

# Reading prints : March 4-July 6, 1993

Date

1993

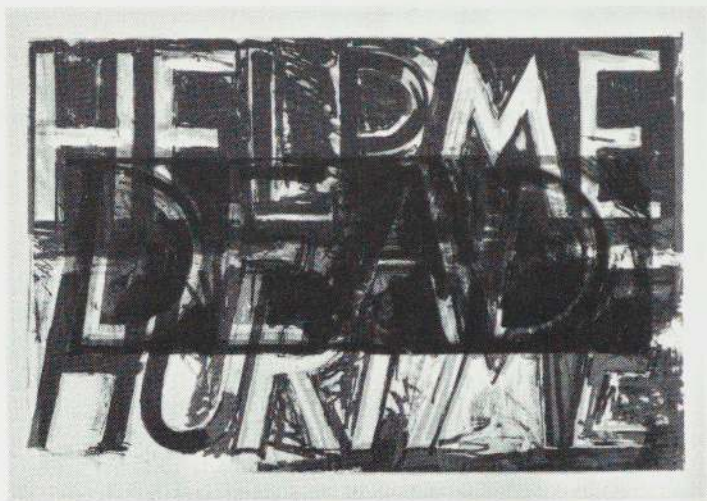
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*Reading*

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Prints

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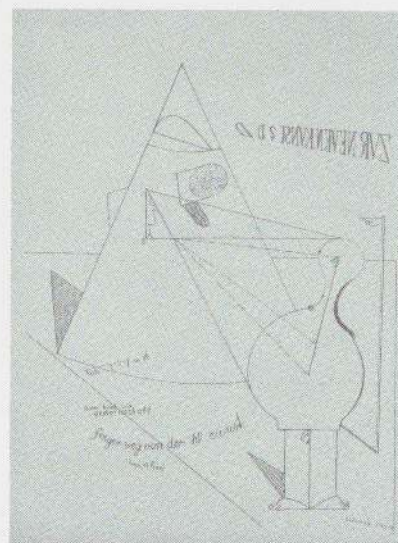
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART  
NEW YORK

Artists have used language as a means of visual expression for centuries. Ancient, medieval, and early Italian art frequently incorporated text. This tendency dissipated with the Renaissance invention of perspective, as the faithful depiction of reality became paramount. One of the signposts of modern art was the reappearance of language, not in a merely narrative or descriptive vein, however, but as a challenge to expected and traditional notions of art. Again and again in this century, the use of language in visual art has been thought of as subversive or rebellious. Printmaking's natural affinity with text has often facilitated artists' desires to enhance their visual imagery with linguistic elements, which they have used both to communicate and to underscore the limits of communication.

The manifold breakthroughs of Cubism's giants, Braque and Picasso, in the early 1910s included the unexpected incorporation of word fragments into works of art. The collaborative nature of the arts during these years contributed to this development, most notably through the influence of the Cubists' friend and colleague Guillaume Apollinaire. His poetry, in which the meaning of the words is enhanced through a visual order, suggested to the young artists the pictorial power of language. The introduction of letters furthered the Cubists' goal of reinforcing the flatness of the picture's surface — the truncated words paralleled the truncated space — and it also brought everyday life into their art. The artists chose words that reflected their Parisian surroundings and habitual activities — signage of bars and bistros, wines and spirits, and newspapers and advertisements. The Cubists understood that words exist on a plane of reality separate from that of objects in space, and that



Georges Braque. *Bass*. (1911, published 1950). Etching, 18 x 12 1/16" (45.7 x 32.8 cm). The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund



Max Ernst. Plate VII from *Fiat modes, pereat ars* (Let There Be Fashion, Down with Art). 1919. Lithograph, 14 3/4 x 11 1/16" (37.4 x 29.6 cm). The Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund

through the juxtaposition of these two elements they could question the very essence of art.

In 1911 the prominent dealer and publisher Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler published two of the most significant Cubist prints, Braque's *Fox* and Picasso's *Still Life with Bottle*. The words "Vie Marc," which appear in Picasso's drypoint, allude to the brandy *l'eau de vieux marc*, and, along with the deck of cards, serve to evoke the bistro setting. The words carry a double meaning, also referring to *Eau de Vie*, the original title of one of Apollinaire's books.\* In Braque's *Bass*, also of 1911, the words "VIN" and "CAFE" and the fragment "JO" are distinguished typographically from the word "BASS," where the artist used the actual typeface of the British ale's label and thus emphasized the intrusion of reality into art.

