

Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language

May 6–August 27, 2012

Special Exhibitions Gallery, third floor

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Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language is a group exhibition that brings together 12 contemporary artists and artists' groups working in all mediums including painting, sculpture, film, video, audio, and design, all of whom concentrate on the material qualities of language—visual, aural, and beyond. The work that these artists create belongs to a distinguished history of poem/objects, and concrete language experiments that dates to the beginnings of modernism, and includes both the Dada and Futurist moments as well as the recrudescence of Neo-Dada in the late 1950s, and international literary movements like concrete and sound poetry in Europe, Latin America, and the United States. Like visual artists who experimented with abstract forms with the goal of arriving at a non-metaphoric artwork that was itself and nothing else, artists working with words in the late 1950s and 1960s used language as a medium; letters, words, and texts were dissected, displayed as objects, or arranged so that form and content were combined.

The works in *Ecstatic Alphabets* represent a radical updating of the possibilities inherent in the relationship between art and language. In this exhibition, the letter, the word and the phrase are seen and experienced, and not necessarily read. Physicalized, transcribed into sounds, symbols, pictures or patterns, scrambled, or negated, language is freed from the page as well as from its received meanings, received forms, and, in some cases, the duties of communication altogether. Working with language has also created an opportunity for artists to move more freely among disciplines, and this exhibition includes work in a range of mediums by artists who are also poets, writers, performers, and graphic designers. Like earlier experiments in this vein, many of these recent works have an abiding connection to poetry, which runs like a subtheme through the exhibition, adding the ecstatic element to each works' alphabetic plainness.

The exhibition is divided into two sections, with the first featuring an abbreviated timeline of language in modern art culled primarily from drawings, sculptures, prints, books, and sound works from MoMA's collection. Artists in this historical section of the exhibition include: Carl Andre, Marcel Broodthaers, Henri Chopin, Marcel Duchamp, Ian Hamilton Finlay, John Giorno, Kitasono Katue, Ferdinand Kriwet, Liliane Lijn, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Bruce Nauman, Lawrence Weiner, and others. Artists in the contemporary section of the exhibition include: Ei Arakawa/Nikolas Gambaroff, Tauba Auerbach, Dexter Sinister (David Reinfurt and Stuart Bailey), Trisha Donnelly, Shannon Ebner, Paul Elliman, Experimental Jetset, Sharon Hayes, Karl Holmqvist, Paulina Olowska, Adam Pendleton, and Nora Schultz. The exhibition is accompanied by a publication designed and produced by Dexter Sinister.

Organized by *Laura Hoptman*, Curator, with *Eleonore Hugendubel*, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture.

The exhibition is made possible by [HANJIN SHIPPING](#).

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



Tauba Auerbach. *The Whole Alphabet, From the Center Out, Digital, V. 2006*. Gouache on paper on panel 30 x 22" (76.2 x 55.9 cm). Private Collection © 2011 Tauba Auerbach. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

Related Publication



Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language

Dexter Sinister (David Reinfurt, Stuart Bailey), edited with Angie Keefer

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Ecstatic Alphabets / Heaps of Language

Introduction

Contemporary Works

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Selected Projects ::

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Credits



Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language brings together historical and contemporary works of art that treat language not merely as a system of communication governed by grammatical rules and assigned meanings, but as a material that can be manipulated with creative freedom, like paint, clay, or any other artistic medium. The exhibition is divided into two sections. The first is a historical overview of 20th-century art that experiments with the graphic, sonic, and kinetic possibilities of letters and words. With a few notable exceptions, these works are confined to the two-dimensional parameters of a page. The second section presents an installation of contemporary works, most of which do away with the page, some do away with writing altogether.

The artist and poet Emmett Williams observed that "the poem as picture is as old as the hills," citing its beginnings in hieroglyphics, Babylonian pattern poetry, the anagrams of early Christian monks, and the permutational poems of medieval Cabalists. A fascination with language as something to be looked at rather than read flourished in Europe in the 20th century, and from its first decade, poets and artists explored language's ability to transmute into sounds, shapes, and even actions. Inspired by these earlier forays into the merging of art and language, in the 1950s poets and artists in Latin America and Europe created Concrete poetry, a hybrid of visual art and poetry in which the physical form of the poem directly reflects its content. In the 1960s and 1970s, artists continued to work with language as something to be arranged, built, or performed rather than written, taking advantage of new mediums like magnetic tape and telephonic technology to propel language off the wall and into the environment.

