'A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that the patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face.'

Jorge Luis Borges

The Artist as Translator

Gustav Elgin

Exhibit A: A dingy, rain-soaked mattress, taped together in a spiral, leans against a tree stump littered with cigarette butts.
Exhibit B: Nestled in the crevice between a telephone pole and an orange trashcan, a hula hoop seems to hover above the latter (like the dot over an 'i').
Exhibit C: Torn tarp exposes a plywood wall, its shape in the silhouette of a piano.

There are many ways in which to perceive the heaps of debris, junk and refuse scattered around a city. While the local on his hundredfold trip to the grocery store has learned to filter out all information that is not exclusively relevant to the journey at hand, the tourist might exhaust themselves on the myriad details of somewhere new, unwilling (or unable) to separate the trivial from the relevant. Someone trained as a detective on the other hand, exists somewhere between the generalizing local and the distracted tourist. Fictional sleuths the likes of Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot divine by focusing on minute, and above all, unintended details.

The Morellian method, developed by its namesake Giovanni Morelli in the 19th century, is rooted in the same assumption as the later whodunits (or the roman-à-clef). A political figure in Italy and self-confessed connoisseur of art, Morelli claimed to have devised a revolutionary method for the accurate attribution and authentication of paintings. The idea was simple. By analyzing the rapidly executed details in the paintings of renaissance masters Botticelli and his student Filippo Lippi, such as earlobes, fingertips and eyelids, Morelli claimed to have gained insights into the painters' personal styles, untouched by the stylistic influences of their respective

period. Their personal handwriting, so to speak. In the stories of Holmes and Poirot, too, handwriting plays a recurring role in revealing (or deliberately obfuscating) the identity of a subject. In movements made unconsciously or repetitiously – the hyphen above an 'i', the smudge of a finger – the subject inadvertently reveals itself. The word for identifying oneself on a document, signing, succinctly embodies this perceived link between identity and writing.

In 2012 Isabelle Graw proposed a definition of painting anchored in semantics, suggesting a link between handwriting and the act of painting. Graw identifies signification as the medium's main constitutive factor, one that indicates the absence of a once present painter-subject. What puts Graw's definition at odds with the method of Morelli, is that this presence of absence needs only to be evoked in the viewer, whether or not the sign actually belongs to the painter-subject is tangential. As much as a painting holds the promise of uncovering the identity of the artist, it is apparently in no position to do so. Yet, despite the 150 years between them, Morelli and Graw both point to the same fundamental belief, namely that signs are phenomenologically tied to the subject. It follows that there exists a connective tissue between our experiences of signs and identity inherently embodied, and thus made visible, in the mediums of drawing and painting. Here the German word for drawing reveals the relation: Zeichnen, literally 'sign-ing', that is, the making of signs.

Yuya Suzuki roams the city very much like a detective. Equipped with a camera, he goes sleuthing for the stuff at the periphery of our optical focus, like the exhibits presented at the beginning of this text: Mattresses, hula hoops and tarps, 'the rubbish-heap of our observations' as Freud once wrote in reference to Morelli. This photographic raw material will pass through a complex metabolic system before it reaches the viewer. Like the titular character in Samuel Beckett's Molloy, who circulates pebbles found on the beach, already partially rounded by the waves, through his coat-pockets and mouth, slowly reducing them to a rounder and rounder shape, Suzuki gradually abstracts his subject matter through repetitious drawing. When Suzuki decides that the found object has distilled into a sign, it is either drawn with color-pencil or painted. Some are transformed into sculptures or digital animations, streamlining as they move through semantic reductions primarily governed by intuitive decisions and the continuous, repetitive motion of a hand, to be exhibited alongside the drawings and painting. One might be inclined to see Suzuki's method in the context of Morelli's, namely as divination of unintended phenomena in the urban composite as a means of revealing the essence of a city. His practice, however, as I will argue below, is more geared toward demonstrating the interconnectedness between our experiences of signs, images and identity that lie at the core of Morelli and Graw's theories.

Repetition, incidentally, is the function of the human instinct by which Freud would define the death drive. The elimination of individuality through repetition, a slow grinding into a common form through an instinct familiar to all humans, is reflected in the sterile, simplified shapes of Suzuki's drawings, sculptures and video-works. Even his paintings, that according to Graw should signify the absence of a once present Suzuki, are painted with a precision that eliminates any discernible trace of the artist himself. In a reversal of Graw's definition, painting becomes the medium that seemingly has no author despite having one. This refusal to let the work be defined by the identity (and name) of the artist-subject recalls Rosalind Krauss' essay In the Name of Picasso after which, as some may have noticed, I modeled the introduction to this text. Krauss launches a forensic investigation into the biographical mode of art historiography prevalent in the 1980s, deconstructing its view of artworks as mere references to the artist-creator, as opposed to containers of 'intension or connation' inherent in the aesthetic sign itself (and the stylistic, social and economic entanglements that govern its production). By eliminating himself as a referent in the sterile 'non-style' of his conspicuously unsigned artworks, and erasing reference to their real-world motives through abstraction, Suzuki begs us to view his works in the manner outlined by Krauss. Doing so reveals them to be neither distillates of the artist-subject nor of the city, rather, they point to the fundamental process of signification itself, revealing it, and this is the crucial point, to be one of translation.

Suzuki presents the process of semantic translation as a form of movement – a movement propelled in time and space through various material instances (and importantly, propelled as a matter of moving through these instances) – material, photography, drawing, painting, sculpture, digital rendering software and animation. This movement is inherent in the Latin translatio, which in its broadest and first sense means to carry something across. This 'carrying across' does not happen within Suzuki's works internally, but in their interstices, like an electrical current flowing between differently charged terminals. The difference in charge here represented by a difference in medium. Translation generates two temporally distinct forms, and only in the movement between their past and present can the subject be identified.

Beckett makes a similar point in the second book of his trilogy, Malone Dies. It takes the form of a diary documenting the protagonist's confinement to the bed of an old people's home. His pencil, 'an old friend,' has grown so short that he must pinch it between his index finger and thumb in order to write. When the lead runs out, so will he. Here too, the repetitive, creative act is one of self-erasure (in the Freudian sense), but moreover, one directly congruous to the act of living. The diary has gaps, the pencil falling under the bed to be found again days later, and errors, when Malone either misremembers or lies. Traces are lost, as are those from the time

before he began to write, when he 'only spoke'. Here, as in the tradition of history, the oral passes into the written, thought and speech transform into written text. Ultimately, he is a translator transforming life into expression, represented by the dwindling pencil. It is this performative act of writing, consequently an act of self-erasure, in which identity emerges. Echoing the symbol of the snake found slithering throughout the cultures of the Walpi, the renaissance and early modernity by Aby Warburg, this performative line of expression submerges and resurfaces through constant temporal, iconographic and medial transformations: A line unfurling in the outline of the face of humanity.

Yuya Suzuki's alphabet has no conventionally assignable meaning, either in the artist-subject itself or in his previous life as a collaborative collage of strangers, animals, and mushrooms. Rather, they point to the action of the individual that begets them: An animated line, shaped by the mouth and fingers of Beckett's characters, in the uncoiling of the snake of Warburg, by the city-dwellers that throw their junk to the curb, and finally the hands of Suzuki, moving it along, letting it emerge.