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Framing Words:

Visual Language in Contemporary Art

by

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of the

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Curriculum Vitae

Rochelle Steiner was born in Los Angeles, California on November 20, 1965. She attended University of Southern California from Fall 1983 to Summer 1985, and Syracuse University from Fall 1985 to Spring 1988. She was initiated into Phi Beta Kappa in 1987, and graduated summa cum laude, with honors, from Syracuse University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English and Advertising in 1988.

Rochelle Steiner began graduate studies in Comparative Arts at the University of Rochester in Fall 1988; she received University Fellowships in 1988 and 1989. She pursued her research in Cultural and Visual Studies under the direction of Professor Mieke Bal, and received the Master of Arts degree in 1990.

Abstract

Throughout the history of representation two distinct artistic categories have been constructed: one visual, based on images; the other verbal or literary, based on words. There have, of course, been points of intersection: visual art that includes letters, words, phrases, written texts, audio recordings and/or linguistic structures with, as, and/or instead of images, such as Cubist collages and Conceptual art; and literary practices that feature images, illustrations, visual imagery, non-traditional typestyles and/or graphic layouts, such as illuminated manuscripts and concrete poetry. However, these combinations of words and images are typically considered "border crossings", exceptions to traditional visual and literary forms, and challenges to the boundaries between them.

The separation of words from images is based on the modernist assumption that each of the arts occupies a specific area of competence. However, recent developments in visual art have overturned such purity: words and/or language frequently function as images, media and/or subject matter in an array of artistic formats. In this study I examine the conventional separation of words from images within visual art practices, demonstrating that it has led to the

classification of linguistic components in art as intrusions, and has resulted in the isolation of "hybrid" practices within their own distinct category.

While examples of art forms at the intersection of the visual and verbal fields are infinite, in this study I examine work by five contemporary artists -- Edward Ruscha, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Lawrence Weiner -- in which words and language function visually. Though their work varies greatly, these artists present verbal components such that their art requires both reading and looking, and results in new ways of seeing and interpreting. By reframing their practices as investigations into visual and verbal signification, rather than as "exceptions" or moments of hybridity within well-established modernist borders, I consider the nature of visual language, and move toward a theory for interpreting how it is deployed in art.

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Chapter 1
Words, Images and Objects in Visual Art

> Easel-painting came from book-illuminations, it was developed from the images that accompanied the texts on the pages of illustrated religious books. In medieval time the image and the text started to become separated. In Renaissance Italy of the Fifteenth Century, aesthetic and other categories were established in a clear way that became definite for a long time. This separation of letters and pictures quickly became axiomatic: paintings were for images and words were for manuscripts and books. One can see during the following centuries a heap of exceptions, of course, but they are clearly exceptions, steps over a borderline.... [1]

> If modern painting can be said to have begun with the illuminated manuscripts of medieval Europe, an argument can be made that "post-modern art" was born when Picasso first collaged newsprint to painted picture plane in the early years of this century. Appropriating pieces of the real world and conjoining them to the invented world -- in particular, embedding the language of language and all varieties of its mechanical reproduction into the language of form -- has perhaps been the 20th century's most radical contribution to how art is made and what it can mean. [2]

> [T]he culture in which works of art and literature emerge and function does not impose a strict distinction between the verbal and the visual domain. In cultural life, the two domains are constantly intertwined. [3]

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[1] Pontus Hulten, "Writing on a Picture," Edward Ruscha: Painting (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, 1990) 19-20.

[2] Joan Simon, "After/Words," Jenny Holzer: Signs (Des Moines: Des Moines Art Center, 1986) 78.

[3] Mieke Bal, Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the Word-Image Opposition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 5.

Throughout history two distinct artistic categories or traditions have been constructed, upheld, and placed in opposition: one is visual, the other is verbal or literary. One is based on images -- image, picture, painting, photograph, visual art; the other is based on words -- word, language, text, literature, writing, speech. There have, of course, been points of intersection between the two: visual art that includes letters, words, phrases, written texts, audio recordings and/or linguistic structures with, as, and/or instead of images, such as Cubist paintings and collages and Conceptual art; and literary practices that feature images, illustrations, visual imagery, non-traditional typestyles and/or graphic layouts within their presentational formats, such as illuminated manuscripts and concrete poetry. However, as Pontus Hulten suggested in the above quoted introduction to the work of Edward Ruscha, mixtures of words and images tend to be viewed as "steps over a borderline", "exceptions" to the traditional boundaries at work between visual and literary art.

The separation of words from images, verbal from visual is based on the modernist "assumption that each of

the arts occupies a specific area of competence." [4] This assumption, as Craig Owens suggested,

> may be traced to that moment in the 18th century when it appeared necessary, for complex, but always ethical, reasons, to distinguish poetry from painting and sculpture. For strategic reasons that distinction was made according to time: in Germany, Lessing, and in France, Diderot, located poetry and all the discursive arts along a dynamic axis of temporal succession and painting and sculpture along a static axis of spatial simultaneity. Consequently the visual arts were denied access to discourse, which unfolds in time, except in the form of a literary text which, both exterior and anterior to the work, might supplement it. [5]

Recent developments in twentieth century visual art, however, have overturned the notion of the written word as a supplement within the visual tradition: in works by Edward Ruscha, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and Lawrence Weiner, among others, words and/or language function as images, media and/or subject matter. They are not exterior but integral parts of their art; with both spatial and temporal dimensions, they are to be looked at as much as read.

Such visual art in which words and/or language play(s) a prominent role comes on the heels of modernist distinctions between art forms as they were delineated by

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[4] Craig Owens, "Earthwords," Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture, ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynnne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 45.

[5] Owens 45.

Clement Greenberg. Beginning in the 1940s, Greenberg insisted on pure and distinct art forms, recasting the late-nineteenth century ideal of "art for art's sake." His objective was an art free from "illegitimate content -- no religion or mysticism or political certainties," a notion fueled by what he saw as "a picture of discord, atomization, disintegration and unprincipled eclectism" in post-World War II American art. [6] Championing Jackson Pollock's "all-over" paintings, Greenberg argued that artistic "purity" could be found in self-criticism, which would "eliminate from the effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thereby each art would be rendered 'pure' and in its 'purity' find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as its independence." [7]

While such modernist rhetoric of separateness would seem to be responsible for isolating words from images, Greenberg claimed that his promotion of the uniqueness of each art form was not necessarily meant to exclude the

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[6] Clement Greenberg, "Our Period Style," Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 2. Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 325.

[7] Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism. Volume 4. Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1986) 86.

literary arts from the visual arts. [8] It does seem telling, however, that during the period of Greenberg's critical reign and his heightened modernist criticism, anything remotely linguistic -- either in form or structure -- was absent from, or at best subordinated within, dominant art history. According to Owens, one of the effects of Greenbergian "purity" was exactly the repression of language and linguistic structures within the visual field. [9] He argued that this subordination of language "might be diagnosed as one symptom of a modernist aesthetic, specifically, of its desire to confine the artist within the sharply delineated boundaries of a single aesthetic discipline. This desire is sanctioned by an unquestioned belief in the absolute *difference* of verbal and visual art." [10]

It also seems telling that the so-called Conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s, whose work was seen as a reaction to modernist purity, frequently employed words,

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[8] Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in 1986b.

[9] For Owens it was not only words but, more specifically, allegory, which he associated with the temporal dimension of language as it unfolds in time, that was repressed from visual art. See Owens, "Earthwords," "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," and "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a theory of Postmodernism, Part 2," ed. S. Bryson 40-87.

[10] Owens 44-45.

language, and linguistic structures in their art forms. Owens identified this movement away from modernist constraints as the

> eruption of language into the aesthetic field -- an eruption signaled by, but by no means limited to, the writings of Smithson, Morris, Andre, Judd, Flavin, Rainer, Le Witt -- [which] is coincident with, if not the definitive index of, the emergence of postmodernism.... This "catastrophe" disrupted the stability of a modernist partitioning of the aesthetic field into discrete areas of specific competence; one of its most deeply felt shocks dislodged literary activity from the enclaves into which it had settled only to stagnate -- poetry, the novel, the essay ... -- and dispersed it across the entire spectrum of aesthetic activity. Visual artists thus acquired a mine of new material, and the responses ranged from Morris' language *File* and the linguistic conceits of Art & Language and conceptual art, to the autobiographical perambulations of narrative or 'story' art and the fundamentally linguistic concerns of performance art, such as that of Laurie Anderson (also an artist who writes). [11]

It is from this perspective of "the eruption of language into the aesthetic field" that I will approach work by Ruscha, Holzer, Kruger, Lawler, and Weiner, all of whom include words, language, texts, and/or linguistic structures in their visual practices. In discussing their art, I aim to distinguish between the various ways they have used words visually, while challenging the borders that have been constructed between the visual and verbal fields.

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[11] Owens 44-45.

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With the increasing number of visual artists using words, letters, texts and language, as well as the developing interest in such work by art historians and critics, a "hybrid" category has developed. Often referred to as "word and image", "image and text", or "art and language", it includes all of the various intersections between visual and verbal elements. Such visually-based practices are often grouped together within a larger "hybrid" category that also includes those literary practices which, having "stepped over" the "borders" of traditional verbal or literary art, move toward a more visual presentation of language. Although common, linking these highly diverse art forms within a single category is problematic on a number of levels.

First, it oversimplifies the differences between individual practices by conflating such concepts as words, language, writing, texts, verbal communication, and linguistics; and such concepts as images, painting, art, visual texts, visual communication, and visuality. For example, the work of Edward Ruscha has been compared to that of Lawrence Weiner because of each artist's use of words within the visual field beginning in the late

1950s and mid-1960s respectively. However, their work has consistently taken two different artistic forms: Ruscha paints common words and phrases on traditional canvases, and Weiner uses language as his medium to present works that suggest sculptural entities, yet remain ephemeral.

Kruger and Holzer have similarly been grouped together because of their uses of words in visual art beginning in the late 1970s. However, Kruger's combinations of words and images into black-and-white photomontages are widely divergent from Holzer's written texts in formats ranging from posters hung anonymously in public venues, to large-scale messages on electric signboards, to marble benches and stone sarcophagi installed in museums and galleries. As I will show in this study, the categorization of such artists based solely on the presence of words or language in their work is at the expense of important distinctions between individual artistic practices, and without in-depth analyses of their art including its specific deployment of language.

Rosalind Krauss has explored the temptation to eliminate differences and create what she has referred to as contiguous artistic categories. About painting and sculpture she has suggested the following:

> In the hands of criticism categories like sculpture and painting have been kneaded and stretched and twisted in an extraordinary demonstration of elasticity, a display of the way a cultural term can be extended to include just about anything. And though this pulling and stretching of a term such as sculpture is overtly performed in the name of vanguard aesthetics -- the ideology of the new -- its convert message is that of historicism. The new is made comfortable by being made familiar, since it is seen as having gradually evolved from the forms of the past. Historicism works on the new and different to diminish newness and mitigate difference. [12]

According to Krauss the elasticity of sculpture as a category or medium has led to the inclusion of anything and everything from the casts of Auguste Rodin to the non-sites, photographs, and writings of Robert Smithson.

The same type of expansion, to a point of all-inclusiveness, governs the visual/verbal tradition and is responsible for bringing together historically, theoretically, and aesthetically different work -- including medieval illuminated manuscripts, William Blake's painted poems, Surrealist writings, Cubist collage and papier collé, Marcel Duchamp's puns and highly conceptual notes for projects, concrete poetry, Conceptual art, and music videos. By forming such links, the unique qualities of the various art forms have been suppressed, and visual and literary arts that are not

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[12] Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986) 27.

necessarily related have been made to resemble one another.

The conflation of "hybrid" practices within a single tradition is also problematic because the newly constructed visual/verbal tradition becomes the primary perspective from which these works are interpreted. Visual art that includes words, language and/or written texts tends to be viewed only in light of other "hybrid" practices, whether or not they are in fact similar. For example, the visual work of a contemporary artist who uses words in her or his paintings, or who uses language as her or his medium is frequently analyzed within the entire tradition of visual/verbal relationships, rather than within the artist's own, contemporaneous -- and usually more appropriate -- frame. This is the case with analyses of Ruscha's work: his word paintings tend to be compared to other "hybrid" art forms in which words appear, while Abstract Expressionism and B-movies, which have been equally influential on his career, are dismissed or, at best, considered incidentally. [13] The

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[13] Ruscha's relationship to Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism was addressed in the exhibition, Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition 1955-62 organized by Donna De Salvo and Paul Schimmel (The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1992). See Paul Schimmel, "The Faked Gesture: Pop Art and the New York School," Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition 1955-62 ed. Russell Ferguson (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: Rizzoli International

same is true of analyses of Weiner's work, which is classified as Conceptual art because of his use of language beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, despite the proximity of his practice to the sculpture and performance art that emerged during the same time period.

These two problems -- the grouping of art that seems to be similar at the expense of individual differences, and the creation of a single perspective from which to view many diverse practices -- are both results of "contextualization". As Jonathan Culler has explained, contextualization "frequently oversimplifies rather than enriches discussion, since the opposition between an act and its context seems to presume that the context is given and determines the meaning of the act." [14] The resulting logic is circular: while a context is used to explain or contribute to the meaning of an individual text, the text itself is what is used to determine that context. In other words, as the context -- be it historical, social, or theoretical -- explains or

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Publications, 1992) 19-65. See also Yve-Alain Bois, "Thermometers Should Last Forever," Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids, Paintings 1966-1969 (New York: Gagosian Gallery and Rizzoli International Publications, 1993) 8-38.

[14] Jonathan Culler, preface, Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992) xiv.

positions the text in question, that text is what motivates the construction of the very same context. In terms of the intersection of words and images, the hybrid visual/verbal category based on the idea of "border crossing" serves as the context or explanation for individual practices that include both visual and verbal elements; yet these are the very practices around which the "hybrid" context was created and has been perpetuated.

Expanding Culler's analysis of context to the domain of visual art, Norman Bryson has elaborated an additional problem within the process of contextualization. [15] He points to the issue of scope -- of knowing how far to step back from any given work of art or artistic practice in order to form an adequate foundation on which to base interpretation. [16] While it might seem ideal to draw as wide a context as possible in hopes of understanding the motivation for a work of art or artistic practice, all-inclusiveness can be deceptive. This is exactly the case with the hybrid visual/verbal frame, drawn so large that the entire tradition is often implicated into the

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[15] Norman Bryson, "Art in Context," Studies in Historical Change, ed. Ralph Cohen (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992) 29.

[16] Bryson 21-23.

analysis of a single work or visual practice. One only needs to refer back to Hulten's introduction to Ruscha's work for an example of this: by contextualizing his word-paintings among book illuminations and other visual/ literary "borders crossings", he places them within the field of vastly different "hybrid" art forms rather than contemporaneous visual practices.

In light of such problems of contextualization Culler reminds us that "context is not given but produced." [17] To this discussion Mieke Bal has added the following point: "[C]ontext ... is a text and thus presents the same difficulty of interpretation as any other text. The context cannot define the work's meaning because context itself defies unambiguous interpretation as much as the work." [18] Like all contexts, this is true for the relationship between words and images: while this category seems merely to be a grouping together of like practices, it more accurately reveals Modernism's long-standing separatist agenda at work on the visual arts. By joining all "hybrid" practices within a single category, these "non-pure" forms have been kept separate from more traditional -- and acceptable, by Greenberg's

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[17] Culler xiv.

[18] Bal 6.

separatist standards -- art. This is why Ruscha's, Weiner's, Kruger's and Holzer's art, despite its popularity, tends to be considered "alternative" in comparison to such non-intermedial art forms as modernist painting and sculpture.

Attempting to eliminate some of the interpretive problems involved in the process of contextualization, Culler proposes to replace the notion of "context" with that of the "frame". He suggests: "[T]he expression *framing the sign* has several advantages over *context*: it reminds us that framing is something we do; it hints of the frame up ('falsifying evidence beforehand in order to make someone appear guilty'), a major use of context; and it eludes the incipient positivism of 'context' by alluding to the semiotic function of framing in art, where the frame is determining, setting off the object or event as art, and yet the frame itself may be nothing tangible, pure articulation." [19] Following this theory, the tradition of visual/verbal "border crossing" would no longer be seen as the single "context" for all of the varied visual practices that include words and/or verbal/literary practices that include images. Rather

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[19] Culler xiv. Culler bases these ideas on Jacques Derrida, "The Parergon," The Truth in Painting trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

individual art practices could have any one of a number of possible frames which, from the start, would be acknowledged in terms of their constructedness, the limits of their scope, and the agenda(s) of the historian(s), theorist(s), or critic(s) constructing and/or upholding them.

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In addition to the problems that result from the grouping together of such seemingly similar -- yet ultimately diverse -- visual practices, the historization and canonization of these "hybrid" art forms is equally problematic. Typically, Braque's and Picasso's Cubist images that include words or word fragments mark the first major "intrusion" of language into twentieth century visual art. These works tend to be held up, in one way or another, as the historical precedents for contemporary "hybrid" art practices.

As the story goes, letters, words, and phrases made their first appearance in modern art in 1911-1912 when Braque stencilled part of the letter "D" followed by the letters "BAL", the letters "C" and "O", and the numbers

"1040" into a painting titled *Le Portugais* (1911-1912).[20] The letters "D BAL" were probably a reference to the words, "GRAND BAL", which appeared on dance hall posters hung in bars and cafes at the time. Picasso, too, incorporated letters in his paintings: in 1911 he painted part of the letter "A" followed by "L" -- also probably to refer to "GRAND BAL" -- into his work *L'Homme à al Pipe*. [21] Like most language to appear in visual art, these early letters and word fragments were seen as intrusions to painting from outside the borders of the visual field, what Hulten has called, "subversive..., shocking and revolutionary [elements], in total contradiction with painterly traditions." [22]

Although widely accepted and deeply embedded in

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[20] John Golding, Cubism: A History and an Analysis, 1907-1914 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988) 91. See also Edward F. Fry, "Convergence of Traditions: The Cubism of Picasso and Braque," Picasso and Braque: A Symposium, ed. Lynn Zelevansky (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992) 98.

[21] Golding 2-3, 70-71. The first Cubist painting to include words, as well as the exact chronology of Picasso and Braque's works has been the topic of much art historical debate: deciphering such information is almost impossible because many of their works were neither dated nor signed. The re-dating of their works has been taken up by Pierre Daix in "Appendix 1-The Chronology of Proto-Cubism: New Data on the Opening of the Picasso/Braque Dialogue", and Pepe Karmel in "Appendix 2-Notes on the Dating of Works," both in ed. Zelevansky 306-345.

[22] Hulten 19.

western thoughts on art, the notion of Cubism as the origin of words and language in contemporary art is deceiving. While Cubism does mark a significant introduction of verbal elements into the visual field, Braque's and Picasso's paintings, collages, and papiers collés were neither the first instances of such "border crossing" nor necessarily influential on Ruscha, Weiner, Kruger, Holzer or any of the other contemporary artists whose work has been located within the word/image category. In fact, the amount of direct influence that Cubism has had on subsequent "hybrid" practices is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify.

Bryson has noted the tendency to assign lines of influence, and the problems associated with this form of history-making. He proposes: "Suppose that such a link is made, between two paintings that have in common a similar handling of a particular feature or range of features.... The model of causality, as art history proposes it, provides an immediate source analysis: the earlier image stands as "origin" to the later image." [23] He warns, however, that art historians can never be sure that an earlier, seemingly similar work is the source of a later work; rather art history can only employ "a

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[23] Bryson 24-25.

negative or subtractive check: that it would *not have been impossible* for the painter of image Y to have seen the earlier image X." [24] Because of the canonical status of Braque and Picasso it is safe to say that contemporary artists are, in fact, familiar with their work; it is less probable, however, that such work directly influenced Ruscha, Holzer, Kruger, Lawler, or Weiner in their incorporation of language since they proceed from different frames and reach different visual and theoretical ends.

And yet, as problematic as it is to posit Cubism as the historical precedent for later visual-verbal interactions, the work associated with this movement has played a significant role in the structural and theoretical changes in art and its interpretation over the past three to four decades. Specifically, Braque's and Picasso's combinations of words and images have become important to discussions about visual representation and semiotics, among other current topics in art history; their creativity and ingenuity at the beginning of the twentieth century can provide insights into contemporary art and communication.

Words, taken from familiar sources, have long been

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[24] Bryson 25.

considered one of the ways the Cubists addressed aspects of everyday life in their art. The words they chose were often appropriated from popular songs and other musical references: for example, Picasso incorporated the phrase "MA JOLIE" (from the refrain of a popular 1911 song, *Dernier chanson*) in a number of paintings and collages including *"Ma Jolie" (Woman with a Zither or Guitar)* (1911-1912) and *Violin, "Jolie Eva"* (1912). [25] Along with their words, Braque and Picasso also included such common objects and materials as wallpaper, postage stamps, revenue stamps from tobacco packaging, labels from alcohol bottles, ticket stubs, and newspaper clippings into their canvases -- an act similarly considered to be a way of linking art and daily life. According to John Golding, "Picasso and Braque turned to the objects closest to hand for their subject-matter, objects forming part of their daily lives and relating to their most immediate and obvious physical necessities and pleasures. The wine glasses, tumblers, pipes and so on were articles which each painter handled regularly in the course of day-to-day life." [26]

In addition to their well-rehearsed thematic roles,

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[25] Fry 98.

[26] Golding 87.

Braque's and Picasso's words and objects have also been seen formally, as part of the Cubist investigation into the relationship between two-and three-dimensionality, or between surface and depth. Given both Braque's and Picasso's extreme fragmentation of the painted surface, it has been argued that they used words and images "to define the pictorial surface and to put it flush with the surface of the painting." [27] As Greenberg suggested, "[language] stops the eye at the literal plane, just as the artist's signature would. By force of contrast alone -- for wherever the literal surface is not explicitly stated, it seems implicitly denied -- everything else is thrust back into at least a memory of deep or plastic space." [28] The incorporation of words and trompe l'oeil objects into Cubist works has also been seen as one of the ways Braque and Picasso counter-balanced their largely indecipherable visual imagery. Because of their uses of wedge-like geometric shapes to depict volume, and grid-like patterns cut by heavy diagonals to convey multiple planes, their art is nearly impossible to "read". Words and word fragments, objects and parts of objects were often the only legible aspects

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[27] Hulten 19-20.

[28] Greenberg, "Collage," Collage: Critical Views ed. Katherine Hoffman (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989) 69-70.

of their canvases, providing recognizable visual forms as well as clues to their subject matter.

Despite the similar thematic and formal functions of words and objects in Cubism, and the historical proximity of their emergence between 1911-1912, objects have held a more significant role than words. The privileging of objects can be seen in the very definition of "collage" -- a derivative of the French "coller", meaning "to paste". Even though many of Braque's and Picasso's objects -- pages from books, newspaper clippings, and theater programs -- had words printed on them, this new medium was defined by the inclusion of objects alone, rather than the presence of words and objects. [29] And even though this new medium was developed simultaneously with papier collé, a similar technique in which paper rather than three-dimensional objects was affixed to canvas, collage has dominated discussions of Cubism. I would speculate that this is due to the notion that the objects in Cubism were "taken" directly from "real life"

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[29] Only a handful of historians, most notably Patricia Leighten and Robert Rosenblum, have focused on the specific words and language in Cubism; their analyses tend to be seen as alternatives to the more dominant perspectives that focus on the objects in Braque's and Picasso's work. See Robert Rosenblum, Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1976) and Patricia Lighten, "Picasso's Collages and the Threat of War, 1912-1913," Art Bulletin (December 1985).

and therefore highly "realistic"; words, by comparison, were thought to merely represent aspects of daily life. They were not seen as actual parts of the real world, but rather (and only) as ways to name aspects of it.

