Cheerio photo courtesy of calligraphycentre.com.

Brody Neuenschwander's Camp Cheerio Workshop: *"Developing Meaning"*

Text and illustrations by Gina Jonas

Traditionally, Western calligraphy has been concerned with the visual representation of verbal meaning, with reading, instead of viewing, alphabetic form. However, for Brody Neuenschwander, calligraphy may acquire the status of an artform when the principles of visual, rather than those of verbal art, determine the primary impression and meaning of a work. Brody compared the literary artform of the sonnet with the visual artform of a painting, Rembrandt's "Nightwatch." With the painting, not only do we immediately recognize its figures, gestures, costumes, etc., but our eyes may continue to dart about the design to derive meaning from their interrelationships. In contrast, we must decode the sonnet, scanning it automatically in accordance with the unvarying convention of reading: moving the eye from left to right, descending from top to bottom. In the literary arts, visual activity is not of primary importance: a blind person can read using the tactile sense. Consequently, the difference in verbal and visual activity demands a corresponding difference in their principles of composition. What does this mean for Western calligraphers? Is it possible to take an alphabetic system "weighted toward the literary" and create visual art? Guided by Brody and his specially developed exercises, we spent an exhilarating week exploring calligraphy as a visual artform unlike any other: "linked to language but different from it."

For Western calligraphers who wish to approach calligraphy as a visual art rather than a literary one, the title of Brody's workshop, *"Developing Meaning"* pointed directly to the challenge they face. How do the laws of visual art operate on language encoded by the Roman alphabet's written symbols? Wherein lies the meaning of our work when, inspired by or based directly upon the words of a text, it is wholly or partially illegible? In preparation for entering this relatively unexplored territory, Brody had us investigate modern artists working as "text artists" before we met. Text art, we learned, is a recognized field within the larger province of modern art. Text artists, as Cy Twombly, Jenny Holzer and Ed Ruschka, may use letterforms, words and texts, but in unexpected ways. They may act as elements in a work, and thus be governed by its larger context; their referential meaning may be employed to express irony and/or social commentary. Such work is clearly not calligraphy. But it was Brody's aim that we should work from the standpoints of both modern text art and calligraphy; he asked us to suspend judgment and try to interrelate these different approaches.

