

## Abstract

This essay is part of a wider research project exploring connections between ideas of grammar and drawing. Here, prepositions are the focus – tiny, overlooked, undeniably ubiquitous words that articulate crucial relations between their dominant cousins, verbs and nouns. They are dwelt on here for carrying deep metaphorical overtones and having considerable potential for visual engagement. The discussion is situated - in section 1 – via the playfully poetical philosophy of Michel Serres, and - in section 2 – through Barbara Tversky’s thought-provoking analyses of highly integrated verbal-visual patterning within the mechanics of thinking. Section 3 introduces the author’s visual glossary of grammar, currently in development. This aims to present the underpinning energy of grammatical forms key to language production, using simple visualisations to communicate the aesthetic drive of syntax in its organisation of words. The digital drawings presented hark back to the formalised modernist abstractions considered in the first section, but also to the glyphs and basic visual vocabulary of common diagrams that have been analysed by Tversky. The article ends by suggesting that the crucial qualities of prepositions – being on the edge and in between, rather than obviously central to meaning like nouns and verbs – resonate particularly well with current tendencies in drawing practice and wider cultural debates.

### Key words:

diagrams  
graphic communication  
language games  
visual grammar  
visual thinking  
Michel Serres

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## Pursuing the prepositions of drawing

Has not philosophy restricted itself to exploring - inadequately - the ‘on’ with respect to transcendence, the ‘under’, with respect to substance and the subject and the ‘in’ with respect to the immanence of the world and the self? Does this not leave room for expansion, in following out the ‘with’ of communication and contract, the ‘across’ of translation, the ‘among’ and ‘between’ of interferences, the ‘through’ of the channels through which Hermes and the Angels pass, the ‘alongside’ of the parasite, the ‘beyond’ of detachment... all the spatio-temporal variations preposed by all the prepositions, declensions and inflections? (Connor 2008: 13)

### 1. *IN*: a little context

In: ‘used as a function word to indicate inclusion, location, or position within limits’  
(Merriam Webster 2019)

Among many fascinating contentions, the French philosopher Michel Serres offers up the idea that philosophy needs to move beyond the more specifically fixed and static prepositions favoured by philosophers of the past. His preference would be to embrace their more

dynamic and fluid fellows, as being somewhat more in keeping with the spirit of contemporary *mores*. So, on the one hand, a philosophy of situation and situatedness, location and belonging, might give way to, on the other, a world of mobile existences, vibrant networking impulses, and transient, fleeting thoughts. A philosophical world-view concerned with categories such as truth, objectivity and morality concedes to one that is concertedly interested in qualities such as transgression, diversity and transformation.

Steven Connor is the ventriloquial critic who has brought Serres' ideas to an English audience. The series of essays and lecture texts in question are available on Connor's website (Connor 1998, 2008). Here he is summarising Serre's theory of prepositions from the work *Atlas* (Serre 1994):

Serres urges us to imagine a mode of philosophy that could equally integrate potentials and actualities. This is largely a matter of the prepositions that we use to govern our thought. We are accustomed, Serres has repeatedly said, to a philosophy governed by prepositions such as *in, on, under, above* or *at* – prepositions, in other words, that seem to designate a specific station or location. We would benefit from a philosophy governed by prepositions that more closely approximate to the etymology of the term 'preposition', in that they come before, anticipate, point or tend towards a position rather than already occupying it, and therefore imply a movement, imply implication itself, between positions – prepositions, therefore, like *along, between, amid, around, while, during, through* and, of course, *throughout*. (Connor 2008: 12)

Born in 1930, Serres has had a career spanning the arc of some major conceptual transitions in philosophical approaches, yielding fundamental changes in the treatment of content in the Humanities: the undermining of the structuralists' fondness for systems by the poststructuralists' pleasure in relativism; postmodernism's fascination with sensation supplanting foundational principles and stable norms and traditions (Eagleton 2003: 41-73). And this broad intellectual transition has deeply implicated the teaching of art and design. In 2008, Goldsmiths' Mark Fisher characterised somewhat negatively the theory 'that has percolated through the art world and cultural studies in recent years': a 'confection of diluted postmodernism and degraded Deleuzianism' (Fisher 2018: 725-6). He picked out three key words as typical of the mindset - *difference, sensation, multiplicity* – words which designate far from simple categories. It is not hard to relate Serres' quest for prepositional re-alignment to this intellectual climate – a vault away from the security of empirical reasoning around unitary principles onto more shifting sands.

