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LANGUAGE IN VISUAL ART:
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Words have appeared in visual art since classical times, but until the modern era their use was generally restricted to a few specific functions. In the early twentieth century, the Cubists Braque and Picasso began using words in their paintings and collages in entirely new ways, and their innovation was quickly adopted by other artists. Words, phrases, and sentences were subsequently used by visual artists for a variety of purposes -- to refer to popular culture, to pose verbal puzzles, to engage with philosophy and semiotics, and for political and social commentary. Throughout the century, the use of language in visual art was dominated by conceptual artists, and the increasing role of language over time was symptomatic of the fact that visual art was progressively intended less as an aesthetic product, to be looked at, and increasingly as an intellectual activity, to be read. The prominence of language is yet another way in which the visual art of the twentieth century differs from all earlier periods, as a result of the increasingly extreme practices of conceptual artists after the development of a competitive market for advanced art in the late nineteenth century freed them from the constraints that had previously been imposed by governments and other powerful patrons.

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Introduction

A distinctive feature of visual art in the twentieth century is its use of language. Words had appeared in paintings and sculptures since classical times, but their use was generally restricted to a few specific functions. From an early date inscriptions served religious purposes, identifying the protagonists in a biblical scene or referring to a relevant biblical text. Artists' signatures identified the person responsible for a work, and dates were often included to specify when a work was completed. And artists sometimes included the title of a painting within the work's image.¹ In the early twentieth century, however, some artists began using language in their works for very different reasons. Over time this practice spread, as words and even sentences became more conspicuous in a number of artists' work. Eventually, in some cases language became more important than images, and for some artists words replaced images altogether.

The introduction of language into art for new purposes is a symptom of the increasingly conceptual nature of visual art during the twentieth century. The increasing acceptance of the use of language equally became an independent factor fueling the conceptual orientation of art, for the possibility of using language appealed to many young artists with conceptual goals: the example of important visual artists whose work featured language helped make visual art an attractive activity for many conceptually oriented artists, and provided them with points of departure for new conceptual innovations.

Word Counts

Determination of which twentieth-century artists made the most important use of language was done by surveying 13 textbooks, all of which covered the art of the entire century,

and all of which were published in 2000 or later. The ranking of Table 1 was made by counting all illustrations in these books of works that included letters or other inscriptions, excluding artists' signatures. The artists listed are the 20 who had the most such works illustrated in the books surveyed.

The inscriptions included in the works counted for Table 1 vary enormously, from a few stenciled letters or a word fragment torn from a newspaper, through a cartoon caption or the label of a commercial product, to full sentences or even paragraphs of printed text.

Understanding why artists used words in these many varied forms is central to this analysis of the role of language in twentieth-century art. But in spite of the diversity, the listing of artists in Table 1 provides a good basis for identifying the most influential uses of language in visual art in the past century. The following sections of this paper will consider how and why each of these artists used language, ordered chronologically by the most important appearances of language in their art.

Language in Art

In the fall of 1911, Georges Braque used stencils to paint letters and numerals on two paintings. On one, *Le Portugais*, the letters included the word "BAL."² This marked the introduction of lettering into Cubist painting. The act cannot have been a casual one: Braque had been working closely with Pablo Picasso in developing the new form of art, and the two were so sensitive to the appearance of their works that for a time they had put their signatures on the backs or sides of their paintings, in order not to interfere with the compositions.³ Picasso quickly seized on Braque's new practice. Before the year was out he had inscribed "MA JOLIE" at the bottom of his painting *Woman with a Guitar*, and the next year he prominently placed the letters

“JOU” on the first collage, *Still Life with Chair Caning*. Letters began to appear in almost all of the two artists’ paintings. When Braque made the first papier collé in 1912, *Fruit Dish and Glass*, he included the letters “BAR.” And when Picasso responded with his first papier collé, *Guitar, Sheet Music and Glass*, one of the pieces of paper pasted to it was torn from a newspaper, including the letters “JOU.”⁴

Braque’s use of a stencil had set in motion a process that would have an enormous impact on both the form and content of advanced art in the twentieth century. Braque would later say that he had done this “as part of a desire to come as close as possible to a certain kind of reality.” The stenciled letters called attention to the two-dimensional surface of the painting, and thus created a contrast, effectively pushing other elements of the painting back into space, and calling attention to the solidity of the shaded facets of the objects depicted: as Braque put it, “they were forms which could not be distorted because, being quite flat, the letters existed outside space and their presence in the painting, by contrast, enabled one to distinguish between objects situated in space and those outside it.”⁵ John Golding observed that the stenciled letters and numbers also served to emphasize the nature of Cubist paintings as *objects*. Picasso and Braque often spoke of “le tableau objet,” and Golding argues that this represented a new concept of paintings “as constructed objects having their own independent existence, as small, self-contained worlds, not reflecting the outside world but recreating it in a completely new form.” The artificial letters and numerals emphasized the novelty of the form of the paintings because - just like the pieces of cloth or paper, or fragments of glass or tin that the Cubists would later attach to their canvases - they were foreign to the traditional practice of painting, and therefore made the viewer aware of the material existence of the work as an object. Braque’s first use of a stencil thus became a

