Alchemy Beyond the Symbol

The Chimeric Glyphic System as a Language of Transformation

Shaharee Vyaas | Laboratory of St. Vincent | LABRC Conference | 15 November 2026

DEFINITIVE SPEAKER SCRIPT · SIX SLIDES · TARGET: 15 MINUTES

SLIDE 1 — OPENING

0:00–2:00 · The alchemical question



Good morning, and thank you to the London Arts-Based Research Centre for the opportunity to share my work.

I would like to begin with a question: what if alchemy were not simply something we represent in art, but something that art itself could perform?

What if an image, a diagram, a fictional character, or even an entire city could participate in a process of transformation?

This question lies at the centre of my artistic research through the Laboratory of St. Vincent. I have been developing an experimental language called the Chimeric Glyphic System—or CGS—at the intersection of visual art, literature, diagrams, and symbolic thought.

I am not presenting alchemy here as a literal method of turning metals into gold, or proposing that my symbols reveal universal truths. I am interested in alchemy as a method for making relationships productive: structure and imagination, memory and invention, containment and change.

I explore that method through three connected books. The Barcelona work provides the starting point. A second book, set in Berlin, is planned for publication in 2027. The third, Road 66, is planned for publication in 2028.

They form one artistic investigation in three movements: a language discovers itself; it encounters a world that resists it; and finally it becomes embedded in human experience.

To explain that progression, I must first explain how CGS works.

SLIDE 2 — ALCHEMY AND CGS



2:00–5:00 · Art as research; a grammar of relationships

For me, the most useful proposition offered by alchemy is that transformation emerges through contact between different forces. The aim is not merely to replace one form with another, but to discover what can arise from their interaction.

In the Laboratory of St. Vincent, I approach art in that spirit: not primarily as a finished object to be displayed, but as an experiment with perception, form, and meaning. Vincent van Gogh is an inspiration here—not as a romantic myth, but as a persistent experimenter in seeing.

The practical question behind CGS was this: can we make a language that works between an image and a sentence?

Written literature usually unfolds sequentially. A visual composition can present several relations at once: centre and periphery, symmetry and rupture, proximity and distance, containment and release. I wanted to develop a system in which those spatial relations could do narrative work.

CGS includes twenty-four canonical glyphs, twelve master sectors, pathways, formation rules, and a wider dictionary architecture. But the point is not the number of symbols. The central principle is that a glyph does not carry meaning alone. Meaning emerges from relations: where it is placed, how it is oriented, what surrounds it, what it connects to, and how it changes.

A boundary may provide protection in one composition and restriction in another. A recurring pathway may express memory, circulation, or repetition depending on its context. A diagram can therefore become more than an illustration of an idea. It can become a way of constructing the idea.

The reader also changes role. Instead of passively receiving a message, the reader follows pathways, notices tensions, and tests possible interpretations. This is why I think of reading as an alchemical act: the artist establishes a field of relations, but attention activates it.

One important distinction: CGS is an artistic research method, not an empirically validated model of cognition. It asks what visual relations can help us think and feel—not what everyone must think when they see a particular sign.

The first book was an attempt to see whether this method could generate a world of its own.

SLIDE 3 — BARCELONA AND BERLIN

5:00–9:00 · From symbolic invention to historical resistance



The Barcelona project is titled The Chimeric Protocols of Transmutation and The Book of Split Ink. It is a duplex work: one body consists of symbolic plates, and the other of narrative language.

Its protagonists, Gala and Salvador, are generated by the system itself. Gala represents structure, measurement, and the intelligence of form. Salvador carries memory, organic life, instability, and bodily transformation. Neither is complete alone. Their encounters make the narrative possible.

This is not a story with alchemical symbols added as decoration. The relationship between the two figures is itself the experiment. Structure is challenged by experience; experience acquires form through structure. The reader occupies a third position—what the book calls the Alchemist—mediating between plate and story.

Barcelona gradually becomes part of that experiment. Its buried streets, Roman remains, markets, cloisters, and historical layers cease to be a background. By the end, the city becomes an unwritten final plate: a place where the symbolic language meets material space.

That discovery suggested the next question. What happens when the symbolic system encounters a city whose histories already exist independently of it?

