Words and Images: A Persistent Paradox

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By Russell Bowman

One of the key developments in American art of the past thirty years is the frequent use of words in conjunction with visual images. This combination of verbal and visual elements is evident in a broad range of artistic approaches of the period: Pop Art and the related Photo-Realism, Conceptual Art and various documentary or information modes, the personalized imagery and language of California Funk and Chicago Imagism, and finally, the various narrative and personally expressive forms leading up to today's Neo-Expressionist and "appropriation" art. The forms in which words and language fragments are presented in visual formats are as various as the types of art, but they are united by the fact that the words serve to increase the image's potential for meaning. Whether the words underline and reinforce the image, essentially become the image, or contradict the image to achieve a telling ambiguity, the combination of the visual image with the visual sign system we know as language always creates a compelling resonance.

The presentation of words with images is, of course, not new. Examples in earlier art of the West range from the identifying inscriptions of ancient art to the illuminated capitals of medieval manuscripts to the written representations of the words spoken by figures portrayed in early Italian and Northern Renaissance painting.[1] The inclusion of words as narrative in painting became much less frequent after the Renaissance; Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*, Bernini's dramatic union of inscriptions and symbolic imagery in his early papal tombs, and the inscription of Marat's murderer, Charlotte Corday, on the letter held by the dead hero in David's *Death of Marat* are exceptions. In all these cases, the linguistic elements serve to explicate or extend the represented image, with the exception perhaps of Poussin's ambiguous Latin.

With the advent of the twentieth century, the use of words reappears, and language takes on a deliberate ambiguity; the surety of the old inscriptive or narrative approach was challenged, as were so many other notions about the reality of representation. The Cubists, particularly Picasso and Braque, included words or portions of words in their painting and collages beginning in about 1912. Within the context of their rather hermetic late analytical and early synthetic Cubist works, the words tended to act both as referents to the real world ("Ma Jolie" for a popular song associated with a lover, or "Journal" and "Bass" naming the newspaper and drinks of everyday life), and as abstract symbols reiterating the flat surface of the support. It is clear that even for the Cubists, the rendering of linguistic elements in visual formats was already laced with paradox and questions about what was more "real," the word or the image. This paradoxical relationship between words and the things or concepts they signified was to be more fully explored by the Futurists with their depictions of signs on moving trains and billboards seen from passing cars, their onomatopoeic rendering of sounds, and their concrete poetry that liberated words from syntax and revealed words' (or typography's) inherent visual potential.

Both the Dadaists and the Constructivists built on the Cubo-Futurists' visual use of words, but with specific political intent: the Dada artists in an attempt to reveal the nonsensical nature of World War I and, slightly later, the Russian Constructivists in an effort to create a new and meaningful art for a new, socialist society. Despite the divergence of their political intentions, the means of both groups were remarkably similar: the juxtapositions of visual and verbal signs in order to heighten the potential for meaning (or nonmeaning). With respect to nonmeaning, the works of Marcel Duchamp are paradigmatic. Picabia used anagrammatic or nonsense titles for his machine works and, as early as 1915, provided a "portrait" of Alfred Stieglitz as a camera with the caption "Ici, C'est Ici Stieglitz" (Here is Stieglitz).

But it was in the Surrealist movement of the 1920s and 1930s that the multiple implications of words and imagery found their fullest exploration. At the close of his discussion of "Words and Images," in his catalogue for The Museum of Modern Art's *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage* exhibition of 1968, William Rubin quotes André Breton's intention "to combine the resources of poetry and plasticity and speculate on their power of reciprocal exaltation."[2] This aspect of Dada and Surrealist practice, often referred to as *peinture-poésie*, is cited by Rubin in numerous examples: Max Ernst's *Who Is That Very Sick Man* (1924), which projects the words of one of Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* into illusionistic three-dimensional interpenetrating figures and architecture, Miró's lively script suggesting the rhythmic flight of bird and bee and the dizzying course of their path embodied in the word "poursuit" in *A Bird Pursues a Bee and Kisses It* (1927), and the later poem-collage by André Breton *For Jacqueline* (1937).[3]

Perhaps the most widely known example of the power of *peinture-poésie* and the ambiguity it can entail is René Magritte's painting *The Wind and the Song (Fig. 1)*, in which an image of a pipe is accompanied by the legend "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (this is not a pipe). Magritte made many versions of this theme throughout his career, suggesting that it held for him much of the magic of reverberations between words and images. A number of other Magritte images come to mind as well, for much of Magritte's art employed what has been called a kind of visual non sequitur: a train emerging from a mantelpiece, a landscape painting on an easel continuous with the view beyond, a nightgown with breasts, and shoes with toes—the list could go on. More to the point are the works combining visual paradoxes with linguistic representations, such as *Personnage Marchant vers l'Horizon* (1928–29), in which a man walks towards a horizon appropriately labeled with the word "horizon" in a thought balloon but surrounded by other words that reveal no relation to the objects they name. The *Key of Dreams* (1930) depicts certain objects juxtaposed with words for other objects. In these works, Magritte reveals the inadequacy of words to describe things or how words and images can be juxtaposed so as to challenge meaning.

