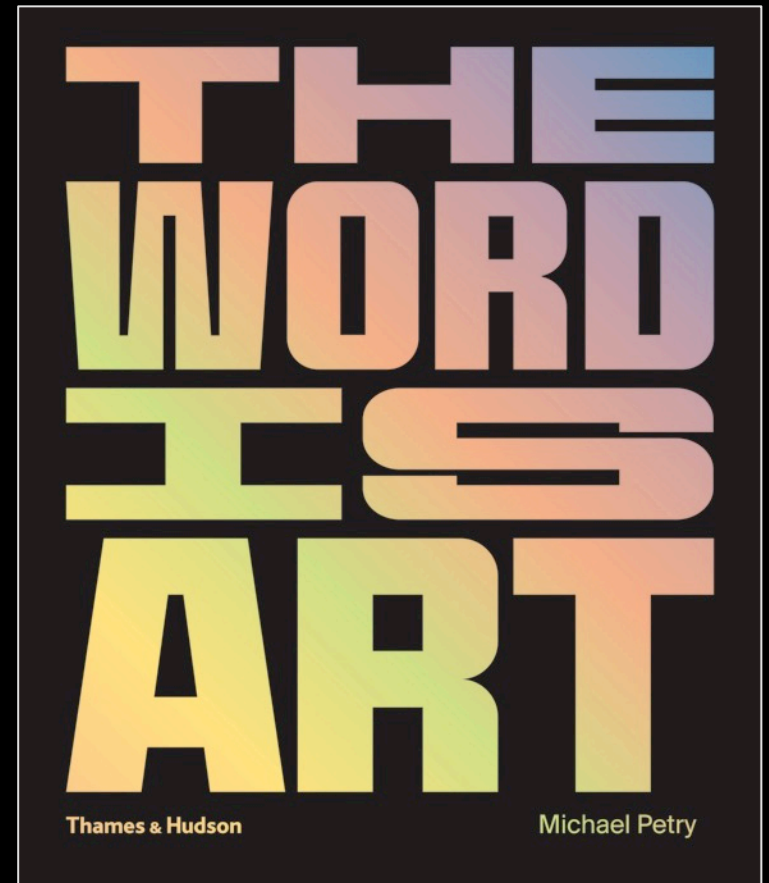
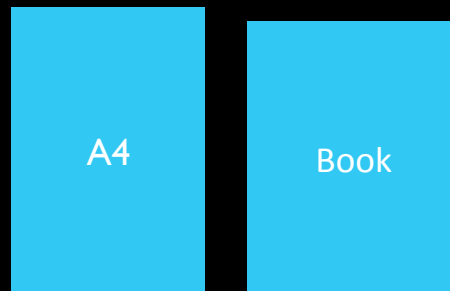


A fascinating overview of how contemporary artists incorporate text and language into work that speaks to some of the most pressing issues of the 21st century

The Word is Art

Michael Petry

Over 300 illustrations
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Key Sales Points

- A global overview of a sphere of art-making that is currently coming into curatorial focus
- Accompanied by a series of exhibitions of the same title, touring across Europe in 2018
- Picks up on media and marketplace concerns about the state of language and value of books in the digital age
- Written by a celebrated artist with a significant media platform

INSTALLED WORDS

Text works installed directly on gallery walls or in complex social situations have become a staple of many high-impact exhibitions. Visitors are often confronted with words on a human scale or even larger, so that the individual letters turn into sculptural objects or the work as a whole becomes cinematic. Lawrence Weiner is the artistic godfather of this move to present text on walls as a form of visual poetry, an evolution of the concrete poetry of the 1960s. Artists may use the blank wall as their canvas, and in most cases such interventions are limited to the length of the exhibition. The market has, however, caught up with such conceptual practices as installation art, and these works are now also available for sale (a certificate of authenticity and directions for the reinstallation are usually provided at purchase).

Younger artists who have taken their cue from Weiner's signature works include Micah Lexier, who takes a strong conceptual stance in his immersive black-and-white wall pieces. Some of his works – and those of Mark Themann – are so large that they spread across two or three large gallery walls, and the viewer is in effect inside the pieces. The use of black text (often in vinyl or professionally painted by sign writers) on white walls has become a trope seen across the art world. By way of contrast, Beni Bischof adds colour and an element of humour to his graffitied wall interventions. Mark Titchner

often presents large-scale texts in full technicolor to startling effect. Jukka Korkeila makes colourful wall works, on top of which he often places his paintings on canvas, adding another layer of visual complexity.

Not all textual wall works are two-dimensional: Annette Messager utilizes a variety of materials to make her pieces, including netting, while Anatol Knotek makes humorous use of cardboard letters that appear to have fallen off the wall. Beyond the gallery walls, Enrique Ježik creates sculptural letters of cardboard and steel. Anka Dabrowska employs satire in her well-placed graffiti-style signage in order to disrupt its austere surroundings. Kate Murdoch places three-dimensional letters into equally unusual contexts to create missing narratives.

