Morley, Simon. Writing on the Wall: Word and Image in Modern Art. Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 2003.

1 Introduction: Words and Pictures

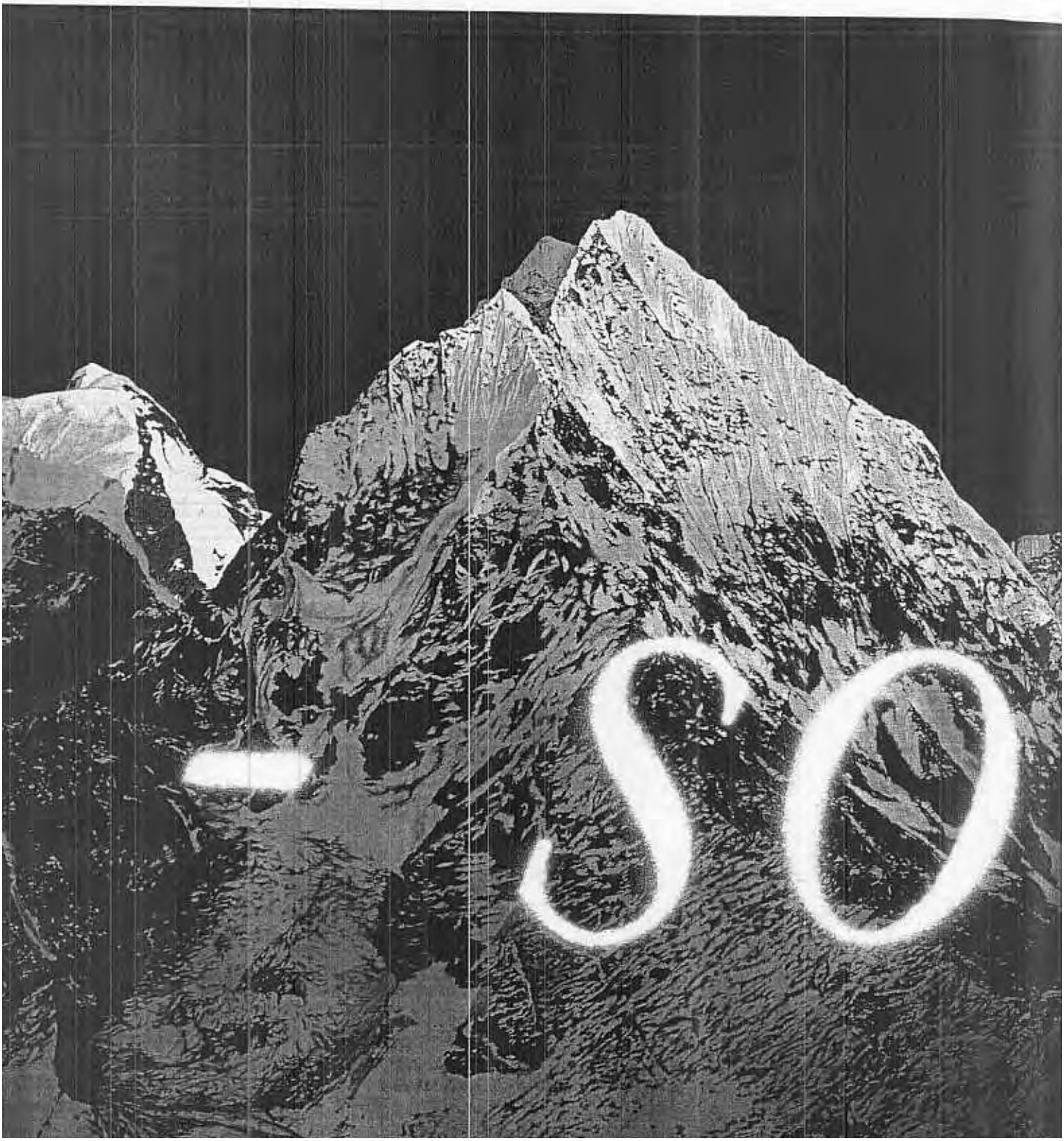
A snow-covered mountain, its peak touched by sunlight, rears upwards into the deep blue sky. Across its flank can be read a curiously equivocal piece of text that looks semi-transparent, as if it may actually be projected onto the face of the mountain itself. Could it be an advertisement for something? Mountains have been used to sell most things, though if so, the product is certainly rather obscure. A new perfume, perhaps?

