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Words and the Meaning of Things

Words had disappeared, and with them the meaning of things...

Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée (Nausea)*¹

Words are important. What we say and how we say it can have a profound impact on those we hold sway over and those whom we wish to convince. Indeed, from the art historical perspective, it is clear that this is an idea that visual artists of all stripe and color have been grappling with for hundreds of years, and as each artistic movement has its own unique stylistic “visual voice,” many also have specific ways in which they intentionally incorporate written and text based elements into their work as well. And whether these “words” were used to comment on the mass media and popular culture of the day, to push forward a political agenda, or to explore the artist’s personal inner life and preoccupations, it’s apparent that text based elements in all their varied forms and physical output have been an integral part of the creation process, and that this phenomenon has been especially apparent in the Western modern and contemporary art traditions.

Starting with the Impressionists in the mid 1800s, you begin to see the emergence of text based imagery incorporated “impressionistically” into their compositions, and culled from a

¹ A line from a passage in Jean-Paul Sartre’s 1938 book *La Nausée (Nausea)*, used to illustrate a point about Sartre’s existential philosophy formed during the Nazi occupation of France, and that encompasses his attempts “to understand and respond to the loss of traditional religious values, the impact of technology, and the realities of political oppression.” (Morley 101) Sometimes there are not words to describe the horrors that mankind can bring upon itself or the tragedies that we must endure in life, though we must attempt to grasp the meaning or there will be no possibility of a fully realized existence.

physical environment that was now rife with a “vertical visual field” full of written messaging on “walls, shopfronts, billboards, advertising pillars, street signs, passing vehicles, even people” (Morley 19) This visual assault of words in art was probably used to the best effect by artists such as Pier Bonnard and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in the creation of their “artistic posters,” which were a hybrid of sorts between advertising and art, and allowed the artists to “contribute rather more directly to the public visual and verbal barrage” within the urban landscape. These posters became part of a “broader revolution in the decorative arts—Art Nouveau—which led to further important innovations in the field of letter-making and typography.” (Morley 23) And it is clear from here, that there is a direct link to the evolution of professions such as commercial illustration and the graphic arts.

In response, by the late 1800s the Symbolists chose to challenge the “perceptual realism” of the previous artistic generation, and instead wanted to create art that opposed the “vulgar culture of a basely materialist society.” This new artform would be one that was better able to incorporate a broader range of human experience and which referenced the artist’s memory. In this way, the written word was used by the Symbolists not merely as a decorative element, but also as one that would be used “as [a weapon] in an armory of anti-naturalism, appearing alongside images in the guise of elusive titles, enigmatic verbal evocations or graphic signs.” (Morley 27) To the Symbolists “the appeal of the calligraphy lay in its unusual visual dynamics rather than in its legibility... an energizing trace of the artist’s gesture.” (Morley 27) As well as from a theoretical perspective, where artwork “was meant to evoke not clear, rational and

concrete meanings, but rather vague states of mind and poetic moods, the conjuring of a chimera, or of the mysterious, equivocal or indeterminate sign.” (Morley 28)²

By the early 1900s, the Cubists brought about controversy not only through their creation of paintings from multiple perspectives, but they also invaded the picture plane through the use of painted words culled from contemporary advertisements, as well as collaged elements glued directly onto the canvas, and in doing so brought the written word into their work. Pablo Picasso ushered in this new medium of “collage” into his work and seemed to be “making it clear that he was bidding farewell to the land of Symbolist and Expressionist escapism. The modern artist ... could no longer simply turn away from the carnival of contemporary life; neither could he rely on old techniques of representation.” (Morley 37)³ The collaged elements comprised bits and pieces of “newsprint, real labels, advertisements, calling cards, tickets and various other extraneous elements, such as wallpaper, sandpaper and cigarette butts” and were used to “act as welcome signposts back to the real, material world.” (Morley 39) Similarly, Picasso’s contemporary Georges Braque said he intended the letters, words, wallpaper and musical notes not “as things to be read” but instead as purely “compositional devices or special figures that draw attention to the textuality of the text” and he used them to “highlight the visible nature of writing as a graphic mark.” (Morley 39) It appears that in this way newspaper type could now be

² Another important idea that emerged from the Symbolists was one brought forth by the composer Richard Wagner in an essay from 1849, in which he stated that he strived for his operas to “express the reality of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or ‘total work of art’.” This concept revolved around bringing all art forms together—the literary, visual, and musical—into one overarching “common artwork.” (Morley 31)

