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## INTERVIEWS, REVIEWS, & COMMENTARY on the work of Timothy C. Ely



### **Access to a Book That Won't Open (Interview)**

Excerpts from an interview with Timothy C. Ely conducted by Steve Clay on July 21 and 22, 1994 at the artist's studio in Portland, Oregon.

"Access to a Book That Won't Open. The Flight Into Egypt: Binding the Book." Chronicle Books, 1995.

**Steve Clay (SC):** Timothy Ely, you were born in Snohomish, Washington, in 1949 and grew up in the Pacific Northwest. You have cited an interest in geological maps, science fiction, comic books, the lore of local UFO sightings, petroglyphs, and the geomantic oddities of the Puget Sound, among many other things. Can you describe how these influences might have informed your youthful imagination and how they exerted their presence in your early work?

**Timothy C. Ely (TCE):** Well, it's a strange world out there. As early as grade school, I remember being really intrigued by UFOs, and I began to see them around that time. I've never known why. Perhaps because I was interested in them, I could see them. It was a time when people were "seeing things." The Kenneth Arnold UFO sightings, in 1947 near Mount Rainier, were not even forty-five miles from where I grew up! There were sightings over an island just west of Tacoma. A whole fleet of the things were apparently flying around. I've always been interested in mysteries and in finding strangeness in ordinary things—like bumblebees. By all regular reasoning they shouldn't work, but there they are! The whole space age was a big part of my growing up. And the possibility of other sources of influence affecting human beings has always been really intriguing to me.

I learned to read by reading comic books at a time when I was barely walking. The stories were intriguing and mysterious. I began drawing by copying comic books. In the area of the Northwest where I grew up, there was a lot of variation in the landscape—from high desert to ocean to mountains—and I wanted to draw it all. As a kid I was a pretty crude landscape artist. I'd had no formal training at the time.

What keeps occurring to me is something Claes Oldenburg said. I remember reading that everything he was doing as an adult artist he'd made up when he was a little kid. That strikes me as a very profound

idea and certainly concurs with my own experience. Everything I'm interested in today I was just as interested in when I was in grade school. I could say that I'm just a little bit more sophisticated today, but the level of excitement now is just as high as it was forty years ago.

**SC:** You once said in a lecture that "words are designed to conceal—images to reveal," yet your visual work is often about veiling and concealing. How would you describe what is revealed in your work?

**TCE:** It's about "revelation" as opposed to "exposure." The classic notion of exposure is someone whipping open a raincoat. Revelation is about being in a higher place. It's like an assembly level convergence of parts of consciousness that are activated by visual symbolic logic. When certain symbols come together, even very simple symbols, they can evoke a sensation that has very little to do with written or spoken language. They can evoke a sense of illumination or enlightenment.

What I'm trying to do is assemble symbols in such a way that a shift occurs in the viewer. We can do the same thing by going out into an herb garden and stroking the Corsican mint. If we feel it and smell it, we will experience a subtle shift. I think that this may be one of the primal effects that drove the early alchemists to begin to understand materials in an intuitive sense. "Shift" is my favorite word for this process, because it doesn't imply a physical change. It's a heightened awareness, like getting a whiff of a strange smell and suddenly getting just a little bit of clarity.

**SC:** Your work has a very abstract, cool, obsessive, intellectual, sometimes even clinical character. How to you sense that it relates to the more visceral qualities of the emotions and the body.

**TCE:** I once read that maps are without emotions. Yet I've discovered that my maps can call forth very strong memories for people. They will tell me stories inspired by what they see a familiar territory, even though, as far as I know, the places I map don't exist. I'm very interested in the images of science, the diagrams of how things get built. I'm attracted to circuit diagrams from computers and flight maps, things that evoke both precision and the mystery of precision. I love things if I don't know how they were drawn. I'm interested in that quality in my work—as kind of methodical craftsmanship of layering method upon method upon method, so that the same sort of revelational occurrence gets channeled into vision.

There's also the emotional phenomenon of the elements, some of them as personal symbols, some as familiar universal symbols. They often are applied and arranged intuitively, driven by some unspoken force, but always seem "right" for the placement or the relationship to other elements on the page. I notice, when people look at my work, that they often evoke an emotional response.

**SC:** Which brings us to alchemy—perhaps you could explain how your studies in alchemy have influenced your work.

**TCE:** An awareness of materials was one of the first concerns of the alchemists. I've always been interested in materials—art materials, hardware materials, building materials—and in how these can be brought into the process. I love transforming materials: say, taking something from a geologic site and affecting it alchemically, affecting it symbolically, exposing it to the four elements, allowing them to reduce it to a more primal material. Alchemy has alerted me to what I think of as primal colors: the color of lead, the color of earth, the color of fire. The palette in some books has been rarefied. There's something freeing about that.

**SC:** I'm interested in how the internal alchemy works for you on a psychological level and in how you

might see that playing out, not so much in the materials, but in the unconscious, unspoken ways in which the books take form and the images are created.