Of course, this is no advertisement, but a recent painting by the American artist Ed Ruscha. It may indeed trade on the language of advertising, but it is most definitely a work of art, and engages the viewer in two distinct modes of information gathering – one involving the visual scanning of the image and the other the reading of the words. The former mode allows openness of interpretation and freedom of mental and sensual movement, while the latter confines the reader to a predetermined route constructed from a horizontal row of letters to be deciphered from left to right and top to bottom. Indeed, the activities of seeing and reading occur at quite different tempos and involve different orderings of perception – the brain must configure consciousness in distinct ways for each activity and we simply cannot do both simultaneously. Scientists, in seeking to find the roots of this difference in the structures of the brain, have distinguished between the 'left brain', which has a bias towards the rational, logical and discursive, and the 'right brain', which is image-based and the site of non-logical, intuitive skills. Thus, it is argued, reading and seeing also involve wholly different mental faculties and motor skills.[2] By mixing up the spaces of writing and picturing, Ruscha has, perhaps deliberately, perhaps inadvertently, engineered a collision between our two 'brains'.

This kind of play with perception and conception – image and text – can, in fact, be located within a broad typological schema that traces the verbal and the visual through increasingly complex and intimate kinds of relationship. As the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce suggested in the late nineteenth century, words and images are all *signs* and can be reduced to three basic types: the 'iconic', the 'symbolic' and the 'indexical'.[3] Images are 'iconic' in that they resemble the thing to which they refer, and, as a consequence, seem to have a close bond to reality. Words – defined by Peirce as 'symbolic' – are far more arbitrary in their sound or shape, and are only by convention related to their referent. They refer to what they name, operating by way of description, depending on a shared lexical storehouse for mutual comprehension. Finally, the 'indexical' sign Peirce described as having some directly causal or existential connection to the referent, as in the case of a pointing finger or a physical trace that links the sign directly to the body of the maker. Furthermore, written sentences have highly differentiated structures based on rules of syntax and semantics; images, on

I can see why many visual artists dislike words in artworks. They feel that words dirty the clear water that has reflected the sky. It disturbs the pleasure of the silent image, the freedom from history, the beauty of nameless form.
I want to name our pains.
I want to keep our names.
I know that neither images nor words can escape the drunkenness and longing caused by the turning world.
Words and images drink the same wine.
There is no purity to protect.
Marlene Dumas (1984)[1]

3 **Ed Ruscha** "-So" 1999
Some kind of advertisement, perhaps? Words in modern art are often inspired by the mass media, but rarely deliver a clear message.



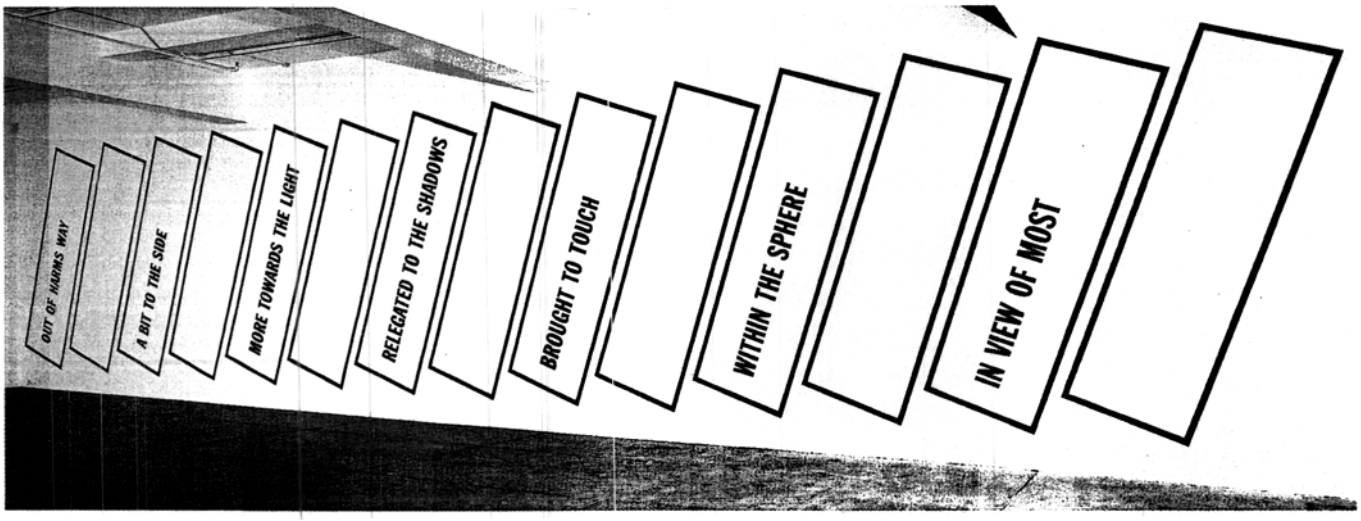
the other hand, are difficult to break down into distinguishable and meaningful components. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, in addressing the structure of the linguistic sign specifically, argued (not too long after Peirce) that a word could be understood as comprising three aspects: the 'signifier' (the aural and written form of the word itself), the 'signified' (the meaning ascribed to that form), and the 'referent' (that element of reality that these components bring to mind when combined).[4] Like Peirce, Saussure stressed that the union of 'signifier' and 'signified' is an entirely arbitrary one, as words do not have a natural relationship to meaning, a point that was to be made a little later by René Magritte's celebrated marriage of an image of a pipe with the words 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' – this is not a pipe – in *The Betrayal of Images*.