Yet the abandonment of the notion of a substantial form of truth goes back well beyond fashions in academic teaching of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century: we are never quite as novel as we feel. Terry Eagleton has called cultural theory 'the continuation of modernism by other means' (Eagleton 2003: 64), and Serres' seeking after mobile forms of language is actually very reminiscent of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century cultural experiments. Fixation with the potential for movement as the message – a desire to draw out dynamic forms in language and representation - is highly characteristic of aspects of early modernism. Much of this takes place in literature but crossovers with visual practice are also clear: Futurism is a notable example, with performance, poetry and painting being mutually conversant.

The territory of grammar – as a set of linguistic rules and customs – quickly became a conducive territory for these exchanges, and early on there seems to be a move away from prioritising the noun form in favour of, first, the vibrancy of verbs and, second, the less

conspicuous force of interstitial grammatical aids such as punctuation. Around the First World War, there are signs of the beginning of a radical rejection of an orthodox standard of correctness. A wholesale collision with the norms of text-formatting comes out of diverse creative experiments in different geographical locations: concrete poetry merging with Dada in Paris, the soundscape performance texts of Marinetti (enacted in London, Berlin and Rome), artist-poets such as Malevich and Kruchenykh trying out new ways of drawing text in Russia (Bartram 2005).

At this point, verbs rather than prepositions were a central focus for exploratory literary experiments. Their action-based tendencies seemed to promise a purer form of expressive dynamism. The avant-garde American writer settled in Paris, Gertrude Stein, declared their higher status - nouns were but 'names' and far too stable. Verbs were the really fruitful carriers of meaning, potent for their intrinsic dynamism and with a promising capacity to be mistaken: 'they can be so mistaken. It is wonderful the number of mistakes a verb can make' (Stein 1935: 211). But prepositions already get a significant look-in: 'verbs adverbs prepositions and prepositional clauses and conjunctions' were the meat of meaning (Stein 1935: 211).

In the context of the post-war Bauhaus, where the emphasis was on re-evaluating both the mechanics and the principles of visual design, we find ideas about verbs and ideas about drawing coming strikingly together. Paul Klee wrote of active versus passive modes in drawing, terminology evidently indebted to linguistic categories for verb behaviour (Klee 1953: 18-19). We should remember too, in this connection, Klee's central concern with the dynamic line, a form that comes to life by emerging from its first point of being: a quintessentially questing mark. This is distinctly anticipatory of Barbara Tversky's ideas about the simplest glyphs of thought considered in the next section. There seems, across such ideas – Marinetti, Stein, Klee - to be an opening-up of the sense of static versus mobile as a distinctive tension to be played with in creative processes and practices.

And indeed, by the 1930s Alexander Calder was pushing the idea of motion into a personal rationale for sculpture, creating his first 'mobiles' in the early 1930s. The highly dynamic wiry drawings that precede these grew from the artist's playful circus performances taking place in informal Paris settings in the late 1920s. Wire seemed to be the agent of thought to Calder: the observable ingredient across his different modes of production, and emblematic of his engagement with mobile connectors as being at the heart of creative expression. Here he is in a manifesto-like poem ('comment réaliser l'art?') written in 1932, first in the original French:

des espaces, des volumes, suggérés par les moindres moyens opposés à leur masse, ou même les contenant, juxtaposés, percés par des vecteurs, traversés par des vitesses. rien de tout ça fixe.

spaces, volumes, suggested by the smallest means in contrast to their mass, or even including them, juxtaposed, pierced by vectors, crossed by speeds.  
nothing at all of this is fixed. (Calder 1932: 6)

'The smallest means'? The means that juxtapose, pierce, cross. There is more than a hint of Serre's inter-relational world of prepositions: *beside, into, across*.

Other examples of mixing point and line, of tracking vectors and an intense fascination with betweenesses can be spotted in drawn work as academically careful as Coldstream's mid-century figure drawings; or, to stray again towards performance - and to drawings that function as bouncing-off points for other media – in John Cage's 1958 *Fontana* score, which was an interleaving of configurations of lines and points on interchangeable acetate sheets. Think, too, of Henri Michaux's 1950s and 1960s mescaline drawings, which hold both points of rest and threads and splutters of gesture characteristic of pen and ink. Watery media are excellent in this regard – Rembrandt, Cozens, Rodin, Beuys, Dumas. In their liqueous surfaces, varieties of all sorts of small force collect.

