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## *Authoritative Forms*

Sayward Schoonmaker

In my art practice, I study the material world and how something forms, catches meaning, gets named, and becomes embodied. I am interested in how abstract things like feelings, love, and perceptions of lived experience take form, and how concrete things form, as in how an object becomes identifiable and understood. For example, why is an object, say a chair, its particular shape? What set of assumptions, beliefs, and materials underlies the formation of said object? I often explore these questions through language and materials. I play with instances where the material/formal (the visual and sonic) and semantic properties of language converge and blur, and potentially both describe *and* create alternative modes of seeing and knowing.

*Authoritative Forms* is a participatory poem-object that invites playing and reordering of how formal entities—for my purposes, what is bound into something named and known—shape and construct our belief systems and assert authority on our ways of being. The work comprises a sheaf of handmade watermarked abaca and cotton paper arranged on a handmade wood table surrounded by work stools (figs. 1–2). Viewers are invited to take a seat at the table to handle, look at, read, and rearrange the papers.

This work began with ruminations on how authority and information are expressed, concretized, and embodied through and with materials. These ruminations led me to the power of the document, the authority of the written word, and the materials used to assert this authority. One such material is paper.



Figure 1 (left) Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Handmade watermarked paper; original text; text drawn from the work of John Berger, James Schuyler, and Hito Steyerl; handmade table; work stools, 2019–20. Image courtesy of Evan Jenkins and Weinberg/Newton Gallery. Figure 2 (right) Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of the artist.

Paper is one of the foundational physical manifestations of a human need to record, account, and communicate. The materiality of paper is easily overlooked: it is the carrier of the message, a substrate for mark making, but is not often the message itself. Because I strive to make work at the convergence of material and meaning, and to question the seeming boundary between form and content, I began to think about the material meanings of paper. While digital technologies abound in our contemporary moment, paper remains an important form of document, a materialization of legitimization with bodily consequences. Paper documents like birth certificates and passports concretize the abstraction of nationality, granting or denying bodies the right to move across borders, to be accounted for. The construct of a document gives a kind of evidence of being, a legitimacy of personhood, that can supersede the body as a document in its own right, which I find absurd, frightening, and fascinating. Papermaking became the site to explore this odd murk of what makes something or someone authoritative: it is a material holding both high and low stations (the diploma and the scrap for jotting notes one plans to discard) and contains the potential to be a document in its own materiality and a vehicle to create one.

Considering paper as a material of legitimization, I explored processes that add additional layers of certainty or authority to paper. Watermarking is a papermaking technique used to authenticate the maker (claiming author[ity/ship]), to prevent counterfeiting, and to trademark, and is a site of artistic expression. Watermarks are patterns or marks impressed during the wet stage of the papermaking process, which produces a variation in the thickness of paper fibers.



Figure 3 Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of Evan Jenkins and Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

When the sheet is dry, the pattern is visible when held up to light (fig. 3) or by reflected light when the paper is backed by a darker surface (fig. 4). Because the watermark is made during the wet stage of forming a sheet, when the fibers are not yet cohered, the pattern/mark/word is inextricable from the paper's material body. A watermark cannot be made or reproduced on an already formed sheet of paper; it is not a mark made on the paper but in the paper. The mark *is* the paper itself.

In *Authoritative Forms*, the watermark serves as a metaphorical proxy and a physical example of the inextricability of form (the paper) and content (the text) or form (the body) and content (the dialectic of reading/looking/touching). One cannot exist without the other. The materiality and participatory nature of this work attempts to interrupt the process of establishing a conferred authority or belief and play around with it. To materialize this attempt, I made 222 paper sheets, each containing a watermarked word, phrase, or image. There was no original order to the text. To invite participation, the papers lay atop a table surrounded by work stools, familiar furniture that assert their own authority by posturing our bodies and telegraphing their intended use. The table, which is narrower and shorter than the standard dimensions of a dining table, creates a physical intimacy between the viewers. This closeness aims to evoke the domesticities and friendships from which meanings, new world formations, and revolutions emerge, oftentimes around the kitchen table. The stools, common fixtures in art studios and schools, speak to the collaborative work of making meaning: that a seat at the table is a potential place of transformation and creativity.



Figure 4 Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of the artist.

The physical and textual presence of *Authoritative Forms* tries to frustrate the assumption of authority: the papers can go in any order, the text resists syntactic coherence, the viewer can read or not read, sit and chat at the table and never touch a paper. The papers meander through objects and ideas of authority. Some refer to the precarity of our contemporary information-seeking habits within the overwhelming scale and speed of the internet age. Others invite a visual deconstruction of the document (figs. 5–6) and visually experiments with the word *form*. Amid original text are excerpts from texts by John Berger on the power of the gaze;<sup>1</sup> James Schuyler on the contextual nature of language;<sup>2</sup> and Hito Steyerl on perspectival space.<sup>3</sup> Throughout, refrains repeat (LOVERS HOLD THE PAGE/ MOM! / DAD!), as a kind of invocation or prayer for deciding our own



Figure 5 Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of Kyle Flubacker and Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