4 **René Magritte** *The Betrayal of Images* 1928–29
One of the most celebrated instances in art of word and image apparently misbehaving but actually imparting a profound truth.

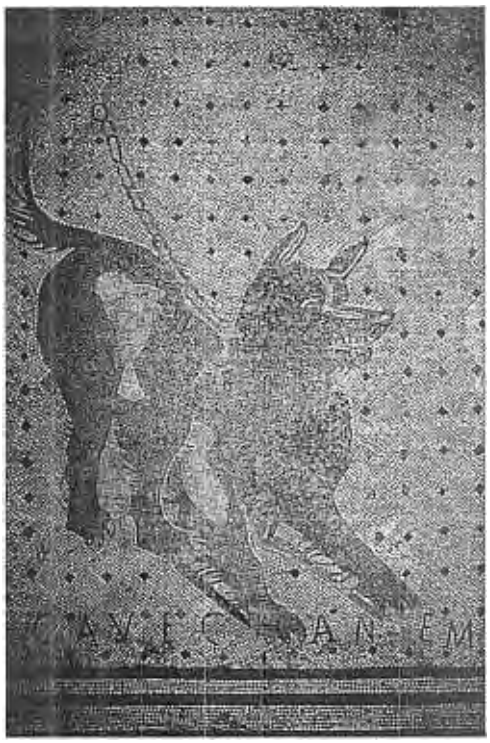
5 **Lawrence Weiner** *A Basic Assumption* 1999
A recent work by a veteran Conceptualist in which words become the raw material for making art.

Four kinds of interaction between the visual and the verbal sign can be identified and these form recurrent themes in this book.[5] Firstly, there is the *trans-medial* relationship. Here, word and work are connected by way of transposition or substitution: the one is essentially a supplement to the other. Such visual–verbal interfaces include any kind of writing or imaging in which the linguistic and the visual remain clearly distinguished both in time and in space, and also in relation to the division of labour. This implies a hierarchy in which the text remains subordinate to the image (or vice versa). Illustrated books and surveys such as this one, art criticism, theoretical discourses and commentaries, or gallery wall labels are all examples of the trans-medial. In the modern period (starting with the nineteenth-century Romantics), however, the clarity of this division can become blurred when artists themselves take on the literary roles once laid aside for others, either writing within the traditional sites of literary discourse or else bringing words into the art gallery, as in a recent work by the American Conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner, *A Basic Assumption*.

Secondly, there is the *multi-medial* relationship. Here, word and image coexist more closely, sharing the same space, though remaining clearly distinguished in terms of spatial relations, kinds of intelligibility and often the division of labour. Prominent examples of this category are shop signs and public notices, advertisements, comic books, or artworks that



