

V I S I B L E L A N G U A G E

Writing is a system of signs for recording language. Text, that is to say printed or written words syntactically arranged, can function as an important visual element within an artwork. Words, as single units of speech or writing, have linguistic meanings which can be endorsed or subverted by their visual presentation, and it is because we use an alphabetic writing system, which consists of abstract signs, that text and words can be visually manipulated. Once they are part of an artwork they are subject to being looked at as well as read, and therefore their visual materiality has significance. US artist and arts writer, Richard Kostelanetz, writes of an art form 'that incorporates both word and image but achieves its final effects and definition not just in words alone or in images but somewhere across and between'.¹

The spectrum of text ranges from legible through decipherable to illegible. Typographic or mechanically produced text can be overlaid to produce a dense thicket of letters and words which nevertheless remain recognisable as print. The choice of type can serve to increase the expressiveness of a text and also provide a means of physically distancing the reader from the author by virtue of its relative anonymity. Autographic writing or hand written text, on the other hand, may appear to reflect something of the writer's psychological make-up and can therefore create a more direct and intimate relationship between author and reader/viewer. The idea of the loss of the 'aura' of an art object through mechanical reproduction, put forward by Walter Benjamin in the 1930's, is relevant in making this distinction, though in the context of artists' prints (as opposed to printing), the fact that handwriting itself is able to be reproduced adds a further layer of complexity.

At times artworks include graphic marks which are intended to represent or suggest the presence of text - a sort of pseudowriting. Had these marks or inscriptions been discovered in some remote cave or at an archaeological dig, they might be subject to rigorous analysis by linguists and archaeologists. But when such graphic marks are used by artists we are not being asked to try to decipher them, rather we are asked to recognise that they are 'about' writing and 'about' communication, and therefore the subject of the artwork IS language and communication.

The ability of the mass produced image to effectively 'create' reality is the concept behind the work *TENET*. This work refers not only to the power that Albrecht Dürer's famous woodcut of a rhinoceros (1515) exerted over popular and scientific imagination for over two centuries, but also to the fact that much of the detail was the artist's interpretation of a second-hand verbal description. In the rendition of Dürer's rhinoceros presented in this exhibition, the figure/ground relationship is gradually inverted. Starting from the left, the rhinoceros' hindquarters are described using graphic marks intended to resemble writing, while the background is more

painterly and tonal. Moving across the body of the animal, the background gradually becomes transformed into masses of 'writing', while the rhinoceros becomes increasingly more tonally substantial: a kind of metamorphosis from text to image. In three small pieces which complement *TENET*, pseudowriting has been inscribed onto perspex, with the intention of suggesting the labelling of preserved relics in a museum.

The power of language to create the illusion of physical reality is again addressed in the photocopy work *Illusion* and in the digital print, *Wish You Were Here*. In *Illusion*, the outline of Dürer's rhinoceros emerges from a mass of printed text, which is made up of overlapping columns of advertisements from the Personal columns. To be found in newspapers and magazines, Personal ads usually consist of written descriptions of both the person seeking and the person sought, and present an illusory ideal rather than an imperfect reality. *Illusion* is intended provide a link between *TENET* and *Wish You Were Here*, a set of oversized postcards which feature landscapes of the body rather than outdoor panoramas, and which are combined with printed text from the Personal ads and handwritten text which expresses personal longing and loneliness.

Novena consists of nine sheets of handwritten prayers which were later scanned and thus effectively became the matrix for *Indulgence*. A novena consists of a particular cluster of prayers recited by Catholic believers over a period of nine days, which carries promises of partial or full indulgence for one's sins. In past centuries, indulgences were sold as the printed verification of prayers said by someone on another's behalf, so that those who could afford it were effectively purchasing atonement for their sins so as to ensure a swifter passage to heaven. The power of structured prayer could also be focussed on matters relating to everyday life: recovery from illness, the finding of lost objects or getting a pony for Christmas.

Whether text or words form part of an image or are the sole element, whether they are legible or illegible or merely allude to writing, once an artwork includes text or words, the issue of their materiality needs to be considered in relation to the overall meaning of the work.

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¹ Kostelanetz R 1970, 'Words and Images Artfully Entwined', *Art International*, Volume 14, no. 7, p44-56