**TCE:** Often, the properties of the materials suggest a psychological or maybe even a psychic connection with things. Dan Kelm and I were very playful with copper for a long time because we felt that it had transformative properties, that it had a lot of connections to areas in the arts of the book that interested us. For me, copper is a material associated with engraving, with image making. Virtually all of the seventeenth-century illustrated alchemical texts had images made with copper plate engravings. Something about the technique of engraving on copper feels like a meditation.

As my life changes, I find that I'm much more interested in gold, using gold as an insulator, using gold as a reflective surface, seeing gold in my own life, and feeling really "golden," almost tanned. Gold has working properties and reflective properties and conductive properties and yet it's basically inert. It doesn't compound itself with things very easily. It resists corrosion. It's a very tough and yet a very giving metal. So I've observed changes that have occurred in my own thinking, maybe because I'm paying more attention. Alchemy seems to be about paying attention and being responsible.

**SC:** I'm interested in how you see the value of art in the context of life and how you might describe the transformative value of art, if it has one.

**TCE:** I've always been interested in "primitive" art and the art of other cultures, non-Western art. The art that interests me the most is art that I consider to be transformative. This relates back to notions of revelation. There are pieces that have been made by famous artists, anonymous artists, even non-artists, that have a quality about them that changes the way we see the external world. They can change us in ways that can be so profound as to leave us breathless, as to leave us in a state of wonderment or bafflement. In their most potent form, they make us feel like fools. In the Tarot, the fool is a very exalted figure. I think it's liberating to be foolish.

Visual, magical, and musical art operates on two levels for me. It either evokes or provokes. Provocative images stab and irritate, they make us think about and ponder issues. Evocative images conjure up and invite other deities, other energies. The UFO may be such an invited visitor brought to our vision by centuries of intense religious yearning.

It is through art's power to evoke that we're transformed or enlightened. Artists such as Ernst, Duchamp, and Miro managed to entwine the parallel dignities of art and magic. The Egyptian landscape is a mental construct, and what it evokes is all internal. It is a place where the art of measurement was perfected—a philosophical geometry of harmony between gods and landscape. The residue of my grandfather's personal mission resides in his tools, and now I possess the tools. The drawings here and in some of my other books became a refraction of the interference wave of the Egyptian landscape; the imaginative imagery of that which was Egypt is present in them.

**SC:** I was thinking about the experiments in transformation of lifestyle that perhaps is exemplified by some of the surrealist artists, who, through their investigations into automatic writing and so forth, were trying to evoke within themselves and presumably in their audiences experiences that aren't normally accessible during the waking state. How do you feel that art might evoke, if not an altered state, then an enlivened one?

**TCE:** I think the surrealists were trying to leave the world through their art. They began to recover and explore the dream world, the then recently revealed world of the unconscious mind. They were foreshadowing later experiments with psychedelic drugs and other tools for leaving the world. It occurs to me that surrealism may be the only art movement of the twentieth century to really try to escape this three- or four-dimensional world and get to a place with a higher or clearer vision. I have a soft spot for the surrealist theory of gravity. I like things not being bound to the Earth. One of the components of transformation is a release from pain and suffering, an opening outward into a field of light. I think the surrealists were probing that field of light. The paintings of Max Ernst come to mind. Ernst was a magician, a shaman if you will, and he was capable of contacting the Other Side.

**SC:** The use of language in your books is at once familiar yet alien and reminds me of the words of Heraclitus: "Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar." William Burroughs, Terence McKenna, and others have suggested that the world is made of language, that we live inside a linguistic creature. Different languages appear in your books, unidentifiable languages most often. This notion of the world being made of language—does this describe the world you map?

**TCE:** The "language" in my books comes from a particular situation that feels like a hybrid of automatic writing, automatic drawing, automatic marking. I can't say that I'm transestatic when it's happening. I do feel that when I am drawing it, making it, that the marks themselves correspond to the ideas that I am currently dazzled with. Maybe the implication that these marks are symbols of language is part of their appeal. I vacillate between thinking that each mark is an increment of context on the one hand, to simply seeing them as drawings. I've encountered card-carrying members of the Lunatic Fringe who are convinced that I'm channeling something deep from another place.

I've been making these marks for more than twenty-five years. I started very innocently in a biology class, working with a pen that leaked. I was mainly left-handed at the time, so as I wrote, my hand would drag through this puddle of ink. So I began to draw backward, and the marks began to resemble Asian or Middle Eastern Alphabets. I immediately tried to depart from that. I liked the idea of drawing these tiny little things that resembled something that might be coded. It was mysterious, and I loved the idea of filling pages with a kind of metapoetry or metaphysics.

Language doesn't have to be verbal or visual. It can be a sensation, it can be in the form of signals. My marks depart from meaning but they're not meaningless. They just have a different internal matrix. They don't necessarily correspond to a sound or a picture. Sometimes the marks are assigned to an emotional color or to a musical note. They are navigational. There is certainly a lot of background noise in these marks—they're crucial to the books. I'm working on a book now about Saturn that has almost no illustrations in the classic sense. It's just page after page of these obscure alien scratchings. I don't really understand these drawings, but they feel right, they look right, they seem appropriately designed for their task.