This sentiment, which reveals misconceptions about "reality" and "representation", is deeply embedded within art history and one of the key factors contributing to the subordination of words to objects within traditional interpretations of Cubism and analyses of contemporary art. Because of the physical presence of objects, and because they were things that could have been plucked from the artists' daily experiences and pasted together in a collage, they tend to be privileged over words as the more "real". However, as Greenberg noted, "the term 'reality', always ambiguous when used in connection with art, has never been used more ambiguously than [it is in Cubism]. A piece of imitation wood-grain wallpaper is not more 'real' under any definition, or closer to nature, than a painted simulation of it; nor is wallpaper, oilcloth, newspaper or wood more 'real', or closer to nature, than paint on canvas." [30] Here Greenberg implies that the objects in Cubism function as <u>representations</u>, and as such we can infer that they are no different than

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[30] Greenberg 68.

the words. Like Braque's and Picasso's words, which were signs standing in for and pointing toward aspects of daily life, so too were their objects; both are what Kahnweiler had called decades earlier, "emblems for the external world." [31]

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As long as interpretations of Cubism are invested in the ideal of "real" objects taken from the "real" world and brought directly into the picture frame, Braque's and Picasso's work remains locked the mimetic tradition. And as long as the words and objects in collage and papier collé are compared to one another in terms of their misconceived proximity to "reality", objects will continue to be seen as the more important element. However, once we recognize that their objects, words, and images function not as reality but as representations, their work can be re-framed from a semiotic perspective.

Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss have both focused on Braque's and Picasso's Cubism, radicalizing

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[31] Bois 1992: 173.

interpretations of their work by comparing the principles underlying these artists' paintings, sculptures, collages, and papiers collés to the organizing principles of structural linguistics. Their readings overturn traditional mimetic views of Cubism by asserting the representational, rather than realistic nature of the materials they used. For example, Bois has suggested that Picasso's *Guitar* (1912-1913), "reads", rather than "looks" like a guitar; it is a representation, rather than a resemblance of a the musical instrument. [32] According to Bois, *Guitar* is based on Picasso's attraction to the *Grebo Mask*, an object from the Ivory coast of Iberia that likewise represents rather than resembles a face.

Following the principles of Saussurean linguistics, which forms the basis of Bois' brand of semiotic analysis, the *Grebo Mask* exemplifies the unmotivated or arbitrary nature of signs: "Although the section of the cylinders is circular, there is no relationship of similarity between these protruding cylinders and eyes of any human being (in the generic sense), in the same way that there is no connection between the word 'tree', and the mental image or concept we form of a tree when we

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[32] Bois 1992: 172-173.

hear the word." [33] Rather than resembling facial features, these three-dimensional elements convey them: as cylinders they are iconic links to optical devices such as telescopes; and placed contiguously with the eye-sockets on the mask they point indexically to the concept "eye." In much the same way, Picasso's cardboard, string, and wire construction represents a guitar, with a cardboard cylinder in the center suggesting the instrument's cavity. [34]

Complementing Bois' analysis of the unmotivated nature of Picasso's visual signs is Krauss' examination of his visual vocabulary based on absence, another fundamental aspect of semiotics. She explains:

> For the linguistic sign, absence is not what depletes and saps the system of representation, but rather what makes it possible. Words operate in the absence of their referents.... We can say the word *depth* pointing over the side of a boat into the sea, or indicating the darkness of a shade of blue, or calling attention to the tone of someone's voice, or remarking the profundity of an argument. In each

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[33] Bois 1992: 173.

[34] Bois suggests that the impact of the *Grebo Mask* on the arbitrary nature of Picasso's work was immediate. Despite agreeing with Bois about "the role of the Guitar in the process of restructuring [art] signaled by collage and thus the impetus from African sculpture," Krauss thinks that "the momentousness of this change cannot be explained as locally as that one encounter would suggest." Rather, she suggests "that something far more continuous and profound must have been at work in Picasso over a far longer period of time for such a change to be truly prepared for, or motivated." Krauss, "The Motivation of the Sign," ed. Zelevansky 264.

> case the meaning of the word is not limited to the positivity of the element to which we point. Depth takes its place in a system of opposition in which it always operates against markers of shallowness, of lightness, of highness, of banality. [35]

Following this logic Krauss suggests that the visual depth in Picasso's Cubism was not present, but rather absent -- implied through its relationship to and difference from such visual signifiers as surface, flatness, and two-dimensionality. In other words, despite the absence of three-dimensional depth in Picasso's *Violin*, which is composed of two-dimensional pieces of paper adhered to paper, Picasso nevertheless "summons[ed depth] as a meaning -- a signified -- that [is] inscribed on the pictorial surface" through visual signifiers (shape, color, shading). [36]

In this light Braque's and Picasso's works can be seen, as Krauss has suggested, in "total resistance to a realist or reflectionist view of art, namely, the idea that the painting or the text is a reflection of the reality around it, that reality enters the work of art with the directness of the image striking a mirror." [37] As Bois reminds us, embedded in Cubism are always

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[35] Krauss 1992: 263.

[36] Krauss 1992: 263.

[37] Krauss 1992: 273.

questions of referentiality: "It is not by chance that, when you are in front of a Cubist painting, you ask, "What is that? Is it a hat, a head, a carrot, a cow?" [38] Thus Bois and Krauss re-frame Cubism such that it is not viewed as a mimetic experience, but rather as a semiotic practice involving the decoding of multiple representations through various forms of signification. This shift to a semiotic approach to art-making and interpretation, which is considered one of the most significant aspects of Cubism, is an invaluable contribution to subsequent art production.

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Having re-framed Cubism via semiotic analysis, I would like to examine some of Braque's and Picasso's Cubist constructions, which have been divided into two formal categories: collage and papier collé. In *Still Life with Chair Caning* (1912), which is considered to be the first collage, Picasso affixed a piece of oil cloth

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[38] Bois, "Discussion," ed. Zelevansky 216.

to canvas to represent a "tablecloth on a table". [39] While Picasso is credited with making the first collage, Braque is recognized as having created papier collé, a more specific form of collage in which materials made of paper (wallpaper, newspaper, etc.) were pasted to paper or canvas. [40] In *Fruit Dish and Glass* (1912), Braque's first papier collé, patterned wallpaper was substituted for painted wood-graining to establish the background of the work.

Like most collage and papiers collés, both of these works also include words: in *Still Life with Chair Caning* Picasso boldly superimposed the letters "JOU" over the abstractly painted background of the canvas, and In *Fruit Dish and Glass* Braque's hand-lettered words "BAR" and "ALE" are situated at the left and right sides of the work, framing the almost indecipherable still life. However, despite the visual presence of words, descriptions of these two artistic forms tend to subordinate the linguistic elements and define the new media in terms of the insertion of objects and paper alone.

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[39] Fry 99.

[40] Fry 99. See also Golding 109.

One of the reasons words in Cubism have been paid little attention may be that early collage and papier collés have been viewed as transitional, as part of Braque's and Picasso's movement from two-dimensional painting to their more intermedial forms. In fact, it has been suggested that objects replaced words as their work became more three-dimensional. According to Golding, "the stencilled letters and numerals in Braque's *Le Portugais* are the prelude to the introduction of collage into Cubist painting, and collage was in many ways the logical outcome of the Cubist aesthetic." [41] However, objects did not replace words, which continued to be included as collage and papier collé developed: letters, words and phrases are featured independent of, alongside, and as part of objects.

Picasso's abundant use of newspaper in both collage and papier collé supports the integral role of words in Cubism. The most common "intrusion" in his work, newspaper is, by its very nature, both a group of words and an object taken from the artist's everyday experiences. This duality confirms that objects did not replace words, and more importantly suggests that these two fundamental elements in Cubism cannot be easily

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[41] Golding 105.

separated. Furthermore, because newspaper is both an object and a paper product, its role in Cubism also demonstrates that collage and papier collé cannot be distinguished merely in terms of the materials used. Therefore, instead of examining the composition of the elements Braque and Picasso brought to painting, it seems more profitable to investigate the ways these materials functioned within the scope of their work -- specifically, within the larger frame of signification.

In the simplest collages (and the most general analyses of them), objects tend to present themselves within the thematic scheme of the work of art: for example, a piece of glass functions as a piece of glass or a ticket stub functions as a ticket stub within the overall visual composition. Such self-referentiality can be seen in *The Letter* (1912), in which Picasso affixed an actual postage stamp to the work, as opposed to painting an imitation of one. [42] In this sense collage can be distinguished from painting in terms of (re)presentation: rather than representing the world through painted images, in collage the world is presented with objects. The opposite seems to be the case with papier collé: here the materials Braque and Picasso used do not present

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[42] Fry 99.

themselves but represent something other. Consider, for example, *Still Life With Chair Caining*, in which Picasso included a piece of oil cloth to represent both a chair (on the ground that it looks like the material used as the backing of chairs) and a table cloth (on the ground that it evokes a table beneath it). [43] The letter-forms in this piece perform similar functions: "JOU" is an icon of the actual lettering of the French periodical "LE JOURNAL"; the "piece" of the word Picasso includes is a diagrammatic icon for a piece of newspaper. By juxtaposing "JOU" with the "table cloth", the "piece of paper" is situated on the suggestion of the "table".

This sets up a basic distinction within collage and papier collé in terms of the ways "foreign elements" function rather than what they are made of. In other words, in spite of the type of materials inserted into the Cubist composition, we can differentiate such "intrusions" based on whether they present themselves or represent something other. This is to say, Braque's and Picasso's work can be distinguished in terms of whether it functions within semiotic theory (representation) or outside of it (presentation). Although this is an obvious simplification of the differences not only

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[43] See Bois, "The Semiology of Cubism," ed. Zelevansky 177.

between collage and papier collé, but also between Braque's and Picasso's achievements in these formats [44], this approach provides a way of looking at Cubism beyond traditional thematic and formal considerations.

It is very possible for both presentation and representation to be employed within a single Cubist image: this can be seen in *Fruit Dish and Glass*, for example. Here the inclusion of a piece of printed wallpaper not only represents (points to) the wall from which it came and evokes the walls of the bar in which this still life is set, it also presents the wood-grain pattern printed on it and introduces it into the overall composition of the papier collé. Also working to set the scene, "BAR" in the upper right corner represents the location of the still life: it is an icon for the word which is a symbol for a drinking establishment. Likewise, "ALE" is an icon of the word which is a symbol for the beverage filling the juxtaposed glass.

By reframing collage and papier collé in terms of modes of signification rather than the materials Braque and Picasso used, my analysis of these practices becomes less of a formal investigation into the relationship between two- and three-dimensionality, and more of an

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[44] Fry 98-99, 121.

investigation into various and potential types of visual signification. Rather than focusing attention on the use of paper versus objects, words versus images, "reality" versus "representation", we can begin to consider the way Braque's and Picasso's "intrusions" into painting function in relation to semiotic theory. This expands on Bois' and Krauss' argument that Cubism's advancement is the development of a semiotic approach to visual art, proposing instead that their contribution to art making is in their ability to work both within and against signification. [45]

By viewing these "intrusions" in light of their relationship to signification, rather than their varying proximities to an ill-conceived sense of "reality", the hard-and-fast distinctions between words and images, between words and objects, and between images and objects break down. Letters and words may be formal devices, while objects may be multi-layered signs, and vice-versa. It is with this sense of bracketing the divisions between words, images, and objects, and between that which is considered verbal and visual that I will approach work by Edward Ruscha, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and Lawrence Weiner. All of the artists I have

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[45] This line of thinking has been developed through close communication with Ernst van Alphen.

chosen to discuss in this study approach words and/or language in a particular way: for each the verbal component is presented visually such that their work requires both reading and looking, and in the process opens up new ways of seeing and interpreting. By framing their work as investigations into potential signification, rather than as "exceptions" or moments of hybridity within the well-established modernist borders, we move closer to a new approach to interpreting the constant intermingling of words, images and objects in contemporary art and culture.

Chapter 2
Toward a Visual Semiotics

> A word on a page, which is also a word painted on a plane, which is also the representation of a word in a picture, becomes a sign, a symbol, and an image, on a ground which is simultaneously a page, a plane, and a picture. Even if you start by looking at Edward Ruscha's first collages with their juxtaposed words and images, even if you ask yourself what the late Roland Barthes considered to be the first question, "What is happening here?" it's not really that simple, since a collage, even without words, is never just a picture, a page, or a plane, but a picture-of-pictures, a page-of-pages, a plane-of-planes, or any combination of the above. [46]

From what has been called "incidental typography" [47] on the images and objects in his earliest paintings and collages, to the enigmatic words and phrases painted against monochromatic or abstract backgrounds for which he is best known, words have played a fundamental role in Edward Ruscha's visual art. Since 1959 he has painted and printed, written and stencilled, pasted on and covered over [48] words in an endless number of colors,

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[46] Anne Livet, "Introduction: Collage and Beyond," The Works of Edward Ruscha (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1983) 14.

[47] Walter Hopps and Edward Ruscha, "A Conversation..." Edward Ruscha: Romance with Liquids, Paintings 1966-1969 (New York: Gagosian Gallery and Rizzoli International Publications, 1993) 101.

[48] In many of Ruscha's recent works, which I will discuss at the end of this chapter, his words do not appear overtly, but rather seem to be covered over or blocked out by white or

sizes, typefaces, styles and media, thereby demonstrating the many possibilities of words as visual entities. In his rare works that do not include words, Ruscha juxtaposed images of such common objects as apples and olives, using them as if they are parts of visual sentences. In this way his paintings focus not only on words themselves, but also on language structures within the parameters of the painted canvas. Working from the historic and theoretical frames developed in the previous chapter, I will demonstrate the various ways words and language function in Ruscha's work, and suggest interpretations of his paintings that are both linguistic and visual. In order to assess the role of language within the mainstream of art history, I will also re-frame Ruscha's work within the context of contemporary practices, rather than as a descendent of interdisciplinary forms including medieval illuminated manuscripts and, in the twentieth century, Cubism. [49]

Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas (1963) demonstrates one of the ways words entered into Ruscha's early paintings: here he painted the image of a gas station, the name of which -- "Standard" -- appears on

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black rectangular blocks.

[49] Hulten 19.

its sign. While this word may seem to be mere "incidental typography" or just part of "a faithful representation" of this particular service station [50], Ruscha's use of "Standard" is revealing on a number of levels. First and foremost, this image is a pun on "signs": it is a reminder that his words, images and objects, like those the Cubists painted and collaged, may function on a semiotic level -- or as signs. "Standard" also names the gas station, identifying the brand and type of gasoline for sale: it signals that this gas is positioned in the market as a standard, rather than a premium or discount brand. But "Standard" not only refers to the gasoline itself; it also calls attention to the gas station in which it is sold. This was just one of many service stations along the Interstate highways, a standard part of American culture at a time when travel across the United States, especially by young artists, writers and poets, was a way of life. [51]

In addition to its significance on a cultural level, the "Standard station" is further indicative of Ruscha's

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[50] Hopps 101.

[51] Hopps recalls Ruscha having once stated: "I don't have any Seine River like Monet, I've just got US 66 between Oklahoma and Los Angeles." (Hopps 100.) In 1960 Ruscha painted *U.S. 66*, an abstraction of a highway sign.

own path from Oklahoma to California, and the development of his artistic career. He first drove west with his family in 1949 at the age of 12, the same trip he would make again in 1956 to begin art school in L.A., and again and again throughout his life. Ruscha documented this path, along Route 66, in his first book *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* (1963), which consists of photographs he took of service stations between Los Angeles and Oklahoma City, and captions identifying their geographic locations. The last image in the book clearly demonstrates the extent to which Ruscha's words are not merely "incidental typography" but signs of conceptual significance: while the photos in the book trace a path from Los Angeles to Oklahoma City, the last image backtracks to a service station in Groom, Texas that sells a brand of gasoline named "Fina". Fina. The End.

Ruscha's books typically consist of photographs and are void of words other than their titles and captions. While these books may seem to diverge from his paintings due to their lack of words, they are similar in that they challenge the distinct boundaries between words and images, literary and visual arts. In the same way that his words are foreign to visual art, so too are books; however, Ruscha uses both as if they are acceptable subject matter and media for a visual artist,

breaking down the strict artistic divisions in the process. [52]

Among the service stations in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, "Standard oil" is represented twice -- in photographs of *Standard, Williams, Arizona* and *Standard, Amarillo, Texas*. This brand has also reappeared throughout Ruscha's career in a variety of media including the previously mentioned painting *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas*, the collage *Standard Station, 10c Western Being Torn in Half* (1964), the screenprint *Standard Station* (1966), and the more recent "silhouette" painting *Untitled (Standard)* (1989). Clearly this image is a "standard sign" within his visual practice. Also consistent is the way Ruscha presents this image: at a 45 degree angle such that the "Standard" sign crosses the canvas diagonally beginning in the upper left corner. [53] Unlike the Pop artists of his day who presented familiar

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[52] For discussions of Ruscha's books see Hopps 99, 103. See also Bernard Blistène, "Conversation with Ed Ruscha," Edward Ruscha: Paintings 134.

[53] While this angle is not "standardized" in the photographs that appeared in *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, Ruscha has used the diagonal format to depict other recurring images which, like the Standard Station, have too become familiar parts of his repitorie of imagery. The "Twentieth Century Fox" logo, for example, has also appeared at a 45 degree angle in the painting *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights* (1962), in the ink and pencil drawing *Trademark 2* (1962) and, in a modified form, in *20-20-20* (1962).

consumer symbols, including coca-cola bottles, dollar bills and cartoon characters, decontextualized from their places in the world at large, here Ruscha depicted the "Standard" sign within its logical context -- as part of the gas station where he found it. And unlike his contemporaries who were using a more graphic, two-dimensional representational style, Ruscha constructed a horizon line and adhered to a traditional representational format based on perspectivalism.

Despite these differences, because Ruscha's earliest words were associated with common objects and everyday products, and because he worked in a cool, deadpan visual style, his paintings have nevertheless been compared to the work of Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein among other Pop artists. [54] With good cause: Ruscha's early work emerged from the same historical context and typically included similar mass-culture images and icons. In *Dublin,* (1959), for example, one of Ruscha's earliest works to include elements from pop culture, he combined a piece of the *Little Orphan Annie* comic strip with one blue and one green piece of wood. (A year later Ruscha re-created *Dublin,* by making a painting of this collage.)

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[54] In 1962 Ruscha participated in his first group exhibition entitled "New Paintings of Common Objects" at the Pasadena Art Museum. The list of participating artists was Dine, Dowd, Goode, Hefferton, Lichtenstein, Ruscha, Thiebaud, and Warhol.

As with *Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas* and *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights*, language enters into *Dublin,* as part of what might be called "incidental typography". Here words appear on the scrap of the comic: the title, the day it appeared in the newspaper (Sunday Morning), and part of the story line are all legible. However, in *Dublin,* Ruscha also presented a word as an independent reference: beneath the collaged elements that are enclosed within a thin a thin, black, ink-drawn line, the word "Dublin" followed by a comma is written (or stencilled) in black ink.

Though often unnoticed, the comma after "Dublin" is an important part of the work: it implies that something follows the word, like additional geographic information such as "Dublin, Ireland" or "Dublin, California." Given Ruscha's travels in the United States and his interest in American car culture, "Dublin," probably refers to the latter. Another possibility is that a date might follow this place name, for example "Dublin, 1959", as in the heading of a letter. This would suggest a pun on the meaning of a "letter", which is both a character or the "stuff" Ruscha's word works are made of, and a written text sent from one person to another, from Ruscha to viewers of his work, from him to us, from I to you. As a piece of correspondence, Ruscha invites us to respond --

to "write back", or to form a chain of communication with him through the process of interpreting his work.

Unlike the other Pop artists' fascination with food and cartoon icons (among other aspects of popular American culture) that flourished in the 1960s, *Dublin,* not only suggests Ruscha's interest in words as images, but also serves as an early indication of what was to become his career-long investigation into the visual properties of language. By the early 1960s, his attention turned from objects and the type on them, to words separated from their referents and presented as independent signifiers. This is the case in *Annie* (1962), his second derivation of the *Dublin,* collage. Here he divided the canvas horizontally, filling the top half with the word "Annie" in cartoon-like red letters, outlined in black, and placed on a yellow background, and painting the bottom half royal blue. Detached from its printed pop culture context, "Annie" is a symbol for the cartoon character by the same name, an iconic reference to the comic strip whose typeface and colors it imitates, and an index pointing to the comic strip as a whole.

As a so-called Pop artist whose main focus was not necessarily consumer imagery, Ruscha's early work was closest to that of Jasper Johns, whose paintings at the time included such visual signs as maps of the United

States and American flags, as well as numbers and targets. While these non-commercial subjects seem to diverge from the more traditional pop imagery in Warhol's and Lichtenstein's work, Johns's imagery reveals the extent to which Pop art went beyond familiar products to investigate signification and representation in visual art. In fact, the tendency to identify and define Pop art by the presence of soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles, Mickey Mouse and Popeye denies the extent to which this generation of artists questioned visual representation and challenged the Greenbergian legacy of abstract painting. Paul Schimmel has suggested that Johns's "use of flags, targets, and numbers provided [him] with recognizable (but overlooked) subjects with which he could comment on issues of abstraction and representation. He avoided the pitfalls of more traditional subject matter (figure, landscape, and still life) while still entering into a dialogue about abstract and representational modes." [55] The same can be said of Ruscha: while his language-based subjects demonstrate the possibility of words in visual art, and bring to painting a semiotic dimension, his rich backgrounds nonetheless participate within the scope of abstract painting.

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[55] Schimmel 40.

The relationship between Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism was acknowledged as the topic of a recent exhibition, "Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition 1955-1962". Schimmel, one of the exhibition curators, argued in his catalogue essay that "it has been an inaccurate oversimplification to see Pop art as representing a clear break from Abstract Expressionism. The numerous instances of comment upon, and continuity with, the art of the Abstract Expressionists is a clear indication of evolutionary change." [56] By looking at early works by Warhol, Lichtenstein, Johns, Ruscha, Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg and others associated with the movement this transformation is unmistakable: none of these artists began their careers with the slick commercial approaches now identified as Pop art, but rather painted in highly gestural and abstract styles. For example, the surfaces of Johns's early paintings of targets and other symbols were "built up" in such a way that the symbol was often secondary to the painted surface itself; similarly, his numbers and maps were often dripping with paint in a manner resembling the "all-over" drip paintings of Jackson Pollock. Ruscha was likewise influenced by the preceding

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[56] Schimmel 19.

generation of painters, especially Willem de Kooning and Franz Klein; this is most apparent in *Sweetwater* (1959), in which he combined the word "Sweetwater" with broad, sweeping, gestural brushstrokes. In doing so he juxtaposed that which had been repressed from painting by Abstract Expressionism -- words and symbols -- with the then dominant visual style.

However, while Pop artists took Abstract Expressionism as a starting point, they did not uphold the principles of their predecessors (or of Greenberg). Rather "for [these] artist[s], expressionist technique was just that: a technique, a style, something that could be copied, altered, and even played with. No longer was painting seen as a subconscious tracing of emotional states of being. No longer did artists struggle to find the picture by making the picture." [57] By adopting the look of the New York School without adopting its gesture, Pop artists "caricatured, copied, reproduced, appropriated, synthesized, and finally drained [it] of conviction." [58] The reaction of Pop artists against Abstract Expressionism is often symbolized by a single work -- Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953),

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[57] Schimmel 19.

