

Kim Dhillon

## *Language To Be Looked At*

Today, there is no shortage of artists making text-based works; those who make meaningful connections between text and typography are rarer. The interdisciplinary relationship between art and design is blurred: throughout the twentieth-century artists have delved into or employed methods from the world of graphic design, and of late, critics like Alex Coles have attempted to nuance the argument of this interface between art and design. While design is a subject of taught rules that need to be skillfully understood in order to break and move beyond them, artists who employ techniques of graphic design or trade on its conventions often bungle the techniques and rules, as Rick Poynor points out, "perhaps through ignorance or perhaps deliberately."<sup>1</sup> Text-based work by artists since the first wave of American conceptual art in the 1960s offers varying positions on the materiality of language, conveyed through artists' use of graphic techniques when working with text. And each artist—I'll look here at Robert Smithson, Lawrence Weiner, Tauba Auerbach, and Frances Stark—deals with such materiality (by which I mean the form of the letters) in a way unique to trends in graphic design, mass communications, and information according to the context and time in which the work is made.

Written language in visual art has a long precedent, from Futurist manifestos about literature, to the Dadaist collage of text and image by Hannah Hoch, used to evoke political argument, to its emergence in the Pop movement by artists such as Ed Ruscha and Roy Lichtenstein, where expressively written text integrated word to image and mimicked popular forms of art such as comic strips. The emergence of Lawrence Weiner, Robert Smithson, and John Baldessari in the 1960s offered a new way within conceptual art works for language to be rendered, made material, and embodied with new meaning. Similarly, artists Auerbach and Stark employ language today concerned with the material qualities of ideas once written and employ varying modes

from design and writing that the audience recognizes, thus offering a "way in" to reading their respective work. The elements of design are little mentioned in the critique of such conceptual or post-conceptual works, perhaps because art critics lack the language or references to address such areas, or perhaps because the work (namely, the early conceptual works) are so encumbered with anti-formalist arguments that to address anything material or formal would seem to miss the point.

Best known for pioneering earthworks (sculptures that altered the natural environment in their making), language for Robert Smithson was an architectural material akin to other media (such as earth and stone). While *Spiral Jetty* (1970)—a 1500-foot-long coil of salt, rock, and earth jutting into the water from the shore of Great Salt Lake, Utah—is Smithson's best-known work, others—drawings and word works—offer a similar pursuit of matter rendering ideas despite being contained within the page. *A Heap of Language* (1966) is the most explicit example of this pursuit, and yet it has been viewed by his critics as either an artwork or a word work depending on the parameters of the category in question. Over a numbered grid (like a blueprint), Smithson drew a triangular shape composed of a list of handwritten words, all related to language (such as *speech*, *dialect*, and *alphabet*) in pencil. Richard Sieburth analyzes *A Heap of Language* by approaching it from both sides: examining it first by looking (thus questioning its formal and sculptural qualities) and then by reading (examining the conceptual integrity of the work).<sup>2</sup> Sieburth takes his critical cue directly from Smithson's own writing: the 1967 press release for Smithson's exhibition *Language to be Looked at and / or Things to be Read* argued that a word is meaningless and paradoxical if isolated from its context.<sup>3</sup> Like a cog in a machine, a word conveys meaning only when in context. Smithson clearly stated this in 1972, claiming that a "sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas—i.e., 'printed matter'."<sup>4</sup> What Smithson seems to suggest is that a word is defined by its context, but that it also, simultaneously, takes us elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> The sculptural shape of Smithson's mass of words dominates the visual scope of the work. In the context of his oeuvre, Smithson's words are akin

to his sculptural materials of earth and rocks. The mount serves as a support for his construction, regardless of whether it exists off the page or not.

For something so common in everyday use, type carries great weight for artists and designers alike. Douglas Coupland—whose novels *Generation X* (1991) and *JPod* (2006) offer a hybrid between fiction and art, providing an experience that is both visual and literary—has written that he is a fan of one of the most popular typefaces of the later twentieth-century, Helvetica (Coupland even claims that he dreams in the typeface). By contrast, Lawrence Weiner, now with more than four decades of language- and text-based work under his belt, is a detractor of the Swiss typeface, disliking it for what he calls its “authoritarian” aura.<sup>6</sup> Calling it “clumsy” and arguing against both its associations and its aesthetics, Weiner uses other typefaces (lately Franklin Monotype Gothic) in his work, which generally takes shape as text installed directly on walls, both within and outside of galleries, though he also makes use of surfaces in the found environment such as man-hole covers as well as books. Weiner’s resistance to Helvetica seems to lie justifiably in its associations with specific corporations and governments for whom the typeface is brand-synonymous (American Airlines, for example). Wanting no part of those associations within his work, or the aesthetics that may hint at them, he uses other typefaces.

