

A linguist's-eye view of the works of Carl Plackman and Anne Hardy

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Part 1: Carl Plackman, *See Subconscious* (1974)

Carl Plackman was born in Huddersfield and worked in sculpture, drawing and writing (mainly in the south-west of England, and Goldsmith's in London) from the late 1960s until his death in 2004. Plackman was known as a complex and enigmatic artist. Among other things, he was interested in language; for example, in the gallery upstairs, there's another work by Plackman called *Stop Whispering, Start Shouting* (1992), though the connection to language is less clear.

In 2003, Plackman wrote, "In many cases [my] work is an attempt to examine how people communicate with each other and how objects often get in the way...the work often grows out of my interest in literature, cinema and the origins of language but at the moment I am primarily concerned with the subversiveness of the silent still image."

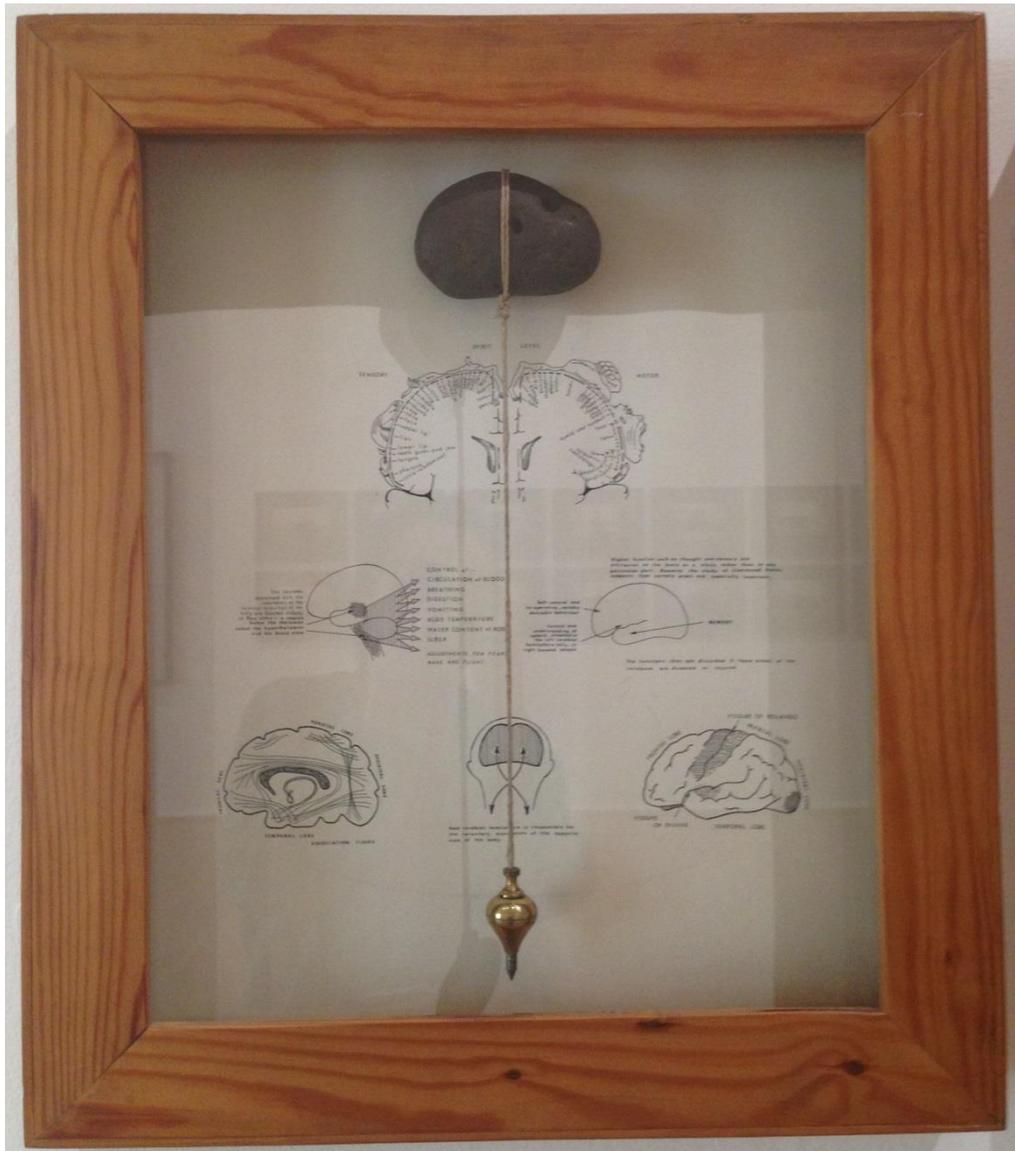
Language is central to this set of three works called "See Subconscious" from 1974. In this talk I'd like to take a linguist's eye view of Plackman's work to see how theories of language and the brain that were important at the time are relevant to some of the ideas behind his art.