This is the challenge of my forthcoming book, Berlin: Boundary - Signal, planned for release in 2027.

BARCELONA



BERLIN



In Berlin, the direction changes. The symbolic system does not invent reality. Reality tests the symbolic system.

Berlin consists of overlapping histories and infrastructures—political, electrical, hydraulic, legal, financial, architectural, and mnemonic. These systems occupy the same places, but they do not always agree. A wall may stop a person while radio transmissions pass through. A building may remain physically present while its ownership or public meaning is transformed. A boundary can disappear from the street and persist in memory or administration.

The figures Anna and Nathanael emerge in relation to Boundary and Signal. Yet they must become more than diagrams in human form. They acquire memory, responsibility, habits, and a relationship that exceeds their original symbolic functions.

Visually, this demands a different approach. Streets, rails, cables, ruins, property lines, and architectural thresholds must carry the diagrammatic relationships. CGS cannot be pasted onto Berlin as an ornamental layer. It has to work through the city's actual material complexity.

There is an ethical dimension to that shift. Historical evidence, artistic interpretation, and fiction cannot simply be treated as interchangeable. A visually persuasive composition is not evidence that history occurred in the way an artist imagines it. The artwork must remain open to what its material refuses to confirm.

So the movement from Barcelona to Berlin is not just a change of location. It is a change in responsibility. In Barcelona, symbolic law becomes consciousness and city. In Berlin, city and history confront the symbolic language and force it to reconsider itself.

The third book carries that challenge from the city into the body and the everyday journey.

SLIDE 4 — ROAD 66

9:00–11:15 · Embodied experience; two scales of narration

The third work is Spotlight on Road 66: An American Struggle with Money, Fame, and Sexuality, planned for publication in 2028.



On the left, you can see the overall eight-movement structure of the book. On the right, a figurative plate shows how that symbolic architecture becomes lived experience through the road, the body, and the environment.

It follows Avery and Jack travelling by motorcycle from Chicago towards Santa Monica. But Route 66 is not scenery. It is an active third protagonist. The road determines where they can move, what they must buy, when they can rest, how they depend on each other, and what happens when their experience becomes visible to others.

The experiment here is to make the CGS grammar almost invisible. In Barcelona, the diagram is declared. In Berlin, the city bears it. On Road 66, the environment performs it: roads become pathways, motel rooms become spaces of containment, utility lines become connections, and public images become afterimages.

The book is organised into eighty sections across eight movements. Forty sections carry the embodied journey; forty interleaved sections examine infrastructure, image, value, body, and afterimage. The two scales continuously challenge one another.

A room may offer privacy, but the next question is how privacy becomes something that must be purchased. A road may promise freedom, but who can afford to move, and whose movement is watched? A photograph may preserve a memory while also turning a private moment into public material.

Money, fame, and sexuality are therefore interconnected rather than separate themes. They shape access, visibility, intimacy, consent, and the possibility of refusal.

The question is whether readers can experience a transformational symbolic structure without repeatedly being shown its symbols. The language has not been discarded. It has entered the conditions of lived experience.

And now I would like to bring these three experiments into one picture.

SLIDE 5 — THE ALCHEMICAL TRANSFORMATION

11:15–13:00 · Synthesis of the three books



This image shows the progression of the research as a whole.

In Barcelona, CGS discovers itself: symbolic law develops into consciousness, body, and ultimately the living city.

In Berlin, CGS discovers the world: it encounters history, infrastructure, contradiction, and ethical responsibility.

And in Road 66, CGS enters lived experience. Its relationships operate through roads, bodies, money, public images, and the traces events leave behind.

Below the three stages I have placed the four familiar alchemical phases—Nigredo, Albedo, Citrinitas, and Rubedo—as a conceptual lens for differentiation, clarification, encounter, and integration. I am not assigning one phase mechanically to one book. These operations can recur throughout the work, as they do in transformation itself.