Over the past forty years, Weiner’s use of text in his work has, as one would expect, changed. Word-works that were in the seventies simple text typewritten on a white letter-sized page had become by the 1980s far more expressive in their use of type. At that time, he introduced non-letter forms to his texts: written gestures such as arrows, boxes, underlinings, broken curves, notational marks, and words written at angles opened his text to flow with a more expressive arrangement where it was installed, frequently a gallery’s white wall. The glittery, silver letters of *TAKEN TO AS DEEP AS THE SEA CAN BE* (2005) arrange words in a poetic structure. A curve swoops above and below the line of the text, suggesting a jumping fish, a cresting wave or, as critic Faye Hirsch observes of the artist’s Whitney retrospective: “the sweeping arabesque something like an editor’s deletion

mark, but also like a fishhook dipping down into the whiteness of the wall below.”<sup>7</sup> The arrangement of words works in tandem with the content of his statements to communicate with the viewer. Hirsch calls it “a form of play, or messing with your mind.”<sup>8</sup> Weiner’s *A PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS ASAP* (2006) also shows his use of type becoming evermore visual, with the “A” partially encircled and “ASAP” enclosed in a box. Such interjections in the text reposition the scale or interrelationship of characters in a text, thereby changing the visual meaning of the word and shifting the reader’s experience of the sentence. Weiner has long resisted any formal reading of his work, and stated that the notion of (his) art isn’t determined by the relationship of the language to idea, but to the resulting series of relationships from his language to object to human beings.<sup>9</sup>

San Francisco-based painter Tauba Auerbach seems to share Weiner’s concern to not disrupt the viewer, but to interact with their reception of messages instead. Auerbach interrogates how language works by focussing on distinct letterforms within her ink-and-gouache on paper works. Painterly and vivid (in contrast to the relatively sparse presentation of Weiner), the relationship of the letterform to the content of the message is intrinsic in her work. Not long established, Auerbach has in a short time developed an oeuvre in which she explores the relationship of spoken language to its visual representation. Early works such as *How to Spell the Alphabet* (2005) and *Eye Exam I* (2004) show a graphic consideration of the space around letters and their layout. Making use of the recognizable format of the eye exam chart, *Eye Exam I* repeats the letter Q in a black sans-serif typeface, in decreasing point size as the reader’s eye descends the page. *How to Spell the Alphabet* (which, like *Eye Exam I* is rendered ink on poster-sized paper) uses an Art Nouveau typeface, hand-painted in red with mid-set dots interspersing the letters, to phonetically list the English alphabet. Auerbach is “trading on” the familiarity of recognized and accepted forms, both aural and graphic. By speaking the letters as we view their phonetic writings, or by viewing the format of the eye chart with a single letter repeated (thus making moot its validity as a test), Auerbach challenges the

authority of the graphic form, in her case, the form language takes when written. She also, however, sets out her larger project: questioning the logic of language in its spoken and written forms.

Auerbach is perhaps the most concerned with type (I believe she is genuinely passionate about and interested in typography) of the artists working with text whom I've discussed in this article. Her paintings show a heightened detail for hand-painting letterforms otherwise most commonly set today by digital processes. She worked for several years as a sign-painter, a skill rarely learned anymore. Smithson, in *A Heap of Language*, demonstrates a shared concern for the relationship of verbal to visual language, where in the eleventh (and central) line of the work, the words list "Letter character hieroglyphic alphabet ABC consonant vowel." Smithson's ordering of words moves from the written to the spoken elements of language. Sol LeWitt wrote once that conceptual artists "leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach," and I would argue that Auerbach is approaching this in her work: exploring the synapses and gaps in the logic of our verbal and written communication.

Frances Stark, also California-based, draws on existing texts as the source material in her work. Self-reflexive, often autobiographical, Stark manipulates graphically the written work of others to develop a deeply personal pursuit of language. While Auerbach's interrogation of language delves into the individual letter in great detail, Stark is concerned less with typography and more with the processes of writing. She maintains a practice as a writer as well as an artist; she also was a cheerleader in high school. The latter anecdote is perhaps not completely irrelevant, because as Benjamin Weissman wrote, she has been spelling out words, letter-by-letter in a system of call-and-response to her audience since shouting "Gimme a C!" and jumping in the air to make the corresponding letter with her body at suburban San Francisco pep rallies.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the contemporary processes of writing (cutting, pasting, revising, rewriting) are recurrent themes in her work. Her materials are simple and tactile: carbon paper, rice paper, ink, and linen tape. Delicate materials that show every mark made on them, they convey best the labourious nature of her processes.