**SC:** Why does your work so often find itself in the form of a book? What is it about books that fascinates you?

**TCE:** Philip Smith calls books "reading machines." Early on, I simply fell in love with books. Something about the intimacy of being able to take a book by or about an artist and curl up in a chair—it was like having them and make these little objects that were easily concealed and hidden. I could fill several books with drawings, and they didn't have to be out lying around. They were never hung on the wall. I don't remember framing anything as a visual artist until I was in my twenties. Only later did I realize "I'm

building books here."

**SC:** There's something very seductive about your marking system that really draws me in. I feel that I'm verging on meaning, yet the closer I get the more slippery and oblique the environment becomes. It reminds me about how we keep coming back to the notion of concealment and revelation. And I'm puzzled by the surface quality of your drawings and the resistance created by the beauty of them. It distracts me from or distances me from the conceptual or philosophical underpinnings of the work and creates a very strong dynamic or tension. I was wondering how you see this tension, how it operates, and how it resolves—if it resolves.

**TCE:** It never resolves, it only revolves—that's one reason why I continue to draw. I love to draw with a stick in the sand at the beach and know that the tide's coming and that in no time at all the drawing will disappear into its original state. I can scratch various geometric formulae into the sand and, with miles and miles of space, momentarily geometricize the earth.

I want to put these same kinds of ideas into my books, where the surface is paper, not miles of sand. For example, I might express Euclid's ideas as a foundation for a map, which might most simply be delineated with pencil on paper. But I am teased and happily seduced by the materials: traditional bookmaking and contemporary painting materials and many other things that find their way in. So instead of just delineating the geometric philosophies in something as ordinary as pencil lines, I want to edge those lines with fields of color that make them shimmer and dissolve into other forms and meanings. I work with techniques as arcane and medieval as gliding over glare, occasionally drawing on goatskin vellum and working on handmade papers with homemade inks. At the far extreme, I'll draw with heated tools and holographic foils.

The materials themselves draw me in because of some beguiling connection they suggest. I'm interested in electromagnetic fields, so that I might draw a line in pencil, put a layer of pressure-sensitive acrylic over that same line, then power it with a pulverized magnet, pulverized magnet, powdered lodestone, so that the page itself has a magnetic field. That's a totally twisted thing to do but there's something wonderful about assigning a material to an unexpected place. Again, it's a kind of alchemical transformation of an equation. It's quite juicy.

I really love beautiful books, so I want my own books, above all, to be beautiful. I have my own sort of aesthetic code for what I think of as beautiful. It's difficult to explain, but I think my interest in making a beautiful object has to do with the fact that it is the first thing one is going to see. It draws one in, makes one curious. It's as if it is the presentation guise for the philosophical underpinnings.

As far as the deeper issues go, they are buried, they're veiled, they're deliberately obscured, and they are often detoured by a misleading sign or a sign that is used out of place or out of context. In the same way I sought to conceal my work as a child, my books and my drawings don't give away the game. I want to reveal enough to—let's see—it's almost like I'm providing hints, providing clues or fragments of maps to treasures. That's enough. That's enough to tantalize. And it's the mythic journey: from beauty, misled through dark trials, then into the light, victorious.

**David Abel. Written for the brochure to accompany Timothy Ely's first Granary Books exhibit "Memo 7 & Other Works." 30 November 1989-12 January, 1990.**

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary gives the etymology of the verb "read" as follows: ME *reden* to

advise, interpret, read, from OE raedan; akin to OHG ratan to advise, Gk arariskein to fit—more at "arm."

*I wish for my books to alter or adjust the perceptions of their observers.*

And for "arm": ME, fr OE earm; akin to L armus shoulder, Gk harmos joint, L arma weapons, ars skill, Gk arariskein to fit.

*I am attracted to the scale of a book that fits from my elbow to the point where my fingers begin.*

The finger points to something seen; vision, an intimate vision, begins by following that instinctive gesture.

*The primary direction for my work is the whole (holistic) Book.*

Concerned equally with the drawn, written, and painted pages as with the structure and execution of their binding or package, Timothy Ely's books function simultaneously as works of visual art, carriers of information, and focusing devices for esoteric experience. In arriving at his images Ely draws on diverse traditions and disciplines: cartography, geometry (sacred and profane), archeology, mathematics, architecture, and astrology, to name but a few. Common to them all is the desire to take a measure of the apprehensible world, a measure whose means satisfy both tradition and experiment—a measure with predictive and corrective power.

*Books are teachers. If a book is good, and one is patient, one can learn.*

If machines are to be our grandchildren's teachers, I can think of none better than Timothy Ely's books, or "looking-at machines" as he has called them. It is pathetically easy to remember that time when books were good, and one was patient. And how, as a child, reading was a magical act, a way to go to another place,—a "time machine." Those "other places" remain near, familiar and yet tantalizingly difficult of access, just as the diagrams and invented scripts in Tim's books hover on the verge of resolution, drawing us.

