

# contemporary

## A WORD ON IMAGES: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND THE VISUAL

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THE relationship between images and language seems to be as old as language itself. The origins of language, on the other hand, are associated with thought. A large number of conceptual artworks produced during the mid-1960s tackle the triangular relationship between image, language and thought, raising crucial questions about the role of representation at its core. Depending on which theory one follows, the connection between language and thought can be understood in three ways: language precedes thought; thought precedes language; or language and thought are simultaneous phenomena. In addition to these, one could add the possibility that both language and thought rely on sensory images. Two of the three theoretical routes understand the relationship between language and thought in hierarchical and cause-effect terms.

Challenging the assumed hierarchies between the elements of the triangle, a conceptual work from the 1960s, such as Art & Language's *Painting-Sculpture* (1966-7), reduces the apparent predominance of image and language, highlighting the aesthetic weight of thought. The image of the work comprises two visually identical canvases: one contains the word 'painting', the other 'sculpture'. In juxtaposing these two statements, the work demonstrates the arbitrary nature of representation, and weakens the historical and cultural links between image, word and idea. Why is this a painting and not a sculpture, or vice versa? Image, language and thought end up isolated, independent and self-sufficient entities. In *Hostage XIX* (1989), another work by Art & Language, the linguistic element – a description of a non-existent landscape – represents the subject as if it were a real scene, and also, ambiguously, the intention to paint it. Language is, in turn, visually represented by the image of the printed text.

The dictionary definitions accompanied by concrete objects and their photographic representations that Joseph Kosuth exhibited during these same years operated in a similar manner. At first glance, the image (object, photography and printed text) seems to depend on language as if it were conventionally determined by a title. However, when looked at closer, each element appears to be an arbitrary representation of the others. The general 'concept' behind the work, seen as a whole, is laid over the 'ideas' represented by the text in such a way that it ends up engulfing them. Despite questioning all sorts of representation, at its peak 1960s conceptual art relied heavily, as reflected in the name of Art & Language itself, on language more than images.

The invention of writing – an event considered by many as the birth of history – and later, of typewriting and the printing press, added more

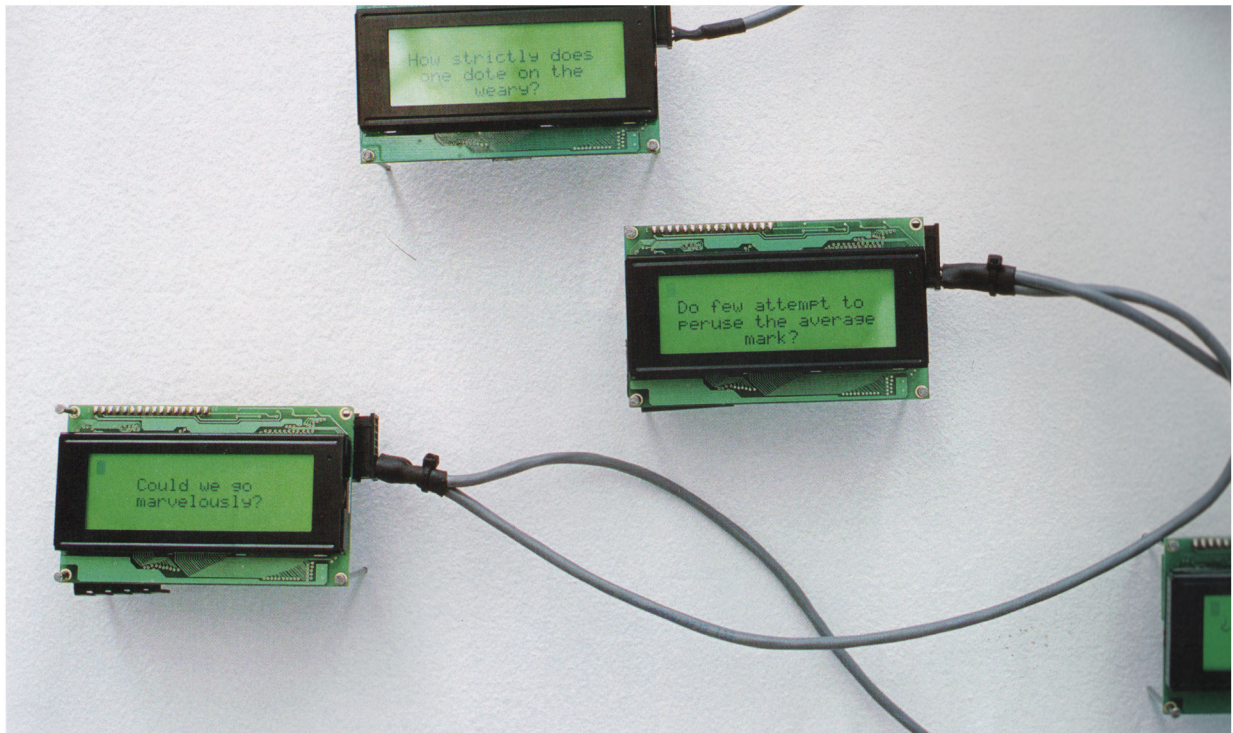
complexity to the already intricate historical relationship of image, language and thought. With writing, the abstraction of verbal language acquires a visual reality. Prehistoric images, which some have called 'wordless signs' – the painted or drawn pictograms that led to writing – have produced hypotheses of a primordial state of thought prior to language, a stage in evolution similar to the pre-linguistic life of an infant.

