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William Chapman Sharpe

The idea that we can compare poetry and painting has its roots in antiquity. It was the Greek lyric poet Simonides of Keos (c. 556–468 BC), who first said, according to Plutarch, that “poetry is a speaking picture, while painting is silent poetry.” (“*Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens*”). Today the phrase from Horace’s *Ars Poetica* is better known: *Ut pictura poesis*: “As is painting so is poetry.” Both writers suggest an equivalence between the two arts, but audiences and critics have also seen the comparison as a sort of tug-of-war between forms of representation, wherein each strives to outdo the other by accomplishing what its rival cannot. The popular saying that a picture is worth a thousand words meets its match in the ancient concept of *ekphrasis*, the verbal representation of visual representation, wherein a whole gallery of pictures can be evoked in a few stanzas of poetic imagery.¹ On the one hand the Greeks created forms of sculpture and painting that have shaped our ways of seeing for millennia, while on the other hand their literature found a way to encompass that achievement through descriptive masterpieces such as Homer’s account of the shield of Achilles in Book 18 of the *Iliad*.

Word and Image

Poems spell out ideas and emotions that pictures can only show from the outside, but pictures show explicitly a visual world that poems can only lay before the eye of the mind. The contest is often uneven, as one form of presentation is temporarily favored over another. For example, Horace is a poet, but he seems to give priority to visual judgment when he compares how both poetry and painting act on an audience:

Poetry resembles painting. Some works will captivate you when you stand very close to them and others if you are at a greater distance. This one prefers a darker

¹ See James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

vantage point, that one wants to be seen in the light since it feels no terror before the penetrating judgment of the critic. This pleases only once, that will give pleasure even if we go back to it ten times over.²

In the eighteenth century the German critic Gotthold Lessing took issue with Horace and the subsequent generations of critics, poets, and artists who had agreed with him, a consensus that had led poetry and painting to be called “the sister arts.”³ In *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), Lessing contended that the comparisons were fundamentally misguided, since literature unfolds in time and painting in space. Rather, he said, each has its own domain and method of making an impression on an audience. But plenty of critics since Lessing’s day have found a way to accept his insights without reaching the same conclusion. They take note of how, particularly with the advent of Modernism, literature assumes an important spatial dimension on the page, while painting is seen, scrutinized, and understood over a period of time, as our eyes travel between and over the elements of the work.⁴

If we look at some of the main ways that words and images emulate or imitate each other, we can better grasp the nature of these comparisons, and why they continue, after all these centuries, to offer fascinating new possibilities for writers, artists, and audiences.

To begin with, poems and pictures can prompt comparison when they share the same overarching theme, such as the suffering caused by love or death, or when they treat specific but still general subjects, such as New York skyscrapers or World War I. When comparing the handling of similar content, critics often look not only at parallels or divergences in meaning; they also analyze how the artist or writer’s choice of form impacts the overall representation. They might point to a set of conceptual priorities, such as the mind/nature dialectic in works of William Wordsworth and John Constable, or focus on a stylistic trait that seems to belong to a particular period, such as fragmenting of objects and conceptual space in both a Cubist still life and a poem like T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922). Or they might seek more local structural parallels, comparing the recurrence of a color to the recurrence of a literary image, for example.

Theoreticians of the arts have speculated at length about the distinctive or cross-over properties of texts and visual images.⁵ But poetry/painting comparisons begin

² Leon Golden, trans. *Horace for Students of Literature: The 'Ars Poetica' and Its Tradition*, (Miami: University Press of Florida, 1995), 361.

