

**ECSTATIC ALPHABETS/HEAPS OF LANGUAGE** is a group exhibition on view at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, from May 6 to August 27, 2012. It brings together forty-four modern and contemporary artists and artists' groups working in all mediums including painting, sculpture, film, video, audio, spoken word, and design, all of whom concentrate on the material qualities of written and spoken language—visual, aural, and beyond.

The works in the show belong to a distinguished history of poem/objects and concrete-language experiments that dates to the beginnings of modernism, and includes both the Dada and the Futurist moments, the recrudescence of Neo-Dada in the late 1950s, and the literary movements of concrete and sound poetry in Europe, Latin America, and the United States. Although artists were experimenting with language (and poets with visual art) at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was only in the 1950s that the idea of a kind of poetry/visual art hybrid was introduced, first in Brazil and later internationally. Like the painters and sculptors of the same period who explored abstract forms with the goal of arriving at a non-metaphoric artwork that was itself and nothing else, artists and poets working concretely with words in the late 1950s and '60s endeavored to use language as a medium like paint, dissecting and rearranging letters, words, and phrases to create works of art whose form and content were meant to be one and the same.

The contemporary works in **ECSTATIC ALPHABETS** in many ways continue the research into the relationship between visual art and language begun by work from the previous century, but now language is more boldly severed from the page and from language's received meanings, received forms, and in some cases its duties of communication. Moving freely among disciplines and mediums, artists who are also poets,

writers, performers, and graphic designers transform letters, words, and phrases into patterns, sounds, moving images, and objects from everyday life, celebrating the synesthetic qualities of language rather than reducing it to pure form. Animated, atomized, transliterated into phonemes, blown up to enormous proportions, or reduced to systems of scratches, this language is meant to be seen or experienced but not read. As in earlier experiments, there is an abiding connection to poetry in many of these recent works, adding an ecstatic element to art that might at first seem to display an alphabetic plainness or even an inchoate quality.

The exhibition is divided into two sections, the first featuring an abbreviated timeline of twentieth-century artworks that treat language concretely, that is, as a material. Most of the works in this section use the platform of the page for their experiments. The second section presents recent contemporary works and projects in which a similar interest in language as a flexible and powerful artmaking material can be discerned, although the results are very different. The artists in the contemporary section have for the most part done away with the page and returned language to the world.

The most conventional and familiar materialization of language is the book, which the exhibition acknowledges through the publication in which this text is contained. This book—a volume in the continuing series **BULLETINS OF THE SERVING LIBRARY**, published by Dexter Sinister—is that artist team's contribution to the exhibition and is available for sale in the bookshop of The Museum of Modern Art and through the distribution channels of The Serving Library.

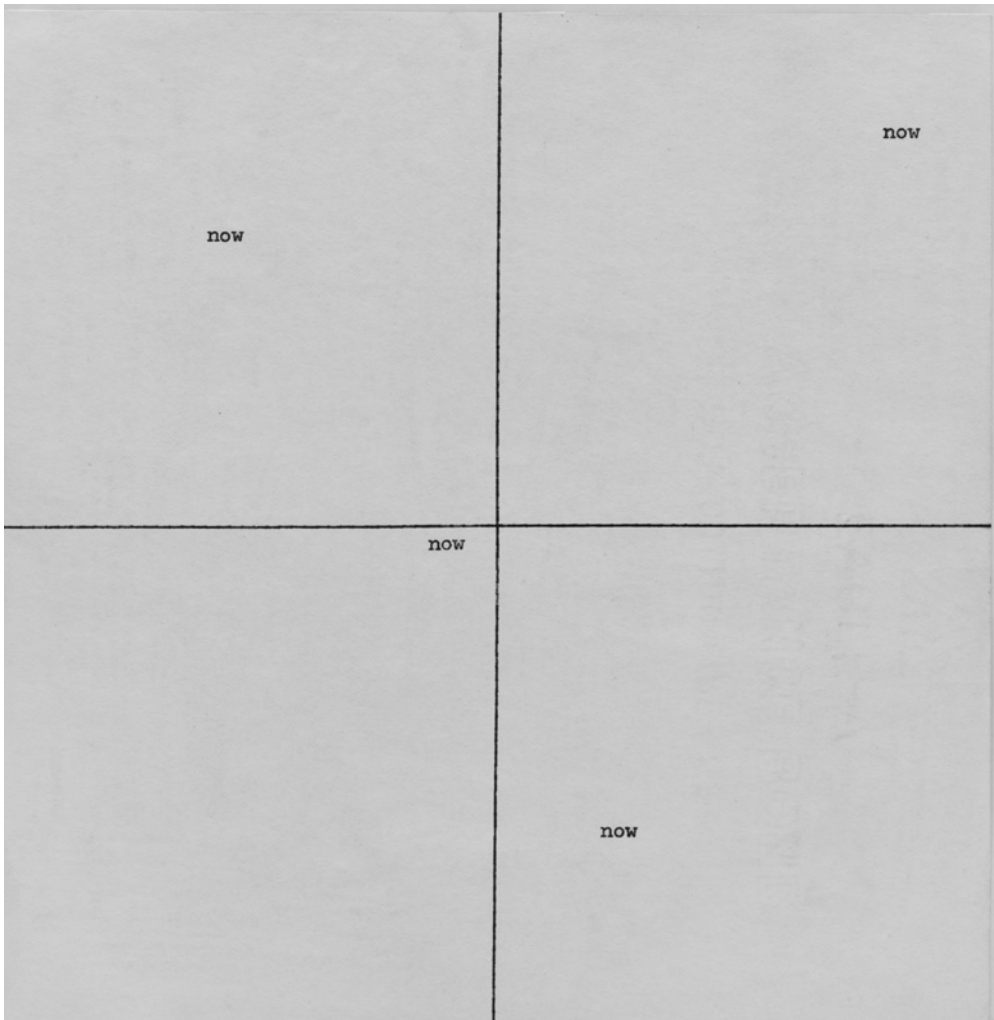
Laura Hoptman  
Curator, Department of Painting and Sculpture  
The Museum of Modern Art

**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**

**THIS LANGUAGE IS A THING IN ITSELF. It is not a delivery system, or a pronouncement, or a reinforcement of authority. It is not even a subject. It just is. It is “noninstrumentalized,” detached from conventional meaning and opposed to the notion of command.**

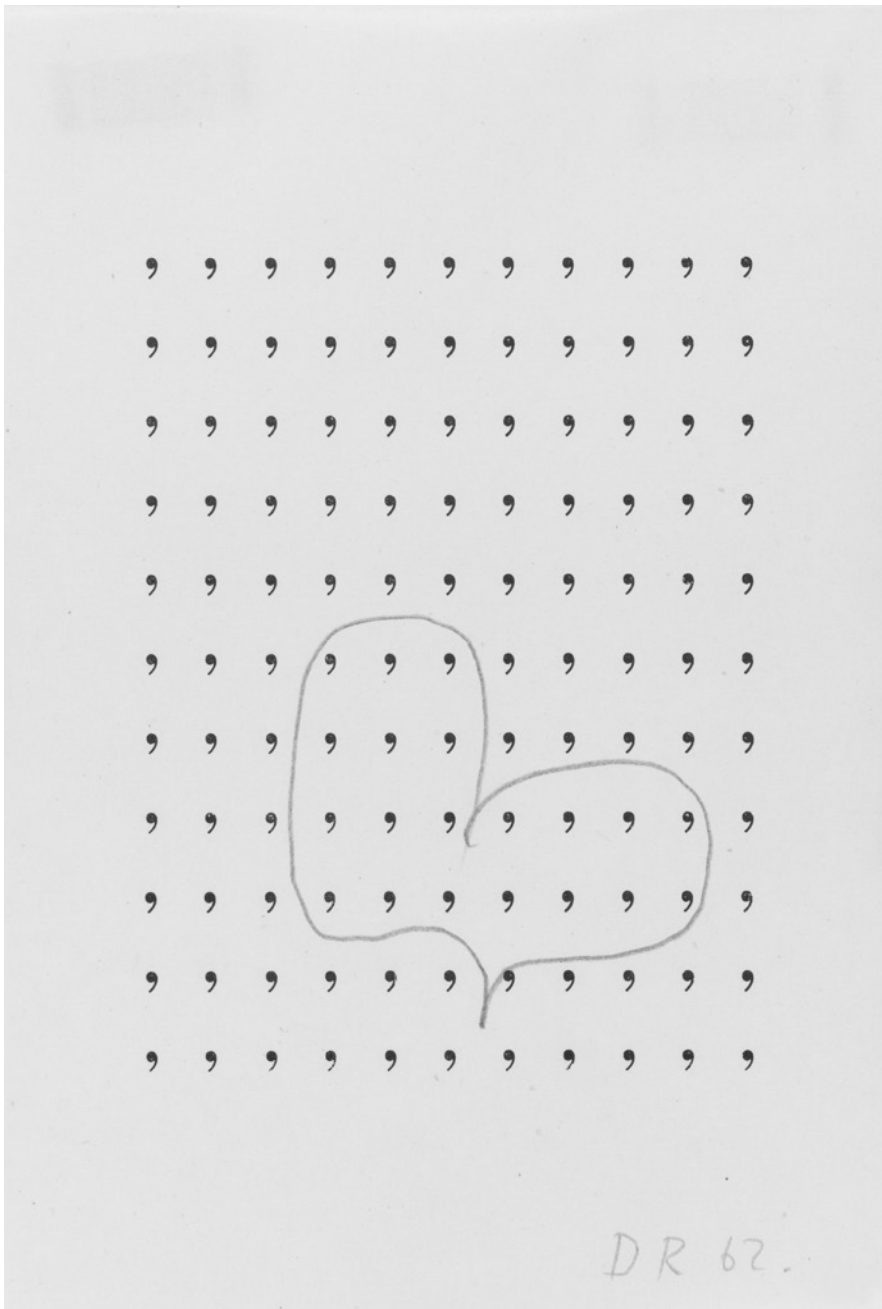
**“Literal usage becomes incantatory when all metaphors are suppressed. Here language is built, not written.”**