conceptual prelude to both collage and papier collé.⁶

Braque's use of letters also affected the content of his paintings. The word "BAL" in *Le Portugais* referred to a popular dance, and this reference to low culture was not an isolated event. Picasso's inscription, "Ma Jolie," was not only a coded reference to a new love who would soon replace his current companion, but also the refrain of a song that was popular at the moment.⁷ And when Picasso began to attach pieces of newspaper to his paintings, he consistently cut them from the sensationalistic *Le Journal*, an inexpensive paper aimed at a wide audience, rather than more sophisticated newspapers intended for more prosperous readers.⁸ By bringing popular images and artifacts squarely into their new art, Kirk Varnedoe observed that Braque's lettering and Picasso's enthusiastic response "initiated a sequence of events that was decisive for the whole future process of modern art's engagement with the materials of popular culture." The departure could not have failed to amaze the advanced art world, because of the stark contrast between the austerity and cerebrality of the images the Cubists had developed by 1911 and the banality of the references to popular culture that they introduced thereafter. Varnedoe commented that "having perfected an exquisite, chamber-music harmony, Picasso and Braque seem to have decided that the perfect next step was to add a kazoo counterpoint."⁹

At a general level, the introduction of letters into their works by Braque and Picasso underscored the radically conceptual nature of their innovation in creating Cubism. Letters that did not function as illusionistic elements of images were obviously a conceptual device, and the challenge they posed to viewers to decipher their meanings within these paintings added another level of difficulty for viewers already faced with the problem of interpreting the fragmented motifs of these works. Conceptual artists had made images that carried symbolic meanings

throughout the history of western art, but the signs they used for these were generally familiar and easily understood by their intended audiences. What was novel in the practice of Picasso and Braque, so much so as to inaugurate a new era of conceptual art, was the use of signs that were not generally familiar to any audience, and that consequently had to be studied and learned, like a new or unfamiliar language. As early as 1915 Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, who was the dealer for Picasso and Braque during their collaboration, wrote explicitly of Cubism as a new language, and noted that its images could not be immediately understood “when the spectator is unfamiliar with the new language.”¹⁰ Picasso echoed this metaphor in 1923, when he told Marius de Zayas that “The fact that for a long time cubism has not been understood and that even today there are people who cannot see anything in it, means nothing. I do not read English, an English book is a blank book to me. This does not mean that the English language does not exist, and why should I blame anybody else but myself if I cannot understand what I know nothing about?”¹¹ Fragments of words, or incomplete sentences, were obvious puzzles, and they reinforced the basic message that the entire works in which they appeared were puzzles. But letters and words were a particular kind of puzzle, for they are associated with reading, and their inclusion thus carried the implication that Cubism itself was a symbolic language, that the observer had to decipher or translate. The letters in Cubist paintings have therefore been seen as indicators of a transition in conceptual art, in which spectators would no longer simply be viewers, but would instead become readers.

Art historians have attempted to find political or social commentary in the specific newspaper clippings Picasso chose to include in his *papiers collés*. Yet the ambiguous fragments of words and phrases he used do not appear to offer decisive support for these specific

interpretations, nor does the fact that he offered virtually no independent statements on these subjects. Varnedoe concluded that “An attempt to decrypt from these works specific messages about the epoch would seem simplistic, in a context where elusive complexity is the defining order; and it would go against the grain of the way the words, and the structure of the works as a whole, consistently work to subvert single-minded clarity. The world of words the Cubists made in these *papiers collés* is not merely an edited shorthand for the one that surrounded them.”

Varnedoe observed that one consequence of this lack of a specific message was that the Cubists’ new device could be adapted to many varied purposes: “Cubist works with words, like Cubism in general, appeared to many contemporaries to provide a language without an ideology, in a time when there were numerous ideologies in search of a language. If the inner circle who made this language never said what it meant, others nonetheless quickly saw what they could do with it.”¹²

In Moscow, Kazimir Malevich had already been following the lead of the Cubists from a distance, and in 1914 he made a series of paintings that transformed the Cubists’ use of language for his own purposes. In contrast to the subdued palette of Picasso and Braque, the bright colors of Malevich’s paintings suggest his excitement with the new methods of Cubism, as does the intricacy of his use of collage, with many more small painted and pasted elements placed against or upon each other, and with more abrupt transitions than in the more sedate compositions of the Cubists. So for example Rainer Crone and David Moos described Malevich’s *Lady at the Poster Column* of 1914, a large painting with a wide variety of collage elements, as a “sensorial bombardment of pictorial and ‘verbal’ information that confronts the viewer in a similar fashion to a passerby absorbing advertisements and announcements.”¹³ Although the specific words and

phrases resist unambiguous interpretation, both the active compositions of Malevich's paintings and the use of fragments from both Russian and French newspapers appear to express Malevich's enthusiasm about the cosmopolitanism and dynamism of life in the modern city, and his approval of the sophistication of life in Moscow in particular.¹⁴