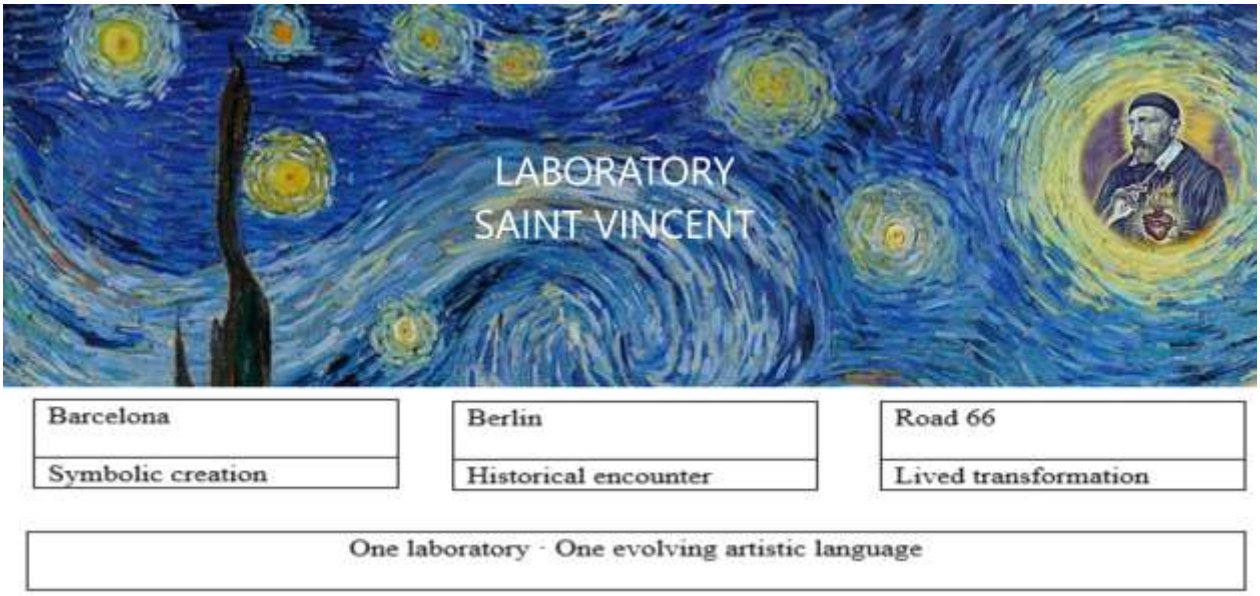
The important point is that the symbolic language undergoes change. It begins as visible structure, confronts the resistance of a historical world, and then becomes woven into lived experience.

In other words, the Chimeric Glyphic System does not merely describe alchemy. It is itself subjected to an alchemical process.

These three experiments belong to a larger artistic undertaking: the Laboratory of St. Vincent.

SLIDE 6 — LABORATORY OF ST. VINCENT

13:00–15:00 · Research identity and closing



The Laboratory of St. Vincent is the artistic and philosophical home of this work.

I conceived it as an experimental art space dedicated to transformation rather than exhibition. It is neither a conventional gallery nor simply a place to present completed books. It is a framework for making, revising, reading, and questioning. In the Laboratory, images and stories are not endpoints. They are catalysts.

Across the three books, the role of the artist also changes. First, the artist creates a symbolic world. Then the artist must listen to material and historical realities that cannot be controlled. Finally, the artist explores how the language can remain active even when it is no longer visibly announced.

The reader changes too. In Barcelona, the reader mediates between plates and narratives as an Alchemist. In Berlin, the reader must weigh relations against history and evidence. In Road 66, the reader moves between personal experience and the systems that enable, constrain, record, and price it.

This is what I hope the project contributes to arts-based research: not a closed code that tells us what everything means, but a practice for examining how meanings emerge between forms, contexts, and people.

I began with a question: what if alchemy were something that art could perform?

My provisional answer is that an artwork can become a site where relations are altered, where contradictions remain productive, and where both maker and reader learn to see differently.

Barcelona asks how a symbolic language becomes alive. Berlin asks what happens when that language encounters history. Road 66 asks what happens when bodies live within systems of movement, value, and visibility.

The books will appear over time, but the experiment continues beyond their publication.

Perhaps the most important transformation is not what happens to the image, the symbol, or even the fictional character. It is what happens to our way of seeing.

The laboratory remains open.

Thank you.