This sensitivity to typography was a benchmark of the Futurist movement in Italy, which occurred at nearly the same moment as Cubism. The Futurists added the elements of movement and speed to the Cubists' spatial innovations and took typography to new extremes in the visual arts. Again, poets and writers, particularly F. T. Marinetti, played an important role in the movement. Using preexisting type in a plethora of sizes and forms, the Futurists liberated words from traditional syntax and created allegories of their contemporary machine-ridden environment in bold compositions of onomatopoeic language. The printed page, in books and periodicals, was a natural outlet for these dynamic investigations of the evocative potency of language's formal and contextual properties.

\* Robert Rosenblum has pointed out the variety of puns and wordgames, with frequent erotic overtones, that appear in Cubist works. Here, Picasso may also have been playing on the word "Marc" which when spelled "marque" is French slang for prostitute. See Robert Rosenblum, "Picasso and the Typography of Cubism," in *Picasso in Retrospect*, Roland Penrose and J. Golding, eds. New York: Praeger, 1973. pp. 48-75.



Anarchy and irrationality found visual form in Zurich during World War I, and in Paris and Germany immediately after, in the Dada movement. Dada, initially a literary movement with Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball, and Richard Huelsenbeck as its main proponents, underscored the inanity of World War I. A new level of irony and political intent suffused the work. The Dada artists expanded upon Cubist collage techniques in juxtapositions of visual and verbal signs designed both to confound expectations and to outrage. Kurt Schwitters was the leading artist of Berlin Dada. Using fragments of printed matter, Schwitters gave equal compositional importance to words, letters, and geometric forms in the photomechanical collages of the *Merz* print portfolio of 1923. Like the Futurists, he took words and letters out of context, treating them as found objects from everyday life. "M" (for his revue titled *Merz*), "G" (for the Dada magazine of that name), as well as cigarette labels and English travelogue texts appear among the typographic components of the portfolio. His use of photographic elements combined with language was of crucial importance for artists decades later.

Marcel Duchamp became involved with Dada in Paris in 1919. His goal — to put art at the "service of the mind" — was the first articulation of a conceptual approach to art. Duchamp used puns, wordgames, and odd combinations to investigate the meaning of art in works where the absurd and the rational compete for attention. In *Monte Carlo Bond*, 1924, he collaged a horned self-portrait, bearded in shaving cream, against a fabricated bond certificate, with the words "moustique domestique demistock," or "domestic mosquito half-stock" printed continuously across the background. With this amusing composite he simultaneously mocked the value of a printed financial note and the value of art.

Max Ernst was an important contributor to Dada in Cologne. In his suite of eight lithographs *Fiat modes, pereat ars* (Let There Be Fashion, Down with Art), 1919, he enhanced his own fantastic imagination with borrowings from de Chirico. An originality of conception, Futurist use of language, and an anti-bourgeois critique characterize these seemingly mechanical drawings of mannequins. Largely through the use of imaginary mathematical equations, and German, French, and Latin texts Ernst conveys the irrational amidst the rational. In plate VII, with the words "Finger weg von der hl. kunst" ("Don't touch the sacred art") and "feiner hund und gemeinschaft" ("elegant dog and partnership") Ernst attacks prevailing attitudes toward art while suggesting a comparison to the fickle tastes of fashion. To underscore his disdain he signs his name "Dadamax Ernst."

The Surrealist movement, centered in Paris, was an outgrowth of Dada and was spearheaded by the poet André Breton. The work of the Surrealists is characterized by dream-inspired imagery and absurd juxtapositions such as that of René Magritte's iconic painting of a pipe with its provocative caption "Ceci n'est pas une pipe." Surrealist printmaking did not develop until the 1930s, with earlier printed examples of their ideas

appearing in illustrated books. In Joan Miró's earliest book, *Il était une petite pie*, 1928, his lyrical handwritten words harmonize stylistically with his biomorphic images while setting up unexpected word/image contrasts.