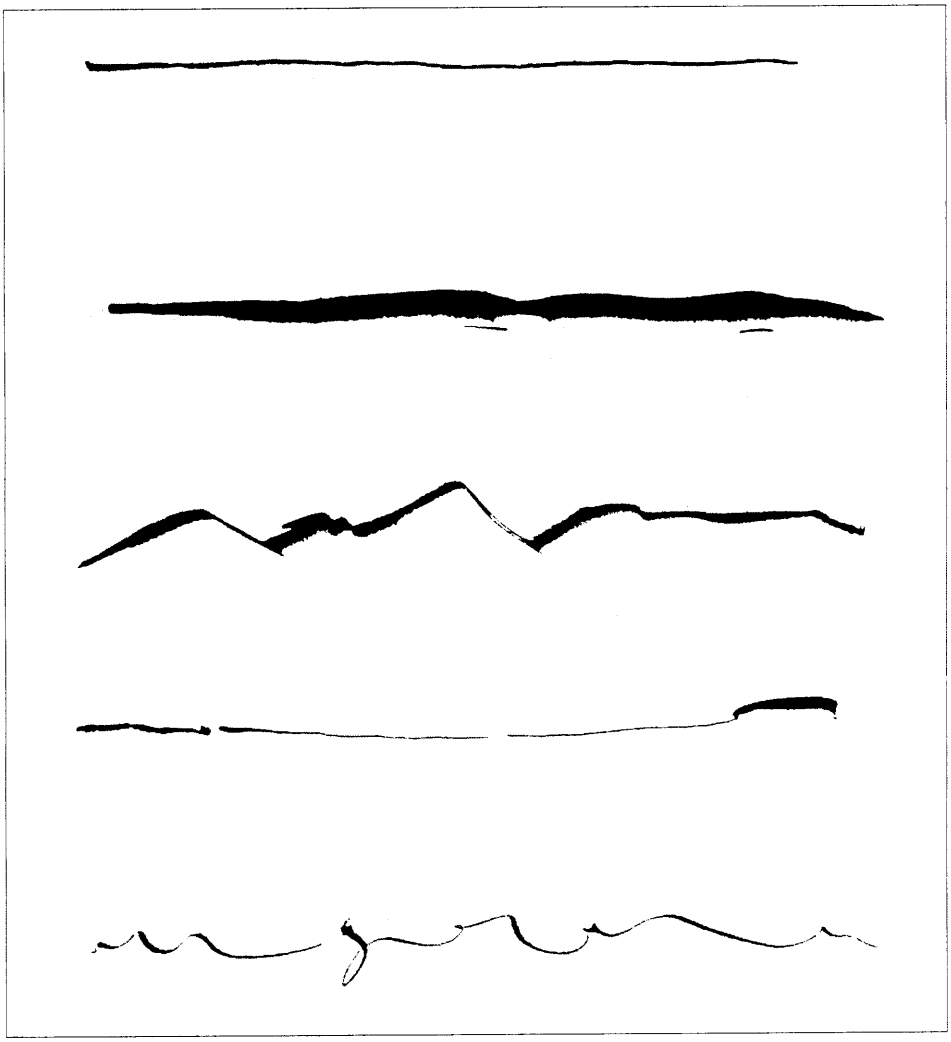


fig. 1 Each of these lines was produced after contemplating a different emotional state.

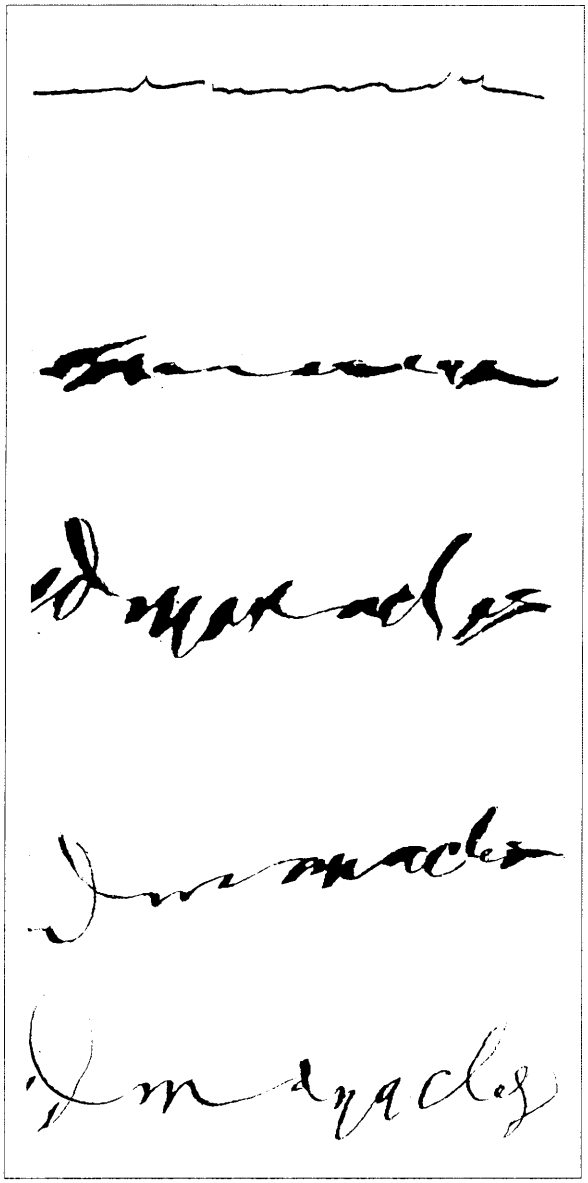


fig. 2 'Translation" of fig. 1's expressive lines into writing. The written word "manacles" is from my text by William Blake: In every cry of every Man,/ In every infant's cry of fear,/ In every voice, in every ban,/ The mind-forged manacles I hear.