In recent decades the clamour for dynamic drawing, a captivation with searching, the desire to 'become' rather than more prosaically to 'be', has been prominent in critical discussion. The Loughborough-based drawing-research hub TRACEY foregrounds notions of potentiality with a particular vigour. We may compare the preposition-focussed titles of TRACEY's three representative publications with the tone of earlier tracts:

*Drawing Now: between the lines of contemporary art* (2007)

*Hyperdrawing: beyond the lines of contemporary art* (2012)

*Drawing Ambiguity: beside the lines of contemporary art* (2015)

How differently much earlier writers couch their projects: Ruskin's *Elements of Drawing* (1857) or Reynold's *Seven Discourses on Art* (1778). Ruskin's 'of' and Reynold's 'on' are exactly the type of conservative, situating preposition that Serres suggests are no longer serviceable. They label and designate. Ruskin is after fundamentals; Reynolds pontificates. *Beside, beyond, between* – these, on the other hand, carry a determined echo of Serres: implicit complexity; a focus on edges rather than centre; a visionary ambition for a state of difference some way off; and an interesting existence of contented ambiguity.

## 2. *ON*: fundamentals

On: 'used as a function word to indicate position in contact with and supported by the top surface of' (Merriam Webster 2019)

A further angle on the idea of prepositions and a possibility for their relevance to thinking about drawing comes from the impressively philosophical range of their usage. These seemingly mundane little words have deep resonances which are fundamentally aesthetic and encapsulate both literal and metaphorical implications. Examining their fundamental energies takes us quickly towards allusions that are visual and sensual.

In teaching English – as I do - rather than prioritising Serres' selection as I have been doing here, it is three of the more orthodox prepositions - *in, on, at* - that are those needed most quickly by students. The others can wait, but these three are crucial to foundational thoughts about life: they designate our connections with time and space, how we visualise the emotions and our intriguing relationship with our own physicality, and also what lies beyond this across a lifetime. We may be 'in' or 'on time'; 'at' our desk or 'in' our bath; 'in love' or 'all at sea'. We attach these tiny nodes of energy to verbs to create powerful indicators, say, of psychological capacity or social allegiance: 'He's right *on* it', 'Are you *in* or *out*?'. Suddenly these are more than small words merely servicing nouns by indicating their relative positions; they are potent indicators of meaning - centrally so.

One of my favourite writers on grammar, George Yule, unpacks with remarkable clarity the shades of literal and metaphorical implication within ideas of in-ness, on-ness and at-ness in terms that resonate formidably with patterns of visual thinking and with aesthetic and design-based practices (Yule 1998: 160-3). We can readily enlarge our basic sense of being ‘in’ somewhere (our body, our mother’s body?) to envisage fundamental ideas of containment – our home, our tribe, our world. ‘On’ harbours the connotation of a surface/depth relationship: what is shown, as opposed to what *really* dwells beneath. It defines a situatedness which is above, or moving over, *a surface*. It implies that there is substance beneath a point of reference. Hence, also, its close relationship to the idea of continuous movement: witness the title of Charles Dickens’ famous Chapter XIX of *Bleak House*, ‘Moving on’, which is actually about a deeply embedded resistance to any kind of useful movement at a societal level (Dickens 1852-3). Relatedly perhaps, ‘Let’s get on with it’ is the Brexit slogan impossible to avoid in 2019. Already we can see complexity in ‘on’ – both still and moving at one go: ‘on top of the world’ but also ‘on the run’. ‘At’ is curious too, in signifying an idea of temporary proximity: it is interested in what is static but simultaneously acknowledges a ubiquitous potential for movement: we stand ‘at’ the bus stop; we alternate in being ‘at work’ and ‘at home’. This is a life: stopping to rest, starting again. ‘At’ is such moments: ‘at play’, ‘at a loss’, ‘at it again’. Interestingly, in English we refer to the time between the periods of our working weeks as ‘at the weekend’ (never ‘on’ or ‘in’, unlike days – ‘on Monday’ - or the span of the individual week – ‘in the week’). It is as if the weekend has the psychological resonance of being only a temporary refuge.

