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Messaging: Text and Visual Art

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MESSAGING TEXT AND VISUAL ART



Mary Corita Kent, *Watermelon*, 1965, serigraph, 18 x 23 1/2"; UNL F.M. Hall Collection, Courtesy of the Corita Art Center, Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles

24th Annual Sheldon Statewide Exhibition, 2010–2011

Sheldon Museum of Art • University of Nebraska–Lincoln

MESSAGING TEXT AND VISUAL ART

Messaging: Text and Visual Art explores the use of language in art. Text in art mirrors the language of our daily lives, drawing on newspapers, advertisements, and personal stories. This exhibition focuses on how artists since the 1960s have used text in their work. The term “messaging” in the title evokes changes in communications that have occurred in recent years. The technological advances that have been underway since the 1990s not only brought about unprecedented changes in the fields of science and industry, but they are also transforming our language.

“Messaging” has become synonymous with technology—a term used to describe electronic communication. In this exhibition, we can see how artists since the 1960s have anticipated the short, sometimes cryptic-seeming messages typical of contemporary communications. “Messaging” is often associated with instant messaging or text messaging. The term is an example of the ways language adapts to changes in culture and new modes of expression. Works in this exhibition demonstrate how artists use language in formal and expressive ways. Texts sometimes appear handwritten, printed mechanically, or digitally presented.

In the decades leading up to the 1960s, artistic practices took a defiant stance toward mass culture or kitsch. During the 1940s, Abstract Expressionism turned away from popular culture. In his 1940 essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon,” art historian Clement Greenberg argued for the separation of painting from mass culture or kitsch culture. A problem for Greenberg was with the insistence that language was the essential vehicle for understanding one’s world. Instead, Abstract Expressionist artists such as Mark Rothko and David Smith, valued the act of creating art over the act of articulating an artist statement. Many Abstract Expressionist artists declined to comment on or speak of the influences within their work, regarding it as providing uniquely subjective experiences for viewers.¹

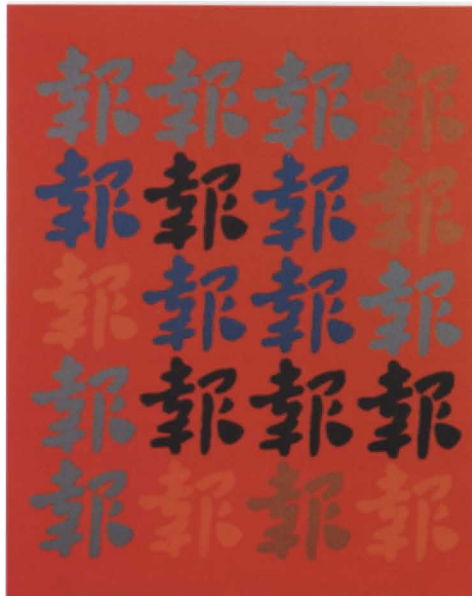
In the 1960s, however, artists began shifting their attention to Pop Art and became interested in what was happening in popular culture. The decades of the 1960s and beyond saw rapid technological growth coupled with a rise in consumer culture. NASA was established in 1958, and by 1969, Americans landed on the moon. Television had become a common household device with 87 percent of American homes having

at least one set in 1960. Increased advertising outlets meant that in 1962 *Time* magazine reported Americans saw 1600 ads each day.

Technology would continue to grow, and in 1972 Atari launched the video game Pong. IBM introduced the personal computer in 1980.² Technology would permeate the lives of everyday Americans and change how we communicate. Now with e-mail, cell phones, and video messaging, communication has become nearly instantaneous, and the language it generated continually adapts to these new technologies. Language is never static; it grows with changes in popular culture. Artists have not been immune to these changes. For example, in contrast to Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art embraced mass media and the language of consumer culture. This interest can be traced in the artwork presented in *Messaging*.

