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Art=Text=Art: Works by Contemporary Artists

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(ART + TEXT) x CHANGE = ART: OR, HOW TO READ AN ARTWORK WITH YOUR iPhone™

N. ELIZABETH SCHLATTER

Gabe: Change equals death!

Judy: What kind of bullshit? That's just a bullshit line! Maybe you fool your twenty-year-old students into thinking that's some kind of a, an insight or something, but it means nothing! Change is what life is made of! Change – if you don't change, you don't grow; you just shrivel up!

With his typical brevity, wit, and exaggeration, Woody Allen's character Gabe, in the 1992 movie "[Husbands and Wives](#)," laments the changes he witnesses in his friends' relationships and his own crumbling marriage. His wife, Judy, played by Mia Farrow, likewise responds in a manner predictable for her character — exasperated, emotional, but like Gabe, declarative. Of course, they are both correct. Change often results in the death or loss of something, or perhaps of a portion or aspect of something, but without change, things die completely.

The ability to change is crucial to the survival of both language and art. Innovations in technology within the last several years have spurred evolutions in our use of the English language, evidenced most clearly (and to some, regrettably) by the invention of "texting."¹ New definitions of the word *text*, as a noun meaning "a text message" or as a verb "to send a text," have followed the example of the invention or resuscitation of other words influenced by previous developments in technology.² Words like *phone*, *fax*, and *e-*

mail began as nouns and eventually served as verbs as well. However, *text* works as either a verb or a noun yet also refers to its own content. Whereas a phone call is composed of the spoken word, and an e-mail consists of text, a text message is composed of itself, namely "text," meaning written or printed words.

The popular media often voices concerns by people worried that texting and its countless abbreviations (e.g. *LOL* and *L8R*) will result in the end of proper spelling, attention spans, civility, privacy, relaxation, and good driving skills. Yet such fear regarding new forms of communication dates back at least to the ancient Greeks. In Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates criticized the invention of writing (as opposed to the spoken word), arguing that it had made men intellectually lazy, as they were free from committing information to memory. According to Socrates, men who can rely upon written information instead of memorization, "will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without reality."³

¹ For an extensive analysis of texting's impact on language see David Crystal, *Texting: The Gr8 Db8* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2008). This essay for *Art=Text=Art* refers only to the English language, but Crystal's book provides examples of inventions and adaptations occurring in dozens of languages worldwide.

² Variations of *text* as a noun meaning "wording of anything written" date back to the fourteenth century and as a verb meaning "to write in text letters" as early as the 1590s. However, in 2005 dictionary sources

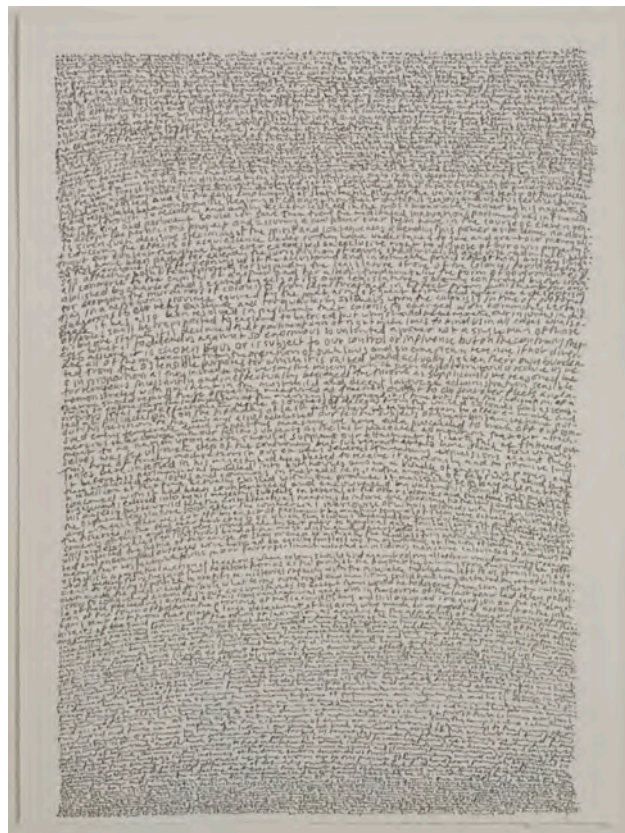
added the definition "to send a text message." [Online Etymology Dictionary](#). Douglas Harper, Historian. (accessed: 3 July 2011)

³ For an interesting analysis of the discussion of the written word in Plato's "Phaedrus" and its relevance to electronic media today, see "[If Socrates Had E-mail](#)," a speech given in February 1997, by Kenyon College president, S. Georgia Nugent.