To provide background, Brody, an art historian, reviewed some of the historic highlights attending the birth of modern art. Such works of Marcel Duchamp's as *Nude Descending a Staircase* and his *Ready-mades* challenged basic assumptions about art and created an intellectual outlook in which "a banana is not just a banana." (Or, in the vocabulary of our post-modern age: "Everything has a subtext.") A fact coming closer to home: the same year, 1906, saw the publication of both Edward Johnston's *Writing and Illuminating and Lettering* and Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams,* in addition to the creation of Pablo Picasso's collage work. While the latter events remain part of our consciousness, Johnston's approach, for Brody, has largely exhausted itself. Perhaps, he acknowledged, it is useful now as a preliminary program of practice—as scales are to music—but certainly it is not one suited to producing calligraphic art on the level of "stage performance." Finally, Brody recognized the role of our exposure to Asian and Arabic calligraphy, unreadable to most Westerners, and hence experienced as visual compositions.

This being said, the calligrapher has traditionally sought to impart meaning through legibility. Just how, then, does the Roman calligrapher express meaning in her work when the goal is not the usual one: a text of good letterforms arranged well? Seeking an answer to this critical question demands that we reconsider the calligrapher's relationship to the text. What alternatives to the role of "servant" are available to the calligrapher? Brody suggested that we "take charge of the text," not aggressively but in the spirit of exploration, even that we author it (create the content) ourselves. (We were asked to bring three theme-related texts 25-50 words in length to class.) Taking up the gauntlet, I authored one of mine and thereby discovered the connection between "author" and "authority!" The next step, undoubtedly, would be to take this liberating experience of authorship to my other-authored texts. But I've gotten ahead of the story. I'd now like to describe some of the exercises Brody had devised for probing the relation of calligraphic art to verbal language. The pages of our exercises were undertaken with the awareness that later they would be cut, folded and bound together.

Exercise I Expression

Since we did not use either letter, word or text, but their common component, line, we could also call this exercise 'mark and meaning.' Tool: Personal choice (I chose the cola ruling pen which Brody had made for each of us.) Paper: Large sheet, Zerkall or similar. Instructions: Using the full length of the paper, make 5 lines, each "expressing" the character/feeling of 5 different emotional experiences: e.g. serenity; how you felt the first time you fell in love; "the day the bottom fell out for you," etc. *(See fig. 1, pg. 4)* After finishing our lines we could see a definite relationship between their visual expression and their emotional content.

Exercise II Style

Instructions: Take the feeling, or "style," of each line and use this to write 3-5 words from your texts; translate your expressive lines into written ones. *(See fig. 2 above)* "Hold onto the essential feeling of the line: go back to memory to be re-informed by the original emotion, or, work from stylistic implications of the line/mark, or both." (Brody introduced the idea of drawing and arm movement.) Writing the same words 5 different ways showed us clearly the direct relationship between writing style and the way the words are read, i.e. meaning.

Exercise III Size

Instructions: Select one of the styles and write a few words in different sizes: begin by writing very large, with perhaps a two-inch body height, and then reduce the writing by half 4 times. *(See fig. 3)*

We observed that the change from large to small also tended to represent the continuum from abstract and expressive to legible. Moreover, the last line, which was small and legible, was able to serve as a caption to the largest abstract, expressive line. Brody asked us to note the sympathetic relationship between the large "visual" writing and the small readable text, and to consider what happens when words and images are juxtaposed.

After completing this sequence of exercises, we paused to regard a work by text artist Bruce Naumann, one in which multi-colored neon tubing was shaped into generic Roman capitals. Although this work was meant for gallery display, not a filling station, Brody was "not willing to accept it as an aesthetic statement." By contrast, he asserted, "calligraphy offers a unique power of expression through its myriad variations in size and form."