**(Robert Smithson, “Language to be Looked At and/or Things to be Read,” 1967)**



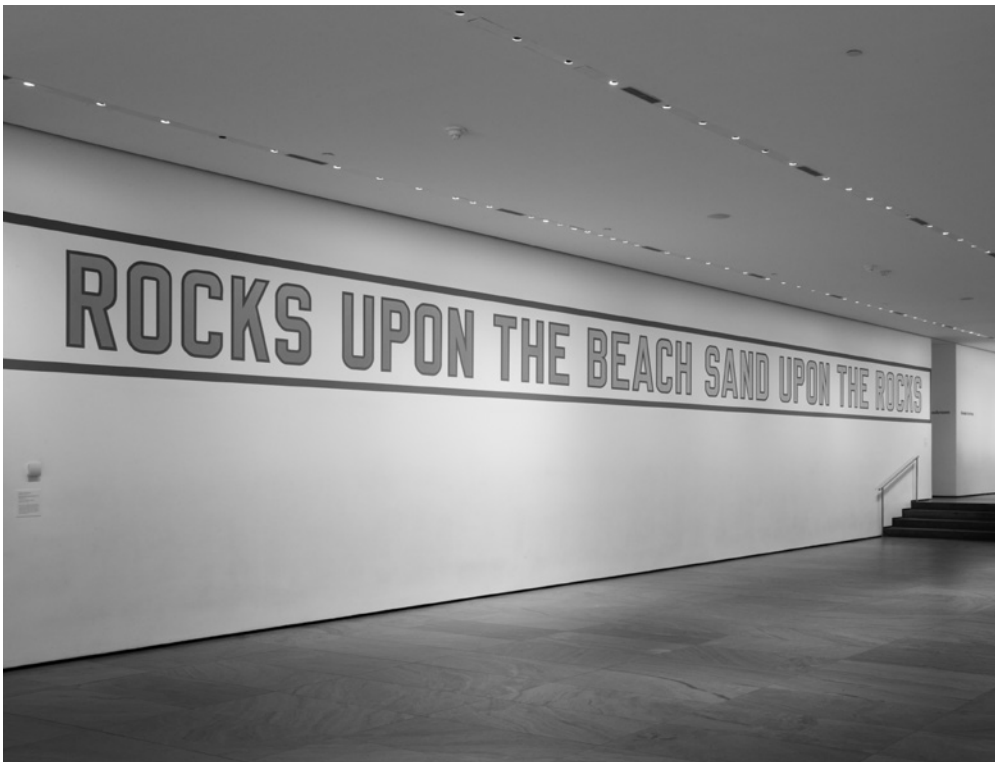
**Carl Andre, NOW NOW (1967). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Sally and Wynn Kramarsky**

**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Dieter Roth, STUPIDOGRAMM (STUPIDOGRAM) (1962). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift (purchase and gift, in part,  
of The Eileen and Michael Cohen Collection)**

**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**

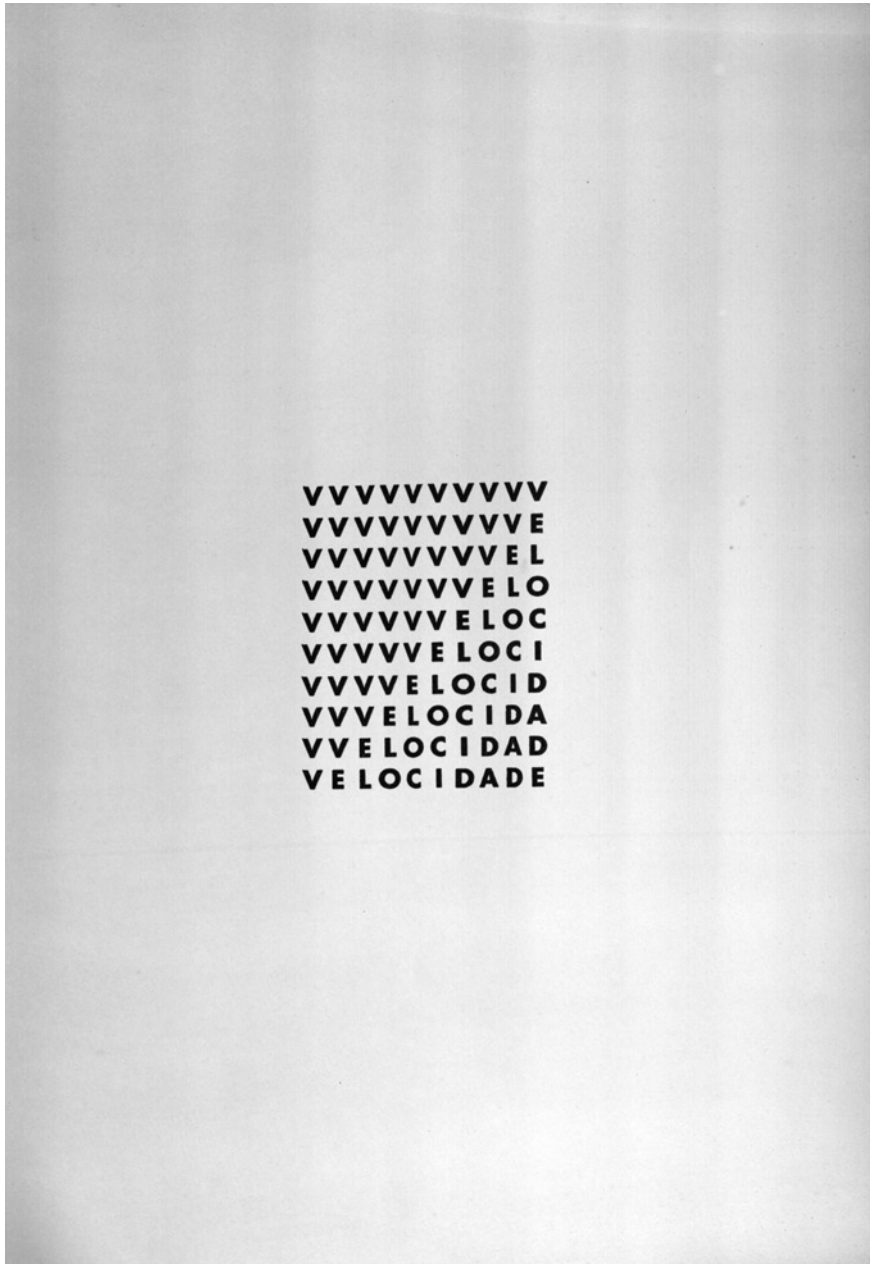


**Lawrence Weiner, ROCKS UPON THE BEACH SAND UPON THE ROCKS (1988). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquisition from the Werner Dannheisser Testamentary Trust**

**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Ian Hamilton Finlay, TYE CRINGLE (1967-72). Private collection.  
Courtesy Christine Burgin, New York**



**Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos, and Ronaldo Azeredo, NOIGANDRES 4: POESIA CONCRETA (1957). Journal. Page showing the poem OESTELETE (WESTEAST). The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. Gift of Andrea and José Olympio da Veiga Pereira**

**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**

**THIS LANGUAGE IS MALLEABLE.** It can be pulverized into words, vivisected into phonemes, atomized into what Georges Perec called “motivated letters.” It is form that is not part of, or related to any structure.