What all these works have in common is the visual impulse of the words themselves. They may be profound, prosaic or poetic, but the viewer must assimilate them in one go, along with their surroundings, whether that is a gallery space or a more unconventional venue.





The Israeli artist Miri Segal investigates the way in which consumers interact with the internet. *Don't be evil* (left) was originally conceived as part of a larger body of work, *Future Perfect*, co-created with Or Even Tov. Large, brightly coloured aluminium letters recall the graphics of the search engine Google. The phrase was previously the motto of the company's code of conduct. Google has been accused of not living up to that ambition in its dealings with smaller online companies and in working with the Communist Party of China, which prevents online searches for the Tiananmen Square Massacre of 1989. In 2004 the firm's founders, Larry Page and Sergey Brin, sent a letter to potential shareholders stating that Google was 'a company that does good things for the world even if we forgo some short-term gains'. Google's new holding company, Alphabet, took overall control in 2015 and dropped the motto.

2011 • Miri Segal
Don't be evil, 2011
Aluminium letters
100.1 x 770.5 cm (59 1/4 x 287 1/4 in.)
Edition of 5



Since the late 1970s the American Barbara Kruger has been one of the most influential artists working with text. Her well-known photomontages, such as *Untitled (I Shop Therefore I Am)* (1987), pair pre-existing black-and-white photographs with captions in bold type, and have become part of the greater cultural language. Kruger's works have appeared on posters, in magazines and also as large-scale installations. The *Belief+Doubt* installation (overleaf) at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC, completely covers the downstairs lobby, including the sides of the escalators. Among the phrases printed on the vinyl covering are 'PLENTY SHOULD BE ENOUGH' and 'YOU WANT IT. YOU BUY IT. YOU FORGET IT.' The immersive work questions both the public and the private spheres of behaviour.

1997 • Barbara Kruger
Belief+Doubt, 2012
Installation, Hirshhorn Museum
and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC
Dimensions variable

THREE DIMENSIONAL WORDS

One of the most diverse areas of text in the visual arts is that where words, letters and characters jump off the page, canvas, wall or screen and become objects in their own right. The fact that the words are composed of a variety of materials, such as wood, metal and stone, places the text in a direct bodily relationship with the viewer. When we read a text and it goes straight into our consciousness, we understand it on an intellectual level; but when words adopt a three-dimensional form, we may have a visceral reaction to them.

Ildikó Buckley and Jane Palmer have brought the word 'YES', in oversized form, into the lives of many viewers who have made use of the sculpture in non-artistic ways (for example, to ask for someone's hand in marriage). Monica Bonvicini's huge letters forming the word 'RUN', commissioned for the 2012 London Olympic Games, seem as much a command as a comment, and the viewer feels their towering presence in a way he or she would not were they painted on to the side of a building. Words may seem to be only abstract notions in our world, but billboards and electronic signage remind us that they have a different power the physically larger they become. Deborah Kass plays with the legibility of text as a sculptural object in a piece that reads as one word in one direction and another in reverse. All of these works are large, if not monumental, in size.

This chapter also features three-dimensional works that are much smaller in scale, such as Jake and Dinos Chapman's etched cigarette lighter and Rosana Ricalde's bracelet of silver and gold. A diverse range of materials is also in evidence, from marble (George Henry Longly; Colin Booth), wood (Fiona Shaw) and glass (Shan Shan Sheng) to brick clay (Rirkrit Tiravanija). Artists may choose to employ different media as a means of commenting on those materials or as a way in which to utilize their unique sculptural qualities, or to confound expectations about what sculpture and text might be.

Antonio Riello takes existing objects, such as bicycles and cars, and reworks them into new text works, whereas Darryl Lauster has white marble carved to look as if it were a fragment of an ancient text – a faux 'readymade', to borrow Duchamp's term. Once the texts have moved into the three-dimensional world of sculpture, many take on aspects of Dadaist humour, as the viewer is not always sure how to read such objects. Are they merely large texts, or does their autonomy turn them into a different kind of written object?

The Egyptian artist Ghada Amer has earned a reputation for her embroidered canvases (see pp. 232–33), but she has also created a series of outdoor gardens that feature text. *HAPPILY EVER AFTER* (right) at the Queens Museum of Art, New York, takes the form of the closing words from many fairy tales, planted in a protective circle of greenery (climbing roses and jasmine inside metal structures) around a circular bench. For *S'IL PLEUVAIT DES LARMES* (If It Rained Tears; below), Amer frescoed the words of a poem by the French writer Boris Vian around the edges of an abandoned garden in a monastery in Padula, Italy. The poem laments that 'If it rained tears when a love dies', and on the occasion of other sad events, 'on the whole earth there would be nothing left'.