³ See Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁴ See Joseph Frank, “Spatial Form in Modern Literature,” in *The Widening Gyre* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 3-62, and Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

to have specific interest for the rest of us when we are confronted with pairs of works that match up more closely. We scrutinize both works to see where they overlap in the presentation of a given motif, and where they diverge, thanks to their medium or the interpretation of their creator. Many paintings have been inspired by a particular poem. Charles Demuth's poster-painting *I Saw the Figure Five in Gold* (1928) developed directly from his friend William Carlos Williams' poem, "The Great Figure" (1921). Dante Gabriel Rossetti painted *The Blessed Damosel* (1875-1878) a few decades after he himself had written a poem of the same name (1850). Rossetti, in fact, matched up so many of his poems and paintings that the artist James McNeill Whistler quipped, "why not frame the sonnet?" Alfred Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" (1832) led William Holman Hunt and many other Victorian artists to picture what happens to the title character. When Tennyson complained that Hunt's illustration had trapped the Lady in her own tapestry, making her unable to complete the action of the poem, Hunt replied, Lessing-like, that the poet had a dozen pages to tell his tale, while the artist had to cram the whole of her fate into a single half-page image. And of course a huge number of paintings have been based on brief moments in narrative or dramatic poems, with epic authors such as Homer, Vergil, Dante, and Tasso joining Shakespeare as major sources of inspiration. Sometimes even a mere title can be enough: in 1889 Van Gogh named his most famous work with reference to Walt Whitman's "From Noon to Starry Night." A century later, in 1993, the painter Jane Hammond asked the poet John Ashbery for a list of titles that she could use to engender paintings. By 2002 sixty paintings had resulted from their collaboration.

The flip side of this relationship is the poem that has been inspired by a painting. While Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* has sparked many poems, William Butler Yeats thought that Walter Pater's prose description of the painting (1866) was so beautiful that in 1936 he cut it up into free verse lines to make it the opening "poem" in the *Oxford Book of Modern Poetry*. And in fact one of the hallmarks of modern poetry has been its fascination with paintings. Pound, Eliot, Stevens, Bishop, Auden, Plath, Sexton, and many others took works of visual art as starting points. The ekphrastic poem, dealing perhaps with a Vermeer, a Van Gogh, or a Hopper, is now one of the most common types of lyric that a reader will encounter. William Carlos Williams was especially active and influential in this genre. He wrote "A Pot of Flowers" (1923) after seeing *Tuberoses* (1922) by his friend Demuth; he invoked the Unicorn Tapestries and Jackson Pollock in the same breath in the fifth part of *Paterson* (1946-1961); and he called his last book "Pictures from Breughel" (1962), after a ten-poem cycle in which he paired his works with famous Renaissance paintings by the Flemish master. John Ashbery, who worked for many years as an art critic, once

⁵ See W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

titled a poem "And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name." More significantly, he used the mannerist artist Parmigianino's *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (1524) as the starting point for his greatest work, a long autobiographical poem of the same title (1975).

Seeking to beat *ekphrasis* at its own game, in 1997 the artist David Hockney published a book of etchings that originated in his reading of a poem about a painting. His book was called *The Blue Guitar: Etchings By David Hockney Who Was Inspired By Wallace Stevens Who Was Inspired By Pablo Picasso*. Hockney's source was Stevens's famous poem about how art transforms reality, called "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (1937). And Stevens was clearly describing Picasso's masterpiece from his blue period, *The Old Guitarist* (1903). Just as viewers of Picasso's canvas have had to contend with Stevens's rendition of it – "things as they are / Are changed when played upon the blue guitar" – so now readers of Stevens must acknowledge that Hockney has added a further layer of meaning to the blue guitar's image.⁶

Yet already at the end of the eighteenth century, the English poet, printer, and artist William Blake had already brought the two arts closer still. He wrote poems, such as the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience* (1794), that he surrounded and interpenetrated with images that partly illustrated and partly commented on the text, creating a visual/verbal construct that needs to be "read" as a single, integrated entity.⁷ Nonetheless, it is possible to extract a Blake poem from its visual context, and common editorial practice has left most of his texts bereft of their swirling, colorful settings. Respected as Blake's artistry is, the fate of his poems suggests that one's reputation as writer or painter makes a difference in how the verbal/visual work is received and reproduced. J. M. W. Turner appended verses to his stormy, light-inundated canvases, but today few people have ever seen his effusions on "The Fallacies of Hope," as he called his underlying theme.