[58] Schimmel 19.

in which "one of the heroes of Abstract Expressionism is literally made invisible by the action of a younger artist in erasing his signature archetype, in this case a "woman".[59]

Eventually Pop art did make a significant break from Abstract Expressionism and its stronghold on the visual style of painting: by 1962 many of the above mentioned artists began to develop the more familiar commercial-art styles and mechanically-reproduced techniques widely associated with Pop art. This was not, however, the case with Ruscha and Johns: in the same way that their subject matter differed from more traditional Pop imagery, their painting styles too diverged from what is now considered classic Pop. Even though Ruscha's lettering became increasingly standardized and often resembled the typestyles of comic books and cartoons, unlike Warhol's mass-produced, serial silkscreens and Lichtenstein's commercial-style Benday dots, Ruscha's work has remained -- by and large -- hand-painted and/or hand-made.

Perhaps Ruscha's *Actual Size*, which includes an image of a popular food product lit on fire, is a metaphoric rejection of the standards of Pop art. As in

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[59] Schimmel 30.

Annie, here Ruscha divided the canvas in half: the word "Spam", painted in the same typography as it appears on the can, is presented in the top half, and a can of Spam engulfed in flames appears to move through space in the lower half. Given the ways Ruscha's work diverged visually and thematically from Pop art, and the ways he challenges art historical categories, it is difficult to group him within that tradition without recognizing a critical gesture such as this. By setting the common consumer food product, "Spam", on fire, Ruscha seems to critique the presentation of such objects and symbols in Pop Art in much the same way that Rauschenberg deflated the Abstract Expressionist gesture with *Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Ruscha made similarly coded references to the rejection of standard aesthetics in *Burning Gas Station* (1965-1966), *Norms, La Cienega, on Fire* (1964) and *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire* (1965-1968). Here he set on fire what Hickey calls a "*station which dispenses standards*", a "*restaurant which served norms*" and "*a museum which did both.*" [60] It is possible that the norms and standards Ruscha was attempting to destroy here were those of Pop Art (symbolized by the gas station and food product) and Abstract Expressionism (symbolized by the

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[60] Dave Hickey, "Available Light," The Works of Edward Ruscha 24.

museum).

By placing words in painting (where images are typically found), and by placing books within the realm of visual art (rather than in their traditional role within literary arts) Ruscha is also challenging the way these entities are positioned and suggesting new possibilities for framing them. However, it is important to note that Ruscha does not merely overturn the traditional dichotomies between words and images, between images and objects, and between books and paintings; rather he investigates (and provokes viewers of his work to explore) the acceptance of their positions and separation throughout the history of art. By painting words and combining them with images, with images of objects, and with objects themselves, he demonstrates that these elements, as well as the visual and verbal fields that house them, are continually intertwined.

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As Ruscha's work developed and as words became the subjects of his paintings, his verbal subjects often seemed to be chosen at random. Consider, for example, *Ace*

(1961), *Boss* (1961) and *Boulangerie* (1961), examples of Ruscha's earliest -- and least complex -- works, in which he painted the words "ace", "boss" and "boulangerie" respectively at the center of solid-colored backgrounds. While these works demonstrate Ruscha's attention to language and his hand-painted approach to art-making, one wonders: what is the significance of these words in particular, and what is their significance as the subjects of paintings? According to Ruscha, his choice of words was arbitrary and indiscriminate: "[Q]uite often it didn't make a difference. It was what was happening at the time, and my instinct, as it began to work, would make me choose one over the other. It was not intentional for a word to have an attitude itself. I didn't have to follow a course, I had no rules for this." [61]

Part of the seeming randomness of these words has to do with the lack of an identifiable "source" or referent. Compare, for example, "Ace", whose source is unknown, and "Annie", whose referent is clearly the "Little Orphan Annie" comic strip as well as Ruscha's own works *Dublin,* (1959) and *Dublin,* (1960). With the mere suggestion of a referent the word seems less arbitrary: for example, Hulten suggestion that Ruscha made *Boulangerie* "in his

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[61] Hopps 101.

hotel room in Paris after sketching the thirties-style-letters from a Paris street" implies a referent for this work and makes the word choice seem less arbitrary. [62]

Even though Ruscha wanted his word-choices to appear arbitrary, he has admitted to the premeditation involved in his artistic practice, and to using it as a reaction against the New York School:

> They would say, face the canvas and let it happen, follow your own gestures, let the painting create itself. But I'd always have to think up something first. If I didn't, it wasn't *art* to me. Also, it looked real dumb. They wanted to collapse the whole art process into one act; I wanted to break it into stages, which is what I do now. First, whatever I'm going to do is *completely premeditated*, however off-the-wall it might be. Then it's executed, you know, fabricated....[63]

According to Schimmel, it is this sense of "premeditation" that influenced Ruscha's *E. Ruscha* (1959), in which he appears to have run out of room while painting his name across the canvas, "an accident that forces him to put the 'ha' above with an arrow pointing to his mistake." [64] "Ha" is also part of a mocking exclamation ("ha ha"), an tonal gesture associated with laughter. In conjunction with is own name, it may suggest self-mockery, perhaps a counter-balance to the

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[62] Hulten 21.

[63] Hickey 1983: 27.

[64] Hickey 1983: 27.

egocentrism associated with making art out of one's own name. Furthermore, this gesture mocks Ruscha's role as an art-maker, and by association criticizes the idealized genius-status of the preceding generation of Abstract Expressionists.

On a semiotic level, the seeming randomness of Ruscha's words is related to Saussure's notion of the arbitrary nature of signs. According to Saussure's well known reaction to 19th century icono-mania, the bond between the signifier and the signified, and thus the resulting linguistic sign, is arbitrary. [65] He provides the following example: "The idea of 'sister' is not linked by any inner relationship to the succession of sounds s-ö-r which serves as its signifier in French; that it could be represented equally by just any other sequence is proved by differences among language and by the very existence of different languages: the signified 'ox' has as its signifier b-ö-f on one side of the border and o-k-s (Ochs) on the other." [66] But, as Saussure clarified, "the word *arbitrary* ... should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the

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[65] Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, trans. Wade Baskin, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1959) 67.

[66] Saussure 67-68.

speaker (... the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community); I mean that it is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified." [67]

It is this type of unmotivated "arbitrariness" that Ruscha implies through his word choices and his combinations of words with images. There is no natural link between words and their backgrounds, or between words and the images with which they are juxtaposed. This differs from the indexicality of Picasso's and Braque's signs, which are motivated by contiguity between sign (i.e., the cylinders in the *Grebo Mask*) and meaning (i.e., eyes).

In addition to their arbitrariness, according to Saussure, signs are also defined by their difference(s) from other signs. For example, the signifiers "bad", "bed", "bid", "rid", and "red", as well as the concepts associated with them "are purely differential and defined not by their positive content but negatively by their relations with other terms of the system. Their most precise characteristic is in being what the others are

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[67] Saussure 67.

not." [68] Because "language is characterized as a system based entirely on the opposition of its concrete units,"[69] no linguistic element can function outside of this relationship to other signs. Ruscha seems to have been acknowledging these qualities of linguistic signs in his 1970 series of screenprints, *News*, *Mews*, *Pews*, *Brews*, *Stews*, *Dues*. Using organic substances he depicted these words on six individual canvases: each appeared in a gothic font like that used on the masthead of the *New York Times*, and in each either the word itself, or the background surrounding it was a variation of a golden hue. These words, like all rhyming words, are differentiated from one another based on deviations in their first letter(s) that result in distinctions in meaning.

But this pattern is not only aural, like most rhyme schemes, but also visual: these prints are distinguished both by the way the words look (i.e., the visual differences between the first letter[s] of each word), and by the sounds associated with them. The inclusion of "dues" confirms the visual quality of this linguistic pattern: if it was merely heard and not seen, it could be

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[68] Saussure 117.

[69] Saussure 107.

mistaken for "dews", which would be an accurate component in this rhyme pattern on a conventional aural level. However, because Ruscha spells the word "dues" it looks significantly different from the others and breaks the pattern visually. By making such a distinction between "dues" and the other words in the series, Ruscha transfers the Saussurean principle -- that the meaning of linguistic signs is established and articulated through difference(s) -- to images. [70] As a result it can be inferred that the significance of images, like that of words, is located not in their similarities to other images, but rather in their differences from other images within an overall visual sign system.

My suggestion of the importance of the visual (or written) component of *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews, Dues*, contradicts Saussure's principle that links signs to sound and writing to the representation of such sounds. In Saussurean linguistics, signs are limited to that which communicates thought: he argues that "the characteristic role of language with respect to thought

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[70] Saussure 117-119. While Hickey noticed the rhyme scheme in Ruscha's work his analysis of them is limited. Rather than seeing the visual potential of such patterns, he suggests that series such as *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews, Dues*, and *Sweets, Meat, Sheets* mark a "dissonance between sight and sound." Dave Hickey, "Wacky Molière Lines: A Listener's Guide to Ed-werd Rew-shay," Parkett 18 (1988): 33.

is not to create a material phonic means for expressing ideas but to serve as a link between thought and sound, under conditions that of necessity bring about the reciprocal delimitations of units." He likened the inability to divide thought from sound to the impossibility of separating the front and back sides of a sheet of paper, arguing that "thought is the front and sound the back; one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound." [71] As a result of this belief, Saussure privileged speech over writing as a more direct form of expression: he considered writing to be secondary -- physical marks divorced from the thoughts that proceeded them and a simple means of representing speech.

This argument is comparable to that at the core of the mimetic tradition that privileges anything appearing to be "real" or "realistic", and discredits that which can be deemed representational. It is, essentially, no different than the illusory notion I challenged in Chapter 1 that the objects in Cubist collage are more "realistic" than the words with which they were juxtaposed. In the same way that Braque's and Picasso's

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[71] Saussure 113.

objects are no closer to "real life" than their words, speech does not hold a more direct relationship to thought than writing. Ruscha conveyed this equality in his rhymed images where neither the audio nor the visual component carries more weight, but rather both the visual and verbal elements are aspects contributing to the overall significance of his work. While I am not suggesting that there is an actual audio component in his work as there has been in the work of Laurie Anderson, Lawrence Weiner, and other contemporary artists who use language as a medium or vehicle for making art, speech is implied and embedded within many of Ruscha's paintings, drawings, books and titles. His words and phrases provoke viewers to read them aloud and make interpretations based on such sounds. [72]

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This brings me back to *Ace*, *Boss*, and *Boulangerie*. According to Saussure, "the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name but a concept [signified] and a sound-

[72] I will address this acoustic aspect of Ruscha's work in more detail in Chapter 3.

image [signifier]." [73] Following this logic, the words in Ruscha's paintings *Ace*, *Boss*, and *Boulangerie* are signs joining signifiers and signifieds "ace", "boss" and "boulangerie" respectively. However, because of Ruscha's use of color and specialized typestyles, and his placement of these words within the context of painting, "ace", "boss" and "boulangerie" are also images. In other words, they not only function as linguistic and semiotic signifiers in the above sense, but also as images and as visual signs. The word "ace", for example, is both the linguistic signifier of the concept "ace" and a visual representation of the word "ace"; it is both the word itself and an image of the word rendered in paint on canvas. But what is an image of a word? And, more importantly, what is the difference between an image of a word and the word itself? Furthermore, how can we conceptualize the difference between words and images without becoming trapped in the hierarchical pitfalls of the well-established methods for interpreting words, images and the relationship between them?

Ruscha depicts words as if they are images, in the same way that other artists depict more traditional visual subjects. He pays attention to the form, shape,

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[73] Saussure 66.

style, and color of the word as another artist would focus on these features in the rendering of a person, an object, or a scene. [74] In the same way that a painting of a person, an object, or a scene is an artist's interpretation and visual depiction of one of these more traditional subjects, Ruscha's images of "ace", "boss", and "boulangerie" are similarly his interpretations of these words as subject matter. However, while it is clear that an artist's subjective rendering of a person, an object, or a scene affects a viewer's interpretation of the image, it is less commonly acknowledged that the visual presentation of a word influences its meaning. By the same token, while it is widely understood that the tone, pronunciation, expression, or context in which a word is spoken sheds light on the way it will be interpreted, a word's visual or typographical appearance is often overlooked as an important factor contributing to its reception.

Saussure specifically argued against the possibility that written or visual presentations of words contribute to their meaning as signs. He concluded that "the means

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[74] Ruscha said about his early, seemingly random word choices, like those in *Smash, Boss*, or *Eat*: "Those words were like flowers in a vase; I just happened to paint words like someone else paints flowers." Fred Fehlau, "Ed Ruscha," Flash Art (Jan.-Feb. 1988): 70.

by which the sign is produced is completely unimportant, for it does not affect the system.... Whether I make the letters in white or black, raised or engraved, with pen or chisel -- all this is of no importance with respect to their significance." [75] However, as Ruscha demonstrates in his work, the significance of his paintings and the words within them rests on the way they are presented in terms of color, type, materials or substances, layout, and the combination of these visual elements.

Despite the above-mentioned similarities between Ruscha's words and more traditional visual subjects, there are also differences between words and images in art based on the dissimilar ways they function as semiotic signs and as representations. Specifically, while a painting of a person, or an object, or a scene is a visual representation in paint on canvas, an image of a word is <u>both</u> a visual depiction (or representation) of that word <u>and</u> (a presentation of) the word itself. An image of an apple, for example, is a representation of an apple but is not itself an apple; by comparison, an image of the word "ace", for example, is <u>both</u> a representation of the word "ace" <u>and</u> itself that word (i.e., a

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[75] Saussure 120.

linguistic sign). In this sense Ruscha's *Ace* is a visual representation of the word "ace" in paint on canvas, as well as the term signifying a number of concepts including a playing card or domino marked with one spot, a serve in a tennis match that one's opponent is unable to return, a combat pilot who has destroyed many planes, and an expert.

This argument is reminiscent of the problematic framed by Magritte's painting *Ceci n'est pas une pipe (This is not a pipe)* (1926) in which a visual representation of a pipe is captioned by a handwritten phrase declaring "This is not a pipe". Michel Foucault explained that this seeming discrepancy between the pipe and the caption below is not a contradiction, but rather a visualization of an aspect of Saussurean linguistics: correctly, this (image painted by Magritte) is not a pipe, but rather an image (or a representation) of a pipe. [76] However, while this logic is true for (the image of) a pipe (and for images of people, objects, and scenes), it does not hold true for (images of) words: although a pipe painted on a canvas is not itself a pipe, the word "ace" painted on a canvas <u>is</u> the word "ace". Again, a painting of an object is just that -- a

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[76] See Michel Foucault, <u>This is Not a Pipe</u> (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

representation of an object and not the object itself; a painting of a word, by comparison, is simultaneously that word and an image of that word.

In light of this theoretical understanding of the way(s) words function visually, and the way(s) they are both similar to and different from more traditional visual imagery, consider Ruscha's *Satin* (1971) in which the word "satin" appears in white gothic-style letters, surrounded by a marbleized pink "background" made from rubbing rose petals on paper. This work demonstrates the way Ruscha fully integrates his words and images, "foregrounds" and "backgrounds", words and their painted "supports", as well as the extent to which these two aspects encode one another and the painting as a whole. Together the word, the color, the typeface, and the material indexically signify the concept "satin", the silky cloth by the same name, and iconically signify Victorian notions of "Romanticism". Here a different color, material, or typeface would have completely altered the significance of both the word and the painting: consider "satin" depicted in red, abstractly-formed letters made from blood stains on a black canvas. Would not this combination of visual elements provoke an interpretation of the word closer to notions of "satan" than "satin"?

Like *Satin*, whose rose-petals contribute to associations with Romanticism, *Evil* (1973), in which the word "evil" appears in large, italicized, brick-red, capital letters on a fire-engine red background made of blood stained on satin, iconically signifies danger. [77] While "evil" would have threatening or dangerous connotations regardless of these aesthetic considerations, here the color scheme, along with the bold type-style and the medium, highlight the meaning of the word. Additional associations between "evil", the color red, blood, and satin suggest the possibility of a shooting or other physical violence that has left its mark on something made of satin, possibly a shirt or a sheet. Of course this is not the only viable interpretation of *Evil*. However, this interpretation process -- based on the combination of a word, its image, and its medium, and the associations one has with these elements and their juxtaposition -- confirms <u>how</u> Ruscha's works mean. [78]

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[77] The same is true of *Stews*, from the series *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews, Dues*, which is composed of "a hodgepodge, or stew, or materials -- from baked beans and fresh strawberries to mango chutney and daffodils." (Christin J. Mamiya, <u>Edward Ruscha: June 5-August 19, 1990</u> (Lincoln, Nebraska: Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, 1990).

[78] Livet also discusses this aspect of Ruscha's production of meaning, arguing that <u>how</u> his works mean is often more significant that <u>what</u> they mean. Livet 17.

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Ruscha's introduction of words into art as typography on images and objects, his juxtaposition of words with images and objects, and his presentation of words as independent subject matter, coupled with the range of his art production -- collage, artists' books and paintings -- form the basis of the interdependent, yet distinguishable phases that make up his artistic career. However, because of the way he has used, reused, and returned again to standardized words, images, objects and visual formats it is difficult to divide his career into specific and clear-cut chronological periods. Instead, Ruscha's works can be grouped visually, thematically and theoretically in terms of the various issues they raise about the nature of words and images, or more specifically the nature of words as images.

Ace, *Boss*, and *Boulangerie*, although not Ruscha's earliest works, are among his first single-word paintings and raise the most fundamental questions about words in contemporary art. Specifically, do words in visual contexts function semiotically as signs, and how do they differ from more traditional painted imagery as well as from more traditionally printed words? *Satin* and *Evil*,

typical of Ruscha's "Stains", are more complex and pose the question: how does a word's appearance affect its significance? These "Stains" (1971-1975) -- works in which Ruscha experimented with a variety of substances, including such organic materials as cherry juice, carrot juice, ketchup and blood, and such non-organic materials as gunpowder and shellac instead of (and as) paint or ink -- reveal the way the meaning(s) of his words and paintings build(s) through the combination not only of words and images, but also of materials and the varied associations viewers have with them.

Throughout the 1960s Ruscha also depicted words in ways such that they border on illegibility and unreadablity; as a result these words act less as linguistic signs and more as abstract images. For example, in *Chemical* (1966), *Automatic* (1966), *Vaseline* (1967), and *Rooster* (1967) he presented words in very small, capital letters of a standard typewriter font, with the individual letters stretched horizontally from end to end across the canvas such that substantial gaps exist between them. The size of the letters, combined with their presentation against backgrounds of contrasting colors, makes these paintings very difficult to read. Also, as a result of the spacing it is virtually impossible to see an entire word in a single

glance; rather the letters must be read one-by-one and added together mentally to form complete words. [79] Reading these works is like attempting to decipher the smallest row of letters on an eye-examination chart: the difference, of course, is that Ruscha's letters come together to form complete words, where as the letters in rows on eye-charts are arranged randomly. Unlike eye-charts, Ruscha's combinations of letters in these works -- like his combinations of words and images throughout his career -- are not incidental but premeditated; they are selected and presented with dually semiotic and aesthetic agenda in mind.

Works such as *Chemical*, *Automatic*, *Vaseline*, and *Rooster* pose the question: can a word be used as an element of aesthetic design, rather than for purpose of linguistic significance? Put another way, can words

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[79] Given the alignment of Ruscha's visual art to linguistic theory, it is possible to see the spaces in these works in light of Jacques Derrida's concept of "differance," a term which translates most closely in English to "spacing." Though Ruscha does not illustrate theories with his work, here he seems to establish a link between "differance" and the difficulty of seeing the obvious, demonstrated by Sigmund Freud's example of letters on a map, written so wide that they cannot be read. Lacan later picks this up in his analysis of "The Purloined Letter," which suggests that the visible can become invisible. Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,' trans. Jeffery Mehlman (with "map of the Text" and "Notes to the Text"). In The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press) 28-98.

function primarily as images? By making "chemical", "automatic", "vaseline" and "rooster" difficult to read and to view, Ruscha tests the limits of words and of words as images. Because of their illegibility they become abstractions, parodies of the standardized typewriter font that, under different circumstances, would be the most easily readable. But if words function as abstractions, do they cease to be words? In other words, is it possible for a word not to be a linguistic signifier and not to function linguistically? The answer to this, of course, is "no". Even when words are displayed illegibly they are nonetheless linguistic signifiers that function in a traditional semantic fashion. Therefore, despite the visual forms they may take, Ruscha's painted words cannot escape being words, even when they are presented first and foremost as images.

While this argument -- that a word can function primarily as an image while retaining its status as a word -- seems logical, it is problematic: words cannot simultaneously function visually as images and semantically as words. Peter Schjeldahl has compared this impossibility to the problem of trying to look and read at the same time:

> No one can read and look simultaneously. The two activities are as mutually exclusive as kneeling and jumping. The brain must configure consciousness differently for each. It can do so with such lightning quickness as to induce a sense of simultaneity, but the sense is an illusion. (When I try consciously to do the two things at once in a sustained way, I experience an oddly disengaged state of almost-reading and almost-looking, my mind in neutral like a car transmission between gears.)[80]

He relates this to the experience of standing before on of Ruscha's word-works:

> Coming upon any Ruscha word picture is like hitting a rock in the road, a distinct bump. The impact is over before I start really looking at the picture, such that my looking becomes the perusal of a thing that has already done something to me. It has made me read. I have read the word as a word -- automatically grabbing at a verbal message -- before looking at it as a form. Now that I am looking, a subtle confusion sets in. A Ruscha word picture delicately frustrates the drive of reading, which is the will to comprehend a complete meaning, by presenting the word in a visual manner clamorous with seemingly complementary but actually disruptive suggestions of its own. Once I start looking at the picture, which happens in a flash, I have lost the train of reading. After the bump, a fumble. I can toggle back to reading, perhaps flicking back and forth rapidly in a futile attempt to merge the two processes. But this requires an effort that, unrewarded, I soon give up. The pictorial and physical presence of the word -- as a designed shape and the deployment of a certain medium that is a certain color -- takes over and holds sway. The reading-drive lingers incomplete, a tiny, unrequited craving in the background of the experience of looking at -- gazing at, beholding -- the picture.[81]

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[80] Peter Schjeldahl, "Filthy Beautiful: Ruscha's Stains 1971-1975," Edward Ruscha: Stains 1971-1975 (New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 1993) 2-3.

[81] Schjeldahl 3-4.

Although convincing as an account of his experience before the works, Schjeldahl's argument is flawed on a number of levels. First, the comparison of the reading and looking involved in interpreting Ruscha's works to one's attempt to simultaneously perform two incompatible activities, such as kneeling and jumping, relate processes that are structurally very different. Specifically, kneeling and jumping cannot occur at the same time because they are based on a physical opposition (of bending and stretching the same muscles); reading and looking, by comparison, are not opposites but rather two distinct forms of interpretation. Second, Schjeldahl's analysis is problematic because Ruscha's work does not, in fact, demonstrate the impossibility of simultaneously reading and looking, but rather the impossibility of processing two different sign systems -- one visual and one linguistic -- at once. In the same way that M.C. Escher's optical illusions fuse two images along a mutual linear border such that they are not simultaneously distinguishable, Ruscha's paintings join formally interlocking, yet semiotically interdependent sign systems into a single word-image. Because Escher's shapes co-exist in a single image, in order to view one the other must be visually subordinated; likewise in order to process Ruscha's works that are both words and

images, one aspect -- either visual or linguistic -- must be temporarily subordinated to the other.