*My view of bookmaking is one of a fusion of many processes, and as an extension of the painted word.*

Timothy Ely's painted word, or world, extends our seen, measured, imagined world into another place. As the poet Robert Kelly remarked, referring to the work of another imaginative geographer, Franz Kamin: "Once while I was listening to a lecture on dreams, I noticed that the girl in front of me had fallen asleep on her arms. Where was she then? It would be gentle to guess that he is busy exploring the geography of her elsewhere." Fortunately for us, Timothy likewise is busy.

**Tetenbaum, Barbara. *Bookways No. 8*, (July 1993).**

Terence McKenna is an ethnopharmacologist and author of such books as *The Archaic Revival: Speculations on Psychedelic Mushrooms, The Amazon, Virtual Reality, UFO's, Evolution, Shamanism, The Rebirth of the Goddess*, and *The End of History*. Mickey Hart has referred to him as "an explorer, a circumnavigator of human consciousness." McKenna's enigmatic lectures mix science and shamanism, and videotapes of his performances are copied and swapped with an enthusiasm not unlike that given tapes of Grateful Dead concerts.

Tim Ely could be simply described as the visual counterpart of McKenna. He is a bookbinder and a mapmaker who charts a metaphoric, symbolic, and psychological landscape. His painted books are filled with indecipherable language, diagrams, and aerial views of invented landscapes. His bookworks "function simultaneously," wrote poet David Abel, "as works of visual art, carriers of information, and focusing devices of esoteric experience." Ely has his own following, and his workshops are filled with devoted students transformed by both his alchemical approach to materials and his metaphysical utterances.

When McKenna visited Granary Books, a New York City gallery that carries Ely's work, in July of 1991, he was handed Ely's densely layered *Bones of the Book*. He proceeded, Granary director Steve Clay reports, to read out loud the information buried in Ely's imagery, explaining its symbols in a broken narrative that moved from sacred geometry to Jungian analysis to metaphysics. Clay, who was interested in publishing a limited edition book with Ely and had been looking for a text that would "ground" Ely's work, quickly realized the possibilities of a McKenna-Ely collaboration, and work soon began for what was to become *Synesthesia*.

McKenna's words are interpreted through the typography of Philip Gallo, Hermetic Press, himself a concrete visual poet, who improvised with both typography and preexisting elements of Ely's drawings. Gallo's typography makes visible the tone and rhythm of McKenna's words as they move among shapes and washes. Ely's work for the seventy-five copies was produced entirely by hand. Large watercolor strokes and marks were "editioned" onto Rives BFK paper, which was then folded down to produce the pages. These were sent to Gallo, who adapted the printing of the typography to the slight changes of imagery within each set.

Daniel Kelm designed and executed the light, compact binding, which acknowledges the reader's human proportion and senses by its size, use of effortless wire-edge movement in the binding, and sensuous relief covers. The bound books went back to Ely, who added "articulated glossolalia refracted from the writing" to complete the project.

The restrained imagery and expressive typography allow space and guidance for the wandering eye. It is in this space between text and image that the magic of *Synesthesia* is found. Text and image merge, giving way to an experience that transcends the page, an idea inherent in the title, which means "a concomitant sensation, a subjective sensation or image of a sense (as of color) other than the one (as of sound) being stimulated." It is a rare and frightening experience, which has the potential of transforming the consciousness of the reader. (It did mine.)

This visionary project created by Clay, Ely, McKenna, Kelm, and Gallo shows us how a book can transcend its own walls and become sacred space.

**Boyden, Ian. "Of Scripts and Stars: The Cipheric Aesthetics of Timothy C. Ely's Cribriform Script."**

It is possible to interpret this confrontation of script and stars. Just as now and then a star emerges from the host—as a moving planet, as a comet—so also does a cipher, whose ideogram becomes intelligible to us, rise up now and then from the heap of incomprehensibility. One could draw the conclusion that the limits of vision correspond to the limits of understanding.

—Werner Spies[j]

Everything we hear is an echo. Anyone can see that echoes move forward and backward in time, in rings. But not everyone realizes that as a result silence becomes harder and harder for us to grasp—though in itself it is unchanged—because of the echoes pouring through us out of the past. . . .