It is precisely this aspect of Magritte's art that has so much fascinated linguistic philosophers. Michel Foucault dedicated an entire book to Magritte's enigmatic pipe painting, in which he cites the key component of the image as "the impossibility of defining a perspective that would let us say that the assertion is true, false, or contradictory."[4] Magritte's painting is both all of these things and none: it reveals that, as Foucault states in another context, "the death of interpretation is to believe that there are signs, signs that exist primarily, originally, really, as coherent, pertinent and systematic marks. . . . The life of interpretation, on the contrary, is to believe that there are only interpretations."[5] Thus, Foucault joins such writers and philosophers as Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin, for whom the reality of language and images exists in their context. This constantly shifting nature of signs and concepts has provided fertile ground for semiotics and structuralist thought, particularly in the last two decades.

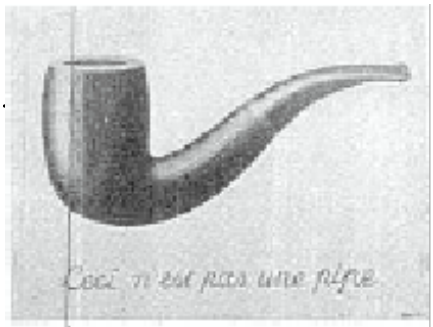


Fig. 1 René Magritte, *The Wind and the Song ("Ceci n'est pas une pipe")*, 1928–29, oil on canvas, 23¼ × 31⅞". Private Collection.

Fig. 2 Robert Motherwell, *Je t'aime IIa*, 1955, oil on canvas, 71⅞ × 53¼". New York, Collection Mr. and Mrs. I. Donald Grossman.

The use of language in recent American art can be divided into six basic categories of intention: words as formal devices, words as signs, words employed as juxtaposition or association, narrative, exploration of language structure, and, finally, language as direct sociopolitical commentary. Unquestionably these categories are fluid, but they allow one to discern commonalities among types of art that previously seemed unrelated or to examine the degree of intention that separates various modes of the past three decades.

For use of words or language primarily as a formal device, one can look to Abstract Expressionism, the movement that owed so much to Surrealism but took the interest in spontaneity, automatic techniques, and mythic subject matter into vastly other directions. With Abstract Expressionism, the words and numbers typical of Cubist works took on a Surrealist-inspired spontaneity. Often the words were in cursive style, such as the seemingly doodled letters and numbers of Pollock's *Male and Female* (1942) or De Kooning's *Zurich* (1947). In Robert Motherwell's *Je t'aime* series of 1955–56, the cursive script provides an occasion for gestural flourish (and perhaps an ironic comment on the flourish of script itself *(Fig. 2)*. The collaborative text painting by Norman Bluhm and Frank O'Hara, *It's Raining* (1960), continues this play of cursive script and Abstract Expressionist gesture.[6] This approach even reaches into the oft-cited *Words* environment created by Allan Kaprow at the Smolin Gallery in New York in 1962. In both these cases, however, the words are not letters or fragments in the pure form of the earlier Abstract Expressionist examples but words in some measure of syntactical sequence. The use of a gestural cursive technique largely as a formal device does continue in the work of such Abstract Expressionist-influenced artists as Larry Rivers and Cy Twombly. In fact, this type of gestural writing becomes the basis of many of Twombly's script and doodle paintings of the sixties and continues in his work to the present day.

An interesting development from the use of language as formal device was initiated by Pop artists in the early sixties and can be seen in the work of Larry Rivers. In such words as *Cedar Bar Menu* (1960–61) and *French Money II (100 Franc Painting (II))* (1962), Rivers uses words or numbers as "realistic" anchors and jumping-off points for broad painterly expression. But in his *Parts of the Face: French Vocabulary Lesson* (1961) *(Fig. 3)*, the words are not in script but in stenciled capitals (perhaps under the influence of Jasper Johns's stenciled words of a few years earlier). More to the point, they act as words should—as signs. In the manner of a medical text or a drawing manual—and in exact converse to Magritte's "this is not a pipe"—they accurately describe the body parts they label. These words are signs that embody specific concepts, although their being in a foreign language distances us from them and suggests that they have a context that may be lost to us.

Other Pop artists employed words as signs somewhat differently. Although many—Lichtenstein, Oldenberg, Dine, and Grooms among them—had, like Rivers, used letters or words in a cursive or hand-done manner reflective of Abstract Expressionism in their works of about 1960, they adopted more clearly delineated and obviously "borrowed" words in their works from 1961–62. The Pop artists tended to use language in much the same way as the Cubists—as signifiers for things in the environment. Interestingly, Robert Rauschenberg had made words and word fragments an important part of his works as early as *Rebus* (1955), which includes a collaged political poster with the words "That Repre. . . ." Although

these words slyly question the nature of representation, the relative levels of reality of words, found images, and abstract but physically "real" paint strokes, they point primarily to their role as posters—literally signs—in everyday life. As the Pop artists explored the common environment and the nature of representation, they repeatedly reproduced language from a wide variety of sources: Lichtenstein's lifting of words as well as images from ads and cartoons, Oldenberg's plaster and stuffed price tags and letters, Dine's works such as *Small Shower No. 2* (1962), in which the word "shower" is inscribed over a real shower head and a deluge of painted marks. Lichtenstein used language, most frequently derived from the comics, that had full syntactical and narrative sequence, but in his cartoon paintings from 1962–66, he always made it clear that his narratives are part of quotations from other sources. The exception may be his *Masterpiece* (1962), in which he himself undoubtedly supplied the ironic tones of the artist questioning his role in the art world: "Why, Brad darling, this painting is a Masterpiece! My, soon you'll have all of New York clamoring for your work."