In view of the fact that Marcel Duchamp's avowed primary goal was to reverse what he considered the unfortunate tendency of modern painting to create visual products and instead "to put painting once again at the service of the mind," it is not surprising that he quickly embraced the Cubists' introduction of language into art.¹⁵ And since Duchamp's "mania for change" made him avoid repetition, it is not surprising that he used language in a series of very different ways in his art.¹⁶ In 1912, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* shocked both the public and Duchamp's fellow artists in part because of its title, which Duchamp inscribed in block capitals at the bottom of the canvas. Duchamp later recalled that much of the negative reaction to the painting at the time stemmed from the attitude that "a nude should be respected. It should not descend a staircase because that is ridiculous."¹⁷ Indeed, when the artist's two brothers famously came to break the news to him that the painting had not been accepted by the 1912 Salon des Indépendants because of its perceived challenge to Cubism, their mission was in fact not to tell him of a rejection, but to urge him to alter the painting in order to make it acceptable: according to Duchamp's account of the meeting, they asked "'Couldn't you at least change the title?' They thought it was too much a literary title, in a bad sense – in a caricatural way... Even their little revolutionary temple couldn't understand that a nude could be *descending* the stairs. Anyway, the general idea was to have some changes, something to make it possible to show it, because they didn't want to reject it completely." Duchamp declined, and retrieved the painting.¹⁸ He

claimed he did not explain his intransigence to his brothers at the time, but when he referred to the episode in an interview years later, he indicated that he considered that title and its appearance on the image a significant conceptual innovation. Thus he noted that the furor over *Nude Descending* was “Probably because of the shock value due to its title, which by the way already predicted the use of words as a means of adding color or, shall we say, as a means of adding to the number of colors in a work.”¹⁹

Later in 1912, Duchamp painted *The Passage from the Virgin to the Bride*, and again wrote the name of the painting at the bottom. Like *Nude Descending*, *The Passage* was concerned with the representation of time. In the later painting, however, Duchamp might have used typography to communicate a sly message. Thus Duchamp wrote *LE PASSAGE* in capitals, and *de la vierge à la mariée* in lower case. Thierry de Duve suggested that this may stress that the passage in question in fact occurs at a single moment in time.²⁰

In 1913 Duchamp created the first of his readymades, which would become one of the most controversial artistic innovations of the century. In a brief speech he made about that innovation in 1961, Duchamp commented on the role of language: “One important characteristic was the short sentence which I occasionally inscribed on the ‘readymade.’ That sentence instead of describing the object like a title was meant to carry the mind of the spectator towards other regions more verbal.”²¹ Perhaps the most celebrated example of this occurred in 1919, when Duchamp bought a postcard of the *Mona Lisa*, pencilled on the image a mustache and goatee, and wrote at the bottom “L.H.O.O.Q.” Read aloud in French, the letters produce a short sentence that is generally translated as “She’s got a hot ass.”²² The juvenile word puzzle reinforced the offensive defacement of the portrait’s image to produce what Varnedoe described as “a cynical,

knowing irreverence, and ... sniping use of crudely barbed wit against established shibboleths.”

Varnedoe characterized Duchamp’s presentation of the postcard as a readymade as “arguably the first modern work to incorporate graffiti into its strategies.”²³

Stuart Davis developed a distinctive early style that combined the flat colored planes of synthetic Cubism with characteristically American symbols and images. During the 1920s, in paintings that mimicked collage, Davis paid homage to Lucky Strike and other popular American cigarette brands, copying their colorful packaging and bold lettering in compositions that sometimes also included newspapers and comic strips, with legible headlines and titles. Davis’ jazz age celebrations of popular and commercial images have often been considered an anticipation of American Pop art of the 1960s.²⁴ In 1921, Davis recorded his belief that he was bringing to painting an artistic appreciation for a distinctively American modernity that had previously been expressed only in poetry: “I feel that my tobacco pictures are an original note without parallel so far as I can see... In poetry we have Lindsay, Masters, Sandburg and Williams, all in some way direct descendants of Whitman our one big artist. I too feel the thing Whitman felt and I too will express it in pictures – America – the wonderful place we live in.”²⁵

Four of the artists listed in Table 1 – Max Ernst, Raoul Hausmann, Francis Picabia, and Kurt Schwitters – were members of the Dada movement, which originated in 1916 as a protest against World War I. Both Dada and its successor, Surrealism, were dedicated to making art from the irrational and the unconscious. Both also began as literary projects before they expanded into visual art. For this reason, William Rubin observed that “The preoccupation with the use of words *in* images, and vice versa, was natural for the poet-painters of Dada and Surrealism.” He also noted that language played a greater role in Dada’s art than in that of their

predecessors: “The Dadaists went far beyond the Cubists in composing pictures with letters and words connected syntactically.”²⁶