**“It was a poetry far beyond paraphrase, a poetry that often asked to be completed or activated by the reader, a poetry of direct presentation—the word, not words, words, words, or expressionistic squiggles—using the semantic, visual and phonetic elements of language as raw materials in a way seldom used by the poets of the past.”**

(Emmett Williams, *AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONCRETE POETRY*, 1967)



**Ei Arakawa, Nikolas Gambaroff, TWO-ALPHABET MONOGRAMS (2009–2010). Installation view, Pro Choice, Vienna, 2009**



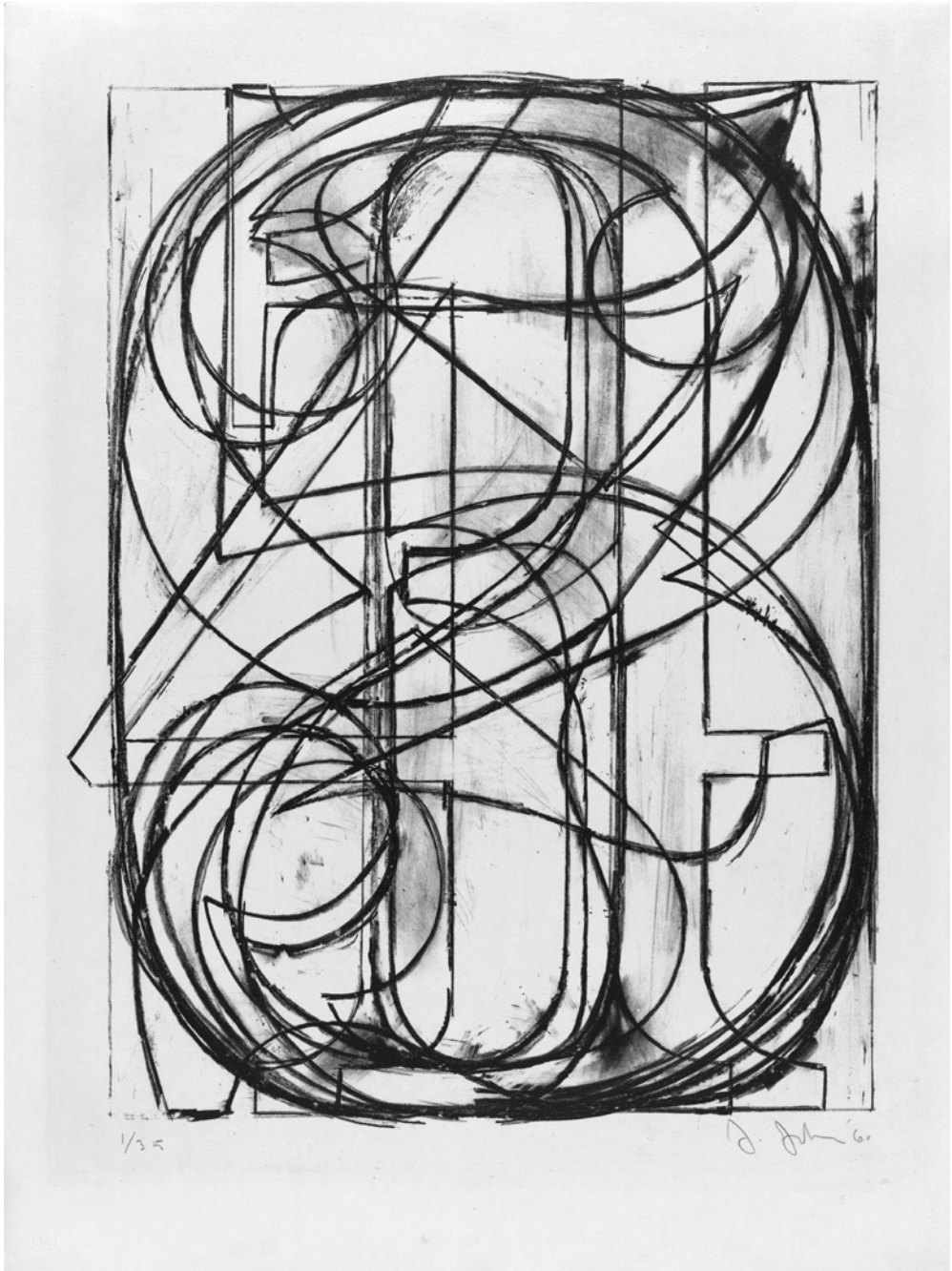
**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Bruce Nauman, RAW WAR (1970). The Baltimore Museum of Art. Gift of Leo Castelli, New York**



**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Jasper Johns, 0 THROUGH 9 (1960). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Armand P. Bartos**

**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Kay Rosen, SHAPED WORDS (2001). Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York**

couleur rose

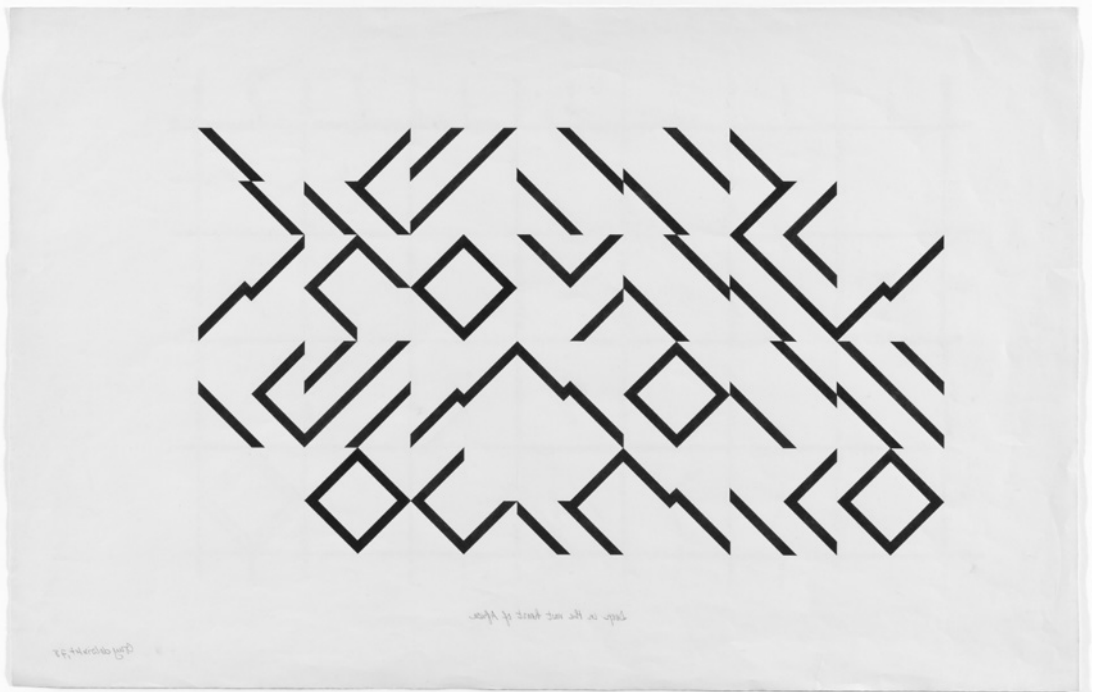
BoTSL#3 2012 APR 16 3:42 PM

**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Adam Pendleton, BLACK DADA (LK/LC/AA) (2008-9). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Fund for the Twenty-First Century**

