

THE
WORD
IS
ART

The WORD is Art

MICHAEL PETRY

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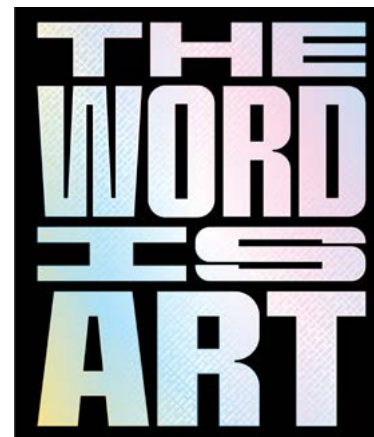
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A fascinating global overview of how contemporary artists incorporate text and language into work that speaks to some of the most pressing issues of the 21st century.

There has been much scaremongering about the 'death of the book' and how, as words find new ways and means of transmission, people might gradually begin to shun writing. In the digital age, text becomes information, and information strives to become free. But what value can text hold in the sphere of visual art? How is such text different to poetry? Can the poetic itself be visual art, or is text in this context consigned to the realms of gimmick and catchphrase?

Looking at the work of a broad range of artists including, Ghada Amer, Fiona Banner, Tania Bruguera, Chun Kwang Young, Martin Creed, eL Seed, Jenny Holzer, Roni Horn, Joseph Kosuth, Barbara Kruger, Christian Marclay, Annette Messager, Harland Miller, Raymond Pettibon, Laure Prouvost, Kay Rosen, Rachel Whiteread, Christopher Wool, Cerith Wyn Evans, Zhang Huan and many more, *The WORD is Art* examines each of these questions, contending above all that in the digital and online age, words have become more important than ever. With the advent of texting and social media, many predicted the debasement of language, and some have pointed to evidence of this in our 'post-truth' culture. Michael Petry demonstrates that, on the contrary, words remain critical, powerful and central to art practice.

Digital communication has seen the word as text permeate life in ways that the poets and artists of yesterday could never have imagined. Presenting a brief history of word- and book-based art, and examining major areas where the word has dominated artistic practice – **Installed Words, Three-Dimensional Words, Light, New Media, The Conceptual Word, Social Comment, The Drawn Word, Books** – *The WORD is Art* takes us on a fascinating and richly illustrated global tour of diverse contemporary art forms.

Michael Petry is an artist, author and Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), London. The *Trouble with Michael*, a monograph of his practice, was published in 2001, and his 2012 one-man show, 'The Touch of the Oracle' at the Palm Springs Art Museum, was accompanied by a ten-year career retrospective publication. Petry was the first artist-in-residence at Sir John Soane's Museum. He has written a number of books, including *Installation Art*, *The Art of Not Making: the new artist / artisan relationship*, and *Nature Morte: Contemporary Artists Reinvent the Still-Life Tradition*, all published by Thames & Hudson.

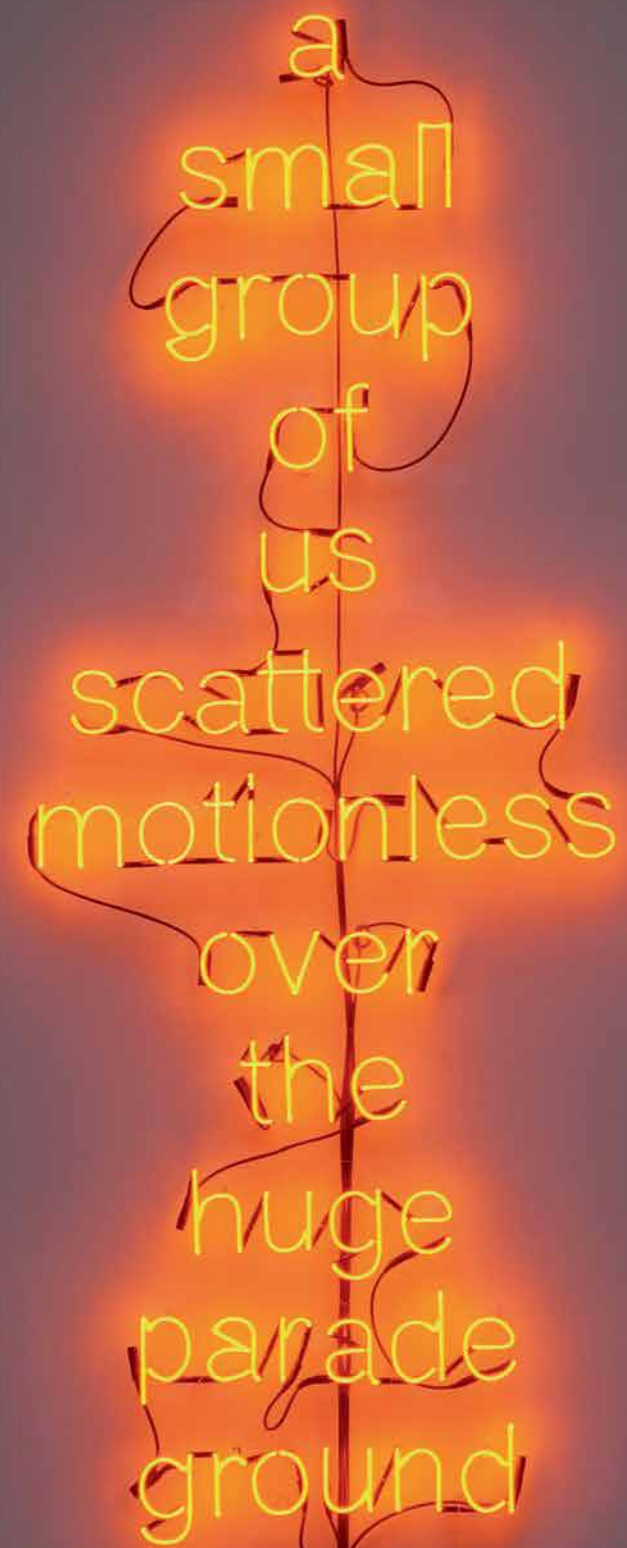


The American artist Joseph Kosuth is one of the founders of the conceptual art movement, making such text-based works as the 'First Investigations' series of dictionary definitions: *'Titled (Art as Idea as Idea) [Water] (1966)* is a photostat of the definition of water mounted on board. Kosuth has also made neon works installed in galleries and museums. *'The Wake (An arrangement of references with all the appearance of autonomy)'* (above) features white neon on grey walls. The work references James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), a modern classic renowned for its experimental style. Kosuth selected phrases from the book based on their location on the printed page. The novel has not been translated into Turkish, but he used both English and Turkish translations for the installation at the KUAD Gallery, Istanbul.

The British artist Tim Etchells – who is artistic director of the influential performance-art group Forced Entertainment – has worked across many media. The neon work *Conscientious Objectors* (opposite) displays the words of Alfred Evans, a First World War 'conchy' who, after being imprisoned in 1916 and sent against his will to France with fifty other men, refused to participate in military drills. The piece was exhibited during the 'After a War' programme at the Battersea Arts Centre, London, as part of the city's biennial LIFT festival. Etchells explains that he is attracted to 'the speed, clarity and vividness with which [language] communicates narrative, image and ideas', yet simultaneously creates 'uncertainty and ambiguity'.

ABOVE · Joseph Kosuth
'The Wake (An arrangement of references with all the appearance of autonomy)', 2012
Warm white neon mounted directly on wall · Dimensions variable

OPPOSITE · Tim Etchells
Conscientious Objectors, 2014
Neon · Approx. 246 × 100 cm (96¾ × 39¾ in.)



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Michael Petry

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