incorporate the title, caption, or some kind of elucidating text while still keeping word and image spatially and cognitively segregated. Traditionally, this relationship has also been hierarchical, with either the image serving to illustrate some text or, conversely, the text used to tie down the specific meaning of an image. Images, after all, are mute and intrinsically vague from the point of view of communication. Without the Latin warning *Cave canem* – beware of the dog – we might assume that the sign from the ruins of Pompeii is simply a representation of some favourite canine. The text in Fra Angelico's painting of the Annunciation from the 1430s – a kind of ancient ancestor of the comic-strip speech bubble – is there to consolidate and make specific the Christian message also carried by the image, while the person depicted in an etching by Dürer from 1526 might be any learned scribe, but the written text informs us that he is one in particular – *Erasmi Roterodami* [*14*]. But, as we shall see, in modern art this kind of orthodox coupling is often deliberately confused or reversed. In the *livre d'artiste* – the 'artist's book' – as it emerged in France in the late nineteenth century, for example, a more independent, yet mutual, role was envisaged for both artist and poet. As artists began to engage with mass media, other multi-medial approaches emerged in Cubist and Dada works, titles inscribed on Surrealist paintings, or Pop art appropriations of comic book images. Thus, the work of the present-day white South African artist Marlene Dumas [*9*] can be categorized as multi-medial, the customary sharing out of roles and hierarchies being thoroughly disrupted, with Dumas taking responsibility for both word and image, mixing up meanings and confusing traditional roles.



6 **'Cave canem'** Before AD 79
A classic instance of the conventional relationship between word and image in which the former serves to anchor the meaning of the latter.

7 **Fra Angelico** *Annunciation* (detail) c. **1432–33**
Writing used in a painting to visualize speech.

8 **Raymond Pettibon** *No Title (Just what was)* 2001
The artist takes on the roles of both image maker and writer in a style indebted to comic books.

9 **Marlene Dumas** *Sold against One's Will* 1990–91
The apparent innocence of an image is cruelly betrayed by its accompanying text.

A work by the contemporary American artist Raymond Pettibon, on the other hand, contains elements of a third type of interaction, that typical of the *mixed-media* relationship. Here, word and image have less intrinsic coherence and are only minimally separated from one other, having been enfolded, decanted or scrambled into each other's customary domain. Emblems are examples of this kind of relationship from the pre-modern period, while in more recent times, posters and advertisements often share such traits. Indeed, the modern world provides a particularly rich harvest of the mixed-medial, and artists have been quick to learn from the forest of signs that constitutes the urban environment, directly depicting it (as in the work of a contemporary realist such as the American Richard Estes), borrowing fundamental stylistic elements (as in Ruscha's painting), or confusing the codes (as in the contemporary English artist Simon Patterson's adaptation of the London Underground map [*13*]).

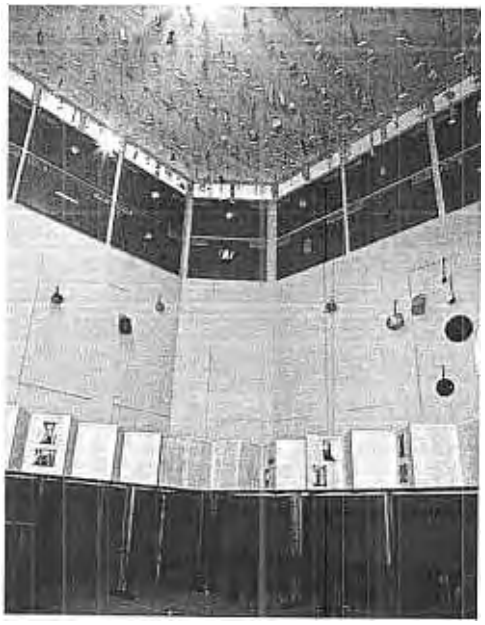
Finally, there is the *inter-media* relationship. The Book of Kells [*12*] is an example of an inter-medial work from the early Middle Ages, while the artist's monogram in Dürer's engraving is one from the Renaissance. Recognition of the visual, material side of letters (and of the performative and sensory dimension to the act of writing) is also at the heart of the traditional practice of calligraphy, as it is of typography. Again, advertising offers a rich harvest of the inter-medial in the modern environment. Here, too, Pettibon's drawing is interesting, for in the central part of the work the coherence as well as the distinction between word and image breaks down, and a hybrid form is produced. This category especially emphasizes the fact that writing is indeed *visual* language, that is, it is something which appeals to the *eye* as well as to the mind. In historical terms the spatialization and

10 **Richard Estes** *M104* 1999
The modern city is a rich source of written words, bewildering variety of styles.