Dada was not a style but an attitude, and the four artists of Table 1 illustrate its diversity. All made art that differed greatly in appearance, and their use of language was equally diverse. Ernst devised a novel way of making collages, in which random combinations of photographs, newspaper clippings, and illustrations from advertising catalogues would suggest new and unexpected forms to him. He would then develop these, by drawing or painting, and often by adding words: “thus I obtained a faithful fixed image of my hallucination and transformed into revealing dramas my most secret desires – from what had been before only some banal pages of advertising.”²⁷ Ernst merged mechanical and biomorphic shapes to create “enigmatic forms and fantastic beasts,” and while his works are obviously symbolic, they do not yield obvious messages or clear interpretations.²⁸ The titles of his paintings added to their enigmatic quality, so Ernst often inscribed them below the images, as he did, for example, in his first major Surrealist painting in 1921, writing “CELEBES” below the image of a mechanical monster that bore some resemblance to an elephant. Much of Ernst’s audience would not have been expected to recognize the painting’s title, *The Elephant of Celebes*, or its subject as references to an obscene German schoolboy rhyme.²⁹

Hausmann was one of a group of Berlin Dada artists who pioneered the use of photomontage. Together with Hannah Höch and John Heartfield, he used photographic images from newspapers and magazines, combined with words and sentences cut from newspapers, to produce biting political satire and angry social commentary. Berlin Dada was the most explicitly political of the Dada groups, and relied most heavily on photographs and texts drawn from the

mass media for its art, in order to “attack the bourgeoisie with distortions of its own communications imagery.”³⁰

Picabia was a close friend of Duchamp, and shared the latter’s taste for a number of artistic devices, including symbolic mechanical forms and the use of verbal puzzles. Picabia inscribed the title “UDNIE” on one of his most important paintings, and “EDTAONISL” on another; numerous attempts to decipher the meanings of those words have been no more definitive than suggested interpretations of the paintings’ abstract forms. When a journalist asked him to explain the titles, Picabia compared his work to musical harmonies, and asked: “why not accept a sign that does not evoke accepted conventions?”³¹

Schwitters created a distinctively personal form of Dada that originated in the structure and materials of Cubist collage. Yet instead of placing a few pieces of newspaper into a painted composition, Schwitters made compositions by fitting together large numbers of small items drawn from his preferred materials – discarded tram tickets, receipts, and other small pieces of waste paper and cloth – so that the collage elements became the primary features of the works, and retained their original identity to a greater extent than in Cubist paintings or the collages of Berlin Dada.³² As a result, the words printed on many of the elements in Schwitters’ collages do not pose puzzles, or ask for symbolic interpretation, but instead contribute to the compositions as if they were abstract forms.

Language played a central role in the single most famous painting ever produced by René Magritte, a leading Surrealist. In 1929 Magritte painted *The Treachery of Images*, in which the meticulously painted image of a briar pipe was placed above the inscription “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (this is not a pipe). The painting was one of scores of works that Magritte called “word-

pictures,” that he began making in 1927 and continued to produce throughout the remaining 40 years of his life. The format of the painting recalls traditional grammar-school object lessons, in which a photograph or careful drawing of a common object is presented above a caption with its name, and the parallel is reinforced by the schoolroom penmanship that Magritte mimicked for the inscription.³³ The imitation of the familiar and trustworthy object lesson makes the unexpected and anomalous denial of the inscription all the more jarring, and this is precisely what has made the painting so successful. For instead of instructing viewers in vocabulary, Magritte was demonstrating a proposition from an essay titled “Words and Images” that he wrote in 1929: “Everything tends to suggest that there is little connection between an object and what represents it.”³⁴ This statement was a product of Magritte’s interest in the writings of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who stressed the arbitrary nature of the relationship between words and the objects they name. Implications of *The Treachery of Images* include the facts that an image of a pipe is not an actual pipe, and that there is no natural relationship between the word and the object. The painting’s controversion of the way in which we are accustomed to using language makes it an example of Magritte’s contention that “my paintings are a kind of defiance of ‘common sense.’”³⁵ *The Treachery of Images* was the single most famous instance of what Suzi Gablik described as the mission of Magritte’s life: “to overthrow our sense of the familiar, to sabotage our habits, to put the real world on trial.”³⁶

In 1956, the English artist Richard Hamilton made a small collage, *Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?*, that embraced popular culture by including product labels and other commercial imagery carefully cut from magazine advertisements, comic books, and newspapers. The work was a caricatural but nonetheless enthusiastic British view of

contemporary American consumer culture, and its words, including the logo for Ford automobiles, the title of Al Jolson's movie *The Jazz Singer*, and the label of a Tootsie pop, were a key element in establishing Hamilton's belief that mass entertainment and modern technology could make a positive contribution to fine art.³⁷