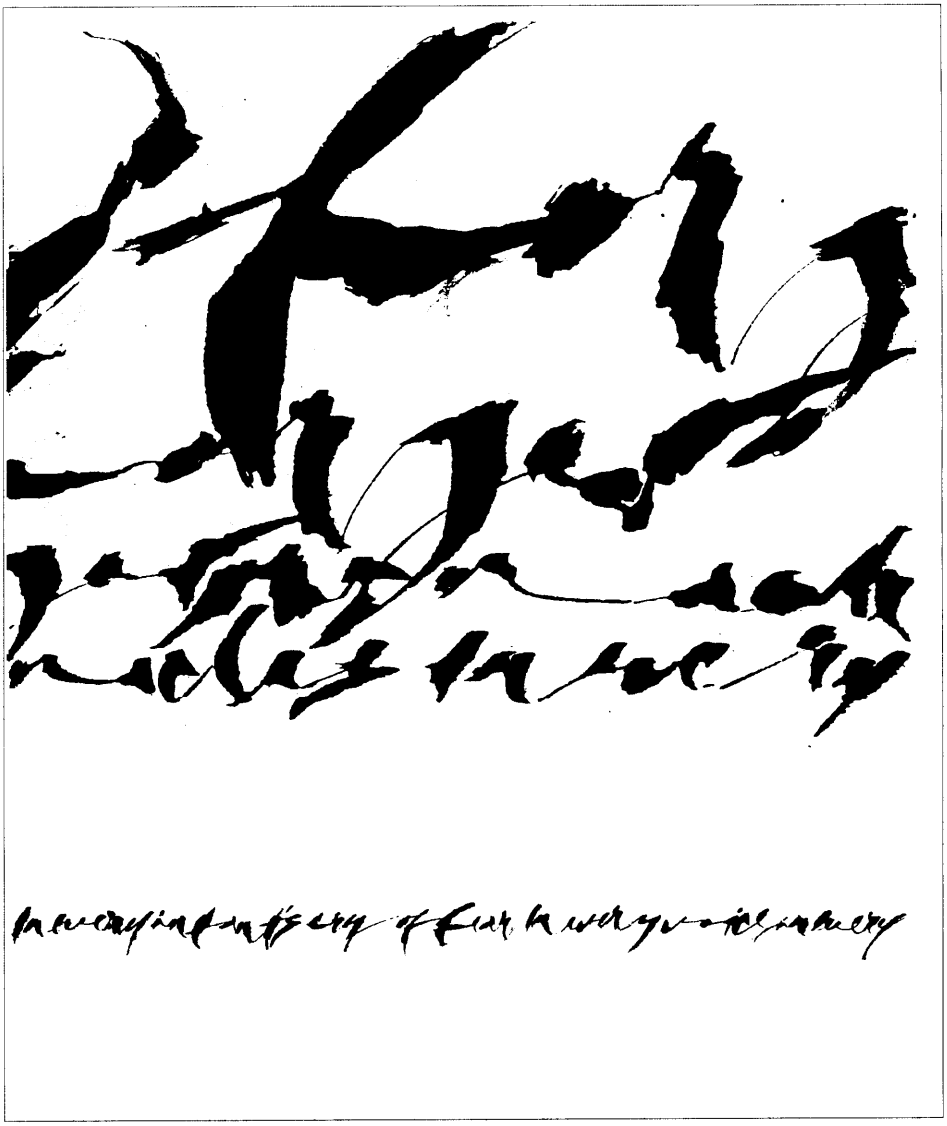


fig. 3 Using the 'style' most compatible to the text's meaning, the 3rd line of fig. 2, for writing the text in different sizes. Noting that the small more legible line serves as a 'caption' to the large more abstract, and hence more 'visual' lines above.

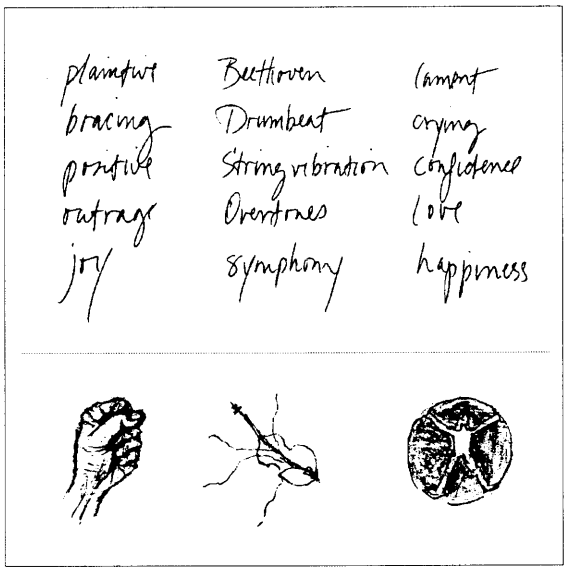


fig. 4 Free associations in 3 different categories to theme-related texts, with drawings of one of the words from each list.