—W. S. Merwin[ii]

Timothy C. Ely is left-handed. In 1970, Ely was given an Osmiroid fountain pen.[iii] To his dismay, when he wrote with the pen, his hand dragged through the wet ink and smeared everything. Such is the tyranny of a dextrally oriented writing system. Searching for a solution, he decided to write backwards like Leonardo da Vinci (Italian, 1452–1519). To his amusement, his writing looked Chinese. Sadly, Ely was not literate in this new language, so, while his backward writing was beautiful, it was utterly useless for recording and retrieving his ideas. Or so he thought at the time. Those first journal entries with the fountain pen were actually the beginning of his exploration of the cryptoaesthetics of written forms—a study of the beauty of written forms one cannot understand, such as hieroglyphics, ciphers, cryptographs, codes, and secret writings. Ely's exploration has endured now for more than three decades, and has developed into a system of writing, which he calls Cribriform.[iv]

Ely's current Cribriform is the product of his remarkable journey through the worlds of writing and geometry—or as Ely calls it “my scripticular trajectory.” Idiosyncratic writing systems and the production of written forms that simply invoke the sensation of writing are certainly not new. However, because such practice is generally private and esoteric, to uninvolved observers its history remains obscure. Ely's studies of this subject are vast: from the calligraphic histories of a variety of writing traditions and concepts central to abstract expressionism, surrealism, and the Northwest School; to esoteric scripts and codes such as those generated by visionaries and alchemists of the Medieval Period, kabalistic and mystical scholars of the Renaissance, and writers of UFO codes in 1950s science fiction novels; to those fellow generators of wholly synthetic written languages such as those produced by Adolf Wölfli (Swiss, 1864–1930), Mark Tobey (American, 1890–1976), Max Ernst (German, 1891–1976), and the unknown producer of the Voynich Manuscript. Ely's studies allow him an incredible capacity for channeling elements from extremely diverse fields of study. His Cribriform is a map of his mind, a chamber filled as much with echoes from the past and future, as of the spice of alien life.

Before turning specifically to his script, it is important to understand the inextricable links between his books, maps, script, and sacred geometry. For years following the sinister episode with the fountain pen, Ely's backward writing remained a private affair, appearing solely as marginalia in his sketchbooks. Then, in the last year of graduate school, he discovered the map collection in the basement of the Suzzallo Library at the University of Washington (Seattle, WA). This collection is one of the premier cartographic collections in the Northwest, and there Ely saw maps that profoundly changed his cosmic-view. He kept going back to look at maps, finding maps of the world produced in other countries with dramatically skewed orientations of the continents, maps of the ocean floor, maps of air currents, roads, topologies, population densities, maps of the stars and of the solar system. One afternoon he happened upon a flat map of Mars. Ely says that while looking at that map, he was struck by two ideas that remain pivotal in his work to this day. First, maps and ciphers are ways of locating ideas in space. And second, he really likes the look of things he cannot understand.

Not long after Ely's reverie over the map of Mars, he was introduced to sacred geometry. This time, Ely was in a grocery store, where he picked up a copy of John Michell's *The New View Over Atlantis*. This small paperback is one of the seminal books on megalithic geometry, especially its use of ley lines—the mysterious straight lines that link sacred spaces in prehistoric Britain.[v] It was through this book that Ely got his first glimpse of the historical stacking of one esoteric system over another. Ely states:

The book completely re-informed my understanding of maps—we are, as a species, engaged in the geometric inscription and re-inscription of the earth. I began to feel that philosophical or sacred geometry was the platform on which everything is built, not just major earthworks, but our religious systems, the sciences, and writing systems as well. Everything just clicked. The exploration of sacred geometry became the nexus for my books, my maps, my script. You could argue that all of my work since has revolved around this nexus.

Pursuing this idea, Ely proceeded to make books of his own—books containing maps of non-existent lands, of oneiric realms, and phantasmagoric spaces. The first book he made following his introduction to sacred geometry was called *Megalith* (see checklist no. 1). It was Ely's first interpretive atlas—a primary object that contained all of the elements that Ely would include in his books over the next decades. Not only did *Megalith* include maps of sacred geometry, but it was also the first book where he employed his proto-Cribriform as a major component of the image. Part of cartographic experience includes sidebars that provide a variety of keys and interpretive information for each given map. It was in these sidebar spaces where Ely began to employ his unusual scripts and ciphers. Fantastic spaces require fantastic interpretation, and Ely used his scripts as means for invoking the sensation, or *qualia*, of such interpretation.

A writing system is generally defined (for those enthralled by verbal practicality) as a system composed of a discrete set of signs that represent spoken language and, that importantly, can be used to retrieve information by anyone who knows the system. Here, interpretation on a basic level means the retrieval of spoken language, which, in turn, points toward some facet of knowledge. Alas! Our first stumbling block: we cannot read Cribriform (at least not yet). In the absence of being able to read it, and thus completing that linguistic loop, we must look for other forms of interpretation. We must look for ways that Cribriform functions as an intermediary to other types of meaning.[vi]

One such way to approach another type of meaning opens up when we examine Ely's reason for naming his script Cribriform. Ely states, “One day, I was reading the dictionary and I found the word, ‘cribriform,’ near a word I was looking for, and when I read the definition, it resonated. Cribriform refers to something resembling a sieve or pierced with holes, which is what text is for me—a high velocity information filter, and not just a filter of sound.” Typical taxonomies of written languages are based on the ways text carries and filters sound (alphabets, syllabaries, logographs, etc.). This concept of text functioning as a filter of information other than sound is big.

