

***Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language* is not just about language, it is about ecstatic language, language that jumps off the page, that has graphic presence beyond its meaning as a sign, that has dimension—in space, like a sculpture, or in time, like a sound. One of the things that can happen to language when it meets and merges with visual art is that it becomes a medium, like paint, and when it becomes a medium, it can be manipulated or deployed without the constraints of systems like grammar and logic. In fact, when language meets visual art as material, that is, in a concrete way, it can avoid the burden of communication in the conventional sense altogether and explode into letters and sounds, colors and graphic figures. This kind of language is deeply impractical, and in that impracticality it can also be poetic. It was the poet/artist who helped define the territory of what would come to be known as concrete poetry in the middle of the last century and it was the artist/poet who broadened that territory by experimenting with sound recording, performance, and sculpture in the following decades.**

Experimentation with language as a material has been going on since the first decades of the 20th century. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's classic drawing *Vive La France* (1914–15), with its exuberant typography and kinetic layout, is so much more than an onomatopoeic series of words and phrases—it is a visual firework whose trails can be followed across the page, an explosion of sound in the minds of those who read it. Four decades later, John Cage began to work with individual sounds that he saw as musical in and of themselves, outside of any note structure, and Augusto and Haroldo de Campos in Brazil, Öyvind Fahlström in Sweden, and Eugen Gomringer in Switzerland, poets all, began to arrange their poems—radically reduced to individual words freed from sentences—so that the form of the poem matched its content. In France, Brion Gysin took a mat knife

to a strip of newsprint and created the Cut-Up, and soon after, with the help of a tape recorder and an early version of a computer, the Permutation Poem; his experiments brought him into the ambit of sound poets like Henri Chopin, who created poems composed of wordless utterances. In Britain, the poet and visual artist Ian Hamilton Finlay created the idea of the single-word poem and, in the spirit of the Cut-Up, poems that consisted of found names that he designed typographically and visually to reflect their content. In the 1970s, Hamilton Finlay would embark on his life's work: a vast garden in which poetry in sculptural form was integrated into the landscape. In the United States, artists like Jasper Johns used letters and numbers concretely, and poets like Vito Acconci dreamed of deploying the linguistic sign across a page, like actors on a stage. In 1966, Robert Smithson created *A Heap of Language*, a drawing but also a sculpture and a manifesto, which graphically illustrates his call for a language that could be “built, not written.” This call was answered by sculptors like Carl Andre and Lawrence Weiner, who deployed words in space as if they were as solid as bricks or brushstrokes.

The implications of these 20th-century forays into language as a material have resonance for certain contemporary artists in this time of excessive information being constantly mainlined into our consciousness via ever more efficient means. The idea of language as a medium, as information rather than as a conveyer of information, as a thing in itself, whether a graphic sign, a three-dimensional object, a sound, or even a movement, inspires and powers a new kind of concrete language art that, although it looks nothing like the concrete language experiments that came before, shares the radical spirit of those earlier works.

Marinetti's *Vive La France* provides the historic context as well as an inspiration for recent works that yank language from

the page or from the canvas, exploding it along the way until it exists only as letters or sounds. There is evidence of a romance with the graphic quality of letters, and an acknowledgement that there is meaning in their shape, color, size, and typographic identity. Letters, in and of themselves, are celebrated with banners and song by Ei Arakawa and Nikolas Gambaroff, even if the song consists only of wordless sounds—pronunciations of the random alphabetic pairings that adorn the more than 300 flags in their *Two-Alphabet Monogram* series. These noises reinforce the abstract nature of the monograms, which can be pronounced but cannot be read in any conventional sense. Even as they are recognizable letters, they are also forms in and of themselves. Abstraction reappears in Nora Schultz's "printing machines." These works manually print unreadable abstractions that are nonetheless decipherable as some kind of expression—a language even—of the machine itself. One machine is aptly named *Discovery of the Primitive*, and one can readily imagine that the marks elicited from the rickety structure of throwaway materials are, or resemble, pre-linguistic utterances, even less recognizable than Arakawa and Gambaroff's *Monograms*.

