

# FORT GANSEVOORT

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### **ART REVIEW; When Words' Meaning Is in Their Look**

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In certain non-Western cultures, the written word is the emperor of art forms. The shape of individual characters, the way they interact, can embody the personality of a writer, the essence of a text, the moral timbre of a society.

Language has rarely enjoyed so privileged a status in Western art. Yet in the 20th century, beginning with Cubism, its visibility has been high. When Picasso and Braque included images of newsprint in their early still lifes, words suddenly became things, the pictorial equivalents of bottles, pears and pipes.

In the 1960's, Pop Art made words the sole subjects of paintings and sculptures (think of Robert Indiana's "Love"). And Conceptualism offered a new kind of virtual art, one that existed only in the form of written proposals and descriptions. Meanwhile, in literature concrete poetry had developed, in which the meaning of a poem lay not only in what it said but also in how it occupied space on the page.

Cross-disciplinary, language-based work is still very much alive, almost as a form of resistance, it seems, to a world awash in verbiage. And some recent developments can be sampled in "The Next Word: Text and/as Image and/as Design and/as Meaning," a group exhibition at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, N.Y., as well as in a few Manhattan gallery shows.

Despite its galumphing title, the Neuberger survey, organized by Johanna Drucker, an artist and art historian, is light on its feet: fun to look at and full of ideas. Most of the work is new and formally eclectic, ranging from oil paintings to CD-ROM's. Many one-of-a-kind, handmade pieces are included, but the emphasis is on print media, and particularly on the intersection of graphic design and typography with fine art.

The personal touch predominates in the section devoted to concrete and visual poetry. Here one finds unique, tenderly crafted manuscripts by Jack Hirschman and Anne Wolf; Emily McVarish's pasted-up words locked inside a metal frame, and Austin Straus's small painted collage of art historical images.

A collaboration between the poet Charles Bernstein and the artist Susan Bee on a brain-twisting children's book, "Little Orphan Anagram," has real visual eclat. So does Paula Scher's "Opinionated Map: Central and South America," in which every inch of the Southern Hemisphere is jammed with critical annotation.

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Elsewhere, the printed text, often taking a cue from advertising, comes to the fore. Blair Seagram's "U Temp est Us" uses a sleek sans-serif type, offbeat spacing and shifting character sizes to hide phrases within other phrases. And a light-board display by the up-and-coming collaborative duo known as Eric Heather Chan Schatz turns an elaborate marketing chart into an exercise in jazzy patterning.

The three members of another team -- ReVerb (Somi Kim, Lisa Nugent and Susan Parr) -- lead a double life. They work as corporate designers and moonlight as political artists (or maybe the other way around), using the same graphic strategies in both contexts.

Political content figures heavily in the show, for example, in artists' books, from Murray Zimiles's big, expressionistic account of Nazi book burning, to Brad Freeman's compact quasi-documentaries, to Joan Goswell's brilliant, wired satiric account of the Bush Presidency, partly executed with rubber stamps.

The artists of the group Class Action put subversive messages on billboards and T-shirts. Other designers tap the ideological potential of commercial graphics more subtly, as in a poster by Bruce Mau in which the phrase "the blurring of our boundaries suggests the shape of new terrain" emerges from a photocolage of bird species.

And sometimes typography scores points on its own. One script, designed by the Font Bureau and notable for its fussy, curlicued elegance, spells out the words "in the quietly restrained, nobly formed and deeply felt typeface we strive to express ourselves and our times." Other fonts, designed by Zuzana Licko and Edward Fella, move into the realm of abstract art.

In the section of the show labeled "visual art," in fact, words find some of their most inventive forms. A few of these are generated by or incorporate electronic technology, as in an installation titled "The Corona Palimpsest" by Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese, in which a small video monitor with a scrolling text is inserted directly into a book.

But more often, text is hand-wrought. This is true in Renee Stout's minute notations of family history; in Edgar Heap of Birds's flurry of impassioned scrawled words; in Archie Rand's loving 1970's paintings of the names of vintage rock groups, and in Karen Kilimnik's drawing in which cynical sentiments emerge from the mouths of supermodel babes.

Obviously this broad-spectrum exhibition is a sampler, not a focused think-piece, which is fine; compilations of language-based art on this scale are few. And a similar scattershot amplitude marks the Manhattan supplement to "The Next Word" at Printed Matter in Soho.

There the selection is restricted to printed books, including those of several outstanding artists from the Neuberger, among them Bill Burke, Warren Lehrer, Clifton Meador, Ruth Laxson and Tatana Kellner. Their work is sealed in vitrines at the Neuberger. But at Printed Matter one can relax on sofas and thumb through the material.

Three other gallery shows are also worth checking out. Exit Art in SoHo has covered its walls with 100 hand-drawn pages from a bravura cartoon-style novel, "War in the Neighborhood," by the artist Seth Tobocman, a vivid eyewitness narrative of real estate battles on the Lower East Side.

A new Chelsea gallery, Murray Guy, is making its debut with "In the Beginning," a beguiling group show of text-based work. The conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner is the senior figure here, presiding over

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strong work by younger artists, some of whom also qualify as poets, among them David Bunn, Emma Kay, Frances Stark and Paul Bloodgood.

Finally, Martinez Gallery in Chelsea, with a show of so-called graffiti art (some of its practitioners prefer the less pejorative term "hitting" or simply "writing"), which takes the word-as-image into the street. The work covers the interior gallery walls and was created in situ by 20 artists, some veterans of the late 1970's, when the genre briefly gained art world attention, others relative newcomers.

Distinctive styles can be sorted out, and the "black books" -- notebook studies for the finished work stored in the back room -- are great, their collaborative designs alive with baroque flourishes and emphatic energy. Like any art form, graffiti has its adepts and its amateurs. But in street argot, a master writer is referred to as a king, which suggests that in one corner of Western culture, the written word is regarded as sovereign after all.

"The Next Word: Text and/as Image and/as Design and/as Meaning" is at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, State University College, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, N.Y., through Jan. 31, and at Printed Matter, 77 Wooster Street, SoHo, through Oct. 24. "In the Beginning" is at Murray Guy Gallery, 453 West 17th Street, Chelsea, through Oct. 31; "War in the Neighborhood" by Seth Tobocman at Exit Art/The First World, 548 Broadway, near Prince Street, SoHo, through Oct. 31, and "Old School/New School" at Martinez Gallery, 515 West 27th Street, Chelsea, through Oct. 31.