There is a way, however, for poets to insure that their texts will not be divided from the pictures that they literally spell out. A poem can meet visual art on its own ground when the text conveys both an idea and a picture at the same time. The technique goes back to the ancient Greeks. By arranging his words in longer and shorter line-lengths, the pastoral poet Theocritus self-referentially gave one of his poems the form of shepherd's pipes. In modern times two of the key players in this game are the metaphysical poet George Herbert in the seventeenth century and Guillaume Apollinaire in the twentieth. Herbert, a religious poet, saw his works as acts of devotion, as in "Easter Wings" (1633) where the shape of the poem makes a pair of bird's wings that lift the poet's or reader's spirit up to God.⁸ Apollinaire on the other hand deployed his visual/verbal lines with humor and irony, as he made

⁶ Wallace Stevens, "The Man with the Blue Guitar," *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 165.

⁷ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_\(William_Blake_poem\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/London_(William_Blake_poem))

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Easter_Wings

pictures of fountains, neckties, and the Eiffel Tower in his collection *Calligrammes* (1918).⁹

In a variant of this approach, the poet can use words and punctuation to create visual images within the poem. Williams exploited the overlap between semantic and visual signs when he ringed the word "soda" with asterisks to emulate the look of a neon sign in his poem

"The Attic Which Is Desire" (1930):

Here

from the street

by

* * *

* S *

* O *

* D *

* A *

* * *

ringed with
running lights

the darkened
pane

exactly
down the center

is
transfixed ¹⁰

Williams, who repeated his motto "No ideas but in things" in more than one poem, sought to make the poem a material thing, what he called "a machine made of words." A key source of this Modernist dream was *Un coup de dés* (1897) by Stéphane Mallarmé. Mallarmé showed poets how to use the white field of the page, as well as the size of the typeface, as a silent partner in shaping the rhythm and meaning of what we read. Ever since, writers have been drawn to the liberating advantages conferred by the freedom to sculpt that white space of the page with lines of varying length, size, and placement. The rock-bottom definition of poetry

⁹ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Guillaume_Apollinaire_-_Calligramme_-_Tour_Eiffel.png

¹⁰ William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, Vol. 1. 1909-1939, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986), 325.

may be that it is a verbal medium in which we care where the line ends. Mallarmé added a profound qualification: we must care where each line and word is *placed*.¹¹

Visual shape has now become an integral part of how modern poetry communicates, and perhaps no poet has ever exploited its possibilities as fully as e. e. cummings. Take, for example, his poem “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r”:

r - p - o - p - h - e - s - s - a - g - r

who

a)s w(e loo)k
upnowgath

PPEGORHRASS

eringint(o-

aThe): l

eA

!p:

S

(r

a

rIvInG

.gRrEaPsPh0s)

to

rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
, grasshopper; ¹²

Cummings shows how Lessing was wrong: poetry can unfold not only in time but also in space until, “upnowgath . . . ering,” it pulls itself together and springs forward on the page toward the eye, ear, and mind of the receptive reader. Today most modern poetry is not only an art of duration but also of visual evocation, and the two modes work together to make their impression on an audience.

Having reviewed some of the ways that word and image can interact, ways that often involve bringing visual effects into literature, I now want to shift the focus and look at a phenomenon less frequently examined: how do words function within paintings? In a visually oriented modern culture, we can readily understand why poets might want to incorporate the immediate power of a visual image in their poems, but why would a painter or sculptor want to locate words *within* the visual field? Let’s consider the two main ways that artists can work with words: word *in* image and word *as* image.

¹¹ <https://textualites.wordpress.com/2015/10/01/avez-vous-deja-lu-un-poeme-graphique/>

¹² E.E. Cummings, *Poems 1923-1954* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1968), 286.

Word in Image

Some words function in paintings to make us think, to complete in a conceptual way what is going on in the image. If we look at Nicholas Poussin's *Et In Arcadia Ego* (1637-1638), we see three shepherds bending over an inscription on a tomb, while a fourth figure, a woman whose aspect helps us identify her as representing Art, places a consoling hand on one shepherd's shoulder. The words they all contemplate are those of the title: "And I too [am or was] in Arcadia." Whether we imagine these words being spoken by a dead shepherd buried here, or by Death or the tomb itself, the central message is that death lurks even in pastoral paradise. Yet the consoling figure of Art indicates the compensation: art helps people, events, and ideas outlast the mortal conditions of life. We can remember the dead and make certain moments live again through the skillful use of images. Indeed, the word "image" comes from "imago," the wax figures of dead ancestors that were used for funeral rites in classical antiquity.¹³