In the contemporary works on view, language is boldly cut off from literature, received meanings, and, in some cases, the duties of communication altogether. Moving freely

Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language

Related Events

Upcoming

There are no upcoming events currently scheduled.

Past

MEMBER EVENTS

Members Preview: *Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language*

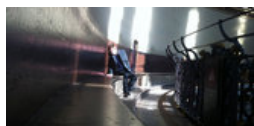
Wednesday, May 2, 2012, 10:30 a.m.

Thursday, May 3, 2012, 9:30 a.m.

Friday, May 4, 2012, 9:30 a.m.

Saturday, May 5, 2012, 9:30 a.m.

LECTURES & GALLERY TALKS | CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS



Artist Paul Elliman

Artists featured in the exhibition *Ecstatic Alphabets* discuss their work and how it relates to the material qualities of language.

Paul Elliman is a London-based artist. His work has engaged the human voice in many of its social and technological guises, as well as imitating other languages and sounds of the city. For the New York performance biennial Performa 09, he created *Sirens Taken for Wonders*, a project involving a live radio panel discussion on the coded language of emergency-vehicle sirens, along with several guided siren-walks through the city. In 2010 he contributed a series of whistled versions of birdsong transcriptions by Olivier Messiaen for the show *We Were Exuberant and Still Had Hope*, at Marres Centre for Contemporary Art, Maastricht.

Wednesday, May 9, 2012, 6:00 p.m.

LECTURES & GALLERY TALKS | GALLERY CONVERSATIONS

Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language

Monday, June 11, 2012, 1:30 p.m.

Sunday, June 24, 2012, 1:30 p.m.

Monday, June 25, 2012, 11:30 a.m.

LECTURES & GALLERY TALKS | CONVERSATIONS WITH CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS



Artist Shannon Ebner in conversation with writer Angie Keefer

Artists featured in the exhibition *Ecstatic Alphabets* discuss their work and how it relates to the material qualities of language.

Shannon Ebner was born in 1971 in Englewood, New Jersey. She received her BA from Bard College and her MFA in photography from Yale University School of Art. Selected group exhibitions include the 54th International Venice Biennale (2011); Sixth Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, Berlin (2010); Les Rencontres d'Arles 2010/41st Edition, Arles, France (2010); 2008 Whitney Biennial, The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2008); and *Learn to Read*, Tate Modern, London (2007). Solo projects have been exhibited at the Hammer

Museum (2011) and PS1 MoMA (2007). Ebner currently lives and works in Los Angeles, California.

Angie Keefe (writer, editor, occasional librarian) was born in Alabama in 1977. She graduated from Yale University in 1999. In 2010, she wrote an eight-part text on octopuses and post-symbolic communication for a project by Dexter Sinister and Shannon Ebner called *An Octopus in Plan View*. In 2011 she co-founded *The Serving Library* with Stuart Bailey and David Reinfurt. She is currently an itinerant, historically a New Yorker.

Wednesday, June 20, 2012, 6:00 p.m.

LECTURES & GALLERY TALKS | GALLERY CONVERSATIONS

Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language

Monday, July 2, 2012, 1:30 p.m.

Tuesday, July 10, 2012, 1:30 p.m.

Wednesday, July 11, 2012, 1:30 p.m.

Friday, July 20, 2012, 1:30 p.m.

Sunday, July 22, 2012, 1:30 p.m.

Friday, July 27, 2012, 1:30 p.m.

Saturday, July 28, 2012, 11:30 a.m.

MEMBER EVENTS | MEMBER GALLERY TALKS

Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language

Wednesday, July 4, 2012, 12:30 p.m.

LECTURES & GALLERY TALKS | GALLERY CONVERSATIONS

Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language

Thursday, August 2, 2012, 11:30 a.m.

Tuesday, August 7, 2012, 11:30 a.m.

Sunday, August 19, 2012, 1:30 p.m.

Sunday, August 26, 2012, 1:30 p.m.

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