Contained within the images in the publication *Frances Stark: Collected Works* (2007) is a work (all are untitled, undated) reminiscent of Smithson's *A Heap of Language*.<sup>11</sup> Repeatedly typing letters horizontally to spell out words vertically and then cutting and pasting sections into a mound-like composition that resembles a landscape, Stark's heap spells out "Erosion's Fertile Debris" across six feet of white space, of which she crops a section for reproduction in the book. A lone circle is laid out above the mound: abbreviations of the days of the week, composed like the dial of a pack of birth control pills, represent the sun in a repetitive rhythm of Sun, Mon, Tues etc. Stark also manipulates fragments of writing by other authors into assembled compositions (Emily Dickinson is a favourite source, as well as the novelist Henry Miller).

While on a residency in Berlin, Stark made a work, *F is for Frances*, drawing not from literary works but *Vanity Fair* magazine. She explains: "every hanging F in the August 1995 issue of [the magazine] began a word or phrase that referred to time," such as "From time to time Carly Simon recalls her childhood and her relationship with her mother."<sup>12</sup> Hand-tracing and then filling in the magazine's uppercase Fs, both serif and sans serif, Stark abstracts the letters from their magazine context. Her concern for the relationship between what we hold in our hands (the page) and what we see on walls (visual art) is implied in many of her works. Integrated with her drawings, the works are delicately composed and convey the visual patterning of language as an intimate experience of voice, reading, and writing.

Stark's works continually point to a reference. In the age of information, where anything has the potential to be looked up on Google and infinitely linked to other information sources via Web 2.0 user-collaborative formats such as Wikipedia, we're inundated by references. But Stark's references are subtler and more ghostly. She's made several works where she reframes old books (by Miller or T. S. Eliot) in a visual art context: her interest isn't the original text per se, but the narrative that follows it: the notes in the margins, underlinings, and comments of a previous reader of the same text. She writes: "annotations are like

arrows pointing where and how to look at what may otherwise go unnoticed."<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the seed of John Baldessari's *Commissioned Paintings* (1969) series is an art critic's comment on conceptual art as being nothing more than pointing. Hiring amateur but "technically adept" painters he discovered at county art fairs to illustrate in a realist style images of hands pointing at various objects, Baldessari choreographs the assistants much like sign painters.<sup>14</sup>

Artworks dealing with language often break down hierarchy in the receivership of art, challenging notions of power. Concern with authority recurs in practices working with text—Weiner and Auerbach certainly share this preoccupation, and somewhat ironically, such practice can be seen to have roots in the language of advertising. Interestingly, many artists who use text in their work have a background of working professionally in the commercial worlds of design and advertising. Both Barbara Kruger and Ed Ruscha worked in advertising and publishing: Kruger as a designer and photo editor at Condé Nast, Ruscha as an art worker at an LA ad agency as well as layout designer for *Artforum*. Kruger's collages of black-and-white photographs overlaid with red-and-white text set in Futura Bold Oblique spell out slogans that make use of the pronouns *I*, *you*, and *they*. Constructing a commentary about the circulation of power, they challenge the authority of images—a concern that sitting on the picture desk of a fashion publisher for over ten years would surely cause. Ruscha's paintings style words into expressively satirical phrases that sit comfortably with design and advertising of the same period in the early sixties. (Curator and artist Matthew Higgs, who also makes work of found text, worked for a brief time in a London ad agency; graphic designers M/M, who have been inaugurated into the art world, operate, quite traditionally, within fashion contexts.) Smithson, who drafted the press release himself for the exhibition at the Dwan Gallery (written under the pseudonym Eton Corrasable) argues that "language thus becomes monumental *because of* the mutations of advertising."<sup>15</sup> In a similar vein, Auerbach worked for three years as a sign-writer, hand-painting lettering in prescribed formats for commercial communication;

Baldessari's early text paintings were lettered by sign-writers in a black typeface. Auerbach, Stark, and Weiner, each for whom type operates very differently, approach type with utmost consideration in their works. With words spread out in a potentially meaningless array around us, it is welcome for artists, who can operate with relative autonomy and without concern for a client or a mass audience, to employ the language of design in order to make sense of it.

#### About the Author

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Notes begin on page 116.