If images can help preserve what's in danger of being lost, words threaten that power. Not only can they remind us of death's imminence, but they can also force us to acknowledge that images are "only" images, and not the real thing. Words in paintings can function like the credits in a film, breaking the frame, so to speak, to indicate that it took some dedicated effort to produce the illusion we see. Probably the most famous instance of this is René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* (1928-1929). When Magritte writes, "this is not a pipe" beneath his painted picture of a pipe, he calls attention to the difference between representation and reality. He later said: "The famous pipe. How people reproached me for it! And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it's just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture "This is a pipe," I'd have been lying!"¹⁴

The picture is famous for making explicit what everyone knows, but it raises further questions. Are Magritte's words part of the picture, are they a visual as well as verbal text? Or do they register as a caption separate from yet pertaining to the image? Moreover, does this picture demonstrate and yield to a hierarchy of media, in which words take precedence over images? Most captions powerfully control our reactions to the supposed reality that a photograph has captured; so do titles of works in any medium also disproportionately determine how we respond? Pictures promise an immediate access to a slice of visual life, but words can claim a further, deeper, or prior knowledge that can alter our understanding. One indication of the word's power is the rise of the word "untitled" as a substitute title. Even though it is

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Et_in_Arcadia_ego

¹⁴ Harry Torczyner, *Magritte: Ideas and Images*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Abrams, 1977), 71.

itself a word, "untitled" functions as a sort of shield to protect the non-verbal work from the onslaught of connotations, denotations, and personal or cultural associations that any verbal title can trigger.

Another reason that artists use words in a visual framework is to compensate for the auditory gap in images that have no way of making sounds. Thanks to comic strips, we are accustomed to the convention that places spoken (or thought) words in bubbles above characters' heads. But when Roy Lichtenstein began creating his pop-art canvases with words and scenes from imagined comics, such as *Whaam* (1963) or *Drowning Girl* (1963), he was returning to a time-honored technique; there are high-art antecedents to popular graphic entertainment.¹⁵ Medieval and Renaissance painters used inscriptions, scrolls, and other devices to convey what was being said in holy scenes. Because the spoken word is so important when Mary learns that she will be the mother of Jesus, artists found many ways to suggest speech in their Annunciation scenes. Around 1340 Fra Angelico used airborne words as well as writing on architectural features in his Annunciation scenes, while in 1511 Gaudenzio Ferrari had the angel Gabriel carry a staff with the words of his Gospel text written on it (1511).¹⁶ Jan Van Eyck wrote the Virgin Mary's response to the angel upside down his Annunciation (1434), as if they were being seen or heard from God's aerial perspective. David Hockney combined modern and medieval elements when he wrote the words "we 2 boys together clinging" (a phrase from a Walt Whitman poem) around his embracing figures in a work from 1961, making the words serve as title and dialogue, as well as a spatial reinforcement of the picture's main concept.¹⁷

There's an obvious reason, too, why words appear in paintings: nowadays we find them so often in landscapes or interiors that they can't be overlooked. Painted words frequently serve mimetic purposes, and to put them in the picture is not to break the frame but to consolidate the realistic effect of the image. The landscape of modernity is a written landscape, and advertising in particular has altered both the look of the world and the look of art. It's a fundamental goal of advertising to try and catch the eye, and that means that the artist who paints a pre-existing advertisement (or even makes his own ads up, as John Sloan often did) is exploiting the visual qualities of a message that was already designed to attract visual attention. Billboards sprouted all over Europe and America in the nineteenth century as literacy rates rose, and John Parry's *A London Street Scene* (1835) is one of the first works that evokes the extent to which the written word seemed to be taking over the walls of the city.¹⁸ Even far from the city, in places where no Briton

¹⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drowning_Girl

¹⁶ <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/gaudenzio-ferrari-the-annunciation-the-angel-gabriel>