³ In an interesting side note, Mary Anne Staniszewski claims in her book, *Believing is Seeing: Creating the Culture of Art*, that contrary to popular opinion, Picasso’s great contribution to modern art wasn’t Cubism but instead was collage. “Collage marked a momentous break in the tradition of Western painting. The organic integrity of oil and canvas was disrupted by the incorporation of mass-produced materials, and the sanctity of pure painting was destroyed.” (210)

seen as more of an element of texture than as legible type, which allowed the Cubists to create “a vocabulary of visual-verbal forms” that directly referenced the culture of the day. (Morley 45)

With collage the Cubists seemed to have opened the flood gates, and from here multiple artistic movements start to spring up in response to the rapidly changing world and its accompanying mass media, each one oscillating back and forth in meaning and intent but with textual elements as a unifying theme. From the Italian Futurists we get the concept of “Words-in-Freedom” and their intent to “[destroy] conventional language in order to set words free.” (Morley 96) For them, it seemed that the only fitting subject for modern art was the “new technological inventions and scientific discoveries” of the burgeoning century (Morley 47). Visually, this translated to elements that “no longer corralled into a linear syntactical structure” and “words [that] were at liberty to roam freely across the page or canvas. The goal was maximum emotional impact.” (Morley 49)⁴

With Dadaism we get “art at the service of the mind” and a desire “to bring together the arts into a new (dis)unity.” (Morley 61) Further, it seems that the “task of the Dadaists was that of exposing through ridicule the pretensions of bourgeois culture. Words were liberated from any obligation to make sense, but only so that they might herald the advent of an era of the absurd.” (Morley 61) Marcel Duchamp pushed these theories forward with his more philosophical ideas

⁴ At my first residency, in one of my first group critiques, I was urged *not* to think of my graphic design and art practices as two separate endeavors (something that I was definitively in the habit of doing). But instead to think of them as one integrated, cohesive practice. Starting with Art Nouveau and on through the history of the Italian Futurists—and its “preoccupation with advertising and the typographic revolution”—I can see where the lineages of the graphic design profession and the visual arts overlap. For example, in the French poet Apollinaire’s “poem drawings” he “laid the words out on the page spatially in order to echo their subject so they could function as iconic images” and in artists such as Robert Delaunay and Kasimir Malevich, you see text based imagery that evokes how text is used in ways that is similar to advertising, forming a sort of graphic “hybrid” between art and design (Morley 54-55).

about “brining art back into the orbit of the literary imagination” and a central theme of “indifference” in order to ensure:

The avoidance of self-expression or the taking of a position in order instead to pursue a detached art of practical, though unorthodox and often amusing, philosophical speculation. The concept of the “ready-made” was a central part of his strategy, and in effect it constitutes a new kind of visual-verbal hybrid.

(Morley 62)⁵

As for technological innovation, Dada was the movement that brought about the concept of the “photomontage:”

By robbing photography of its presence as a convincing illusion, through its gaps, blanks and spacings photomontage brings to the fore the fact that we are looking not at “reality” but at an interpreted, mediated world, a system of signs, and at an ordered syntax that is the essential condition of any conventional code. (Morley

67)⁶

⁵ Another of Duchamp’s innovations was found in his “hybrid” project, *Le Boîte Vert* (The Green Box), a collection of handwritten “jottings, extended reflections, drawings, diagrams and photographs” that were bundled together and unbound within the covers of a green boxlike book. This ephemera all revolved around one of his earlier works *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* and allowed the viewer/reader to interact with the information in an “open ended fashion.” (Morley 64) With *Le Boîte Vert*, Duchamp seems to have foretold the current trend in artist’s installations in which the viewer is a participant in the work. Today we can see this concept taken to the extreme, with social media documentation being one of its main objectives. In this way the artwork is experienced in real time by the viewer who is immersed in the “experiential” installation and experienced secondhand anytime by the viewer of one’s social media feed. For example, the Rafael Lorenzo-Hemmer interactive exhibit *Pulse* recently on view at the Hirshhorn in Washington, DC (<https://www.annebarnesdesign.com/blog/my-recent-artful-excursions>) and the Meow Wolf art collective’s *House of Eternal Return* (<https://santafe.meowwolf.com>) in Santa Fe, NM. (I’m going to be in Santa Fe next week and plan to go to the Meow Wolf exhibition while there.)