While one of the two sign systems in Ruscha's paintings must be subordinated at any given moment for interpretation to occur, there are cases in which Ruscha subordinates both the visual and the linguistic sign systems to the substance with which he "paints". Like the "Stains", in Ruscha's "Liquid" paintings (1966-1969)[82] the materials he used function semiotically and contribute to the overall significance of the works. These pieces appear to have been made by spilling a variety of materials onto canvases, resulting in images of words with amorphic, organic and, at times, indecipherable qualities. In *Hey* (1969), for example, Ruscha "spilled" the word "hey" onto a canvas, as if made from a half-liquid, half-bean mixture. (Maybe these are not beans, but caviar?) Like Ruscha's "eye-chart" paintings, his "liquid" words are difficult to read; however, in his "liquid" words it is not only his words, but also his images that border on indecipherability. Specifically, *Hey* is not only illegible as a word with mis-formed letters, but also as an image with a strange

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[82] This period is often referred to by Ruscha as his "Romance with Liquids", a phrase which appeared on his 1975 painting by the same title whose materials are onion stalks and juice.

and illogical combination of elements that is enigmatic at best. What do "hey" and beans (or caviar) have to do with one another? It is as if this painting asks "Hey, what's going on here?" What is going on here is that both the linguistic and visual aspects of this word have taken a back seat to Ruscha's substance: while his letters and his image are liquefying, his beans have solidified.

In works like *Air* (1970) and *Lips* (1971) Ruscha raised the stakes of his visual semiotics by presenting "air" and "lips" not only as words, images, and (images of) substances (shaped like words), but also as (images of) three-dimensional objects. In *Air* it seems as if Ruscha first created an object or three-dimensional structure by manipulating a thin strip of paper stood on end into the shape of the handwritten form of the word "air", and then illustrated that word-shaped object in gunpowder and pastel on paper. Whether or not Ruscha actually created such an object is irrelevant: what is important is that the subject of this drawing is at once a word, an image (of a word), and (an image of) a three-dimensional object (shaped like a word), and (an image of) the material (i.e., paper) from which this word is made. The individual letters that form the word "lips" similarly appear as if they were first constructed three-

dimensionally out of paper and then rendered in gunpowder and pastel on paper; however, here the letters are not connected (i.e., in a handwritten script) but rather presented as independent, free-standing, detached forms. Again, whether or not Ruscha actually constructed these four letter-shaped structures is insignificant: what is important is that the boundaries between word, image, object, and substance are drastically blurred.

Also significant in these works is the way Ruscha collapses the visual presentation of words with their referents. In *Air* Ruscha forms iconic links between the concept "air", the image of the word as a weightless, wafer-thin strip of paper, and its rendering in a scripted, lofty, handwritten typestyle, while creating a contradiction with the substance, gunpowder. In *Lips* Ruscha forms similar iconic links between word, image, object, and referent: the individual letters "L", "i", "p", and "s" are wavy and limp, and they appear to be frail and quivering like the lips of a person standing out in a blizzard. (Consider the same word presented a flowing, scripted type-style and rendered in red lipstick.) In *Air*, *Lips*, and other similar drawings Ruscha creates an icon of a word's referent, and presents that icon as an image of an object shaped like the word itself. These visual, conceptual, and semiotic aspects

are fused into a single image which Ruscha renders in a substance or material which too contributes to the significance of both the word and the work. It is on this highly complex and multi-layered level that each of Ruscha's single-word works operate. Despite the simplicity of the words he chooses, as Anne Livet has suggested "it's not really that simple." [83]

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In the 1960s Ruscha was not only painting single words, but also painting images of three-dimensional objects including such everyday items as pencils, comic books, and prepared foods. In them he depicted objects so realistically that one might contemplate whether they were images or the objects themselves [84], challenging the borders between what is thought to be real and what is considered to be a representation, and continuing the debate over visual "reality" addressed by the Cubists in

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[83] Livet 15.

[84] Because of his highly realistic style, Ruscha's work has also been compared to surrealistic images of Rene Magritte. See Livet 17 and Peter Plagens, "Ed Ruscha, Seriously," The Works of Edward Ruscha 33.

their collages. He also further blurred the boundaries between words, images, and objects by treating (images of) objects as if they were equally arbitrary as linguistic signifiers: his (images of) objects seemed to be chosen from daily encounters with an equal degree of indiscriminacy as his seemingly random words. In effect, Ruscha displaced the arbitrariness of language onto the (apparent) randomness of his choice of common objects, exchanging these codes of representation in the same way that he related the theory of difference that governs the relations between linguistic signs to images.

However, like Ruscha's words which were not random but premeditated, his object choices also only appeared to be arbitrary. In reality they were signs, coded within the context of Ruscha's artistic practice and brought together to form visual "sentences". For example, in 1969 Ruscha combined a number of seemingly random objects -- three marbles, an apple, an olive -- in a work that, like most, is puzzling and enigmatic. What do marbles, an apple, and an olive have to do with one another? The only apparent similarity between them is that they are all round, they are all painted in a highly realistic fashion against a green background, and they all appear to be suspended in mid-air without supports.

Livet has provided the following interpretation of

this work:

> The painting presents us with a syntactical joining of three disparate but roughly synonymous objects performing the same action in some kind of significant space, a situation that invites the viewer so inclined to make a sentential reading, to look beyond the objects for whatever meanings they might embody. The marbles could refer to the objects most of us played with and collected as children and therefore could be a reference to childhood, or it could be a colloquial reference to the condition of having lost one's marbles. The olive is a martini olive and, as such, a symbol of the adult world. The apple could be the forbidden fruit with which Eve tempted Adam, a cultural symbol for the loss of innocence, and probably the verb of the "sentence".[85]

Her analysis is based on reading Ruscha's (images of) objects as if they were linguistic signifiers, and interpreting both his combination of elements and her own associations with them. While Livet's suggestion that the apple could be the "verb" in this visual "sentence" is feasible, the "verb" more literally can be found in Ruscha's title -- *Bouncing Marbles, Bouncing Apple, Bouncing Olive*. In this work it is actually the title that links these objects -- or visual "nouns" -- with an action, and informs the viewer that these three round objects are not suspended or floating, but in motion.

Bouncing Marbles, Bouncing Apple, Bouncing Olive is one of a small number of Ruscha's works (and one of an even smaller number of his earlier works) that does not

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[85] Livet 17.

include words, except in its title. While many artists use titles as incidental labels, for Ruscha they often have been integral and fundamental parts of the works themselves, providing viable material toward one's search for their significance. However, while it is tempting in cases such as this to think that Ruscha's titles "explain" his paintings, this is a highly problematic approach to the relationship between visual and linguistic signifiers: words do not translate or describe images, just as images do not illustrate words. Rather words and images inform and interact with one another based on their juxtaposition and combination. Therefore *Bouncing Marbles, Bouncing Apple, Bouncing Olive*, like all of Ruscha's paintings, is encoded through the juxtaposition and combination of words (including those in the titles), images, and objects, as well as through all of the relationships and associations that develop as a result of Ruscha's colors, typestyles, substances and repetition of imagery.

Titles have played an equally integral, if not more important, role in a number of Ruscha's recent "silhouette" paintings in which grainy, black-and-white

images resembling enlarged film stills fill his canvases. [86] Like his early paintings of objects, many of these works are void of words except in their titles; however, here Ruscha seems to have "deleted" the words from his canvases and replaced them with black or white rectangular spaces or boxes. This elimination can be considered in two ways -- the covering over of words that were once present in the image, or the leaving open of a space for words that have not yet been brought to the canvas. In either scenario words are not completely absent from these works: given his career-long engagement with words, such implication is enough to convey their presence. The role of words in these "silhouette" works is reinforced by the way the word or words in the title "fit" diagrammatically into the respective rectangular spaces on the canvases. For example, in *Drugs, Hardware, Barber, Video* (1987) four white rectangular boxes are superimposed over the dark shadow of a child's swing. These blocks, which function as indices of "wordness", are the relative lengths of the consecutive words found in the title.

In *Man, Wife* (1987), also a "silhouette" work, two

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[86] For a discussion of this work, see Christopher Knight "Against Type: The Silhouette Paintings of Edward Ruscha," Parkett 18 (1988): 82-95.

identical ships sail side-by-side into the distance; they are rendered with perspectival accuracy such that the closer ship is larger than the ship further in the horizon. In the skyline above them Ruscha placed two white, rectangular blocks that seem to pose as labels: into them the words in the title -- "man", "wife" -- appear to "fit". While these two boxes act as the representations of words, they also demonstrate yet another way Ruscha breaks down the borders between words, images, objects, and the codes that govern these forms of representation. With the same sense of perspectivalism that he paints the two ships, he depicts the block above the closer ship larger than the one above the ship further in the distance. As a result, these two indices of "wordness" also appear to be sailing into the horizon, suggesting that words can follow the conditions of figurative representation typically reserved for images and objects.

With *Man, Wife* Ruscha continues to challenge the "standards" governing visual and verbal representation, moving freely between codes and sign systems to create work that is fully interdiscursive. Like the Cubists who broke with accepted art historical traditions at the beginning of the twentieth century by bringing words into visual art, since the late 1950s Ruscha has taken steps

over the visual/verbal "borderline" inscribed by Greenbergian modernism. However, by also mixing visual and semiotic theories, his combinations of words, images and objects take these elements to new levels of signification.

All of the works I have discussed in this chapter, which represent but a small part of Ruscha's creative output, confirm that his art is highly concerned with meaning -- both visual and linguistic -- and the way it is produced via various ways of signification. Throughout his career he has placed words on canvases and images in books, examining the ways both words and images look, as well as the ways they mean. He has turned words into images and into objects, and turned images and objects into words. He has depicted words visually and figuratively, and depicted both images and objects linguistically and syntactically. In each of his word-works Ruscha demonstrates that whether painted, drawn, or spilled on canvas words function as signs and follow the principles of semiotics Saussure thought to be reserved for spoken words.

As exemplified by the series *News, Mews, Pews, Brews, Stews, Dues*, Ruscha confirms that whether signs are written, painted, or spoken their meaning is created through difference(s) from other signs within an overall

language system. In Chapter 3 I will continue to explore the relationship between the spoken and painted word in Ruscha's work, an important -- yet often overlooked -- component of his visual language. As I have demonstrated so far and will continue to do in the next chapter, Ruscha does not illustrate existing visual, linguistic, and semiotic theories, but rather creates a theory of visual language uniquely his own. This is true of all of the artists I will discuss in this study: their work serves as the basis of a much needed theory of visual language.

Chapter 3
No End to the Things Made out of Human Talk

> Noisy images abound.... There are breaking pencils, glasses shattering, explosions of musical notation; there are paintings like VASELINE and PRESSURES, whose text stretches from edge to edge across the center of the canvas like the "buzz-line" on an audio-spectrograph, and drawings like EXHIBITION OF SLEEPERS and EXHIBITION OF CROONERS, across which fuzzy white lines describe ascending and descending arcs alluding to the rising and falling inflections of snoozing and crooning; there are works like HONK and SCREAM, with graphic text distorted to create a kind of visual onomatopoeia, and others with the text altered to convey qualities of speech -- like the disingenuous rising inflection inferred by the rising angles of LISTEN, I'D LIKE TO HELP OUT, BUT, or the plaintive note struck in SHE DIDN'T HAVE TO DO THAT by the distortion of "that" and the medium (blood), or the passionate clamor imagined by the crowded text and Latin chromatics of SCREAMING IN SPANISH. [87]

I was sitting in a gallery somewhere talking to a friend and flipping through GUACAMOLE AIRLINES AND OTHER DRAWINGS.

"Ruscha is so weird!" I said upon reaching page sixty-seven, "SHE SURE KNEW HER DEVOTIONALS! What's <u>that</u> about?"

But having said it, and having heard myself, I knew it was the clandestine congruence disguised by the different spellings of sh ("she [sh], "sure" [su] and "devotionals [tion]). This raised the question of <u>how</u> she knew her devotionals: By sight? By sound? By heart? And this called to mind yet a fourth spelling of <u>sh</u> [sch] in the artist's name; the disjunction between sight and sound was non-standard enough that he had seen fit to phoneticize it (rew-Shay) on his "business cards" of "Eddie Russia" -- reflecting its most common mispronunciation (and yet a fifth spelling [ss] of <u>sh</u>). Which called to mind his early painting, <u>Su</u>. Was it pronounced "shh" as in "quiet please"?

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[87] Hickey 1988: 19-32.

> The phonetic thing to do at this point would have been to call Pete Schjeldahl [schj!], but instead I began listening more carefully to what I was looking at. [88]

As Hickey suggests in the above passages, Ruscha is invested not only in the way(s) words look, but also in the way(s) they sound. Using a number of strategies including "graphic text distorted to create a kind of visual onomatopoeia," rhyme schemes, and phrases that seem conversational, he embeds images with sounds and creates a unique form of visual noise. As a result one must look as well as listen, see as well as hear what Ruscha is doing, for this is where the significance of his art often lies. [89]

Focusing on the way(s) words sound, Ruscha has signified the act of pronunciation in a number of works that depict individual voices. One can imagine someone

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[88] Hickey 1988: 29.

[89] While the above passages demonstrate that the idea of sound in Ruscha's work is not a new idea, Hickey's analysis of Ruscha's audible world is limited in that it is not fully connected to the artist's treatment of words as images. In this chapter I will take Hickey's argument a step further by suggesting the theoretical implications of Ruscha's interest in the way words sound, and the importance of sound in contemporary art.

Yve-Alain Bois has also investigated the topic of "noise" in Ruscha's work, but his analysis focuses on the idea of "noise as refuse", or an excess of information within Ruscha's images; in other words, "noise" in the sense used in information theory. Bois 1993: 8-15.

announcing "She didn't have to do that," explaining "Listen, I'd like to help out, but," and declaring "Now then, as I was about to say...," all phrases that appear painted on canvas in works by the same titles. [90] In other works he has depicted the types of chatter one overhears in passing or, more accurately, mishears: "Honey pass me the can of Nu-Smell please," "I don't want no retrospective," and "Honey, I twisted through more damn traffic today" are reminiscent of the type of verbal nonsense that results from hearing something out of context. [91] These works represent pictures of talk, indices of conversations had by others, snippets of audible speech preserved in paint.

As Hickey realized with *Guacamole Airlines*, when viewers read Ruscha's words and phrases aloud, the (words as) images are activated on an acoustic level. It is here that rhymes and alliteration emerge and Ruscha's works develop audio, as well as visual, qualities. However, even without being read aloud, many of Ruscha's works are endowed with tonal qualities: his words can be heard

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[90] *She Didn't Have to Do That* (1974), *Listen, I'd Like to Help out, But* (1973), and *Now Then, as I Was about to Say...*(1973).

[91] These phrases appear in works by the same titles: *Honey Pass Me the can of Nu-Smell Please* (1980), *I Dont Want No Retro Spective* (1979), *Honey, I Twisted through More Damn Traffic Today* (1977).

whether they are read "aloud" or "silently" to oneself. This raises an important question: where do such non-vocalized sounds come from?

Jean Francois Lyotard's reflection on the conceptual relation between writing and reading can be used as a first step towards answering this question. In Lyotard's introduction to *The Lyotard Reader*, he suggests the following:

> They say that anyone who writes -- an *écrivant* or, more rarely, an *écrivain* -- is *his/her own first reader*. I've been known to say so myself. It can be argued that reading has priority or primacy over writing. It seems to be a coherent argument. You cannot write without reading what you have written. Of course you cannot write without rereading, but first you have to read what you are writing. Of course you hear yourself writing. Even if you try not to listen to yourself. [92]

Though Lyotard stops short of suggesting that one speaks or hears what one reads, following his logic it can be argued that as Ruscha paints (writes) he both reads and hears himself painting (writing). But in order for him to have heard himself it stands to reason that, in the process of reading, he must have spoken. Whether aloud or within his own mind, Ruscha "speaks" as he paints, and in doing so sets off the signs that become his images. Through the act of painting words, the processes of

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[92] Jean-Francois Lyotard The Lyotard Reader ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Blackwell 1989) vi.

writing, reading, speaking, and hearing become conjoined activities within the creative process.

By uniting these acts into a single image, Ruscha demonstrates that we hear (and therefore speak) what we read; thus, in the case of his paintings, it can be said that we as viewers hear images, whether or not we read his words aloud. Through his work it can be inferred that speech is embedded within all writing -- the audible component of the graphic text. Like Derrida, who rejected the dominance of speech over writing, Ruscha succeeds at overturning the speech-writing hierarchy according to which speech is the original and writing a derivative and always faulty record of it. While Derrida achieved this through a complicated argument in which the former also becomes an inscription, a term typically associated with the graphic text, [93] Ruscha demonstrates that audio and visual experiences of his paintings are not only linked but interdependent. But even more than subverting this hierarchical relationship, Ruscha complicates the speech-writing paradigm by implying that speech -- and more generally noise -- may be visual (i.e. written, painted, graphically inscribed) and that visual inscriptions are embedded with speech and are subject to

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[93] Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974).

the interpretive process of pronunciation.

So far, this analysis accounts for one theoretical level of hearing involved in Ruscha's work -- specifically, that of the artist in the process of making his visual works. On a more practical level, however, it is important to note that subsequent viewers/readers also hear sounds as they interact with the words and images on Ruscha's canvases. Like Hickey did when he read the phrase "She sure knew her devotionals," individuals hear their own voices echoing as they read Ruscha's word-works and discover meanings not readably apparent through looking alone. In addition to hearing themselves read, however, Ruscha's audiences are also privy to a trace of his voice embedded in the text. Essentially, his "voice" is couched within the painted text, resurrected by the viewer who reads, speaks, hears, and in turn interprets the work.

Ruscha may have been alluding to these multiple voices within the process of viewing, reading, and hearing his paintings in *Pontiac Catalinas?* (1976). Here he painted the phrase "He walks into a meeting hall full of workers and yells out 'O.K. What is it you guys want, Pontiac Catalinas?'" in pastel on paper. In addition to the "voices" of Ruscha and the viewer, there are two others present in this image -- one that asks the strange

question "O.K. What is it you guys want, Pontiac Catalinas?" and a second that recounts overhearing it. One voice is embedded within the other, signaled by Ruscha's use of two sets of quotation marks. Ruscha's works, such as *Listen, I'd Like to Help out, But* and *Pontiac Catalinas?*, make reference to what Saussure described as parole -- the individual utterances and speech acts that form the basis of human communication. Parole can be differentiated from what Saussure defined as langue, the overall language structure that allows for the utterances. According to Saussure, "Language is not a function of the speaker; it is a product that is passively assimilated by the individual.... Speaking, on the contrary, is an individual act. It is wilful and intellectual." [94]

If *Pontiac Catalinas?* is a visual example or index pointing to parole, then *No End to the Things Made Out of Human Talk* (1977), one of Ruscha's lesser-known paintings, might be considered a metaphor for langue. In this work he returned to his thematic use of fire, but unlike *Burning Gas Station, Norms, La Cienega, on Fire* and *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire*, flames do not destroy public buildings; rather they are contained

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[94] Saussure 14.

within a brick fireplace and part of a seemingly domestic setting. Here fire functions as an energy source: when filled with language (or "human talk") this hearth can produce an endless number of words and phrases as potential subjects for Ruscha's canvases -- or an endless amount of "noise". While we might expect to find Ruscha's warm fire and "human talk" within a cozy bourgeois setting, he instead depicts an austere room devoid of human interaction, perhaps a critique of the lack of humanism -- specifically interpersonal contact and conversation -- in our increasingly fragmented world of sound-bites.

It is significant that *No End to the Things Made Out of Human Talk* does not include words other than those in its title: here Ruscha does not present an individual utterance, but rather a visual structure that encapsulates his work with words. It also is significant that this is one of the rare instances where Ruscha's visual imagery has, to date, been unique. Neither the brick fireplace, nor the phrase in the title has been reused in his work, a uniqueness that strongly aligns this painting with the singular system or structure that generates the production of signs, rather than the

endless utterances created by it. [95] Although Ruscha seems to be aligned here with Saussure in terms of his differentiation of langue from parole, as I suggested in Chapter 2 there are also instances where Ruscha's work can be seen as a critique of Saussurean linguistics. Specifically, the above analysis of the speech involved in Ruscha's work contradicts Saussure's problematic separation of speech from writing: by embedding speech -- be in theoretical or practical -- within many of his images, Ruscha insures that these two traditionally opposed forms of communication are united.

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[95] Following another language theory, Hickey has suggested that the title of this work "amounts to a literary recasting of Noam Chomsky's first principle of transformational grammar: an infinite number of sentences can be generated from a finite number of words which undergo a finite number of transformations of order." Applying this to Ruscha's oeuvre, Hickey notes "the visual language of Ruscha's painting developed grammatically. There were, in the paintings after 1969, a finite number of iconic images, including words, whose relationships were transformed according to four or five basic formal strategies, from paintings to drawings to prints, from words to images to literal substances, through a number of "significant" spatial formats." Hickey 1982: 24. In the same way Ruscha transformed the Saussurean principle of difference to make sense in the visual arena, Hickey suggests that Ruscha displaces notions of the infiniteness of language and the transformational nature of grammar onto image production.

In addition to Ruscha's investigation of the way words sound, he has also focused on the ways sounds look. Since early on in his career, he has been depicting visual icons of particular sounds -- not merely presenting referents, but imagining the way sounds might look and representing their noises visually. [96] Two paintings entitled *Lisp* (both 1968) are examples of this audio-visual quality in his painting. In each the word "lisp" is depicted as an image of the noise made when one lisps, a visual icon of the sound associated with the referent. In one, lower case script letters are surrounded by small dots resembling spit droplets: it is as if the image were produced by the very pronunciation of the word. In the other, "lisp" is presented as a series of italicized capital letters that appear to slide -- or lisp -- from left to right across the canvas. In both works the letters "i" and "s" are blurred together -- a visual "slur", an icon of both the concept and the sound of a "lisp", essentially a slip of the lips. Notably, if the letters that spell "lisp" are re-arranged, the result could be either the word "slip" or "lips". Coincidence? With Ruscha such coincidence is never accidental, but rather the result of his calculated

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[96] Bois argues the opposite: that in these early works Ruscha merely named noise. Bois 1993: 8.

meditation on and insight into the way words look and sound.

In addition to verbalizing images and visualizing sounds in his work, Ruscha has also made reference to noise in a more generalized sense. In *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western* (1963), for example, he combined an image of the word "NOISE" with images of a pencil, a broken pencil, and a comic book entitled *Popular Western*. As with most of his paintings, the first question that comes to mind is: what do these elements have to do with one another? Livet offers the following possibility for uniting these components through syntax into a visual "sentence":

> On a primary level, the word "noise" seems to refer simply to the noise made by breaking the pencil, but the juxtaposition of the seemingly disparate elements, like the images in a Symbolist sonnet, generates a whole battery of interpretive questions.
>
> Who broke the pencil?
>
> What do pencils have to do with the cheap Western?
>
> Why does the artist choose to emphasize the noise of a broken pencil?
>
> Is it only to make the image of the broken pencil more immediate -- a breaking pencil?
>
> It doesn't really matter, of course, since the more familiar you become with the work, the more mysterious it becomes, the more questions you find to ask, and the fewer answers you find. [97]

Like all of Ruscha's works, what *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western* means is purely speculative and in

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[97] Livet 15.

the end "doesn't really matter". Rather, how these heterogeneous elements acquire meaning -- how they are encoded and decoded as parts of visual sentences, and how they "hang together" -- is more important in the scope of understanding his visual "grammar".