This sense of words and signs as fragments of the larger environment continued in the word images of many of the Photorealists. Although James Rosenquist's work had already included these large-scale, billboard-like scenes in such works as *F-111* (1965), the Photorealists with their photo-derived renditions of banal street and highway scenes showed us not billboard-like fragments but snapshot views of streets, highways, storefronts, and horse shows. The works of Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, Robert Cottingham, Richard McLean, and others almost always included a profusion of written signs. These function in their works, as they did in Pop Art, both to suggest the environment and to question ironically the legitimacy of image-making through "copying" processes. As to the primacy of language in their work, most of Estes's street scenes include many different types of signs, while Cottingham's works usually make a word of a neon store sign their central focus. Interestingly, this sense of the centrality of words in our visual environment is carried on in the graffiti-like words and word fragments of Jean Michel Basquiat's painting and the borrowed slogans and supermarket signs in much of David Wojnarowicz's work.

It is, however, the use of words in juxtaposition or free association and in narrative that is closest to both the Surrealist and visionary impulse. Directly related to Surrealism, Joseph Cornell's assemblages, constructions, and collages often employ words in poetic, disconnected relationships to the images. Such artists as Ray Johnson in New York and George Hermes and Wallace Berman in California continued this assemblage or collage-based aesthetic with its attendant use of language in their objects and collage poems of the sixties.

Fig. 3 Larry Rivers, *Parts of the Face: French Vocabulary Lesson*, 1961, oil on canvas, 30 × 30". London, The Tate Gallery.

Fig. 4 Jasper Johns, *False Start*, 1959, oil on canvas, 67¼ × 54". New York, private collection.

Quite another matter is the language use of Jasper Johns, perhaps the most complete inheritor of the Dada sensibility. Johns's use of the juxtaposition of words and images owes not only to Duchamp but also to Magritte's playful explorations. Johns's earliest works were often painted on newspaper collaged on canvas, so that ghostly words rose through his paint surfaces. In works of 1955 like *The* or *Tango* the words took on the same object-like status as his targets and flags. His alphabet and numeral paintings continued this play between painted shape and known symbol. But it is in works like *False Start (Fig. 4)* that Johns comes as close to breaking the links between sign and signified as Magritte had in his pipe painting. Here, Johns has labeled actively painted color areas with names of hues other than those represented: "red" on blue, "blue" on red, "white" on yellow, and so on. Thus, Johns uses the contradiction between what is represented and the word concept in much the same way as had the Dada-Surrealists. In *Fool's House* (1962) he returns to the cursive script of the Abstract Expressionists to label accurately the objects included in the painting as stretchers, canvas, and cup. Although these words correctly identify the objects they signify, their painterly quality and, indeed, the very fact that the objects are painted bring the play between what is more real—object, word, or painted surface—to the fore again. In fact, as Irving Sandler has noted, much of Johns's work is concerned with "the definition of art and non-art; 'real' objects and 'art' objects; with the connection of verbal and visual images . . . of what is conceptualized and what is seen, that is, with the complex and ambiguous process of experiencing art."[7] The juxtaposition and free association of language and image, clearly influenced by Dada and Surrealism, are an integral part of Johns's work.

Johns's work was probably influential not only for a number of other artists involved in the developing Pop Art—Rivers and Dine, for example—but also for slightly younger artists working in the mid-to-late sixties. In California, Ed Ruscha, associated with so-called California Pop, was producing works in which word-image plays were central. Ruscha has credited reproductions of Johns's works seen in 1957 with his decision to become a serious artist, and he was much influenced by Johns's and Schwitters's works seen in 1960.[8] In works of 1960–61 Ruscha juxtaposed commercial subjects in which words were very prominent with such emotionally charged place names as Dublin or Vicksburg. *In Actual Size* (1962) he contrasts an actual-size Spam label with the word "Spam" repeated in large scale in the painting's upper portions, and in *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western* (1963) he uses the word "noise" to suggest the sound of the pencil breaking. Ruscha's later use of language involves the images of words such as "Adios" or "City" emerging from random spills *(Fig. 5)*, words floating

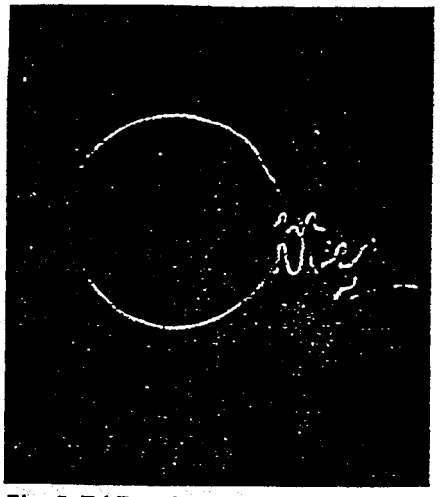


Fig. 5 Ed Ruscha, *City*, 1968, oil on canvas, 55 × 48". The Art Institute of Chicago, 20-Century Purchase Fund.

against Hollywood skies, or, most recently, more narrative statements in clear type on simple grounds. Statements in such works as *Very Angry People* (1973), *Another Hollywood Dream Bubble Popped* (1976), or *Honey, I Twisted through More Damn Traffic Today* (1977) extend what Peter Plagens has called Ruscha's "objectification of the word"[9] in his earlier paintings to what might be called the objectification of meaning in his later narrative statements. Although these statements are so deadpan, so ironic, as to seem to turn everything to cliché, it is the fearsome truth behind the deadpan delivery that startles us to realization. In this way Ruscha not only uses words in the ironic, paradoxical manner of so much of Dada and Surrealist art but, like those earlier movements, also seeks to lead the viewer to self- or social recognition.