The frustration of reading is not always linked with abstraction. It is often noted that Trisha Donnelly's multifaceted work is unreadable; in fact it is precisely that because it has not been built to be apprehended through reading. Donnelly's work plays with forms of language, but decidedly not of conventional signs. Her works are visual, aural, and sculptural, sometimes at the same time, and are not intended to deliver information via predetermined signs or symbols deployed in relation to one another. Like in the untitled stone on view in the exhibition, meaning, or rather significance, occurs like a chemical reaction in the mind; the sparkle of opalescent marble the appearance of a 700-pound slab plus a serrated glyph that is not written into the marble slab as

wrestled from it. The glyph emerges from the rock more like a sharp sound, than it does as a drawing. Because Donnelly is interested in illuminating the language of things in all their dimensions, as they exist in the world, her work makes a point of being a part of nature, not a reproduction of it.

She shares this with Shannon Ebner, with whom she studied at Yale, and with Paul Elliman, a visionary typographer and artist who lectured at the university during both artists' time there. For Elliman, the elements of language are physically part of our daily life, and he has demonstrated this through his *Found Fount*, a remarkable ongoing project he began more than 20 years ago, which comprises a collection of thousands upon thousands of found objects—from a piece of die-cut cardboard to a broken bike lock—that can function as letters in the English alphabet. Elliman's goal is to create a font that is so various that it never repeats. In other words, he endeavors to make a system to describe the world that is as varied as the world itself. In addition to this perpetual project, Elliman has also amassed other collections. In pursuit of his interest in aural signage, he has made collections of human voices, particularly those that are used for public address. For Elliman, the human voice, with its particular accents, tones, and modes of address, has a kind meaning that overlays the conventional meaning of spoken words—like typography does for the written word. Elliman, in collaboration with six members of MoMA's security and visitor services staff, has also made a new sound work specifically for *Ecstatic Alphabets*. Called *A List of Imaginary Places and a Voice to Call Them Out*, it plays every 15 minutes inside the exhibition galleries.

Evoking a place by filling the air with the sound of its name is a technique that Sharon Hayes has also explored in her public protests, group readings, and lec-

tures. In her new work for *Ecstatic Alphabets* she uses the space and the flow of the exhibition as the structure through which a narrative travels. Five poetic statements, linked sequentially, have been installed at various points in the gallery. If followed in sequence, they lead the reader on a search that is reflected in the narrative of the text. If read individually, the texts function like a missing-person flyer tacked to a telephone pole; it is a piercing cry, a public acknowledgement of loss that describes a hole in the fabric of reality where the missing party used to be.

Shannon Ebner met Paul Elliman at Yale, but became familiar with his work more recently, realizing that her photographic and video work had much in common with Elliman's ethos of words of the world as the world. Her early series of words photographed in, and as part of, a landscape recall the single-word poetics of mid-century concrete poets, with the added exploration of the material presence of language as a sculptural form. Shot on an actual horizon line that functions like a line on a page, Ebner's words seem inscribed in the world in a manner reminiscent of concrete poems: they are physically embedded as objects, and meaningfully embedded as words. Typography has a special significance in Ebner's work; five years ago, she built a font from cinderblocks, which she painstakingly photographed character by character. Calling it the "Strike Alphabet," it exists only in photographs, and Ebner has used this photographic font to create large-scale, multi-panel installations, as well as animated videos like *The Ecstatic Alphabet*. In the latter work, from which this exhibition takes part of its name, individual letters from the "Strike Alphabet" flash semaphorically, blinking out a poem, letter by letter, that asks a question that the video answers: "When is a photographic sentence a sentence to photograph?" For Ebner, the photographic is akin to the typographic—each adds a

layer of narrative to the language of the object. Avidly interested in typographic history, and particularly that of modernist typography, Ebner's work exemplifies the ways in which graphic design and visual art have found common ground within the parameters of material language investigations.

Adam Pendleton, an artist whose work includes forays into painting, sculpture, performance, and poetry, as well as the publication of books and periodicals, has linked modernist typography with modernist poetics and abstraction. His ongoing project, entitled *Black Dada* after the 1964 poem *Black Dada Nihilismus* by beat poet LeRoi Jones, encompasses paintings, objects, publications, and a manifesto in the form of a long-form free-verse poem that challenges the modernist notion of the avant-garde through the much more fraught filter of race.

