EST 2017
JAMES CASTLE HOUSE
BOISE IDAHO

Prolegomenon to a Residency

Eric Follett
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My Language

Like most, or many, or some, I feel compelled to approach James Castle's art from a language-soaked place. Language, in many of its various masks, is the main tool that I use to interact with his work, just as it is the main tool I use to interact with the landscape and with the people in my life.

As far as I can remember, the first piece of James Castle's art that I saw was his drawing of a house, split into vertical sections, which are separated from each other, with the uninterrupted landscape showing through the new columns of House. This drawing was hanging in the Boise Art Museum, as I recall, on a small stretch of wall that separates one of the main galleries from the restroom, where I was about to go, or maybe from where I had just come.

I stood for some time, I am sure, looking at the deceptively simple piece. The liberation of the landscape from the stranglehold of the opaque house was a revelation to me. There was something very pure and very sincere about the interaction of the artist and the architecture and the landscape.

When I began to move again through the museum, I was glad to find more pieces by James Castle, whom I was not familiar with before that particular visit to the museum. I don't remember what the next drawing of his they had on exhibit was, but I remember very well reading the words *Soot and Saliva on Found Cardboard* on the plaque next to, or perhaps underneath, the drawing. I could not have imagined a more compelling material or process with which to produce such art.

I was lucky enough to have visited the Boise Art Museum while they had a number of pieces of James Castle's work on display. At each new drawing, or construction, or design that I saw, I became more excited, tried harder and harder to produce the language necessary to 'understand' Castle's art.

It was there I learned that, like me, James Castle was raised in Idaho. I also learned that, unlike me, James Castle was congenitally deaf, and acquired no formal linguistic system - for example, English or a sign language of any kind - during his life. I felt, at exactly the same time, a deep connection to Castle and also a deep void between us.

His Language

Before trying to detail any ideas about James Castle and his art and his Language, allow me a simple but powerful disclaimer: Very simply, James Castle's art *feels* like Language to me. All of the subsequent analysis or exploration or comparison is my own personal attempt to figure out *why* I feel this way.

When I talk about capital-L Language, I am not referring to Castle's experiments with text and typeface, or his creation of the so-called 'authors' or the books and book-like layouts that he created. At least not exclusively. These longings of Castle for an expression of his linguistic abilities are striking and important, but I believe that they are only one small aspect of his larger artistic endeavor; one that is intimately connected to Language.

When I speak of Language, I refer instead to the richness and depth and illusory simplicity of Castle's art, which seems, to me at least, to be the same kind of thing as the richness and depth and illusory simplicity of Language as most of us experience it, whether we speak English or Shoshoni or Spanish or American Sign Language. Furthermore, by Language I do not mean writing, which is an invented and learned technology. I refer to spoken or signed language, which is a biological process, a characteristic of our species, genetically inherited and inevitably acquired in early childhood (except in cases of extreme neglect or pathology).

Language is a phenomenon that has defied all claims to 'understand' What Language Is, despite the ease with which we may discuss What Language Does. In fact, the monolithic stature of Language in our day-to-day experience makes it almost impossible to imagine an existence without it.

Since the 1950's, Noam Chomsky and the so-called 'generative enterprise,' also referred to as the Biolinguistic program, has considered Language, or more specifically the Human Language Faculty, an 'organ of the body,' like other cognitive systems. This was a great and meaningful departure from the traditional conception of Language simply as behavior, which was made up of conditioned responses within a community using a set of symbols.

The heart of the Biolinguistic program is that Language, that is, the ability for Language, is a universal human capacity, a genetic endowment consisting of some type of computational system for generating, producing, and comprehending complex and abstract symbols. In Chomsky's words, "a genetic endowment… which interprets part of the environment as linguistic experience." I could hardly think of a better summation of James Castle's art.

Seen through this Biolinguistic lens, James Castle - despite never acquiring the language (English or American Sign Language) of the communities of which he was a part - was as linguistically capable as any other individual due to the human genetic endowment for Language. And I believe that he proved this during his lifetime of artistic creation.