Several other California artists, working with full knowledge of one another, extended the Surrealist-inspired use of words even further through their use of obvious puns and wordplays sometimes combined with a highly autobiographical content. In 1966–67 William T. Wiley moved from painting in an Abstract Expressionist mode to creating odd and enigmatic objects or small watercolors that frequently incorporated words, phrases, or entire statements. Objects such as *Enigma's Weener Preserved in Wax* and *Slant Step Becomes Rhino/Rhino becomes Slant Step* (both of 1966) include the inscriptions of the titles in the object and reveal a clear debt both to the tradition of Surrealist objects and to Johns. The pieces were included in the *Funk Art* exhibition organized by Peter Selz for the University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley, in 1967 and are representative of the assemblage-based, playful but emotionally charged work then being produced mostly in the San Francisco Bay and called Funk Art. Wiley extended this sensibility as early as 1967 into watercolors such as *Wizdumb Bridge (Fig. 6)* that had punning titles and long, hand-written paragraph captions relating a seemingly autobiographical anecdote that connected only tangentially to the depicted subject, often a construction in the studio. Wiley's interest in ruminative, associative texts examining his life as an artist culminated in his many studio interiors of the mid seventies and his development of the alter ego Mr. Unnatural.

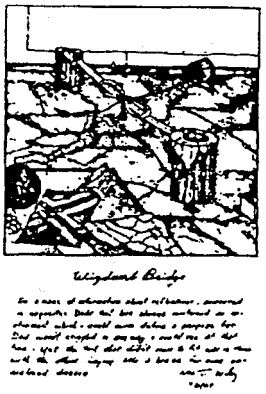


Fig. 6 William T. Wiley, *Wizdumb Bridge*, 1969, watercolor and ink on paper, 24 × 19". Chicago, William and Deborah Struve Collection.

Fig. 7 Robert Arneson, *Classical Exposure*, 1972, terra-cotta, 96 × 36 × 24". Washington, D.C., Barbara Fendrick, Fendrick Gallery.

Another artist associated with the Funk Art movement was Robert Arneson, who in the late sixties began to develop his ceramic work away from the standard utilitarian forms to disjunctive objects with a distinctly Surrealist cast. Arneson's work soon began to take on an autobiographical flavor with the frequent inclusion of self-portraits caught in various situations or emotional states. Arneson's primary use of words was in his titles, which often have a punning relationship with the represented image. Arneson makes one of his most complex verbal-visual puns in *Classical Exposure (Fig. 7)*. Basing the form on that of a classical Greek herm—a satyr-like head perched on a column with an exposed phallus—Arneson aggrandized these elements to a full bust portrait on a column, yet another reference to the classical sculptural tradition, but the bust is a cigar-chomping portrait of the artist, and his feet stick out from the column base. *Classical Exposure* is a double pun on sculptural tradition and the personal self-exposure of the artist.

Bruce Nauman's use of visual-verbal puns in some of his early photo-pieces has a distinctly Wileyesque ring. *Fountain* (1966) shows Nauman spouting water in a clear reference to Duchamp's urinal Readymade of 1917, while *Feet of Clay* represents Nauman's feet encased in that substance. Nauman's work of the early seventies made frequent forays into anagrams, such as *Perfect Door, Perfect Odor, Perfect Rodo* (1973) or the neon *Run from Fear/Fun from Rear (Fig. 8)*. Although much of his work of the seventies used language in a much more conceptual or documentary mode, a number of the neons continued to explore not only language structure but specific content, often with a clear social intent. Beginning with the anagrammatic *Raw War* (1970) or partly anagrammatic *Eat Death* (1972), this direction continues in such works as *American Violence* (1981–82), with its alternatingly lit phrases "Rub It On (Your Chest)," "Stick It In (Your Ear)," "Sit on (My Face)," "American (Violence)." In these works, Nauman's use of language recalls aspects of Dada and Surrealism, but rather than juxtaposing images, he juxtaposes words within themselves as anagrams or palindromes to jolt the viewer into an awareness of language and its power for both nonsense and statement.

At the same time as Ruscha, Wiley, Arneson, Nauman, and others in California were working with language juxtapositions and autobiographical or social statements, another group of artists were exploring this same post-Pop territory, but with a fierce imagery and adolescent linguistic abandon that was all their own. The style, now called Chicago Imagism, was born with the

first exhibition of a group called the Hairy Who in 1966. Obviously a pun (Harry, Who?, Who's Hairy?) on a rock-group-like name, the group title was emblematic of the language play of these Chicago artists. Their acknowledged "father" was the independent sculptor H.C. Westermann, who began his career in Chicago but had moved on to Connecticut by the time of the first Hairy Who exhibition.