Exercise IV Mental engagement: free association

Instructions: Apply the technique of free association to your 3 theme-related texts using 5 different categories: general, the first 5 words that jump into your head; musical associations; formal (shape, color, texture, etc.); emotional; and artworks. Group the lists into columns. *(See fig. 4)*

Exercise V Drawing

Instructions: Make 5 small drawings, each based on a word from one of the 5 lists generated by free association. *(See fig. 4)*

Tools: Of our own choosing.

Brody: "A lot of modern art depends on the force of the symbol rather than its rendering."

Brody's evening slide talk helped us to integrate the day's various, seemingly disparate, exercises. Its topic—the interrelationship of text and image—was considered historically and culturally. An example from an ancient style of Chinese writing, the seal script, showed writing as image. From the Western tradition, we saw that in at least one instance words had also been seen as images, in the late 8th century *Book of Kells*. Nonetheless, in the medieval period there occurred a decided split between text and image. At this time the page program of text describing image, or, image illustrating text, was established. (When book production converted to type, pictures often dropped out of books entirely.) Leaping forward to the 20th century, Brody mentioned the literary movement of the '50s and '60s known as concrete poetry in which a poem's meaning was connected with a specific arrangement of its words upon the page. Hence, the poet created a visual as well as literary experience. This exceptional movement, however, only proves today's generally accepted rule whereby text and image are regarded as separate entities.

This separation, we learned the next day, had dramatic consequences for the Roman calligrapher. Distinguishing between the literary and visual experience in terms of their distinctively different laws of composition (noted at the opening of this review), nestling us upon the horns of our dilemma, Brody had prepared us for his major breakthrough toward its resolution. It occurred upon his viewing an Arabic seal. Although this written object was unreadable, it communicated, strikingly, on a visual level; indeed, the impact was so strong Brody felt compelled to seek an explanation for his response. This led to a comparison of Roman and Arabic calligraphy. Generalizing, but to helpful effect: the Arabic line of writing exhibited "differences—not little ones but dramatic ones"—while the Western