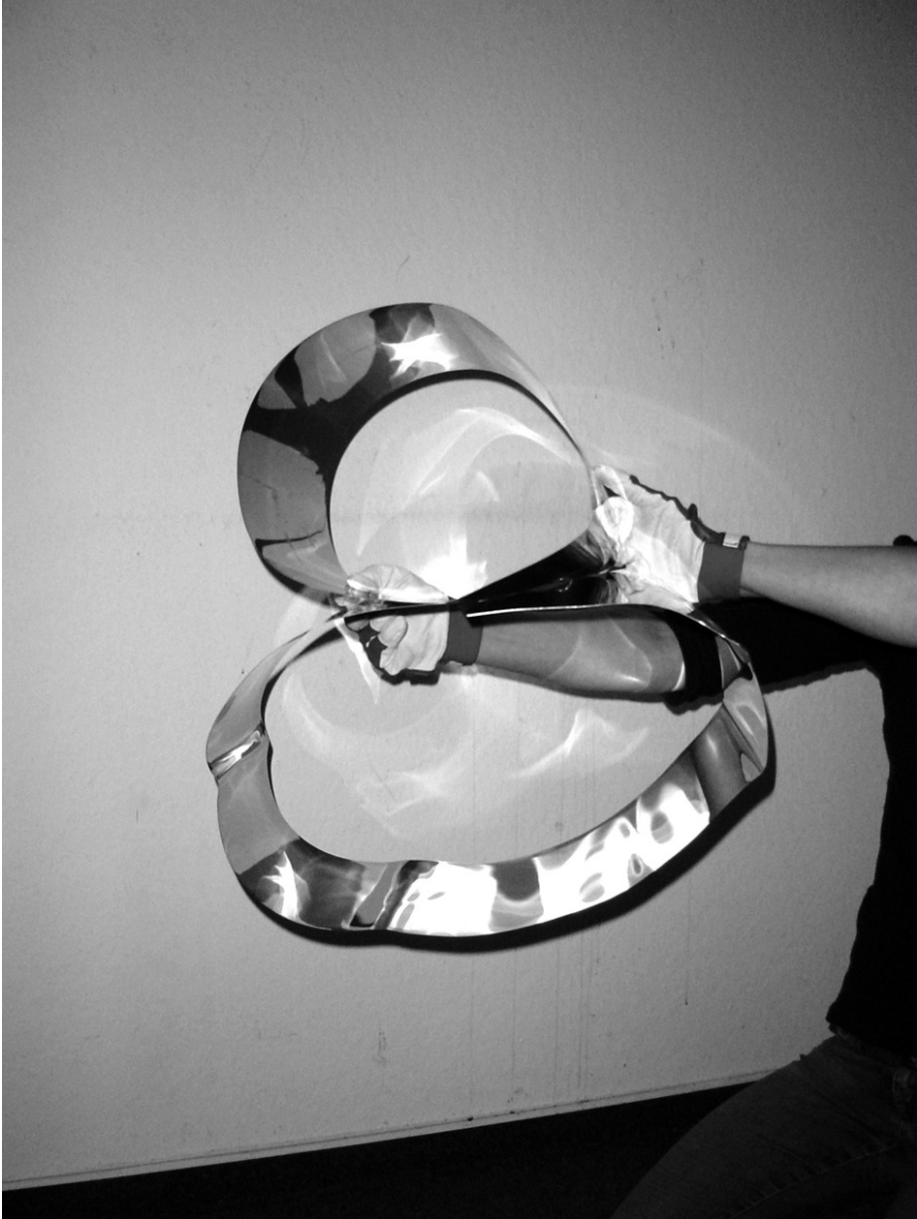
**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Guy de Cointet, DEEP IN THE VAST HEART OF AFRICA (1978). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Committee on Drawings Funds**



**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Nora Schultz, COUNTDOWN PERFORMANCE (2007). Courtesy Campoli Presti, London/Paris**

## **Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**

**THIS LANGUAGE IS HYPERGRAPHIC**, a term coined by the Lettrist Isidore Isou. It has been transformed from the verbal to the alphabetic, from the readable to the ideographic. This can occur through graphic design, a form of translation in some cases, intervention or obfuscation in others. It can also be seen as a form of thinking. With hypergraphic language, graphic design is the work itself and not a technique of a work's presentation. It can be the way that the visual and the textual become one and the same thing.

**“Words at liberty are naturally transformed into self-illustrations by means of free expressive orthography and typography, synoptic tables of lyric values, and visual analogies.”**

**(Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “Geometric and Mechanical Splendour and the Numerical Sensibility,” 1914)**

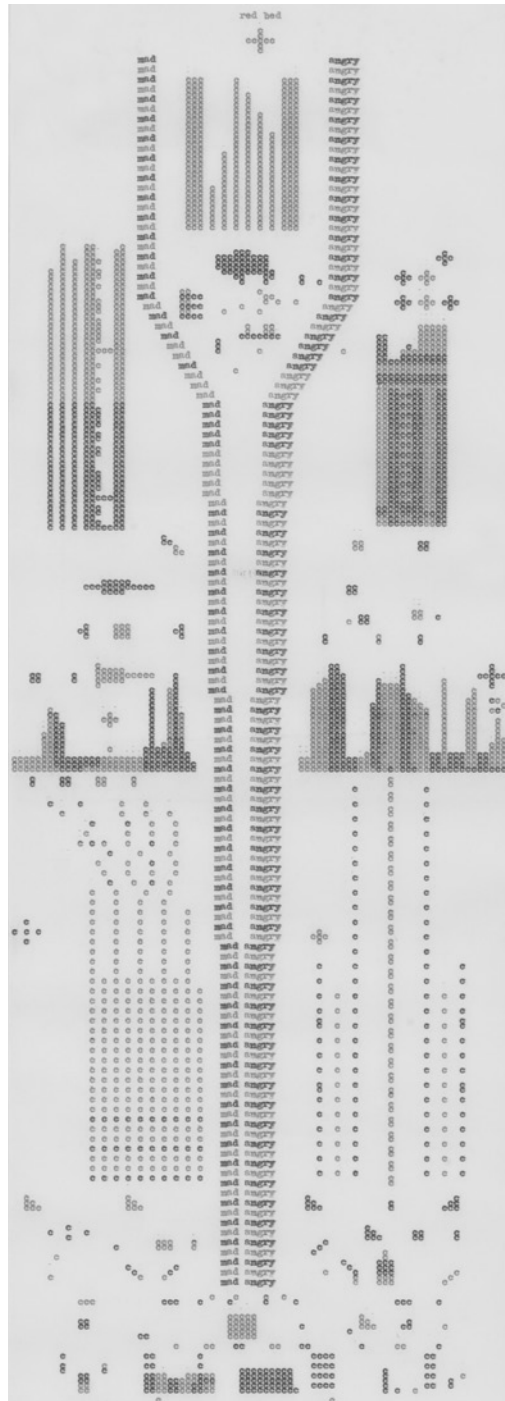


**\*\*Hello world\*\***

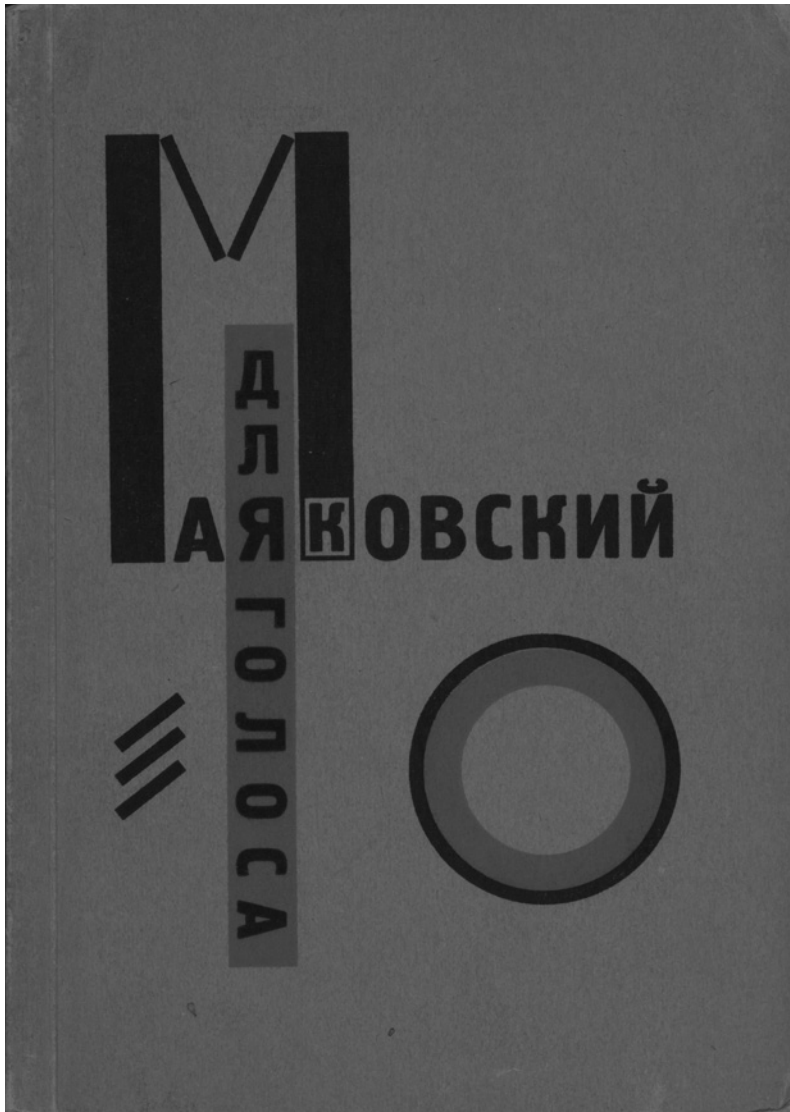
**Dexter Sinister, TRAILER FOR THE EXHIBITION CATALOG (2012). Courtesy Dexter Sinister**



**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Christopher Knowles, UNTITLED (CHRISTOPHER KNOWLES, PUEVFGBVCURE XABJYRF) (detail) (1980).  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings  
Collection Gift**



El Lissitzky, **DLIA GOLOSA (FOR THE VOICE)** (1923). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Gift of The Judith Rothschild Foundation

**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Ferdinand Kriwet, WALK TALK (1969). Courtesy BQ, Berlin**

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AFFICHE 1918

## CAUCHEMAR

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1938-1946

Raoul Hausmann, POÉSIE DE MOTS INCONNUS (POETRY OF UNKNOWN WORDS) (1949).  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Louis E. Stern Collection

**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**

**ZANG!  
TUM  
BTUMB**

**IF YOU WANT IT**

**Tuuumb! Tuuum Tuuum Tuuum**

**Experimental Jetset, ZANG TUMB TUMB (IF YOU WANT IT) (2003).  
Courtesy Experimental Jetset**

## Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

**THIS LANGUAGE IS IMPRACTICAL.** As opposed to the Russian formalist notion of a “practical language” that is discursive and purely for communication, this language resists a direct correlation with meaning. It has been cut loose from the burden of description or commentary. It can be meaningless or can exist in an ambiguous state between meaning and nonmeaning. It is useless for communicative purposes and can be deployed to undermine that role. It is autonomous and therefore connected to poetry. It can be poetry. It can exist at the intersection of the graphic and the poetic.