While the American artist Jack Pierson may be best known for his photographs documenting masculinity, his word-based sculptures, which he has been making since the early 1990s, have been equally influential. *Desire, Despair* (1996), *In Sunshine or in Shadow* (2003), *Pornography* (2004), *Listen, Darling* (2007) and *You Don't Own Me* (opposite) all allude to different stories. In the same way as his photographs, they depict another side, a queer side, to the American dream. The pieces are made from found advertising signage, hence the different sizes, typefaces and colours of the letters. It is Pierson's skill and his merging of the disparate elements into a whole that make them more than one-liners, as they offer multiple readings.



RIGHT, TOP - Ghada Amer
HAPPILY EVER AFTER, 2005
Wood, metal and foliage
Dimensions variable

RIGHT - Ghada Amer
S'IL PLEUVAIT DES LARMES
(If It Rained Tears), 2005
Frescoed installation
Dimensions variable

OPPOSITE - Jack Pierson
You Don't Own Me, 2014
Acrylic, steel, enamel, metal and
aluminium
368.3 x 297.2 x 30.5 cm
(145 x 117 x 12 in.)





The British artist Martin Creed is known for his conceptual works, all of which are numbered. *Work no. 1092, MOTHERS* (above) features the word in steel and white neon, standing over 5 metres (16 ft) high. It slowly rotates, and the viewer is invited to stand beneath it; the idea of the mother is literally placed on a pedestal. Originally shown in London, the piece has since been exhibited several times, including at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 2012. Creed explains: 'I think the most powerful and difficult relationship in the whole world is between a mother and a child. That is the one where the baby is literally part of the mother and is not separate, and then you have to come out and be separate...I think to actually be a mother is very difficult and to have a mother is difficult.' The work is highly personal yet speaks to a global audience.

Kendell Geers, a South African artist, uses a wide variety of media in his text-based works, from paint for wall-based installations to neon. *S:LAUGHTER* (opposite) is a play on words and the ways in which meaning can quickly change. The large neon 'S' turns on and off, so that the viewer reads either 'SLAUGHTER' or 'LAUGHTER' – words that are emotionally worlds apart. Discomfort and disruption of meaning are at the core of the piece, as Geers asks the viewer to try to merge the words into one work. It has been shown in various locations, including outside the Nobel Peace Center, Oslo, and the Contemporary Art Museum St Louis, Missouri.

above - Martin Creed
Work no. 1092, MOTHERS, 2011
 White neon and steel
 5 x 12.5 x 0.2 m
 (16 ft 4 1/2 in. x 41 ft 1/4 in. x 7 1/4 in.)

opposite - Kendell Geers
SLAUGHTER, 2005 - Neon
 10 x 2 m (32 ft 9 1/4 x 78 1/4 in.)





In *The Castle* (left), Jorge Méndez Blake harnesses the power of words in both a symbolic and a physical way. Blake placed a paperback copy of Franz Kafka's unfinished novel (1926) of the same name in the middle of his work, at the base of a wall of red bricks. In the novel, the protagonist, K, attempts to deal with an unseen, stifling bureaucracy that crushes him, much like Blake's brick wall might do. The placement of the book disrupted the structure of the wall and, as each row of bricks was added, the bump in the wall became more pronounced. Blake's work is more hopeful than Kafka's, however, as it demonstrates the way in which one individual or text can make an impact on the world.



Five Thousand Trashy Romance Novels (opposite), by the American artist Thedra Cullar-Ledford, is a conceptual portrait of her mother, a 'serious' published author who secretly loves to read romantic fiction. Consisting of colourful paperbacks (with such titles as *Tears of the Moon*, *Rebel's Desire* and *Seasons of Love*) stacked into a square, it is topped by a concrete lid that presses down on – one could say, suppresses – the novels geared towards women. The work poses the question: what books are suitable for adults to be seen reading? The piece has been remade on several occasions, including at the National Academy Museum, New York, in 1998, and in 2016 at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Texas.

LEFT • Jorge Méndez Blake
The Castle (detail at bottom), 2007
Bricks and 1 copy of Franz Kafka's
El castillo
17.5 × 23 × 0.4 m
(57 ft 5 in. × 75 ft 5 1/4 in. × 15 1/4 in.)

OPPOSITE • Thedra Cullar-Ledford
Five Thousand Trashy Romance Novels,
1997/2017
Approx. 5,000 books, concrete and
graphite, installed here at the
Contemporary Arts Museum Houston,
Texas, 2016
114.5 × 114.5 × 121.9 cm
(45 × 45 × 48 in.)



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