

The Museum of Modern Art

50th Anniversary



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
NO. 43

CORRESPONDENCE OF WORDS AND PICTURES EXPLORED AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

WORDS AND PICTURES, an exhibition of some 95 works from the Drawing Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, will focus on the varied, difficult and often ambiguous relationship of words to pictures in modern art. The exhibition, in the third floor Sachs Galleries from August 20 to October 6, 1981, is directed by Bernice Rose, Curator of Drawings at the Museum.

Among the works on view will be illustrations for mythological and biblical texts, illustrations for pre-existing literary texts, and illustrations to texts created by the artists themselves. Some examples go beyond the traditional illustrational relationship of word and image to the use of the word as the pictured object, itself a subject. At the other extreme, the exhibition will include artists' "journals" -- the picture as narrative -- and a book without text. The show will not include illustrated books as such.

"Many of the illustrations are unpublished," comments Bernice Rose, "indeed, most were not commissioned and probably not intended for publication, but were called up by the work on which they are based." Examples are Charles Demuth's watercolors after Henry James' The Turn of the Screw and Nana by Zola. Thirty-Four Illustrations for Dante's Inferno by Robert Rauschenberg have not been seen in their entirety in the United States for over five years.

A great many modern artists have attempted illustrations simply for pleasure -- sometimes for the sake of the text as a pretext for images that

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function only in a metaphoric or symbolic relation to the text. So critical, in fact, is the visual artist's relation to the word in modern art, that the word itself has often become the pictured object, as in Carl Andre's Crowding and Jasper Johns' Jubilee, in which the colors are named, though it is not itself a color work. The exhibition will include examples of Cubist and Dada works in which words or letters have been incorporated into the image, of Surrealist works with made up texts, and where narrative title and image interact, as in Max Ernst's Here Everything is Still Floating. Also included will be book covers, in particular Picasso's original collage for Minotaure.

In his now famous essay on the tradition of representation from written texts in Western Art, art critic and scholar Meyer Schapiro noted that from late antiquity to the 18th century when this tradition formed the greater part of visual art, the "correspondence of word and picture is often problematic and may be surprisingly vague." That this is true, even in an era when the artist usually sought to create direct links between pictured elements and words, makes it unsurprising that for modern artists working in a tradition that has most frequently sought to sever the link between the literary and the visual, the problem of the correspondence of word and picture becomes more complex. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, artists exploring this problem have produced a body of very beautiful work, extremely varied in approach and form.

June 1981

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