**“Poetry is present when the word is felt as a word and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when the words and their compositions, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality.”**

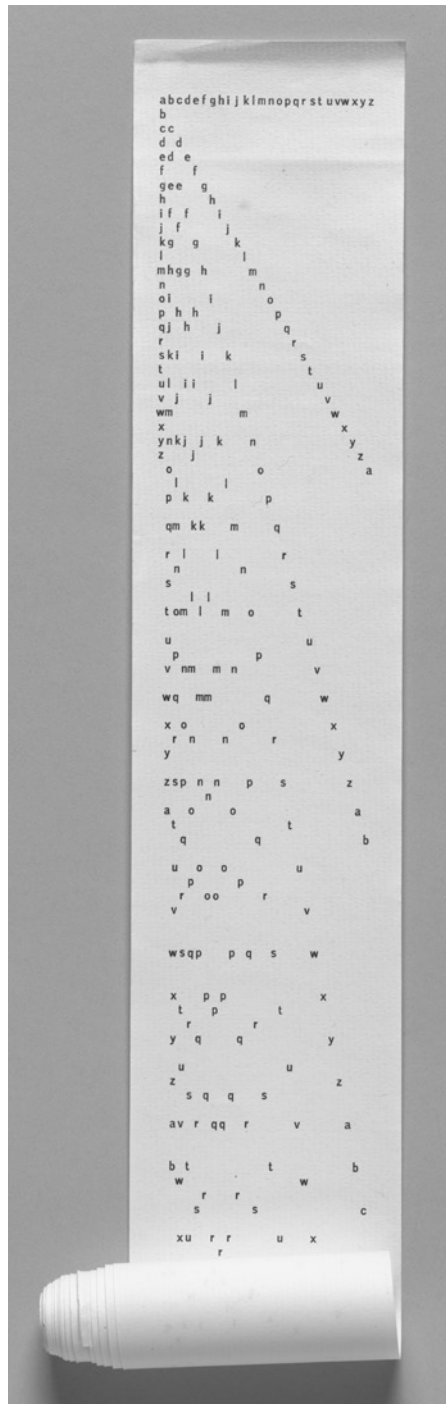
(Roman Jakobson, “What is Poetry?” 1933–34)



Rirkrit Tiravanija, still from UNTITLED 2008 (JOHN GIORNO READS) (2008).  
Courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise



# Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE



Emmett Williams, **ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ (1963) (detail)**.  
Fluxus edition announced 1964. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman  
Fluxus Collection Gift



**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Sharon Hayes, I MARCH IN THE PARADE OF LIBERTY, BUT AS LONG AS I LOVE YOU I'M NOT FREE (2008).  
Performance, The New Museum, New York, December 1-January 27, 2008. Courtesy the artist**



**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**John Giorno, DIAL-A-POEM (1970). Installation view in the exhibition "INFORMATION." The Museum of Modern Art, New York, July–September 1970. Courtesy The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York**

# Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

The Museum of Modern Art Library

of things just pass things pure up cize pass think it here/on(to  
this, that is, to the s/In the first days of the year 1911, a badly d  
ressed young man/teeth and fists, he smashed eternity to smithereens.  
Then/women were remembered in the icy fog./Lute/He died like the sun/  
studio last year while eating lemons./There, then, they did it ov/iii  
ii/iiii/I am putting on the topsoil i/In Wiltshire there dwelt a Far  
mar of indifferent wealth,/him for a garment or two, and so tooke him  
into service:/eously: wel appareled he was, and well monied, & might  
/heard that hee had married a wife in Wilshire, not farre/the coming  
of hir trecherous husband, who returned within a/him with lookes ful  
of death, made him this answer: I villaine,/cast them in his face, &  
said, Now lustful whoremaister, go/22/23/first and then fold and even  
/1, 2, 3, 4, 5,/face them, they are cheek by/steps, shops noses, ear  
s, eyes/A surface of/an apple/As there were four where anyone seldom/  
s it, and he is it. And ther/ / /ad made it. Whether he had  
m/The field of Carnac is a large, open space where eleven/buried. Th  
e fact of the duel required that the stones be/representation of the  
python, because, according to Pausanias,/been. "Let us look for the  
reason, a thing no one has thought/l'Ecole Polytechnique, an engineer  
, a M. de la Sauvagere./as ever were Pelloutier, Deric, Latour d'Auve  
rgne, Penhoet/them), if anyone should, after all these opinions, ask  
me mine,/sharp, clear tones swelled louder as they came nearer and/ra  
ising her arm as if to hide under it, she turned her head/by little t  
he soil assumed its usual level and everyone went/road, and the sun,  
which made our shoulders smart beneath/dinner/dinner/nds folded befor  
e you -- I t/The engine/Carter's body/A treasure/Dahlstrom said/Pollic  
e found/---/---/et to mention that -- during/'Twas in the month of  
December, and in the year 1883,/And was first seen by the crew of a G  
ourdon fishing boat,/Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silvery Tay!/Upw  
ards of two miles and more,/Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silv'ry T  
ay!/It must have been an awful sight,/at me stealing away from my/tic  
k/tick/t, noticeable, unmistakable(/all all/ide the left half of  
the hum/Six Works by/to/is/listeners/just/gardens,/and ec-/plug in yo  
ur hands, as well/There is a changling that can't/s means you. I mea  
n that. I/Why don't you tell every one about it, he said to her/His  
attention was disturbed by the sudden lodging of a beebie/Beeflesh. U  
p in the interesting hive his wife and baby bees/u point away. Come  
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, a badly dressed young man/teeth and fists, he smashed eternity to s  
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Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer, 0 TO 9 no. 3 (1968). The Museum of Modern Art Library,  
New York

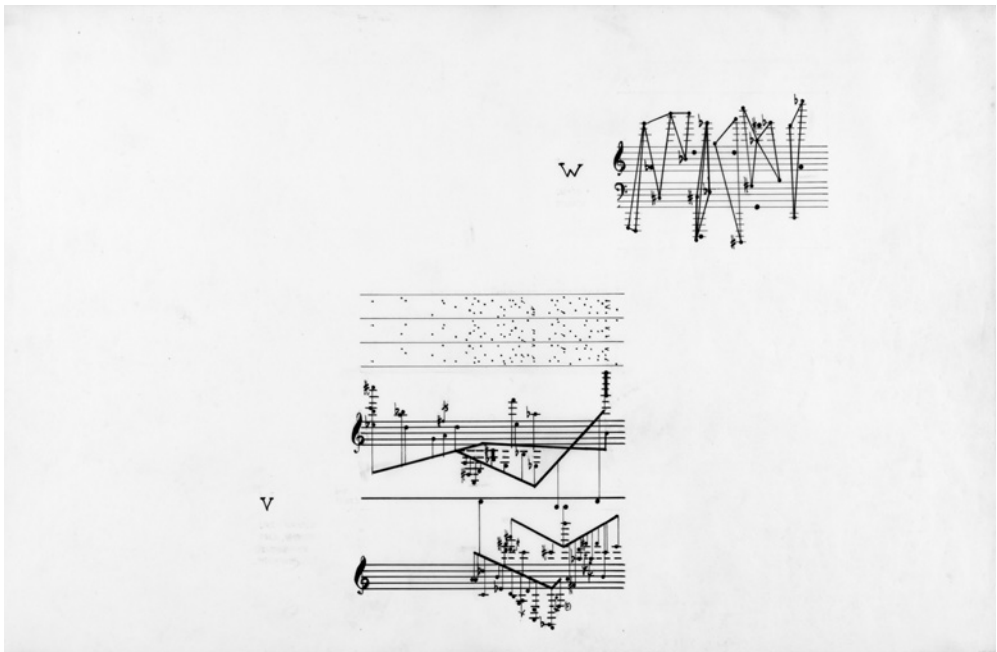


**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**

**THIS LANGUAGE IS SYNESTHETIC.** It is a medium and it is also a transmedium. It is a sound, an object, a place, an activity, a symbol like a mandala. It can be used like paint. It can be a site, or, as Vito Acconci put it, “an installation of words.” As such, it can change the way we perceive language.