Barbara Tversky’s fascinating on-going work regarding visual thinking – and particularly her observations on the parallels between map-sketching and conversational direction-giving – similarly lands on the idea of three crucial first principles in the categorising of core thought-types. She speaks of zero-, one-, two-/ three-dimensional thinking, which translates into: (i) being static in a way that can be temporary and expectant; (ii) entering into a novel space by engaging with a secondary agent or force; and (iii) taking off entirely to take leave of normality in a radical way. Here in a very compressed passage she helpfully makes the link with the three vital prepositions I have mentioned:

In English, prepositions are clues to zero-, one-, two- (and three-) dimensional thinking, notably at, on, and in. She waited at the station, rode on the train, rose in the elevator. She arrived at 2, on time, and was in the meeting until dinner. She was at ease, on best behavior, in a receptive mood. Visual expressions of dimensionality are common in diagrams, as they abstract and express key conceptual components. (Tversky 2011: 517)

For Tversky – and I would agree with her - it is ‘in’ that is the radical preposition. It is once the agent leaves its accustomed space, entering a novel context (an elevator, a meeting, a receptive mood), that an opportunity for synergy or transformation opens up. Serres too, in fact, places a huge emphasis on middle zones – *boîtes* or boxes where ideas may coalesce and transmute – as being the spaces for alchemy in human exchange and creative endeavour. Going ‘in’ - crossing a threshold - is an act of implication and promise. Indeed, the body itself is a type of meeting place for whatever enters its magical zone. The *boîte* is Serres’ idea of the sense of hearing. See how he envisages its processes:

...I am a house of sound, hearing and voice at once, black box and sounding-board, hammer and anvil, a grotto of echoes, a musicassette, the ear’s pavilion, a question

mark, wandering in the space of messages filled or stripped of sense... (Connor 1999: n.pag.)

To return to Tversky's paragraph, which segues at its end into the example of diagrams - we are firmly now within the territory of drawing. Tversky, who is a cognitive psychologist, has carefully explored the nature of visual-spatial reasoning over many years, and her understanding is that visual reasoning underpins the linguistic impulse: 'traces of visual communication [...] are one of the earliest signs of culture. They not only precede written language but also served as the basis for it' (Tversky 2011: 500). Behind writing lies speech, implicitly a bodily thing that surfaces visually in gesture. In gesture Tversky sees the origin of communicative drawing, whose role is to 'externalise thought' and give it the potential of permanence (500). The modes of gesture and drawing reflect a basic need to create and distribute different kinds of meaning, extending to abstract conceptualising and subjective distinctions. Physical and observable categories such as proximity, for example, are readily manipulated at different scales to indicate degrees of hierarchy or complex metaphorical comparisons in relation to life (508).

Tversky focuses a great deal on what she calls 'spractions' (spatial-abstraction-action) – actions that articulate space and which may be given by the hands or through larger body movements, and which, she argues, underpin the glyphs that populate diagrams and that are common across cultures: dots, lines, arrows, circles, boxes, as well as abstracted likenesses. Diagrams, like language, for Tversky offer a window onto and into the deeper patterns of thought-processes, and these glyphs form a basic but profoundly flexible vocabulary within drawing, offering a rich diversity of meaning:

In combination, they enable creating the vast variety of visual expressions of meaning, pictures, maps, mandalas, assembly instructions, highway signs, architectural plans, science and engineering diagrams, charts, graphs, and more. Gestures also use many of these features of meaning, but they are more schematic and fleeting; diagrams can be regarded as the visible traces of gestures just as gesturing can be regarded as drawing pictures in the air. (Tversky 2011: 528)

Tversky's interest in simple visual components which have versatile potential for expression recalls the graphic permutations of Klee's entire working life - and those of other Bauhaus artists too. Klee was rampant in his deployment of arrows, circles and boxes, alongside hovering dots and ambling, darting, deviating lines. The title of Kandinsky's essay *Point and Line to Plane* (1926) anticipates the essence of Tversky's three-act drama: moving from *at* (the initial point) to *on* (becoming line) to *in* (the radical transition where there is change of state). Potential energy moves out of its initial hemisphere to acquire 3-dimensional substance. Serres also picks up on the three-beat rhythm of this regular natural process, reshaping it sometimes in scientific language (solid/liquid/volatile), sometimes as historical evolution (form/transformation/information) (Connor 2008: 2). Kandinsky in exploring ideas for visual abstraction was trying to articulate a grammar of design: he had an eye on language as a useful model. Tversky – the psychologist interested in language – places visual ideas at the base of her theory of language. The two have a great deal in common: indeed, seen from this perspective Tversky's more extended choice of glyphs seems quintessentially Bauhausian.

So, Tversky's research and writing join together tendencies in language and drawing that seem to offer some simple first premises about how we readily identify ourselves as being in

the world. These seem to relate to aspects of position, movement, and ideas about changes of state - exactly the territory of prepositions that are foundational in language-learning. They are also preoccupations implicit to drawing and to all kinds of graphic expression.