Due to their evolving relationship to text, contemporary art viewers bring an expanded range of interpretation to their “reading” of artwork that incorporates text. For example, compare [William Anastasi’s two drawings titled *Word Drawing Over Short Hand Practice Page*](#), both from 1962, with [Annabel Daou’s *The Declaration of the Cause and Necessity of Taking Up Arms*](#), from 2006. All three works feature the artists’ handwriting and content originally authored by someone else. The former includes shorthand exercise sheets and the latter is a handwritten copy of a [1775 document](#) prepared primarily by Thomas Jefferson to explain why the colonies had begun arming themselves in the lead-up to the Revolutionary War.

Anastasi, along with other so-called first-generation text artists such as [Lawrence Weiner](#), [Sol LeWitt](#), and [Robert Barry](#), employed characteristics and strategies that tested the definition of art, such as immateriality, temporality, de-skilling, and de-authoring. These artists explored modern currents in philosophy and semiotics, interrogating the relationships between language, image, and meaning. The pre-printed shorthand symbols in Anastasi’s *Word Drawing Over Short Hand Practice Page* bear no relation to the longhand words the artist wrote next to the symbols, and this combination of words and symbols challenges the viewer to contemplate how meaning is personalized and conveyed in text. However, many observers today would likely consider shorthand an antiquated skill, if they even recognize what shorthand looks like at all. Thus, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Anastasi’s two drawings not only exhibit semiotic connotations, they also suggest the diminishing utility of systems of handwriting in particular (shorthand and longhand) as a means of notation and communication.

Daou’s transcription of a historical document written at the beginning of the American Revolution is initially visually intriguing because of the large amount of handwritten text squeezed onto a relatively small piece of paper.



Annabel Daou, *The Declaration of the Cause and Necessity of Taking Up Arms*, 2006, graphite on paper, 7 ½ x 5 ½ inches (19.1 x 14 cm). © Annabel Daou / Photo: Laura Mitchell

When was the last time any of us have written so much by hand? And why copy in longhand a document that surely exists in printed form? Daou’s choice to handwrite in 2006 comes from motivations different from Anastasi’s choice to write in cursive in 1962. With the pervasive use of laptops, smartphones, and touchscreen tablets, combined with the free availability of historical documents on the Internet, to write a pre-existing text in longhand is a means to internalize that text both mentally and physically. This important link between text and hand — as a highly personal, time-consuming, and outdated mode of communication — is readily but perhaps not consciously recognized by a contemporary viewer. This subtext of hand-scripted words contributes to the depth of meaning in Daou’s work, particularly when combined with factors such as the artist’s personal history (Daou was born in Lebanon and lives in New York), American history and politics, and, like Anastasi, semiotics.



Allyson Strafella, *Untitled*, 1995, typewriter drawing on carbon paper, 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches (27.3 x 21.6 cm). © Allyson Strafella / Photo: Laura Mitchell

In light of the blistering pace at which communications technology is evolving and the delivery of text via computers, smartphones, and e-readers, there is a possibly unintended but nonetheless strong sense of nostalgia pervading some of the art in *Art=Text=Art*. Donald Evans's stamps from the 1970s that he created for imaginary societies, Ray Johnson's mail art from the 1970s and 1980s, and Buster Cleveland's ART FOR UM subscription series from the 1990s are no less fascinating today, but it is difficult to view them now without being reminded of the waning usage of the postal service. A few works made within the past ten years purposely incorporate means of recording, delivering, and receiving text that are declining in popularity. By using aging and yellowed pages or endpapers from books, John Fraser and Suzanne Bocanegra suggest opaque narratives with materials that are instantly recognizable and evocative. Allyson Strafella and Stefana McClure employ the unmistakable mark of typewritten impressions yet render them

ineffective as communicative means. Karen Schiff references the structure of the placement of text and image in newspapers and illuminated manuscripts. These later works of art almost seem to negate text altogether, to promote the contemplation of the role of text in our lives by rendering it incomprehensible or absent where it should normally occur.

New communication technologies also foster new patterns of reading, specifically the literal physical act of moving the eyes to locate and recognize meaningful letters, words, and sentences. For example, frequent Internet users learn to "power browse," rapidly skimming over text and images on a website to find the most relevant or interesting content. While efficient for seeking discrete bits of information, this style of reading may preclude the capacity for content retention and for a deeper comprehension and engagement with longer texts, such as novels.⁶

Several artworks in the exhibition remind us that reading is a learned physical activity that adapts to visual obstacles. Mel Bochner's series of monoprints entitled *If the Color Changes...*, from 2003, feature rectangles or ovals of brightly colored inks, on top of which he has printed in black sans-serif capital letters a quotation from the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's unfinished work *Remarks on Colour*, from 1950-51. The excerpt is printed in both English and German, with one translation overlapping the other. Bochner is playing with ideas about the opacity and transparency of language (a constant theme in his work), the definition of color, and the inability to simultaneously "see" a work of art aesthetically and read text that exists on or within the same visual plane. Although Bochner's prints seem most obviously to be about the subjective nature of words and of color, they are also about reading. One must visually tease the

⁶ For references to a British study of online reading habits see Carr, op. cit.

words out from under each other to read and comprehend the quote.

