Deixis and Desire: Transitional Notation and Semiotic Philosophy of Education

DEREK PIGRUM

The philosophical underpinnings of this article are the Peircian notion of the triadic nature of the sign as iconic, linguistic and indexical, and the use of the sign as a ‘Zeug’ or thing as a means of pointing to or deixis in the context of creative activity in the classroom. This involves Lyotard’s conception of desire as the generation of a space where the pupil can be affected by what the world donates. Both deixis and desire take on added value in relation to the psychoanalytic theories of Winnicott in terms of the role of transitional object use in the generation of ‘potential space’, and Nussbaum’s notion of tyche or being on the lookout for what the world has to offer. In terms of education, the central section of the article looks at the way these notions can be applied to teaching and learning in the secondary art classroom. This involves the use of what I have termed transitional notation, combining all three Peircian sign modes on a surface of inscription that is ‘ready-to-hand and that operates as what the anthropologist Alfred Gell termed an ‘index of agency’.

... we may discern all things, in an admirable contemplation; though still but in signs ... (St Augustine, Confessions, II.XII, ch. XVIII [1475/1964, p. 417]).

Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our Own (Shakespeare, Hamlet, III.2, lines 234–235; Shakespeare, 1934).

Teaching means above all pointing (Calasso, 2010).

INTRODUCTION

The term ‘transitional notation’ which I use in this article derives from Winnicott’s notion that the capacity for human creativity is engendered in
the infants play with ‘transitional objects’ in ‘potential space’: a play in which there is the continual relation of presence and absence, of the tendency to engage in a play of repetition with changes.

According to Lammert (2008) notation can be conceived of as a ‘visual form of thought’ (Denkform) that rests on the conceptual power of the sign but which is not bound to any one sign system. Following Peirce I conceive of these signs as triadic, that is to say iconic, symbolic (linguistic) and indexical (Peirce, 1998, vol. 2, ch. 2).

The word ‘notation’ has many and varied connotations and denotations. Among these are: to show; to denote: show by signs the presence or existence of; betoken; to signify; to describe; to make known; to mean; to stand for, to record, or fix in memory; to take due or special notice of, to call attention to; notice or observe with care; to indicate or show a characteristic feature, theme or quality; to demarcate, to serve as an indication of, to mark or mark off. In all of these the notion of pointing out and pointing to, of showing by means of a sign, is implicit.

The sub-section of this article entitled ‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’ is about the way we use the surface of inscription for what Heidegger terms the Zeige Zeug, or ‘showing thing’ of the sign, of the sign as deixis or a means of pointing.

The gap between potentiality and actualisation in transitional notation, that I have addressed elsewhere is also the gap between desire and fulfilment, a gap that is filled with an intense somatic and mental activity. Gell (1998) terms this activity ‘protention’ towards the fulfilment of the completed work. In the article I adopt Lyotard’s conception of desire (Lyotard, 2011), which allows us to generate a space where we can be affected by what the world donates. In a previous paper I have focused upon the nature of the studio and art classroom as just such a space. In this article I return to my original interest in transitional notation on the ‘ready-to-hand’ surface of inscription such as a piece of newsprint or envelope.

The first section of the article is itself a transitional reflection on ancient Egyptian cylindrical seals that involves my use of newsprint as a ‘ready-to-hand’ surface of inscription to generate, modify and develop ideas concerning the seals. This is followed by the section ‘Desire in Transit’ that outlines what Lacan but, more particularly Kristeva, mean by desire and its relation to the semiotic. This is followed by a discussion of the notion of tyche or what ‘comes to the agent from the external world’ (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 7), and ‘the cognitive insecurity’ this introduces into transitional notation. The section entitled ‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’ is an exploration of some of the ideas of Heidegger that relate closely to the surface of inscription of transitional notation and includes a discussion of the drawings of the sculptor and painter Alberto Giacometti on newsprint. The central section of the article is on transitional notation in the classroom with examples of the way pupils have used the ‘ready-to-hand’ surface of newsprint as an introduction to transitional notation. This is followed by a closer look at the relevance of the anthropologist Alfred Gell’s notions of ‘pretention’ and ‘abduction’ that have a close relation to transitional notation. The final section suggests a link between Aby Warburg’s notion of the
polarity of affective states in his *Pathosformeln* or pathos formula and transitional notation. In the conclusion I attempt to bring together the various strands of the article and point to further research directions.