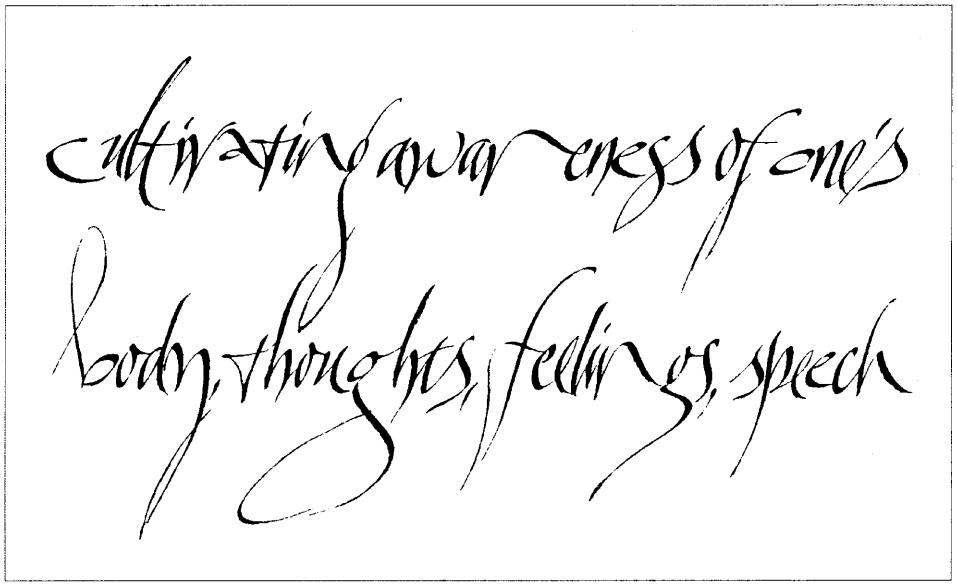
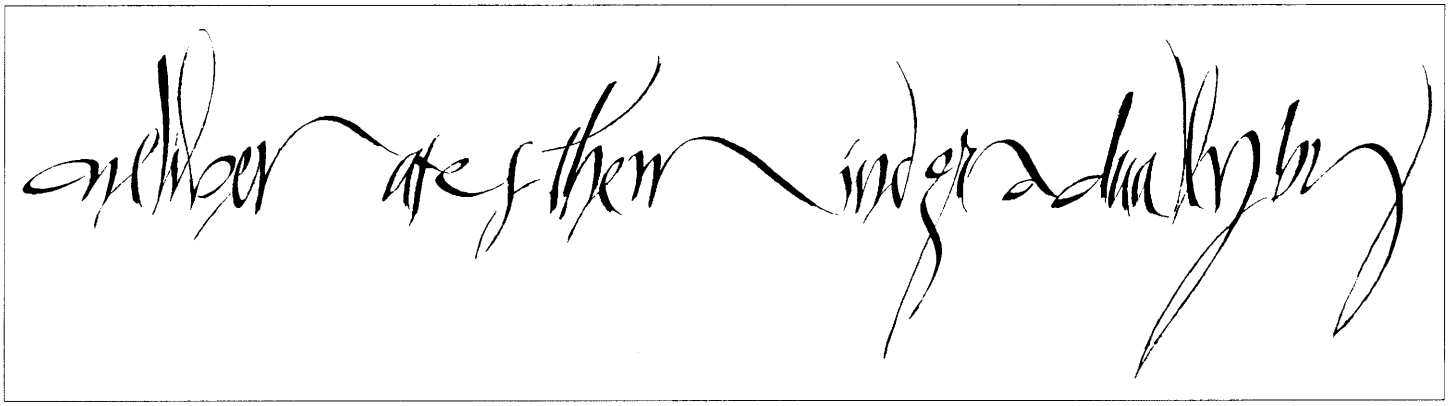


fig. 5 (above) and fig. 6 (below) The writing uses an 'alphabet' style designed to express one of my texts dealing with liberation of the mind. Attempting to use letter variants to create a more expressive written line.



Exercise VI A New "Alphabet" Paradigm

Introduction: "Capitals and minuscules do not exist anymore: only wide/narrow, high/low, open/closed." Brody asked us to "Create a balance between wide and narrow forms—a wide and narrow option for each letter: when you write, every letter is a decision. It's not automatic." *(See figs. 5 & 6)* Brody also quoted Hans Joacquim-Burgert[1] who had influenced him significantly, "The line of written text is the unit of composition—it must have enough variety/playfulness to hold the reader's/viewer's interest." The challenge for composition would be to make "things in dialogue with each other, not a crowd all yelling at once."

Instructions: Make 2-3 versions of each letter of the alphabet to create a style expressive of the theme of your text(s). Get ideas from other styles, e.g. Uncial, but make it work with your style.

1. The Calligraphic Line, Hans Joacquim Burgert, translated by Brody Neuenschwander and available soon from John Neal, Bookseller.

line displayed sameness. An example, even if somewhat extreme, was a typical page of Gothic with its repeated verticals and narrow spacing in contrast to an Arabic page with its much greater contrasts in direction of line and scale. Scale for the Roman letter, that is, the relation of body height to other heights such as cap or ascender, is generally 1:2. This ratio of scale also exists for Arabic; but, a ratio of 1:20 doesn't break the rules! Clearly, with respect to the design element of scale, there was "a lot more going on."

Given the realization that Roman calligraphy as conventionally practiced lacked Arabic's visual interest, Brody decided to take the principle of difference, as exhibited in Arabic calligraphy, to Roman. Toward the accomplishment of this aim, Brody stated, "We're going to have to go through a period of research in the West, and, it won't always be legible." He would begin his probe by posing the fundamental question, "What is the essence of the letter and how do I recognize it?" For Brody there would be no separation between upper and lower case; there would be letter designs which served his aesthetic purpose and those which did not. "I have to write a 'w' but I want a rounded form." With this revolutionary approach in mind, the following exercise was introduced.

