

'Art and Language'

By Lloyd Gill

Language has the ability to embrace multiple meanings in artwork. Extracts of dialogue have consistently been used in a range of art movements since Cubism and later Dada. In Picasso's work *Still life with chair caning* (1911-1912), the work included the letters "Jou" in the top right hand corner in reference to the Paris newspaper "Le Journal".

"Jou may also at the same time be a pun on the French words Jeu (game) or Jouer (to play)"¹. In many synthetic Cubists' works, words existed as periphery (fragments of newspaper) attached in collage formation. Perhaps the reference to the newspaper was an attempt to evoke a sense of time and place. It's interesting to understand how artists capture social activity with the prompted expression of language.

Roy Lichtenstein's painting titled *Whaam* depicted a fighter plane firing a rocket destroying the enemy, which was fumigated by the expressive use of onomatopoeic 'Whaam' text, taken from a comic image. It was the ironic combination of comic book cliché and an exquisite formal adjustment that gives his work its depth and edge. "There is anonymity in the mass-produced, sometimes vulgar and cheap comic book; the pictorial language, the typography, the pixels, all are borrowed from the aggressive language of advertising"². Advertising, which growls and demands attention, usually provokes annoyance. In doing so, advertising subjectively embeds the subconscious with purchasing slogans and Lichtenstein has stressed this adequately.

¹ Richardson, John. 'A life of Picasso', p. 157. The cubist rebel, New York. 1991.

² <http://www.studio-international.com/painting/lichtenstein>

Few artists have used words as consistently and with as much focus as Ed Ruscha. Ruscha developed an appreciation of language fuelled by his graphic design training. In much of his work, words manifest as calligrams or palindromes (word games). He becomes engrossed in a dialogue of speech and certain impediments such as stuttering. Ruscha enhanced language by revealing the fact that a word exists materially with object form, as a sound made in the mouth and received by the ear. “Words have temperature to me”, Ruscha said. “When they reach a certain point and become hot words, then they appeal to me...”³.

In 1955, while on a course in advertising design and photography at Chouinard, Ed Ruscha had awoken his artistic lust that as he was seduced by the work of Jasper John’s *Target with Four Faces*, assemblage, while searching through *Print Magazine*. Ruscha described the pivotal find as “an encounter that was an atom bomb in his training”⁴. Ruscha included words in his paintings throughout his career. Later work consisted mostly of motif ice-capped mountain scenes with alternating text of street names taken from maps. The contrast between planned modern cities and untamed nature could not be more pronounced.

Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs*, a conceptual work of documentation in 1965, explored how an object can be appropriated as a form of art as it has been taken from its original context and into the gallery site. Kosuth used a dictionary interpretation as part of the tautological idea of ‘a chair is a chair is a chair’ as ‘art is art is art’. The text accompanied an actual chair, with a photograph of a chair. Kosuth’s use of the text definition emphasized the pictorial with the actual. At the Freud Museum in Vienna in 1989, Kosuth exposed a site-specific installation *Zero and Not*, consisting of paragraphs of Freud’s text which had been enlarged onto huge sheets of paper that covered the walls.

³ Schwartz. ‘Pindell interview’. p. 57. 2002

⁴ Richards, Mary. ‘ER: Ed Ruscha’. P. 11. Tate publishing, Millbank, London. 2008

“As though in an act of repression, Kosuth crossed the words out but then, as Freud points out, the repressed always returns”⁵.

The Californian video artist Bruce Nauman had explored the quintessential use of language in works such as *One hundred Live and Die* (1984). “The viewer, like a child learning to read, is asked to rehearse a set of paired terms”⁶. The resulting pairs become increasingly unsettling the further one reads the descriptive text. The work is constructed in neon tubes, normally associated with signage.

As a portrayal of language that exists in the conscious mind, a work by Gillian Wearing, *Signs that say what you want them to say and not signs that say what someone else wants you to say* (1992-1993), projected the thoughts of London’s pass-byers. Some stem from a range of catalogued thoughts and aim to deliver direct messages. In particular, the couple holding the message ‘WORK TOWARDS WORLD PEACE’ is forecasting their hopes for humanity.

These artists and many others all have the use of language in common for one particular reason: language can enforce the crucial identity of powerful statements within artwork. As language is a primordial sense of communication, it can instantly connect with the viewer. Often ambiguous, words function as a fuse, triggering direct thoughts towards catalysing understanding of the messages that lay in the contextual undergrowth. Language will always be present in art as its formalities bring philosophical and psychological subtext.

⁵ Godfrey Tony, ‘Conceptual Art’, p. 358. Phaidon Press LTD, London, 1998.

⁶ Godfrey Tony, ‘Conceptual Art’, p. 10. Phaidon Press LTD, London, 1998.