Influenced, perhaps, by the Surrealist collections that were being formed in Chicago in the fifties, Westermann turned from the imagistic but emphatically unplayful expressionism of the so-called Monster Roster of Leon Golub, Cosmo Campoli, June Leaf, and others to witty, enigmatic, highly crafted objects that often included juxtapositions of both image and language. *The Big Change* (1963–64) had its knotted form juxtaposed with its obviously laminated layer construction. *Walnut Box* (1964) was a box of that material filled with walnuts. *Cliff* (1970) played on his own nickname. Westermann often inscribed his pieces with the titles or other legends so that words became part of the image. Despite his playfulness and frequent irony, Westermann was capable of ambiguous but extremely personal statement, as in the career-long series of "Death Ships" relating to his World War II experience. It was Westermann's combination of deep personal expression and ironic distance that influenced many of the younger Chicago artists. With respect to language, as well as a peculiarly distorted, cartoon-based imagery, a small painting of Westermann's, *Battle of the Little Big Horn* (1959), and the artist's illustrated letters to friends were particularly influential for the developing Hairy Who. In fact, Jim Nutt, a Hairy Who member, had direct access to these unexhibited works through Westermann's Chicago dealer Allan Frumkin.[10] *Battle of the Little Big Horn* has the violence, the rubbery cartoon imagery, and the misspellings basic to much Chicago Imagist Art.

Fig. 8 Bruce Nauman, *Run from Fear/Fun from Rear*, 1972, neon tubing and clear glass tubing, edition of 6, top: 19 × 116¾ × 2¾"; bottom: 10¾ × 113 × 2¾". New York, Sonnabend Gallery.

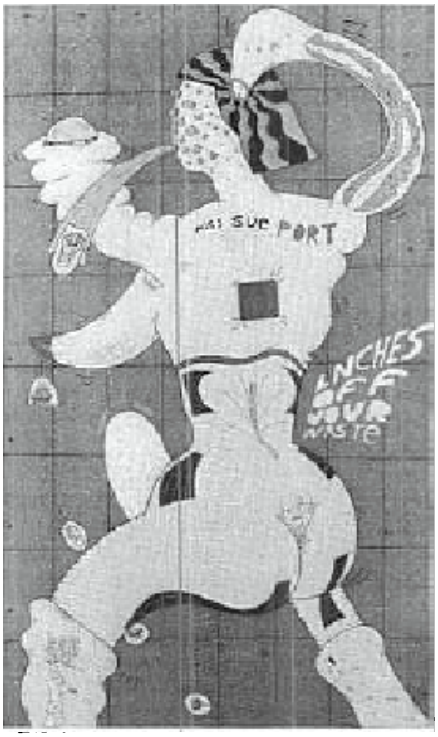


Fig. 9 Jim Nutt, *Miss Sue Port*, 1967–68, acrylic on Plexiglas and enamel on wood, 61 × 37". Collection of the artist.

Two of the Chicago Imagist artists most involved with actually incorporating language into their images were Jim Nutt and Karl Wirsum. Both members of the original Hairy Who group, Nutt and Wirsum brought wordplays, puns, and malapropisms from their titles into the images or object-like frames of their works. Wirsum's verbal-visual puns include the depiction of a muzzled dog in *No Dogs Aloud* (1965), a grotesque gargling figure painted on a medicine-cabinet door in *Gargoyle Gargle Oil* (1969), a papier-mâché sculpture of a genie emerging from a bottle in *Genuine Genie Wine* (1969), an acrylic-behind-Plexiglas image beginning to be smeared by a wiper blade in *Wipe Out* (1970), and many others in a similarly childlike, humorous vein. These are almost always worked into the image by Wirsum in a type style that fits his vernacular or primitive-derived, angular, patterned style. Occasionally, further juxtapositional words or phrases will be used as well, as in "The Howln Wolf" of *No Dogs Aloud*. Jim Nutt, too, indulged in a similar kind of linguistic high jinks in his Hairy Who period works such as *Y Did He Du it* (1966–67), which contains an image of "Officer E. Doodit," *Miss Sue Port (Fig. 9)*, with the inscription "Inches Off Your Waste," and *Cotton Mouth* (1967–68), which has actual cotton behind the mouth of the acrylic reverse-painted-on-Plexiglas image. Certain later works continue the punning: *I'm Da Vicious Roomer* (1969), *Summer Salt* (1969–70), which actually rolls up on a window shade, and *He Might Be a Dipdick But They Are a Pair* (1972). These are typical of Nutt's language use, in that these titles appear not as part of the image itself but as inscriptions on the painted backs. Occasionally, words are incorporated into the image itself, such as the "smooth," "heavenly odor," and the cartoonish "awk" inscribed in the image of *I'm Da Vicious Roomer*. Nutt has said that the typographic style of these words were often chosen to emphasize or juxtapose with the meaning itself.[11] From about 1970, when Nutt's imagery drew away from vernacular and cartoon models and became more freely invented, the language of his titles and the expletive-like words included in his images were more conversational fragments of the interior dramas that the images came increasingly to represent. Nutt essentially developed his language use from words as indicators of the vernacular world of the comics and cheap ads to the more fully syntactical language of conversation and interchange—from one-liners to enigmatic statements of our daily interactions. From his self-consciously provocative beginnings, Nutt has developed into one of the more subtle investigators of the paradoxical relationships among images, words, and entire sign systems, and his continuing investigation falls directly in line with the linquistic juxtapositions of Dada and Surrealism.