### 3. *AT*: taking position

At: 'used as a function word to indicate presence or occurrence in, on, or *near*' [my emphasis] (Merriam Webster 2019)

The previous sections have looked at prepositions and drawing through the filter of the history of modern drawing – especially regarding some curiosities of terminology and aspects of evolving techniques growing out of early modernism - and also through Tversky's claim that aspects of drawing originate in foundational modes of thinking, which she associates directly with gestural forms of expression that have yielded the commonest graphic glyphs. Here I turn to the present, and to how prepositions might offer a promising focus for researchers and practitioners of contemporary drawing as they peruse the current state of play.

My own engagement with the concepts behind these vital words has been organic. Figures 1-4 show several examples of digital drawings which are part of a current project to create a visual glossary of grammatical forms. These are from the preposition series, which aims to illuminate the diversity of implication carried under the label 'preposition'. The glossary project has grown out of lecturing across art-school and language-teaching contexts, using modes of visual thinking as a point of departure in each direction: to open up a sense of common ground between art students' need to write and their own visual practice, and to persuade language students that detecting patterns in linguistic forms and designing the way they communicate are options for more secure and genuinely creative language production. The glossary is itself an exercise in visual thinking – a playful exploration of how grammar makes meaning happen and – seemingly against general expectations - also makes it lively.

This work – whose purpose is to convey the drive beneath the word across the contexts of its use - borrows conspicuously from early-modernist design tropes. Simple configurations of colour and geometry frolic with foundational aesthetic properties: warm/cool, soft/hard, static/mobile, space/shape, size/scale, symmetry/asymmetry, consistency/inconsistency, singularity/multiplicity. I have drawn consciously on the systematic experiments of the Bauhaus, and on artists such as Calder and Miro who mobilised forms about to erupt into narrative. Among later artists with a similar propensity is Warja Lavater, a much less well-known Swiss designer who in the 1960s and 1970s made abstract renditions of the main European fairy stories, all very 'readable' (Reynolds 2007: 37-38). And certain of Bridget Riley's works from the same period offer a similar blast of sensual implication. Indeed, thinking prepositionally, Riley's 1961-painting *Kiss* - marking the beginning of her journey with abstraction - is superbly evocative of the resonance of the preposition 'under'.

But to open out the discussion, finally, towards the context of drawing now, and looking slightly to the future: in terms of contemporary drawing practice and research, what might thinking about prepositions lend to thinking about drawing and drawings in 2019 and beyond? I would suggest two areas of possibility.

First, there is clear richness in a focus on edges as well as centres. Zones of transition and qualities of between-ness yield matter for study no less than conurbations. Minor background

details offer intriguing narratives of their own, and homing in on these can draw out potential from passages too readily seen as incidental. This, I think, is Serres and Tversky's combined lesson in relation to the phenomenon of prepositions.

And in contemporary drawing practice, there is certainly an interest in incidentals. We might think, for example, of the specifics of Kathy Prendergast's graphic involvement with maps. The 2016 installation *Atlas* featured a display of multiple road atlases with landscapes inked out. Around chinks of cities and towns, all connectors and contours were buried. The missing capacity for toing and froing feels significant – and politically deeply truthful. Prendergast's earlier digital print *Lost* (1999) played a similar game of unexpected selection. A large reproduction of the landmass of the United States was bereft of all place names except for those containing the word 'lost': 'Lost Hills', 'Lost Cabin', 'Lost Trail', and so on. Both of these works – and others of Prendergast's many map-projects – connect well with Serres' sense of a destabilised contemporary topography: earlier norms losing out to a new order, or sinking fast in its wake.

Equally, as artists work increasingly in the context of new types of territory and weather-system (the digital era, pressing climate anxiety) there is a reaching for different ways of mapping and new forms of symbolical charts. Simon Armitage speaks of a new trend in poetry writing: 'Nature has come back to the centre of poetry' (Flood 2019). In Paris, as I write, there are two conceptually and materially wide-ranging shows featuring the life of trees: *Le rêveur de la forêt* at the Musée Zadkine (2019-20) and *Nous les Arbres* at the Fondation Cartier (2019-20). In London's Drawing Room earlier this year (2 – 19 May 2019), as part as the *Modern Nature* exhibition, the work of contemporary artists such as Mark Dion and Christine Ödlund was set among older visionary work of Derek Jarman and Hilma af Klint. Ödlund's work, in particular, presents an intriguing attempt to communicate aspects of nature that are not readily tangible - a new form of 'beyond' coming into view with the stark urgency of the climate crisis. In her case, this is the language of plants. Her interest in tracking what to the human ear is imperceptible, and what might seem to many of us inconceivable, has led to delicately drawn evocations of a new territory for language (Figure 5). There is something quite reminiscent of Klee and Kandinsky in her mixing of sharp shapes and fluid, tender colours.

