

Words and Weapons:

The RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ's Formula for Reclaiming the Power of Language

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ABSTRACT: This project explores the history and power of language in relation to graffiti writer Rammellzee's philosophy of Ikonoklast Panzerism as well as to his art. Using informal interviews, ethnographic engagement, and close readings relating to Rammellzee and the alphabet's history, I investigate how the individual can claim the power of language back from colonizers and oppressors through subversive art. I question how Rammellzee's work can be used to reimagine the alphabet as a tool to deconstruct monuments of oppression and imperialism that are pervasive to society. Rammellzee founded Ikonoklast Panzerism on the idea that each individual letter of the alphabet can be armored and weaponized in order to free themselves from the institutions which wield the power of language over the rest of society. He bases his beliefs in the medieval history of monastic illuminated calligraphy and uses his theories to create art which subverts structures of power. I argue that Rammellzee's work reveals the potential of individualized power by reclaiming the almighty power of language and challenging the limitations of legibility and standardization. Drawing from concepts such as ethnographic refusal, and from the writing of scholars like Michel-Rolph Trouillot to inform my creative work, this project emphasizes the power of the written word in today's world and investigates how language can be reimaged and repurposed by each individual. I synthesize my research findings into a creative form that touches on my own relationship to language in academia, and how I can apply Rammellzee's ideas to my own life.

“The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.”

– Michel-Rolph Trouillot

Art-Based Armament

Rammellzee's career spanned decades, genres, and media, its influence evident in the more commercially oriented and culturally mainstream works of his peers and collaborators. He was born in Far Rockaway, Queens, New York, and began his career as a graffiti writer in the 1970s on the New York City subway system. A young Rammellzee made a name for himself on the A-train, which transported him from his home in Far Rockaway to an underground universe where letters became missiles and whips, and cans of spray paint became a means of enlightenment. It was during his time bombing and tagging trains that Rammellzee birthed his philosophy of Ikonoklast Panzerism and defined his own creative style as Gothic Futurism. The work that Rammellzee created as a product of his philosophy of Ikonoklast Panzerism, when considered tangentially to the history of the Western alphabet and language in general, exists as a prime

example of how art can be used to grant the individual power of language to the common person, dismantling the hierarchical institutions which have wielded the power of language over societies since the time of the Ancient Greeks. His ideas surprised and impressed his more established cohorts, who could not imagine how a teenager from Far Rockaway had conjured up such mind-bending ideas and Einsteinian formulas.

He based his philosophy off the history of the medieval monks, whose individualized artistry of illuminated calligraphy was stripped from them by the bishops, as they were not able to read the script that was needed to tax the people. As Rammellzee puts it, "...the bishops stopped the monks because their power was becoming too strong with the letter... The calendar monks sent a letter to the one place God cannot go: Hell" (Tate "Ikonoklast Samurai"). Generations later, Rammellzee and his fellow writers discovered that same letter in the underground depths of the subway system, where they took it upon themselves to continue the monks' mission of individualized power over the letter, and refusal of hierarchal demands. Each train car was empowered with Rammellzee's swirling symbols and became a mobilized weapon often compared to the German Panzer tanks of World War II – referenced by Rammellzee in his naming of Ikonoklast *Panzerism* – which challenged the exploitative and deleterious nature of the Western alphabet (Tate "Ikonoklast Samurai").

After the city of New York successfully completed its campaign to "sanitize" the trains of Rammellzee and his peers' prolific writings, he took to his TriBeCa loft – characteristically titled "the Battle Station" – to continue developing his ideas surrounding the weaponization of language and the Western alphabet. By the time he transitioned from bombing the A train to creating "Letter Racers" and "Trash Gods" in his loft, it was clear that "He felt that even now if you control the language, you control the discourse, you control the power" (Kennedy "Art

Excavated”). His work often appeared not as artwork, but as philosophical manifestations of another universe, born entirely from the spinning wheels of Rammellzee’s brain, a universe in which letters gained agency and followed at his command to free themselves from the power structures that had established the standardization of Western language (Kennedy “Rammellzee”). The arc of Rammellzee’s career showcases an ultimate refusal to participate in traditional language structures, standing out because of its incorporation of beauty and change into this concept of refusal that is so often watered down to a simple ‘No’.