Artists such as Robert Indiana focus on the graphic quality of words and texts. They use language with a formalist emphasis, favoring the form of words over their meaning. Mary Corita Kent used cultural and advertising slogans spread across the page in unconventional ways. Calling advertisements “contemporary fairy tales,”³ she treated advertising phrases or words as homilies. As a nun at the Sisterhood of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Los Angeles in the 1960s, Kent drew from popular culture, literature, and religious texts. Her work invokes *Peanuts* comic strips, Beatles lyrics, poems by e.e. cummings, and passages from

the Bible. In *Watermelon* Kent used bright colors and bold typeface to highlight the graphic quality of the letters and text she had chosen. Large white letters float above and below Gertrude Stein’s poem, “A Very Valentine,” interrupted with the words “No Man is a Watermelon.” The latter phrase recalls John Donne’s “No Man is an Island,” meant to suggest the interconnected nature of humanity. Kent’s phrase also suggests the Civil Rights slogan “I Am A Man,” as counter to racist stereotypes. This variation of phrasing is underscored by Stein’s repetitive style of poetry, here in a valentine to her partner, Alice B. Toklas.⁴



Robert Indiana, *Love*, 1971, lithograph, 39 x 32"
UNL-Gift of Gallery in the Market, Omaha
© 2010 Morgan Art Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Robert Indiana also taps poetry for visual inspiration. "Wherefore the Punctuation of the Heart" is a poem he wrote in the 1960s. It begins:

Wherefore the punctuation of the heart
When that slim prim agape
LOVE
Erred into
L.O.V.E²

This poem and others would eventually fuel the inspiration for Indiana's *LOVE* series, begun in 1964. Like Kent, who is interested in forms created by letters, Indiana focuses on the visual placement of the letters that make up the word "LOVE." He pulls us away from our associations with this word through his attention to typeface: the shapes created by juxtaposing bold graphic letters in positive and negative space—Indiana's stacking, flipping, and reversal of the letters "L", "O", "V", "E." The manipulation of the word breaks down or fragments its message, highlighting the symbolic and reflective quality of the letters and, by extension, the reflective quality of love itself.

Like Kent and Indiana, Greek-born artist Chryssa plays with language in a conceptual way. In the 1970s Chryssa began to visit New York's Chinatown, where she became fascinated with the forms of Chinese script that she saw on flags, storefronts, and buildings. Because she did not know the meaning of the signs, she focused on the forms of the characters and their visual appeal. Often repeating the same character over and over—a process she calls "fragmenting." The

characters thereby became symbolic of the urban landscape where she lived. *Chinatown* (Orange, Lettering in Beige, Gray, and Blues and Pale Orange) is one of ten silk-screens Chryssa produced in a series. The series presents a single motif of Chinese ideograms in multiple color variations. The characters create a visual experience in which the message remains cryptic—to those of us illiterate in Chinese languages.

For Edward Ruscha words are both objects and symbols. Aware of Pop Art and the appropriation of mass-produced objects as fine art, Ruscha

Chryssa, *Chinatown* (Orange, Lettering in Beige, Gray, Blues, and Pale Orange),
1978, color screen print, 33 x 28"
UNL-Gift of Dr. Yacoub L. Massuda through the Martin S. Ackerman Foundation

began creating images with words in the 1960s. Choosing product names such as "Spam," and other phrases for the visual qualities they represented, Ruscha routinely drew from popular culture for his subject matter. In *Question* Ruscha's title is replaced with a symbol: a question mark. His substitution of the symbol, as a stand-in for the word, anticipates contemporary text messaging communication, in which, for example, the number "4" is used to substitute the word "for." Such textual and grammatical truncations force the reader to use context clues to gain meaning from sentences. The figural repose of the question mark, however; floating at an angle in a hazy background, offers little context for the symbol and, instead, stretches its own mystery and uncertainty.



Edward Ruscha, *Question?*, 1989, lithograph, 27 x 36"
UNL-Gift of the artist © Ed Ruscha

Other artists in the exhibition tap the narrative function of words to convey a particular message or point of view. Artist and author Faith Ringgold incorporates texts into her quilts to tell a story with words and visual images. *Coming to Jones Road Under a Blood Red Sky* is a series of prints the artist created about the Underground Railroad and the journey of escaped slaves to freedom. Her text was drawn from her imagination and personal memories. The anecdote reads: "Aunt Emmy could be in two places at the same time and Uncle Tate could vanish in a flash and turn up in the same way. One day they just up an walk to freedom and nobody see em go." Ringgold's words are underscored by the vibrant red sky



Faith Ringgold, *Coming to Jones Road: Under a Blood Red Sky #8*, 2006
digital print with hand lithography, 12 x 12"
UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust



Alec Soth, *LL-Would You Come Home?*, 2005
chromogenic color print, 30 x 24"
NAA-Purchase with donations from Sheldon Forum



Julia Jacquette, *Four Sweets*, 1995, thirty-two color screen print, 18 ⁵/₈ x 27"
UNL-FM, Hall Collection

and pastoral landscape in which two small vague figures stand. Her placement of the text as a border around the image evokes a pattern of a traditional quilt square.