Therefore, James Castle's art *is* language, in a very literal sense. I believe that he tapped into his faculty for language in order to produce the staggering body of art that he left behind. His mind-brain contained the same computational system for generating complex expressions that my mind-brain does. I occupy that generative system for producing complex phrases and sentences from my Lexicon of English words. Castle, with that same generative system but no access to the languages of his communities, produced complex drawings and constructions based on his memory and experiences with the Idaho landscapes in which he lived. His drawings may not look or sound like my sentences, but I believe that the generative computational system is at the heart of both of our productions. At least, this is the idea that I am exploring.

Capital-L Language

Here are a few of the observations and principles about Language that have come from the Biolinguistic framework that I believe apply deeply to James Castle's work.

The Poverty of the Stimulus. Languages, as a rule and despite their apparent simplicity, are complex to the point of being unlearnable. Linguists have been able to show that even simple phrases often have certain hidden structural properties. These apparently invisible properties determine how phrases are interpreted, and so must be 'real,' in some sense. These properties also affect which kinds of linguistic operations are possible with different phrases. A great part of Biolinguistic research amounts to the gathering of 'impossible' sentences and phrases. These 'impossible,' or 'ungrammatical' (as they are called in the linguistic literature) phrases serve as the data from which general principles about the hidden structure of Language are abstracted. Even though children do not encounter these 'ungrammatical' sentences when they are acquiring their native language, they still accurately and intuitively glean the correct structures, and do so quickly and intuitively. This apparent contradiction in the acquisition process is called the

Poverty of the Stimulus. In other words, children do not seem to have enough data, or even the right kind of data, to learn a system as complex as Language.

A set of famous examples of this conundrum are the so-called 'double-object verbs.' Many verbs that take both a direct object and an indirect object in English can appear in two different structures. I can say "John gave a dish to Sam," where the indirect object (Sam) shows up in a prepositional phrase; but I can also say "John gave Sam a dish," where the indirect object (Sam), shows up with no preposition between the verb and the direct object (a dish). A child who is learning English would assume that when a verb takes both a direct and an indirect object, this alternation is possible. However, this is not true. There are plenty of examples in which a given verb cannot be used in both structures. For example, I can say "John donated a painting to the museum," but not "John donated the museum a painting." Why this is so is not obvious. It is this kind of hidden structural variation that linguists study, hoping to learn something about the deep nature of Language. These examples come from Steven Pinker's book *Learnability and Cognition*, which examines this particular aspect of the learning paradox known as the Poverty of the Stimulus.

This is only one simple example of the great complexity of language that has become apparent in the systematic analysis that has come from the Biolinguistic Program. This type of complexity is not taught to children as they learn to communicate in the language of their community, nor can it be, since even linguists who study these principles do not fully understand how they work, if they've noticed them at all. The double-object verb example as a learning paradox was not even described until 1974. Toddlers were successfully acquiring these complex distinctions well before any linguist noticed them. The computational system that is part of the human genetic endowment allows for such complexity to be acquired very early in life. One need only consider the detailed and repeated instruction necessary to teach a child something as seemingly simple and obvious as arithmetic. In other words, arithmetic must be explicitly taught to a child, while Language is something that happens to the child.

I believe that this principle of the Poverty of the Stimulus has much to offer toward understanding the great depth and complexity of James Castle's art, despite his very limited experience as a deaf man who failed to acquire a traditional language and who only ever experienced a few very limited parts of Idaho.

Generativity. The Biolinguistic program posits that language is a generative system, which accesses vocabulary items from a storehouse in the mind and through a simple combinatorial

process, produces strings of sounds, which are words, to be produced (spoken or signed) and then interpreted in the mind of the listener.

The repetition and combinations and variation of simple themes and structures in Castle's art recalls to my mind this generative process. James Castle spent his early life collecting a 'vocabulary' of symbols and figures and landforms from his exposure to the landscape of Idaho and his access to the material culture of the time. These themes and forms appear in his work over and over again, often in new and surprising and beautiful ways, just as a language of limited vocabulary and grammatical structures yields an infinite variety of poetry and prose and everyday conversation.

