Commercial language functions without an individual speaker.* Absolut avoids having to say "I" as subject, meaning "a multinational corporation" as this doesn't *sound* good. Not only is this sentence impersonal, it is multitudinous; as someone well-versed in the field of marketing, I can tell you that its appearance is the result of many people. It therefore reflects a multitude of overlapping and conflicting interests and the result is a kind of word salad. In this it perhaps also reflects the algorithms that artificial intelligence uses, piecing together cue words or phrases that are sufficiently vague and non-specific enough that they can be understood as "intelligent" in a wide range of conversational contexts. So another reason for *almost sense* in this sentence—language without an individual speaker.

We have come to accept commercial language as a simulacra of sense with an absent speaker, and one which paradoxically (and tautologically) makes sense—through the assumption that assumptions of taste are pronounced through advertising as a matter of course, and we understand this happens naturally, normally, whether or not this language makes sense. We naturally don't expect for it to make sense—so when it does not, it conforms to our expectations and therefore remains unchallenged.

Here we return to the missing 'e' in absolute—what makes it Absolut Logic. I am indebted to Jean Jacques Lecercle's discussion of 'upholstery buttons' from the essay within this book, as well as our offhanded conversation as we walked from the symposium to the exhibition, where he suggested this missing 'e' as a button removed, popped off the sentence, which allowed for its unravelling. It is this missing 'e' that invites us to understand absolut logic (or *almost sense*) as sense as such. And it is within this environment of *almost sense*—commercial and political languages that 'sound like' sense, asking to be taken as sense—that artists make work today.

Is *almost sense* nonsense? Deleuze describes

a “flow of speech, or a wild discourse which would incessantly slide over its referent, without ever stopping”³—asking us to consider that nonsense is perhaps *the character of language itself*, in its paradox of perpetual becoming (not inextricably linked to a proposition or to things). We must admit that almost sense—as a form of nonsense that is perhaps less intentional—may be simply characteristic of language and its ultimate malleability, and is not opposed to us or imposed on us, but surrounds us and flows through us. And via this, the possibility emerges to *solicit sense* in its “aliquid movement” to eddy forth and pool. And here is where artists have a crucial role to play—in the redistribution of sense.

In our neo-liberal condition, it becomes increasingly difficult to uphold hard lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (corporate and personal) although it probably always was: as Tristan Tzara said in his Dada Manifesto of 1918: “To impose your ABC is a natural thing—hence deplorable. Everybody does it in the form of crystalbluffmadonna, monetary system, pharmaceutical product, or a bare leg advertising the ardent sterile spring.”

Between commercial language (where every term is exchangeable in its repetitions) and lyrical language (where every term is *irreplaceable* and can *only* be repeated)—we must navigate the waves. This opens up possibilities for productions of sense—as a *function* of nonsense.

Because nonsense, “far from being an absence of sense,” says Deleuze “is that which has no sense, and that which, as such and as it enacts the donation of sense, is opposed to the absence of sense.”⁴ What first appears as nonsense (for the time we spend caught out in it, since it always has a duration) offers us possibilities: nonsense re-routes flows; destabilizes relationships between extremes, confuses categories, and asks for new relationships to be formed.

Nonsense needs sense: these polarities are the stakes in each others’ claims—and this ourobourous is in constant movement. The exhibition *In An Absolut World True Taste Comes Naturally* was an experiment in working with artists that engage this movement. The works I chose seemed to embody a continuous provocation—in their vascillations, deferrals, elisions of context, and continual becomings, they distort our relations to fixed forms of sense. Deleuze tells us: “It is thus pleasing that there resounds today the news that sense is never a principle or an origin, but that it is produced. It is not something to discover, to restore or to re-employ; it is something to produce by new machinery.”⁵

Sense must be produced; it must be *made*, and nonsense appears dramatically on this constantly shifting stage, playing out its feints, absolut jokes and bamboo logic.

¹ See Kant 1790, pp. 51–53, p. 149.

² <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/naturally>, accessed May 25, 2015

³ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1990), 2.

⁴ Deleuze, 71.

⁵ Deleuze, 72.