After the Second World War Dada and Surrealist concepts were the primary influences on European artists. The Lettrist movement, which began in France in the late 1940s and included artists such as Isidore Isou and Roland Sabatier, was inspired by Tzara and aimed to discover new meaning and creativity in art through the forms and sounds of letters, as opposed to words. Like the Lettrists, the CoBrA group was distinguished by a close association of artists and writers. Early prints by Pierre Alechinsky, the most prolific printmaker of the group, such as *Stains of Evidence*, 1953, were based on ideas of Christian Dotremont, the leading CoBrA poet. In later works, showing his interest in the decorative scripts of antique documents, Alechinsky scrawled his own spontaneous calligraphy with his distorted figures over printed letters and receipts.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the United States witnessed an outpouring of art involving language and a renewed interest in printmaking. This can be seen in the work of Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, and the emerging Pop artists, who were inspired by the proliferation of images in our society. In one of his first color lithographs, *False Start I*, 1962, Johns contrasted words and their meanings by printing the names of colors in inks of contradicting colors. Is the word "blue" or blue ink a truer representation of the concept *blue*? These issues of perception, and the persistent paradox of the reality of words versus that of images, are at the core of Johns's work and reveal his debt to the conceptual underpinnings of



Jasper Johns. *False Start I*. 1962. Lithograph, printed in color, 18 x 13" (45.7 x 35 cm). Gift of the Celeste and Armand Bartos Foundation

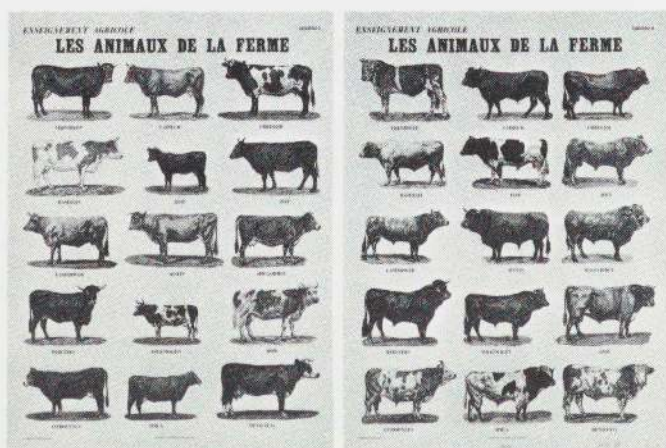


Duchamp and Magritte. In typical Johnsian fashion, he took full advantage of the relative ease of reprinting a lithograph in different colors, compounding his theoretical question by making a version of this image in only black and gray.

Robert Rauschenberg's prints used signage taken from our everyday environment, first with simple printed words and later with entire diagrams and documents, linking him to Duchamp and the Surrealists. His use of photographic imagery recalls Schwitters's manipulation of preexisting text and images. Printmaking, with its ease of layering images, offered Rauschenberg a perfect vehicle for combining his disparate elements. In *Sky Garden*, 1969, the largest of his series of prints based on the launching of Apollo 11, photographic images of Florida, including palm trees and pelicans, are set against a screenprinted technical plan of the enormous rocket, boldly conveying his response to the Cape Kennedy experience.

Pop artists used words as signifiers of time and place much as the Cubists had a half a century earlier. Our mass-media consumer-oriented environment is brazenly portrayed in screenprint in Andy Warhol's Soup Cans, Roy Lichtenstein's comic book images, and Edward Ruscha's West Coast landscapes. The boldness of color available in screenprinting and its commercial look and status contributed to its popularity as a medium for artists of the Pop movement. British Pop artists, including R. B. Kitaj and Joe Tilson, were more overtly political than their American counterparts, while using similar strategies of combined photographic and typographic images. The provocative nature of language in art was at the essence of Pop and contributed to the force of its rebellion.

Artists of the Conceptual movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s exploited the descriptive potential of language, often as an accompaniment to photographic images, in their attempts to subvert the notion that a work of art must be permanent and collectible, as well as handmade and illusionary.



Marcel Broodthaers. *Farm Animals*, 1974. Photolithograph, printed in color on two sheets, each: 32 x 23 1/2" (81.5 x 59.7 cm). Linda B. Janovic Fund

As a means to document their temporary or unrealized installations, numerous artists including Chris Burden, Dennis Oppenheim, and Christo made prints that contain extensive textual explanations of idea-oriented work.