My second point is to draw attention to the spirit of potentiality which is at the root of prepositions. They are, as Connor points out, *pre*-positions: that which *precedes* position. Dwelling on prepositions – as TRACEY's titles perhaps intuit - opens up fresh opportunities for thinking about drawing's many tendencies and varieties, basic as well as complex, readily apparent or obscurely buried, to be revisited in connection with the challenging themes of the contemporary world. Serres and Tversky help us see richness of detail in the smaller elements of language. Drawing, too, from the perspective of its multiplicity of marks and quirkier traditions, has many details, and thus many exploitable accents. It is a primary conveyor of thought and this is a fertile attribute, as is made clear by Edward Tufte's extensive exploration of diverse forms of visual communication – all ultimately offspring of drawing - that have come down to us in the printed record (Tufte 1992).

Finally, there is always the interesting question of how specific marks might be taken in connection with specific prepositions. Which marks might seem to denote 'in-ness'? Which might cluster around the concept of 'beyond'? Thinking carefully about the implication of a mark is a device for idiosyncratic experiment across a drawing practice. Scrutinising a mark



alongside ideas of individual prepositions may well give it a more conscious eloquence the next time it or close cousins surface.

There are more than a hundred examples of prepositions existing in English according to the *Cambridge English Dictionary* (Cambridge Dictionary 2019), providing a rich seam of description for the processes and outcomes of drawing. Careful description can lead to better seeing and fuller understanding within creative practice (Elkins 1998). This, in turn, can bring wider, more exacting terms of engagement and, potentially, in due course greater graphic inventiveness. The Bauhaus writer-artists, Klee and Kandinsky, are exuberant cases in point.

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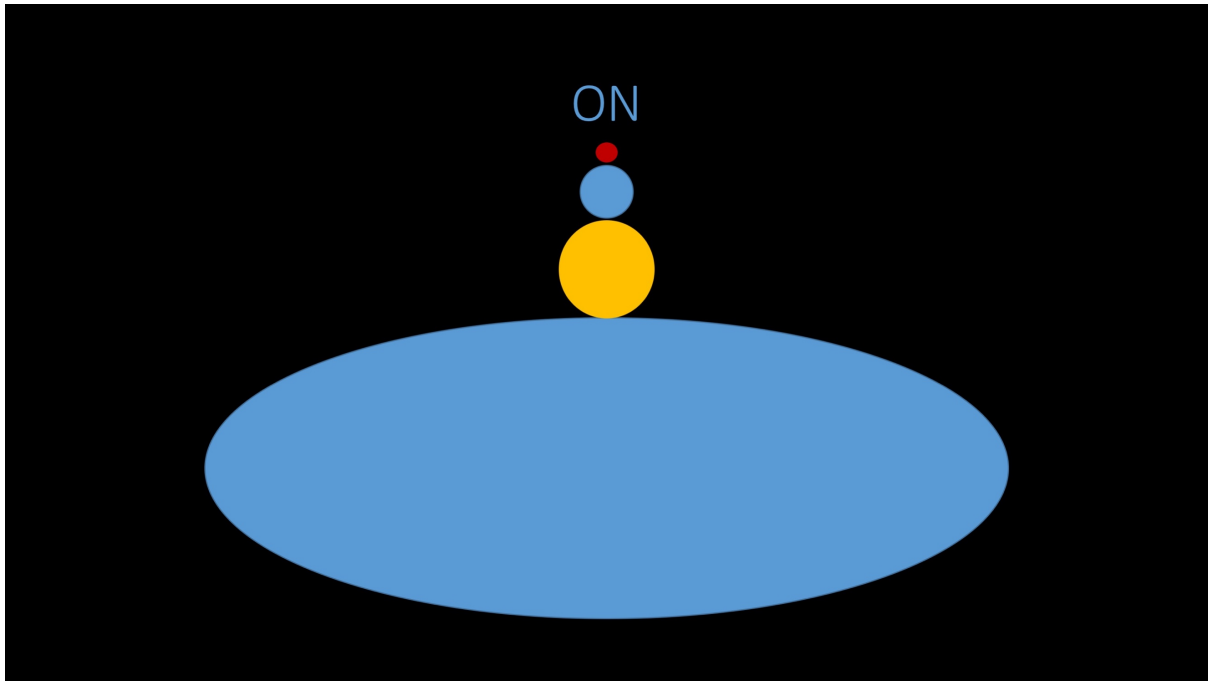


Figure 1: 'On', 2019. (Sarah Blair, *Visual Grammar* series).