⁶ Kurt Schwitters, a German artist who belonged to the “Utopian, mystical wing of Dada,” eschewed political content in his work for the detritus of the streets. These found materials of little or no value or “rubbish” made their way into his work and included elements from “posters, tickets, handbills, newspapers, advertisements, banknotes, calling cards, and labels” most of which included typographic lettering that was used in his art to exploit the “visual status” and “narrative qualities” of the words (Morely 68). Similarly to Schwitters, I too have the impulse to incorporate collections of paper ephemera into the body of my paintings, but unlike Schwitters’ “rubbish,” my content does have highly personal meaning and is far from random, found objects, as they are materials that I very consciously collect on my travels and throughout my day-to-day experiences. These pieces

And on it goes through artistic movement after artistic movement, from the Dadaist's cult of the absurd, to Constructivism⁷ which gave us "purification of rationalism," and the Surrealists who gave us "a means by which the conventions of language could be used against themselves and the rules of semantics and syntax employed not in the service of reason and orthodoxy but to give voice to the unconscious, to desire itself." (Morley 82)

If words matter, then signs and symbols do as well, as they can relay a message just as swiftly and effectively—maybe even more so—than the written word. Comprising simple ideographic imagery, inherently loaded with meaning, these graphic marks are able to project a cultural concept within the confines of a few basic graphic strokes. A proficient symbol should require no verbal definition or linguistic cue in order to understand its meaning, and in this way, it can be used in powerful ways to sell something, to bring about unity, or to do great harm (as any decent advertising executive—think Target or Nike—or dictatorial regime could tell you.)⁸

After the atrocities of World War II, existential philosophies were formed partly around the idea that language wasn't enough to express "the true nature of man's existence," as well as

have dates, photographs, and other textual cues that serve as remembrances, and in this way, I have come to think of this practice as a form of memory keeping. Further, similarly to Schwitters, the work that I produce then become an "informal document of a specific time and place ... [that] serves as a very real record of [my] interaction with the world." (Morley 68)

⁷ From the mid 1920s until its closure by the Nazis in 1933, the most important place for the Constructivist ideals was the Bauhaus school in Germany (Morley 77), that coincidentally, is currently celebrating its 100th Birthday. This big anniversary is being lauded around the world and is bringing attention back to the school and its identity which is closely linked with "modern architecture and design." The Bauhaus is also associated with affordable, functional product and furniture design, sans serif typefaces, and "clean-lined graphic design." (Smee) As for the use of language, "in the Constructivists' vision, the abstracting of verbal language went hand in hand with the principles of efficiency and standardization." (Morley 96)

⁸ In the 1920s and 30s all totalitarian regimes took art and the ideas inherently imbedded in it very seriously, as they realized that it would be through the media that they would "win the battle for the minds of the people." The Nazis used symbolism—both graphically (i.e., the Swastika) and through actions (i.e., book burning) to get their initial message across. While the Bolsheviks in Russia symbolically renamed cities, and in Franco's Spain regional dialects themselves (i.e., Basque and Catalan) were banned. (Morley 93) While further down the timeline, the Chinese use it to censure all political rhetoric and ideas. As the artist Xu Bing stated, when referring to his childhood under Mao's regime, "[words] could kill one person, and ensure a very good life for someone else." (Morley 194)

from the need to process the recent horrors enacted by human kind during the war. (Morley 101)

And from these philosophies and the reactions to them, you see the development of artistic movements such as Art Brut and Abstract Expressionism (AbEx), where “glyph-like markings and gestural traces” expressed in the works of artists like Jean Dubuffet, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, and Cy Twombly also evoked “a kind of abasement of writing, one that eschewed the sophistications of typography and mechanical lettering and the pleasures of clarity and comprehension in favor of the authenticity of the direct and deliberately artless scrawl.” With Franz Kline painting his “graffiti” like scrawls directly onto newsprint and telephone book pages. (Morley 110)

By the 1960s, in a response to the more primitive, graffiti-laced and expressive imagery of Art Brut and AbEx, an “intermedia” artform started to evolve. This “hybrid” practice of art making “involved the dialectic between media” and was influenced by the social and technological innovations and transformations of the day. Referred to as Neo-Dada, the American artist Robert Rauschenberg was one of its innovators. (Morley 115)