Both [Cy Twombly's *Untitled*](#) (1971) and [John Waters's *35 Days*](#) (2003) test the limits of legibility in handwritten forms.⁷ [Ed Ruscha's *Gray Sex*](#) (1979) and [Susanna Harwood Rubin's *102 boulevard Haussmann*](#) (2000) exploit the mind's automatic capacity to recognize words with minimal visual cues and to then immediately imbue those words with personal references. Alternately, within the context of *Art=Text=Art* a few works suddenly become more "readable" or at the very least more textual than they might be if displayed alone. Examples include [Jane Hammond's *Scrapbook*](#) (2003) composed of a selection of elements from her personal visual vocabulary; [Christine Hiebert's *three study drawings, Untitled \(Brand Markings\)*](#) from 1998-99, which feature what appear to be newly invented letterforms; and [Joel Shapiro's *Untitled*](#) (1969), with small fingerprints on a grid suggesting a potentially disturbing record keeping of human activity.

Finally, several of the pieces in *Art=Text=Art* relate to data visualization. Data visualization has been around for centuries,⁸ but the explosion of computer-assisted data visualization over the past ten years — from relatively simplistic word clouds to complex and interactive infographics — as well as its increasing use in the popular media, minimizes the conceptual leap from information to static visual forms. Older examples from the exhibition include [Mark Lombardi's *Casino Resort Development in the Bahamas c. 1955-89 \(Fourth Version\)*](#) (1995), which diagrams a complex and corrupt network of power relations and money flow be-

⁷ Waters collects Twombly's art, and he referred to Twombly's handwriting as "both violent and erotic," in a lecture at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in 2009. For a description of that talk see Howard Kaplan, "John Waters on Cy Twombly," *Eye Level*, Smithsonian American Art Museum, 30 March 2009. (accessed 24 June 2011)

⁸ For the history and analysis of data visualization, see Edward Tufte, *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, LLC, 2001).

tween organizations and people, and choreographer [Trisha Brown's *Untitled and Drawing for Pyramid*](#) (both 1975), which were created to help her dancers visualize the concepts of accumulation and de-accumulation of movements in a performance.



Jill Baroff, *Untitled (Tide Drawing)*, 2006, pigmented ink on Japanese gampi mounted on rag, 31 x 31 inches (78.7 x 78.7 cm). © Jill Baroff / Photo: Ellen McDermott

A few contemporary works in *Art=Text=Art* relay information in a similar fashion but seem particularly poetic because of their embodied, personal interpretations, their irregularities in transcription as opposed to standard algorithmic constructions, and their apparent lack of practical purpose outside of artistic expression. [Jill Baroff's *Untitled \(Tide Drawing\)*](#) (2006) is part of a series of works informed by recorded water levels at different locations during a period of about two or three days, yet the image seems more focused on emulating the overall sense of the rhythm of waves than conveying actual measurements. [Suzanne Bocanegra's *Brushstrokes in a Victorian Flower Album: Long Headed Poppy*](#) (2000) mimics and categorizes the brushstrokes used by the illustrator in a nineteenth-century publication. In her [artist's book *Breaths #1*](#) (2010), Jill O'Bryan punctured sheets of paper with

a pin, each hole marking one breath taken by the artist, and then rubbed the raised portions of the paper with graphite. But O'Bryan's intent is not to record an action or series of actions but rather to refer to the fluidity of images and to the concept of air as floating and moving through bodies, just as it moves through the holes in the book when one turns the pages.

Situating the art in *Art=Text=Art* within the framework of new modes of textual communication underscores the continued relevancy of art incorporating text. The older works from the 1960s to 1990s maintain their original content but also acquire new import thanks in part to the role of text in today's society. Meanwhile the most recent works were created amidst the infiltration of text into our everyday lives, and that contemporary context pervades both the production and the reception of the work.

Ultimately, Mia Farrow's character's pronouncement about change rings true for both language and art. Flexibility ensures the continued use of English despite novel modes of communication. Art, however, progresses somewhat differently. While the kind of art being made changes according to the times in which it is created, most art, once made, doesn't radically

change (except, of course, when one of the primary characteristics of the art is change). But viewers' perceptions do change. And the art that withstands time is, like language, ideologically flexible enough to retain a core content while accommodating new meanings and interpretations. Experiencing a contemporary exhibition about text in art allows us to consider that flexibility from a distinct vantage point, and leads us to wonder how people will see and "read" the same art in the future.

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