visualization of language through the technology of writing came many thousands of years after man first set himself apart from other animals by learning to communicate through a complex system of coded sounds. The origins of writing lie in pictographic and ideographic forms that were entirely independent from speech and an explicitly visual mode of communication. The invention of the alphabet by the Phoenicians, however, transformed writing into something intended to record the spoken word and henceforth, at least in the West, it would become both subordinate to oral language and increasingly non-pictorial. This was a trajectory that the Western invention of moveable type by Johann Gutenberg in the fifteenth century continued and exaggerated: writing became a uniform, colourless, mechanized medium housed within the organized space of the folio. The activity of inscription was decisively severed both from image-making and from its origins in the bodily gesture. Indeed, in an era dominated by the protocols of the printed book the visual nature of written words can easily be forgotten. 'The wonderful thing about language', wrote the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty of the typical experience of reading a printed page, 'is that it promotes its own oblivion.... My eyes follow the line on the paper, and from the moment I am caught up in their meaning, I lose sight of them. The paper, the letters on it, my eye and the body are there only as the minimum setting of some invisible operation. Expression fades before what is expressed, and this is why its mediating role may pass unnoticed.'[6] The inter-medial relationship between word and image exposes the fact that writing and image-making share common roots, and this is true in terms of the visual nature of an inscribed sign and in the sharing of the technology (such as the chisel, pen, pencil or brush) required to make such notations.

11 **Ilya Kabakov** *The Communal Kitchen* 1991
For the contemporary artist, words, images and objects become part of a total inter-medial experience.

12 **Book of Kells** *Folio 8 recto* c. 800
Writing as a strikingly visual form.