Jasper Johns' early paintings famously portrayed familiar objects – “things the mind already knows.”³⁸ In some cases, words appeared on objects he painted or sculpted, including cans of Savarin Coffee and Ballantine Ale. In other cases Johns stenciled letters or numbers on his paintings, as part of his search “for subject matter that was recognizable.” Like the flags and targets he had painted, letters and numbers became common objects in an uncommon setting: “everyone had an everyday relationship to numbers and letters, but never before had they seen them in the context of a painting. I wanted to make people see something new.”³⁹ In other paintings, Johns achieved a different kind of surprise by stenciling the names of colors on his paintings, often – but not always – in a color different from the color named. He explained that “I liked it that the meaning of the words either denied or coincided in the colored paintings... Those paintings to me were an accomplishment in ambiguity that previous paintings had not matched.”⁴⁰

It is not surprising that the two leading painters of the Pop art movement appear in Table 1. The most famous images of both Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein included language, in Warhol's case the labels of the Campbell's soup cans that introduced Pop to a wide audience in 1962, and in Lichtenstein's the phrases that appear in bubbles to communicate the thoughts or exclamations of comic strip characters, or the onomatopoetic words that provide the sound effects for the explosions or collisions in those same enlarged comic strip frames. The language

of these paintings is obviously a key element, for the carefully designed labels of popular products in a supermarket or the bold and simple language of comic strip characters are essential to their identity, and this is a basic concern of Pop art. Thus the critic Lawrence Alloway observed that “The communication system of the twentieth century is, in a special sense, Pop Art’s subject.”⁴¹ The selection of familiar images by Warhol, Lichtenstein and their colleagues allowed “American Pop art of the 1960s[to] become, more swiftly and perhaps more widely than any other kind of modern art, genuinely popular.”⁴²

Toward Language as Art

In the work of all the artists surveyed to this point, language appeared as an adjunct to images: in most cases words played a clearly subordinate role, while in a few cases words were central, and might even be considered as important as the images. During the 1960s, however, visual artists began to feature language more prominently: for some artists words became more important than images, and for others words replaced images altogether, as words effectively became the images. Four artists who appear in Table 1 – Marcel Broodthaers, Joseph Kosuth, Ed Ruscha, and Bruce Nauman – represent this new tendency as it appeared in the ’60s, while two others – Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer – illustrate its development beyond that decade.

Broodthaers was a starving Surrealist poet who publicly declared in 1964 that he had decided to make visual art in order “to sell something and succeed in life.” Inspired by the success of Pop art, “The idea of inventing something insincere finally crossed my mind, and I set to work straightaway.”⁴³ His first sculpture consisted of a package of the remaining copies of a book of his poetry, half-embedded in plaster. The books remained visible, but they could not be opened unless they were removed from the plaster. Broodthaers intended the work to pose a

frustrating choice for the viewer: “Here you cannot read the book without destroying its sculptural aspect.” Yet he observed that viewers did not recognize this problem at all: he was the only one who saw the irony in the fact that his poems had had no significant audience, but that an object made entirely of those poems succeeded in attracting a sizeable audience after the poems were made inaccessible.⁴⁴ Broodthaers devoted much of his efforts to a critique of the institutions of the art world, with a series of works that involved what he considered the contradictory relationship between artistic and commercial values. The most ambitious of these was a simulated museum, an installation that included a wide variety of objects and displays, as well as all the kinds of equipment necessary to transport and display art in a museum. Words played a prominent role in this notional modern art museum, for in addition to signs specifying hours of admission and other practical information for visitors, every exhibit had a card reading “This is not a work of art.” The latter stemmed directly from Broodthaers’ fascination with Magritte’s caption, “This is not a pipe.” Broodthaers’ target was what he considered the arbitrary ability of museums to confer value on objects by declaring them to be art and displaying them: since his museum was fictitious, his signs testified to the fact that he lacked this ability.⁴⁵

While still a student at New York’s School of Visual Arts, Kosuth made *One and Three Chairs*, which would become his single most celebrated work.⁴⁶ It consists of a wooden folding chair, a photograph of that chair, and an enlarged photograph of the dictionary definition of the word “chair.” A different chair would be used in each location where the work was exhibited, and a new photograph would be taken of that chair. Kosuth liked this procedure because “it meant you could have an art work which was that *idea* of an art work, and its formal components weren’t important.”⁴⁷ In a subsequent series titled *Art as Idea as Idea*, Kosuth eliminated two of

the three elements, and these works consisted exclusively of photostats of dictionary definitions of selected words.