In the case of *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western,* "NOISE", depicted in red capital letters at the top of the canvas, appears to be a three-dimensional block shaped like the word "noise" -- or, an image of an object shaped like a word. Like the comic book at the bottom of the canvas and the two pencils toward the center, the word appears to have the material properties of an object. However, looking closer, these four elements also appear to be weightless. The individual letters that make up the word "NOISE" seem to be the effect of projections by five different spotlights shaped like the letters "N" "O" "I" "S" and "E", and the comic book and pencils appear to be images of objects suspended by invisible threads that allow them to float against the solid blue background rather than objects with material properties as first assumed. From this perspective these elements are not tangible, but immaterial and fleeting. It is as if (the) "NOISE" would vanish instantly if the spotlights were turned off, and the comic book and pencils would float off of the canvas if they were not

anchored down. In this sense, "noise" is not only something Ruscha could turn on and off with the flick of a switch like spotlights from a projector; it is also the very thing that illuminates the image and holds the elements in it together. Thus, noise serves as a metaphor for Ruscha's strange and often discordant combinations of audio and visual signs.

Once we as viewers are turned on to the audio component of Ruscha's work -- once we look and listen closely to his words and see as well as hear the images he depicts -- we are more apt to see and hear the various noise(s) that have been present throughout his visual practice. Ruscha's move toward expanding existing visual and linguistic theories, and toward creating a form of visual analysis that accounts for words, images and sounds came at a time when artists began to embrace critical theory and investigate the nature of representation. It also came at the time that, as I have mentioned, Owens identified as being marked by an "eruption of language into the aesthetic field," [98] which he associated with the advent of postmodernism. Although Ruscha is not one of the artists Owens discusses in his analysis (his paintings are usually framed by Pop art

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[98] Owens 44.

rather than the shift towards postmodernism), his work clearly demonstrates an "eruption" of language -- be it visual, verbal, spoken, painted, read, heard, or overheard -- into visual art. [99] His multi-faceted attention to the endless visual and verbal qualities of words, images and objects takes his art -- and analysis of it -- to a new level of visual semiotics in which Saussurean hierarchies and separations break down.

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Although vastly different from Ruscha's work in form and content, tone and context, Jenny Holzer's work has been framed within the visual-verbal trajectory because of her use of words in art. For nearly the past two decades Holzer has used language to develop a seemingly inexhaustible number of written statements and essays which are grouped together in series: *Truisms* (1977-79),

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[99] Ironically, it is Ruscha's books, which typically do not include words, that tend to be included in analyses of the shift in art practices towards postmodernism. Though his books have been credited with influencing the development of the artists' book category, as I have demonstrated the paintings nonetheless break with the purity of modernity by exploring visual and verbal theories of signification.

Inflammatory Essays (1979-1982), *The Living Series* (1980), *the Survival Series* (1982), *Under a Rock* (1986), *Laments* (1988-89), *Lustmord* (1993-94). Her words have appeared in a variety of non-traditional artistic forms, including street posters and adhesive stickers, bronze and enamel plaques, electronic signs and large-scale message boards, baseball caps and pencils. Although her work has, in the past ten years, been shown in galleries and museums, it is most commonly identified as public art.

Unlike Ruscha's work, which is situated historically at the intersection of Abstract Expressionism and Pop art and plays off linguistic and visual theories, Holzer's work is socio-political in nature. It emerged during the 1980s, during the developments of what are known as "appropriation" or "postmodern art" and "feminist art." Along with work by artists such as Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince, Holzer's texts became popular for using the repository of media-generated themes and imagery to call attention to and criticize contemporary culture. Though Holzer's work is not appropriative in the strict sense of the term -- images quoted from their original sources and recontextualized through photographic reproduction within visual art -- it nonetheless employs vehicles of media culture to comment upon aspects of

contemporary art and life. In addition, Holzer's work also developed at a time when a second generation of feminist artists, including Kruger and Mary Kelly, began using words with, in, and/or as visual images to comment on and subvert traditional representations of women. [100]

Despite these differences between Ruscha's and Holzer's artistic practices, what their works most clearly have in common is an underlying attention to sound. And like the acoustic component in Ruscha's paintings, sound -- both actual and metaphoric -- in Holzer's work similarly has been overlooked. Her texts, each set with a different tone and theme, deliver messages from divergent viewpoints and through a range of "voices". [101] She has suggested that the "reason [she] wrote from every point of view -- Far Left, Far Right, common-sense, lunatic -- was that [she] thought it was a more accurate way of portraying people's beliefs, and maybe a better way than always having didactic or dogmatic stuff." [102] As the texts are viewed and read

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[100] I will discuss these frames and their intersection in detail in Chapter 4.

[101] Michael Auping, "Reading Holzer or Speaking in Tongues,' The Venice Installation (Buffalo: The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1991) 13.

[102] J.B. Flynn [interview], The Progressive [Madison, WI] April 1993: 30.

the voices embedded within them intermingle and play off one another, creating a cacophonous -- almost schizophrenic -- experience that is at once visual and acoustic. These points of view have included an omniscient, authoritative tone not unlike that of the government which establishes and reinforces societal norms and values; what seems to be Holzer's perspective as artist, woman, philosopher, street-wise reader of signs, and mother; and the voices of her viewers/readers who react to and interact with her written texts.

While the above list reflects but a few of the view points identifiable within Holzer's body of work, all of them are present in her earliest series of statements entitled *Truisms*. This project consisted of approximately 275 proverbial phrases, which first appeared in sets of 40-60, alphabetically listed and printed in black type on white posters. [103] Originally these posters were hung anonymously on the streets of New York, "pasted on

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[103] According to Diane Waldman, "while every poster related to the rest, each was largely self-contained." By the same token, while every statement related to the rest, each one was self-contained. As Holzer expanded upon her display methods, the *Truisms* appeared -- both individually and as parts of alphabetical listings -- in a number of presentational forms including t-shirts, postcards, and electronic message boards. The complete set of *Truisms* -- along with Holzer's next set of writings, *Inflammatory Essays* -- were also published in English, French, Spanish and German by the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

buildings, walls and fences ... sharing space with advertising posters, political broadsides and record advertisements." [104] Circulating within this context, Holzer's words adopted the feel of slogans and other catchy media phrases. However, despite their resemblance and proximity to commercial messages, these statements were not advertisements for products, goods or services, but rather pronouncements of social ideals, values, standards, and myths.

Holzer herself has described the *Truisms* -- which include A SENSE OF TIMING IS THE MARK OF GENIUS, BEING HAPPY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANYTHING ELSE, and CHILDREN ARE THE HOPE OF THE FUTURE -- as "the Great Ideas of the Western world in a nutshell." [105] Like proverbs, cliches, and such familiar kernels of cultural wisdom as HASTE MAKES WASTE and THE EARLY BIRD ALWAYS CATCHES THE WORM, the *Truisms* posed as if they were official and authorless. They were "presented as full-blown facts, with no clue as to who the author of these messages might be, nor whether they were true or false, official or subversive, indeed whether they were advertisements or

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[104] Auping 18.

[105] Diane Waldman, Jenny Holzer (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989) 10.

art works." [106] And yet, despite the fact that they seemed to be universal beliefs and sayings appropriated from the world at large, these statements were, in fact, written by Holzer. [107] As she has described them, they were her "attempt to reformulate important statements by simplifying them, ... to make 'the big issues in culture intelligible as public art.'" [108]

In order to communicate such "Great Ideas" to a wide audience, Holzer used language that was accessible in terms of its content and tone: her concepts were familiar, her words were clear, and her approach was straightforward. [109] Furthermore, her visual style was uncluttered, her poster format inviting, and her street locations accessible -- all of which contributed to the seamless acceptance of her work into the landscape of everyday city life. In a sense, the *Truisms* became part of the background noise of the streets on which they appeared, part of the media clutter that bombards us on a daily basis. However, like most public art, these posters

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[106] Simon 80.

[107] Simon 81.

[108] Waldman 10.

[109] It has often been suggested that Holzer's midwestern roots are responsible for the simplicity and clarity of her language. Simon 82.

had a "double life": most frequently posted in Soho, they were rooted within the context of the art world. As a result, her audiences were comprised of a mixture of unknowing passers-by and knowledgeable art-world viewers. [110]

Joan Simon has suggested that "[a]ppearing as they did in New York's Soho, a residential neighborhood founded by artists and in the '70s being rebuilt by them, it seemed safe to assume these posters were art works, or at least artist-generated statements. During the '70s downtown ambience of street works and street politics, the *Truisms* needed no explanation, either as art or politics." [111] Holzer was working alongside other artists "who, like her, saw the streets as one of the more important targets and vehicles for ... highly charged, social realist imagery." [112]. For artists such as Keith Haring and Peter Nadin, for example, city streets -- and especially those in Soho -- became spaces in which to "speak" about such politicized topics as race, class, and gender relations, and such everyday social concerns as food, shelter, poverty, and

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[110] Adding to Holzer's art-world positioning of the *Truisms* was their installation in such alternative New York art venues as Franklin Furnace, Broadway Windows, Fashion Moda, and Printed Matter.

[111] Simon 80.

[112] Auping 14-18.

homelessness.

Thus the *Truisms*, which also include MONEY CREATES TASTE, PEOPLE WHO DON'T WORK WITH THEIR HANDS ARE PARASITES, THINKING TOO MUCH CAN ONLY CAUSE PROBLEMS, and ABUSE OF POWER COMES AS NO SURPRISE, are not neutral records of generalized ideas. Rather they seem to reflect or interact with Holzer's view of life, or what she has called her "version of everything right or wrong with the world." [113] Although Holzer denies that the voice in her writing is identifiable as that of a woman[114], many of the *Truisms* -- including ROMANTIC LOVE WAS INVENTED TO MANIPULATE WOMEN, RAISE BOYS AND GIRLS THE SAME, and SEX DIFFERENCES ARE HERE TO STAY -- seem to be particularly feminist in tone. In the same way that viewers/readers of Ruscha's work are apt to hear his voice in his painted phrases, it is tempting to attribute the *Truisms*, or statements in any of the other series, to Holzer herself and suggest that they reflect her own point-of-view as an artist, a woman, and a critic of dominant culture. As Roland Barthes pointed out in his 1968 text entitled "The Death of the Author," "capitalist ideology ... has attached the greatest importance to the

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[113] Bruce Ferguson, "Wordsmith: An Interview with Jenny Holzer," Jenny Holzer: Signs 67.

[114] Ferguson 72-3. See also Simon 82.

'person' of the author.... The *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* 'confiding' in us." [115]

However, as Barthes demonstrated in his analysis of a passage of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, [116] it is impossible to pinpoint whose voice is embedded within such a text. Barthes proposed that

> a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this

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[115] Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," Image - Music - Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1977) 143.

[116] In his story *Sarrasine* Balzac, describing a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: 'This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.' Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas of femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of original. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. Barthes 1977: 143.

> destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. [117]

Following this logic, the voices in Holzer's statements cannot be attributed to the artist herself but rather to her readers. In this sense, her work is part of the shift in focus from the primacy of an autonomous author/artist-as-creator to the process by which the reader/viewer experiences and (in)forms a text.

For Holzer, as for Ruscha, the idea of the reader-as-focalizer is not merely a theoretical position, but an actual role played out before the work. As I suggested earlier in this chapter, in front of Ruscha's work the viewer becomes a reader, sounding out the meaning of his words in order to make sense of his images. Similarly, since the earliest postings of the *Truisms* viewers/readers have tended to respond to Holzer's statements directly on the posters. Going through her alphabetical listings line-by-line, viewer/readers consider each "mock-cliche" and evaluate it as true or false based on their own level of agreement or disagreement. As a way of voicing their opinions, individuals have edited her words and replaced them with

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[117] Barthes 1977: 148.

ones thought to be more suitable. Likewise, entire statements have been crossed out in protest to the ideas they reflect. As Michael Auping suggested, "Holzer's public art is meant not to decorate the urban landscape but rather to elicit and provoke public discourse." [118] Like viewers of Ruscha's art, whose associations with his words and images form the meanings of his work, respondents to the *Truisms* not only interpret her statements but also create (author) their own art through the use of their voices.

In one of Holzer's most recent projects, *Please Change Beliefs*, she has put her texts on the internet, thereby soliciting direct participation from viewers/readers. [119] Her adoption of this newly-emerging medium not only expands audiences for her art, but also places her texts in a situation that is inherently interactive and encourages the voicing and co-mingling of thoughts and opinions. In this format the *Truisms* have become the basis of a "cyber-conversation", something around which to speak one's mind. (The idea of voice, and more specifically, of speaking is embedded within the language of cyber-communication, in which the

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[118] Auping 18.

[119] http://adaweb.com/adaweb/context/artists/holzer/holzer1.html

use of capital letters signifies "screaming".) On-line participants are invited to select a *Truisms* and alter it to suit their own tastes -- to literally change the beliefs that appear before them. By turning her readers into writers, Holzer confirms Barthes' notion that the voice of the text rests with the reader. In giving power to the individual who interprets her *Truisms*, Holzer's art rests squarely within the realm of postmodern theory: it is a clear example of the shift from the primacy of the author toward the power of the voice of the reader.

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Even before cyber-space became a popular venue for artists to present their work, Holzer's attention to the intermingling of voices and her interest in viewer/reader participation were fundamental aspects of her work. In her large-scale, multi-media exhibition for the American Pavilion of the 1990 Venice Biennale [120] Holzer combined two visual formats that have been standard parts of her

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[120] Holzer was the first woman artist chosen to represent the United States at the Biennale, and for her installation she won the prestigious *Leone d'oro* prize.

oeuvre since their inception in the early and mid-1980s respectively: LED (light-emitting diode) message boards, and engraved stone, marble, and granite benches. This project, perhaps Holzer's most successful to date, demonstrates the extent to which her work is not "just" written texts: it is testimony to the fact that her writing must be interacted with and experienced as part of specific environments in order to understand the significance of her words as art.

Holzer's *Venice Installation*, as it was reinstalled at the Walker Art Center, [121] filled three galleries, each with a distinct atmosphere and tone. The first consisted of horizontal LED signs boards stretched across three walls; each was programmed with selections from *Truisms*, *Inflammatory Essays*, *The Living Series*, *The Survival Series*, *Under a Rock*, *Laments*, and *The Child Text*. These texts -- displayed in five languages, three colors (red, yellow, green), and a multitude of typestyles -- moved rapidly from left to right across the boards, blinking and alternating at a frantic speed. Her words lit the entire room in a neon glow.

Holzer's use of this electronic format, which has

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[121] The *Venice Installation* as it appeared at the 1990 Biennale formed the core of an exhibition, organized by Michael Auping, which travelled to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, MN in 1991.

come to be emblematic of her visual style, began in 1982 with the display of a selection of the *Truisms* on the spectacolor board in Times Square (NYC). [122] By placing her work in this highly travelled and visible outdoor location -- and later in such equally public venues as the message board in Candlestick Park and at airport baggage-claim carrousels -- she was able to reach an exponentially larger and more general audience than she was with her street posters. [123] However, outside the context of Soho and other art-identified spaces, Holzer's texts were not positioned by the alternative and politically-charged contexts that had once surrounded them: in the more public venue of Times Square, her "slogans" had to fight for air time, recognition, and impact amongst the visual noise and media clutter of traditional advertisements for consumer goods and services.

But whether in a museum or on the street, in this

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[122] This project was sponsored by Public Art Fund.

[123] Between the posters and the LED signs, Holzer tried her hand at printing her work on stickers, placed in locations including public pay phones, and presenting her work on enamel plaques, which were placed on locations including building entrance ways. While these interventions received critical attention within the art world, it was with her adoption of the electronic format that her work became a sudden media spectacle embraced by the popular press as well as art critics.

format Holzer's messages are fleeting and impermanent; more so than on printed posters her individual statements could be seen or missed in the blink of an eye. In the *Venice Installation* words sped across the walls, forming patterns of blinking shapes and colors that were often visually indecipherable because of the speed with which they moved. Here most of her words were also literally unreadable because they appeared in multiple foreign languages. Viewers/readers were bombarded by light and color, words and languages, a media blitz on the level of Las Vegas casinos. After spending some time concentrating solely on the English lines, I was able to decipher a few ranting statements: ... DON'T BE NICE TO ME ... I'VE BEEN PLANNING WHILE YOU'VE BEEN PLAYING ... The atmosphere of this first gallery of the installation was tense and chaotic, and -- despite being literally silent -- the space screamed. The only relief from the blinding pitch came when, periodically, all of the messages ended simultaneously and the room would go to black. Like Ruscha's *Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western*, in which the visual noise was associated with the projection of spot lights, in this gallery Holzer's ranting was audible only so long as the LED boards were illuminated.

The second and main gallery in the Walker's exhibition of the *Venice Installation* also consisted of

selections from *Truisms*, *Inflammatory Essays*, *The Living Series*, *The Survival Series*, *Under a Rock*, *Laments*, and *The Child Text*; however, the tone of this section was considerably different. Here Holzer's words were not only programmed onto LED message boards, mounted less than one foot from the ceiling of all four walls, but also engraved into granite benches that lined the perimeter of the rectangular gallery. With this installation Holzer provided a seat from which to contemplate her words as they circled the room overhead. Although more calm than the previous gallery, this space was too pitched with anxiety, fueled by the desire to read all of the texts and the realization of the futility of the attempt to do so. Faster than humanly possible to read, Holzer's electronic messages emerged from one corner of the gallery, traversed the room, and then -- upon returning to their starting point -- vanished ... THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR WILL BE A SECRET ... YOU ARE CAUGHT THINKING ABOUT KILLING ANYONE YOU WANT ... Because of the speed at which these texts progressed and the often obscured typestyles in which they appeared, it was impossible to take in each and every word; the texts were fleeting and the experience -- although contemplative -- was frustrating.

The "catch-as-catch-can" task imposed by these

electronic texts was in direct contrast to the still, steady permanence of the adjacent stone benches. By inscribing texts from the *Living Series*, such as MOST PEOPLE ARE BUILDING HIDING PLACES IN THEIR HOMES, SMALL REFUGES THAT ARE UNDETECTABLE EXCEPT BY SOPHISTICATED DEVICES, on them Holzer encouraged viewers to sit down, relax, and consider the parables of modern life. Holzer began engraving her texts into marble, stone and granite benches in 1986, and one of their first public displays was in an installation at the 60th Street entrance to Central Park in Manhattan. There she combined four white marble benches, whose tops were inscribed with selections from the *Truisms*, with four smaller black granite benches, whose sides were engraved with selections from her then new writing series entitled *Under a Rock*. These new texts were substantially longer than the *Truisms* and, by using more words, Holzer had the opportunity to be more descriptive. For example:

> CRACK THE PELVIS SO SHE LIES RIGHT. THIS IS A MISTAKE. WHEN SHE DIES YOU CANNOT REPEAT THE ACT. THE BONES WILL NOT GROW TOGETHER AGAIN AND THE PERSONALITY WILL NOT COME BACK. SHE IS GOING TO SINK DEEP INTO THE MOSS TO GET WHITE AND LIGHTER. SHE IS UNRESPONSIVE TO BEGGING AND SELF-ABSORBED.

Here a woman's brutal and painful death is poetically implied, yet the specifics of her murder are vague. Waldman suggests that in these texts "a commentator is

watching horrific events and describing them as they happen in a relative objective tone" [124]; the voice is no longer identified as that of dominant culture, but rather of a shocked on-looker, a witness to a brutal crime against a woman. [125] Because of the placement of the benches at the entrance to Central Park, Holzer may have been alluding to the many acts of violence against women that have occurred in that public space. Her use of benches as a vehicle for displaying these texts may also be an allusion to tombstones, likewise made of stone and inscribed, and to graves on which people similarly sit in contemplation and memorial. This notion is supported by Holzer's use of "Government Style" typeface, a font developed by the War Department in the 1930s and still used today by the Veterans' Administration on all its headstones and markers. Holzer's benches diverged from all that had come before, and especially from the LED signs: formally the stone, marble, and granite benches evoked the history of classical sculpture and monuments, where as the light signs mimic advertising and public service vehicles. Conceptually, the benches invite viewers/readers to partake in more in-depth contemplation

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[124] Waldman 11.

[125] Holzer returned to the theme of violence against women in the 1993-4 series entitled *Lustmord*.

of her words, here permanently incised, while her blinking electronic one-liners require full alertness and concentration from them. In stone her words are timeless and eternal, lethargic and unchanging, typically grieving or lamenting; in lights, by comparison, they are always noisy, and frequently ranting and raving -- inflamed in red neon, cautious in yellow, contemplative in slow-moving "hollowed-out" lettering, and outraged in quick-paced flashing graphics.

The third and final gallery of the *Venice Installation* was divided into two parts, the first of which housed Holzer's then recent *Child Text*. This room was illuminated by tri-color LED signs, installed vertically such that the texts programmed onto them ascended toward the ceiling and descended toward the floor. The glow from these electronic sign boards revealed an excerpt from the *Child Text*, which was engraved into a red marble tablet and laid into the floor. The atmosphere of this room was distinctly different from the other two, with a somber air reminiscent of a religious chamber. This text, which seems to be the most personal of Holzer's work, is simultaneously angry and solemnly mournful:

I AM INDIFFERENT TO MYSELF
BUT NOT TO MY CHILD.
I ALWAYS JUSTIFIED MY INACTIVITY
AND CARELESSNESS IN THE
FACE OF DANGER BECAUSE I WAS
SURE TO BE SOMEONE'S VICTIM.
I GRINNED AND LOITERED
IN GUILTY ANTICIPATION.
NOW I MUST BE HERE
TO WATCH HER.
I EXPERIMENT TO SEE IF
I CAN STAND HER PAIN.
I CANNOT,
I AM SLY AND DISHONEST
TALKING ABOUT WHY I SHOULD
BE LEFT ALIVE BUT
IT IS NOT THIS WAY WITH HER.
SHE MUST STAY WELL BECAUSE
HER MIND WILL OFFER NO
HIDING PLACE IF ILLNESS
OR VIOLENCE FINDS HER.
I WANT TO BE MORE THAN
HER CUSTODIAN AND A FRIEND
OF THE EXECUTIONER.
FUCK MYSELF AND FUCK ALL OF
YOU WHO WOULD HURT HER.

Composed just after her daughter's birth, it is difficult not to read a hint of autobiography into the text; however, Holzer has remarked: "it's not wholly autobiographical. It was based on my experience, but it's not a diary by any means. It's a more complete account of what a woman might feel as she tries to protect her child from everything from environmental disaster to bad government." [126] The tablet, like her benches, suggests a grave marker or monument in stone to one's life. Inscribed with *Child Text*, however, it reveals a

[126] Flynn 34.

lamenting, mournful glimpse of life at the end of the twentieth century. [127]

The other part of the third gallery was filled with white marble benches engraved with selections from *The Living Series*, including IT TAKES A WHILE BEFORE YOU CAN STEP OVER INERT BODIES AND GO AHEAD WITH WHAT YOU WERE TRYING TO DO. Placed in distinct rows, these benches created a cold and somber mausoleum-like ante-chamber, a final resting place for viewers on their journey through the exhibition. By combining the benches, tablet and LED boards together in the *Venice Installation*, Holzer seems to have been suggesting comparisons between life and death, light and dark, contemporary and classical, urgent and still, fleeting and permanent. As I will demonstrate, with such juxtapositions she also creates a metaphor for the relationship between modernism and postmodernism.

