

THE “=” IN ART=TEXT=ART

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This essay derives from a gallery talk given by Karen Schiff on September 2, 2011, at the Joel and Lila Harnett Museum of Art, University of Richmond Museums, Virginia, as part of the educational programming surrounding Art=Text=Art: Works by Contemporary Artists.

This exhibition’s title posits an equivalence between art and text: **art** equals **text** equals **art**. Because I am an artist and a former English professor, my mind works in a hybrid of visual and verbal modes, so I am intrigued by the idea of giving these categories equal value. The artworks gathered here use **text** in ways that reveal it to be essential — **art** emerges through or around or because of **text**. Yet the show’s title dares us to ask fundamental questions:

Does **art** equal **text**?

Does **text** equal **art**?

To say that **art** equals **text** — in other words, that a work of **art** is a “**text**” to be read — is to indulge a strand of poststructuralist literary and cultural theory that was most popular a decade or so ago, after philosopher Jacques Derrida became famous for saying that there is “nothing outside the **text**.”¹ That is, all that exists can be subject to endless interpretation, including the interpretations themselves. In this way of thinking, a work of **art** is a **text**, to be mined for however it can enrich our understanding about anything. We can look for symbolism or aesthetic structure in a work of **art**, using techniques similar to those used in literary analysis. In other words, we can seek meaning. Though this analytical approach to artwork might seem unremittingly rational, analysis can also lead to the acknowledgement of mystery — as in a Freudian analysis of the unconscious, through a dream or “coincidental” event — and interpretation can eventually lead to a sense that some things can never be fully unraveled. A work of **art** can retain

its *je ne sais quoi*. But since a “textual analysis” of **art** is universally applicable—even to artworks without any writing in them—this way of equating **art** and **text** will not contribute to theories specific to this exhibition’s title.

To say that *text equals art* is quite another thing. I don’t want to discuss whether a piece of writing can be crafted well enough to qualify as literature, or a verbal **art** form. Rather, I want to probe the assertion that writing is itself a visual **art**, or that textual information — or data — can have the visual presence of a work of **art**. As we’ve established, in the context of this exhibition, writing – **text** or visual emblems that suggest **text** — is essential to the artworks...but this immediately presents a conundrum. Do we look at these works or read them?

The peskiest part of this conundrum is the back-and-forth motion of the mind. Though you look and read with the same eyes, the mental operations of looking and reading feel radically different. Neurologists have even shown that they activate separate regions of the brain. This poses problems for artists using **text**. How can a work of visual **art** include **text** without being overwhelmed — or narrowed — by the words’ literal meaning? Can an artist invoke the feeling of reading without having the work get stuck in “reading mode”? Can the visual properties of the work somehow derive from textual information or layout? Does the work *have to* relate the visual to the verbal? Altogether, how does an artwork juggle the claim that **text** equals **art**?

¹ Originally “il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (orig. Les Editions de Minuit, 1967; trans. Johns Hopkins, 1976), p. 158 in the 1998 English corrected edition.

The pieces in this exhibition offer many answers to these questions.² Some artworks include writing that is illegible or difficult to read, so that this textual element functions primarily visually.³ Other artworks use legible words, but the drawing's visual power and the words' verbal meaning are both so intense that concentrating on looking very quickly leads to reading, and vice versa, until the mind toggles between looking and reading at a dizzying rate.⁴ And some artworks perform a kind of visual research, presenting information in aesthetic formats that go beyond mere diagramming. Some of these reveal the subject of their research⁵; others conceal it by abstracting it.⁶ Still other works foreground symbols, codes, or gestural marks that evoke writing but belong to no language: they must be "read" visually.⁷ These works, which carry a whiff of textuality, are reminders that writing is, after all, a visible system. Yet it can also be an invisible system — in [my own work](#), `text` is often either illegible or hidden, hinted at within a format or a frame instead of exposed directly.

I have adopted this latter strategy in my work because I think `text` can never be *just art*. Even when characters are written with beautiful forms, or using engaging techniques, writing always carries the residue of what it signifies — it refers to layers of meaning beyond the confines of the work of `art`.⁸ Numbers

² The gallery talk was structured around examples of how artists combine art and text. Though those examples are recorded here in footnotes, readers will also ideally explore www.artequalstext.com to find additional examples for each category, and perhaps also to invent new categories altogether.

³ Artists whose work fell into the category of illegible writing included Cy Twombly, John Waters, and Annabel Daou.