In the article *The Flatbed Picture Plane*, the critic and art historian Leo Steinberg elaborated on his idea of “the flatbed surface” and its importance to the medium of contemporary painting. The idea, “borrowed from the flatbed printing press—‘a horizontal bed on which a horizontal printing surface rests’” (Steinberg)—Steinberg’s theory revolves around the observation of Rauschenberg’s practice of embedding two and three dimensional objects into his work and how this transformed the traditional “window like” surface of the painter’s canvas into something more akin to the horizontal printing press. And in the process of doing so, how these objects altered the artist’s relationship to their work from one evoking “Nature” to one that is

infused with the possibilities of the current “Culture.” (Steinberg) In reference to Rauschenberg’s artistic production, Steinberg wrote:

It seemed at times that Rauschenberg’s work surface stood for the mind itself—
dump, reservoir, switching center, abundant with concrete references freely
associated as in an internal monologue—the outward symbol of the mind as a
running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming
unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field. (Steinberg)

Further along the art-historical timeline you find the “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” (Morley 17)—is further invaded through the Pop Art movement (art in service to the mass media and “popular” culture) and Conceptual Art (the “dematerialization” of art). With these art forms you now could speak not only of “words in art” but of “words *as* art.” (Morley 139)

The 1970s and 80s brings us to Postmodernism, where “any sense of linear progress had ceded to the pluralism that is a central characteristic” of postmodernism’s aesthetic. And where at the “heart of this new cultural climate was a pervasive suspicion concerning any overarching and totalizing ideas. As a consequence of the collapse of any one dominant artistic teleology, a far more open set of artistic practices could prevail.” (Morley 173) This ideal was born in the practices of graffiti and street artists, as well as through the primitive, childlike imagery of Jean-Michel Basquiat, and the text-based works of Julian Schnabel. (Morley 174)

By the end of the millennium we see the idea of “linguistic colonization” and of “the repressive connection between nomination and possession,” as well as “cultural currency.” (Morley 188)

At the beginning of the new millennium the inherent imperialism of language is to some extent being countered by instances of non-totalitarian appropriation. At the same time, this flux has led to a growth in awareness and acceptance of the foreignness and intrinsic untranslatability of different cultures. (Morley 197)

Until finally you end up in the computer age of “hypertext” and digital medium where “formerly discrete signs could now be dissolved into a seemingly endless stream of data flow, dematerialized in the continuum of countless electronic ‘bits’ in which all information is reduced to the binary code of zeros and ones.” (Morely 200) It seems that here, finally, artists are able to imagine something as close to the Symbolist’s “Wagnerian total work of art” that I referenced earlier. And as “David Crystal, a leading authority on language, sees in the present realities of usage the emergence of what he calls a whole new medium—‘Netspeak’—that, in effect, constitutes a ‘third-medium’ beyond speech and writing.” (Morley 204) With “Netspeak” at the heart of this new artistic language, the possibilities are seemingly endless.

Finally, now that I am more aware of the history, I am forced to plumb the depths of my unconscious in order to discover the motivations behind my own creative urges—to use text, collage, and found paper ephemera in my art—and I fear that the reasons may not be wholly cogent, but instead lie behind the need for my mind to become obsessed with something other than a preoccupation with my human failings or relationships. I wonder, is this enough of a reason to continue to create? My confusion is exacerbated by the fact that art making is a very vulnerable endeavor, one that is hard to know if you are any good at, as the output is viewed so subjectively. Additionally, I find that by intellectualizing my artistic process, I am led to wonder if I am getting better at it, or possibly, *an even worse outcome*, paralyzed. It also seems that the more knowledge on the subject that I gain, the more confused that I become about why I am

even making the effort in the first place. Like a first-year medical student who is learning about obscure medical disorders and self-diagnosing similar symptoms in herself, I am finding myself and my particular creative practices aligned with every new artistic movement that I learn of along the art-historical timeline.⁹ Ultimately though, I hope that the “words” imbedded in my own work don’t come across as trite or merely as “feel good” affirmation, but I do want them to be of positive value, because words matter.

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⁹ This real condition called *Medical School Syndrome* refers to the tendency of medical students to erroneously diagnose themselves with the symptoms of the diseases that they are studying. “References to medical school syndrome, also called *medical students’ disease* or *medicalstudentitis*, date back nearly a century. Boston neurologist Dr. George Lincoln Walton described the condition in his 1908 book *Why Worry?* ‘Medical instructors are continually consulted by students who fear that they have the diseases they are studying ... The mere knowledge of the location of the appendix transforms the most harmless sensations in that region into symptoms of serious menace.’” www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2267854/