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[127] Waldman 12. In retrospect, Holzer's death theme and tone seemed to have already been developing with her presentation of texts from the *Living Series* on metal and enamel plaques. In light of her benches and her crypt-like installations, these plaques resemble memorial or grave markers.

When I saw Holzer's exhibition at the Walker Art Center, there was a group of grade-school children visiting the museum: upon arriving in the main (second) gallery, they began reading the electronic texts aloud word by word, statement by statement. Their voices not only echoed those embedded within the texts, but also added new points-of-view to the project. For example, they would frequently say "yes" or "no" as a sign of agreement or disagreement with the messages that flowed past them. What surprised me was the extent to which Holzer's language provoked dialogue -- how it encouraged these kids to read her work aloud, to interact with her words, and more specifically to make noise. What also surprised me was that even after they left the gallery, I continued to "hear voices" as I read the texts silently to myself. Whether or not anyone was actually speaking aloud, Holzer's texts created an audio experience not unlike those with Ruscha's paintings.

Coincidentally, that same day there was also a group of deaf adults viewing Holzer's exhibition; their presence immediately changed the tone of the installation from noisy to silent. These individuals could neither speak the texts aloud, nor hear them being spoken by others. Watching them tour the galleries I felt that, in some way, they were missing an important part of the work

-- the experience of pronouncing her texts and the noise that resulted from it. Regardless, they signed back and forth and, while I cannot be sure, they seemed to be communicating Holzer's texts to one another just as the kids had read them aloud to one another. Yet, while it seemed perfectly legitimate -- and even necessary -- for the children to pronounce Holzer's words, I could not think of any reason why these adults would sign them to one another exactly as they appeared in lights before them.

Suddenly it dawned on me that, like the kids, they were "speaking": in their own way, they too were making noise. Their sign language was no different than the kids' voices echoing in the installation, or the graffiti commentary inscribed on her street posters: these viewers were likewise interacting with the work and setting off discrete signs in the process. After some thought, it became clear to me that Holzer's art cannot be passively consumed by her audiences; rather, individual viewers/ readers must actively play the role of the senders of messages. Like viewers of Ruscha's works who bring meaning to his imagery by pronouncing his words and phrases, Holzer's audiences insert their voices into her texts and, as a result, transform them into visual signs. The kids and deaf adults intuitively recognized the need

to create noise in order to activate Holzer's art and, in doing so, moved it from the autonomy of modernity into the fragmented and interactive realm of postmodernism.

Through the juxtaposition of the electronic message boards and the stone work, Holzer set up a comparison between contemporary "signs" and classical monuments, between postmodern media culture and traditional sculptural ideals, between noise and silence. Her benches and tablet refer to art in its most pure form: starting with Romanticism and continuing throughout modernism, silence has been idealized as a source of purity and a condition for the occurrence of the sublime. [128] By filling the spaces around these traditional forms with "noise" -- the postmodern antidote to the sublime -- Holzer corrupts the traditional museum-as-temple, and its role as a elegy to classical purity and silent beauty. With the *Venice Installation* the museum was invaded by contemporary culture and all its impure urgency. Modernist culture was buried beneath Holzer's red marble tablet, monumentalized by its polished surfaces and memorialized by the cemetery-style lettering upon it.

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[128] This line of thought developed out of correspondence with Ernst van Alphen. See Ernst van Alphen, "Touching Death," Death and Representation eds. Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Goodwyn (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1993) 29-50.

What emerged victoriously from the ashes were the voices of today's culture in all their boisterous, colorful, media-wise glory.

Chapter 4
Framing Language

> "A frame is essentially constructed and therefore fragile: such would be the essence or truth of the frame." [129]

Along with the other art I have discussed so far, Barbara Kruger's and Louise Lawler's practices similarly have been framed by hybridity within the visual field. And like art by Ruscha, Weiner, Holzer, and others who use language, their work has been included in a number of museum and gallery exhibitions, panel discussions, books and lectures devoted to the topic of words and/or language in art. [130] Despite the differences in Kruger's and Lawler's agendas, both formal and political, their work is at the core of an interdisciplinary approach to contemporary art making that, as I have

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[129] Derrida 1987: 73.

[130] To list just a few of the recent exhibitions of words in art: "Modes of Address: Language in Art Since 1960," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1988; "Word/Image," Lehman College of Art Gallery, Bronx, NY, 1989; "Word as Image: American Art 1960-1990," Milwaukee Art Museum, 1990; "Rhetorical Image," The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1990; "Inquiries/Language in Art", Art Gallery of Ontario, 1990; "Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky-Homage an Stephane Malarme," Kunstmuseum Winterthur, Germany, 1992; and "L'art le mot," Le Musee d'Art Contemporain de Lyon, France, 1993.

discussed in Chapter 1, has come to be seen as an aesthetic category unto itself.

Although Kruger has developed a diversified creative strategy that includes roles as writer, critic, teacher, as well as visual artist, [131] she is most widely known for her art that juxtaposes "scavenged" images from anonymous media sources with pithy, often confrontational, texts. Since the late 1970s she has been appropriating black-and-white photographs, which she enlarges, crops, and manipulates before combining them with typeset phrases; she then photographs these visual/verbal combinations to create seamless photomontages, which are typically framed in red. Having worked as a graphic designer and as an editor for Conde Naste publications before becoming an artist, she is highly versed in the layering of words and images to create persuasive intertextual messages, and uses these skills to expose power relations within contemporary

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[131] According to Kruger: "I try to avoid a typical production of verticality; the refinement of a singular gesture which marks most 'professional' practices. I consider my work to be more horizontal in its construction: comprised of object-making activities, teaching, writing criticism, doing billboards and other public projects, sporadic curating and book publishing, and working on the boards of various exhibition venues.... I consider all of these activities to be part of my 'work.'" Anders Stephanson [interview], Flash Art (Oct. 1987): 59.

culture. Like Holzer, Kruger has installed her work throughout city streets on billboards, bus stops, and other public spaces; it has also appeared in magazines, on t-shirts and postcards, as well as in gallery and museum exhibitions.

Since the late 1970s Lawler likewise has combined photographic images with short texts, and like Kruger and Holzer her work has appeared in a variety of formats. However, while Holzer's visual texts and Kruger's photomontages possess a bold and immediately recognizable aesthetic identity, Lawler's word-and-image style is more evasive. To date her projects have most consistently taken the form of photographs -- hung in galleries or printed in art publications -- with accompanying captions. [132] Lawler's visual components typically represent works of art by other artists as they are exhibited in museums, galleries and private collections,

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[132] In addition to numerous exhibitions of such art which combines words and images, Lawler's work has served as "photo-essays" in such critical anthologies as Art After Modernism. They have recently appeared in Douglas Crimp's On the Museum's Ruins where there "are intended not simply to illustrate [his] ideas but to expand on and reorient them." According to Crimp, here her photographic contributions are of three kinds: photographs made expressly to illustrate [his] essays, already existing photographs appropriated for [his] essays, and photographic works made for the project but not connected to particular essays." Douglas Crimp, On the Museum's Ruins (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993): viii.

displayed in auction houses, and stored in storerooms. Her verbal components -- whose tone ranges from didactic to poetic -- provide frames for viewing not only her own practices, but also those works of art she captures as her subject matter. Lawler has also produced audio tapes and brochures, stationery, matchbooks and other objects that display her verbal queries and critiques of the art world and the values established within it.

In addition to the hybrid nature of Kruger's and Lawler's work with words and images, their practices also reveal hybridity on the level of the framing and analysis of contemporary art. As I mentioned in Chapter 3, Holzer's work emerged during and influenced the development of postmodern and feminist art practices in the late 1970s and 1980s. The same is true of Kruger's and Lawler's art: against the backdrop of these two contemporary perspectives, their work simultaneously investigates the relationship between photography and postmodernism, and examines representation as a site of power and gendered inequalities.

Although distinguishable, these frames, the artists identified within them, and the theoretical arguments associated with them often overlap. The fact that Kruger's and Lawler's work has been featured in both arenas demonstrates the complexity of their art and of

attempts to write contemporary art history. [133] The extent to which these frames overlap also, and more importantly, marks a shift in analysis away from the monolithic contextualization of autonomous art practices, toward the possibility of multiple frames -- historical, social, aesthetic, and theoretical -- that are not given, but constructed. However, despite the possibility of such a shift, these frames tend to be analyzed without reference to the next, or recognition of the agency involved in the author's construction. Thus the tendency to separate what is considered "appropriation" and "feminist" demonstrates that the history of contemporary art is written from isolated points of view. Similarly, the tendency to see such categorical distinctions as given or natural suggests that it is written without acknowledgement that writing about art is itself a form a framing. In this chapter I will examine Kruger's and Lawler's work in light of the above-mentioned frames, analyzing the extent to which these categories are interrelated and overturning the separation of that which is connected, both practically and theoretically.

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[133] It is interesting to note that Crimp chose to collaborate with Lawler who, as I have noted, "illustrates" his book, On the Museum's Ruins; Owens' posthumous anthology of writings, Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture, is "framed" by one of Kruger's works on the dustjacket.

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One of the most prevalent discussions of contemporary art in the last three decades has revolved around the changing status of photography and its relationship to what has been identified as postmodern art. In the mid- to late-1960s, photography was recognized as an integral part of visual culture and a key to developing theories of representation. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau has remarked,

> That photography should ... figure as a crucial term in postmodernism seems both logical and (at least retrospectively) inevitable. Virtually every critical and theoretical issue with which postmodernist art may be said to engage in one sense or another can be located within photography. Issues having to do with authorship, subjectivity, and uniqueness are built into the very nature of the photographic process itself; issues devolving on the simulacrum, the stereotype, and the social and sexual positioning of the viewing subject are central to the production and functioning of advertising and other mass-media forms of photography.... Seriality and repetition, appropriation, intertextuality, simulation or pastiche: these are the primary devices employed by postmodernist artists. [134]

Such uses of photography broke with the traditions of

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[134] Abagail Solomon-Godeau, "Photography After Art Photography," Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, Inc., 1984) 80.

modernist art photography, in which photographers set forth to "capture" a view of the world and explore the formal possibilities of the medium.

These new critical strategies are present in the early work of Rauschenberg and Warhol, among others, who integrated images from popular culture, and particularly from the mass media, into their art. [135] According to Solomon-Godeau, "common to the photographic usages of these...artists was an insistence on what Roland Barthes termed the *déjà-lu* (already-read, already-seen) aspect of cultural production, a notion alternatively theorized, with respect to postmodern art practice, as a shift from production to reproduction." [136] Following the changes in photography advanced in the 1960s, a younger generation of artists, including Kruger and Lawler, Richard Prince and Sherrie Levine, began to generate images through the reproduction of images. Known as appropriationists, these artists, among others working in

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[135] In addition to Rauschenberg and Warhol, Solomon-Godeau also included Ruscha in her list of artists who, in the 1960s, used photography to new ends. However, although his use of photography, which appears in his artists' books, shows attention to seriality and repetition, with similar images presented on the consecutive pages of his books, Ruscha's photographic work does not demonstrate the same type of appropriative qualities.

[136] Solomon-Godeau 75.

the late 1970s and early 1980s, used pre-existing imagery to subvert the power of familiar cultural icons circulated and perpetuated by visual culture.

More directly and bluntly than Rauschenberg and Warhol, these artists literally re-photographed existing imagery and presented it within the context of their own visual practices. For example, Prince's early photographic work re-presents familiar consumer imagery, including "scenes" from cigarette advertisements and product logos from liquor advertisements. By re-photographing these images he "cast doubt on basic assumptions about the authority of photographic images, the ownership of public images, the nature of invention, and the fixed, identifiable location of the author." [137]

Levine similarly re-presents existing images, although hers are not taken from popular culture but rather from art history. In her early work she appropriated photographic images by such modern (male) masters as Walker Evans and Edward Westin, literally re-photographing them and presenting them as her own. Levine's subject matter has been interpreted as evidence of the extent to which contemporary art is "readymade," implicating both Marcel Duchamp's ability to turn

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[137] Lisa Phillips, Richard Prince (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1992) 21.

familiar, everyday objects into art and the photographic medium for their lack of "originality." [138] The fact that Levine has continually appropriated work by modern male artists has also been seen as an attempt to expose the patriarchal lineage within the history of art: by intercepting images produced by men, Levine ensures that they cannot be clearly identified with their "makers". For example, if one views Levine's *Untitled (After Walker Evans)* (1981) next to its source, it is impossible to know which is by Levine and which is by Evans. But the act of appropriation not only subverts patriarchal authorship; it is also itself an act of authorship.

Though Levine's approach to art making may seem passive -- "Is she really 'making' anything?" -- her decontextualizaton of modernist masterpieces from their traditional art historical lineage and placement of them within the scope of postmodern photography demonstrates an active framing process. The use of photography as a framing device is also at the root of Lawler's work,

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[138] Levine has made specific reference to Duchamp's readymades, recasting *Fountain*, Duchamp's first and most infamous readymade, the upside-down urinal, in gold, and fabricating Duchamp's "bachelors" outlined in the notes for *The Large Glass*. Although neither project is photographic, they both demonstrate the extent to which her artistic practice relies on the "readymade" nature of art historical sources for her "appropriations."

which similarly re-presents existing works of art. However, unlike Levine who shows us images alone and (for the most part) as is, Lawler crops her subjects and juxtaposes their reproductions with captions. She uses these strategies to critique deeply embedded conditions within the art world, including the mythic value of the "masterpiece" as an untouchable relic. Consider, for example, *Pollock and Tureen* (1984): in this photo-plus-text piece she uses the above phrase to caption for her photograph of one of Jackson Pollock's signature drip pieces hung in a private collection. Without these words, viewers might not recognize this "masterpiece" by the artist who Greenberg championed as the genius of Modernism removed from its more familiar museum setting.

In addition to depicting it in an "unofficial" location, Lawler further deflates Pollock's work by photographing it in a domestic setting, and by cropping the image so that a mere few inches can be seen behind the tureen. The tureen, which acts as a sign of the feminine through both its stereotypical association with decorative arts and its functional role in the kitchen, becomes the focus of the image, displacing the machismo of Pollock's gestural painting into the background. Lawler's appropriative work thus tends to be more overtly editorialized than Levine's: her critical voice is

located not only in the act of appropriating, but also in the strategies of cropping and framing that occur both visually and verbally.

Like Levine and Lawler, Kruger also uses the photographic medium to appropriate pre-existing imagery, and like Lawler she manipulates images through a number of techniques including cropping. However, though the work of these three women has been grouped together as appropriative, Kruger's differs in a number of ways. Formally, while Levine and Lawler focus on the act of "taking pictures", Kruger uses photographic processes to create photomontages after her images have been combined with texts. Thematically, while Levine and Lawler focus on art historical subject matter, Kruger's images tend to be appropriated from popular culture and are usually unidentifiable.

One exception to the unidentifiable nature of Kruger's imagery can be seen in her *Untitled (You invest in the divinity of the masterpiece)* (1982): here she re-presents Michelangelo's famous *Creation of Man*, cropping it such that the hand of God reaching out to touch the hand of Adam is framed in the center of the piece. While this also appears to be an exception to Kruger's tendency to scavenge images from popular culture, this image -- though art historical -- is widely circulated in the

mass-media. Metaphorically this icon represents the ideal by which creative genius is handed down from father to son. Kruger's placement of it "behind bars" that stretch horizontally across the work subverts -- literally bars -- this ideal, implying the possibility of opening up a position for the artist and other women to be recognized as creators. By superimposing the phrase "You invest in the divinity of the masterpiece," over the image -- and, more specifically, by placing the word "divinity" directly beneath the two hands, Kruger also points to our investment in that which is handmade. She mocks "you" for "your investment" in such originality when the most famous creations -- including this one by Michelangelo -- are known primarily through photographic reproduction.

It is significant that much of the so-called appropriation art of the 1980s was created by women artists investigating power relations within a patriarchal society. As Kate Linker has suggested, "many women turned toward photography, opposing its simple mechanical means of picture taking with the masculine ethos of creativity that was celebrated in the traditional media of painting and sculpture." [139] In

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[139] Kate Linker, Love For Sale (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1990) 59.

each of the examples I have discussed, the appropriation artist uses photography -- and, in the cases of Kruger and Lawler, photography combined with linguistic texts -- to frame and deconstruct images as well as deeply embedded cultural ideals. Kruger, Lawler and other women artists have also used the technique to challenge the myth of the masterpiece and the patriarchal lineage of artistic creation that surround them: by cutting and cropping images, they subvert the "hand" of the male artist, asserting their critical voices in the process. Thus the feminist perspective and appropriative strategy used to address Kruger's and Lawler's work begin to converge: though often identified as independent developments in contemporary art, to discuss one frame necessarily implicates the other. [140]

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Kruger's and Lawler's work -- along with that of Sylvia Kolbowski, Sarah Charlesworth, Laurie Simmons and

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[140] Owens comes closest to linking feminism and postmodernism in "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," reprinted in Owens 166-190.

other contemporary women artists who emerged in the late 1970s and 1980s -- has been both informed and framed by feminist debates and theories concerning the construction of gender and representation of women. Kate Linker has suggested that this generation of artists, as well as feminist writers and filmmakers

> began to express dissatisfaction with the equal-rights strategies that infused cultural politics in the 1970s. At issue was the failure of these strategies -- based on eliminating discrimination and establishing equal access to institutional power -- to disturb the ideological structures of which discrimination is symptomatic; attention was focused on their rigid and deterministic definition of sexuality as "natural," pregiven, or biological. Among [this] generation, gender was not regarded as an innate or "essential" condition, but rather as a construction produced through representation. Sexuality was regarded as the result of signification and semiotic effects, rather than of biology .... Masculinity and femininity came to be seen as the products of adaptation to social standards of sexuality, in which the impact of signs play a determining role. [141]

Through their appropriative techniques, as well as their combinations of words and images, these artists merged discussions of gender relations and the "politics of the image," deconstructing traditionally accepted roles and representations of women that are circulated within contemporary society.

Probably more so than any other artist of this generation, Kruger -- who believes "power is not exerted

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[141] Linker 59.

through physical violence but through symbolic effects"[142] -- has challenged stereotypes that establish and perpetuate gendered inequities. Some of her earliest work points to idealized images of women with a sense of dismantling sarcasm: for example, in *Untitled (Perfect)* (1980) she superimposed the word "perfect" over a photograph of a woman whose hands are clasped in prayer. The woman's pose and clothing seem to be dated circa 1950, conjuring up notions of the traditional roles of women as housewife and mother. Faceless, she is silent, without a mouth to speak. In another work from this period, *Untitled (Deluded)* (1979), the word 'deluded' is juxtaposed with an image of a woman surrounded by fashion magazines and what appears to be a wind bottle. Here the woman's face is mask-like, divided top (eyes) from bottom (mouth). She seems to be reaching up to her face to remove the bottom section of the mask, perhaps an attempt to break that which confines and silences her. Like mass media imagery, Kruger's work seduces viewers through its bold and visually arresting appeal; however, unlike media images which aim to "sell" cultural ideals of feminine beauty and myths of perfection to women, here Kruger overturns stereotypes by calling attention to their

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[142] Linker 27.

shortcomings and their constructedness. In her own words, her photomontages "intercept the stunned silence of the image with the uncouth impertinences and uncool embarrassments of language." [143]

In addition to Kruger's use of words and images to challenge the stereotypical roles of women in contemporary culture, her work has also consistently addressed the tendency for women to be looked at rather than to look, to be viewed rather than to view. In *Untitled (We have received orders not to move)* (1982), which depicts a silhouetted image of a woman bent over in submission, Kruger explores both the social position of women and their more theoretical position as objects of the gaze. Here the woman's gesture resembles that of a typist, conjuring up the notion of a secretary who must submit to her boss' orders. But this woman is not only instructed not to move by Kruger's words, she is also made not to move visually: she is literally held in place with pins that resemble the keys of a manual typewriter.

These pins also have an indexical relationship to the "pin up girl," one of the most extreme examples of women objectified by the male-identified gaze. In addition, they suggest the scientific laboratory

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[143] Linker 29.

technique of dissection, an act in which animals are suspended as objects for viewing and experimentation, implying that this gaze is not only dominating but also cold and physically destructive. However, the woman in this image is not pinned to a dissection board, but rather to a cross-hatched patterned background that resembles a needle-work canvas. In this sense, she seems to be pinned to her traditional role of domesticity and the jobs, such as sewing, that accompany it.

The relationship between viewer and viewed, as well as the ways Kruger uses pronouns to create and engender such positions are also prominent here. The first person pronoun "we", clearly referring to the female figure, assigns the position of "you", the second person, to a viewer. By implicating the viewer in the oppression of this woman, Kruger aligns us with her boss, or with the male-identified objectifier. And by aligning "us" (viewers) with "him" (boss), Kruger makes us utter the order: "Don't move!" In other words, we become the oppressor in the speech act. However, like the woman pinned into place, we too are imposed on by the work's confrontational address: "we" are ordered to order the woman, "we" are also oppressed by the "boss."

Similarly, but in a more ambiguous way, pronouns turn the language situation into a person-to-person

interaction in the complex work *Untitled (I can't look at you and breathe at the same time)* (1982). Here a woman, whose image is presented as a "trophy" on a t-shirt, is denied access to the gaze: by superimposing the words "I can't look at you" over her eyes and the words "and breathe at the same time" below her mouth, Kruger denies her the power to look. [144] If this woman were to look -- to attempt to assume the power of the gaze -- she would be unable to breathe: essentially, she would die.

As is the case in *Untitled (We have received orders not to move)*, here Kruger aligns the woman in the image with the first person pronoun. However, in *Untitled (I can't look at you and breathe at the same time)* Kruger also opens up the possibility for the woman to be aligned with the second person pronoun, "you": although "I" most readily refers to the woman who cannot look and breathe at the same time, it can also refer to viewers who cannot look at the woman because she, an object of beauty, takes their breath away. In this case the woman becomes aligned with "you", in the personified version of the traditional role of the object of the gaze. Either way, she is denied access to the gaze, and either way she is

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[144] In another version of this work, the entire phrase is superimposed over the eyes of a woman swimming the backstroke.

vulnerable: as "I", she risks her life, and as "you", she is subjected to the scrutiny of the gaze. But by making the woman too beautiful to look at, Kruger subverts the objectifying look, allowing the woman to withstand that which is directed at her. In other words, despite the fact that she is an object, Kruger cuts off the gaze, thereby disempowering the viewer. [145]

Like *Untitled (I can't look at you and breathe at the same time)*, *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)* (1981) also demonstrates Kruger's attention to the power of the gaze, while using combinations of words and images to offer possibilities for deflecting it. By juxtaposing the phrase "Your gaze hits the side of my face" with a sculpture of a woman's profile, Kruger positions the viewer of the work (you/your gaze) as the subject of the gaze, and the woman (me/my face) as the object. Here Kruger's words appear to be in motion toward the woman's cheek, slipping between the position of the black background behind "your", "hits", "side", and "face" and the white blocks on which these words sit. Moving to strike her, the gaze is violent and without retaliation, implying a sense of victimization which

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[145] For further discussion of pronouns, see Owens 192-193, Bal 33, and Emile Benveniste 1970.