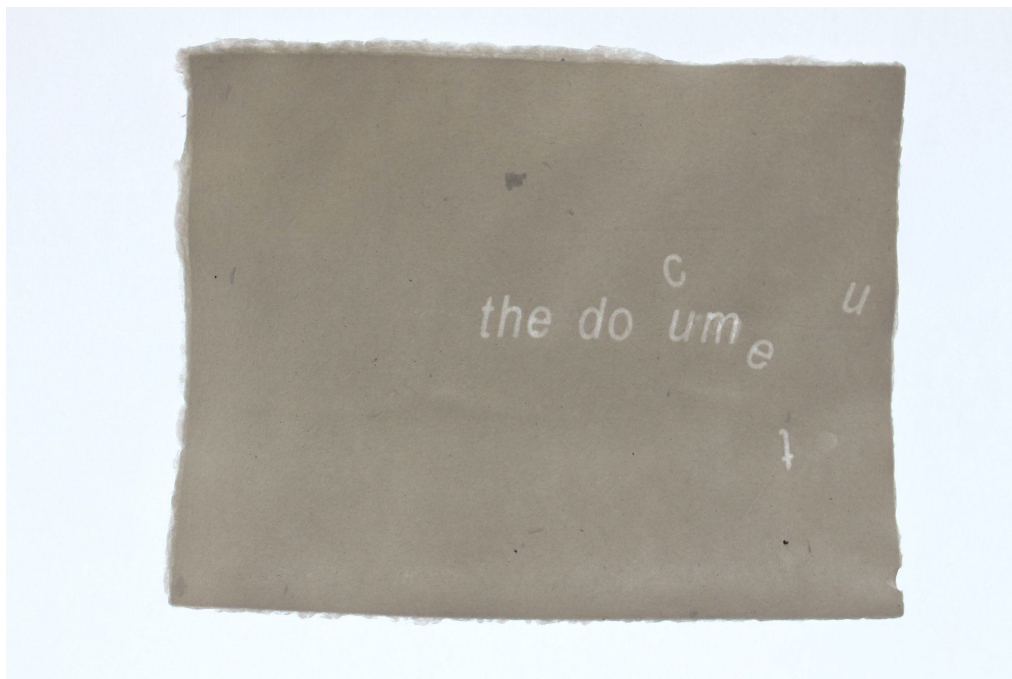


Figure 6 Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of the artist.

metric of value and an anxious call for some grounding. An excerpt from [the complete text](#):

Shape, arrangement of parts.	<p>A matter of time                  A paper trail(s)                  Are you counted?                  You are the document</p>
The shape of the different parts of a body.	<p>Conform uniform                  Forming cons                  Forms a framework</p>
<p>Abstractly considered as one of the elements of the plastic arts.                  An image, representation, or likeness (of a body).                  A body considered in respect to its outward shape and appearance; esp. that of a living being, a person.</p>	<p><i>FOR !! MAT</i>  <i>SPLAT</i></p> <p><i>FORMLORN</i></p> <p>the fact of the matter                  the matter of the fact                  a matter in tatters                  a matter of form                  a form of matter                  a tatter of matter                  a matter of tatter                  a formal matter what matters is let's hold hands?</p>
<p><i>for for ! m</i>  <i>for for ! m</i>  <i>for for um !</i></p>	



Figure 7 Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019-20. Image courtesy of the artist.

In participating, in playing along, viewers unmake the work's uniformity:

You see a table and set of stools from across the room, their authority, yet uncontested, is in their familiarity. A meandering trail of deckle-edged papers of soft whites, warm grays, and deep blacks covers the tabletop. You pull the stool up and sit. You notice the paper before you, the range of weight and texture. Some are feathery light and wispy, others thick and soft with the density of fiber, another has the tooth of drawing paper, smooth yet subtly bumpy under hand. [At first glance, the papers appear blank, but when you lift one and the surface catches light, words appear. The letters glow. You are seeing a watermark.](#) Viewing/reading each mark on each paper is situational and positional. Depending on the paper's tone and the light in the room, the position of your hands and body, the mark appears, disappears, flickers. Some watermarks are so diaphanous that the text nearly breaks the formal boundary, nearly disappearing. The black papers swallow light, and reading becomes more tactile and visual. The words, shaped by an absence of fibers (a slightly thinner surface) appear more as embossment, the words' edges discernible by the slightest ridge where thinness meets thickness (fig. 7). The words appearing and disappearing





Figure 8 (top) Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of the artist. Figure 9 (bottom) Sayward Schoonmaker, *Authoritative Forms*, 2019–20. Image courtesy of Kyle Flubacker and Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

constitute fragmentary thoughts, an inside voice searching, calling, and asking for a foothold in form. That is to say, the voice asks what in the material world is bounded and therefore is formed. How you read is an invitation to play. The papers are unbound, awaiting order and disorder; they do not demand a sequence. With time and hands and people, the tidy trail becomes a disheveled pile, a beautiful tatter of matter, a conversation among those at the table floats over the papers (figs. 8–9). For a time, the table gains the intimacy of a dinner table, the papers become the cups and dishes, handled with intention and sometimes completely ignored, and then absent-mindedly fondled while talking, as if your hands are working up a thought, forming it to pass through your lips.

Within the paper trail, an invitation: PERMEABLE PREAMBLE. The hope is that *Authoritative Forms* creates a microcosm for remaking meaning, a site to hold authority to the light and sense a possibility of shifting the structures around us,

just as a hand stirs and swirls a haze of paper fibers in a vat just before the sheet forms.

\* \* \*

Sayward Schoonmaker is an artist and educator. Her work has been exhibited across the United States, most recently at Weinberg Newton Gallery, Illinois; the Hyde Collection, New York; and Adds Donna Gallery, Illinois. She is a coauthor of award-winning research on diversity and bias in library information systems and the author of one poetry chapbook, *3259* (Dancing Girl Press). She holds a BS in studio art from Skidmore College, an MFA in fiber and material studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and an MLIS from Syracuse University. Sayward's creative practice, scholarship, and approach to arts administration spring from a common root: a lifelong dedication to exploration, critical engagement, and experimentation. She is currently artistic director of Stone Quarry Hill Art Park, Cazenovia, New York.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corp., 1973).

<sup>2</sup> James Schuyler, *Collected Poems* (New York: Noonday, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Hito Steyerl and Franco Berardi, *Hito Steyerl: The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).