THE CYLINDRICAL SEALS

Shortly before writing this article I came across the collection of ancient cylindrical seals in two display cabinets in the Egyptian rooms of the Art History Museum in Vienna (*Kunst Historisches Museum*). My finding of the seals is, in itself, both an occurrence related to *tyche* and one that reflects Benjamin’s view of the past not ‘as an object, already complete in its determinations and unchangeable, not closed, but that make recognizable forces that can now effectively transform the present’ (Friedlander, 2011, p. 73) and initiate a process of transitional notation on a ‘ready-to-hand’ surface.

The cylindrical seal is inscribed or incised. When rolled onto a clay or wax tablet this inscription leaves behind a relief. The seals and the impression made on the tablet make possible the rendering of a signifier that is distinct from a ground and can be repeated almost unchanged and as such is a bound system. Both the pictorial and early forms of writing co-exist in the seals. Their material varies but is most often Serpentine and Nephrite. The figures and writing incised in the cylindrical seal produces a series of repeatable reliefs as the seal is pressed into and rolled along the surface of a tablet of wax or clay. The shift between the incised figures, and the relief it produces, is an exchange of one object of perception for another that is characteristic, if we follow Boothby (2001), of the life of all signs (see Figure 1 and Figure 2 below).

What is incised into the surface of the cylinder hinges for its use upon the displacement of the wax or clay that fills the cavity of the inscription, and as such the cylindrical seal and the wax tablet are like the two edges of the fissured *symbolon*.

![Figure 1: Cylindrical Seal and Clay Tablet from the Egyptian Rooms of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Photograph by the author.](image-url)
Originally, *symbolon* was the broken part of an object. . . . *symbolon* is the fragment of a wholeness that is not or is no longer. Because of these traits, symbol is a very peculiar sign: first of all it is a sign because like any other sign, it ‘refers to’—*rimanda* (the fragment refers to the still unbroken object of which it is part, of which it is a sign) (Sini, 1993, p. 105).

Sini’s view of the signifier above is more than simply a relation to the signified, because he also posits an essential gap, a void that oscillates between the ‘pointing’ or showing of *deixis* and the thing. How are we to understand this? Lacan uses the example of the potter’s making of a vessel to indicate the signifier’s introduction into the world as emanating from the void, just as the void of the potter’s vessel is not the signifier of a particular signified but the ‘there is not’ of the void, of emptiness that, at the same time, is the ‘there is’ of the vessel (1986/1992). In the *deixis* of the potters hollowing out, and opening wide of the vessel, lies both the unbridgeable void, the abyss of representation, the separation between the thing and the sign but this void is also what Winnicott terms ‘potential space’ that is generated by transitional object use in early childhood and is the source of all subsequent creativity.

THE LIFE OF SIGNS: DESIRE IN INFINITE TRANSITION

Both Kristeva’s and Lacan’s notion of desire go beyond biological need or bodily appetite as ‘distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, imprint, trace, figuration’ (Sini, 1993, p. 93). The point at which the semiotic takes on symbolic forms is what Kristeva terms the *thetic* when the signifier and the signified open up ‘towards every desire but also every act’ (Oliver, 1998, p. 100). According to Kristeva the child initially keeps ‘psychic space’, or what Winnicott (1971) terms ‘potential space’, open through the process of ‘abjection’, without which ‘access to the life of signs is impossible’ (in Beardsworth, 2004, p. 82). Kristeva characterises abjection as a ‘casting out’ and a ‘throwing forward’, notions very closely related to the root of the German word for draft, as a form of
transitional notation, which is Wurf meaning to throw, auswurf to cast out or expel, and entwurf to draft. Abjection is conceived of as belonging to the unstable attempt to establish an inside/outside boundary, to stabilise separation from what Winnicott termed ‘the good enough mother’ with the difference that Winnicott views this in terms of ‘transitional object use’ in the generation of ‘potential space’. Nevertheless, for our purposes the notion of transitional notation, the drafting and sketching on the dispensable surface of inscription, brings both of these notions into play.