Figure 2: 'Under', 2019. (Sarah Blair, *Visual Grammar* series).

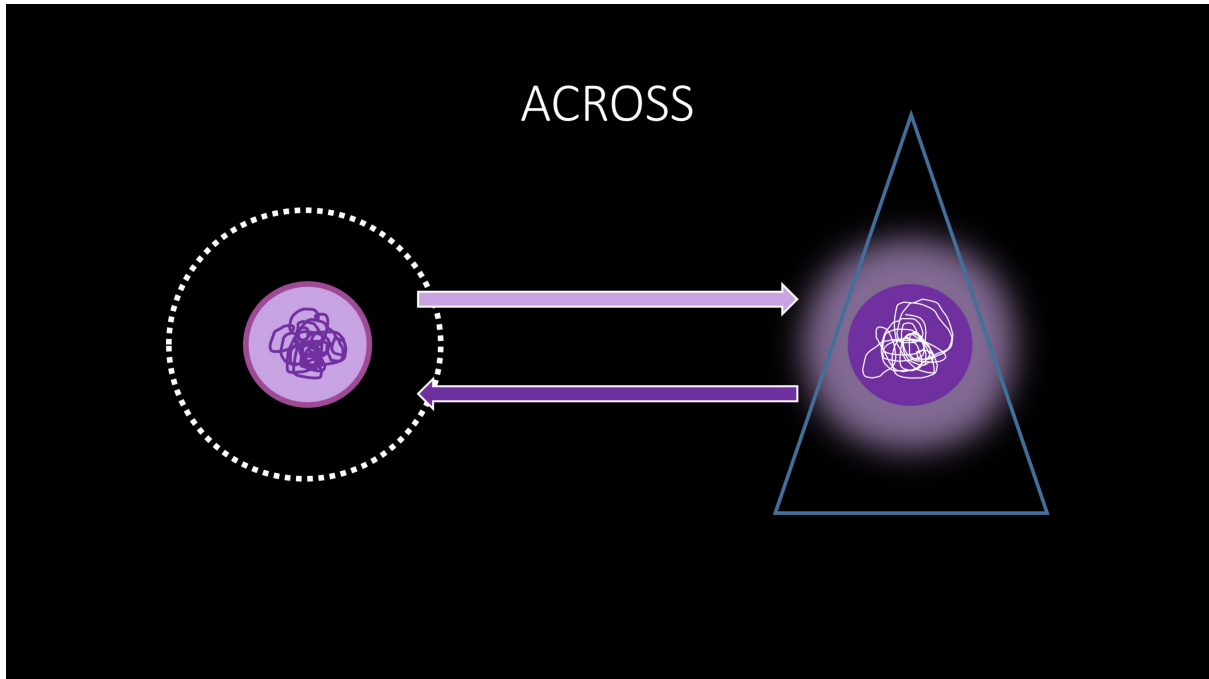


Figure 3: 'Across', 2019. (Sarah Blair, *Visual Grammar* series).