Abandoning sound as text's *raison d'etre*, we dive into the non-sonic world of scribes, engravers, and calligraphers. It is a realm where text is understood and expected to filter light, geometry, the heartbeat in the fingers of a scribe. In fact, in this world a host of potential taxonomies abound from the mechanical to the wildly esoteric. For instance, writing systems can be arranged by the scribe's tools, materials, and surfaces, the implied directionality of the writer's marks, and the relative discreteness of individual graphs. Writing systems can also be classified by their ability to appropriate a whole host of macrocosmic cultural values, such as geometric proclivities, gravitational inclinations, attitudes toward secrecy and magic, the congruency of alternate symbolic or religious logic, the capacity for the script to be carried by birds or angels, the vicinity of the unconscious, even the proximity to the stars.

The formal, mechanical aspects of Ely's mark making are as follows. Ely tends to write with one or more tools, which include, a technical pen, a ruling pen, a copper-nibbed dip pen, brushes, and various

dropper bottles. He rarely uses dry materials like graphite or charcoal. Rather, he tends to write with aqueous mediums composed of carbon, gums, shellac, and distilled water. He writes on paper and vellum. He also writes from right to left, with the lines generally beginning at the top right and ending in the bottom left corners of each graph. And finally, his script tends to manifest either inside the cells of square and rectangular grids or in horizontal lines.

These formal qualities of making marks lead to certain comparisons. For instance, in some of Ely's writing, one can find haunting similarities with the Chinese calligraphy of the Zhou dynasty (ca. 1100–256 B.C.E.), especially a script known as *dazhuan*, or large seal script. This writing is found engraved on stone and on the surfaces of bronze objects. Although it is impossible to say with certainty, it would appear that a primary aesthetic question for the early Chinese calligraphers of this script was how to activate a square space—a central question for Ely as well. Another set of similarities can be found in Devanāgarī, the script used to write Sanskrit. This time, similarities spring from the use of the nibbed pen and the established top line from which the remainder of the letterform is suspended. Ely describes a potential symbolic reading: “These letters start on a line, fold and descend from heaven.”

According to Ely, these comparisons are fortunate coincidences. In fact, Ely claims to have not practiced any form of traditional calligraphy: “When I was young, I was very interested [in studying calligraphy]. But everyone said, ‘Hey, you're left-handed, you can't do that,’ which left me to figure it out on my own.” His first serious investigations of calligraphic marks began in college when he started to study abstract expressionists and works by members of the Northwest School. Ely was initially drawn to the calligraphic works by Mark Tobey, Robert Motherwell (American, 1915–1991), and Franz Kline (American, 1910–1962). Ely says: “Chinese calligraphy and brushwork were very attractive and sexy. Ultimately, these guys were stepping stones of sorts. Soon I wanted to know who they studied.” To his astonishment, Ely found magic and alchemy across both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans.

Investigating Chinese calligraphy, Ely discovered the Daoist calligraphic tradition rich with magic talismans, alchemical diagrams, and sacred cosmograms. These images embodied elements of the Daoist philosophical traditions such as concepts of eternal change, of *yin* and *yang*, and alchemical pursuits, especially of the transformation of the Five Elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water). These graphic marks were believed to have extraordinary magical powers from warding off sickness and evil spirits to aligning one's energies with the cosmos.[vii] Such is the stuff caught in Ely's Cribiform filter.

Across the Atlantic, Ely discovered the surrealists. It was among them that he found artists that remain some of his favorites to this day: Joan Miro (Spanish 1893–1983), Max Ernst (German, 1891–1976), and Adolf Wölfli (Swiss, 1864–1930). The work and ideas of the surrealists profoundly shaped Ely's own working method. He carefully studied the ways they accessed alchemy, magic, dreams, and the unconscious and how they incorporated these subjects into their work. He states: “I suppose the fundamental idea that I got from them was that art can be primarily provocative or evocative. Provocative art is like a jab in the ass. I guess I am not interested in art that is provocative, for me it has to be evocative.” For Ely, alchemical, magical, and psychoanalytic practices were essentially evocative systems that have the capacity to aid in self-discovery, as well as to transport the viewer into another realm. The question then became how to make his script evocative of the self and the other.

Ely became interested in the psychoanalytical theories of Carl Jung (1875–1961), and was drawn especially to ideas of synchronicity, the collective unconscious, and the division of the conscious and

unconscious mind. Intrigued by the concept that an image could access the unconscious and the world of dreams, Ely felt there was a distinct possibility that a single mark could reflect the world of the unconscious and perhaps serve as a form of map of the mind. The surrealists recognized that random words, sounds, and images could function as triggers to unknown trajectories. To this day, Ely continues to practice a technique known as automatic mark making, or what ethnopharmacologist Terrence McKenna (American, 1946–2000) termed “glyptoglossia, the rare written equivalent of spoken glossolalia.”[viii]

Ely's practice of automatic mark making is fascinating. He pulls out several large sheets of paper, gets a variety of tools ready, and then turns the lights down so as to see what happens when the hand-eye coordination is disrupted by the lack of light. He then proceeds to make marks until he starts to feel that he is becoming too conscious. At that point he stops, turns the lights back up, and looks at the marks he has made. Among the marks he will isolate those that trigger a response and use them to generate a page of Cribriiform or perhaps the design of a page in one of his books.