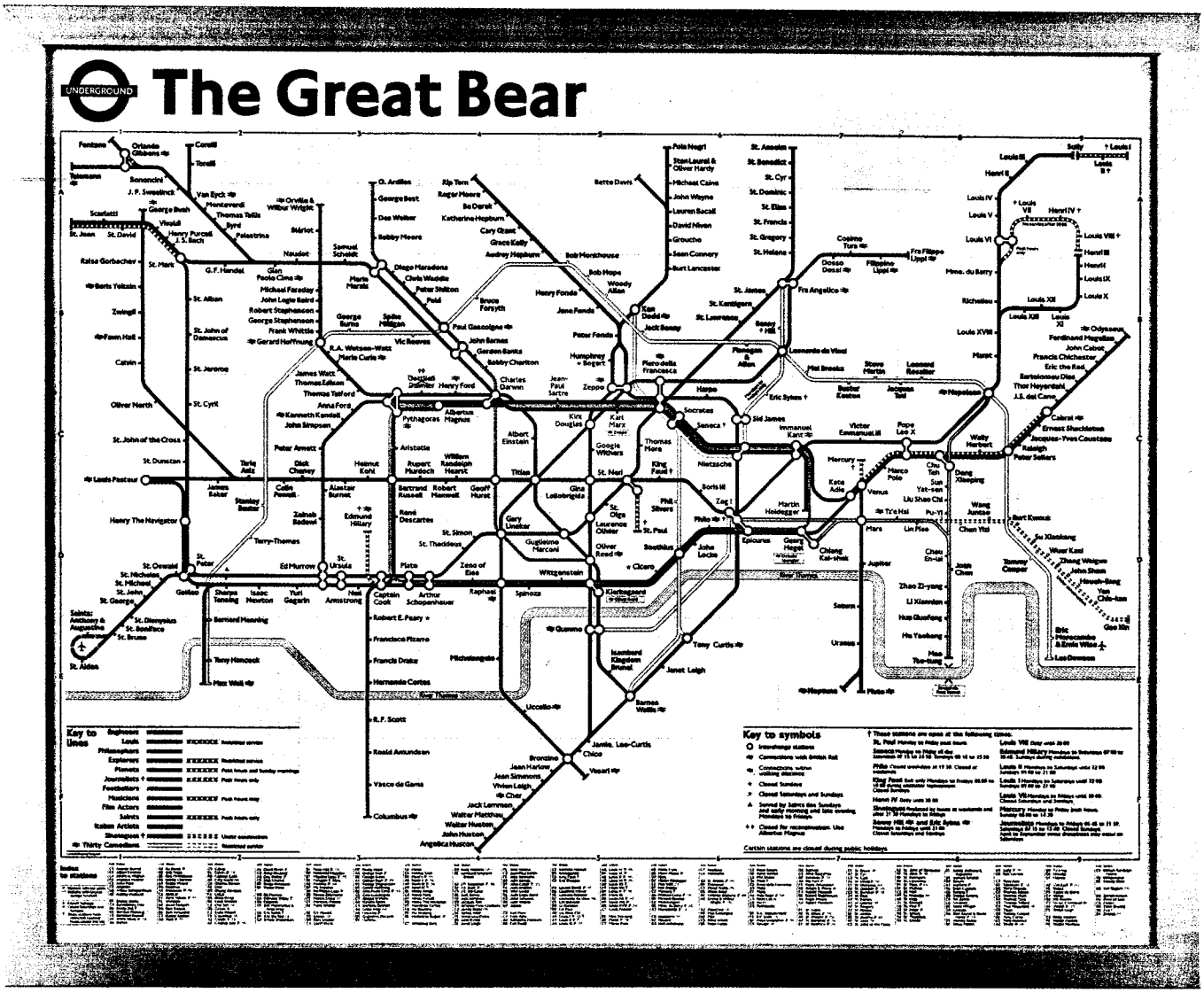


But in the modern period the inter-medial relationship has also come to signify much more than the melding of the visual and the verbal on a two-dimensional surface. In the mass media and in art there has been a strong impulse to extend notions of the inter-medial by breaking down the boundaries between the various media in radical ways. This generally involves the integration of diverse spaces, movements and sounds, as seen in the work of the contemporary Ukrainian artist Ilya Kabakov. A multi-sensory experience – a kind of 'total work of art' – has been created that operates within an vastly expanded field of communication and information. Here it is no longer possible to speak in terms of specific genres, either visual or verbal.

The broad cultural context for such visual–verbal cohabitations is one in which, for religious, political and philosophical reasons, word and image have often been in contest, even open conflict. Plato initiated a philosophical tradition that not only judges all representations to be mere simulacra but is also deeply suspicious of writing. The alphabet, which in the fifth century BC was still a relatively recent invention, was seen by Plato as a dangerous new technology. This was because he believed that as information was 'downloaded' and stored within written texts the power of memory was diminished, and as writing distanced the two sides of any communication, deception could prosper.[7] Later, in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, a prejudicial distinction was made between the word and the image on religious grounds. The spoken word, being a mental or spiritual entity (rather than a mere physical manifestation), was now credited with the highest status because God, being invisible, was understood to communicate to Man not through visual forms but rather through the medium of a divine language – The Word of God or the *Logos*, which is intelligibility itself. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God', declares the first line of the Gospel According to St John.[8] While in the Middle Ages in the West (and more generally under Islam) veneration of the word led to an exploration of calligraphy as a visual phenomenon, more generally the monotheistic religions have been suffused with a deep-rooted suspicion towards the potentially seductive nature of all images. In the West this became especially evident under Protestantism – a Lutheran altarpiece from 1537 in the Spitalskirche in Dinckelsbühl [*15*] shows the form this iconoclasm could take. Not only has the traditional imagery of the altarpiece been replaced by a group of texts, but these words have been inscribed in the standard letterform of the period and place, 'blackletter' (also known as 'gothic' or, later, 'Fraktur'), which was intended to be visually unassertive.[9]

With Gutenberg's invention of moveable type just a short time before the Protestant Reformation, the visual dimension to writing would be further suppressed. This served to segregate word from image as text came to be organized according to mechanical criteria and as painting turned increasingly to the task of representing the world of appearances. So, while subsequent secularization in the West diminished the hold of such theologically sanctioned iconophobia, new technology would erect another kind of barrier between words and images. In art itself, the quest for verisimilitude or naturalism placed strict limitations on the possibility of incorporating words into pictures. Fra Angelico's device would thus no

13 **Simon Patterson** *The Great Bear* 1992
The artist as a subverter of conventional codes.



14 **Albrecht Dürer** *Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam* 1526
Words are incorporated into a naturalistic representation and give specific information that the image alone cannot provide.

longer be a credible one, for it negates the attempt to construct a three-dimensional space. Dürer's insertion of an inscribed tablet into his representation, on the other hand, suggests a possible solution: the depiction of a text that is ostensibly sited, and therefore depicted, within the illusionary three-dimensional space.