Early in his career, Kosuth decided that being an artist meant questioning the nature of art. This couldn't be done using painting or other traditional means, because to use these implicitly accepted the nature of art. His solution lay in the use of language: "It seemed to be the only possibility with the potential for being a neutral non-material." Making works entirely out of language avoided "the mystified experience of aesthetic contemplation... Texts are human marks, language is daily, banal; no magical worlds to enter, no theatrical suspension." Using only language allowed him to focus on the essential: "Works of art are analytic propositions."⁴⁸ Kosuth has consistently maintained the extreme conceptual position that "art's viability is not connected to the presentation of visual...experience," and his admirers agree; so for example the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard observed that "Kosuth's work is a meditation on writing."⁴⁹

Language has played an important role in Ruscha's paintings throughout his career. He initially became known for his images of such California icons as Standard gas stations, the Hollywood sign, and the 20th Century Fox logo, all of which prominently featured words. From the mid-1960s he increasingly painted single words, often portraying them as three-dimensional objects. He explained his interest in words as a result of the influence of the printed media: "I guess I'm a child of communications... I felt newspapers, magazines, books – words – to be more meaningful than what some damn oil painter was doing." The words he selected came from popular culture: "The content was important... I responded to contemporary life, city life; the words I picked were pulled off the street, for their street power." Once the words were chosen, the painting had been conceived: "I don't know what motivates me, but each of the works is

premeditated. I don't stand in front of a blank canvas waiting for inspiration." What matters to him is the effect of the language on him: "It might be the power of the word or words that I'm glorifying." His paintings are made from his ideas, but they are not designed to send messages: "Whether or not the work communicates anything to anyone is not important to me. The work is my indulgence. I don't set out to get something across." In general, Ruscha distrusts art as communication: "That's where the trouble begins, when artists try to communicate."⁵⁰ But the words in his paintings take on visual interest as objects from the clever and often elegant designs Ruscha devises for them: as Peter Schjeldahl put it, "Ruscha makes loaded words and phrases sit for the their portraits."⁵¹

Nauman gave up painting while he was in art school because "I couldn't get enough of what I was interested in into paintings. For example, language."⁵² He has made language into three-dimensional forms, and presented it in photographs and neon signs. Whatever the medium, Nauman's concern is with the properties of words. His use of words was influenced by Wittgenstein's discussion of language games. As Arthur Danto observed, Nauman often works by taking words apart: "Thus he finds the word EAT in DEATH. Or he finds that EROS spelled backward is SORE. He discovers shapes within the shapes of words or expressions, and presents them to us as if they mean something beyond the fact that one shape occurs within another. One genre of his work consists in neon signs, in which, for example, we are to join him in seeking the connection between VIOLINS and VIOLENCE and SILENCE... Is there a connection? Other, that is, than at the level of sound?"⁵³ It is unlikely that Nauman would be troubled by Danto's skepticism. In a 1987 interview, Nauman was asked whether he really meant the statement presented by one of his celebrated early neons, which read *The True Artist Helps the World by*

Revealing Mystic Truths. His response was non-committal: “It’s one of those things you say to figure out what you think about it yourself.” He explained that his work wasn’t intended to answer questions: “it’s more that I figure out what those questions are.”⁵⁴

Kruger and Holzer both became prominent during the 1980s. Both exemplify a novel phenomenon of the time, of artists using the technologies of advertising and the mass media to attempt to reach a public much larger than the usual audience for advanced art. Kruger and Holzer did this in order to provoke and influence public discourse: both are examples of the artist as activist, and of the use of art as a political instrument.

Kruger began her career as an extremely successful graphic designer, as she became the chief designer of *Mademoiselle* magazine at the age of 22. Her experience in advertising taught her the importance of creating a sense of immediacy and urgency, and when she became an artist she created a distinctive format that used language and photography as a vehicle for social criticism. Her work aimed to make people aware of how they are unconsciously indoctrinated by the many forms of propaganda that surround and bombard them in their daily lives. Danto commented on the intent of one of her most celebrated messages: “‘I shop therefore I am’ was meant to bring to consciousness what, when one thought it through, was not simply a fairly innocent distraction but a kind of willing collaboration in a social system. The shopper is an agent of her own oppression. The work is a piece of consciousness-raising.”⁵⁵ More generally, Linda Weintraub concluded that “Kruger subverts established ideological and economic values by inserting an outsider’s perspective into the information stream. She asserts the female point of view.” Kruger’s goal has been to transform passive observers into active thinkers: “her work fortifies the public against the perils of mind control.”⁵⁶