**“I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now. I am recording the sound of my speaking voice and I am going to play it back into the room again and again until the resonant frequencies of the room reinforce themselves so that any semblance of my speech with perhaps the exception of rhythm is destroyed. What you will hear, then, are the natural resonant frequencies of the room articulated by speech.”**

(Alvin Lucier, “I am Sitting in a Room,” 1969)



**John Cage, PAGE 18, SOLO FOR PIANO, FROM CONCERT FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA (1958).  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Lily Auchincloss**

EY · BEE  
CEE · DEE  
EE · EF · DJEE  
EITCH · AI · JAY · KAY  
EL · EM · EN · OH · PEE  
KIEW · AR · ES  
TEE · YEW · VEE  
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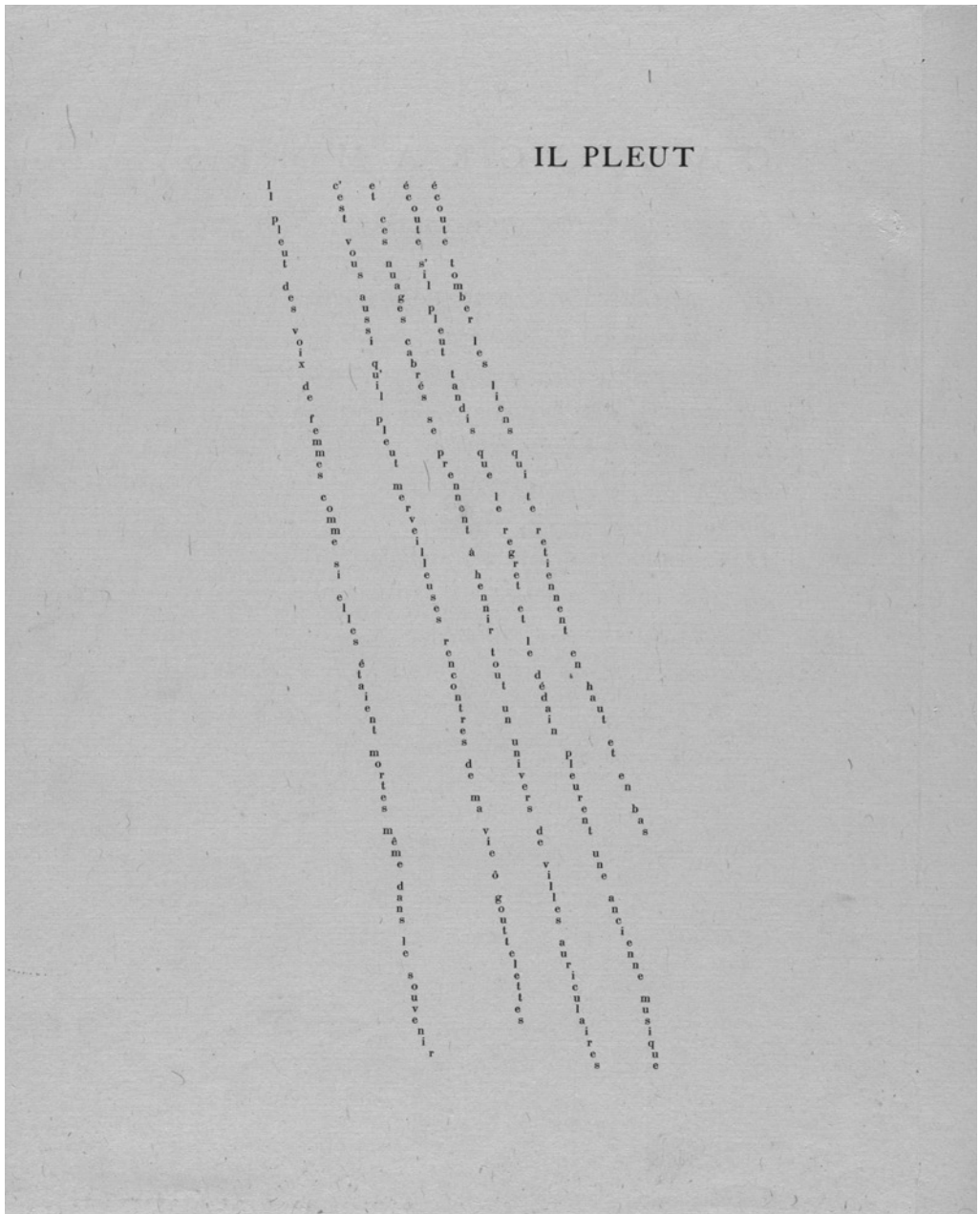
Taub Auerbach, HOW TO SPELL THE ALPHABET (2005). Private collection





Fümms bö wö tää zää Uu, pögiff, kwiiee.	ü:
Dedesnn nn rrrrrr, li Ee, mpiff tilff toooo? Till, Jüü-Kaa.	1
(gesungen)	2
Rinnzekete bee bee nnz krr müü? ziuu ennze ziuu rinnzkrmmüüü;	3
Rakete bee bee.	3a
Rummpff tillff toooo?	4
Ziiuu ennze ziiuu nnskrmmüüü, ziiuu ennze ziiuu rinnzkrmmüüü;	ü 3
Rakete bee bee,	ü 3a
Rakete bee zee.	
Fümmsbö wö tää zää Uu,	1
Uu zee tee wee bee	
zee tee wee bee	
zee tee wee bee	
zee tee wee bee	
zee tee wee bee	
zee tee wee bee Fümms.	
<b>schluss:</b>	
Fümms bö fümms bö wö fümms bö wö täää?	1
Fümms bö fümms bö wö fümms bö wö tää zää Uuuu?	1
Rattatata tattatata tattatata	
Rinnzekete bee bee nnz krr müüüü?	3
Fümms bö	1
Fümms böwö	
Fümms bö wö täää??? (gekreischt)	

**Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE**



**Guillaume Apollinaire and Giorgio De Chirico, CALLIGRAMMES (1930). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Louis E. Stern Collection**

## Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

**THIS LANGUAGE WORKS AGAINST READING.** It can be unreadable, although it can also be apprehended and even pronounced. It subverts conventional modes of interpretation. It is not text, it is form, and that form can have an infinite number of variations. In some cases form is its content. In some cases it resists form altogether.

“Bert finds Ernie at a typewriter having just completed what he calls ‘the greatest story ever told.’ ‘Here goes,’ says Ernie, reading from the beginning: ‘A, b, c, d, e, f, g ...’ He then cries through the sad part, ‘h, i, j, k, l, m, n ...,’ shouts the letters of the action sequence, ‘O! P! Q! R! S! T! U! ...’ and collects himself for the solemn conclusion, ‘... v, w, x ...’ stopping at ‘... y ...’ for risk of spoiling the end.”

(Paul Elliman recounting an episode of Sesame Street, “My Typographies,” 1998)



Marcel Duchamp, Disk inscribed with pun for use in the film ANEMIC CINEMA, produced by Duchamp with Man Ray and Marc Allégret. 1. MOSQUITOES DOMESTICS [HALF-STOCK] REQUESTED FOR A NITROGEN CURE ON THE CÔTE D'AZUR (1926). Collection Carroll Janis

