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Words That Do More Than Signify 'Sites of Reason' Underway at Museum of Modern Art

By KEN JOHNSON JULY 3, 2014



Matt Mullican's untitled work (2005). Left background, Seth Price's "Essay With Knots" (2008). Credit Thomas Griesel, 2014 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

In 1974 Allen Ruppersberg copied by hand the entire text of Oscar Wilde's novel "The Picture of Dorian Gray" onto 20 6-by-6-foot canvases. It's a safe bet that no one has ever read Mr. Ruppersberg's rendering of the book all the way through. Printed in a pale marker on beige fabric, the words aren't easy to decipher. But see for yourself: The whole thing is included in ["Sites of Reason: A Selection of Recent Acquisitions"](#) at the Museum of Modern Art.

Organized by David Platzker, a curator in the drawing and prints department, and Erica Papernik, an assistant curator in the department of media and performance art, the exhibition of works by a multigenerational roster of 13 artists includes drawings, videos, sculpture and installations from 1972 to the present. Most deal in some way with spoken or written language. It's not a visually gratifying show, but it offers much fodder for philosophical thought.

At issue is a trend that began in the 1960s, basically as a result of two developments. On the one hand, ambitious younger artists were seeing diminishingly few possibilities for growth in the overfarmed fields of painting and sculpture. On the other hand, many were excited by what's been called in philosophy "the linguistic turn," a perspective that sees language not as a reflector of reality but as a medium that produces and shapes reality in the minds of language-using animals. To mess around with words, then, could be a way to intensify and expand consciousness and alter reality.

In “Boomerang,” a 1974 video by Richard Serra and Nancy Holt, the camera is trained on Ms. Holt, who wears earphones that play back to her, with a one-second delay, whatever she says. You hear her speech and the echo of her words simultaneously. The effect on Ms. Holt is evidently confusing as she hesitantly describes what she’s experiencing. “I find that I have trouble making connections between thoughts,” she says at one point.

If something impedes or interrupts the usual, habitual stream of thought, what new channels might thinking flow into? A tactic for avant-gardists working in the public realm has been to present unfamiliar texts in familiar advertising formats. [Eve Fowler](#), for example, hired a sign-making company to print posters with lines from the writings of Gertrude Stein rendered in block letters on candy-colored backgrounds. These she tacked up on telephone poles and other outdoor surfaces in busy parts of Los Angeles. (Here, the set of 20 posters is displayed in one long row in the corridor leading to the exhibition proper.) In theory, such unusual messages would startle passers-by into alternative states of mind.

A more ambitious and multifaceted effort to divert the flow of collective consciousness is [Seth Price’s “Dispersion,”](#) the basis of which is a long essay he wrote in 2002 that ruminates on art, commerce, ideology and modes of distribution in the Internet age. Part of it appears here in the sculptural piece “Essay With Knots.” The text and Internet images are printed on plastic panels that were vacuformed over short lengths of rope knotted in places. What you see here, however, is only a small piece of the larger project, as Mr. Price has disseminated his essay in a variety of formats to bypass established institutions. He’s published it as a printed book and as [a free PDF that you can read on his website](#). Thus he hopes to infiltrate and radicalize public awareness.

The impulse to scatter art into multiple formats and sites of presentation and to mix verbal and visual forms of representation raises the question of dispersal’s opposite: synthesis. Consider “[Manifestos 2](#)” (2013), an installation by Charles Gaines. For this piece, Mr. Gaines focused on four speeches or revolutionary manifestos proclaiming rights for women, indigenous peoples, undocumented workers and blacks. He set them to music by associating letters of the texts with musical notes. The scores are rendered in four large, precisely made graphite drawings.

Meanwhile, the words scroll on four flat screens as the pleasant atonal music plays. The effect is not politically rousing; the mood is elegantly formal and coolly analytic. You become preoccupied less with the content of the texts than with trying to comprehend the relationships between the different forms of presentation and the underlying, systematic logic of the whole. Had Mr. Gaines used speeches by infamous fascists or lectures by self-help gurus, the effect would not be much different.

Like other works in this show, Mr. Gaines's installation resists the mind's effort to synthesize diverse streams of information into coherent pictures of reality. In that sense, it highlights the plight of contemporary consciousness, straining to assimilate vast amounts of noisy, complicated and contradictory input.

A popular artistic response to the bewildering effects of modernity has been to retreat into simpler, pastoral or primitive states of mind. This is Matt Mullican's way. Mr. Mullican practices a kind of self-hypnosis in which he somehow activates an entity he calls "that person," who is characterized in a wall label as "an ageless, genderless being that is a passenger inhabiting his body.

It's "that person" who is presumed to have created the contents of a walk-in environment of walls covered gridwise with numbers, lists of words and puzzling symbols painted in black on paper. "[Untitled \(Learning From That Person's Work: Room 1\)](#)" (2005) also includes a video in which we hear the person mumbling and humming nonsensically as he repeatedly partly fills and then empties water in a bathtub. It all suggests a state of autism, a consciousness cocooned within its own obsessive compulsions.

There's something similarly withdrawn about the pages of meaningless script by [Hanne Darboven](#), circa 1972, and "[Where to draw the line](#)" (2011-12) by Simryn Gill, a gridded patchwork of manuscript pages typewritten in such a compacted way that only the author would be able to read it.

The paradox of such works is that to grasp their import fully requires a great deal of theoretical knowledge. That's the case even with the exhibition's sparest pieces, including an installation of large, silvery photograms by [Liz Deschenes](#) called "Tilt/Swing (360° field of vision, version 1)" (2009) and "Two Poles," a 1974 sculpture by [Peter Downsbrough](#) consisting of two wooden dowels, one hanging from the ceiling and the other rising from the floor. Nothing in contemporary art is ever as simple as it might seem.

"Sites of Reason: A Selection of Recent Acquisitions" runs through Sept. 28 at the Museum of Modern Art; 212-708-9400, moma.org.

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