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hockney,_We_Two_Boys_Together_Clinging.jpg

had supposedly ever gone, the ubiquitous Victorian slogan “Pears Soap is the Best” began popping up. This prompted the Pears company to make its own word-in-image advertisement in the 1880s, showing puzzled Sudanese warriors contemplating the message painted on the rocks amid a barren landscape. It is during this period that people begin to encounter a new but fundamental property of modern life, one that Poussin had probably never dreamed of – even in Arcadia, there is advertising.¹⁹

The other major form of verbal intrusion into the environment of country and city is the governmental sign: “Stop,” “Walk,” “No Parking,” “Speed Limit 50,” etc. Like advertising, these signs tell us what to do, although unlike advertising they carry messages that we are not free to ignore. These words or orders also show up in paintings, and what commercial and public messages have in common is that they deal with the immediate present or the near future. While the image or “imago” connects the present with the past by commemorating what’s lost or the dead, the words we meet in the modern landscape look ahead to things we should do. A few hundred years ago, outside of books and papers, people might meet letters on gravestones or architectural inscriptions or milestones or the occasional shop sign. But with the arrival of the modern textualized landscape in the early nineteenth century, the acceleration of life and commodification began to demand that people be literate and that messages be instantly legible. And whereas earlier messages dealt with the presence of the past (“Here lies the body of ...”), the street signs and advertisements of modernity seek to make the not-here into the here, and direct our behavior in the future. This either takes the form of invoking the absent authority of the state (“STOP,” “YIELD,” etc.) or the internalized authority of capitalism: (“BUY” and “SHOP”). Commercial signs bring the aura of a product to a place where the product itself cannot be – at the top of a building, in a station of the metro, by the side of the road, and so on into the distance.²⁰

When brand-name ads make their way into paintings, as they do in Stuart Davis’s collage-like poster paintings of the 1920s, or in Edward Hopper’s *Nighthawks* (1942), the ads lose some of their urgency, even as they acquire further layers of meaning. The “imago” effect that commemorates a past moment in life pulls backward against the advertisement that represents both its forward-looking self (go buy a Phillies cigar) and its “reality” effect (people once sat in a diner where this real-world ad was displayed).²¹

18 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Parrywatercolour_London_Street_Scene.png

19 <http://pages.ucsd.edu/~bgoldfarb/cocu108/data/images/Week9/album/slides/pears-soap-ad.html>

20 <http://www.grayflannelsuit.net/blog/ads-from-the-open-road-volume-1>

21 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nighthawks>

Within the painting, advertising signs are signifiers both of what's not there (the product, and the scene in which we see it) and what is there: the sign itself, since the painted sign is still an ad, after all. Andy Warhol brought the advertisement itself to the fore in 1962 by leaving out the world in which the product might be consumed. He turned soup cans into art by isolating their banal self-presentation and mass-produced monotony, recognizing that what was commercial could also be iconic if treated that way. The soup evaporated, so to speak, but the power of the can was unleashed.

At roughly the same time, the Californian artist Ed Ruscha began to explore how a whole landscape could be seen as a form of packaged commodity. In *Standard Station* (1966) Ruscha worked from a reality, Standard Oil Company, the progenitor of Esso (S-O) gasoline, to look at how the American landscape was itself being standardized by major corporations, a process that has only accelerated exponentially since then. "Standard" functions in his painting as both a real sign and as a commentary on American life.²² More recently, Ruscha has overlaid words on a landscape, as in *Mean as Hell* (2002), where he plays the monotonous sameness of Western urban/suburban sprawl against the self-congratulatory ideology of the proud settlers of the frontier. Setting white streetlights and headlights against a nocturnal blue background and inscribing the scene with red letters, he evokes the American flag, American pride, and the metaphoric hell that American meanness has created all over the world.²³ With some of his recent works we reach a transitional moment where the image gives way to bands of color, and the words sit at their junction, proclaiming "Faith" or "Purity," as if the artist were questioning what the viewer expects from art.²⁴

Word as Image

And at this point the word becomes the image, or at least the primary feature of the visual field. If the "word *in* image" category presents us with words that have been somehow naturalized in "real" locations in representational art, the "word *as* image" category challenges us in two different directions. On the one hand we are asked to accept the materiality of words (their size, color, shape, texture, location, and so on), while on the other hand we have to recognize them as malleable materials whose conceptual power may well outweigh whatever visual potency they happen to have.