First Language Acquisition. Language (except in cases of certain disorders or extreme neglect) is an inevitable part of the development of a child. Babies begin to babble well before they are able to form complete words or complete phrases. Even in oral cultures that may lack the near continuous linguistic stimuli (constant conversation, radio, television, internet) present cultures like our own American one, toddlers develop complex linguistic behavior very early in life, especially given the complexity of linguistic systems, as discussed very briefly above.

Since James Castle was born deaf and did not participate in the oral linguistic community in which he grew up, I believe that drawing and building art were essentially substitutes for linguistic behavior in his young mind. The sheer volume of art that he produced reminds me of a sort of babbling, an experimentation with the forms and structures that he would later develop into a complex, language-like corpus of art.

Recursivity. Recursivity is the foundational mechanism of the human linguistic system in the Biolinguistic framework. In a narrow sense, it is the property of the generative (combinatorial) system that allows a linguistic object to be paired with another linguistic object, like *the* and *man*, and then for that complex unit *the man* to be paired with a third object, such as *draws*, to form a full phrase, *the man draws*. In a broader sense, recursivity is the phenomenon that produces 'nested' phrases that give language some of its apparent complexity. Phrases like *the man draws* can have 'nested' phrases inside of them, such as *the man that lives in the shed draws*, or a step further, *the man that lives in the shed that he built himself draws*. And so on and so on.

This fractal basis for language is something that Castle tapped into deeply in his art, whether in the form of doors within doors within doors or his layouts of books within books, as well as a variety of more subtle fractal-like art.

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Grammaticalization. A near universal phenomenon in human languages is the grammaticalization of words that previously referred to some thing or action in the observable world. Grammaticalization is essentially the abstraction of words with referential meaning into purely linguistic usages, where these words no longer refer to things in the world, but have purely grammatical functions (to mark things like tense, aspect, number, etc.). In English, as well as many other languages, these grammaticalized terms often undergo a phonological reduction, that is, their pronunciations are significantly shortened. For example, in English, the verb *to go* has a specific meaning referring to movement through the physical world, as in *I am going to the store*. It also has a purely grammatical meaning in its usage in future tense constructions, as in *I am going to draw a picture*. In this second example, there is no movement or 'going' in the literal sense.

The language has co-opted a word with a real-world reference for use in a purely abstract tense-related usage. In this grammatical usage, *going to* is very often shortened to something like *gonna*. The phonological reduction of these grammaticalized forms can, in fact be quite extreme. It is common to hear a phrase like *I am going to draw a picture* pronounced something like *I'm'n'a draw a picture.* However, when *to go* retains its referential meaning of movement, such phonological reduction is not heard. I, at least, have never heard anyone say *I'm'n'a the store*. And if I heard it I would not understand what was meant.

I believe that James Castle was experiencing and exhibiting some phenomenon of abstraction similar to what is observed in language. This is observable in many of the depictions of human beings with reduced, mask-like faces. And perhaps even in his monolithic, totem-like objects which decorate some of his landscapes as if they were the trees of the forest. While these forms often tend toward abstraction, in other realms - such as perspective and volume, as in his many drawings of interiors - there is not a move toward abstraction. Just as in Language, Castle seems to observe a divide in the types of objects he produces, with abstraction in one realm, but not the other.

A New Language

Examining his art through the lens of some of the principles and observations of the Biolinguistic framework, James Castle is a stunning experiment and example of What Language Is. He was congenitally deaf and educated (however slightly) at a time when sign language was not taught. Despite his failure to acquire a formal linguistic system by traditional interpersonal exposure and

communication, I can't help but believe that his innate language faculty instead manifested in his art.

While these observations cannot sum up or completely explain the otherworldly art of James Castle, I believe that they may lead to a greater appreciation of his deeply human work.

Besides, it might just be that Castle himself, by working so much with typeface and book layouts and by using the saliva of his mouth as an artistic medium, was inviting us to view his art as his Language in as many ways as we could think to do so.