During the Enlightenment, this sequestering of word and image was consolidated on theoretical grounds as the various artistic media were distinguished both operationally and epistemologically. It was argued that the literary arts were centrally involved with narrative because they unfolded in *time*, whereas the visual arts' proper domain was deemed to be *space*, and so could not be said to owe anything to verbal language.[10] Because, it was argued, we use the faculty of *taste* in appreciating a painting or sculpture – this being a *sense* like seeing or feeling – the response to the visual arts should be understood as fundamentally non-cognitive and non-conceptual, innate and unreflexive. The consequence of this was that verbal language, because it was based on conceptual rather than sensual entities, could be said to have no place in the practice or appreciation of visual art.[11]

Such arguments would subsequently become cornerstones of the kind of art theory and practice that came to dominate much nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art. Even after the collapse of naturalistic conventions of imitation, a division of the arts was still deemed necessary in order to protect the purity of each artistic medium from the encroachments of a seemingly debased mass society. Thus, the influential American art critic Clement Greenberg, drawing on earlier formalist art theory, could argue in the 1950s and 1960s that the goal towards which painting unerringly moved was the articulation of a purely *optical* experience. It was necessary, Greenberg declared, to eliminate anything from this experience that might interfere with the detached operation of 'taste' upon the ineluctable essence of painting, which was identified by Greenberg as its flatness. The arts were envisaged as fields of specialist knowledge, autonomous and independent both from the world of daily life and from other media, and a fundamental distinction was made between the directly sensual response appropriate for the visual image and the mediated one intrinsic to the reading of text. Painting and sculpture, by drawing attention to the *visual* nature of art, provided the groundwork for practices that were subordinate neither to literature nor to the task of representation. Clearly, such policing of media boundaries represented an approach to visual art that was profoundly inimical to text, or at least to text that was meant to be *read*. Words, as linguistic elements, were regarded as the province of the literary arts. As a result, Greenberg would suggest that the importance of the letters, numbers and words that began to appear in the work of Braque and Picasso in 1911 lay exclusively in the fact that, 'by their self-evident, extraneous and abrupt flatness, [they] stopped the eye at the literal, physical surface of the canvas in the same way that an artist's signature did.'[12]

Such restrictive readings of modern art are now being broadened, just as artists themselves have increasingly sought to escape media specificity. Such revisionism has also permitted the re-evaluation of earlier art. For example, the linguistic dimension of the fragments of text in Cubist paintings and collages that was suppressed in formalist writings such as Greenberg's, has

become the focus of attention for a number of more recent historians. This new approach has also addressed other previously neglected movements from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Dada.[13] Earlier interpretations of modern art have been challenged and supplanted, and while the fascination of modern artists with the 'primitive' was once recognized primarily as an assault on the hallowed conventions of naturalism, it is now also understood to have been driven by the desire for a kind of artistic practice that was able to incorporate multiple elements – visual and verbal – rooted in integral forms of organization, rather than in specializations, and in models that repudiated discrete categories in favour of a promiscuous mixing of media. Indeed, by looking beyond the traditional canon of Western artists, we encounter numerous examples of the kinds of visual–verbal interaction that had been largely banished from the West since the Renaissance. Various forms of 'primitive' picture-writing, such as glyphs, sigils, pictograms, hieroglyphs and ideograms, or the oriental traditions of calligraphy and scroll painting, expose the visual roots of writing, the role of the body, and the temporal dimension to inscription.

The specific critical context for *Writing on the Wall*, then, is the battle that has been waged over the past four decades against practices and theoretical interpretations that seek to separate artistic media; a battle that had in fact already been started by the avant-garde of the late nineteenth century. The story of modern art told in the following pages amounts, therefore, to a narrative with a number of linked themes, including the impact of non-Western ideas, the relationship between words and power, the influence of the mass media and new communication technology, and the fruitful interactions between writers and artists.

In place of the overly linear, hierarchical and segregated relationships between reading and writing, and between the seeing and reading that characterize normal practice, the artists in *Writing on the Wall* can be said to engage with what has been called 'topographic' space – a space in which writing is severed from its role as mere verbal description and is experienced instead as both a verbal and a visual phenomenon.[14] By so doing, artists have sought different organizations of the spaces and contexts within which word and image appear. Artists make a series of incursions from the domain of the image and of the body, invading the territory of a print-saturated culture, a culture dominated by the rigid and constraining protocols of the book. But this enterprise also amounts to a fundamental investigation into basic categories of meaning. For the study of how visual artists have interrogated language – of the myriad ways in which they have subverted the norms of writing and challenged the conventions of seeing and reading – is also, ultimately, a study of how they have sought to map out different modes of consciousness by upsetting customary categories and practices.

15 **Evangelical-Lutheran Congregational Altarpiece** 1537
This early Lutheran altarpiece from Dinckelsbühl, Germany, substitutes the pure, infallible and sacred Word for the potentially idolatrous image.