Mulvey has described in the following way: "Here the threat of destruction is emphasized by a statue's mask-like perfection and its smooth, white surface. An exterior, like a shell (both self-protective and exhibitionist), shields the object of gaze ineffectively from an act of aggression. Voyeurism slips into sadism, but the female profile remains inert." [146]

Owens has pointed to "the power of the gaze to arrest -- literally petrify -- its object," [147] which he refers to as "the Medusa Effect." [148] This notion is based on the myth in which Medusa's gaze was endowed with the power of turning to stone all who came within its purview -- with the power, that is, of creating figures, statues." [149] Owens reminds us that in this story "Perseus contrived to steal [Medusa's] power for himself [...] *to himself become a producer of figures*, [which he] accomplished by means of a ruse: using his shield as a mirror, he reflected the deadly gaze back upon itself, where upon Medusa was *immediately* [...] petrified." [150]

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[146] Laura Mulvey, "Kruger and Burgin," Creative Camera 233 (May 1984): 129.

[147] Linker 62.

[148] Owens 191-200

[149] Owens 196.

[150] Owens 196.

Thus, although Medusa possessed the power of the gaze, it was turned back against her by a man. Owens applied this notion to *Untitled (Your gaze hits the side of my face)*, suggesting that here "we see [...] a woman immobilized -- turned to stone [...] -- by the power of the gaze." [151] While superficially this may seem to make sense because the two important components of the narrative -- the gaze and a stone figure -- are present in this word-and-image combination, with closer examination the logic of Owens' metaphor breaks down. In the myth it is Medusa's gaze, cast back against herself, that turns her to stone. The woman in this image, by comparison, does not possess the look: she does not control the gaze, but rather is viewed by "your gaze". And although this gaze approaches, it does not actually strike; rather it is repelled by the turn of her head. Thus the figure escapes the gaze, withstanding that which is typically directed at her. Despite readings that have inadvertently perpetuated the notion of women as objects, this work, like *Untitled (I can't look at you and breathe at the same time)*, opens up the possibility for women to deny objectification.

Like Kruger, Lawler has similarly made reference to

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[151] Owens 195.

Medusa in her photographic work *Statue before a painting, Perseus with the Head of Medusa, by Canova* [152] in which this phrase acts as a caption for a black-and-white photograph of a museum installation view. Lawler's cropping technique focuses viewers' attention on the statue of a male figure, displayed from the genitalia down, which stands on a pedestal in the foreground of her image. Initially the correspondence between the word "statue" and the image of the figure leads us to identify this classical sculpture with the "statue before [the] painting." However, closer analysis of this visual/verbal combination reveals that the statue does not stand before but rather to the side of the painting that hangs in the background of the photograph. In actuality, it is a group of male-identified patrons who stand "before" the painting, *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*. In front of it they risk being turned to stone, as the myth has led us to believe. By connecting the sculpture, which seems to stand before the painting and whose image is cropped extremely close to its genitalia, and the men who more literally stand before the painting, Lawler implies that these viewers risk becoming statues,

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[152] This undated work appeared in Lawler's "Arrangement of Pictures," October 26 (fall 83).

not unlike that in the foreground that is all but castrated.

Here Lawler plays a framing game with words and images, combining and cropping them in such a way that together they create a visual theory of the gaze and its relationship to castration. Like the other works I have discussed in this chapter, Lawler's *Statue before a painting, Perseus with the Head of Medusa, by Canova* uses the appropriative strategy to feminist ends: here she nearly emasculates a male figure via photographic framing, and threatens to petrify patrons by positioning them before a representation of Medusa. However, the impact of Lawler's framing is not achieved through her photography alone; her combination of words and images links the statue, the men in the background and Medusa. Like a camera lens, Lawler's words function as a framing device, shifting the viewer's perspective on the scene from the foreground to background, and focusing the narrative structure of the work in much the same way that her camera visually crops images. In the rest of this chapter I will closely examine the ways Kruger and Lawler juxtapose words and images, demonstrating that their combination, like photography, acts as a framing device.

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Despite the bold presence of words in Kruger's photomontages, the specific ways in which they interact with her photographic imagery has not been extensively analyzed. Like Ruscha's words which, because they are also images, force viewers to both look at and read his art, Kruger's photomontages similarly provoke both of these interpretive processes. However, as is the case with Ruscha's word-works, Kruger's visual and verbal components cannot be viewed and read at the same time: the combination of these sign systems requires that viewers look and read alternatingly, shifting between her words and images in an attempt to articulate a relationship between the two. This process is apparent in *Untitled (You thrive on mistaken identity)* (1981) in which Kruger combines the phrase "You thrive on mistaken identity" with a black-and-white image of a woman's profile abstracted as a pattern of "cells". Upon viewing this work, I find my eyes moving back and forth between the clarity of Kruger's typeset words and her blurred image, unable to focus on both at once.

The shifting nature of the interpretive process is important in that it ensures that neither Kruger's words nor her images are privileged, a contradiction to Barthes' notion that an order always hierarchizes visual

and verbal signs. [153] Kruger also grants her visual and verbal signs equal footing by creating intertextual messages in which her words and images double one another. For example, in *Untitled (You thrive on mistaken identity)* the blurred image reinforces the woman's desire to conceal her identity by translating "mistaken identity" into an image. Such equality is also present in *Untitled (We have received orders not to move)*, in which the woman pictured is literally pinned into place -- both visually and verbally.

These photomontages, in which Kruger's words and images are in complete accord, oppose Linker's suggestion that her visual and verbal components do not repeat, but rather contradict on another. [154] By closely examining Kruger's combinations of words and images, it is apparent that she often provides the same information in two distinct sign systems, essentially translating it from one "language" to another. [155] Kruger's *Untitled (You*

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[153] Barthes S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974) 7.

[154] Linker 29.

[155] Linker uses the notion of visual-verbal opposition to distinguish Kruger's art from mass media imagery. However, that Kruger's words and images reinforce one another does not make her photomontages any less complex than they would be if these elements were in opposition. In fact, because Kruger's word/image relationships are so hyperbolically literal she forces

are not yourself) (1983) exemplifies both the shifting relationship between verbal and visual sign systems, and the way these two elements literalize one another. Here the phrase "You are not yourself" is spelled out letter by letter in a style resembling a collaged "ransom note": individual letters in a black lowercase typeface, which look as though they have been clipped from the white background of a magazine page, are superimposed over a black-and-white image of a woman looking at herself in a shattered mirror. Like the mirror, the statement is fractured: not only are the letters cut apart from one another, the word "not" is also visually differentiated from the other words in the phrase. Presented in white print, "not" stands alone in the image; and unlike the letters in "You" "are" and "yourself" that are disjointed, those in "not" are connected.

Although smaller and separated, the position of "not" at the center of the work is of primary importance: like a bullet to the mirror, this word makes the image scatter. It negates the woman's identity and the unity of her image which, like the mirror, is also broken. Cracked and splintered, with slices of her face reflected

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viewers to think twice about their relationship to advertising, raising the possibility that her work might include a critique of the structure to which it is indebted.

in the broken shards of glass, this woman is "falling apart". Here Kruger literalizes the metaphor "in pieces" on the visual level, conflating it with another metaphor, "not being oneself". But Kruger's differentiation of the word "not" from the rest of words in the piece affords another interpretation. Because it is smaller and in white type, "not" fades into the background, resulting in a second message -- "You are yourself." In the same way that one's eyes shift back and forth the between the visual and verbal components in *Untitled (You thrive on mistaken identity)*, here viewers alternatingly read "You are not yourself" and "You are yourself". Though these two messages seem to be contradictory, together they suggest that this woman <u>is</u> herself by <u>not</u> being herself. In other words, to be a woman is to be fractured.

Notably, the woman in *Untitled (You are not yourself)* is both the subject and the object of her own gaze. Holding the mirror in her hand, on one level she objectifies herself -- judging herself against the idealized image of woman to which she, in her fractured state, will never measure up. However, with the mirror in her grasp, on another level this woman possesses an individual point of view, a specific way of seeing comparable to the view provided by the framing and cropping of appropriative art practices. Like the

photographic process of re-presentation, her mirror does not neutrally reflect that which is in front of it but -- combined with Kruger's text -- presents ideals of feminine identity in a critical fashion.

In this sense, the woman's mirror is similar to the photographic lens through which Lawler frames other artists, their work, and aspects of the art world. Lawler's fragmented artistic practice can be divided into three distinct yet interdependent categories: "that of an artist who exhibits in galleries and museums, that of a publicist/museum-worker who produces the kind of material which usually supplements cultural objects and events, and that of an art-consultant/curator who arranges works by other artists." [156] In each of these cases, the artist is a "behind-the-scenes" collaborator, calling attention to the activities (curating) and materials (labels, catalogues, invitation cards, etc.) that support the exhibition and viewing of art. In all but the first instance, her work is typically unidentified -- either as art or as an endeavor by Lawler -- and tends to exist at the margins of art production.

While Lawler's artistic strategy reveals aspects of the art world as parts of a highly constructed

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[156] Andrea Fraser, "In and Out of Place," Art in America (June 1985): 122.

institution and provides an opportunity to see works of art in a new and critical light, it results in an elusiveness that makes writing about her work difficult. Art historians and critics tend to write around her practice, contextualizing it in the process: for example, most are quick to point out that her interest in exposing the art world's underlying support systems is indebted to the work of Conceptual artists (specifically Daniel Buren, Michael Asher and Hans Haacke) who began to challenge the conditions, frames, and limits of art making in the 1960s. [157] Though I too have found myself tempted to approach Lawler's art in this way and discuss its position in relation to the work of others, by closely examining her words and images and the ways they intersect I will demonstrate that her work frames itself.

By photographing works of art in situ -- both in "official" and "unofficial" locations ranging from museum installations to store rooms, from corporate and private collections to auction houses -- Lawler dismantles "the idealism of modernist art, in which the art object *in and*

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[157] Lawler's work is most frequently compared to that of Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke. See Foster, "Subversive Signs," Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985): 99-118; Claude Gintz, "The Same and the Other in the Work of Louise Lawler" (Saint-Etienne: Maison de la Culture et de la Communication de Saint Etienne, 1987).

of itself was seen to have a fixed and transhistorical meaning." [158] As exemplified in *Pollock and Tureen Arranged by Mr. and Mrs. Burton Tremaine, NYC* and in *Statue before a painting, Perseus with the Head of Medusa, by Canova*, the significance of the art she represents is dependent upon the frames -- both physical and linguistic -- in which she shows them to us. This is also apparent in a particularly disturbing work that depicts art objects in storage: as units in an inventory they are transformed from valued commodities into mere volumes. [159] Here two classical figures appear to be held hostage, attempting to claw their ways out from under the plastic covering that, like a glass frame, "protect" them. However, unlike art under glass, our vision of these objects is obscured: they cannot be "properly" seen as "masterpieces" in this "unofficial" context. The tape that surrounds them functions like a police barricade, suggesting that in this condition these works are off limit, out of reach, and beyond the eyes of the viewing public.

By juxtaposing this image with a matter-of-fact caption, Lawler provides us with their location and terms

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[158] Crimp 17.

[159] This undated work appeared in Crimp 1993.

of "incarceration": "Storage. Queens Museum Flushing Meadow -- Corona Park, New York, on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, restored with funds from the Chase Manhattan Bank, 1984." Such a documentary-style word-and-image combination recalls Barthes' analyses of press imagery in "Rhetoric of the Image," in which he argued that images are dependent upon words to explain them. According to Barthes, "[t]he text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others.... The text is indeed the creator's (and hence society's) right of inspection over the image; anchorage is control ... with respect to the liberty of the signifieds of the image, the text has thus a repressive value." [160] While Lawler's work does resemble press imagery in terms of her combinations of photographs and captions, her words do not behave in a "repressive" fashion. Like the words in Kruger's photomontages, Lawler's texts do not have the "last word": viewers must shift back and forth between the visual and verbal elements in order to "read" and integrate the two sign systems. Thus, her words do not direct her images, but rather encode one another, providing a perspective from which to view her subject

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[160] Barthes 1977: 40.

matter.

In addition to storage areas, Lawler has also photographed works of art in the "unofficial" location of auction houses. One of her images presents a Jasper Johns numeral painting, a Roy Lichtenstein drawing, and a Robert Rauschenberg collage -- along with their accompanying "price tags" -- as they were displayed "for sale" at Christie's auction house. [161] On a background resembling a bulletin board, these early works are not depicted as precious art objects by contemporary "masters", but as goods for sale. Grouped as parts of a lot and installed in a seemingly random fashion, their arrangement subverts the idealized presentation of autonomous art objects by individual creative "geniuses".

By juxtaposing this image with the following text from the auction house's catalogue, Lawler further deflates the aesthetic value of these three works of art. By exposing the "disclaimers" that surround them, she implies that outside the "official" context of the museum they are not authenticated as "masterpieces".

> All property is sold "AS IS" in accordance with the section entitled ABSENCE OF OTHER WARRANTIES, and neither Christie's nor the seller makes any express or implied warranty or representation as to the condition of any lot offered for sale, and no statement made at any time, whether oral or written,

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[161] This undated work appeared in Crimp 1993.

> shall constitute such a warranty or representation. Descriptions of conditions are not warranties. The descriptions of the conditions of articles in this catalogue, including all reference to damage or repairs, are provided as a service to interested persons and do not negate or modify the section entitled ABSENCE OF OTHER WARRANTIES.

Like their "price tags", these words transform the works into mere commodities. As with all of her endeavors, here Lawler reminds us that without an institutional frame to guarantee their validity as art works, they are merely objects -- in this case, for sale to the highest bidder.

Here Lawler's cropping technique decenters these works of art, instead placing the "bulletin-board" background at the focal point of her image. By doing this, she calls our attention to a "support" -- literally that behind the work of art -- which, like the storage area, would otherwise be out of public view. The picture wire that emerges from beneath the Lichtenstein exposes another typically invisible apparatus "behind" art objects, a literalization of that which "holds them up" as works of art. This image serves as a metaphor for Lawler's artistic practice: as in all of her endeavors, she pushes that which is central -- works of art by individual artists -- to the margins, instead focusing on that which is invisible or "unofficial" within the art world -- the picture wire, the "as is" conditions of the

work of art in the auction house. This displacing is the function of her language which, although not visual, is visualizing: it monitors vision, directs our focus, not unlike the lens of the camera. Hence Lawler's language functions as a frame, which is the most decisive element in semiotic communication, be it visual or verbal, and thus the distinction between these categories falls away.

Lawler's work, which acts as a critical frame or lens through which to view aspects of the art world, parallels my approach to writing about the visual field. In much the same way that she re-presents her subjects, moving existing works of art into new frames of reference and, in the process, shifting our way of seeing them, my analysis of her and Kruger's visual language results in alternative ways of approaching the long-standing separation of words from images. As I have demonstrated, just as it is impossible to interpret the words and images within Kruger's and Lawler's work independently, it is also impossible to consider the influences -- historical, theoretical, social -- on their work separately. Therefore, in much the same way that Kruger and Lawler merge, among other things, photographic appropriation with an attention to language and to feminist interests, I have re-positioned their art, within the multiple layers of contemporary art production

and interpretation, in which neither a work of art, nor an artist's practice is a monolithic entity.

Chapter 5
"Language and the Materials Referred to"

> "When you are dealing with language, there is no edge that the picture drops over or drops off. You are dealing with something completely infinite. Language, because it is the most nonobjective thing we have ever developed in this world, never stops." [162]

In addition to the identification of Kruger's and Lawler's art as photographic appropriation and feminist, their work has also been labeled "conceptual," [163] an ambiguously over-arching term that today encompasses a wide-range of work not answering to traditional forms or the trajectories of specific mediums such as painting, sculpture, photography, or film. [164] Conceptual art has

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[162] *Art Without Space*, Symposium moderated by Jeanne Segal, WBAI-FM, NYC (November 11, 1969).

[163] As I suggested in Chapter 4, Lawler's work is typically compared to that of Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, and Hans Haacke, which has investigated and challenged the institutional frames of the art world for nearly the past thirty years.

[164] Ann Goldstein and Anne Rorimer Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975 (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995) 13. The impossibility of defining Conceptual art has been consistent since its inception. A recent exhibition, *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975* at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, investigated the practices associated with Conceptual art as it was historically defined. The topic was also the subject of a round table discussion between Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Alexander Alberro, Thierry de Duve, Yve-Alain Bois, and Martha Buskirk

come to function as a "catch-all" frame for non-conventional approaches to art making -- comparable in scope to the broad-ranging and problematic "word-and-image" category I have been deconstructing throughout this study. At its root is an indebtedness to aspects of Conceptual art, as it was historically defined in the 1960s; however, with the development and use of the terms "Neo-Conceptual" and "Post-Conceptual" to refer to recent practices, including Holzer's, Kruger's and Lawler's, that fall outside the mainstream of traditional media, the ambiguity of the category has only continued to increase. [165]

Even as it was defined at its inception, Conceptual art was imprecise. Its strategies have included the increased participation of the viewer in the production of the work of art, resulting in the de-centering of the traditional role of the artist-as-creator; the

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published in *October* (fall 1994): 127-146. This discussion centered on the reception of Marcel Duchamp by Conceptual artists, and his influence on the changing state of art in the 1960s and 1970s.

Throughout this chapter I will use "conceptual art" as a general label for non-traditional contemporary art forms, and "Conceptual art" to refer to its historic roots, as a loosely-defined movement which developed in the Americas and Europe in the mid- to late-1960s.

[165] "Conceptual Art Supplement," Flash Art (Nov/Dec 1988): 87-117.

exploration of art theory and its conflation with artistic practice; and the use of language both as a signifying system and an artistic medium. In addition, perhaps one of the most consistent aspects of Conceptual art as it developed in the 1960s was the primacy of ideas over the material execution of art, a notion outlined by Sol Le Witt in 1967. [166] In his "Paragraphs on Conceptual art," written for *Artforum*, he stated:

> In Conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.[...]
>
> What the work of art looks like isn't too important. It has to look like something if it has physical form. No matter what form it may finally have it must begin with an idea. It is the process of conception and realization with which the artist is concerned.[...] [167]

At this time, many artists were writing art criticism and theory, resulting in a number of explanatory "manifestos" presented as, or as part of, works of art. With the

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[166] There have been numerous debates surrounding the dating and chronology of Conceptual art practices. For a historical discussion of the period and an example of such debate, see Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969," October 55 (winter 1990): 105-143, Joseph Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub, "Replies to Benjamin Buchloh on Conceptual Art," October 57 (summer 1991): 152-157, and Benjamin Buchloh, "Reply to Joseph Kosuth and Seth Siegelaub," October 57: 158-161.

[167] Sol Le Witt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," Artforum (June 1967): 79-84.

emphasis on ideas, language became the main vehicle for expression and for art making by the so-called Conceptual artists.

At the same time that artists were focusing on ideas, they were also emphasizing activities or actions. Though this type of process-oriented work is most frequently associated with Fluxus and Happenings, art forms that were largely performance based, [168] many Conceptual artists proposed (in language), carried out, and/or documented a variety of actions (in language, photography, and/or video). For example, Vito Acconci's *Room Situation: A Situation Using Room* (1970) involved the act of moving his belongings from his downtown New York apartment to a gallery uptown over the course of time that constituted the duration of the exhibition. Black-and-white photographs and typewritten texts documenting the transport of various household objects serve as a record of the piece. Here Acconci noted: "The show is my activity from point to point; the gallery serves to show (indicate) the show (my activity)."

The main consequence of the Conceptual artists' emphasis on ideas and on actions was that the material quality of their work often became secondary, ephemeral,

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[168] See Liz Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss, In the Spirit of Fluxus (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1993).

or even non-existent. Lucy Lippard, an early curator and historian of the changes in art as they were unfolding in the U.S., Canada, and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, labeled this tendency "the dematerialization of the art object." [169] By this she was referring to the "deemphasis on material aspects (uniqueness, permanence, decorative attractiveness)" [170] seen in works, such as *Room Situation*, that are action-based and documentary in nature. The dematerialization of the art object led to deconstruction of art as it was most familiarly known -- two-dimensional painting and three-dimensional sculpture -- and of the traditional museum/gallery exhibition. As ideas and/or activities proposed/and or completed, Conceptual art often took the form of linguistic texts and/or photographs published in art journals and catalogues. These pieces not only conveyed ideas, but in many cases themselves constituted works of art; by the same token, the publications in which they

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[169] Lucy Lippard, preface Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972 (New York: Praeger, 1973) Here Lippard admits: "it has often been pointed out to me that dematerialization is an inaccurate term [...because] a piece of paper or a photograph is as much an object, or as material, as a ton of lead"; however, the term nonetheless serves to mark the difference between traditional painting and sculpture which emphasize uniqueness and permanence, and the more ephemeral art forms then developing.

[170] Lippard 1973: preface.

appeared did not document shows, but themselves constituted "exhibitions".

One of the earliest conceptual exhibitions, *January 5-31, 1969*, was organized by Seth Siegelaub, who by the mid-1960s "had begun to reinvent the role of the 'art dealer' as distributer extraordinaire [...through a] strategy of bypassing the art world with exhibitions that took place outside of galleries and/or New York and/or were united in publications that were art rather than merely *about* art." [171] According to Siegelaub, the exhibition, which included work by Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, and Lawrence Weiner, "consist[ed] of (the ideas communicated in) the catalog; the physical presence (of the work) is supplementary to the catalog."[172] Though this "show" and other catalogue exhibitions may seem reductive on one level -- a mere representation of art in textual, schematic, and/or photographic formats -- these efforts also extended the possible venues in which art could be experienced. Such non-traditional work and alternative exhibitions opened the doors for the following generation of artists,

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[171] Lucy Lippard, "Escape Attempts," Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975 20.

[172] Lippard 1973: 71-72. These artists have since become associated with the core of the "movement" as it developed in the United States.

including Holzer, Kruger and Lawler, to use language as a visual medium, to produce new types of art objects, and display them in increasingly experimental ways. [173]

While Conceptual artists were re-defining art and the parameters of the museum/gallery system, so too were sculptors testing the limits of sculpture's traditional status as a three-dimensional art form and the ways it could be experienced. By 1967 sculpture included photographs, film, video, performance, linguistic propositions, maps, imaginary sites, travel to specific locations, artists' books and sound tapes. As Rosalind Krauss suggests, "surprising things ha[d] come to be called sculpture: narrow corridors with TV monitors at the ends, large photographs documenting country hikes; mirrors placed at strange angles in ordinary rooms; temporary lines cut into the floor of the desert." [174]

The most well known example of sculpture in "the expanded field" is Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1969-1970), a large scale earthwork whose setting is the Great Salt Lake in Utah. Like many sculptors at the time,

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[173] Foster 1985: 99-118.

[174] Krauss 1985: 277. As I noted in Chapter 1, Krauss attributed these changes to the collapse of the well-defined boundaries between sculpture, architecture, and landscape, a shift she marked as the emergence of postmodernity.

Smithson set out to mark a site on the earth with natural materials. Though this construction is now submerged beneath the surface of the water, the process of its creation and its results are documented in photographs and video. Like much Conceptual art, many sculptural endeavors in the 1960s and 1970s focused on sites (often imaginary) and processes (often unrealized); because of the remote locations and/or hypothetical nature of such pieces, they were frequently documented in written texts, photographs, and/or video which served to signify the idea of the work.