First of all, the title of the work is important, and gives us some clues about the themes we're going to look at. "See Subconscious" is of course a pun – it refers to the dictionary entry for the word *subconscious*, which we find in the third piece – but also to the sea, which brings in important visual metaphors here.

The 3 sections of this work may reflect levels of consciousness or mental states: this might be the Freudian id, ego, superego; or levels related to higher, mid- (waking) and subconsciousness.

Carl Plackman was a voracious reader and collector of ideas. As a sculptor, he and his peers were trying to devise a "language of art". The early 1970s were also exciting times for debates about the relationships between the brain, language, and consciousness – and these are exactly the ideas Plackman wrestles with in "See Subconscious".

Let's start with **the first piece**. Here we see images related to the physiology of the human brain. These look like they've been cut and pasted from a psychology textbook. The "cortical homunculus" was devised by neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield in the 1940s and 1950s. It's a map of the brain according to function: you can see that more of the brain's cortex controls motor functions for hands and mouth, and for vocalisation (spoken language) than for the legs and walking, for example. These other diagrams describe the location of other brain functions, including the region associated with language on the left here.



This “localist” approach to brain function was very fashionable when Plackman did this work. A few years previously, in 1967, Eric Lenneberg published a book called *The Biological Basis of language*, in which he used evidence from stroke patients who had lost their language to argue that the brain is hard-wired for language and linked to certain regions of the brain. Plackman seems interested in this fragility of brain function, and mentions this here: “the functions that are disturbed...if diseased or injured.”

Plackman divides this piece into two “hemispheres” corresponding to the structure of the brain. On the left side are the physiological functions (breathing, vomiting), and on the right side, higher functions (including speech, memory, etc). Down the centre of the piece is a plumb line made of string attached to a plumb bob. So in the first piece here we have the physical aspect of consciousness, the brain itself, which houses the senses and the emotions.

But look again at the plumb line - it looks like a spine down the centre of the piece, and it’s anchored by this heavy, smooth pebble at the top here. It seems stable and solid – but it’s not, it’s precariously balanced; if the whole thing slips to one side, we lose our mental

balance, our faculties, and perhaps our consciousness. The brain itself may be a solid physical object, but the thoughts and meanings it houses are precarious.

In **the second piece here**, we have some enigmatic objects, some natural and some man-made - a turtle shell, a roll of tape, and a crumpled newspaper. There is no explicit language here, no text, but this piece seems to be about our waking consciousness, and about the way language and objects can (and cannot) transmit meaning.



Like in the first piece, we have another vertical string. The knot in string forms something like a belly button, with the roll of tape nailed in. The string connects these 3 objects, and the ideas they represent, and gives them a kind of physical body.

At the top is a turtle shell, which brings to mind various images: turtles go in and out, they go above and below, they are aquatic (a reference to the sea), they are in/visible, they can pull their bodies in for protection. Turtles are emergent; part of them is always hidden.

In the middle we have a roll of audio recording tape (this was made during the pre-digital age, remember!). I think this represents one form of language, the spoken form - this is language as we hear and speak it. But while there might be a recording on this tape, we can't access it. It's language without accessible meaning.