Very significantly, Kristeva maintains that it is the semiotic that continually transgresses and remodels the signifier, but these signifying practices are suppressed or ‘discarded under fixed, fragmentary, symbolic matrices . . . that obliterate the infinity of process (in Beardsworth, 2004, p. 122). This infinity of process can be seen in two ways: what I have termed ‘Das Gegenwerk’ or the work towards the work that avoids definitive closure, and of transitional notation as that which ‘our desire eternally seeks’ (Kristeva, in Bowie, 1991, p. 169) involving a recognition of the things that break in upon us, of what the Greeks termed tyche that can serve as ‘indexes of agency’ and initiate that doing, undoing and re-doing that is a characteristic of transitional notation.

TYCHE AND THE TRANSITIONAL

Lacan glosses tyche as ‘what may chance to break in upon us at any moment’ (Bowie, 1991, p. 103). It is beyond the scope of this article to provide more than the briefest outline of the importance of this notion for both Plato and Aristotle but the following points are of importance in relation to transitional notation: the incursion of tyche is something ‘coming to the agent from the world outside, and from his own value system insofar as it links him to the outside’ (Nussbaum, 1986, p. 46). Nussbaum, in her book that deals with dimensions and problems related to tyche, states ‘we must always be on the lookout for what is there before us in the world’ (ibid.). In terms of semiotic philosophy of education and transitional notation, a certain use of Aristotle’s conception of tyche is of central importance. Nussbaum states with regard to planning, ‘Aristotle warns against pressing such an aim too far: for he shows that each of the strategies used to make practical wisdom more scientific and more in control than this leads to a distinct impoverishment of the world of practice’ (ibid., p. 310).

In order to teach the competencies of transitional notation practices in the educational setting we must strive to achieve a balance between intention and ‘protention’, planning and the ability of pupils and teachers to utilise the unpredictable and unplanned.

NOW YOU SEE IT, NOW YOU DON’T

For the painter and sculptor Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) there was no difference between writing and painting (or drawing) because the signs of
the written text are just signs for something, they are not and in painting (drawing) it is the same’ suggesting that the iconic sign cannot be unlimbered from the symbolic sign as ‘the underlying formative power of all human conceiving’ (Boothby, 2001, p. 221). Etymologically, the relationship between writing and drawing is close. The German word riss is closely related to both writing and drawing (riss is the origin of the word ‘writing’ in English). In German the concept of riss, or incision, is related to the concept of wrestling, Reissen is to wrest, and it is the relationship of the concept ‘to wrest’ that is of importance to our understanding of transitional notation of facilitating the ‘wresting’ of an idea (Heidegger, 1975) by the use and coexistence of sign modes on the same surface.

There are a number of drawings, mostly of the frontal view of the human head by Alberto Giacometti on the ‘ready-to-hand’ surfaces of newsprint, book pages, leaflets and other printed material. The drawings are most often done with BIC pens of different colours but also black ink. According to Koepplin (2011) these drawings were a verification of Giacometti’s understanding of the structure of the human head (Vergewisserungszeichnungen) or a showing to himself that he had understood the structure of the head. Unlike the drawings he did from the live model, landscapes and interiors, the drawings done on printed surfaces are not subject to his inveterate habit of erasure. The ballpoint drawings are a ‘nest of lines’ (Liniennest), or what Koepplin terms ‘nests of condensation’ (Nester der Verdichtung) (Koepplin, 2011, p. 179), fully integrated with the movement of the hand, of drawing as the language of the hand. Through the nest of lines the newsprint, and sometimes a printed image, are visible.

Koepplin suggests that the newsprint as a drawing surface tends towards the limitless space of thought (denkraum) or what Winnicott would term ‘potential space’, and that Giacometti’s use of printed matter as a drawing surface was not a question of a stop-gap solution but rather that he used such surfaces for the transparency he could achieve, for the imbrication of the iconic sign with the discursive nature of the linguistic sign.