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It is at this crossroad of Conceptual art and the expansion of sculpture that Weiner's practice developed. After beginning his career as a painter and then making a series of pieces resembling earthworks, [175] in 1968 he turned to language as his medium. Since then his art has

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[175] I will discuss both his paintings and his early sculptures in this chapter, demonstrating that they set the stage for his work in language. I will not, however, enter into the debates over the precise dating of Weiner's early work.

consistently taken the form of linguistic phrases, and has included verbal declarations of site-specific constructions, actions, and processes such as 3 **STANDARD MILLED CLEAR PINE 1" X 3" PLANKS OF ARBITRARY LENGTH WITH THE THIRD PLANK SHORTER THAN THE PRECEDING TWO GLUED TOGETHER AND SECURED TO THE WALL AT INDICATED SCREW POINTS** (cat. #014), **ONE QUART EXTERIOR GREEN INDUSTRIAL ENAMEL THROWN ON A BRICK WALL** (cat. #002), **A 36" X 36" REMOVAL TO THE LATHING OR SUPPORT WALL OF PLASTER OR WALLBOARD FROM A WALL** (cat. #021), **THE ARCTIC CIRCLE SHATTERED** (cat. #074), and **THE RESIDUE OF A FLARE IGNITED UPON A BOUNDARY** (cat. #029). [176] They have also included states of materials such as **IGNITED** (cat. #081), **FERMENTED** (cat. #082), and **DISPLACED** (cat. #083); and more recently conceptual "recipes" such as **NITER & BRIMSTONE KEPT APART** (cat. #719), **BITS & PIECES PUT**

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[176] Weiner always presents his work in capital letters, typically sans serif, and without punctuation. The one exception to this format is found in his first artists' book, Statements (New York: The Louis Kellner Foundation/Seth Siegelaub, 1968), where he uses no capital letters. Also distinct here is that Weiner runs words to the end of each line, breaking them in the middle where necessary to fit on 'the page.

Throughout this chapter I will use bold typeface, rather than italics here to represent his works, which are neither titled nor dated. Rather, they have been "catalogued", not from initial conception but from their first public presentation. For a complete listing of his works through 1993, see Weiner's Specific & General Works (Villeurbanne: Le Nouveau Musee/Institut d'art contemporain, 1993).

TOGETHER TO FORM A SEMBLANCE OF A WHOLE (cat. #690), and **STONES & STONE & STONES & STONES & STONES & STONES** (cat. # 741).

Though Weiner's attention to language as his medium has been constant, he has utilized a number of varied presentational formats over the past 30 years. Most often his works are painted (or applied with vinyl letters) directly onto the walls of the museums and galleries in which they are shown. They also are installed on the floors, ceilings, and facades of public buildings, presented in books and on posters, t-shirts and pins, and form the basis of his films, videos, and audio tapes. Although, in this sense, Weiner's work seems similar to Holzer's, which has appeared in many of the same formats, it is distinct both in terms of its content and medium. While Holzer utilizes language as a device for communication and a persuasive tool in socio-cultural "proverbs", Weiner presents aesthetic situations that explore the nature and properties of materials, relations between them, and our relationship to them.[177] As Weiner suggested in 1968, and has reiterated time and time again since then: ART IS A METAPHOR FOR THE

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[177] Though Weiner's art has been called statements, poetry, texts, and other linguistic terms, he refers to them as "works."

RELATIONSHIP OF HUMAN BEINGS TO OBJECTS AND OBJECTS TO OBJECTS IN RELATION TO HUMAN BEINGS. [178] This idea forms the basis of his art, and is exemplified in such works as **MANY COLORED OBJECTS PLACED SIDE BY SIDE TO FORM A ROW OF MANY COLORED OBJECTS** (cat #462), which denotes a relationship between objects, and between objects and human beings who place them side by side thus creating a sculpture.

Weiner's work also differs from Holzer's in terms of his use of language as his medium. Unlike Holzer, whose language conveys messages, and whose posters, LED boards, and benches constitute her media, Weiner considers language itself to be his medium, with the individual formats serving as vehicles for presenting the work. In this sense, the form in which we encounter Weiner's work -- be it a book or a tatoo, a t-shirt or a public building -- is not part of the work itself, but rather its translation into a given context. The same is true of his use of various languages: he has utilized Dutch, French, German, Spanish, Catalan, Swedish, Finnish, Hebrew, Greek and/or Japanese, among other languages, depending on the cultural context in which his work is

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[178] This text is one of a number of "essays" Weiner has written about his art; it is not considered a "work" in the sense of individual pieces of art.

presented. These formats and languages act as Weiner's parole: concrete utterances which, for him, may be either visual or linguistic. He encapsulates this notion in **A TRANSLATION FROM ONE LANGUAGE TO ANOTHER** (cat. #071), which appropriately has been "translated" into other languages and manifested through in a variety of visual vehicles.

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Because of the tendency to group all art with language together, Weiner's work has been firmly associated with Conceptual art in terms of its history, and word- or language-art in terms of its trajectory. However, Weiner has continually framed himself as a sculptor whose focus is materials. Like Smithson and others working on large-scale, site-specific projects "in the expanded field", much of Weiner's work focuses on elements from nature in actual or proposed situations that alter the landscape. In the early 1960s, before starting to work with to language, he created "specific sculptures by setting off explosions that left craters in

the landscape" in Mill Valley, California. [179]

About this early work Weiner has said: "I had an idea that each crater constituted a specific piece of sculpture. [...] I thought that each individual act itself was what constituted the making of art. The craters came about as a way to make sculpture by the removal of something rather than by the normal intrusion of things.... [Realizing] that much of the work I was interested in sculpturally was not capable of being built I began to present work in its language state." [180]

While this approaches my description of Conceptual art, what distinguishes Weiner's projects is his consistent focus on materials: unlike Acconci's *Room Piece*, which is rooted in an action, and Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, which is a site-specific sculptural production, Weiner's work focuses on real or hypothetical interactions with materials and their real or hypothetical results. Like Kruger's and Lawler's work which tends to be seen as either feminist or photographic yet is clearly influenced by both perspectives, Weiner's

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[179] Dieter Schwarz Lawrence Weiner. Books 1968-1989. Catalogue Raisonne (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther Konig; Villeurbanne: Le Nouveau Musee, 1989) 129.

[180] Lynn Gumpert. Early Work: Lynda Benglis, Joan Brown, Luis Jimenez, Gary Stephan, Lawrence Weiner (New York: The New Museum 1982) 45-47.

work tends to be seen either in terms of its linguistic format (i.e. Conceptual art) or in terms of its emphasis on materials (i.e. sculpture). However, its initial development demonstrates the extent to which these two frames are completely fused within his artistic practice.

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Invited in 1968 along with Robert Barry and Carl Andre to make an exhibition of outdoor work at Windham College in Putney, Vermont, Weiner set posts into the ground to form the outline of a rectangle and from these posts he strung twine to form a grid pattern. [181] About this piece he has noted: "it could have been placed anywhere; all it required was a reasonably flat area."[182] In other words, this work was not specific to the site at Windham College, but rather conceived in relation to a general outdoor space, placing emphasis on

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[181] For this exhibition Andre created *Joint*, 183 unit of uncovered common bailed hay ene-to-end from woods into a field, and Barry stretched 1,206′ of half-inch woven nylon cord, 25′ off the ground between two buildings.

[182] Lippard 1973: 46-48.

the idea of the work rather than its actual construction in the exhibition. In this sense, Weiner's physical work with string was the manifestation of an idea that, according to Weiner, could have been constructed in any location.

Weiner further emphasized the "conceptual" nature of the piece when some of its strings were cut: rather than feeling that the work had been destroyed, he suggested that it nonetheless continued to exist as an idea. Noting the piece in language as **A SERIES OF STAKES SET IN THE GROUND AT REGULAR INTERVALS TO FORM A RECTANGLE TWINE STRUNG FROM STAKE TO STAKE TO DEMARK A GRID A RECTANGLE REMOVED FROM THIS RECTANGLE** (cat. #001), it became his first work in language. Like Acconci's *Room Piece*, documented as a combination of typewritten texts and photographs, and like *Spiral Jetty*, now buried and represented by photographic and video documentation, Weiner's work at Windham College, now completely destroyed, is signified by the above linguistic proposition.

However, unlike Acconci's photos and texts, which record the piece as an event, and Smithson's photos and videos, which testify that his work did exist as a sculptural production, Weiner's words -- and specifically his passive verb forms -- do not confirm the actuality of

its physical existence. Without knowing the history of the piece (i.e. whether or not it was built), we are not given the same kind of physical evidence or documentation to confirm that stakes were set in the ground and twine strung between them. Instead, Weiner's work is both a representation of (what might have been) a physical production, and a presentation of the idea of a construction.

Also unlike Acconci's and Smithson's actions, which exist in fixed times and places, Weiner's work is neither site- nor time-specific: in addition to the possibility that it might be constructed in other locations, it can also be built or re-built in the future. Weiner's use of language erases the difference between past, present, and future tenses, focusing instead on the potentiality of his work. [183] In this sense, his work in language is simultaneously a statement of an idea, a summary of (the possibility of) a past construction, and/or an indication of a (potential) future construction.

The potential nature of Weiner's art is further confirmed by the following conditions, which he has stated consistently since 1968:

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[183] See Lane Relyea, "But Can She Bake a Cherry Pie?" Parkett 42 (1994): 65.

1. THE ARTIST MAY CONSTRUCT THE WORK
2. THE WORK MAY BE FABRICATED
3. THE WORK NEED NOT BE BUILT

EACH BEING EQUAL AND CONSISTENT WITH THE INTENT OF THE ARTIST THE DECISION AS TO CONDITIONS RESTS WITH THE RECEIVER ON THE OCCASION OF RECEIVERSHIP [184]

This statement of intent identifies the complex relationship between Weiner's art as an idea and as a physical entity, and between himself and his viewers as its creator. The first part -- the artist may construct the work -- is relatively clear. As the artist, Weiner may physically build any one of his works. For example, for various exhibitions **A 36" X 36" REMOVAL TO THE LATHING OR SUPPORT WALL OF PLASTER OR WALLBOARD FROM A WALL** has been constructed by removing a 3-foot by 3-foot square from the wall in a museum or gallery space. For other exhibitions, the linguistic form alone has constituted this piece, with the text painted directly onto the wall in the exhibition space.

The second part of Weiner's statement -- the work may be fabricated -- is more ambiguous: he does not specify how, when, where, or by whom. It may be fabricated in the present; likewise it may have been constructed in the past, or be a proposition for the

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[184] Again, this is not a work, but an "essay" of a sort, stating the conditions by which to approach his art.

future. Although Weiner himself may (have) create(d) the piece as he suggests in the first point, he leaves this open through the use of the passive voice. Weiner's concluding remark -- each being equal and consistent with the intent of the artist the decision as to conditions rests with the receiver on the occasion of receivership -- seems to undermine his authority as a "creator": here the receiver, comparable to Barthes' notion of the "reader," is granted the potential to decide on the form(s) this art might take. [185] Weiner's interest in his viewers' active participation in the creation of his art can be traced back to his paintings, which he made according to specifications supplied by their recipients. Attempting to challenge what he referred to as "the arbitrariness of the decisions of [the] artist" [186] he aimed to make art that fit the "receivers'" ideals of how it should look. [187]

With the third point in his statement -- the work need not be built -- Weiner reminds us that his art exists as ideas, signified in language, which may be

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[185] For a discussion of "the problematization of the agent" and the "decentering of subjectivity" within conceptual art see "Round Table," October 70: 131-134.

[186] Schwarz 135.

[187] Schwarz 132.

independent of physical constructions. Though Weiner "proved" this point with his piece at Windham College, it is further emphasized by what he considers to be the medium of his art: "language and the materials referred to." [188] This would seem to imply that **A ROPE (OF HEMP) + A CABLE (OF STEEL) + A THREAD (OF SILK) & BRAIDED (ALL TOGETHER)** (cat. #681), for example, is made of language and hemp, steel, and silk. However, Weiner's "medium" does not consist of language and materials, but rather language and the materials referred to: put simply, his work is made of signs. If we deconstruct the statement, "language and the materials referred to," Weiner's medium can also be thought of as "language and the materials pointed to" or "language and indices." Thus, the above work is not made of language and hemp, steel, and silk, which would mean it exists both as a linguistic proposition and as a physical entity, but rather of language and signs for hemp, steel, and silk. It is this indexical quality that renders the actual materials and construction with them unnecessary -- even seemingly redundant. Therefore, in the above example, a rope of hemp, a cable of steel, and a thread of silk are already braided together linguistically; they need not be

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[188] This phrase serves as the "medium" for all of his catalogued works.

physically joined.

By stating that his work need not be built, Weiner seriously challenges the status of the art object and its role in a system that thrives on the creation of unique physical objects by individual artists. Though a number of Conceptual artists, such as Haacke, set out to undermine the commodity status and monetary value of art objects, this seems to be a consequence, rather than an objective of Weiner's work. His focus is less on the role of his work as a commodity per se, and more on the importance of the democratic use of art in contemporary society. The phrase NAU EM I ART BILONG YUMI, which translates from Papua New Guinea pidgin to "the art of today belongs to us," has appeared in a number of his books, drawings, and other pieces, announcing his ideal that art should be available to everyone. [189] Weiner has achieved this by giving away posters, pins, stickers, books, and other unlimited editions in association with his exhibitions. He has also declared a number of his works "public freehold", meaning that they are not for sale, but rather available to and owned by everyone.

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[189] This phrase is not one of Weiner's catalogued works, but one of a series of phrases that function like a chorus throughout his work. Others include "Stars don't stand still in the sky" and "Rome was built in a day."

With this type of work, which includes **COVERED BY CLOUDS** (cat. #629), viewers are invited to take his art home with them -- to copy down the work and "build" it in whatever way they see fit. Of course, practically speaking, this is the case with all of Weiner's work in language...

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As Weiner has consistently stated, and as I have made a case for in terms of the origins of his art "in the expanded field," his work can be considered sculpture despite his use of language as the medium. Though it might not look like sculpture because it lacks a sense of physical constructednesss, it nevertheless functions as sculpture on a semiotic level. However, it is also possible to consider Weiner's art sculpture <u>because</u> of his use of language -- in other words, to see Weiner's work in language as inscriptions, with language acting as the material substance in which it is made.

Unlike other artists whose work is linguistic, Weiner not only uses language as a medium in which to convey ideas, but also as a material substance in which

to mold them. In language he performs sculptural activities, just as he would if he were constructing his work with string, stone, or any of the other materials to which he refers. He uses language as a substance in which to bring together "many colored objects," or "a rope of hemp, a cable of steel, and a thread of silk," in much the same way that another artist might use clay to bring together -- or sculpt -- eyes, a nose, and lips to create a face. However, because of the intangible nature of language, its role as a material is elusive. Its qualities can be revealed through a comparison to "skywriting," the process by which planes make white marks in the sky. Like the point of a chisel put to marble by more traditional sculptors, skywriters "carve" their messages overhead: as the planes fly, they "push" and "part" the sky, inscribing marks -- usually words -- into it.

Weiner's sculpture, or inscriptions in language, function in much the same way: by painting his words on the walls of galleries and museums, printing them on posters and in books, and recording them in songs and sound-tapes, he materializes his marks in these supports, emphasizing the nature of his inscriptions that otherwise would be transparent. Though his art has taken all of these forms (and more), his presentations on walls most

literally exemplify the qualities of his inscriptions and reveal the material nature of language. In this format his marks, like skywriting, are impermanent: at the end of his exhibitions they are covered over, literally erased, in preparation for the next show. However, like skywriting messages that continue exist in people's minds after they fade, and like Weiner's work at Windham College that has continued to exist since its physical destruction, his inscriptions are present even after they are removed from the gallery's walls. [190]

This principle is epitomized by **AS LONG AS IT LASTS** (cat. #716), and its 1993 installation on the Euromast in Rotterdam. In this location, the work was presented in non-permanent paint so that, over time, the four meter high letters slowly disappeared. It's fading literalizes the idea, "as long as it lasts," and serves as a metaphor for the quality of Weiner's work as an inscription. [191]

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[190] This is confirmed, practically, by the fact that Weiner's works continue to be for sale even once they have been covered over.

[191] This work also appeared on pins, given away as gifts at the opening of the exhibition at Witte de With (Rotterdam), with which the Euromast project was connected.

It has also been presented in the form of a stainless steel stencil, appearing both in English and in Japanese (Edition Gallery 360, Tokyo). Here the words are cut from the metal, a physical inscription, which is then visualized when paint is applied through it.

In this sense Weiner seems to be literalizing Derrida's conception of writing as an inscription, making a material version of differance. For Derrida, writing consists of a detour in space and a deferral in time, both of which are present in this public project: the large scale of Weiner's letters, and their fading over time is a metaphor for the materiality of language in these two respects (detour and deferral).

In a number of recent exhibitions, instead of painting his works directly onto museum and gallery walls, Weiner has incised them into the exhibition space. For example, in 1995 some of the "stones" and "ampersands" of **STONES & STONES & STONES & STONES & STONES & STONES** were cut into the walls of the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York, revealing the textured wallboard beneath the layers of plaster and paint. It might seem that by literally inscribing this work into the architectural structures, Weiner is to attempting to reckon with the impermanence of his art. However, like his painted installations, these marks are also temporary; similarly obliterated at the end of the show. But as it was the case at Windham College, here only the physical manifestation of the piece is "erased": the work itself, which is an inscription in language, is present as a sculpture regardless of its visual presentation, or

lack thereof. Thus, instead of making his works permanent, Weiner's incisions are literalizations of the act of inscription. Like etching, in which "an image is made present by the creation of absences" [192], here Weiner demonstrates the material presence of his work as sculpture by "removing" the walls that serve to support its existence -- both visually, and economically as an object within the commodity-driven art market.

In the last decade and a half, Weiner has adopted another way to emphasize the sculptural nature of his work in language: diagrammatically. Consider, for example, **BREAD CAST UPON THE WATER** (cat. #712A), **WINE POURED UPON THE SEA** (cat.#712B), **STONES PLACED UPON EACH OTHER** (CAT. #712C), and **WOOD THRUST INTO BRINE** (CAT. #712D), which are each juxtaposed with visual diagrams indicating the processes involved in their construction. The objects (bread, wine, stones, and wood) are represented by rectangles, water by a horizontal line, and brine by two horizontal lines. The verbs (cast, poured, placed, and thrust) are represented by curved lines, modified "arrows" of a sort, depicting the action necessary to build each of these works. Using a combination of marks, Weiner suggests the movement of

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[192] Ernst van Alphen, "The Poetics of Etching," Ursula Neubauer (oeuvre catalogue), Amsterdam 1996.

these materials through space. When he exhibited these four works in 1994 at the Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, he incised the above words into the walls of the exhibition space, juxtaposing them with large-scale versions of their respective figures painted directly onto the walls. These diagrams visualized the notion that his work is not a series of "statements", but rather sculptures that "may be fabricated" though "need not be built."

But could Weiner's work really be this didactic? As I have argued, the act of physically constructing Weiner's art proves to be unnecessary for it to exist as sculpture because his work is, first and foremost inscriptions in language. One need not pour wine into the sea for it to function sculpturally, and on this level, these diagrams might also seem redundant. However, I would like to suggest another possibility in which Weiner's visual presentations expand our ideas about language. Over the past fifteen or more years the visual (and, in some cases, audible) components of Weiner's work in exhibitions, as well as in printed, recorded, and editioned pieces, have become increasingly elaborate, beautiful, and arresting; they are anything but unnecessary parts of his artistic practice. Instead of redundant translations or manifestations of the work as

sculpture, Weiner's diagrams -- along with his use of colored paints and unique layouts -- have become part of his sculptures.

Weiner's diagrams remind us that his work is not a reduction of the artistic experience because it uses language, but rather an expansion of the linguistic experience into the visual field. Just as sculpture has come to include language, so too has language moved to include "visual sculpture" such as Weiner's works. Thus Weiner's visualization of words and materials leads us to ponder not only the relationship between the visual and verbal fields, but also the nature of the relationship between materiality and visuality. Is visuality merely part of the material form language can take? Or is visuality a metaphor for materiality? Or is visuality a supplement that materiality needs to be "whole"? Weiner does not answer these questions, but constructs a frame -- in which language is at once a medium, a material, and part of an intricate system of visual signs -- from which to explore them.

Conclusion

> I was once hired to do picture research for an industrial film about the history of transportation, a film that was to be made largely by shooting footage of still photographs; it was my job to find appropriate photographs. Browsing through the stacks of the New York Public Library where books on the general subject of transportation were shelved, I came across the book by Ed Ruscha entitled *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, first published in 1963 and consisting of photographs of just that: twenty-six gasoline stations. I remember thinking how funny it was that the book had been miscatalogued and placed alongside books about automobiles, highways, and so forth. I knew, as the librarians evidently did not, that Ruscha's book was a work of art and therefore belonged in the art division. But now, because of the reconfiguration brought about by postmodernism, I've changed my mind; I now know that Ed Ruscha's books make no sense in relation to the categories of art according to which art books are catalogued in the library, and that is part of their achievement. The fact that there is nowhere for *Twentysix Gasoline Stations* within the present system of classification is an index of the book's radicalism with respect to established modes of thought. [193]

Writing about art involves drawing lines. Time-lines document the chronological achievements of artists, as well as the succession of art practices and broad-based movements; lines of influence attempt to trace and project the effects of one artist on another, and one movement on another; lines drawn from one artist, type of work, or movement to another connect practices that seem similar, resulting in larger groupings or contexts; and lines drawn between artists, types of work, or movements

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[193] Crimp 78.

separate that which seems dissimilar. All of these lines are present in conventional analyses of the relationship between words and images in visual art, and in the larger analysis of the relationship between the verbal and visual fields. It is a consequence of these lines, which function both to link and to separate, that Ruscha's, Holzer's, Kruger's, Lawler's and Weiner's work has been positioned within the over-arching "word-and-image" category, which -- because of its hybridity -- tends to be segregated from the mainstream of art historical discourse.

In the process of examining the role of words and language in contemporary art -- and more specifically in the work of these five contemporary artists who use words and/or language in a visual(ized) ways -- I have been examining the lines that link and separate, considering who has drawn them and to what end, and deconstructing them. In their place I have been enacting frames --- ways of looking and interpreting comparable to a photographer's cropping technique -- in order to bring the visual aspects of these artists' work with and within language to the foreground. Such re-framing has proven to be critical: without it, Ruscha's work would continue to be seen as Pop art, forsaking the ties his early work had to Abstract Expressionism or the unique visual

theories about the nature of words and images his art produces. Without it, Holzer's, Kruger's, and Lawler's work would be identified either as photographic or as feminist, lacking an understanding of the extent to which these aspects of their practices intersect, not only with one another, but also with the role of words and language in visual art. Without it, Weiner's work would continue to be seen as Conceptual art, rather than sculpture, denying his complex formulations of language as a material in which to make visual inscriptions.

Like the librarian who had to decide on which shelf to place Ruscha's *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, I have had to construct frames from which to analyze the relationship between words and images in contemporary art, and the role(s) of words and language in the work of individual artists. Like Ruscha's book which, according to Douglas Crimp, is unclassifiable within the established system of library categories, so too is the rest of Ruscha's art -- along with that of Holzer, Kruger, Lawler and Weiner -- within the existing limits of verbal/visual hybridity. By reframing their work outside of the parameters of what has come to be known as "word-and-image", "art-and-language", and "image-and-text" we are free to examine all aspects of contemporary their painting, photography and sculpture.

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