We now moved beyond abstract line as an expression of feeling to letterform as a vehicle for expressive feeling. We now had the creative space in which to break free of calligraphic expression restricted to historical styles and their contemporization. We likewise released ourselves from the mentality of typography in which the principle of sameness—one design only for each letter of the alphabet. (In his font *Zapfino*, Hermann Zapf has injected a delightful variety of form, a calligraphic mentality, into his type design!) Although this limit may have been reasonable for machine production, the mind-set it breeds severely inhibits the calligrapher's creativity.

The next day we again began by looking at the work of text artists. Cy Twombly brought irony to his piece, "Virgil," by not writing this word/name as it is "supposed" to be written, in dignified Roman capitals, but rather in a childlike scrawl. With this "form content disjunction" the viewer enters the contemporary realm of Art: an open-ended space for other people to enter in, where a wide range of possibilities are created. Brody contrasted this with the Sentimental: a close-ended space telling others how to feel. A statement we heard more that once from Brody, "All art is for niche markets," was beginning to make sense when he further noted, "Standards of judgment are relative to the audience the work is for."

We engaged in further exercises for text investigation, but all too soon it was time to assemble our work into a booklet. *(See fig. 7)* To make them visually cohesive we wrote the lines from our texts at a constant position across the pages as single lines, or threads, and "tied" them together.

In conclusion, if one holds that Roman calligraphy could be an even more expressive artform than it is at present, this workshop was one well designed to encourage such development. One might say it had been brewed also as a cure to the ailments Brody diagnosed in his comments as a juror of the *2005 LAR Review* issue. He criticized work that focused more on the background, or "look of the thing" rather than making an effort "to develop any deeper meaning." The submissions, in his opinion, did not pursue "any serious experimentation with the forms and expressive potential of the letters." He further exhorted, "It seems rather odd that the world of calligraphy (surely still and important part of *LAR*'s constituency?!) should show so little interest in the exploration of letterforms and the investigation of the text. These should be our main concerns!" Thank you, Brody, for skillfully guiding us in the process of such investigations, and for placing before us the crucial issues of form and meaning in an exceptionally stimulating workshop.

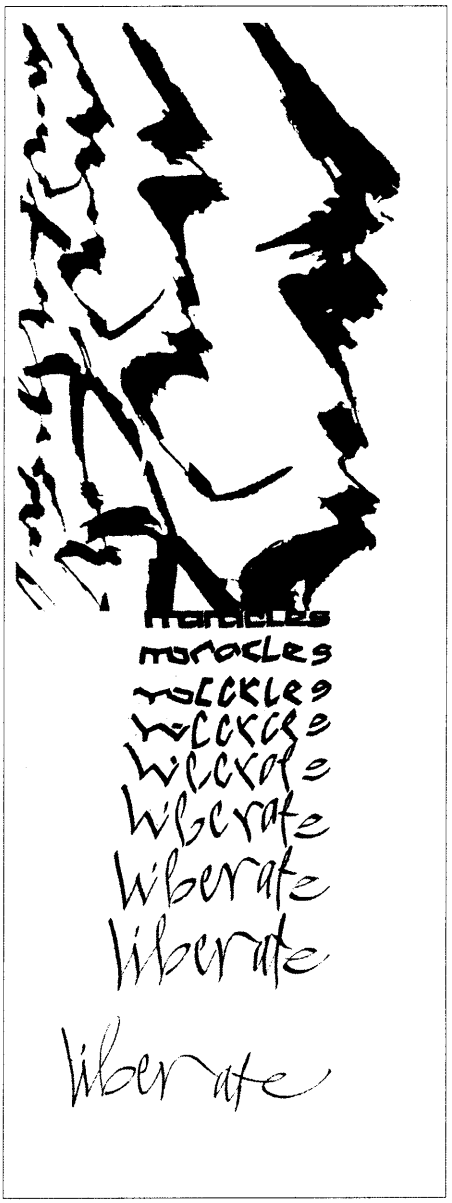


fig. 7 A double-page spread: The top page from the exercise on size, the bottom from an exercise called "morphing." We transformed one word into another word the polar opposite in meaning—'manacles' morphes into 'liberate'—rendering each word in a way that expressed its meaning!