According to Heidegger, the greatest densities of meaning lie in the ‘ready-to-hand’ (zuhandenen) where the thing and our immediate concerns converge. Heidegger states:

The peculiarity of what is proximally ready-to-hand is that, in its readiness-to-hand it must, as it were, withdraw in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically (Heidegger, 1962/2005, p. 99).

But what does Heidegger mean by this seemingly counter-intuitive notion of presence and simultaneous absence?

For Heidegger there is that which has the ‘being’ character of the ‘present-to-hand’ (vorhandenheit), or the available but what he terms Zeug, are in use and, as such, have the character of the ‘ready-to-hand’ (zuhandenheit). The Zeug is embedded in practices and to use a Zeug is to forget it as a thing. For Heidegger the sign is a particular kind of ‘showing’ Zeug (Zeige-Zeug). In the example above, Giacometti’s drawing has the quality of readiness-to-hand because of the coexistence of other sign modes upon which the drawing was superimposed.
My first act of transitional notation initiated by my encountering the seals was performed on an article on Parisian photography in a two-week-old issue of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*. The drawing was done in a café and began with a drawing from memory of the cylindrical shape of the seal and the horizontal slab on which it had been rolled (see Figure 3 below).

I wrote and drew for some time before noticing that to the left of the photographic profile of the women there is a windowpane into which the figure of a cupid has been incised (see Figure 4 below). Thus there was a moment when the newsprint was absent in the notational process, followed by one of a ‘return’ to presence of the newsprint on my becoming aware of the cupid.

Those parts of the cupid that appear in a grey tone, if cut into a cylinder, and then rolled onto a clay tablet, would produce a relief figure of the cupid. The convergence between the newsprint image and the seals seemed entirely fortuitous, while at the same time there seemed to be an ineluctable

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**Figure 3:** Drawing by the Author on Newsprint. Photograph by the author.

**Figure 4:** Detail of a Cupid from the Same Piece of Newsprint shown in Figure 3. Photograph by the author.

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link between the way the ‘readiness-to-hand’ of the newsprint provided an example of the phenomenon that was the subject of the notation. It is certainly true that I spent a long time gazing at the photographic image when I first read the article as I connected it to certain experiences in my early twenties on a visit to Paris, and it is conceivable that this prompted my choice of this particular page as what Gell terms an ‘index of agency’.

The oscillation between presence and absence: the ostensible absence of the newsprint, when used as a drawing surface, and its sudden reappearance when I became aware of the cupid, echoes Freud’s observation of the fort/da game in which a child repeatedly cast away a spool and thread and then wound it back in again. What interested Freud was the void separating the two moments of presence, and of the existence of a tendency to engage in a play of repetition with changes. Lyotard states ‘Through the game of fort/da the child constitutes the object as something that can be both there (da) and not there (fort) since one can make it disappear when it is present and call it back to presence when it is absent’ (Lyotard, 2011, p. 124). Lyotard goes on to state that the fort/da game is ‘the model of all objects . . . the initial opposition between absence and presence allows every speaking subject to posit in and through her/his discourse what is not’ (ibid., p. 125). The newsprint as a surface of inscription has the quality of what Lyotard terms ‘the void separating two moments of presence’ (ibid., p. 354). The newsprint, as a surface of notational inscription, was at first present and then withdrawn in order to be ‘ready-to-hand quite authentically’, that is to say: while I was using the newsprint as a surface of inscription its character as newsprint was effaced or absent. However, in the moment when I became aware of the photograph the newsprint returned to presence.

TRANSITIONAL NOTATION IN THE CLASSROOM

The choice of the newspaper as the surface for transitional notation is of course a particular recourse to action, an acquired practice that has proven successful in past experiences. The drawing on the newsprint was done in an instant. The words I wrote were pointers, it seems to the drawing I was looking at, markers between invisible, internal self-address and the drawing looked at.

I often point to and encourage students to use the dispensable and expendable character of newsprint as a surface of inscription for the transitional generation, modification and development of ideas towards a completed work. I have observed that very often the use of newsprint (see Figure 5) generates those moments of presence and absence mentioned above.