²² <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/76637>

²³ https://www.liveauctioneers.com/item/6797869_ed-ruscha-mean-as-hell-2002

²⁴ <http://www.edruscha.com/works/faith/>

It was in the late 1950s in New York that Jasper Johns and other artists began to bring text and word into painting in the first of these new ways. Johns was less interested in regarding texts as scraps of modern life, as did the Cubists, or as real signs, as did Hopper, than he was in seeing what he could do with letters that didn't say anything at all. As building blocks of language they could answer the need for subject matter, but the main subject of the painting would be the painterly treatment he gave them. If in St. John's Gospel the Word was made flesh, in this new kind of painting the letter (or the flag, or the map of the United States) was made paint. Warhol made ordinary objects into icons by accentuating their flatness, while Johns, whose popular subject matter preceded Warhol's, made things with no real depth, like numbers and letters, into icons by painting them so densely that they were almost sculptural. In such works as *Out the Window*, *Colored Alphabet*, and *False Start* (all from 1959) Johns found a way to address the perennial question, what should be the subject of art, by sticking with representation even as he drained his signifiers of content. He created a form of representation that refused to represent, stenciling his letters, divorcing the names of colors from the actual colors he used, and using the names of colors in grisaille works where the colors themselves would never appear. In effect he was saying "the spirit (of the Abstract Expressionists) killeth, but the letter (as I paint it) giveth life."²⁵

More recently, an internationally known Swiss graffiti artist named Smash 137 has melded Johns' approach with that of the group he was reacting against. Smash's artwork begins with his name, making him an heir to the egotistical sublime of Pollock or de Kooning, whose gestural work can be read as a hyperbolic signature. But Smash varies each tag so that, while the word "SMASH" is the image, the image itself remains dynamic. He varies the style in which the letters of his name are spelled out, thickening and thinning them, altering color, outlines, slant, spacing, and so on, making each signature into a new statement of who he is.²⁶

The pop artist Robert Indiana made the word even more material in 1970 when he took his famous, two-dimensional "LOVE" image, which he created for a Museum of Modern Art Christmas card in 1964, and turned it into a monumental steel sculpture. Located at the corner of 6th Avenue and 55th Street in New York, the work has inspired many spin-offs in other cities and languages. The sculpture in effect materializes an abstract concept, showing that love is real – and cast in steel.

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²⁵ <http://www.jasper-johns.org/false-start.jsp>

²⁶

https://www.google.com/search?q=smash+137&espv=2&biw=1568&bih=727&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKFwiUtrFu7LMAhVFeT4KHVEiDjIQ_AUIBigB

²⁷ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_\(sculpture\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_(sculpture))

At the opposite end of the spectrum, conceptual artist John Baldessari created *What is Painting* (1966-1968) without painting anything himself. The work consists of a white canvas on which these words, lettered by someone else, appear:

WHAT IS PAINTING DO YOU SENSE HOW ALL THE PARTS OF A GOOD PICTURE ARE INVOLVED WITH EACH OTHER, NOT JUST PLACED SIDE BY SIDE? ART IS A CREATION FOR THE EYE AND CAN ONLY BE HINTED AT WITH WORDS.

Baldessari enjoys questioning both the nature of art and the usual role of the artist in actually making it. He thinks of his works rather than constructs them, and does his best to remove traces of his own involvement in the process, so that while his words do end up on canvas, creating a tangible object, Baldessari himself is not “present” in that work.²⁸