In the 2005 *Niagara* series, artist Alec Soth photographs love letters as instances of private narratives. Shot in Niagara Falls—the cliché of romantic destinations—such letters echo the site with clichéd sentiments of love. Soth takes as his subject an everyday object, a love note, and allows us to ponder the story behind it. The letters, requested by Soth from his photographic subjects, are intimate objects. The handwriting emphasizes the intimate nature of the notes. In a time of quick electronic messaging, the personal nature of the love letter underscores the fact that someone took the time to handwrite the note. Soth echoes this sentiment in his photographic process. Instead of using a small or quick digital camera, *Niagara* was shot using an 8 x 10 inch camera that requires a tripod, black shade cloth, and manual calculations for exposure and focus.⁶ Soth's slow, large-format photographic process reinforces the idea of value in messages that are not always instantaneous.

The theme of longing found in the language of Soth's photograph is mirrored in a humorous play on food and sexuality portrayed in Julia Jacquette's *Four Sweets*. Depicting candy and sweets, Jacquette alters the message on the candy bar wrappers, placing her own phrases where the brand of candy would ordinarily appear. Instead of brand names,

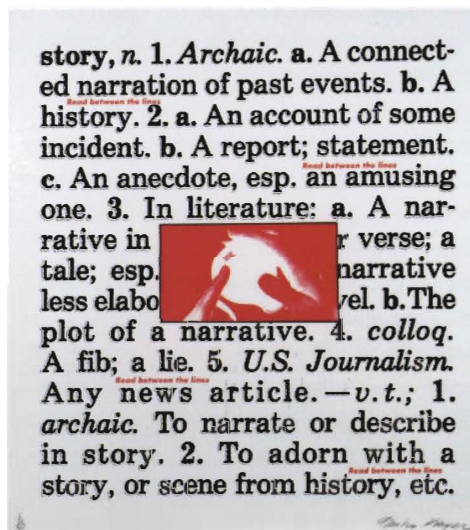
the candy wrappers have phrases that contain suggestive expressions such as “your lips” and “the shape of your thighs,” eliciting ideas of desire and guilt. By altering the brand names of the candy bars, Jacquette redirects the marketing goal of product consumption by exposing the subliminal appeal of packaging labels, as well as suggesting the risks of consumption.

In postmodern fashion, Steve Lambert creates signs that are *about* signs, rather than functioning *as* signs. They combine humor, irony, and a critical eye on the uses and abuses of commercial sloganeering. Lambert’s piece *Everything You Want, Right Now!* appropriates 1950s and 1960s storefront advertizing signs that peddle low-end commodities or services. By stating something with wry wit, Lambert invites viewers to question the message and, by extension, the sources of such messages in the commercial world. *Look Away*, another Lambert sign piece, ironically urges us to turn away while simultaneously drawing us in with its glowing presence. Lambert’s messages become laughable because their promise is unattainable. In this way his work draws out the contradictory messages inherent in advertizing—creating the desire to do and be what you cannot, hence manufacturing desire, serviced only by a product you would have to buy. By pointing out the rhetoric of contemporary advertising, Lambert’s work invites viewers to question the messages they receive.

In *Read Between the Lines* Barbara Kruger juxtaposes the definition of the word “story” with



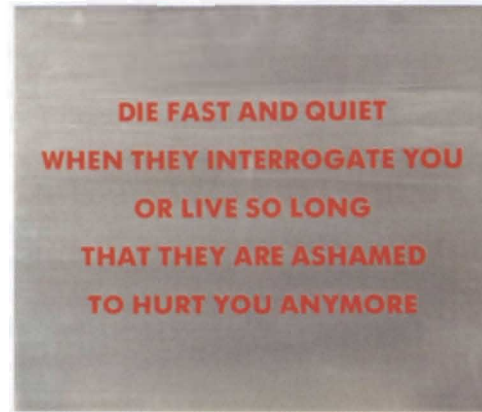
Steve Lambert, *Everything You Want, Right Now!*, 2009
pine, oil, enamel, laser cut acrylic, sign bulbs, wiring, 41 3/4 x 29 7/8"
UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust



Barbara Kruger, *Read Between the Lines*, 1989
etching and embossing, 21 7/16 x 19 3/4"
UNL-F.M. Hall Collection

the phrases "read between the lines" and "printed matter matters." Often her work suggests criticism of consumerism, patriarchal society, and the media. Kruger worked for ten years as an editor for Conde Nast publications, bringing her experience in the advertising world to her artwork. Speaking about her work Kruger says, "I see my production as being procedural, that is, a constant series of attempts to make certain visual and grammatical displacements."⁷ At first glance, *Read Between the Lines* looks like a dictionary definition of the word "story." However, Kruger's embedded phrase, "read between the lines," suggests that something is left out, that there is more to a story than what is printed. The idea is that we should read critically. The phrase "printed matter matters" alludes to the legitimacy bestowed upon printed documents. We might take them as fact unless we learn to read between the lines.

