

The Museum of Modern Art

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READING PRINTS

March 4 - July 6, 1993

The use of language as a pictorial element in twentieth-century printed art is the subject of **READING PRINTS**, an exhibition of approximately 100 works opening at The Museum of Modern Art on March 4, 1993. Drawn entirely from the Museum's collection, the installation traces the dynamic and ever-diversifying role of language in modern and contemporary art in general and in the print mediums in particular.

READING PRINTS presents a historic survey from the drypoints of Braque and Picasso to Pop Art signage to computer-assisted photolithographs. Wendy Weitman, associate curator, Department of Prints and Illustrated Books, and organizer of the exhibition, writes, "One of the signposts of modern art is the use of language not just in a narrative or descriptive vein, but as a challenge to traditional notions of art."

The installation begins with the Cubists who, in the 1910s, used words unexpectedly both to reinforce the picture's surface and to introduce elements from their daily Parisian environment. At the same time, the Futurists revolutionized the pictorial nature of typography by separating language from meaning.

Kurt Schwitters and other members of the Dadaist avant-garde of post-World War I Germany drew inspiration from literary colleagues Hugo Ball,

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Richard Huelsenbeck, and Tristan Tzara. Often incorporating text into their work, the Dadaists juxtaposed visual and verbal signs to confound expectations and to outrage. Marcel Duchamp (with puns and wordplay) and Max Ernst (with imaginary equations and perplexing phrases) explored the meaning of art in works where the absurd and the rational vie for attention.

The surrealistic works of René Magritte and early compositions by Joan Miró present startling word/image contrasts. The concepts of Dada and Surrealism were important influences on many postwar European artists including those in the Lettrist movement in France. Lettrists focused on the design and sound of the alphabet (as opposed to words) to reinvest art with broader meanings.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the United States witnessed a renaissance of art involving language and a renewed interest in printmaking. This is seen in the works of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and the emerging Pop artists, who used words as signifiers of time and place much as the Cubists had done half a century earlier. Society's fixation with mass-media and consumerism are brazenly portrayed in screenprint in Andy Warhol's soup cans, Roy Lichtenstein's comic book images, and Edward Ruscha's landscapes.

Conceptual artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as Chris Burden and Dennis Oppenheim, exploited the descriptive potential of language, often as accompaniment to photographic images, to document their temporary or unrealized installations. In Surrealist-inspired prints, European Conceptualists like Marcel Broodthaers combined text with photographic imagery

to make provocative cultural critiques. Robert Indiana, Claes Oldenburg, and Bruce Nauman, among others, present words themselves as images, often intending to jolt the viewer into a heightened awareness of the power of language for both nonsense and social statement.

The exhibition comprises works by numerous artists who have explored printmaking's ability to integrate pointed statements into the visual whole. In the past decade, language-based art has often investigated sociopolitical themes and the impact of the media -- advertising, in particular -- while attempting to involve and implicate the viewer. These themes resonate in the printed works of Eugenio Dittborn, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Nancy Spero, and Christopher Wool.

Ms. Weitman writes, "When combined with visual images, words either reinforce the image, become the image, or contradict the image to create ambiguity. The compelling nature of this work results from its subversive power to create both sensual and conceptual responses in the mind of the viewer."

READING PRINTS, which continues through July 6, also includes works by Pierre Alechinsky, John Baldessari, Hanne Darboven, Otto Dix, Fernand Léger, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long, Sigmar Polke, and Pat Steir.

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