

# The Writing on the Wall

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**I**T MATTERS HOW YOU BUILD THINGS. I KNOW THIS BECAUSE the life I've made owes no small debt to university architecture.

I was studying photography in a building where the classrooms were on the tenth floor, digital labs on eleven, and the darkrooms up on twelve. There was a bank of six elevators in the lobby, and they could take so long to come that I invented a game I called Psychic Elevator, wherein I tried to predict which doors would open next. I was getting pretty good at it when I realized there was another set of doors opposite the elevators. And through their plate glass panes, I glimpsed a museum.

The door was heavy, the interior the usual crisp blank white of contemporary art galleries, but the exhibitions were smart and small. And it didn't cost anything to go in, so I could afford to keep meeting it in glimpses and spare moments and between other things. The curation was so nimble. The work made me think.

And the more I thought about it, the more it seemed like an interesting place to be. I'd noticed by then the student workers. I didn't know exactly what they did in the prep room behind the suspended metal welcome desk, but I saw flashes of white gloves and portfolio boxes going in and out.

I submitted three times before my application landed in the right hands and someone called me back, an application I still remember was one page, but three different colored sheets to take the carbon copy. The last entry on the form left two and a half lines to record special skills. I wasn't entirely sure I had any, but the form anticipated that and held some possibilities in parentheses. I borrowed one, claiming for the very first time, in triplicate, next to some computer programs and how fast I could type: writing.

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My new boss noticed, bothered to hold on to what had just become a fact, and introduced me to museum text. There are a handful of ways that writing goes on the wall, but the most sensuous I know is a certain size of vinyl letter. The text comes on big sheets, as if pulled from the typewriter of a giant, on a smooth and sturdy kind of wax paper. There is much measuring and leveling and double-checking sight lines before the paper is tacked to the wall. And then I'd climb a ladder until I was eye to eye with the titling, holding the flat blade of a bone folder point out.

A bone folder is an old piece of technology; they have worked so well for so long there's now a market for vegan versions. They are so good at setting creases, skimming paper like that, but in this instance are held like a carpenter's pencil. The tip of a bone folder, like all its edges, is dull. The pressure to transfer the letter from the paper to the wall is a kind of tracing, a kind of drawing, sometimes a kind of coloring in.

It is a process that moves letter by letter. Slow as any ritual or procession. I would recognize this pace and attention later, hand-setting lead type for a printing press, the museum letters at least not upside down and backwards. Sometimes a character will seem to hesitate, its ascender on the wall and its bowl still clinging to the page. The letters tremble. You hold your breath, and they jump the little gap of air.

As the letters of a text get smaller, they become more delicate. Their stems are prone to break. Even the fat wedge of a seraph or a blot of punctuation may tear or crack, an effect that looks not unlike the thin veins of marble, if you are close enough to look. You have to steady your hands to be precise, steady your breath so as not to blow some fragile bit apart, anchor yourself to the stationary wall without otherwise leaving a mark.

**C**hristine Coulson spent twenty years at the Metropolitan Museum of Art before she left to write her own books. The first one is a collection of stories based on objects in the Met collection, and the new one is a novel, written in the form of wall texts, called *One Woman Show*. The latter follows the life of its protagonist, from the age of five until after her death, sometimes in a kind of overheard conversation rendered in italics, but almost exclusively through a series of labels. I have long been charmed that the industry calls such labels

“tombstones,” because these markers are so often composed of a name, a few dates, and some brief but meaningful context to accompany those facts.

Coulson leverages the conventions of the form: the changing titles re-defining who this woman is, the dates and locations marking shifts in time and setting, the provenance ascribing whom she belongs to that raises a wealth of ideas about class and gender all by itself. But the author keeps the constraint of the word limit under which she was trained to write wall text for the museum. And so the novel unfolds, 75 words or less at a time.

One of the consequences of this formal experiment is that every installment fits on one page. The page is vertical, but still of proportions that would make sense on a wall. And by the author’s design, each facing page remains blank. The effect suggests a wall, or an absence, or for some readers: a screen. Coulson says readers have tried to talk to her about the illustrations in the book—but there are none. These readers are so sure they saw something, pictured the story so well in their minds, that they are unconvinced when she corrects them, have to be shown the book as evidence.

I looked forward to this book coming out for months, which is whole orders of magnitude longer than it took to read, the entire thing consumed in one sitting the same night I came home from her appearance at a bookstore. The bookstore reading had proved something of a convention for wall text nerds. During the Q & A, a dramaturge said she sometimes describes her job as writing the wall text for a play. The author and I weren’t the only ones in the room who’d written wall texts. The author and most of the room weren’t convinced anyone should read them.

It reminded me of my museum days giving print viewings. After the students left, the professor would linger. The professor was usually an artist, sometimes in our collection, and as time went on, quite possibly a friend. Which is to say, these were people who knew me professionally enough to know that part of my job managing the collection was writing about the collection. Sometimes for the new website, sometimes for an exhibition card, occasionally the wall. And these same people would bring up to me, full of pride, that they never read the wall text.

It happened so often I began to trace a spectrum. The no-text purists, the look-at-everything-and-only-then-read adherents. It turns out there are some folks who actually read and *then* look, but they always seemed a little afraid to confess it. I had no idea it was all so personal and nuanced. As I accumulated points of data, I found I began to hope. Maybe somewhere there are people who see it differently. Maybe there are people that know that the art and the objects will still be there, but the text will go away. Maybe there’s someone who makes these pilgrimages just for the words. Maybe that should be us.