A surprising continuation of this use of the juxtaposition of word and image and the objectification of words occurs in the work of such recent "appropriation" artists as David Salle. Although his methods of image (or language) appropriation from mass culture are related to the exploration of cultural sign systems by Pop Artists, they abandoned the cool, deadpan irony of Pop Art's "copying" process in favor of conveying a sense of the meaninglessness inherent in our contemporary bombardment by images. Salle's approach to images or words and meaning is probably most closely allied with Johns, Rosenquist, or Ruscha, but his art clearly has juxtaposition at its base. The difference between his use of juxtaposition and that of classic Surrealism is that no particular psychological or sociological expression is intended; rather, meaning shifts within various contexts, between images, between images and words, and from viewer to viewer. A clear example of Salle's approach to the use of words as part of his images is the

Fig. 10 David Salle, *What Is the Reason for Your Visit to Germany?*, 1984, oil and acrylic on canvas and lead on wood, 96 × 191½". Aachen, West Germany, Ludwig Collection.

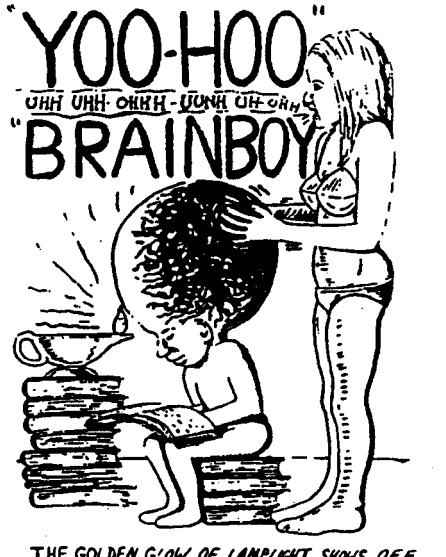
large-scale *What is the Reason for Your Trip to Germany (Fig. 10)*. Discussing this work during its formative stages in a filmed interview with Donald Kuspit, Salle stated that after "resisting attempts to conjoin it with words," the word "fromage" just popped into his head and seemed right.[12] Clearly, any association between the quasi-pornographic depiction of a woman, a saxophone molded under Johnsian lead, images of Lee Harvey Oswald, a pour of paint, and the word "fromage" exists only in the artist's mind, but their conjunction has the power to intrigue us.

Although it is the use of language in forms of juxtaposition or free association that seems closest to the spirit of Dada and Surrealism, and thus have come under close scrutiny here, several other approaches play a role in visionary art. The most important of these is narrative. Much Surrealist or, more broadly, visionary art had a strong narrative interest, which critics, particularly in the reductive 1960s, referred to as its literary quality. Apart from artists already cited who have a strong narrative element in their work—Cornell, Wiley, and Nutt, for example—a number of artists of the late sixties and seventies exploited sequential narrative or story-telling elements creating what has been described as a strong narrative current in American art by the late seventies.[13] Among the artists usually linked to Conceptual Art and using language in the manner typical of that movement, i.e., to document actions or ideas that could be recorded only through words or documentary photographs, Vito Acconci and William Wegman evolved their documentary statements into more personal narratives: Acconci with written and taped narratives of a self-revelatory and autobiographical sort, and Wegman with playful references to everyday activities from talking to his dog to dreaming. Artists related to this photodocumentary vein, such as Duane Michals and Bill Beckley, developed works that incorporated photographs and language in clear narrative sequence. Michals certainly owed a great deal to Surrealism in his numerous dreamlike sequences. Several California-based artists using narrative texts broadly in their work were Eleanor Antin, Alexis Smith, and Allen Ruppersberg. In Chicago, Roger Brown seldom incorporated words into the actual images of his paintings, although several recent paintings include narrative captions for related sequential scenes laid out in a comic-book manner. But his images are almost always readable as narratives, usually abetted by his titles. This narrative interest continued in the work of Nicholas Africano, whose early paintings with tiny images and frequent captions floating in large fields are arranged sequentially from painting to painting to tell the story of some personal incident. Africano extended the narrative interest into a series of paintings depicting operatic and literary themes such as the "Girl of the Golden West" and "Jekyll and Hyde." Hollis Sigler's early drawings and later paintings always include a verbal message that illuminates or illustrates the image *(Fig. 11)*. In Texas and the Southwest a personalized narrative developed in the work of Terry Allen, James Surls, and Vernon Fisher. Allen introduced broken bits of narrative from his performances and songs into his collaged paintings, while Surls used words for the titles or sometimes Wileyesque narratives incorporated into his drawings. Vernon Fisher based his work on the juxtaposition of images with extended "typed" narratives that seem to be fragments of some stream-of-consciousness response to life in his Texas environment. *El Amor es Estraño (Fig. 12)* combines an image of an El Lissitsky-like traffic sign against a broad Texas landscape superimposed by a text discussing art, women, the Abstract Sublime, and Spanish love songs on a border radio station. Fisher's works are at once playful and serious, local and universal. They are grounded in Surrealist word-image paradox but with a more personal, self-revelatory edge. Much late-seventies art, especially that produced outside New York, took narrative interest to new levels of complexity and personalization, both contributing to the so-called pluralism of that time and preparing the way for the Neoexpressionist interest that was to develop with the eighties.

Fig. 11 Hollis Sigler, *I've Got This Job of Being a Woman*, 1982, oil and pastel on paper, 28¼ × 34¼" (framed). Chicago, Collection of Kemper Insurance.