aspas de astros	***
riscos de astros	///
pontos de astros	...
traços de astros	---
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lascas de astros	( (
pastos dos astros	==
pastos dos astros	==
bordados de astros	xxx
favos dos astros	! !
dardos dos astros	
alças dos astros	
mungos dos astros	***
ostras dos astros	ooo
rolêtas dos astros	c e
rolêtas de astros	c e
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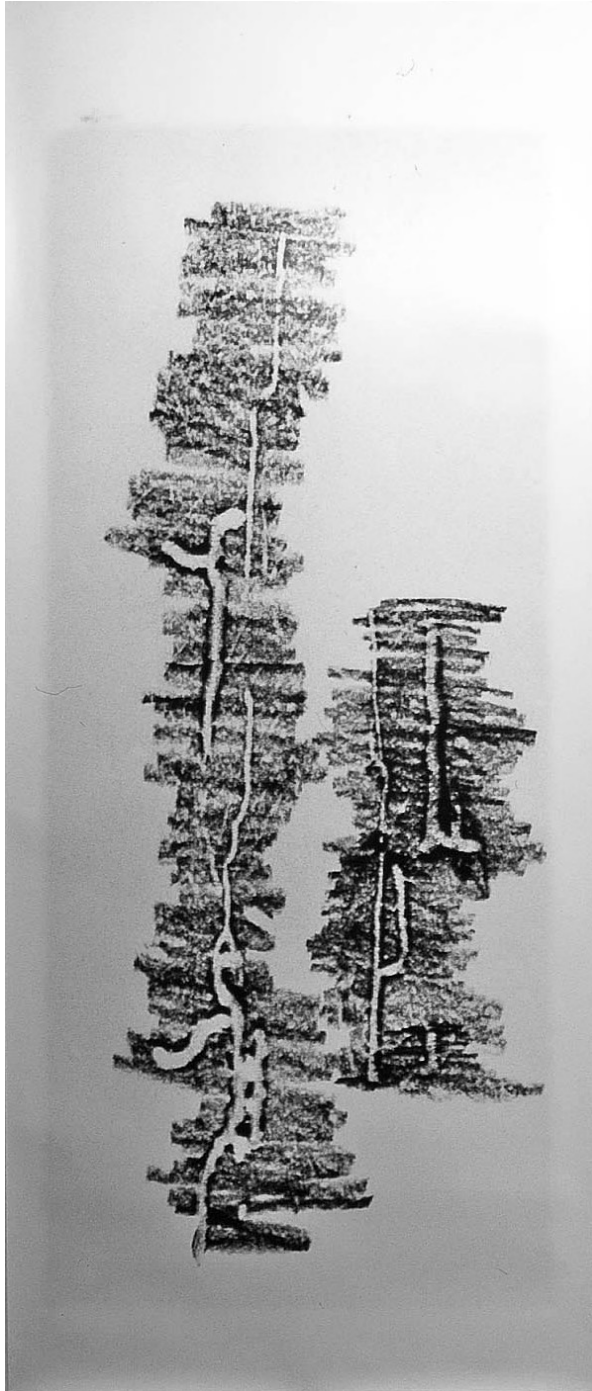


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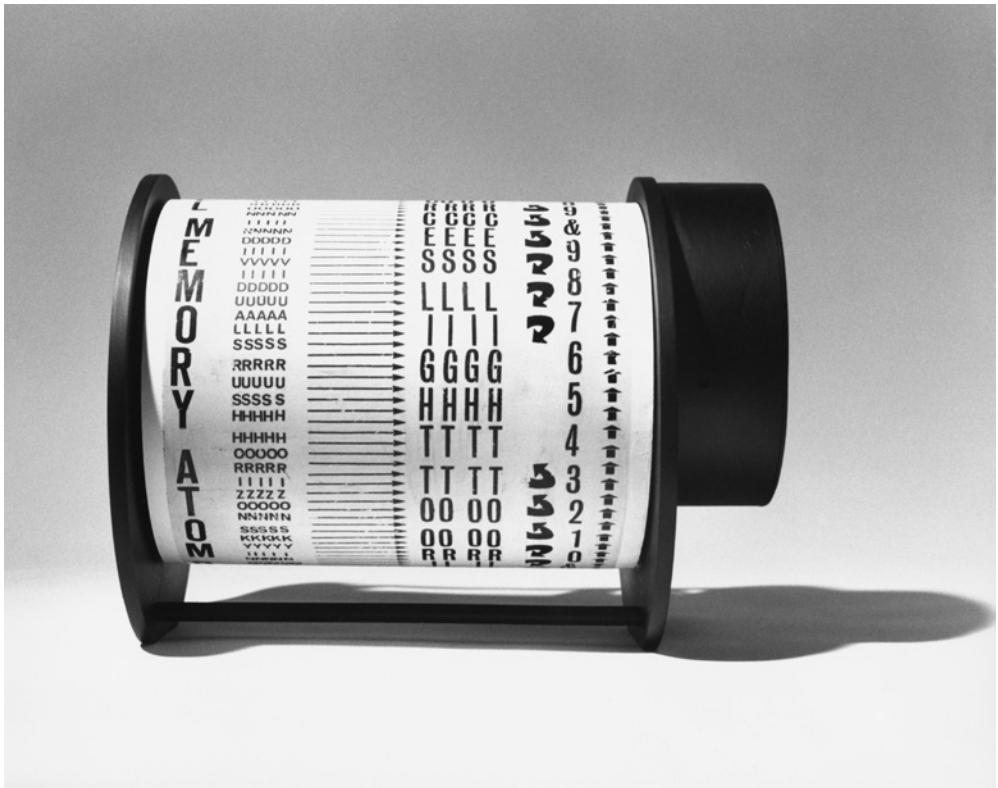
**Nora Schultz, DISCOVERY OF THE PRIMITIVE (2011). Courtesy the artist and dépendance, Brussels**

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**Trisha Donnelly, UNTITLED (2005). Courtesy Air de Paris, Paris**

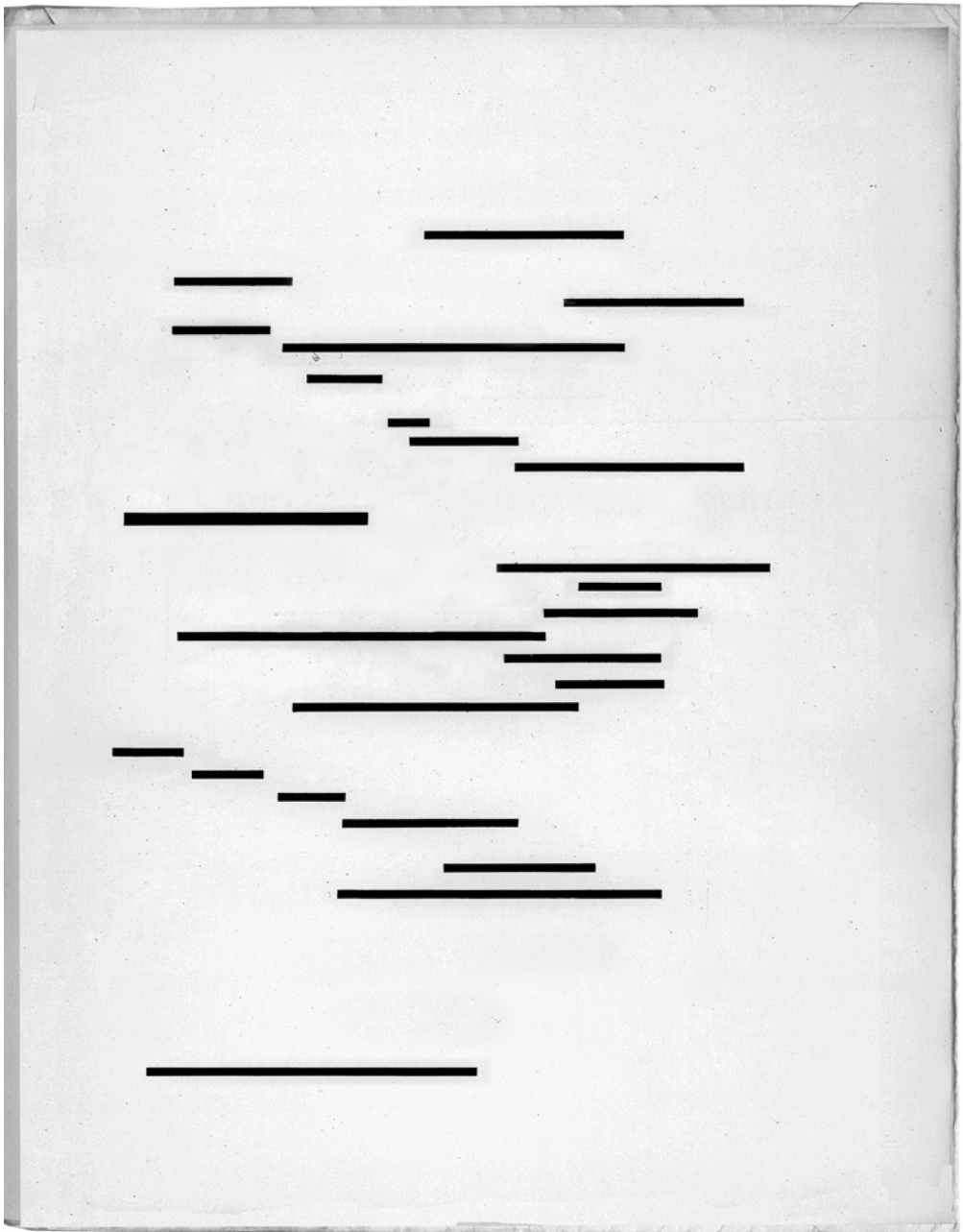
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**Liliane Lijn, ATOM BORN BEINGS (1962/63). Courtesy Liliane Lijn**



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**Marcel Broodthaers, page from UN COUP DE DÉS JAMAIS N'ABOLIRA LE HASARD (A CAST OF THE DICE WILL NEVER ABOLISH CHANCE) (1969). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase**

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**Henri Michaux, Mescaline Drawing (1960). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.  
Gift of Philip Johnson**

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**THIS LANGUAGE IS NOT DESCRIPTIVE OF REALITY BUT IS REALITY ITSELF.** Because it has equal stature with the tangible, it can be found in the world. Or created ex nihilo. Existing autonomously, it has, in Eugen Gomringer's words, "an organic function in society" and has the ability to reflect and or comment upon that society. It has the ability not to describe a truth but to create one.