To a certain extent, Baldessari can be paired with Jenny Holzer, an artist as passionate as Baldessari is detached, because both have worked with words rather than paint. Holzer, best known for her collection of aphorisms called *Truisms* (1977-1979) and her *Survival Series* (1983-1985), writes, projects, inscribes, and otherwise places words in public locations so that people can ponder her deadpan utterances, such as “Men don’t protect you anymore” and “Protect me from what I want.” Whereas Baldessari uses words in a deliberately unremarkable way in an effort to question our assumptions about art’s materiality, Holzer uses the combination of verbal signification and highly visible public placement to generate thought and discussion about urgent social issues. Although her words, like those of Blake, are often extracted from their context, she can be considered as a sort of sculptor whose works, conceptual though they are, gain much of their power from the materials she uses – LED lights, for instance – and from the sites she chooses to place them in. We have a Jenny Holzer bench at Barnard College in New York where I teach, made of marble and inscribed on four sides with some of her Truisms. The passer-by can read “Abuse of Power Comes as No Surprise” (on the seat) and (on the side) “Murder Has Its Sexual Side.” If you approach to sit down, you can read “It’s Crucial to Have an Active Fantasy Life” and “Stupid People Shouldn’t Breed.”²⁹

So when the word becomes image, it can either gain a certain solidity and visually arresting self-presentation, as in the work of Johns or Indiana, or it can make the materiality of the words – important though the visual aesthetics may be – finally less crucial (to most audiences) than what they have to say. Contemporary British artist Fiona Banner has worked in both directions. Her installation called *Concrete Poetry* (2002) is a pile of letters, each cast in concrete, with some words legible in the pile, such as “BASE” near the bottom of it.³⁰ Meanwhile *Leaning Nude* (2006) is part of

²⁸ https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/john-baldessari-what-is-painting-1966-68

²⁹ <http://barnard.edu/headlines/jenny-holzer-sculpture-arrives-barnards-campus>

her “wordscapes” series, in which she uses words, placed on large framed panels, to describe in stenciled capital letters works of visual art: “SHE’S LEANING BACK ONTO THE HEEL OF HER FOOT . . .” Banner gives us wall-mounted *ekphrasis*, as if it were – and it is – the very artwork that it describes.³¹ Where she takes us furthest, however, is in her series of *Full Stops* (begun 1997), made in materials ranging from neon to steel, and in size from the minuscule to the monumental. Working with different typefaces, she pondered how each full stop, what Americans call a period, put an end to speech and words, how they stop a thought or utterance. Since they look a lot like cannon balls, there is a militant, aggressive quality to their lethal-looking substance. Banner remarked:

It was the idea of a finality. I was thinking of the nature of full stops: are there different kinds of full stops? Is there a full stop that just goes errrrrm? A full stop is the ultimate mark due to the total brevity of it, or due to the fact that it’s a stab. It’s a mark that alludes to nothing; it is a mark that is a thing in itself... It has no subject and yet is not abstract.³²

One of the many unanswered questions that arise from the word and image overlap is whether job descriptions such as “artist” or “poet” have much relevance any more. Many painters still paint, many poets use words alone, but aren’t they increasingly implicated in each other’s business? Frank O’Hara addressed this problem in his famous but notoriously elusive poem, “Why I Am Not a Painter” (1957), written in the same year that he started collaborating with the painter Larry Rivers on a series of lithographs. The artist in the poem, however, is Mike Goldberg, who painted a work called *Sardines* (1955) that somehow made O’Hara think of his own poem “Oranges” (1949).³³ Near the opening of the poem, O’Hara drops into Goldberg’s studio and observes, “I look / up. ‘You have SARDINES in it,” to which Goldberg replies, “Yes, it needed something there.” But when the picture is finished, SARDINES has vanished, “all that’s left is just / letters, ‘It was too much,’ Mike says.” Meanwhile, O’Hara is working on a poem about the color orange, about “how terrible orange is / and life:”

Days go by. It is even in
prose, I am a real poet. My poem
is finished and I haven't mentioned
orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery
I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES. ³⁴

30 http://www.frithstreetgallery.com/shows/view/fiona_banner1

31 <http://gamm.org/index.php/2009/04/30/leaning-nude-fiona-banner-2006/>

32 “Fiona Banner Talks to Polly Staple,” Untitled, Autumn 1998, <http://www.fionabanner.com/words/pollystaple.htm>

33 <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=40531>

34 Frank O’Hara, “Why I Am Not a Painter,” *The Selected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Vintage, 1974), 112.