Of the artists related to this developing expressionist tendency, one of the earliest to strike out in this self-reflexive vein was Jonathan Borofsky. Interesting, particularly with regard to relationships to Surrealism, is Borofsky's reliance on dreams for his imagery and narrative texts. In about 1973 Borofsky began drawings and paintings on canvas board that recorded dream imagery. Titles inscribed in these works include *Dream #1 (I'm walking the streets of some strange town with my mother. I hustle with mother and a huge crowd into a supermarket for protection . . .) at 1,944,281* (1972–73), *I dreamed my model for the universe was much better . . . at 2,208,287* (1973), or *I dreamed I was taller than Picasso at 2,041,324* (1973). *I dreamed that a man in a tower was being shot at at 2,307,327* of 1975 *(Fig. 13)* represents a fully realized example of these early dream paintings, and Borofsky began to develop similar images into wall drawings and installations that same year. Borofsky's installations have grown into full-blown dreamscapes made up of dissociated bits of images, words and objects of all kinds that seem to spring from the artist's subsconscious and constitute, for him, a

Fig. 12 Vernon Fisher, *El Amor es Extraño*, 1975, acrylic on paper, 94 × 94¾". Addison, Texas, Hilre Hunt.



THE GOLDEN GLOW OF LAMPLIGHT SHOWS OFF HIS MOST ALLURING FEATURE TO ITS BEST ADVANTAGE. BRAIN PICKED AND GROOMED - TAKEN ADVANTAGE OF THE YOUNG HUSTLER - THE YOUTHFUL ABE

Fig. 14 Mike Kelley, *Abe's Log Cabin and His Most Alluring Feature*, 1984, acrylic on paper, two parts, 52 × 69" overall. Los Angeles, Collection of The Capital Group, Inc.

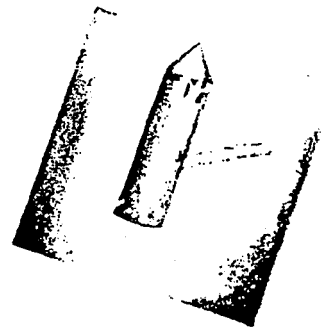


Fig. 13 Jonathan Borofsky, *I dreamed that a man in a tower was being shot at at 2,307,327*, 1975, oil on canvas, 58 × 58". Collection of David Pincus.

telling, repeatable vocabulary. His revelatory use of language seems almost classically Surrealist, and his installations are often reminiscent of the Surrealists' environments for their exhibitions, such as Duchamp's installation for the *First Papers of Surrealism* of 1942.

Two artists who work in a narrative vein but whose works are perhaps more distanced and less personalized are Steve Gianakos and Mike Kelley. Gianakos's works since the mid seventies have involved bawdy and black-humored, cartoon-like drawings with draftsmanly captions. Kelley's large drawings and narrations involve juxtapositions of images and words that are enigmatic but compelling. *Abe's Log Cabin and His Most Alluring Feature (Fig. 14)* reveals Kelley's ability to debunk the common mythology of our culture in a way that is both funny and profoundly unnerving.

Although juxtaposition, wordplay, narrative, and personal revelation seem closer to the Dada-Surrealist heritage and the visionary intent, other uses of language in recent art sometimes relate to a surprising degree to aspects of the Surrealist-visionary intention. On the surface, it would seem that the strict, directional language of Sol LeWitt's drawings, the documentary descriptions of Dennis Oppenheim's works, or the linguistic explorations of Joseph Kosuth's work are at opposite poles from the allusive language of Surrealist or visionary art. Yet, despite their use of objective language, the paradox of which is more real, the word or the image, remains implicit in their work. Kosuth's early *One and Three Chairs*

(1965), in fact, actively investigates how we receive a concept through the real object, the image, or the linguistic definition. Although this can be seen as the inverse of Magritte's pipe—this *is* a chair, three ways—there is still a paradoxical element in the consideration of which is really "real." The paradoxical element is even more evident in certain works by other Conceptual artists. Douglas Heubler's attempt to document everyone in the world in his *Variable Piece #70* (1970) has a certain Dadaist tone, as does his untitled drawing of 1968 with a point and the legend: "Represented above is a point whose actual location is 10" ahead of the eyes of the percipient. At the exact instant that this location is perceived the point moves off into random patterns of direction that describe the entire space of this room and continues to do so until the participant has departed." So, too, do Lawrence Weiner's early "projects" existing only as statements: *The Artic Circle Slattered, A Square Removal from a Rug in Use* (1969) and his enigmatic later wall works.

Artists linked to Conceptualism's interest in the structure of language but who consciously "deconstruct" it (to use a frequent recent phrase remarkably similar to aspects of the Surrealists' intent) include Neil Jenney, John Baldessari, and the graffitist Rammellzee. In Jenney's early works crude images illustrated captions boldly painted on the frames that demonstrate the extreme difference in the concepts signified by words only a few letters apart, for example, *Saw and Sawed* (1969) or *Trash and Trash Can* (1970). This exploration of words relies not on the juxtaposition of word to image but on the surprising contrast of words and their near counterparts. The effect could be as jolting and as challenging as Magritte's pipe. John Baldessari does juxtapose words and images in such works as the *Blasted Allegories* series of 1978, which includes randomly chosen television images, each described in a word by friends, with the word-images joined in mock sentences that hint at meaning but reveal none. These words and the many series based on the structure of sentences or stories suggest that Baldessari is well aware of the conceptual structure of both language and meaning. Although influenced by modern semiotic theory, his sensibility is very close to Magritte's. An artist whose deconstructive methods are rather different is Rammellzee, perhaps the leading theorist of the graffiti "movement." Rammellzee's theories, referred to as "Ikonoklast Panzerism," stipulate the literal deconstruction of language into letters, letters to be graphically "armored" to do battle with the language of established society. Although the visual results of Rammellzee's theory seem little more than a fast-paced evolution from medieval illumination, the theory of language breakdown as a tool of guerrilla warfare is an interesting tangent to semiotic "deconstruction" and remarkably reminiscent of the Surrealists' threats to destroy bourgeois culture.