Experimental Jetset is an Amsterdam-based trio of graphic designers best known for their use of modernist typefaces in a manner that reveals those typefaces' "meaning." In their T-shirts and posters, for example, Helvetica, a font so ubiquitous as to be almost neutral, becomes a crucial element of context—even explanation—of the message those objects bear. *Zang Tumb Tumb (If You Want It)*, on view in the exhibition, conflates Marinetti's iconic martial phrase with Yoko Ono's equally iconic, pacifist Fluxus emblem, the poster *War Is Over If You Want It*. An homage to the history of typography in 20th-century modern art, *Zang Tumb Tumb* is also an antiwar statement delivered with an ironically upbeat, modernist utopianism that emanates as much from the typeface as from the words themselves. Experimental Jetset studied with Paul Elliman, as did Stuart Bailey and David Reinfurt, the two designer/artists who make up Dexter Sinister, a collective that produces a series of journals. Dexter Sinister has contributed to *Ecstatic Alphabets* by creating a publi-

cation—the third issue of their *Bulletins of The Serving Library*—that contains articles relating directly to the subject of language as material, as well as a single-channel video that plays in the exhibition gallery. The video is a visual “trailer” for the publication and serves as a time-based, fourth-dimensional translation of the three-dimensional book.

Tauba Auerbach’s series of gouaches and paintings take as their subject the graphic translation systems of sounds and words. Whether she is drawing the almost hieroglyphic sequence of the Ugaritic alphabet or transcribing an obsolete method of “visible speech” designed for use with the deaf, these works seem to take their cue from earlier concrete-language experiments whose goal was to create non-metaphorical work that merged form and content. Auerbach’s RGB color-block books do something similar, erasing the once-removed connection between an art object and what it represents. They are not books about the visible color spectrum; each is, in fact, an example of the visible color spectrum as seen from the perspective of one individual color: red, green, or blue.

The contemporary artist whose work is perhaps closest to the concrete poetry of the 1950s and 1960s is Karl Holmqvist. A poet and an artist, Holmqvist creates his work out of words and phrases culled from popular songs, films, literature, and even other people’s artworks. His method, which de-familiarizes language through de-contextualization and repetition, recalls Brion Gysin’s Cut-Up method, although visually it can resemble the work of concrete poets like the German Ferdinand Kriwet, who created wallpaper and floor adhesives to extend his poems into the environment. Holmqvist’s neo-Beat sensibility is an homage to gay outlaws like Gysin; William S. Burroughs, who wrote his most influential books using the Cut-Up method; and Allen Ginsberg, whose poem *Howl* (1955) ends

with the phrase “I’m with you in Rockland”—which is memorialized in a neon sculpture by Holmqvist. Crucially, Holmqvist’s work exists in multiple mediums, including spoken word, books, a three-dimensional sculpture, furniture, and built environments. For Holmqvist, his artwork is his assembled words, and those words can be delivered, ideally, via many multi-dimensional platforms at once. For *Ecstatic Alphabets*, Holmqvist created a new work that is experienced simultaneously through a recording, an installation, a book, and a neon sculpture.

The poet and artist Emmett Williams wrote that the word as image was as old as the hills and, in fact, the idea of language as a dimensional thing-in-itself spans history and culture, beginning with hieroglyphics and reaching through today’s screen-based information culture. The idea, born of 20th-century concrete language experiments that language, our most powerful system of the control and dissemination of ideas, can break from received meanings and run free in the world strikes a chord with contemporary artists. Irreverent and ecstatic, the work of the contemporary artists in *Ecstatic Alphabets* is fundamentally engaged not with the celebration of existing linguistic systems, but with the much more creative and difficult job of re-imagining a more expansive role for language in contemporary art. One of the founders of concrete poetry, the Swiss poet Eugen Gomringer, predicted that “initially concrete poetry needed poets with wit; in the future I think it will need poets with character.” The contemporary artists in *Ecstatic Alphabets*, in their attempts to set language free from the confines of convention, and ultimately, of power, have gone a long way to prove that Gomringer might have been prescient.

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