The function of prehistoric wordless signs seems to have been to both identify an entity and direct attention to it. Exploring this idea further, one could assume, in a world of human development before rationality, the existence of primordial images associated with instincts, basic mental functions (the subconscious, perhaps), emotional impulses and even motor skills. Artistic trends from the late 1950s shared certain visual patterns with wordless signs, what was then called 'ornamentation', graffiti or scribbling. In the historic sequence that progresses from pictogram to modern doodle, this was perceived as a regressive step, reverting from the beginnings of writing to a 'primitive' truth embodied in the signs preceding language.

Abstract artists such as Cy Twombly have exploited the vein that runs through the history and prehistory of writing. Centuries before Twombly, in the mid-1600s, the painter Pieter Saenredam saw something fundamental in the image produced by handwriting. In his architectural paintings recording the interiors of Dutch churches, Saenredam included a number of type-stamped or carved texts as official inscriptions on the walls, furniture and floors of the buildings. In one of these paintings, *Interior of the Mariakerk in Utrecht* (1651), he included in the foreground a small graffiti. In contrast to the formal, impersonal and symmetric character of type, graffiti is irregular and child-like. However, the handwritten words refer not to the architecture, but to something more personal and individualistic: the artist's signature.

This contrast can also be perceived in Twombly's work, as well as that of artists such as Lawrence Weiner. Weiner's site-specific installation, *Bard Enter* (2004), uses print type and formal inscription in an architectural space, as Saenredam had done before him. But Twombly pays attention to the informality of the stroke – the gesture that connects calligraphy and drawing – turning the stroke into a sort of 'sign... stripped of its word'. A stroke of this kind can reveal the traces of subjectivity present in Saenredam's signature, and one could even argue that Twombly's illegible scribbles remain attached to language in a structural manner: his strokes relate to each other, resembling a grammatical system of pre-linguistic contents – positions, movements, emotions, impulses. Some even suggest the mixture of public and intimate contexts in which they were produced.

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Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, *33 Questions per Minute*, 2000. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Antimodular

Gillian Wearing's *Signs that Say What You Want Them To Say and Not Signs that Say What Someone Else Wants You To Say* (1992-3) could be also placed in this spectrum of relationships between image and language. Wearing uses handwriting to create signs that are exhibited in the street, provoking a sharp contrast between the formalities of the public order and the emotional content of handwritten words, combined with the confessional element of the message. Similarly, artists like Joseph Grigley and Stefan Sandner also make use of the visual qualities of writing to link image and language. The handwritten notes they collect continue the tradition of attributing subjectivity to the stroke. In the case of Grigley, who is deaf, the notes are produced by people to communicate with him. When the notes are exhibited, the materials, distribution of the strokes and semantic content of the texts provide a way for recording both oral communication and the circumstances in which it occurred. In Sandner's case, the content of his collected notes covers the space that separates the private whisper from the academic language.

At the beginning of the 21st century any discussion regarding the relationship between image and language must take into account the impact of modernisation and mass society. In many contemporary artworks image and printed language are linked according to the structure of the emblems made famous by Andrea Alciato in the 1500s. This structure, formed by a title (motto), an image (pictura) and a brief text (inscriptio), still exists in objects such as the modern book. Today, title, cover and text have replaced the older elements.

In Alciato's emblems, image and language bear the same importance and value; one is not the illustration of the other. Despite this, the human eye prioritises the image. While the eye can perceive many elements simultaneously, written and printed words require a linear sequence and more time to be accessed. In text works of recent decades, such as those by Barbara Kruger and Ken Lum, the basic emblematic relationship between image and text is still a valid model. The most notable difference between their structure and that of older examples lies in the levels of printing technology and the familiarity contemporary viewers have with the printed word. The images used by these artists are photographic, and the typography

and layout are unavoidably linked to modern journalism and commerce. Kruger uses mass-media formats, rhetorical slogans and propaganda techniques, while Lum appropriates the persuasive language of advertising and the formats of commercial leaflets and catalogues. The impact of these works lies in the tensions created by images and messages in drastic disagreement with the visual and linguistic formats in which they are placed.

Writing constitutes a fundamental but not necessarily dominant aspect of certain contemporary artworks that combine image and language. The works of On Kawara and Hanne Darboven involve images with graphic formats that are designed to be filled by words. Darboven's images of handwriting are not only words on charts, but reveal a sense of order – dividing, classifying and distributing segments of writing into units of time that take the form of graphics: the calendar, the diary and the timetable, among others. All these formats display time spatially. In addition to reflecting on time, writing is an action that also occupies time and has a temporal dimension. Equally, charts are a representation of human life seen as multiple organisations of time. Kawara works in a similar fashion. In his paintings entitled 'Today' (1966-2007), made of abbreviated dates painted against bold backgrounds, he uses language to make time visible, following the digital format of electronic calendars and clocks. He also works with the printed formats of the telegram and the rubber postal stamp, both of which act as records of time. What the message says is not as important as the here and now implied by the speed and urgency that the image and words demand.

Recent forms of information technology and electronic communication, such as video, LCD screens, internet and mobile-phone texting, explored by artists such as Antoni Muntadas, Jenny Holzer, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and José Aburto Zolezzi, have made the relationship between image and language even more urgent and less palpable. No matter how soon it is received, image, text and thought now form rapid interactive triangles. For today's observer, what remains in the memory are the coordinates of a virtual order, which, for a future observer, will be devoid of corporeality.

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