Another technique Ely uses for accessing the evocative is one he gleaned from his studies of Max Ernst. Ely comments: “Ernst was an alchemist. He would allow his materials to teach him—the transformation of materials was a guiding principle for making art.” Ely not only listens to his materials and lets them direct his mark making, but he has also delved into the rich history of alchemy. Among alchemical texts, Ely became fascinated with the records of scripts, codes, and sacred diagrams recorded by late-Medieval and Renaissance alchemists, theologians, and polymaths. A selection of examples that Ely found inspiring include the spirit codes produced by Johannes Trithemius (German, 1462–1516) in *Steganographia*,[ix] the angelic script described by John Dee (English, 1527–1608) known as Enochian,[x] and the celestial and kabbalistic alphabets and diagrams recorded by Cornelius Agrippa (Italian, 1486–1535)[xi] and Athanasius Kircher (German, 1602–1680).[xii] Though Ely has never consciously appropriated their graphs into his Cribriiform, he uses the sacred geometry and magic diagrams celebrated by these individuals to generate some of his own scripts.

Among his favorites are magic squares, the Vedic Square, and the Sephirothic tree. Recalling Arthur M. Young's (American, 1905–1995) observation that “all meaning is an angle,” Ely uses these images as systems to generate some of the angles in his Cribriiform[xiii]. In so doing, he has created marks that look vaguely like maps of constellations and vaguely like contemporary crop circles. Ely agrees that Cribriiform carries an extraterrestrial quality commenting mischievously, “Oh yeah, I love alien graffiti. There are marks all over that we can't resolve, like the crop circles or the Nazca lines. They are the mystery of our times.”

Part of what drives Ely is his love of a good mystery. And to that end, Cribriiform is now leading Ely into himself as he works to understand and complete it. Ludwig Wittgenstein (Austrian, 1889–1951), in his book *Philosophical Investigations*, poses the question of whether it is possible to have a private language spoken and understood by only one person.[xiv] It would appear that Ely plans to escape this philosophical dilemma, for he now envisions a book that holds the key to understanding Cribriiform. This book will mark the culmination of his emersion into the cryptoaesthetics of written forms. All Ely is willing to reveal at this point about this project is that his lexicon is composed of 366 marks organized under 21 indices. Ely's proposed delivery is most mischievous, using every alchemical trick he possesses to both reveal and conceal its meaning. The pages of the book will be worked “in a manner conversant with occluded archive security, making visual access very difficult and reproduction a printing nightmare.” Among the tools and tricks he plans to employ are ultraviolet-transcolor-reveal paints, sympathetic inks, holographic transfer foils, gilding, and blind impressions. Such techniques will

“challenge the would-be cipher clerk to link the Cribriform marks to the existing chain of figures already extant in the world.” Once completed, the book will be clasped shut and sealed with wax—the seal only to be cracked open by the ultimate owner of the book.

Ian Boyden  
Director of the Donald H. Sheehan Gallery

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[i] Schamoni, Peter. *Max Ernst: Maximiliana, the Illegal Practice of Astronomy*. Boston, MA: New York Graphic Society, c. 1974, pg. 75.

[ii] Merwin, W.S. *Houses and Travelers*. New York, NY: Atheneum, 1977, pg. 75.

[iii] Osmiroid pens were, for most of the last century, one of the premier metal nibbed pens in the world. They were recently discontinued. The pen mentioned here was given to Ely by his friend R. A. Simonson.

[iv] All quotations and information about Timothy C. Ely was gleaned from conversations and written communications between Ely and Ian H. Boyden during the summer of 2004, unless noted otherwise.

[v] Michell, John. *The New View Over Atlantis*. Ballantine Books, 1972.

[vi] Grabar, Oleg. *The Mediation of Ornament*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

[vii] Legeza, Laszlo. *Tao Magic: The Chinese Art of the Occult*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1975.

[viii] Ely, Timothy C. *The Flight into Egypt: Binding the Book*. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1995.

[ix] Trithemius, Johannes. *Steganographia*. Nuremberg, 1721.

[x] Dee, John. *Enoch his Book*. 1586.

[xi] Agrippa Cornelius. *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*. Llewellyn Publications, 1994.

[xii] Kircher, Athanasius. *Polygraphia Nova et Universalis*. Rome, 1663.

[xiii] Young, Arthur M. *The Geometry of Meaning*. New York: Delacorte Press, c1976.

[xiv] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan, 1953.