The grade-ten pupil who produced the drawing in Figure 5 later on continued to draw figures where the face was not rendered as complete. Further to this, she chose the word that is visible on the newsprint as a possible title for the work—memory (Erinnerung). In Figure 6 the pupil’s choice of the particular page of newsprint strongly suggests a focused interest in a reproduction on the page of a painting by Klimt. I should
mention here that following Gell I have ‘abolished the hard and fast distinction between the dynamic present and the fixed unchanging past. Past, present and future are all of a piece and all equally dynamic’ and further on ‘the ‘dynamic past, and future which continually alters complex-ion, cannot be accommodated in “physical” time, but only in cognitive time’ (Gell, 1998, p. 240).

In Figure 7 the pupil produced structural lines that later became a central theme in her painting process, whereas the figure of the boy completely disappeared and was replaced by a mechanical panther-like figure, a transitional process that generated a shift in emphasis and figuration. It has frequently been my experience that transitional notation on the ‘ready to-hand’ surface of newsprint gives rise to unanticipated, unintended consequences.

The pupils’ use of the ‘readiness-to-hand’ of newsprint as a surface of inscription is, following Gell, ‘a material index . . . that permits a particular cognitive material operation’ (Gell, 1998, p.13). According to Peirce an index is a ‘natural sign’ from which a causal inference can be made. The inference is that it will allow ‘events’ not intended by the pupils to occur, thus serving as a surface of inscription rather than one of the transcription of intention. Later on in the course we studied Rodin’s ‘Gates of Hell’ and the girl who produced Figure 7, without prompting, produced her own powerfully evocative version of the gates that, in my view, could serve as

Figure 5: Drawing by a Grade 10 Student on Newsprint. Photograph by the author.
the cover for Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) (see Figure 8 below).

Following Gell I can, as both teacher and practicing artist/researcher, identify with the transitional procedure the pupil adopted, but a point of ‘incommensurability’ is reached at which it is no longer possible to identify the pupil’s agency with my own, a point where I am left suspended between two worlds. The pupil’s transitional notation is there before me and the completed work, but there is an ineluctable gap between my experience of agency and her own.
Once pupils have completed Grade 12 their ability to use transitional notation in the generation, modification and development of ideas has most often reached a high level of competence. Now the surface of transcription is their investigation workbook, as this is a course requirement. Figures 9 and 10 below are examples of transitional notation in the investigation workbook.

In these pages some of the ‘self-address’ invisible in the earlier examples has shifted its locus to the page, with the pupils’ prospective and retrospective evaluation of what has been done and what might be done in what the anthropologist Strecker, writing about the incursion of the unexpected in film, terms ‘actual and potential events’ (Strecker and Verne, 2013, p. 54). These events have ‘looking’ as a main focus. Calasso quotes Goethe as saying ‘thinking is more interesting than knowing, but not than looking’ (in Calasso, 2010, p. 125). In the context of higher education and on the basis

**Figure 8:** Pen and Ink Drawing by a Female Student in Grade 10. Photograph by the author.

**Figure 9:** Notation by Grade 12 Student in an Investigation Workbook. Photograph by the author.
of students’ accounts, it would seem that the acquired practice of transitional notation inserts them, in a receptive state of mind, into what appears in the inexhaustibly varied reservoir of what the world holds, and equips them with a semiotic ‘abductive’ approach that allows them to tentatively unfold something encountered in the perceptive continuum.

Long experience has indicated the new orientation in thinking required of transitional notation, an orientation that rests upon the pupils’ ability to receive and respond to an impulse from the external world, that situates them in a continuous process with minimum intervention from the teacher, in which the pupil makes as much for him/herself of the process as possible. This entails an acceptance that there are no fixed rules or formulas for transitional notation. Figure 11 below is transitional notation in the form of a scroll presented by a former pupil on the University course she was attending.

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Her transitional notation gravitates around an ‘index of agency’ that may or may not produce something conclusive in the way of a completed work. She took the notion of avoiding becoming prematurely trapped in selecting one orientation over all others but remaining open to various possibilities and allowing them to unfold, or in her case ‘un-scroll’, in a fecund tension that will be mentioned later in the article, between the poles of excitation and contemplation.