This political aspect of much language art is experiencing something of a renaissance in the eighties. Of course, the direct syntactical use of language to convey a sociopolitical message occurs in a number of earlier artists' work: Robert Indiana's *Alabama* (1965), with the legend "Just as in the anatomy of man every nation must have its hind part" to indicate Selma, Alabama, or his *USA 66* (1964), with the words "Eat" and "Die"; Peter Saul's savagely distorted, cartoonish paintings of the sixties excoriating everything from the welfare state to the Vietnam War; or Hans Haacke's conceptual works exposing the machinations of the art market, art funding, and the corporate world. Surrealist juxtaposition is not far behind in Haacke's juxtaposition of the saccharine Breck Girl and the text in *The Right to Life (Fig. 15).*

Among recent artists who employ words for sociopolitical statement are Mike Glier, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Ida Applebroog, and John Fekner. Glier and Kruger use images "appropriated" from the media to underline their political perspectives. Almost all Kruger's inversions of advertising's message convey a feminist intent. Applebroog employs her distinctive illustrational style in rather baleful images of people seen through windows often with conversational captions that reveal the hopelessness of their situations. Holzer's posters, plaques, and

Fig. 15 Hans Haacke, *The Right to Life,* 1979, color photograph, silkscreen under glass, 50¼ × 40¼". Oberlin College, Allen Memorial Art Museum.

Fig. 16 John Fekner, *Decay*, 1981, black-and-white photograph, 8 × 10". New York, Semaphore Gallery.

electric signs carry her "truisms" and other statements conveying the disturbing nature of human and social circumstances: "Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise," "Money Creates Taste," or "What Urge Will Save Us Now That Sex Won't." Holzer's clichéd statements have the ring of truth, and they encourage us to examine both ourselves and our role in the world. Likewise, John Fekner's installation *Broken Promises* (1981), in which the giant word "Decay" is stenciled on a crumbling Bronx building, or his word painting *Video Jello* (1983) encourages self- and social examination, just in the way that Breton had theorized for Surrealism. In fact, the paradox of Fekner's "Decay" legend on a building behind President Reagan on one of his election tours is ample illustration that Surrealism is in the world *(Fig. 16)*.

As is evident from this broad-ranging but certainly not inclusive survey, the use of language as a part of visual images has been particularly prevalent in the past three decades of American art. This language use has reflected a variety of intentions that cross accepted stylistic categories in surprising ways: the incorporation of words as signs of the environment in Pop Art, Photorealism, and much recent appropriation art; the use of word-image juxtapositions, wordplays, and puns in artists as diverse as Rivers, Johns, Ruscha, Nauman, Wiley, Nutt, and Salle; the highly personalized narratives of a wide range of artists particularly in the late seventies; and even the structural or sociopolitical investigations of certain Conceptual and recent word-oriented artists. While the use of juxtaposition or wordplay and a personalized narrative has obvious precedents in Dada and Surrealism, both the Pop-like use of words as signs and the linguistic or sociopolitical investigations seem less related to the Surrealist or visionary context. It must be remembered, however, that an investigation of language and its meaning is certainly basic to Magritte's pipe painting and much other Surrealist art and that Breton's various manifestos of Surrealism called for art as a tool of personal and social revolution. Underlying all these various uses of language, though, is a basic condition: the persistent paradox of the reality of words versus that of images. The Dadaists and Surrealists knew and exploited this paradox. Recent American artists have done so as well. Many undoubtedly want to use words as Jonathan Borofsky has stated: "I wanted to reach people in a common language—words and images."[14] But they are also aware of the shifting nature of the meaning of these words and images as they collide in the environment, in a work of art, or in our minds. In recent American art, as in much of the art of this century, words and images seem to represent both the desire to communicate and the awareness that no communication is absolute.

Notes

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1 Several of these examples are cited by Robert White and Gary Michael Dault, "Word Art and Art Word," *Artscanada* (June 1969), pp. 17–20.

2 William S. Rubin, *Dada, Surrealism, and Their Heritage*, exh. cat., New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1968, p. 94.

3 Ibid., pp. 94–100.

4 Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983, p. 20.

5 Quoted by Harkness, "Introduction," ibid., p. 12.

6 Rubin (cited n. 2), pp. 94, 99.

7 Irving Sandler, *The New York School: The Painters and Sculptors of the Fifties*, New York, 1978, p. 183.

8 Anne Livet, *The Works of Edward Ruscha*, exh. cat., San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1982, p. 157.

9 Peter Plagens, "Ed Ruscha, Seriously," ibid., p. 37.

10 Barbara Haskell, *H. C. Westermann*, exh. cat., New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978, p. 26.

11 See my "Interview with Jim Nutt, *Arts Magazine* (March 1978). p. 134.

12 David Salle, in the film, *A New Spirit in Painting: Six Artists of the 1980s*, produced and directed by Michael Blackwood, New York, Blackwood Productions, Inc., 1984.

13 A particularly useful document of this narrative tendency is Paul Schimmel, *American Narrative/Story Art: 1967–1977*, exh. cat., Houston, Contemporary Arts Museum, 1978.

14 Joan Simon, "An Interview with Jonathan Borofsky," *Art in America* (November 1981), p. 165.

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