The third object here is crumpled newspaper. This is another form of language, the written form. It's difficult to read the actual text here, and I think that's the point. Like the audio tape, this is language without meaning.

I think there are comments on the ephemeral nature of language here, and the contrast between the physical form and the abstract. Starting with the turtle: the shell of a turtle has permanence, but the soft part, the animal, the essence of the thing that makes it a live turtle, is impermanent; here all that's left is the shell.

Spoken language, and consciousness itself, are ephemeral things – we speak, our brain processes meaning in milliseconds, then it's gone. Audio tape is a way of making language permanent. So is writing. Both are human-made, constructed artifacts, used to capture something that's transient and make it physically solid. And then we discard them, and they're ephemeral again.

We can also see this as a rejection of language as a way to convey meaning. Carl Plackman was deeply suspicious of the language of fine art criticism as a way to describe his work. Writing about his art in 1973, he said: "The 'structure/situation' is now too complex for verbal explanations which pollute experience with prejudices. Authoritative opinions are accepted as a guide when interpreting something you have not experienced yourself. These errors and myths that are perpetrated result from communications (an acceptance of phrases and formulas which do violence to reason). The actual structure of present communication systems affects even interpersonal relationships and has its basis in politics."

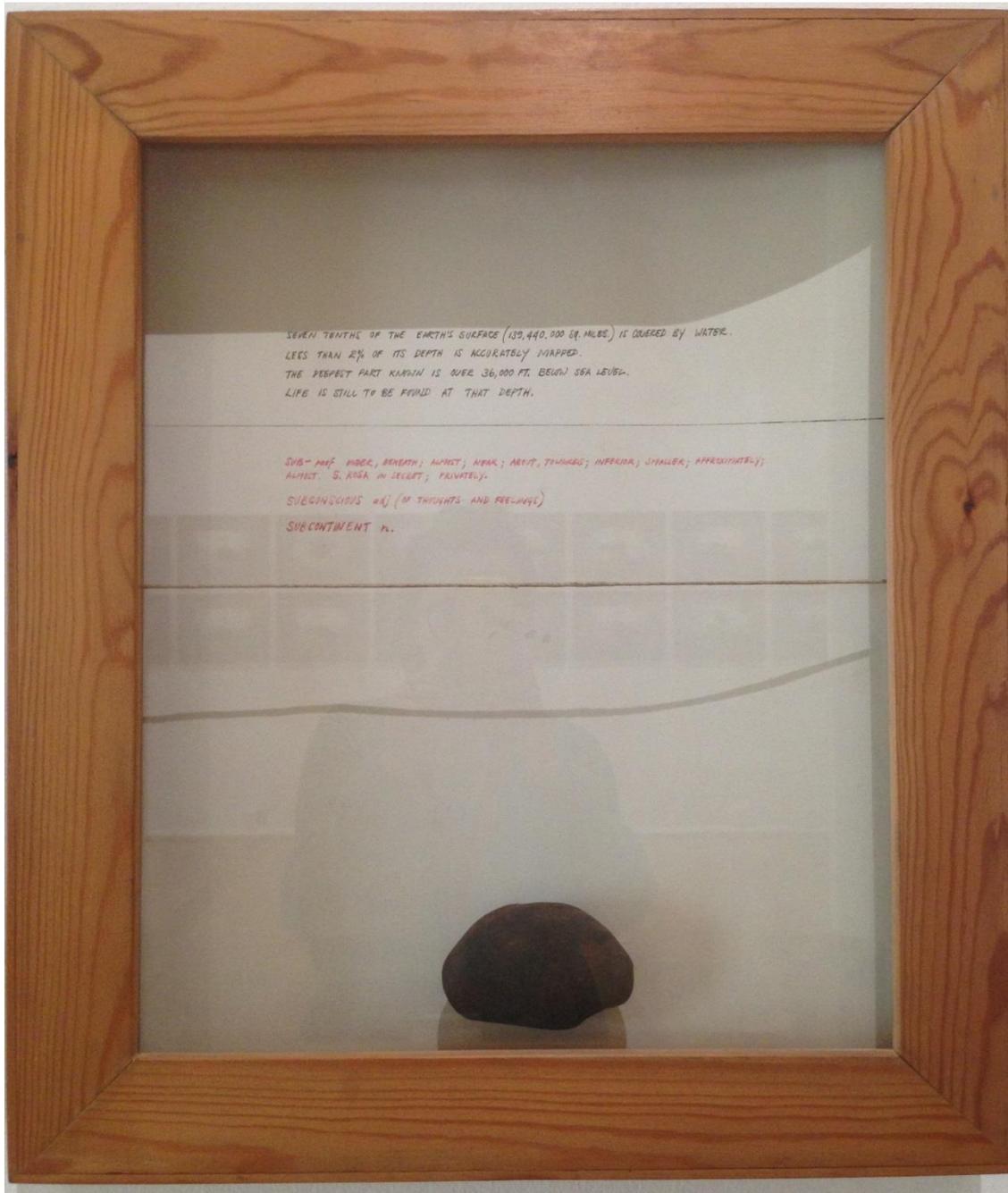
Fenella Crichton, reviewing Plackman's work in 1977, wrote: "Plackman is interested in almost every kind of language, except that employed within the narrow confines of fine art...to put it at its simplest, he draws his material from the world of daily experience, but subjects it to a questioning process designed to alter the perceptions we normally take for granted. Objects constitute the basic vocabulary of his vernacular, but gestures and semantic associations are roped in as well."