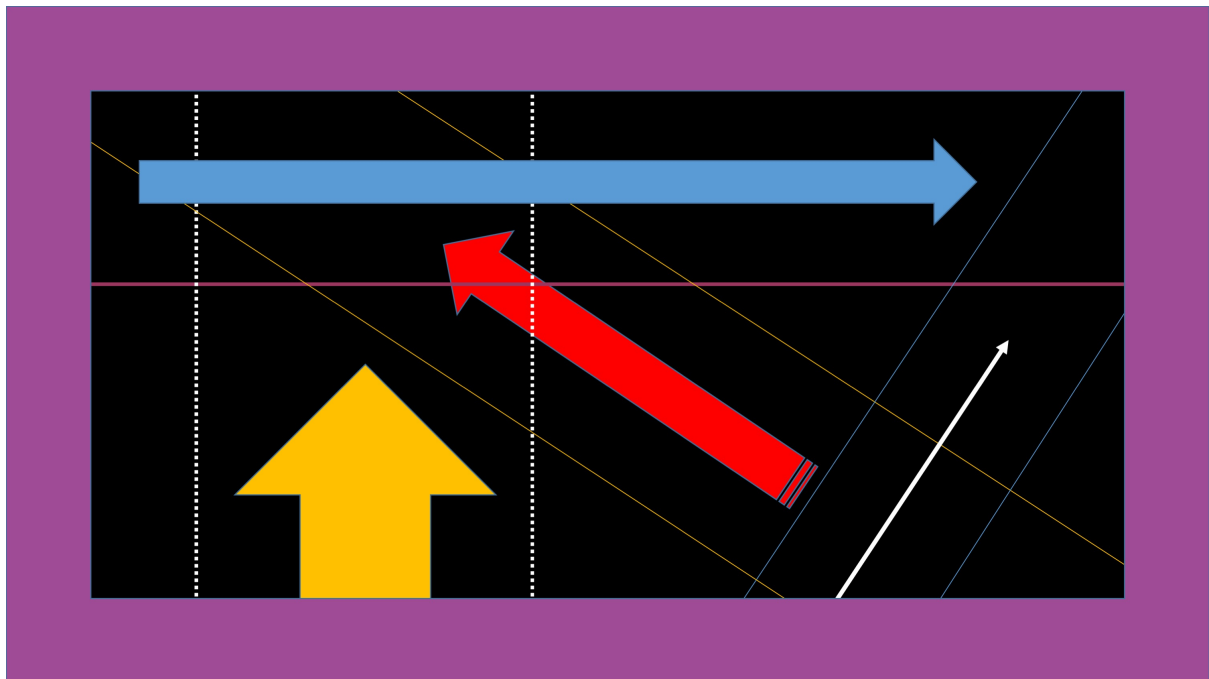


Figure 4: 'Through', 2019. (Sarah Blair, *Visual Grammar* series).

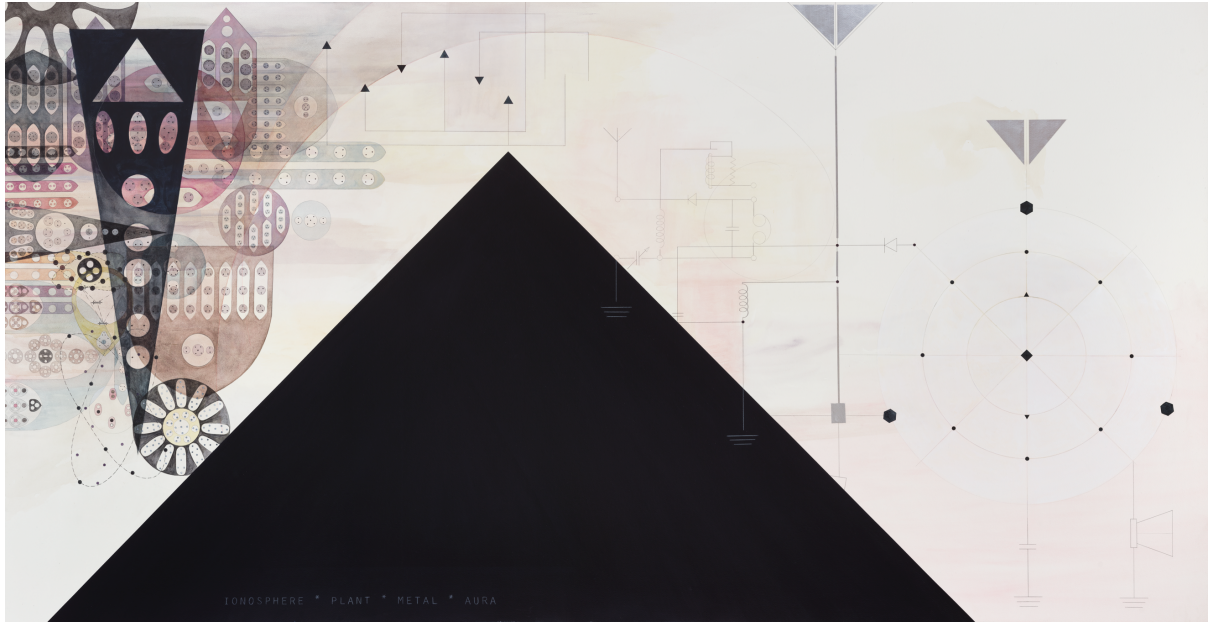


Figure 5: Christine Ödlund, *Ionosphere \* Plant \* Metal \* Aura*, 2018. Plant pigments, acrylic binder, zink tempera and aluminum foil on paper. 110.5 cm x 214 cm. Courtesy of the artist.