⁴ This category was discussed using William Anastasi's *Untitled (READING A LINE ON A WALL)* and Molly Springfield's *Chapter IX*.

⁵ See Mark Lombardi's chart that reveals the financing for casino resorts in the Bahamas.

⁶ See Jill Baroff's concentric circles that document precise measurements of the tides.

⁷ This idea was explored in light of Christine Hiebert's *L.99.1*.

⁸ We talked about this concept in front of Ed Ruscha's *Gray Sex*.

and letters are never just squiggles on a page.⁹ Of course, every work of `art` connects to threads of discourse that exist outside of the work itself...but we usually become aware of this interrelatedness of cultural phenomena only by actively thinking about it. When a piece contains `text`, by contrast, we get a head start on making those connections. The artist chooses words that tell us what to think about first.

So far, these reflections presume that we interpret the "=" in *Art=Text=Art* as a linguistic sign: the written symbol means "equals." What if we don't *read* this sign, but we instead *look* at it as a graphic pattern? The "=" sign consists of two parallel lines. So let's think about `art` and `text` as running on parallel tracks. And if these lines *are* tracks, where is this train going?

For these lines to remain in parallel, `art` and `text` would need to be of equal value; otherwise, the lines might eventually touch or cross as they chart the waver relations of these two categories. And if the paths of `art` and `text` never intersect, then perhaps the brain researchers are right: the visual and verbal modes are destined never to be at work simultaneously. Certainly this separation carries some weight in the `art` world: many people talk about how they don't want to read while looking at `art`, as if `text` interfered with aesthetic pleasure. I encountered this sort of resistance after my portfolio review for graduate school, when a printing professor cried, "But you can't put words in `art`!" Perhaps this matter boils down to a question of taste. Still, if we do move in this direction — keeping `text` out of `art` or `art` devoid of `text` — I would want neither `text` nor `art` to lose power relative to the other. I am loyal to them both; I like them both too much.

Next let's try thinking of these lines not as static geometries, but as rays or arrows — still one is `art`, the

⁹ Christine Hiebert's drawings of cattle brand markings, however, served as emblems of the generally arbitrary quality of most systems of visible language.

other `text`. I'd like to imagine that both words and images spring from the same source and head toward the same goal. That is, I posit an inchoate primordial ooze from which people get the impulse to write or to make `art`. Then, both writers and artists can share the goal of having certain impacts on people. Though the pathways stay separate, moving through visual or verbal modes, the beginning points and endpoints are basically the same.

The other way I'd like to see the "=" sign in *Art=Text=Art* is to look at the two lines together, to think about them as directional lines going from `art` to `text` and back to `art` again. I imagine them as the edges of a shape resembling [the snake that swallowed an elephant in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*](#): bigger in the middle. The lines start with `art`, bow out to encompass the idea of `text`, and then reunite as they move back toward the idea of `art`. Conceptually, this works like the [lyrics](#) to Donovan's song, "There Is a Mountain" (1967): "First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is." In the Zen tradition from which these lyrics come, you think at first that you know what a mountain is. Then you start looking into what makes a mountain — really exploring the details of all the trees and rocks and slopes — and you realize that there's no discrete object that could be called a "mountain" ...until at last we have to say something everyday, like, "I'm going to climb that mountain today." Suddenly the mountain exists again. In the context of *Art=Text=Art*, we start with the premise that we're going to make visual `art`, and then our framework for what that `art` could encompass expands to include `text` — an unexpected ingredient. When we remember that even though we're including `text`, we're still making `art`, we've come full circle — the snake of `art` has swallowed the elephant of `text`. And the return to the idea of `art` — like the return to the mountain in the song — is richer for having passed through a phase of `text`. Some of the works in the exhibition look like abstract

formalist studies, but then their bibliographic source materials become apparent, after which their formal properties regain the foreground.¹⁰

In this last way of thinking about *Art=Text=Art*, `art` is bigger than `text`. It can expand its scope to include anything — even something as reputedly inimical to `art` as `text`. This sounds most accurate to me. *Art* seems like a more flexible system than `text`, though some writers (such as Jonathan Safran Foer, most recently) are determined to push at the visual and physical limits of `text`.¹¹ As an English professor, I researched novels whose visual manifestations amplified their verbal meanings, but these examples were few.¹² Books are bound up! Letters are in cases! Numbers are in sets! Language generally obeys grammatical rules, and mathematics is subject to logic. *Art*, on the other hand, knows no boundaries. Conventions are meant to be challenged, not followed. Though fiction and even mathematics can, in their most creative manifestations, invent new frameworks for reality, they are governed by systems that visual `art` can sidestep. As you explore the exhibition, in person or through this website, I hope you will discover artists suggesting ever further ways to imagine `text` and `art` in combination.