**"Initially concrete poetry needed poets with wit; in the future I think it will need poets with character."**

(Eugen Gomringer, BETWEEN POETRY AND PAINTING, 1965)

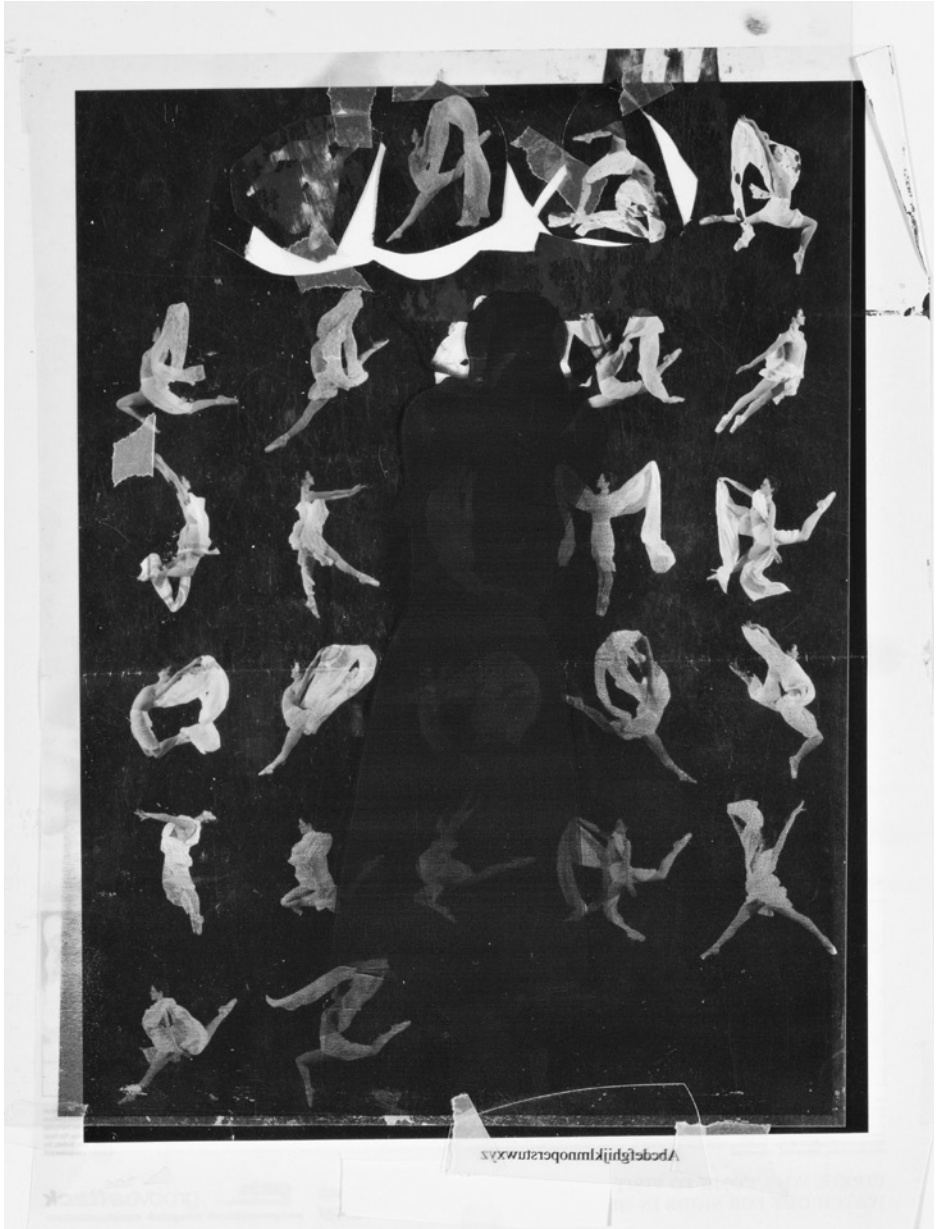


**Shannon Ebner, SCULPTURES INVOLONTAIRES (2006). Courtesy the artist and Wallspace, New York**





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**Paulina Olowska, X (STUDY) (2007). Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin**

**WAR  
IS  
OVER!**

**IF YOU WANT IT**

Love and Peace from John & Yoko

**Yoko Ono and John Lennon, WAR IS OVER! IF YOU WANT IT (c. 1972). The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York. The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection Gift**



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**Paul Elliman, FOUND FOUNT: DEAD SCISSORS (2004–present). Courtesy the artist**

## Acknowledgments

### Artists:

Vito Acconci, Carl Andre, Guillaume Apollinaire, Tauba Auerbach, Ei Arakawa and Nikolas Gambaroff, Marcel Broodthaers, William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, John Cage, Luis Camnitzer, Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, Henri Chopin, Guy de Cointet, Dexter Sinister, Trisha Donnelly, Marcel Duchamp, Shannon Ebner, Paul Elliman, Experimental Jetset, Ian Hamilton Finlay, John Giorno, Raoul Hausmann, Sharon Hayes, Karl Holmqvist, Jasper Johns, Kitasono Katue, Christopher Knowles, Ferdinand Kriwet, Liliane Lijn, El Lissitzky, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Henri Michaux, Bruce Nauman, Paulina Olowaska, Yoko Ono, Adam Pendleton, Kay Rosen, Dieter Roth, Mira Schendel, Nora Schultz, Kurt Schwitters, Robert Smithson, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Lawrence Weiner, and Emmett Williams.

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Philip Aarons and Shelley Fox Aarons; Air de Paris; Amer Abbas; Shane Akeroyd; Baltimore Museum of Art; Alexandra Bowes and Stephen Williamson; BQ, Berlin; Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York; Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin; private collection, courtesy Christine Burgin, New York; James Cahn; Jeremiah Collatz; Jan Kåre Fekene; John Giorno; Shane and Julie Campbell; Campoli Presti, London/Paris; Paula Cooper Gallery, New York; Josef Dalle Nogare; dépendance, Brussels; Martin and Rebecca Eisenberg; Marsea Goldberg, New Image Art; David Hoberman; Carroll Janis; Kevin King; Liliane Lijn; Lena and Johann König; Suzi and Scott Lustgarten; Ninah and Michael Lynne; Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; David Nolan Gallery, New York; The Over Holland Collection; The Pace Gallery; private collections; Jean Edward van Praet; Pro Choice, Vienna; Stacy and John Rubeli; Kay Rosen; John Solt; Supportico Lopez, Berlin, and Fondazione Morra, Naples; Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo; Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin; and Wallspace, New York.

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Chief Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Robert Okuda Fitzpatrick; Katharina Forero de Mund; Eivind Furnesvik; Hollis Goodall, Curator of Japanese Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Matthew Higgs; Kristen Hileman, Curator of Contemporary Art and Department Head, Baltimore Museum of Art; Hannah Hoffman; Alexis Johnson; Hannah Kauffman; Angie Keefer; Nicole Klagsbrun; Ferdinand Kriwet; Tom McDonough; Victoria Miro; Brigitte Morton; Cora Muennich; Noda Naotoshi, Setagaya Art Museum; Giti Nourbakhsh; Stefania Palumbo; Rifleman, London; Martin Roth, Director, Victoria & Albert Museum; and Lily Scholer.

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Special thanks to: Shane Akeroyd; Amer Abbas; Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna; Pro Choice, Vienna; Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo; Standard (OSLO); and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

This book, **BULLETINS OF THE SERVING LIBRARY #3**, edited with Angie Keefer, was published as **Dexter Sinister's** contribution to **ECSTATIC ALPHABETS/HEAPS OF LANGUAGE**, an exhibition organized by Laura Hoptman at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, from May 6 to August 27, 2012.

The exhibition is made possible by

 **HANJIN SHIPPING**

Major support is provided by Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley and by MoMA's Wallis Annenberg Fund for Innovation in Contemporary Art through the Annenberg Foundation.

Additional funding is provided by The Junior Associates of The Museum of Modern Art.

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