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**Boyden, Ian. “Chasing Shadows, Becoming Atlas.”**

*I begin to contemplate cosmography as though in the lofty mirror of the mind . . .*

— Gerardus Mercator, Preface to his *Atlas* (1595)[1]

To open one of Timothy C. Ely's books is to open a world of gathered mystery. There, enigmatic scripts and equations, curious diagrams and geometries, and peculiar topologies and projections combine to form remarkable maps. At once familiar and alien, Ely's maps are vehicles for incubating dreams, for gathering and plotting the trajectories of ideas, for inscribing our symbolic mind in Earth and sky. They simultaneously dislocate, disorient, and hypnotize. Distinctly “off the map,” these graphic images demonstrate a virtuosic array of marks and beautiful compositions. Gathered as books, they extend atlas-like invitations to cradle potential worlds.

Typically, maps chart various aspects of our world—the relative positions of cities, the topographical contours of a coastline, the speed and direction of currents within the ocean, or the stellar punctuation of the constellations. Each map diagrams fixed locations and relative positions of a given set of information and so allows us to navigate the external world. If we compare Ely's cartographic projects with paradigmatic maps, we can begin to understand what is unique about his vision.

As a young man, Ely pored over the maps in the Suzzallo Library at the University of Washington. It was there, one afternoon, that he had an epiphany. Remarking on the event, Ely states, “Until that day, my view of the universe was that it was fixed and stable. I was looking at this old map when suddenly I realized everything is in constant change. The immutability of the map was an illusion, each one was simply a projection of what had been.” With that, Ely's work changed. Instead of trying to create microcosms of the external world, he began to view maps as means for diagramming the potential of what could be.

All maps chase shadows—shadows cast by the birth and death of cities and states, the inexorable erosion of mountains and river valleys, the slow shift and drift of languages. What Ely discovered was that these shadows could, just as easily, be positioned within his mind. Ely posited that “If maps are already abstractions of what once was, why not take that one step further and make maps that are abstractions of maps themselves?” Using historical techniques of cartography, he began to chart the world of dreams and the imagination. Within the imagination, the world becomes as limitless as the shadows cast by the firing of billions of neurons.

Maps invite us to wander the world, and in their presence we avail ourselves of the exploration of the unknown. As Ely jubilantly declares, “The nice thing about maps is that they allow you to travel without actually going to the place! They are quintessentially metaphysical objects—even hyper-dimensional objects.” When we lose ourselves in a map, we exist in more than one place at a time.

In engaging one of Ely's images, we enter a palimpsest-like world in which we are suspended amid traces of some ancient and yet vaguely familiar gnosis. The result is an exhilarating sense of disorientation in which we are left to fend for ourselves. This is the chaos from within which a new order might be found. In the wake of such ontological upset we search for meaning. There is a heightened receptivity to structure, to line and color, to patterns. We begin to see the structure more as an idea than as a place, which is a generative mnemonic that shakes loose ideas and memories in our own minds.

In his short vignette, “On Exactitude in Science,” Jorge Luis Borges describes a country ruled by

mapmakers. Their obsession with accuracy causes the maps to become larger and larger, until the map and the country are exactly the same size, and the citizens no longer know if they are living in the country or the map itself. Eventually, the map is abandoned to the forces of nature and it falls into oblivion. Borges's story points to that delightful juncture of consciousness where the thing and its name become at once unified and wholly separate. For a moment, the map becomes the world, and yet in that very instant stops being a map. Maps, it seems, must maintain their microcosmic stance regardless of whether they are a map of the world or a map of the mind.

A similar metaphorical delight can be found in the word “atlas,” which refers to a bound collection of maps. Gerard Mercator (Flemish, 1512–1594) was the first person to use the word “atlas” to describe a book of maps in his *Atlas sive Cosmographicæ Meditationes de Fabrica Mundi et Fabricati Figura*. In his preface, Mercator states that the name is in honor of the Greek Titan Atlas, condemned by Zeus to carry the celestial sphere upon his shoulders. His choice of names is strangely unnerving. The title “atlas” thus becomes less a title, and more an incantation to the reader—in a sense presaging a pending transformation. The moment we pick up an atlas, we ourselves become Atlas, shouldering a yet-to-be-opened world. That this was Mercator's intention is buttressed by the frontispiece he created for his 1595 edition of his *Atlas*, wherein he depicts Atlas holding the Earth in his hands, as if he were holding a book and turning its pages.

In this context, Ely's books of maps are most appropriately understood as atlases. In some of his more elaborate productions, the covers of his books are actually covered with amazingly elemental skins made from the Earth itself. Embedded into the leather are an array of soils, stones, and metals. Appearing ancient and eroded, these covers invite touch, so we may physically encounter the surface of Earth with our own hands. When we pick up one of Ely's books, we are simultaneously picking up a world—a world that is hyper-dimensional, metaphysical, and filled with diagrams of potentiality. Turning the pages, we are at once ourselves and Atlas and travelers chasing shadows through the lands of Ely's imagination.

*Written for the exhibition "Timothy C. Ely: Line of Sight" at the Northwest Museum of Art and Culture, Spokane, Washington.*

[1] Translated by David Sullivan, from the digital edition of Mercator's *Atlas* (Oakland, CA: Octavo Editions), p. 24.

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