So while Plackman saw critical language (language about art) as something constraining and a threat to artistic expression, at the same time in his own work he tried to construct

meaning by combining language together with objects in a new way, a playful and complex way.

In **the third piece**, we return to the title “See subconscious”, and the pun on “sea”.

Here the panel divided horizontally- this creates a horizon or sea level (to contrast to a spine).



In his Notes for Raft (1977-78), Plackman said: "I spent a considerable number of years as a student in Bristol. The fact that the city grew up around one of the major ports of this country has always made me very conscious that we live on an island separated from others, surrounded by the constant instability of the sea. It is not surprising therefore that this disturbing presence of the sea, which seems to hold the traces of our origins beneath its surface, is frequently used as a metaphor for our subconscious. This metaphor sometimes makes us reflect upon our own personal predicament and experience."

There's text here about how much of the earth is covered by water, and how little we know about it. Like the brain and consciousness itself, the sea is something mysterious and unexplored, and to us land-dwellers, what lies below is hidden and unseen.

Here there's a dictionary entry, with a definition of the prefix "sub-", then *subcontinent* and *subconscious*. The word "subcontinent" is an interesting one; it could mean a geographical space, like India, but it also suggests a sunken or submerged land, like Atlantis.

Both of these words also bring to mind a series of related words, which are supported by images in the piece here: *submerged*, *subliminal*, *subaqueous*, *suppressed*, *sub-par*.

Going back to linguistics for a minute, the dictionary entry may be a reference to our lexicon, a mental word list that all speakers of a language have. The lexicon is constantly changing and being added to; there are words we know and words we don't know and words we sort of know, and the meaning of words can change over time. A dictionary is a way of pinning the lexicon down, making the mental word list into something more permanent.

At the bottom is this blank space. This is our subconscious, with nothing visible, an inert and unknowable space. Here we can't access meaning; we have what is hidden, what is not expressed, what is inaccessible. There's this black stone here, but it's not clear what it represents. It looks like the black stone in the first piece, which hangs at the top, but here it evokes a different response. Instead of looking strong and solid, it looks solitary, dull, kind of depressed. Like meaning in language, context is everything.

Carl Plackman once told his friend, the fellow artist Tony Cragg, that he was interested in "talking about the things that one could not talk about". The artist John Davies said, "Carl Plackman found his own language, through the poetry of objects: unconsidered things were given power."