Like Kruger, Jenny Holzer also uses signs ironically in order to question received ideas. In speaking about her work, Holzer says, "I think it's not at all surprising that my work comes out of this country, because signs are so pervasive here, and also because homilies and 'fronterisms' [words associated with the frontier] are part of the American culture."⁸ Holzer's artwork often appears in public spaces, and at first glance they appear to be yet another sign or advertisement. Holzer uses industrial materials or contemporary technology, such as LED signs, to present her anti-messages. The statements appearing in these



Jenny Holzer, *Die Fast and Quiet When They Interrogate You or Live So Long That They Are Ashamed To Hurt You Anymore*, 1989, enamel on brushed aluminum, 15 x 18"
NAA-Gift of Sally and Jack Campbell © 2010 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

works are often ambivalent. *Die fast and quiet when they interrogate you or live so long that they are ashamed to hurt you anymore* is a work from her *Survival* series. Holzer's sign bears an ominous resonance with recent debates about the use of torture as an interrogation technique.

Walter Robinson is another artist who creates sign-like works. In his 2009 *Transport* series, Robinson produced paintings reminiscent of Mark Rothko's color field paintings. In large rectangular blocks of color made glossy with paint and epoxy, Robinson floats chrome-plated automobile name emblems, such as "Rebel." His use of a single word draws on mass culture and consumerism present in the symbolic function of an automobile emblem,



Walter Robinson, *Transport/Rebel*, 2009
 MDF, epoxy, chrome auto emblem, 32 x 34 x 2"
 UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust

logo, or a brand name. Fully aware of Pop Art's focus on mass consumerism and branding, Robinson turns Rothko's floating fields of color and their claim to pure spiritualism upside down to suggest there is a commercial function like branding also at work in the great artist's style of painting.

By experimenting with language in their work, artists give us insight into our cultural values and norms. As a society we continually invent and

reinvent new ways of expressing ourselves. Digital technologies have provided new avenues of communication and created the need for new words and phrases to describe our experiences.

Messaging: Text and Visual Art looks at how artists use language to respond and adapt to changes in popular culture. Exploring the function of message making, artists convey meaning or ideas through the use of words and texts, or use typographical form as an end unto itself. The variety of ways in which artists engage with texts and textual forms provides a rich context for thinking about how our own use of language is informed by the world in which we live.

Sarah Feit, Curatorial Assistant
 Jorge Daniel Veneciano, Director

Endnotes

- 1 Ann Gibson, "Abstract Expressionism's Evasion of Language," *Art Journal* 47, no. 3 (1988): 208.
- 2 Erika Doss, *Twentieth-Century American Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 155.
- 3 Mary Corita Kent, Harvey Cox, and Samuel A. Einstein, *Sister Corita* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1968), 12.
- 4 Ula E. Dydo, *A Stein Reader* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 376.
- 5 Susan Elizabeth Ryan, *Robert Indiana Figures of Speech* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 197.
- 6 Anne Wilkes Tucker, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, Alec Soth, <http://www.alecsoth.com/quotes.html> 16, April 2010.
- 7 Jeanne Siegel, "Barbara Kruger: Pictures and Words" *Arts Magazine*, 61 (June 1987), 18.
- 8 Jenny Holzer, "Wordsmith, An Interview with Jenny Holzer," with Bruce Ferguson, *Art in America*, 74 (December 1986), 113.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Chris Burden

Untitled, 1974

two-color lithograph with hand coloring

20 x 16"

UNL-F.M. Hall Collection



Chryssa

Chinatown (Orange, Lettering in Beige, Gray, Blues, and Pale Orange), 1978

color screen print, 33 x 28"

UNL-Gift of Dr. Yacoub L. Massuda through the Martin S. Ackerman Foundation



Jose Luis Cuevas

Self Portrait, 1962

lithograph, 17 1/2 x 13"

UNL-F.M. Hall Collection



Marcel Duchamp

Fountain (Un robinet originale revolutionnaire)