Words themselves became the images in works by Robert Indiana, Claes Oldenburg, Edward Ruscha, and Bruce Nauman. In 1966 Nauman, inspired by Wittgenstein's method of including contradictory arguments in his language theories, began playing linguistic games that resulted in ironic wordplays such as *Help Me Hurt Me* of 1975. His visual/verbal puns and anagrams have a clear social intent, recalling aspects of Dada and Surrealism; he jolts the viewer into an awareness of the power of language for both nonsense and statement.

Linguistic investigations characterize the work of other Conceptual artists, such as Joseph Kosuth, who worked in diverse mediums from temporary wall installations to printed posters, artists' books, and postcards. Kosuth utilized dictionary definitions to communicate abstract ideas about art making. He made images obsolete and demanded that his works be read, not just seen.

The Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers was among the most influential in the development of European Conceptual art. He combined text and found imagery in a manner reminiscent of his friend Magritte, but with a compelling cultural critique. In *Farm Animals*, 1974, Broodthaers subverts the viewer's expectations by captioning the agricultural cow chart with automobile brand names. Compositionally his interest in charts and classification systems takes on a Pop design of repeated imagery, while his underlying theme of art as commodity is subtly conveyed by the contrasts of car culture and its status with an obvious symbol of consumption.

Language-based art focusing on sociopolitical themes experienced a renaissance in the 1980s. Contemporary art increasingly began to involve issues of humanity and exhibit a disillusionment — a sharp critique of society. Artists such as Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger focus on themes of power and encourage self- and social examination, much the way the Dada and Surrealist artists did before them. Kruger's format, however, has been altered to emphasize the impact of the media — and advertising in particular — on today's environment, involving and implicating the viewer. Holzer's *Truisms*, 1978–87, reflects a strong populist view in its terse one-liners and its simple photostat presentation. Her alphabetically arranged statements are designed as pointed platitudes projected from diverse, often contradictory viewpoints. Nancy Spero's work usually involves literary sources combined with found photographic images that poignantly evoke the plight of oppressed women around the world. In Christopher Wool's untitled triptych of 1991 language is de-contextualized; the artist parodies the standard media practice of oversimplification by filling the entire sheet with oversized words in isolation. The obvious graphic quality of these computer-assisted photolithographs intensifies their allusion to the printed media.



story, *n.* 1. *Archaic.* a. A connected narration of past events. b. A history. 2. a. An account of some incident. b. A report; statement. c. An anecdote, esp. an amusing one. 3. In literature: a. A narrative in verse; a tale; esp. a narrative less elaborate. b. The plot of a narrative. 4. *colloq.* A fib; a lie. 5. *U.S. Journalism.* Any news article. — *v.t.*; 1. *archaic.* To narrate or describe in story. 2. To adorn with a story, or scene from history, etc.

Barbara Kruger. Untitled (*Printed Matter Matters*). 1989. Photolithograph, printed in color, 25 x 23" (63.5 x 58.5 cm). Riva Castleman Fund

Many other artists are experimenting with nontraditional mediums in which printmaking has played a central role. Chilean artist Eugenio Dittborn's *8 Survivors*, 1986, created in the form of "mail" art, is one of the most compelling recent printed works to explore text and image relationships. In this moving and powerful amalgam of found newspaper texts and old photographs the artist metaphorically alludes to the thousands of "disappeared" Chilean political prisoners. By folding the print and sending it through the mail, he suggests their mysterious journey.

Whether in photostat, screenprint, or lithography, artists involved with sociopolitical themes throughout art history have used text to elucidate their concerns and have exploited the multiple aspect of printmaking to communicate more widely their ideas and convictions. 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.

Wendy Weitman  
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Department of Prints and Illustrated Books

This brochure has been made possible through the generosity of The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

Front cover: Bruce Nauman. *Help Me Hurt Me*. 1975. Lithograph, printed in color, 32  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 48  $\frac{1}{4}$ " (82.2 x 123.5 cm). Jeanne C. Thayer Fund. Copyright Gemini G.E.L.