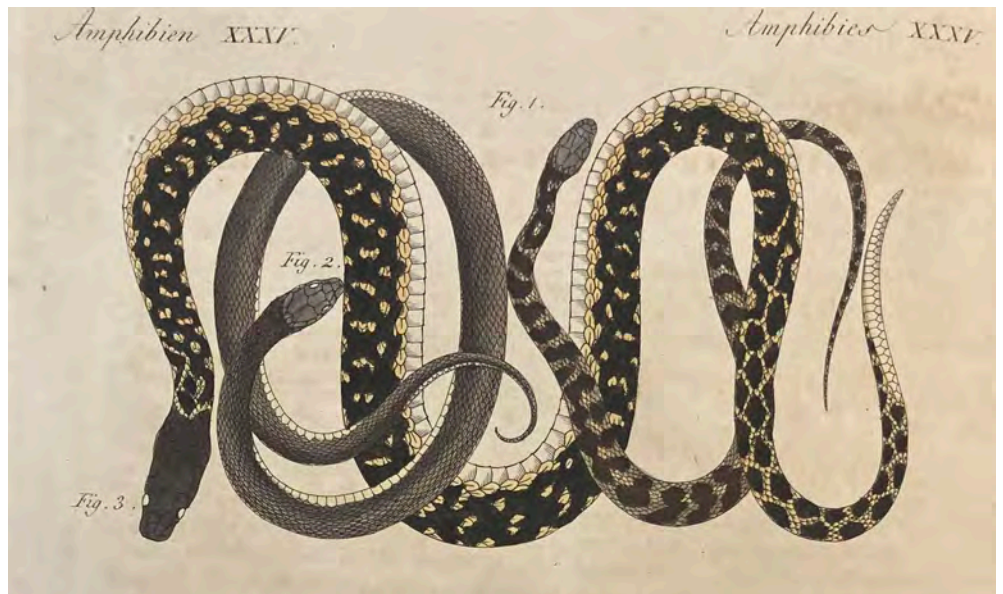
The best wall text I've ever read was at the Cape Fear Serpentarium in Wilmington, North Carolina. The place itself was a block away from the water. Inside it were two levels, with 50 displays of exotic animals, featuring no shortage of venomous snakes. I'm sorry to say, you can't go there now. It closed permanently in 2018, after tragic circumstances, but I was once in town for a wedding, and right on time for the full tour.

There is no question that I learned plenty without the help of wall text. It was feeding day, and I thought how lucky I was that my timing coincided with an event that only happened once a week. I did not think about what feeding snakes entails. I certainly did not think that the safety apparatus was basically two screen doors on a hinge, a barrier between the assembled onlookers and whatever enclosure was being opened with one upward sweep of its exhibition glass.

I saw with my own eyes the five-gallon bucket of hot water that warms up the dead rats to a more appealing temperature. I watched young men who loved reptiles, thrilled to talk to the young woman employed to feed an alligator named Bubbles. I witnessed the consummate showmanship of the herpetologist trying to entice an Eastern Kingsnake to accept the offering of a warm turkey neck—feeding snakes to snakes raised a delicate ethical issue for the serpentarium, so they made an imitation with the cylindric flesh anointed with two drops of snake blood, which they said they kept in a freezer but did not say how they obtained—and then convinced us that we had seen the rarest thing of all: a snake that wouldn't eat!

And still, no doubt about it, the unsung hero of the whole spectacle was the wall text. I've never seen anything like it. Sometimes it read like an encyclopedia entry about the snake. Sometimes it was like an obituary. Sometimes it was like office gossip, which keeper in which

From Friedrich Justin Bertuch and Carl Bertuch, *Bilderbuch für Kinder* (Weimar, 1798-1830). Public domain.



zoo had been bit or maimed or killed. At least once it was a memoir, though it read like a different era of adventure story marketed to boys. The wall text was thrilling. There was no telling what would happen next. It might be about range and habitat and breeding, or it might be about the time the village sent the author out to avenge a child who'd been bit and as he was swinging his machete, he stopped, mid-swing, suddenly confronted with the serpent and unwilling to cut it in half.

It made sense to me, later, that snake collector and Serpentarium founder Larry Dean Ripa had a lot of interests, that he was a painter and a musician, and the kind of writer who kept a correspondence with Beat poet William Burroughs. It's not surprising that when he died suddenly, in the apartment above the Serpentarium, he left behind a massive nonfiction project about it all that his family says will now "lay unfinished."

The building was sold and the snakes were sold and the story kept getting sadder. It's very small in the scheme of things, and perhaps smaller still in the midst of this tragic end, but I don't know whatever happened to the wall text. You can dig through the news stories and the Yelp reviews, but no one talks about that. It may exist only in memory. I wish you could see it.

There are so many ways to live within structures. I know that my life is shaped the way it is in no small part because of one building where I never figured out how to take the stairs. Because a woman in overalls tasked somebody else to prep the walls and had a different job for me. And almost from the very beginning, the question of how language exists in a museum—how we ever live with text—was put right in front of my face. In the architecture of the old Serpentarium, there's a new attraction now. It probably has something to say, writing of its own. But I suspect I'm never going to know. I can't bring myself to look.