1964

etching with letterpress text, 10 x 8"

UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust



Adele Henderson

Cyclopedia Series #2 (Stamen), 1999

vitreograph, 27 x 20"

UNL-Gift of Samuel M. Kootz and Phillip Grandville by Exchange



Jenny Holzer

Die Fast and Quiet When They Interrogate You or Live So Long That They Are Ashamed To Hurt You Anymore, 1989

enamel on brushed aluminum, 15 x 18'

NAA-Gift of Sally and Jack Campbel



Jenny Holzer

Untitled, 1986

electronic moving message unit, LED

sign, red diodes, 5 x 29 x 22"

UNL-Extended Loan from Wil J. and Sally Hergenrader



Robert Indiana

Love, 1971

lithograph, 39 x 32"

UNL-Gift of Gallery in the Market, Omaha
© 2010 Morgan Art Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS)
New York



Julia Jacquette

Four Sweets, 1995

thirty-two color screen print, 18 5/8 x 27"

UNL-F.M. Hall Collection



Mary Corita Kent

Watermelon, 1965

serigraph, 18 x 23 1/2"

Courtesy of the Corita Art Center,
Immaculate Heart Community, Los Angeles



Barbara Kruger
Read Between the Lines, 1989
 etching and embossing, 21 ⁵/₁₆ × 19 ³/₄"
 UNL-F.M. Hall Collection



Steve Lambert
Everything You Want Right Now!, 2009
 pine, oil, enamel, laser cut acrylic, sign bulbs,
 wiring, 41 ³/₄ × 29 ⁷/₈"
 UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust



Steve Lambert
Look Away, 2009
 birch plywood, casein and tempera, sign bulbs
 121 × 84 × 5"
 UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust



Kerry James Marshall
Brownie, 1995
 color lithograph, 19 ¹/₂ × 14 ³/₄"
 UNL-F.M. Hall Collection



Faith Ringgold
Coming to Jones Road: Under a Blood Red Sky #8, 2006
 digital print with hand lithography, 12 × 12"
 UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust



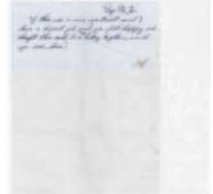
Walter Robinson
Transport/Rebel, 2009
 MDF, epoxy, chrome auto emblem
 32 × 34 × 2"
 UNL-Olga N. Sheldon Acquisition Trust



Edward Ruscha
Question?, 1989
 lithograph, 27 × 36"
 UNL-Gift of the artist © Ed Ruscha



Alec Soth
LL-Would You Come Home?, 2005
 chromogenic color print, 30 × 24"
 NAA-Purchase with donations from Sheldon Forum



Richard Tuttle
Untitled (Poetry Project Print), 1991
 color lithograph with screen printed text
 12 ¹/₈ × 36 ¹/₄"
 UNL-F.M. Hall Collection



Carrie Mae Weems
Commemorating, 1992
 porcelain, silk screened text, 7 ⁷/₈ × 10 ³/₄"
 UNL-University Collection



2010–2011 Exhibition Schedule
MESSAGING
TEXT AND VISUAL ART

August 25–September 26, 2010

Chadron State College, Chadron, NE

Sponsor: Chadron State College

September 29–October 31, 2010

McKinley Education Center, North Platte, NE

Sponsor: Nebraskaland, National Bank

Mike Jacobson, President & CEO

November 2–December 2, 2010

Museum of the High Plains, McCook, NE

Sponsor: McCook Arts Council

January 5–February 4, 2011

Gallery 92 West/Fremont Area Art Association,

Fremont, NE

February 5–March 7, 2011

Columbus Art Gallery, Columbus, NE

Sponsors: Robert and Linda Labenz, Columbus
Bank & Trust

March 9–April 11, 2011

Cornerstone Bank, York, NE

Sponsor: Cornerstone Bank

May 15–June 15, 2011

Library & Arts Center, Stalder Gallery, Falls City, NE

Sponsors: Richardson County Arts & Humanities
Council

Dates are subject to slight modification.

Messaging: Text and Visual Art is a Sheldon Statewide exhibition; Statewide is an outreach education and exhibitions program of the Sheldon Museum of Art. This exhibition is made possible by the generous support of Farmers Mutual Insurance Company of Nebraska, Lonnie Pierson Dunbier, the Sheldon Art Association, and the Nebraska Arts Council. **Special thanks to Rhonda and James Seacrest.**