**ABDUCTION AND PROTENTION**

As stated earlier in the article, in my stroll through the Egyptian rooms of the Art History Museum I came across the cabinet of seals that became for me an ‘index of agency’; both the agency of their makers, and now mine because they initiated a sequence of events that at that moment were not anticipated nor attributable to something intended in advance. The ‘mode of inference’ I brought to bear on the seals is termed in semiotics ‘abduction’, which Eco states is ‘. . . a tentative and hazardous tracing . . . which allows the sign to acquire meaning without knowing what they signify’ (Eco, in Calasso, 2010, p. 14).

In the conclusion of ‘Art and Agency’, and in spite of his primary focus on the index of the art work, Gell is fully cognisant of the work of the artist as transitional when he states the finished art work informs us about ‘cognitive processes of generation (that) allow us an insight into artistic activity as a process of unfolding over time’ (Gell, 1998, p. 233). This insight is very closely aligned to what I have termed *Das Gegenwerk*, mentioned earlier, where the difference between the transitional and the completed work communicates Gell’s idea of the artist’s agency as one indivisible work. This work consists of many physical indexes but amounting to a single temporal entity in which transitional notation and completed works flow into each other, intertwine and interweave in an uninterrupted, circular motion. As Jullien states ‘no end is absolute since it always carries a beginning along behind it’ (Jullien, 2004, p. 60).

One of the obstacles to teaching transitional notation is that this unity is culturally divided into transitional forms or what Gell terms ‘protentions’ and completed works. Had Gell lived longer I am certain he would have developed his ideas on protention in greater depth, and would find there the common ground that would have enabled him to extend his research beyond the focus of visual art. In terms of Gell’s link to what I have said concerning object relations theory, Gell’s argument, like the one I have presented here, pivots on the isomorphy of structure between the cognitive processes we know from the inside and the spatio-temporal structures of distributed objects in the artefactual realm. Primarily my argument is that this isomorphy is formed in transitional object use in childhood and the ‘creation of potential space’ and is not restricted to the artefactual realm of art works, but to any object or thing the world bestows that has a ‘charge for us’, that sets in motion the ‘protention’ of transitional notation.
FROM EXCITATION TO CONTEMPLATION

Aby Warburg [1866–1929] developed his famous *Pathosformeln* Pathos formula as a metaphor for certain pregnant images of the bodily expression of vital human experiences, whose *nachleben* or after-life is embedded in cultural memory and can re-emerge or be re-invoked in a non-linear way under different circumstances and in different historical periods. Warburg made extensive use of morphological components in his theory, often based on derivative forms of a word. Rehm and Wedepohl (2012) provide the example of Warburg’s use of the word *greif* to explicate the different affective states of *Greifen*, to seize or grasp, *Ergriffenheit*, to be moved in an affective sense and *Begreifen*, to understand or to comprehend (see Duden-Oxford, 1999). It is beyond the scope of this brief article to explore any parallels between Warburg’s Pathos formula and Gell’s Art and Agency. However when it comes to what has been said above concerning transitional notation there is a strong link between what Warburg referred to as ‘*fixationsformeln Affectuöser Erregungszuständer*’ (Warburg, 2010, p. 505) or ‘formulas of fixation of affective states of excitation’ and the way we encounter and seize upon certain objects that stop us in our tracks, hold our attention and move us in some way, often without us knowing why. I have argued that these objects can initiate a transitional abductive process of notation in which we use signs to pin down, or ‘fix’ what we have seized, albeit tentatively and provisionally, in a state of absorbed contemplation. Of course, transitional notation is not a ‘formula’ or metaphor for cultural genesis, but it is the way we most often work towards the work of art or design.

In addition, Warburg’s *Pathosformeln* is very much concerned with what, in German, is termed *Gebärde*, which is more than just gesture, but the expression, or rather depiction, of affective states in terms of bodily movement. In the trajectory from seizing upon an object or ‘index of agency’, through to absorbed contemplation of possibilities, we cross-through, encircle, erase, draw bold arrows, underline, strike-through. In other words we make use of a somatic, semiotic range of pointers in the transitions from evasive desire to fulfilment.