Holzer gave up abstract painting while she was an art student, and began to make art from language: “I wanted to write so that I could be very direct. I could say exactly what I wanted on any subject, and I could address specific topics. This is impossible to do with abstract painting. That’s how I came to use language. I had the desire to be explicit and I felt the need to study dearly held beliefs.”⁵⁷ Her texts have appeared in a wide range of forms often devoted to advertising, including posters, t-shirts, magazines, billboards, television, and her signature medium, LED (light-emitting diode) signs.⁵⁸ She initially used electronic signs simply in order to reach a large audience, but she found that “A great feature of the signs is their capacity to move, which I love because it’s so much like the spoken word: you can emphasize things; you can roll and pause, which is the kinetic equivalent to inflection in the voice.”⁵⁹ Her most celebrated work, a series of several hundred aphorisms called *Truisms* that she made early in her career, were intended as political activism, but not as advocacy of any specific position – indeed, the claims of individual truisms often contradict each other. Holzer has explained that the goal was “to show that truths as experienced by individuals are valid. I wanted to give each assertion equal weight in hopes that the whole series would instill some sense of tolerance in the onlooker.”⁶⁰ She is concerned with the visual presentation of her art, but each work begins with a text: “Language has been the core because the writing holds most of the subject matter.”⁶¹

Conclusion

Prior to the modern era, when words appeared in paintings for purposes other than to identify the artist, they usually served conceptual ends – to identify the figures in a religious painting, to make clear the allegorical content of an image, or to specify the identity and position of a person shown by a portrait. Words rarely appeared in works by experimental painters, who

were generally concerned with images rather than messages. This pattern continued in modern art, even as words began to be used for a variety of new purposes. Remarkably, all 20 artists in Table 1 – those twentieth-century artists who have the most works using language illustrated in art history textbooks – are conceptual artists.

Braque and Picasso introduced letters and words into their paintings for formal reasons, and this motive was a consideration for many of the artists who followed them in the practice. But the Cubists also used language to refer to popular culture, and this intention ran through many later artists' use of language, including Malevich, Davis, Hamilton, Warhol, Lichtenstein, and Ruscha. Duchamp quickly followed the Cubists in using language, but since his constant concern was to increase the conceptual orientation of visual art, he consistently used letters and words to make puns and to pose verbal puzzles. His friend Picabia appears to have done the same, and his admirer Johns later followed suit. A succession of artists used language to engage with philosophy and semiotics: prominent figures considered here were Magritte, Broodthaers, Kosuth, and Nauman. And a number of artists used language for political or social commentary. The Berlin Dada artists, of whom Hausmann was a leading member, pioneered this practice, and they were followed in it by many others later in the century, including Kruger and Holzer.

Language has played a prominent role in the visual art of the past century, and this is one more way in which the twentieth century differs significantly from all earlier periods. The use of words in paintings and other genres spread very rapidly after Braque's initial stencilings of 1911, and the uses to which visual artists put words quickly proliferated. The twentieth century was a time of extended conceptual innovation, and language is a powerful and versatile conceptual tool. Once Braque and Picasso had pioneered its use in painting, many other conceptual visual

artists recognized the value of words, and even texts, for their own purposes. The diversity of the specific uses of language surveyed above is symptomatic of the increasing diversity over time in the conceptual uses of visual art. Throughout the century, the increasing role of language was an obvious product of the fact that much of visual art was progressively less something to be looked at, and increasingly something to be read. One end-point of this tendency occurred at an exhibition in 1972, as the critic Brian O'Doherty observed of Joseph Kosuth's installation at Leo Castelli's New York gallery that "It is not a looking room; it is a reading room."⁶²

Footnotes

I thank Rob Jensen for suggestions and discussions.

1. Louisa Matthews, "The Painter's Presence: Signatures in Venetian Renaissance Pictures," *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (December 1998), pp. 616-48.
2. Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *High and Low* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1990), p. 23.
3. Brassai, *Conversations with Picasso* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 93; Alex Danchev, *Georges Braque* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2005), p. 113.
4. David Cottington, *Cubism and Its Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), pp. 122-31.
5. John Golding, *Cubism: A History and an Analysis, 1907-1914*, revised edition (Boston: Boston Book and Art Shop, 1968), pp. 92-93.
6. Golding, *Cubism*, pp. 93-95.
7. Varnedoe and Gopnik, *High and Low*, p. 40; John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, Vol. 2 (New York: Random House, 1996), p. 222.
8. Varnedoe and Gopnik, *High and Low*, pp. 27-32.
9. Varnedoe and Gopnik, *High and Low*, pp. 23, 39.
10. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *The Rise of Cubism* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1949), pp. 12-15.
11. Alfred Barr, *Picasso* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), p. 270.
12. Varnedoe and Gopnik, *High and Low*, pp. 47-49.
13. Rainer Crone and David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 107.
14. Varnedoe and Gopnik, *High and Low*, pp. 54-55.
15. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson, eds., *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989), p. 125.

16. Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1987), p. 37.
17. Alice Goldfarb Marquis, *Marcel Duchamp* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), p. 99.
18. Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), pp. 81-83.
19. Katharine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 83.
20. Thierry de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 41.
21. Sanouillet and Peterson, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, p. 141.
22. Tomkins, *Duchamp*, p. 221.
23. Varnedoe and Gopnik, *High and Low*, pp. 77-78.
24. Lowery Sims, ed., *Stuart Davis* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991), pp. 148-51, 174-75; Varnedoe and Gopnik, *High and Low*, pp. 294-97.
25. Sims, *Stuart Davis*, p. 151.
26. William Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1968), p. 94.
27. Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948), p. 14.
28. Rubin, *Dada Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, p. 50.
29. John Russell, *Max Ernst* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1967), pp. 64-66; Fiona Bradley, *Surrealism* (London: Tate Gallery Publishing, 1997), p. 28.
30. Rubin, *Dada Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, pp. 42-46.
31. William Camfield, *Francis Picabia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 59-62.
32. John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 85.
33. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), p. 214.
34. David Sylvester, *Magritte* (Antwerp: Mercatorfonds, 1992), p. 212.
35. Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 14.

36. Gablik, *Magritte*, p. 9.
37. Richard Hamilton, *Collected Words, 1953-1982* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), pp. 42-43.
38. Jasper Johns, *Writings, Sketchbook Notes, Interviews* (NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1996), p. 82.
39. Johns, *Writings*, p. 136.
40. David Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 163.
41. Steven Madoff, ed., *Pop Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 170.
42. Varnedoe and Gopnik, *High and Low*, p. 335.
43. Foster, et. al. *Art Since 1900*, p. 549; Sam Hunter, John Jacobus, and Daniel Wheeler, *Modern Art*, third ed. (New York: Vendome Press, 2004), p. 364.
44. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 871.
45. Hunter, Jacobus, and Wheeler, *Modern Art* p. 365.
46. David Galenson, *Artistic Capital* (NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 129.
47. Joseph Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), p. 50.
48. Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After*, pp. 91, 180, 20.
49. Kosuth, *Art After Philosophy and After*, pp. 22, xv.
50. Ed Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 150, 225, 253, 254, 281, 298.
51. Peter Schjeldahl, *The "7 Days" Art Columns, 1988-1990* (Great Barrington, Mass.): The Figures, 1990), p. 76.
52. Robert Morgan, ed., *Bruce Nauman* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 166.
53. Arthur Danto, *The Madonna of the Future* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 140.
54. Morgan, *Bruce Nauman*, p. 269.

55. Arthur Danto, *Unnatural Wonders* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2005), p. 64.
56. Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over* (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, 1996), pp. 194, 196.
57. Michael Auping, *Jenny Holzer* (New York: Universe, 1992), p. 73.
58. Auping, *Jenny Holzer*, p. 11.
59. Jeanne Siegel, ed., *Artwords 2: Discourse on the Early 80s* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), p. 294.
60. Siegel, *Artwords 2*, p. 289.
61. Auping, *Jenny Holzer*, p. 95.
62. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (Santa Monica: The Lapis Press, 1986), p. 64.

Table 1: Total Illustrations of Works Including Letters or Words, by Artist

Artist	Illustrations	Year of birth	Year of death
1. Marcel Duchamp	21	1887	1968
2. Pablo Picasso	17	1881	1973
3. Georges Braque	15	1882	1963
4. Richard Hamilton	12	1922	--
5t. Max Ernst	11	1891	1976
5t. Joseph Kosuth	11	1945	--
7. Andy Warhol	10	1928	1987
8t. Raoul Hausmann	9	1886	1971
8t. Roy Lichtenstein	9	1923	1997
8t. René Magritte	9	1893	1967
8t. Francis Picabia	9	1879	1953
8t. Ed Ruscha	9	1937	--
13t. Marcel Broodthaers	8	1924	1976
13t. Stuart Davis	8	1894	1964
13t. Jenny Holzer	8	1952	--
13t. Jasper Johns	8	1930	--
13t. Barbara Kruger	8	1945	--
13t. Kazimir Malevich	8	1878	1935
13t. Bruce Nauman	8	1949	--
13t. Kurt Schwitters	8	1887	1948

Source: see text and appendix.

Appendix. The 13 books surveyed for this study are listed here, ordered alphabetically by author's surname.

Adams, Laurie, *Art Across Time*, third ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007).

Arnason, H.H., *History of Modern Art*, fifth ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004).

Bell, Cory, *Modern Art*. (New York: Watson-Guption Publications, 2001).

Blistène, Bernard, *A History of 20th-Century Art* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001).

Cumming, Robert, *Art* (New York: DK Publishing, 2005).

Davies, Penelope, et. al., *Janson's History of Art*, seventh ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007).

Dempsey, Amy, *Art in the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

Foster, Hal, et. al., *Art Since 1900* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004).

Honour, Hugh, and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts*, sixth ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

Hunter, Sam; John Jacobus; and Daniel Wheeler, *Modern Art*, third ed. (New York: Vendome Press, 2004).

Kemp, Martin, ed., *The Oxford History of Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Parmesani, Loredana, *Art of the Twentieth Century* (Milan: Skira, 2000).

Richter, Klaus, *Art* (Munich: Prestel, 2001).