In the early 1970s, when Plackman created this work, it was an exciting time for what we now know as cognitive science. Researchers in the fields of psychology and linguistics were starting to really grapple with big questions about the way the brain worked and the nature of language.

Until the mid 20th century, language was seen as one of the main things that separated humans from animals. Importantly, language was taken to be an extension of human culture and society. According to this view, Japanese parents teach their children to speak Japanese,

alongside teaching them to use chopsticks and how to bow to show politeness. Japanese language comes straight out of Japanese culture.

Starting from the late 1950s and through the 1970s, linguist Noam Chomsky suggested that language was not a cultural construct, but something with a biological basis in the human species. Language still sets us apart from animals, but for a different reason. According to this theory, language has an innate (genetically-based), underlying structure shaped by a set of rules that children pick up unconsciously, just like they pick up learning to walk or the idea that objects have permanence.

As adults, we know the rules of our native language without being aware of them. If I say something like “Cat the on the mat sat”, you know this sentence doesn’t follow the rules of English. But how do you know that? Nobody has explicitly taught you this. Chomsky would say that you were born “knowing” some of these rules, or at least born ready to pick them up quickly and easily.

The theory that children are born with an instinct for language was (and still is) a radical view. The idea that our knowledge of the rules of language is something implicit, not something we’re aware of, locates language in the subconscious mind, rather than part of our conscious awareness.

Chomsky also saw language as having levels, which he called Deep Structure and Surface Structure. Surface Structure maps more closely on to the language we are conscious of hearing and speaking, while Deep Structure is linked more closely to meaning. I have no idea if Carl Plackman read Chomsky, but it’s interesting to consider this piece in the historical context of Chomsky’s ideas and the wider debates in cognitive science going on at the time he created these works.

Part 2: Anne Hardy, Falling and Walking (phhhhhhhhhhh phosshhhhh crrhhhhzzz mn huaoogh)

So, why did Anne Hardy choose this work by Carl Plackman?

From an artistic point of view, there are all kinds of things to say about space that I’m not going to talk about because I’d be making it up. But I think it’s clear that Anne Hardy is also interested in many of the same ideas as Carl Plackman, especially around the nature of consciousness, the relationship between humans and the natural world, and around permanence versus transience. Like many artists, she is also trying to convey meaning by going beyond verbal language, by using a language of objects.

We can start with the title of the work, Falling and Walking (phhhhhhhhhhh phosshhhhh crrhhhhzzz mn huaoogh), which is obviously a play on what language can and can’t do; language is notoriously bad at capturing sounds, and not all sounds convey meaning.

There's no explicit verbal language in this installation, but there's a language-like chatter in the background from natural and human-constructed sources- rain, birdsong, thumping, clattering of cans.

In this corner, like Plackman, Hardy has also tape. It's VHS tape but it looks very similar to the audio tape in Plackman's piece. Hardy hangs it in curtains, and discards rolls of it on the ground in tangled piles. The curtains create a kind of visual ambience that is echoed by the use of ambient sound. The discarded tape again seems to relate to the short-lived, immediate nature of sounds. Sounds (including language) can be captured and made permanent, and then discarded.

Hardy is also clearly interested in the nature of consciousness. Her installation has a surreal, dreamlike quality, and moving through it feels like you're moving in and out of states or levels of consciousness.

When thinking about both Plackman's work and Hardy's installation, it's worth mentioning another really interesting topic from cognitive science, which is the inner voice. Linguists and psychologists studying that internal monologue see it as another level of language altogether. Some call it "Mentalese", the language of thought. It flows along with our stream of consciousness, giving us fragments of sentences and words, but we're normally not aware of it. The inner voice helps us to process what our senses are giving us.

The sensory experience of both of these works strongly evokes the inner voice. It's impossible to view one of Carl Plackman's sculptures or walk through Anne Hardy's installation and not hear the inner voice trying to make sense of what we're seeing, giving us a stream of memories, thoughts, emotions and sensory responses. By evoking the inner voice, art connects our waking consciousness with our subconscious, all through the medium of language.