It is beyond the scope of the present article to explore further parallels between object relations theory and Warburg’s *Pathosformeln* but I believe future research may conclude that both perspectives may co-exist and point to each other in ways that may deepen our understanding of the complexity of the creative agency of transitional notation, its relevance to the Philosophy of Education, and use in the teaching and learning situation.

CONCLUSION

In the beginning of this article I presented a reflection on ancient Egyptian cylindrical seals. I experienced the finding of the cylindrical seals, of gazing through the glass at the miniscule objects, as knowing that they pointed to something of importance in the context of my research, but not knowing what or why. Faced with this uncertainty, I resorted to transi-
transitional notation on the ‘ready-to-hand surface of inscription’ on a page of newsprint as an act of what Wittgenstein (1963) would term ‘knowing how to go on’. This ‘knowing how to go on’, but not knowing where it would lead, if anywhere, is the absence that is the beginnings of the play of absence and presence, of the fort/da of transitional notation. In the words of Lyotard this involves ‘the strength to want to stare at the deep figure of desire, to accommodate its space of play, to embrace the anguish of keeping open the void where it can bounce back its figures’ (Lyotard, 2011, p. 385). The often disposable substrate of the ready-to-hand surface on which we initiate a transitional notation process creates the all-important conditions of a ‘void’, or a space for thought unencumbered by considerations of the quality of the surface that compel what we do to prove its significance or effect; a surface where we can do, undo and re-do, erase and restore, veer away and turn back in pursuit of the evasive desire for fulfilment. In this sense the ritual of its ever-repeating practice echoes the use of transitional object use in early childhood to open a ‘potential space’ in which the agent can establish a separate identity.

In terms of teaching and learning transitional notation rests on a minimum of intervention. Once transitional notation is underway it often surpasses the anticipated outcomes of pupils because of the oblique routes it adopts, routes and modulations that unfetter consciousness and produce variations that proceed directly from the nature of the process set in motion, from the immanence at work in transitional notation that allows the pupil to enter the boundless and complex territory of the indeterminate, the incalculable, the realm of uncertainty. This article is in part a plea for a deeper understanding, in the context of the philosophy of education, of the role of transitional notation as a practice that once acquired, enables the pupil to establish connections to unanticipated ‘indexes of agency’ and unfold these in an abduction that necessarily involves the discomfiture and delays of uncertainty.

In the realm of physics the fruitfulness of uncertainty has taken firm root (see Prigogine, 1997) producing a discourse where we no longer try to predict the future or, in the words of Prigogine ‘retrodict the past’ and where ‘the laws of nature . . . now express possibilities and probabilities’ (Prigogine, 1997, p. 4). This is also evident in other areas of research discourse particularly anthropology (see Strecker and Verne, 2013). In education however, there seems to be little or no recognition of the role of uncertainty inherent in the creative competency of transitional notation, where the pupil uses the sign as a pointer to an as yet unknown outcome, and for the desire this engenders towards fulfilment.

Transitional notation points both towards and beyond that step where the agent begins to produce an object. It is a semiotic placing of an ‘index of agency’ in view, of ‘getting it down on paper’ and pointing towards its possibilities with signs. This involves a never-ending motion back and forth from the pole of a semiotic binding of excitations to the pole of their suspension in contemplative detachment and as such has, I suggest, an ineluctable link to the polarity of Aby Warburg’s ‘Pathosformeln’.
There are a number of future research directions that this article points to. One that is of particular interest is the nature of the ‘mark’, partly semiotic and partly non-semiotic in its resistance to interpretation. Another research direction already underway is to give close-up, case-by-case attention to pupils’ transitional notation in the visual arts and how this is transformed in higher education.

The history of transitional notation as a cultural phenomenon is marked by many signposts in notebooks and manuscripts across a wide range of practices beyond that of the visual arts, and one future direction would be to use the signposts of transitional notation that I have collected to design and offer a University elective concerned with transitional practices based on perspectives from philosophy, pedagogy, psychoanalytic and cultural theory, and semiotics.

Correspondence: Derek Pigrum, Zedlitzgasse 3/13, 1010 Vienna, Austria. Email: dpigrum@vis.ac.at

NOTES
3. Adapted from Gove, 1976, p. 1,534.

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