Though *Art=Text=Art* posits equivalence between `art` and `text`, this essay arrives at privileging `art`. This feels appropriate because we are, after all, considering these hybrid works in the context of

¹⁰ In the gallery talk, works by John Fraser and Jón Laxdal were examples of this phenomenon.

¹¹ See *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005) for visual games with writing, images, and page layout, and *Tree of Codes* (Visual Editions, 2010) for die-cut incisions into the printed page.

¹² The most compelling example appeared just as the novel was gaining ascendancy as a genre: Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1760-67). This novel is better known in our time simply as *Tristram Shandy*. No contemporary edition matches the genius of the original. Virginia Woolf also collaborated with her sister, artist Vanessa Bell, to create a visual-verbal gift edition of Woolf's *Kew Gardens* (Hogarth Press, 1927). A facsimile of this book is available as a reprint (Chatto & Windus, 1999).

an art museum, where art is our primary framework. Yet this exhibition demonstrates that art and text are inextricably, symbiotically linked. Text is the occasion for this gathering of works, the grain of sand that gives the oyster its pearl. And so it sits in the middle of the title, creating questions and consternations that ideally smooth over to form germs, or gems, of ideas.

Thanks to Wynn Kramarsky, for imagining me in this role, to his curator, Rachel Nackman, for her gracious and skillful help in making everything happen, and to museum curator N. Elizabeth Schlatter for her good cheer and careful attention as we brainstormed ideas and finalized details.

Karen Schiff (b. 1967, New Haven, CT) earned her AB in Comparative Literature and her AM in English from Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island (1989). From the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, she received her PhD in Comparative Literature and Literary Theory (1998). Schiff completed her MFA in Studio Art at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts / Tufts University, Boston (2006). In 2005 she won a Drawing Award from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Schiff has been resident at the Vermont Studio Center, Johnson (2004); the Jentel Artist Residency Program, Sheridan, Wyoming (2006); the Harwood Museum of Art, Taos, New Mexico (2007); the Edward F. Albee Foundation, Montauk, New York (2007); the Wesley Theological Seminary, Washington, DC (2008); Anderson Ranch, Snowmass Village, Colorado (2011); Yaddo, Saratoga Springs, New York (2012); and the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation of New Mexico, Taos (2012). She will return to Yaddo in 2014. In 2010 Schiff spoke on two panels about book arts criticism at the Contemporary Artists' Books Conference, MoMA PS1, Queens, New York. In 2012 she spoke about her work to a symposium of medievalist art historians at the University of Chicago's Special Collections Library. She repeated this presentation at the annual conference of the Society for Textual Scholarship in 2013, and plans have since been made to publish a written version of this work in the Society's journal, Textual Cultures. In April 2013 Schiff also presented at two events for artists using words in their work: a performance at The Dalloway and a panel discussion at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center, both in New York. Recent solo exhibitions have been held at Danese, New York (2010), and the Flanagan Campus Art Gallery, Community College of Rhode Island, London (2011). Schiff's work has been included in numerous group exhibitions, most recently at such venues as Björn Ressle Gallery, New York (2008); the Mills Gallery, Boston Center for the Arts (2009); the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente, Segovia, Spain (2009); Galería Astarté, Madrid (2010); Danese, New York (2010, 2011, 2012); the Katonah Museum of Art, Katonah, New York (2011, 2012); dmcontemporary project room, New York (2011, 2012); Kentler International Drawing Space, Brooklyn (2011, 2012); and the Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock (2012). In 2013 Schiff curated the group exhibition Winter Reading: Lines of Poetry at Diane Birdsall Gallery, Old Lyme, Connecticut. 2013 also brought the publication of two articles: a review of the Yale University Press/Dia Foundation critical anthology on Agnes Martin in Art Journal (Fall 2012), and an essay responding to the critic Nancy Princenthal's forum in The Brooklyn Rail on whether words have "won" over visual art (March 2013). She lives in New York City and has a studio in Brooklyn. More information about her work can be found at www.karen-schiff.com.