Looking Back and Looking Forward

While Rammellzee most frequently referenced the medieval monks’ relationship to the alphabet and language as a power, he also acknowledged the ancient Greeks and Phoenicians and the hand they had in creating the alphabet that we use today. Taking even the most superficial look into the history of the Western alphabet illuminates a harrowing tale involving colonization, accessibility, standardization, and hierarchy. The alphabet we use today has its roots in Phoenician and ancient Greek language structures, and these cultures often emphasized the potential power each letter held just as Rammellzee did – in fact, the ancient Greeks saw their alphabet in its entirety as an equation analogous to and comprising of the whole universe (De Looze 23). As the ancient Greek alphabet began to inspire other empires and cultures’ own alphabetical systems, it became clear that – in the eyes of its possessors – to have a system of written language was an indicator of civilization, and with the invention of the Gutenberg printing press, the world saw a standardization of language and thus the exponential growth of the alphabet’s civilizing dimension (De Looze 24). With the start of European expansion and colonization into the Americas, Africa, and Asia, colonizing forces established their own

structure of the written language as the foremost bearer of civilization, enforcing linguistic imperialism upon the cultures they colonized and establishing their language structure as not only superior, but unparalleled (De Looze 81).

Rammellzee witnessed through both historical and contemporary lenses the alphabet's evolution from a tool in the hands of the people into a weapon of colonization and a perpetuator of unjust declarations of superiority. He noted major news outlets' – such as The New York Times or Long Island Press – use of monastic calligraphy in their logos and headings, and equated it to his wildstyle writings underground in the subway cars (Tate “Ikonoklast Samurai”). By noting indicators of alphabetical imperialism in modern-day publications, Rammellzee asserted that these linguistic issues were contemporary and significant, and that it was the duty of the graffiti subculture and its writers to reclaim the power of language, arming each letter to break away from the hierarchies and institutions which constrained them as well as the rest of society. His work's historical references acknowledge the history of the Western alphabet and push “...at the boundaries of legibility as a reclaiming of the linguistic shapes against the mechanical tyranny of the Gutenberg press and its digital descendants” (Bajiee). He emphasized the ability of himself as well as others to complete this mission of complete armament and liberation of the alphabet. Rammellzee believed each person had it in them to not only understand his ideas surrounding the power of language, but also to use this knowledge to set off on a journey of creation and enlightenment that would free their own minds and language from those who have used language to subdue their power. When asked in an interview what the individual would achieve by successfully arming the alphabet, liberating it, and taking its power into their own hands, Rammellzee replied, “Well homeboy, you be god” (Tate “Ikonoklast Samurai”).

My Power and Yours

This idea of individualized power through art and language is what has resulted in the creative form of my project. Throughout my research process, I have become increasingly frustrated because the very ideas that Rammellzee preached surrounding subverting and reimagining art and language, the ideas which I wish to communicate through this project, are somewhat undermined by the formality, privilege, and inaccessibility of elitism that the Summer Institute is swathed in. Rammellzee believed in the widespread liberation of language, in freeing it from systems and institutions which use language to enforce hierarchy based on education, class, and domination – the very systems and institutions that have been our subject of discussion and subversion throughout this summer. It felt wrong for me to produce a traditional academic research paper as a result of my studies, as the use of standardized language and the privilege that accompanies it places me at the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of what Rammellzee wanted to do, and inspire others to do, with language. I also wanted to pay homage to Rammellzee’s mind-bending visuals and his focus on crossing the borders of legibility in order to restore the power of language to the writer. Using Rammellzee’s own weaponized alphabet as well as characters from the medieval calligraphy that he found inspiration in, I have chosen to rewrite my project’s abstract to the point of “illegibility”, arming my own formal academic writing against the institution of elitism and hierarchy that I have participated in and perpetuated throughout this summer, and enlightening my writing against the power structures of Western language that have oppressed, silenced, and erased so many. While I am still years away from leaving this university, using this project to take a critical stance against my own privilege and the hierarchies that have brought me to the University of Washington as well as to the Summer Institute is the least I can do to honor Rammellzee’s mission of complete liberation from the

powers that be. It was important above all else for me to make clear my work's refusal to fully participate in traditional forms of academic knowledge production, to resist complete complicity within an institution that thrives off of elitism and privilege, and to incorporate an element of beauty into my refusal that Rammellzee's work exemplifies. To effectively refuse tradition as Rammellzee did, one must not only deny its continuation, but challenge its principles and reimagine its basic structure into something that moves beyond, while still acknowledging, histories of oppression and colonization – I hope that through my project's creative form, I have at least brushed the surface in regards to what reimagining and liberating the alphabet can mean for each individual, for the humanities and academia, and for the world in general.

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