The poet starts working with a color, the painter with a word, so their tasks seem reversed. But then the poet adds more and more material, while the painter subtracts. So perhaps poetry is all about inclusion and painting is about shaping? Or is poetry about what can't be said, a color, and painting about what can't be painted, the textual world? Both poet and painter end up naming their works after what they did not or could not put in. So it may be that the poet is not a painter because color eludes him just as the word eludes his friend Mike. Perhaps the best answer simply comes at the start of the poem: "I am not a painter, I am a poet. / Why? I think I would rather be /a painter, but I am not."³⁵

If Poussin ever wondered why he was not a poet, he could have painted a picture about it. And in effect his words "et in arcadia ego" do tell us something about writing as well as death in a pastoral setting: in effect they say, "et in arcadia scriptura" – even in the world of art, writing, like death, will always be with us. We can't avoid words and signs, no matter where we go.

It may be the unconscious recognition of this fact that makes the crossovers and confusions between word and image so compelling. But we don't necessarily have to like what we find intriguing. I personally prefer Poussin's traditional approach to art – I like to have a good picture with my text instead of no picture at all. The pleasure of seeing and analyzing the visual image is for me superior to the pleasure of seeing and analyzing the absence of the visual image.

Or, rather, I would prefer to look at a visual representation of the visual world, with letters and words in it, than a visual representation of how textual features are themselves a visual entity. I find the pleasure of the text is augmented when one does not really have to focus on the materiality of the text. So maybe I am lazy or conventional. Part of the reward of modern art, for some people, is the way in which we meet the unexpected: no pictures in the painting, for example, but plenty of text; little in the way of transparent text in the poetry, but plenty of visual materiality. But it is also possible to resist or refuse this so-called reward, and to read the presence of words within painted images as a sign of the poverty of painting, just as the foregrounding of text and picture in literature can be viewed as a sign that the author does not have much to say.

One could argue that a sculpture or a painting that provides us with striking examples of the materiality of words and letters is making an effort to reeducate us, and to rebalance a world already too full of visual images. But we also live in a world so full of signs and texts that we might not want to receive that lesson. One of my greatest real-world pleasures this past year has come from living in a village in the *département du Gard* where there are no shops and until recently, no road or street

³⁵ O'Hara, 112.

signs. For me the village represents something we have almost completely lost, the unscribed landscape, a place where one can live, work, and walk without having to read a message about where we are or what we ought to be doing.

Nonetheless, there's an important general lesson to be learned from our scribbled-over world where the edges of word and image become ever more blurry. Implicit in Poussin, it's a message whose details have to be figured out anew with each work we encounter, but whose central proposition is clear: in the end, these painted words and pictured texts are not some anomaly but are instead presentations of one of the most typical, if least recognized, features of verbal and visual art – namely, their tendency to run into one another, to overlap, to call on the resources of the other for completion and communication. Words are always visual images as well as signs of some deferred presence. And words have always been images – we can't read them otherwise; there is always a physical dimension to their presence. Typographers know this, as did the Greeks and Romans who carved inscriptions on temples and monuments, and as do those who are sensitive to their legacy, such as Holzer and Banner. But visually represented objects or people, as in painting or photography or film, are also signs as well as images; they send us elsewhere in time and space to complete whatever meaning we want to assign to them. Texts have visual qualities, while pictures inevitably gesture towards exterior, language implicated concepts that will give them meaning.

So in a sense Horace was right – *ut pictura poesis* – painting and poetry are similar. Both are material and representational; both are presences and absences. The presence catches our attention, while the absence is what then holds our attention. We react to the sign, and then to what we think the sign says, until we come back to the presence and start to feel how the absence is incorporated into it. Horace says, "Poetry resembles painting. Some works will captivate you when you stand very close to them and others if you are at a greater distance." And the fact is, we are *both* standing close *and* looking at a great distance whenever we confront a work of art. We look at what is there and we contemplate what is not there.

The word is an image, but an image is also a form of word. Words and images may register with us, initially, on different planes, as we read or look, but the activity involved afterwards becomes fundamentally similar as we respond to the perceived beauty of words or paint, and as we look further afield for what they are possibly communicating to us. Words send us to pictures, pictures send us back to words. It is a tennis match, and it is up to us to judge whose court the ball is in when the point has been made.

PLAN

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