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
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)
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC Because

Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, Haroldo de Campos, and Ronaldo Azeredo,
Laurie 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)

Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Armand P. Bartos
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

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

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)
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

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!
TUMB
BTUMB

IF YOU WANT IT

Tuuumb! Tuuuum Tuuuum Tuuuum

Courtesy Experimental Jetset
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)
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

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

Karl Holmqvist, **UNTITLED** (2012). Courtesy the artist and Alex Zachary Peter Currie, New York
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

of things just pass things pure up size pass think it here/on to this, that is, to the s/in the first days of the year 1911, a badly dresse young man/teeth and fists, he smashed eternity to smithereens.

Then women were remembered in the icy fog./Late/He died like the sun/ studio last year while eating lemons./There, then, they did it ov/viii
11/11111/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 took him
into service, eously: wel appareled he was, and well monied, a might
/and said Now lustful whoreson, go/22/23/first and then fold and even
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, face them, they are check by/Steps, shops noses, ear
s, eyes/ a surface of/an apple As there were four where anyone seldom/
so/it must have been an awful sight, let me stealing away from my/tic
k/tick/t, noticeable, unmistakable (all all the left half of the hum/Six Works by/to/1e listeners/jut/gardens, and ec-plug in yo
ur hands, as well, there is a changing that can't/s means you, i mea
n that, j/Wy don't you tell every one about it, he said to her/His
attention was disturbed by the sudden lodging of a bee/bee/lath
up in the interesting hive his wife and baby bees/n point away. Come
to the po/of things just pass things pure up size pass think it here/on to this, that is, to the s/in the first days of the year 1911, a badly dressed young man/teeth and fists, he smashed eternity to smithereens. Then women were remembered in the icy fog./Late/He died like the sun/studio last year while eating lemons./There, then, they did it ov/viii
11/11111/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 took him
into service, eously: wel appareled he was, and well monied, a might
/and said Now lustful whoreson, go/22/23/first and then fold and even
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, face them, they are check by/Steps, shops noses, ear
s, eyes/ a surface of/an apple As there were four where anyone seldom/
so/it must have been an awful sight, let me stealing away from my/tic
tick/t, noticeable, unmistakable (all all the left half of the hum/Six Works by/to/1e listeners/jut/gardens, and ec-plug in yo
ur hands, as well, there is a changing that can't/s means you, i mea
n that, j/Wy don't you tell every one about it, he said to her/His
attention was disturbed by the sudden lodging of a bee/bee/lath
up in the interesting hive his wife and baby bees/n point away. Come
to the po/of things just pass things pure up size pass think it here/on to this, that is, to the s/in the first days of the year 1911, a badly dressed young man/teeth and fists, he smashed eternity to smithereens. Then women were remembered in the icy fog./Late/He died like the sun/studio last year while eating lemons./There, then, they did it ov/viii
11/11111/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 took him
into service, eously: wel appareled he was, and well monied, a might

Vito Acconci and Bernardette Mayer, 0 TO 9 no. 3 (1968). The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York
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)
EY·BEE
CEE·DEE
EE·EF·DJEE
EITCH·AI·JAY·KAY
EL·EM·EN·OH·PEE
KIEW·AR·ES
TEE·YEW·VEE
DUBBLYEW·EX
WAI&ZEE

Tauba Auerbach, HOW TO SPELL THE ALPHABET (2005). Private collection
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

IL PLEUT

L'incendie de vos voix de remèdes, comme elles durent, mortelles, même dans le souvenir,

The Louis E. Stern Collection
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)
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Nora Schultz, DISCOVERY OF THE PRIMITIVE (2011). Courtesy the artist and dépendance, Brussels
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Liliane Lijn, ATOM BORN BEINGS (1962/63). Courtesy Liliane Lijn
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Gift of Philip Johnson
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

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)

Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Kitasono Katue, PLASTIC POEM, published in VOU 133 (October 1972). Collection John Solt
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

Paulina Olowska, X (STUDY) (2007). Courtesy Galerie Buchholz, Cologne/Berlin
Laura Hoptman: THIS LANGUAGE IS ECSTATIC BECAUSE

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

Artists:

Lenders to the Exhibition:
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 Rubelli; Kay Rosen; John Solt; Supportico Lopez, Berlin, and Fondazione Morra, Naples; Taka Ishii Gallery, Tokyo; Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin; and Wallspace, New York.

MoMA Staff:
Eleonore Hugendubel


Other Friends and Colleagues:
Bob Bielecki; Sergio Bessa; Florence Bonnefous; Sabrina Buel, Christine Burgin; Casey Kaplan Gallery; Augusto de Campos; Katherine Chan; Pippa Cohen; Lauren Cornell; Michael Darling, James W. Alsdorf

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 Keever; Nicole Klagsbrun; Ferdinand Kriwet; Tom McDonough; Victoria Miro; Brigitte Morton; Cora Muench; Noda Naotoshi, Setagaya Art Museum; Giti Nourbakhsh; Stefania Palumbo; Riflemaker, London; Martin Roth, Director, Victoria & Albert Museum; and Lily Scholer.

/ 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 Keever, 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.

MoMA